

The Diplomats



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Chapter 11: Father's Blessing

There was an obvious change when we got to the edge of the city. The hunters faded into the woods around us like smoke in the night sky until only Amstys and Renald remained. I could still feel the eyes of the other hunters out there, but they were invisible, stalking.

Rebecca shivered.

She was the only non-hunter among us, but she'd become long accustomed to travelling in the wilderness. We made good time.

If I thought the hunter's camp had looked trampled and basic when I'd first seen it, now it was all but falling apart. The meadow the cabin sat in was churned to a lake of mud, and the trees around it had been mostly chopped down, turned into makeshift shelters and firewood.

I didn't bother to even slow when we neared the camp. Amstys and Renald fell away as I neared the cabin. It wasn't until I stood before the door that I let go of Rebecca's hand.

"You might want to wait out here, babe."

She rolled her eyes. "You could let me come in with you, Wolfy. You know, provide a united front."

I gave her a quick kiss to the forehead before gently pushing her aside. "Not this time, babe. Dear old Dad's protective instinct is flaring up again and I'd best settle him down."

I didn't bother knocking before I entered. Pushing the door open, the scents of a hundred hunters who had passed this way washed over me. Some of them had been brave and bold, but most had been terrified.

Sitting in the same seat as he had when I'd last seen him was my father, he was the only one in the room. His head was slumped to one side, snores whispering into the darkness.

I padded up beside him, my feet silent in the dry ground. I saw his ears twitch as I moved. He knew I was here, but my familiar scent kept from waking with a start.

Sitting down next to him, I carefully ruffled through the papers that were set on his small desk. They looked more like marching orders for a militia than something I'd associate with a group like the hunters. Despite everything that had happened, the only real purpose the hunters had was collection of food from the forest.

I laid one hand on my father's shoulder. He twitched slightly in his sleep but didn't wake. I could feel the corded muscles under his pelt.

Lowering myself to look in his face, I could see a troubled frown tug at his lips every few seconds as he dreamed. His ears were back and his features pulled.

And if I held my breath and stilled my heart I could only just hear the slightest echos of a pained and frightened whine escape his lips. That sound chilled my heart more than anything I could remember.

My father was a strong man. He'd done greater things than I could ever hope to, and he'd done them all without so much as a single moment of fear.

Without thinking, I drew my hand gently across his head, soothing down the fur between his ears and edged myself closer to him. A few moments later my presence helped calm him.

It wasn't long after that before he opened his eyes.

"Tommy?" His voice was rough from sleep, I could still hear the slightest tremors of a whine at its edges. "Gods, Son, I was... I was just dreaming about you."

"It's okay, Dad. I'm here."

He never seemed to move, but a moment later his arms were around me, clutching me so tight that I could hardly breathe.

"I heard what had happened, Tommy." He ran a thumb over my shoulder where I'd been shot. To anyone else the wound would be completely healed over by now, gone, but he knew me well enough to see the telltale signs of regeneration. "I don't want you going back, Son. It's too dangerous in there for you. I want you to stay out here with me, with the hunters."

"What?" I tried to gently push him back, but he wouldn't give an inch. "Dad, I'm the mayor now. I can't just walk away. I have obligations to the people, to the city."

His blue eyes looked down at me, hardening. "I'm asking you, Tommy, as your father. Don't make me order you as your alpha."

I held his stare now. "And what would you do if I ordered you as your mayor to return to the city and abandon your hunters? Would you do it, Dad, would you walk away from your obligations because you were ordered to? Your heart can't be taking it well living out here, you really should come back and be looked over by a doctor."

He huffed out a breath. "Very well. Your alpha won't order it of you, but..." His gaze softened, almost pleading. "Please, Tommy, you're my only son... I shouldn't have to live out here without you while you're in danger."

I let my grip on him tighten. This was *not* the time to tell him I'd just survived another assault.

"Why *are* you out here, Dad? Everyone's welcome back in the city. The rebuilding is going great, even the humans have returned. The hunters are the only ones who haven't come home."

He wasn't looking at me now, he stared out into the shadows of the small room.

"We are home, Tommy. This is where we belong, out here. They don't just call us hunters, that's what we are. We don't belong in the city."

"Dad..." I couldn't get him to look at me. I tried to gently pull his mussel towards me, but all I got for it was the shadow of a growl. "Is that why you're really keeping them out here? They're not just hunters, they're people. They have families, friends, lives beyond just hunting. Are you really keeping them out here, away from those they love?"

The shadow of a growl I'd heard before grew until, with a strangled gasp he cut it off. "There were so many hurt, Tommy. I couldn't help them, I couldn't save them. You were gone... I... I was powerless to save anybody."

"And so you're keeping them out here, separated, under your watchful eye? Dad, I know you

just want to protect them, that's what an alpha does, but they're not your pups." I paused for a long moment. "I am. I'm the one you want to shelter, Dad, not them. Let them go. Please, come with me, come back to the city."

He didn't say anything. I could see his lips moving, but no sounds came forth. He was staring into the shadows. It wasn't until his arms closed around me so tight that I could feel his claws digging into my flesh, blood slowly running down my pelt, that he spoke.

"I don't want to lose you, Tommy. I don't ever want to lose you. Gods, for so many years I tried to push you into hunting, I never realized how much safer I felt with you working an office job. I knew you were going to come home every night, I always knew where you were. When you started hunting with that lion I could just pass everything off as first time jitters... but now that people are trying to kill you... Gods, you have no idea how powerless I felt when the world came crashing down around the city and you were hundreds of miles away across the mountains. Or when you left me to go into the city again." He turned to me, I could see tears staining his fur. "Just don't leave me alone in this world, Tommy. You and Aggy are all I have."

I reached up ever so slightly to brush the back of one of my claws against his nose. "I don't plan on dieing, Dad. Just promise me that you'll do the same and we have a deal."

A slight smile touched his lips. "I don't expect I'll last as long as you, Son, but I'll try."

We layed there for the better part of an hour after, not saying a word. I could feel the warmth of his body beside me, and that was enough.

Eventually I had to ask, "Where's Mom?"

Another slight grin pulled at his lips. "She decided that she wasn't held by the same edict that I had given the hunters. She left for the city a few hours ago to check on the house and bring back a few things. She said she was tired of living in a, what did she call it... 'poorly constructed hole in the ground den' and wanted to go pick up some modern conveniences."

Heh. That didn't sound much like the soft spoken lady I knew. Dad must have really been pressing her buttons in order for her to start even such light name calling as that.

"I do have something to ask you, Dad." His ears perked up as he turned his head towards me. "It isn't official yet, I haven't even asked her, but... I'm thinking about marrying Rebecca."

He cocked his head to one side. "Marry? Why bother? The two of you are together, as bonded as any pair I know. There's no reason to marry. Aggy and I never bothered, but everyone still calls her my wife."

"It's a..." I had to laugh, "Long story, Dad."

He shook his head. "This has something to do with those backward human customs, doesn't it? They can't just leave things well enough alone. A bone can't be a bone until they've named it as such, until they've classified it and measured it."

"It's a bit more complicated than that..."

His arm tightened around me again. Not crushing this time, not cloying. Just warm, comforting, there.

"As far as I'm concerned, Tommy, you're already married." A slight chuckle escaped his lips. "If you want, I could be the one to make it official. I am the alpha, after all. It's one of the perks that comes with the title."

I pulled back slightly. "You? Since when could you marry people?"

He rolled his eyes. "Since I've been an alpha, and more than likely even when I retired. It's not something I've done often. Most canines don't care one way or the other, and the felines who get married want the grandest ceremonies they can get to feed their vanity. They normally hire some

dignitary from one of the churches."

I couldn't help but laugh at the image of a young hunting cat spending a years worth of money just for a lavish festival that wouldn't last more than a day.

"Well, we're not quite up for something like that." I sat up, the memory of Rebecca waiting outside the door pushing me onward. "Just, please, come back home and we'll take it from there. I really do miss you, Dad. I can't come out here all the time."

He grinned. "We'll make something work. But," This time his face hardened into mock seriousness, but his eyes still danced. "I want some time alone to speak to your bride-to-be." He threw out a hand dramatically, "All this time and I've never truly spoken to her snout to snout." A mischievous grin crept to his lips. "I need to make sure she's worthy of you. Heh, you're the son of the sitting hunter's alpha, we can't have you marrying off to *just anybody*."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't let her hear that comment, she might just try to slice a set of mittens from your hide."

Stepping outside, I found Rebecca waiting next to the door, never having taken a step from where I left her.

"Babe?" I came up behind her, wrapping a arm around her shoulders. "You didn't have to wait right here."

She threw me a lopsided glare. "Where else would I go, Wolfy? This is the hunter's camp, not Horseshoe Bay. I don't know a single person here except for Amstys, and he doesn't seem to be moving." She pointed to the other side of the door where the wolf was resting on his haunches. he nodded at me gravely, but didn't say a word more.

"Ah, babe," I felt suddenly nervous, "Dad want's to talk to you for a bit."

"Me?" Her brow came down. "Why me? He's *your* father."

I shrugged, trying to fain innocence. "Who knows, I don't exactly keep a leash on him."

She gave me a good poke in the nose. "Yeah, right, and I do that to you?"

I licked the tip of her finger. "Not right now, babe, not in front of all the people."

She blushed slightly and laughed before heading into the cabin. I closed the door softly behind her.

Not even my ears could pick up what was said between my father and Rebecca. I heard everything from raised voices to laughter, but I couldn't make out a single word.

After half an hour or so I gave up and began wandering the camp. Renald appeared at my side the moment I moved, and Amstys trailed a few feet back like a lost puppy.

"Where have you been, Renald?" I asked the tan wolf as we strolled through the trees. "I thought dear old dad gave you the job of keeping me alive. Don't you kinda have to be around me to make sure of that?"

His face was a touch disgusted. "Boss, if I wasn't doing my job the alpha would have my hide by now." He rolled his eyes. "Just 'cause you don't see me doesn't mean I'm not around. Me and the storm cloud of doom back there," He pointed a thumb at Amstys who perked up slightly, "Haven't exactly been sleeping on the job. You ain't dead yet, and that means that neither am I. Give me credit where credit's due, boss. I'm one of the only hunters allowed to enter the city whenever I want, the mangy police dogs ain't the only ones keeping you safe."

"Right." Through the trees I could see Gowin and Lucy sitting around a camp fire. Even those two experienced hunters were looking a little worse for wear being trapped out here in the wilderness for so long.

"So what's the story, Renald?" I turned back to him as I stopped to lean on a tree. "How bad are things out here? I've been fighting so hard to get the city back into order that I never even thought about the hunters still in self-imposed exile."

He snorted. "It ain't 'self-imposed', boss. We all just want to go home. It's the alpha who won't let us, and all the beta and upper classes are too loyal to his gimpyness to ever say a word against him."

I had to claw back a growl at the insult he'd hurled, even offhandedly, at my father. I guess there wouldn't be too many people complaining once Dad announced his change of heart to allow folks to return home.

I let my back slide down the rough bark of the tree until I was sitting on the ground. It did feel good to have the earth underneath me again. The dogs seemed to always feel at home in the concrete and asphalt of the city, but I needed a little real earth under me to balance things out.

Amstys had come up now to sit before me, Renald shrugged and took a spot next to him.

"How bad is it out there, really? I can't imagine things are *that* bad that it takes not only a police guard plus the two of you to keep me safe."

Renald was about to speak when Amstys cut him off. The black wolf's low tones likely didn't carry any further than my ears.

"It's not good, young master... Tommy." He took a deep breath. Renald shot him a dirty glance, but Amstys didn't even seem to notice. "There have been no other... direct incidents that we know of, but someone is most definitely arraying forces against you."

I let out a laugh. "Yeah? Tell me something I don't know. Everyone either wants me on their side or wants me out of the picture. I guess they can't take a mayor who doesn't swim with the sharks."

Amstys cocked his head at me for a moment. "Sharks?" he asked before brushing it aside. "As you say, young master, though I certainly haven't seen any sharks."

I rolled my eyes. "So have you found anything we can use?"

"Not really, boss." Renald leaned back against a tree and began plucking weeds from the dirt before him. "We ain't got bugger all. Though the fact that we can't get any other hunters in the city ain't helping."

I sat and watched the clouds float past for another half hour before the door to the cabin opened. Walking forward, I met Rebecca just a few steps out. The look I got from her was confused, but not alarmed.

"What was all that about, Wolfy?"

I did my best to look innocent. "Depends what 'that' was, babe."

We were walking away now, back towards town. I could see my father leaning on the door frame of the cabin, grinning like a fool. I waved goodbye to him before turning back to Rebecca.

"Gods, Tommy, with the things he was asking me you might just as well think we were expecting a litter the day after tomorrow. I haven't had to talk that much about myself and my parents since I was back in school."

"Everything go alright then?" I couldn't hide the trepidation in my voice.

She shrugged. "I guess." She pulled one of my arms over her shoulders as we walked, draping it around her like a scarf. "Just wish I knew what he was going on about. It's as if I'd just been brought home to meet them for the first time." She poked me in the nose, "Like we weren't already a couple."

"Heh, yeah. Imagine that."

We took the walk back to V-town at a leisurely pace. My father must not have spared any time in announcing that the hunters could return home. We weren't more than halfway back when folks

began sprinting past us in a headlong rush towards the city limits.

Interestingly, it wasn't the youngest and fastest who passed us first. It was the older hunters, the ones who were mature enough to have families. I don't think I've ever seen people run like that. It was like their tails were on fire, like they were running from demons.

Or like they were racing home to see if their loved ones were still alive.

Only Amstys and Renald of the hunters remained with us. I turned to the tan wolf.

"If you want, Renald, you can disappear for a while and go see your family now that the embargo is off."

He shrugged. "Don't have much to visit. Most of my family are hunters, and anyway, I've already seen who I need to see."

Stepping foot onto the pavement, we were about neck and neck with the main body of the hunters streaming back into the city.

The expressions on the faces of the dogs waiting to greet me was priceless. Gods, they must have thought it was an invasion the way the hunters materialized from the trees. Thankfully, all the hunters were citizens of the city, and there was no *technical* reason for the dogs to be alarmed with their return. In the end both sides seemed to try to do their best to simply ignore each other, and that was the best I could hope for.

My police guard closed in around me as I walked on, Amstys and Renald falling away. Rebecca was still at my side.

"So, was it worth it, Wolfy?"

I smiled, watching the frantic faces of the hunters rushing by. Not all of them would find good news having returned to the city, but I was happy for them to at least be able to return home.

"I think so." Looking at the sun, it was getting closer to evening. "What do you say we drop by the V-town general and check on Jon, then get something to eat, babe?"

The smell of antiseptic always made me stuff up. The V-town general was still doing a brisk business these days, looking after the long term injuries that had come during the riots and quake.

I was happy to see Jon sitting up now. He was still a bit groggy from all the drugs they'd pumped him full of, but he was far and above what I'd last seen.

"How are you doing, Jon?" I took a seat at his bed side. The dog was busy trying to drink down a cup of soup.

Now, that might sound like an easy enough thing, but the cup they'd given him was too deep and narrow for him to lap from, and I knew from personal experience just how hard it could be for someone with a canine mussel to try and use a soup spoon.

"Evening, Sir." He must really be having a hard time with that food, he hardly glanced at me before he turned his attention back to it.

"This. Is. Not. Working." He threw the spoon down on the tray that sat on his lap in an uncharacteristic fit of annoyance. "They'll only give me liquids, and never in something I can actually bring to my lips." If a glare could kill, that innocent cup would be on fire by now. "I'm starving, and they won't give me anything I can eat!" He turned to me, eyes pleading, "Tommy, please, get me out of here." He paused for a moment. "Or at least get me some kibble."

I couldn't keep from laughing.

"How about I see what I can find, Jon?" Rebecca set a hand gently on his shoulder as she spoke. "They must have a cafeteria around here somewhere." She paused for a moment. "What do you eat, anyway?"

I grinned. "We're both canine, babe. Just pick up something for me and get a second order for

him." I paused for a moment before adding, "And not gods blasted kibble!"

Jon slouched in his bed. "But I *like* kibble."

Rebecca was gone a moment later. That left me alone with Jon. There weren't a lot of single rooms in the hospital, but his status as a police officer, plus the pull from being personal attache to the mayor, seemed to have gotten him one.

I stretched, letting out a yawn as I relaxed in the chair beside him. "Now that we've got the most important thing out of the way, how's life between the white walls?"

I got another sour look. "Does your authority as mayor extend to providing me with an early discharge? I would rather scale a mountainface with you than spend another day here."

I grinned. "I'll see what I can do. But, with how under staffed the hospitals are, I'm betting they'll put you out on the street as soon as they can." He lightened slightly at that thought. "But, Jon, seriously," I edged closer to him, my voice falling, "How much do you remember from the assassination attempt? The service isn't saying much."

He narrowed his eyes, ears falling to hug his skull. "Sir, it's a touch drafty in here. Don't you think?"

A few seconds later I had the door to his room closed. I was annoyed to see there was no lock.

"That's better, Tommy." His voice had lost some of its clip now, falling to something at least vaguely approaching normal speech. He still took a moment to peer about the near empty room, as if someone might just be hiding in a corner. "I was debriefed by no one less than Commissioner Sayer after the... incident."

I felt my skin go pink under my fur. "That was kind of my fault. I sent him to go see you."

He shook his head. "No. Immediately after I regained consciousness he was there with Superintendents Able and Baker. They were... concerned." His face pulled into a grimace. "They asked me if I had in anyway aided or abetted the attempt."

My blood ran cold. "They accused *you* of being involved with trying to kill me?" I could feel my hackles raising.

"You must remember, Sir, that I did abandon my position at your side when the attack began, putting you in additional danger." His eyes dropped. "Then I failed to remove you from the scene, and to top it off my actions resulted in the death of the one person who may have been able to answer our questions."

I set my hand on the dogs paw. I could feel it trembling slightly in my grasp.

"Jon," I waited until he met my eyes, "This wasn't your fault. No mater what happens I *will* protect you through this. If anything you're going to come out with a commendation."

A wan smile crept to his lips. "Thank you, Tommy, but you really needn't. I've been cleared of any suspicion. Do you really think they would let you in here with me alone if there was even the slightest concern that I might endanger your life?"

I rolled my eyes. "Sayer has done stranger things. Now the real question, what do *you* think is going on?"

He sucked in his lips for a moment. "I haven't had much time to think about it. Most of the day has been involved in debriefings of one sort or another. That," He raised his lips for a moment, "Or the doctors and nurses coming to review my status."

I just realized that this was the first time I'd ever seen Jon, fur out. He was wearing nothing but bandages around his abdomen. Every other time I'd ever seen him he'd been in uniform, disguise, or traveling clothes.

"And let me guess," I gave him a gentle poke, making sure to avoid his wounds, "All they've

given you is one of the useless hospitable gowns that makes you feel like a shaved monkey."

I now got the glare that had been reserved for the cup of soup. "I'd rather not talk about it... Sir."

A knock at the door caused the both of us to turn in unison. A moment later it cracked open. The first thing through was a hand holding takeout bags.

I'm pretty sure Jon would have been scrambling off his bed if his wounds had allowed. He made only as far as setting his feet on the ground before the twisting of his torso left him gritting his teeth and falling back into bed.

"Babe, are you a sight for sore eyes."

Rebecca walked into the room, holding the brown paper bags before her like an offering to the gods.

"Are you really saying that, Wolfy, or is it just the food you want?"

I rolled my eyes as I reached out for her, pulling her to sit on my lap. "Both, babe, definitely both."

As expected, she'd hit two different places, my normal Cub-caf, and one of her weird human food shops.

Jon gave the bag I dumped in his lap a suspicious sniff. "This isn't kibble."

Rebecca shrugged. "I just did what the oh-so-wise mayor said, ordered you the same thing I got him."

Opening the bag, Jon pulled out a wax paper package. A chunk of moose.

"Raw meat?" He raised an eye ridge at me. "I haven't eaten this since we got back to the city."

I shrugged. "It's good for you. The gods only know what they put in that refined kibble your kind is so found of."

He bristled at the comment. "It's balanced to meet our nutritional requirements."

We returned home to the apartment soon after. Something must be picking up, the riot by the front doors had grown exponentially. Only this time I noticed that there were people on *both* sides.

The vast majority of the folks out here were holding their signs and chanting against me, but there were perhaps a dozen folks with banners that read 'Support the Open party, open government for a fair city'. The banners were decorated with a white letter 'O' on a multicoloured backdrop.

Heh. I guess Max had been doing his job.

The police clustered around me to keep both sides away. It seemed like my 'supporters' were just as eager to get close to me as those who wanted me out of office.

Up the stairs, I could just see the sun beginning to set. I shouldn't be tired yet, but this had been a bear of a day. Heh, every day recently had been a bear and then some.

Rebecca on the bed beside me, I let myself stretch out as I fought to drive the kinks from my muscles.

"So what were you going to say back in the garden, Wolfy?" Her voice was a soft mumble as she drifted off beside me.

I looked out the window, the red of the sunset reminding me of the fire that had swept through V-town during the riots.

"Don't worry, babe, we'll bet back around to it." I nuzzled her ear. "How about we take a trip to Stanley Park tomorrow? Just you and I."

As always, the morning came well before I was ready for it.

Able arrived with my daily packet of papers. Sayer must be having a good day, he'd gotten the

count down to nine.

One of the reports remarked on the new political party that had seemingly sprung up overnight. He'd traced it's funding back to Storm Front. There was a small message scrawled hastily on the bottom of the paper, it read 'Glad to see you're taking the initiative, but we will have to discuss your platform'.

I was flipping through the papers with one hand and gnawing away at a bone in the other when a knock came at the door.

"Come in." I didn't bother to look up.

"How goes it, Tommy? I thought you might like a status update." Max walked in carrying a stack of papers almost as tall as he was.

I groaned. I'd just gotten Sayer and the police dogs leashed when it came to paper, now Max was taking up their slack.

He dumped his pile on my counter and smiled at me. "Things are going great, man. Some of the police administration dropped by yesterday and gave us a head's up on your current policies and programs. All we had to do after that was extrapolate them out and create a platform off them."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't rely on the police too much, Max. This is your show, not Sayer's. I want you to do what *you* think is right, not just whatever he tells you to."

He shrugged. "But just about everything they're doing is better than anything we could ever think up. It's like they've already got this planned out, wrapped up, and were just waiting for an excuse to drop it in our laps."

I shook my head. "That's what I was afraid of." I ruffled the papers in front of me with a thumb. "So, what is the platform? I noticed I've got a logo now, thanks by the way. So, what do I stand for?"

He looked slightly nervous for a moment. "Well, I kind of had to guess..." I waved him on, "We positioned you as an inclusionest, someone who wants to bring all the different species of V-town to the table and work out a unified solution." A worn out grin edged to his face. "Not that it's been easy. Do you have any idea how hard it is to show you as an equal opportunity man when you don't seem to want to actually meet with anyone?"

Now it was my turn to grin. "I've had to shake more hands than I care to remember, Max. I did my time, I don't want to have to kiss too many more babies."

"Fine, fine." He pressed on, "But we do need you this evening. There's a big rally going down in one of the sports fields. All the major parties will be there. This will be one of the only chances the public will get to see everyone side by side at the same time before the election."

"So how is the election going to work, anyway? Weren't we setup with a modified democratic system?"

Max nodded. "We were. But the upheaval in the city has made it all but unusable. It supposed to be a setup where each race has a random group of people selected from it to vote. The idea is to allow each species to be represented while still keeping the voting numbers low enough to make things manageable. That's not the way this election will play out. We can only use the reduced system when things are... well, *normal*. None of the parties have any qualms with declaring this an abnormal election. As a result the entire population is able to vote." He scratched his large forehead. "This should be interesting. I've haven't seen a full election since I moved here fifteen years ago." He frowned. "It could also be a problem. Most of the people who will be up to vote have never cast a ballot in their lives. They have no idea what's at stake, nor do they even know how to educate themselves. This race is really going to come down to who can impress the most people. The average man on the street doesn't care about platforms and policies, no matter how much we might, he just

wants a job, a safe place to sleep, and food for his kids."

"Then I guess things never change, eh? Even before the Cataclysm it seems like that was more or less business as usual."

Max shook his head. "That was what the modified system was created to combat." He shuddered. "But look where that got us. I'll take apathy and disinterest any day over flat out corruption."

I let the papers fall back to the counter without reading them and pushed the stack towards Max. "So what am I supposed to do? Show up, look pretty, and smile for the audience? I don't even know what to say when they start asking questions."

Max smiled. "Don't worry too much, Tommy. Most political lime-lighters are figureheads." I shuddered when he said that word. "They'll ask you some basic questions to get a feel for who you are, but you shouldn't have too much trouble. Just answer honestly and stick to what we outlined in these documents and you'll be fine."

I laughed. "Max, there's no way I'm going to be able to read all this before the debate." His face fell. I set a hand on his shoulder. "We'll deal with it. Anyway," I raised a claw to my lips, "Who's my running mate in all this?"

Max looked confused. "I, uh, assumed it was the lion, English. He's the one bankrolling everything, and the only other person you asked me to defer to."

I shook my head. "Gods no. English is a great guy, but there's no bloody way I'm making him second in command of anything." I laughed, "I still don't know how he manages Storm Front." I eyed Max for a moment, "How'd you like the job?"

"Me?" He just about fell off his stool. "There's no way I could ever do that. I'm just an adviser, I couldn't be deputy mayor."

I grinned. "Why not? You're the one running the campaign, I might as well make it worthwhile for you. English is my friend and a great man, but I'd be honoured if you'd run with me."

The oni smiled. "I'll do it."

I got Max out of my apartment a few minutes later. It wasn't long after that Rebecca was by my side.

"Didn't you promise me something about getting out today, Wolfy?" She looped her arms around my shoulders as she whispered in my ear.

"Heh, you got it, babe."

I poked my nose out the front door of the building before deciding to leave via the back route. The two warring factions out there had grown. The KDP group was still far larger, but they were only there because they were being paid to. My own team, despite the fact I hadn't the slightest who any of them were, seemed to be there by their own violation. And they fought all the harder because of it.

Guards forming a protective bubble around us that seemed to seal the world out, Rebecca and I headed north-west to Stanley Park.

The park was a massive expanse of undeveloped land sandwiched between the edge of downtown and the coast. It was almost a small forest in and off itself. I'd spent time here when I was young, when I was still trying to learn how to hunt. It wasn't that there were animals here anymore, but its natural terrain so close to downtown made it feel like a mix between the city and the wilds. It was comforting.

The dogs didn't quite break off as we ventured into the trees, but they did spread out and disappear. Every so often I could hear them bumbling through the undergrowth. They couldn't move through the wilderness like I could.

Leading Rebecca by the hand, we stalked through the trees until we came upon a stream meandering through the forest. It wasn't much, but I'd come here as a pup when my father had been out hunting. This had been my little slice of the wilderness. It wasn't large enough to get lost in, but it was more than enough to feel like you were free.

I gathered my tail around me and sat on the dry grass, pulling Rebecca into my lap. The sun slanted down around us, shining through the turning leaves on a rare, clear V-town autumn day.

Rebecca was cuddled up into me, raising her face towards the sun, warming herself.

"So, what was it you wanted to talk about, Wolfy?"

I let out a breath. "Babe, I love you, more than anything in the world."

She chuckled. "I thought we'd already figured that out long ago, Tommy. Why else would you have thrown everything away to come with me to Horseshoe Bay?"

"Heh. Yeah."

I reached out, holding one of her hands before us in both of mine. For a moment I just looked at it, so small and fragile in my thick fingers. Her pale white skin contrasted against the dark, rough pads of my fingers and the black of my claws.

Gently, I lifted her second to smallest finger. "Babe, how'd you like a ring on there?"

She giggled. "You know I don't wear jewellery, Wolfy. And anyway..." She petered off as she realized what finger I was holding up. "Tommy..." She tried to turn and face me, but I kept her firmly looking forward.

"I mean it, Rebecca." I'd lowered my voice. I was whispering now, my lips almost touching her ear. "I really do want to be with you forever."

Her reaction wasn't quite what I'd been hoping for. She let out an annoyed sigh and struggled to her feet, pulling her hand from my grasp.

"This is because of the election, isn't it, Tommy?" She was facing me now. She wasn't angry... not yet, but her eyes were hard. "You talked to the humans, didn't you?"

I cast my eyes down as a slight whimper escaped my lips. "I love you, Rebecca."

Her hand came up, the same one I'd been holding, it lifted my chin until I was looking her in the eye.

"Tommy," Her voice was soft, "Wolves don't marry. Why do you want this?"

I couldn't escape her. "The humans won't support me in the election if we don't wed, or at least get engaged." I paused, gulping for breath. "But I love you, babe. I really do. This isn't just for them... it's for us. I thought you would want it too. You *are* human, and I thought it might mean as much to you as it does to them. We're already mated, I couldn't see any harm in going the rest of the way."

Slowly, I edged forward until I could just reach the tip of her nose with my tongue for a quick lick. She giggled, pulling back.

"I'm not happy with you, Wolfy." Her words were stern, but her voice and expression didn't match as she turned and sat back against my chest. "You could have talked to me about it first."

"We are talking, babe. I won't force you into anything." I wrapped my arms tightly around her, pulling her against me as I buried my mussel in her hair.

She laughed. "I didn't say I wouldn't, Tommy."

My ears perked up. "Oh? Is that a yes?" I reached out to lick her cheek.

She swatted me away playfully. "I didn't say that either." Gently, she reached out to grab one of my whiskers, using it to pull me level with her face. "I did some reading on wolves after we got back into the city while you were so busy acting all moyor-like." She rolled her eyes, "You could have given me some warning about this mate-for-life thing. I didn't realize what I was getting into when you spent

that first night in the tent with me."

I wasn't sure whether to feel hurt or horny. "You weren't exactly complaining." I let my tongue come out to wet my lips, "I'll admit I wasn't too experienced then, but I think I've got the hang of it now." I tightened my grip for a moment.

"That wasn't what I meant, Wolfy." She let out an exasperated sigh. "It's too late now anyway," She gave my whiskers another small tug, "Not that I'd have it any other way." One more yank and we were together in a quick over-the-shoulder kiss. "But some warning would have been nice."

"So, that's a wait and see, now is it?" I fought to keep the disappointment from my voice.

She laughed. "I certainly didn't say that." She struggled in my grasp, turning to face me again, her chest pressed up against mine. "We're as good as married already, no reason we shouldn't tie the knot."

"That, babe," I let my mouth drop open in a grin, "Is the best thing I've heard in a long, long time."

She resisted for just a moment as I pulled her into a deep kiss. "I expect to get a good honeymoon out of this, Wolfy. And the trip to Edmonton doesn't count."

We, ahem, took our time before returning to the city. I'm sure the dogs were around us all the while we were in the forest, but they were discrete enough that I didn't care.

We were back on the street now, heading towards the richer parts of town.

Pulling one of the dogs aside, I took him a few steps from Rebecca.

"Back when Jon was guarding me he carried my cash, do you do the same?"

I couldn't see the dog's eyes under his helmet, but he looked confused. "Yes, sir. We are authorized to cover any expenses you may incur from the city purse."

"No." I shook my head. "Not from the city purse, from my own wage. I get payed to be mayor. How much money do I, personally, have?"

It took him a few moments. "Well, Sir, you've officially been on the job since Commissioner Sayer appointed you back in the spring, that would be almost six months. With a wage of one hundred thousand dollars a year, I would estimate you have fifty thousand dollars waiting for you in your account. Assuming no outside forces in play."

Huh? "Fifty thousand dollars?" Gah, that was more money than I'd ever seen in my life, even when I was hunting with English.

I sent the dog off to check my account and bring me a chequebook.

"Hey, babe?" I had Rebecca back in my arms now. "How do you feel about getting a really, really nice ring as my apology for dropping this on you so suddenly?"

It wasn't that I had any clue how to go about buying a ring. I'd never had to do anything like this before, but I knew where the high end stores were.

Back into the same district that held Smith's shop, we slowly worked our way down the street, looking in windows and reading signs.

We were just about to enter a jeweller's three stores up from Smith's shop when I heard a door snap open.

"Tommy?" Smith Arrow stood in front of his store, peering out at us through a thick pair of glasses. He was so crooked over that he had to lean on the storefront just to stay upright.

"Smith!" I walked over to him, Rebecca in tow, to take his hand.

"What are you doing back here, my son? There aren't any more social events coming up with you on the guest list."

I shook my head, Rebecca still held close beside me with one hand. "No, Smith. We're making our own event. Rebecca and I are getting married. We're picking out a ring."

"You are, are you?" He adjusted his glasses, peering at me. "Unusual for a wolf." He huffed out a dry laugh. "But then again, when was the last time you or that pussy-cat English ever did anything normal? And speaking about that wayward lion, he never did come by to pick up his white-tie suit."

I laughed. "Yep, and he stood out like a crack claw at the party. He was still wearing that suit from when we were last on the Diamond Dice."

For a moment I almost thought the fox had swallowed his tongue. "He what? That's totally inappropriate for a party like that! He..."

I set my arm on the fox's shoulder to calm him. "It all ended up for the best. But you'll have to excuse me. Rebecca and I are picking out a ring."

The fox's hand came up to grab mine, fingers wrapping around more tightly than I'd ever have thought his frail form was capable of.

"Not without me, my son." He was lurching from the wall now, using me as a walking stick. "You're as hopeless as that lion when it comes to such things. Without me the two of you would likely end of getting swindled for some cheap knock-off."

Beside me, Rebecca giggled.