

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 11:	Father's Blessing.....	131
Chapter 12:	Howling In Public.....	144

Chapter 12: Howling In Public

The three of us had to get buzzed into the jeweller's store. The only way in was through a double set of doors that looked like they just as well could have been airlocks.

The reason for their security was obvious the moment we stepped in. There was enough gold in here to furnish a good sized Aztec pyramid. Display cases were filled from one side to the other with all manner of rings and lockets. Gods, the amount of diamonds in this store alone was just short of blinding.

Smith hobbled off to talk to the owner, seems they were old friends. That left Rebecca and I alone together to wander between the displays.

"You don't really have to do this, Wolfy." Her voice was low as she ran her fingers over the glass of one of the cases. "It's not like a ring really means anything."

I nuzzled the side of her head. "Nah, babe, but I *want* to. You've been with me this long, I'd better get you something shiny to repay you, otherwise you might just run off."

"And since when have I ever been enamoured with shiny things?"

I laughed. "Okay, you got me. This is as much for show as it is for you. We're getting married to make the public happy. They won't believe us if we don't have anything to show for it."

Around and around the small store we went. The owner came out to show us his wares, but he spent more time arguing with Smith than actually talking to us.

Every ring the two of them tried to sell us was more lavish and... well, ugly than the last. There were no simple designs, nothing understated. Everything was big and flamboyant, weighed down with fancy stones and loops of metal that would more than likely get caught and ripped free the first time we went into the forest.

Even then they still forced a half dozen designs on Rebecca's finger. She was about as enthused with them as I was.

At long last we'd managed to get a little space from the two busybodies. They were arguing over yet another design as we fled towards the back of the store.

Tucked in the far corner of one of the least decorated display cases was a small, simple, unadorned gold band. It was so thin and basic as to looked like little more than a loop of gold wire.

"How about that, babe?"

It took her a moment to even find it hidden amongst the baubles and gaudy trinkets pressed around it.

A slight laugh escaped her lips. "That, Wolfy? It hardly even looks like any of the other rings in this place." A smile touched her lips. "I like it."

I took a moment to try and get the other mens' attention, but they didn't even seem to notice me.

Rolling my eyes, I checked to see if the display case was unlocked. Surprisingly, it was.

Reaching in, I clumsily plucked the thin gold band from its display pillow with my black claws. The thing looked so delicate in my fingers that I was afraid I was going to destroy it.

Placing it in my palm, I held it out to Rebecca. She smiled.

There wasn't much room, pressed in between the display cases as we were, but I clumsily lowered myself down to one knee.

"Rebecca, babe," My voice was hardly above a whisper, "Will you marry me?"

She rolled her eyes as she leaned forward to place a soft kiss on my nose.

"Yes."

I slipped the ring on her finger. It wasn't the perfect fit, but it stayed in place well enough.

Grunting back to my feet, I raised my voice as, Rebecca in hand, we walked back towards Smith and the Jeweller.

"We've picked our ring. How much?"

Their eyes nearly bugged out when Rebecca held up her hand.

"That's no ring!" The Jeweller was scrambling forward now. "It's just a loop of gold wire I was going to bend to make a gelding on a real ring."

I grinned lopsidedly. "How much?"

Both he and Smith fought tooth and nail to try and dissuade us, but neither Rebecca or I were willing to budge.

In the end we got the ring for a pittance. It was hardly more than a day's salary as mayor. Heck, I could have almost afforded it when I was still working at KDP.

Walking back towards the apartment, I lifted Rebecca's hand in the afternoon sun to let the ring glint ever so slightly.

"What do you think, babe?"

She laughed. "I can live with it, Wolfy. More importantly," She gave me a gentle punch to the gut, "I can live with you."

We were closing in on the apartment now, the protesters around us, when I heard a voice through the din.

"Doggie!"

Urk.

Even Rebecca looked up at that call. She and Molly had never met, but I had a *feeling* that Rebecca recognized her.

A moment later the pure white wolf was pushing against my police escort. They were the only ones holding her back.

"Molly." I was backing away as I whispered her name.

Rebecca was in my arms a moment ago, but now she pushed forward, meeting the wolf who still stood just on the other side of a police dog's armoured arm.

"Let her through." Rebecca's voice was calm as she spoke to the dogs.

The confusion was written across Molly's face as Rebecca civilly took her hand and lead her into the apartment building. It was all I could do to follow along behind.

The lobby had been refurnished since the riots. There were couches and tables down here again. Rebecca wasted no time in leading Molly to one and sitting across from her. I got a hard glance from both of them when I neared. The only seat left was at the end of the table, between the two of them. I took it without a word.

"So you're the Molly I've heard about?" Rebecca's voice was cool, but not aggressive. She didn't show any of the signs that a wolf would have in this situation. No displays of dominance, no anger or possession.

Molly shrugged and nodded. "And you would be?" Of all things it was Molly who was edging into a display of dominance. There was no growl to her voice, but she stood straight, hands resting on the table as if she owned the building.

"Rebecca."

Molly raised a claw to her lips. "I know you. You're on the Doggie's staff." A slight chuckle came to her lips.

"She's-" I was cut off before I could even get a word out. I, it seemed, was not welcome in this conversation. The glare I got from either of them alone was enough to cut glass. Together it could make any man shrivel.

"Right." Rebecca's words were slow and carefully chosen. "But that doesn't explain why you're here."

Molly brushed her shoulder nonchalantly. "Doggie and I are... acquainted. I'm sure he's more than happy to have me."

I was smart enough not to say anything this time.

It took me a moment, but I realized that Rebecca had her hands cupped together, the left folded over the right. Hiding her new ring.

"Funny... Tommy never said anything about you until just a few days ago."

Molly laughed. It came out like an actress, full, ready, and well practised. "Well, I'm sure you know Doggie. He's a little shy talking about such things." She laughed again. "There's a hundred and one ways to make him blush under there." She cast an eye to me. "It really is rather cute."

Rebecca pulled Molly's attention back with the sound of one of her nails clicking on the hard, dark wooden table between them.

"Last time he came home, Molly, after seeing you, he smelt of a scent that most certainly wasn't your natural one."

The wolf dismissed her accusation with an off hand flick of a wrist. "Are you accusing me of using perfume? From what I'm aware, you would do well not to call the kettle black."

Rebecca froze. "And how would you know I've worn perfume like that?" Her voice had fallen now. "The only people who knew about that were the human's who made it for me."

The wolf froze. For just a moment I could see fear in her eyes as she stared across the table at Rebecca. "I think that's none of your business. I'm here to talk to *Tommy*. Not you." Her teeth gritted as she used my real name.

A smile crept to Rebecca's lips. "The only way you could have gotten that information is if the people at Horseshoe Bay traded it for food. Who gave you that information, Molly? Or for that matter," She paused for a moment, cocking her head, "Who mixed the perfume? There were only a half dozen people in the entire city who could make something like that when I was wearing it."

Molly had pulled back now. The dominance she'd been trying to assert a few moments ago had completely fled.

"Doggie," She looked to me, putting everything she could into fluttering her eyes, "Why don't we go for a nice private walk? Just the two of us."

Rebecca tapped her fingers on the table again. This time her hands were apart. The gold of her new ring glinted under the overhead lights.

"My *husband* will be staying here with me while we ask you some questions."

"Your *what*?" She spun to me, eyes wide. "You slept with this human... this *thing*?"

I couldn't keep from jumping to my feet, a growl in my voice. "You will watch what you say, Molly. We've been mated for over a year, now we'll be married."

The pure white wolf wrapped her arms around herself as she fell back into her seat. With each passing moment she seemed to shrink, to shrivel into herself.

"What is it, Molly? What's going on?" I tried to temper my voice as I spoke, but it still came out as a snarl.

"Doggie..." Her voice was high and pained as she held her hands to her eyes. "I... I don't want to see you hurt."

I had to laugh at that one. "Hurt? By Rebecca? She would be the last person I would have to fear."

"It's not that, Tommy. " She lowered her hands now, but was still unable to meet my gaze.

"They asked me to find you, to be with you again. They wanted me to take you out of the race."

I let out a huff and fell back into my seat. "Who, Molly? What's going on this time?"

"It was a cat, back in Club Bedlam..."

I lowered my head to the table. "Let me guess, he gave you some cash to try and distract me. You don't know his name, and you can't identify him."

Molly bristled, her fur standing straight out.

"He did *not* offer me any money. What to you take me for, Thomas? A prostitute? I was down on my luck and he told me that the new mayor was the same Taggart that I'd known." Her fur fell back into place a measure. "That you was trapped with a woman you didn't want, that he'd help me catch your eye again."

"Urk." Well, I wasn't exactly being eloquent today.

"Would you be able to identify him?" Thankfully, Rebecca was a little more on the ball than I was.

Molly shook her head. "Not a chance." She looked down. "I'm... I'm really sorry for all this. They gave me the perfume and an invitation to the party at West's, then set me off. I never even got a good look at the cat."

Something tickled at the edge of my mind. "Molly," It took a moment for me to find my tongue again, "You may not have seen him, but did you get a whiff of his scent?"

She looked confused. "Of course. He was right across the table from me."

A slight grin edged onto my face. "Say you were to meet him again, would you recognize him?"

She nodded. "What do you think I am, stupid? Of course I could."

Rebecca kicked me out of the little impromptu meeting a few moments later. I had the distinct feeling that she wanted to have some words with Molly that I wasn't to overhear.

Rebecca may not be a cat, but I had a feeling that the claws were about to come out.

I was planning to take the opportunity to start reading through the papers that Max had left on my desk. They were from *my* party, and I should have at least some idea what we were doing, after all.

These things were even duller than what Sayer had been pumping me with. At least the dog had experience in sending me papers that *looked* like they might be important. These things went right down to expense reports submitted to Storm Front for the salaries of the different people.

I did get a smile out of it though. With how much this was costing, English was likely to burst a vein when he had to start signing cheques.

I was more than happy to drop the papers back into a stack when someone knocked at the door. "Come in."

Speak of the devil. Max poked his head around the door a moment later.

I smiled and waved him in. "Are you here to prep me for the speech?"

His eyes widened. "Not quite. We have to get over there. The debate starts in an hour and a half, and you need to get ready."

"That soon?" I turned to look out the window. The sky was already starting to fade.

Back down the stairs, Rebecca was in tow a moment later and Molly was nowhere to be seen.

"Do I want to ask, babe?"

She shook her head. "Probably not. But," A smile touched her lips, "You won't have to worry about her again. We have an *understanding* now. She will, however, be showing up at the debate tonight to see if she can find the person who contacted her."

I shook my head. "Great. Why does this suddenly feel like a soap opera?" A thought occurred to me as we stepped out the front doors, my guard snapping into place. "What about English?" I turned to Max. "Is he going to be there?"

The oni nodded. "He wouldn't have it any other way." He snorted. "Literally. Once he heard what was going on he demanded to be there. It sounds like he plans to get himself on stage too."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Yep, that sounds like him. You'd best let him. I haven't any idea what he plans to do, but we'll likely lose limbs if we try to stop him."

"Whatever you say, Tommy." The oni lowered his voice to a mutter, "I don't want to piss him off. He's the one who signs my pay cheque."

The debate was being held in one of the big soccer pitches just to the south of downtown. There was already enough seating here to hold over a thousand people, and they'd infilled much of the turf to allow for more.

There was still an hour to go by the time we arrived, but a lineup of people wanting to get in had already formed. Almost every single one of the folks standing in the que was wearing a patch from one of the parties.

That was something that I never was able to understand. Most of the people who came in for a display like this were already dyed in the wool supporters of a party. Hardly any undecided people came. It was like the whole thing was more of a masturbatory exercise to keep your own supporters than make new ones.

Okay... politics and the word 'masturbatory'. Those were two things I never wanted to think of together.

The three of us came in through a side entrance with no problems. I noticed that the security here was all being run by the police department. Gods, with the number of cops they had here there couldn't be any left to walk the streets.

There were groups of tents set up on the field for the different parties. The Conservative party had a red tent to the east, Liberals a blue to the west, Progress party was a money green tent to the south, and our own was white and to the north.

We hadn't gotten ten steps towards our little camp when folks began streaming out. They ran about me like I was some kind of saviour.

I didn't recognize more than one in ten of the people here, and even then only in passing. They

all seemed to know me though.

I was led away and set down in a chair where some old deer pulled open an over sized handbag and began futzing with my fur.

"What have you been doing, sleeping in a mud puddle? Gods, just look at you!" Her voice was nasal and made me think of an 'Aunt Bertha' or something like that.

Fight as I might, I just couldn't seem to get free of her grasp. This woman was worse than Smith once she got a hold of me. At least Smith had the decency to limit himself to what I was wearing, this woman felt like she was trying to rip the very fur from my skin.

And all Rebecca did was sit back and watch, laughing.

I kid you not, the deer ended our session with a massive powder puff almost as big as my face. I must have sneezed loud enough to wake the dead.

"Looking dapper, mate."

When next I was able to open my eyes English was standing next to Rebecca. The lion always had a way of keeping himself looking regal, but now he looked just short of holy. His fur and mane were brushed out until they shawn, and he was dressed in a black vest and slacks that somehow managed to almost look like one of Smith's suits, yet at the same time something you could walk down the street in.

"We'll be getting started in a few moments, mate. You just sit back and let the pros do the talking. I'll take the opening speech, Max will handle the policy discussion, and *you*," He eyed me critically, "Will get to debate toe to toe with the other party heads." He laughed. "Don't look so worried, mate. They're mostly just figureheads too, they're just as confused as you are."

I'd managed to fight off all the staff who tried to press me into a getup like what English was wearing. As far as I was concerned my pelt was plenty. Especially now as I felt like I was being weighed down by five pounds of makeup and hairspray.

The first few groups of people were up now. I wasn't sure who was saying what, but English was all but dancing and doing one-liners for the crowd. Are people *supposed* to be laughing at a political rally? Either way, the lion seemed to be having a good time.

I was pressed into a small tent behind the stage, along with all the other party heads.

Heh, the only way I could tell who was who from the Liberals and the Conservatives was by the colour tie they were wearing.

The Liberal, Paul Khrétien, was a ferret decked out in a simple brown suit and a blue tie that matched his party's colours. He was fairly young, no more than ten years older than I was, and gave me a quick smile when I looked his way.

The Conservative was Jim Clark. His suit was... well, conservative. It almost looked like something Smith would make. Who knows, he probably had. The only flare the bear wore was his red silk tie. I didn't exactly get a smile from him, but his constipated grimace was handed out equally to everyone.

Jameswell needed no introduction. The cat wore, if anything, the most expensive suit of them all. It was a dark green and, gods, I swear it *smelt* like money.

"Mr. Taggart." His voice hadn't changed. He wasn't hissing at me like last time we'd met, but his calm voice held an edge that could cut the trunk of a hundred year old oak.

"Hello, Jameswell." I forced a smile to my lips as I nodded to him. "How goes life at KDP? I haven't seen you since that day with you and Heyfair."

I swear to the gods he looked like he was about ready to claw my eyes out.

"We've been busy, Mr. Taggart." He cleared his throat with a huramph, "Forming a political

party is serious business. We are no longer full time employees of KDP." He gave me a withering glare. "But not that you would know of such things. You've have your lackeys to help you at every turn. I'd be surprised if you've had to raise so much as a finger to get this far." An ugly smile spread across his lips. "But I plan to make you work for tonight. You won't have anyone out there to hand off to, Mr. Taggert."

I had to keep the growl from my voice. "I'll hold my own, Jameswell. Just make sure you can do the same. It's no fun when my prey doesn't put up a fight."

English had been off the stage for some time now. He gave me a wink as he descended the steps, but didn't come any closer. The audience died down quite a bit after he left, sounds like he was the only comedian.

One at a time, members from the other parties went up, said their bit, then came back down. I could hear the muffled echo of their words from here, but I couldn't make them out.

"So you're the mayor, huh?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin when Paul, the Liberal leader, spoke to me.

"Heh," I had to push my sweat slicked fur back. "Yeah, I am. I'm still a bit new to the job."

He laughed. "Don't worry too much." He pointed a thumb back towards the Conservative leader. "Jim and I have been at loggerheads doing this for years. This is all just for the public. Stick to the lines your PR people fed you before the show, try not to lose your temper, and join us for a drink afterwards if you feel like it."

He smiled, and you know what? I think it was for real.

"Heh. Thanks." I nodded towards him. "I'll have to remember that."

Even the bear in the red tie glanced my way and worked up a wan smile.

I didn't get so much from Jameswell.

There was just enough time for my nerves to reach the greatest possible level of 'Oh gods, what am I doing here?' before a stage hand poked his head in.

All we got out of him was, "You're on."

I followed the three others up the steps and onto the stage. Jim and Paul were relaxed, you could see they'd done this a dozen times before. Jameswell was... well, he was a cat. He sauntered forward like he owned the place.

Me? It was the most I could do to keep my tail from curling between my legs.

I'd never been on stage before, never even dreamed about it. Gods, the only saving grace was there were enough lights glaring down on us that I couldn't see the audience.

I'd gotten a quick glance out into the sea of faces before stepping into the spotlight. Every seat it seemed was taken. There had to be thousands of people out there, a fair percentage of the city.

On stage now, I was just glad I was the last person in the line, I hadn't the slightest where to go or what to do. There were four podiums set up, each with the colour of one of our parties.

I was at least smart enough to know to go to the white one. Heh, it matched the cream fur of my belly.

Staring forward, it took everything I had not to shade my eyes to try and make out the people in the shadows. My hands were gripping the podium in front of me so tight that my knuckles were beginning to ache.

"Thank you for joining us tonight, gentlemen." The voice came from a dog, a boarder collie. He had the baritone of a veteran actor. "Tonight," He turned to the audience, "We are lucky enough to have the candidates from all the major parties. Paul Khrétien of the Liberal party, Jim Clark of the Conservatives, Dean Jameswell of the Progress party, and Tommy Taggert, currently interim mayor,

from the Open party."

I bowed my head slightly when he said my name.

The dog rambled on for a few moments, reiterating what had been said before. I should have been listening more closely, but the bright lights dazzled me, making it hard to concentrate.

"Mr. Taggert?" I snapped back to attention when the dog spoke my name. "As the current mayor, you get the opening statement."

"Uh, yes. Thank you." My mind was racing. How had I gotten all the way up here and not even thought of a single thing to say? "I'd... well, I'd..." I cleared my throat, "I'd like to thank every person here, no matter their species or age, for pulling together to help with the reconstruction. V-town has just been through its greatest trial since the Cataclysm. It's not just what I've done, gods, I've done nothing compared to you people. It's on your backs that the reconstruction rests, by your hands that we've gotten this far in so short a time..."

"I object to that!" Jameswell cut in, "You can't take credit for the reconstruction. It's KDP, under my leadership, that's put so much time and effort into bringing the city back from the brink. We're the ones who saved the city. Not you."

I fought to keep my temper, when I spoke my voice came out placid. "No, Jameswell. I'm not taking credit for anything. It's the citizens who have made this possible." Now I did let a snarl slip ever so slightly in, "And not KDP. If I remember, wasn't it you who came to me not so long ago, asking that KDP be exempt from the reconstruction?"

The cat narrowed his eyes. "The Progress party believes in a true free market system. Yes," he growled, "KDP helped because we were ordered to. But we would have helped anyway, even if we hadn't been commanded. It's good for business if the city is back to normal. We would have been able to do even more if the *government* hadn't butted its fool head in."

Things didn't get much better from there on. Jameswell launched into a rant about the evils of government and how it couldn't do a single thing right. I did like to think I got one good point in when I asked him 'If government is truly so bad, then why do you want to run it? Wouldn't putting someone in charge who thinks government is inefficient just make it a self-fulfilling prophecy?'

He got a little flustered at that one.

The host eventually had to break in and pose a question straight to one of the other parties.

"Mr. Khrétien, what are the Liberal party's plans should they win the election?"

The ferret paused for a moment to send out a winning smile to the blackness before us. His voice was smooth and sure when he spoke, like he'd done this a hundred times.

"The Liberal party's platform is unchanged since the last election. We value the work having been done by the *interim* mayor," He stressed the word ever so slightly, "And we believe it is a good starting point for recovering our footing. Through investments in science and technology, and emphasis on industry, we believe we can help move V-town back, back to the glory it held before the Cataclysm. The pre-Cataclysm civilization is superior to what we have today in all ways. Don't get me wrong," He laughed, and no small part of the audience laughed with him. "We're doing a great job with what we have, but there is only so much we can do as long as we embrace our beast-like natures. The Liberal party platform will push us back to the greatness." He pointed a finger to the stars overhead, "To the moon! We've done it before, and we can be that great again!"

No small fraction of the crowd cheered.

"Thank you, Mr. Khrétien." The announcer turned to face the bear. "Now, Mr. Clark of the Conservative party?"

The bear cleared his throat and adjusted his tie as he pulled himself up to his full height.

"The Conservative party's platform remains unchanged. The *interim* mayor, Mr. Taggert, has

done an excellent job, but that has simply returned us to our starting point." He let out a heavy sigh. "We do not encourage the development of industry, but we understand why, in these dark times, it is required. Through encouraging our youth to return to their natural instincts, we believe we can help society progress. Forward is the only direction available to us, we must push on from what the Cataclysm started. The post-Cataclysm civilization is greater in all ways to what we had before. Please, don't confuse my message," He glared sternly out to the audience, "What we have today is certainly impressive, but there is only so far we can go while holding on to the past. The Conservative party platform will free us, help us move forward, out into the unexplored wilderness." He nodded his head to the shadows around us, "Into the forests, and out of the city, our future is waiting for us."

I'd never followed politics before, it astounded me that these two, so different in views, could be so civil to each other off stage, practically friends.

I'd been listening intently while the two had talked, but Jameswell opposite me had been just short of making faces.

"Thank you, Mr. Clark," the announcer said, stepping back in. "Now, Mr. Jameswell of the progress party, would you like to complete the round?"

"Thank you." For a moment the cat's voice was calm and dignified, smooth and professional. He shuffled the papers in front of him and that all slipped away. He glared at the audience now, his voice a shade from a growl.

"You can listen to these fools all day, but pithy ideology will get you nowhere. They wax philosophic about the merits of domestication versus going feral." Khrétien and Clark bristled at that jab. "This is about the government, the city," He paused for emphasis, lowering his ears, "the *economy*. Mr. Taggart can't seem to see past the nose on the end of his face. He's been so busy with the so called 'rebuilding' that he can't spare a moment to look at the big picture. Everyone thinks he's doing such a great job? That's only because there's nothing to compare him to. If the Progress party had been in control we would have moved twice as fast. Twice as many people would have their homes rebuilt by now, twice as many jobs would have been created. It's about the wealth, people. As long as misanthropes like Taggart are in control, the government will never let up. The progress party doesn't care what you do in your personal time. We just want to *run the government*. Less is more. The Progress party will evolve V-town into a true free market system, minimal government oversight, minimal policing, no forced reconstruction, and fewer taxes!"

There was a sizable cheer as he spoke, greater than either of the other two parties had gotten, but I noticed it sounded... off.

"Thank you, Mr. Jameswell--"

"I'm not done." The cat's voice was low as he turned to the mediator. You know, I think this is one of the first times I've seen a cat cower a dog.

"Unlike the current *mayor*," Jameswell continued, "The Progress party is professional, efficient, dignified. We do not go to public social events and become so drunk that we can hardly walk."

"Hey!" I couldn't help but break in, "That wasn't..."

"Wasn't what, Taggart?" The cat was smiling now, playing with me like a mouse. "Wasn't your fault? Who do you think you are? You can't even keep your own body in check, and you think you can run a city?" His grin grew wider. "And, let us talk of your back room deals. Is it not true that you have close ties to the bounty hunting organization Storm Front?"

"Yes, but..."

"To the point that the owner is financing your campaign, even fronting this very debate for you?" From somewhere in the darkness I could hear a very leonine growl start to build. "Your very name is the 'Open party', your platform is based upon the ideals of equality and transparency. Why is it

then that ninety percent of the government bounty hunting contracts go directly to Storm Front?"

"What?" I couldn't keep my own growl down now. "There has been absolutely no collusion between Storm Front and the government." I narrowed my eyes. "As far as I know, Storm Front simply happens to be one of the few remaining bounty hunting organizations large enough to take on the contracts. There's no one else who can."

Jameswell laughed. "I know of one. KDP recently formed a company of their own, Secure Services. They are just as capable as your *friend's* company. Why is it they don't seem to hold your favour?"

I forced my lips down to hide my teeth. "If they're as good, then I'm sure they would get just as many contracts. The fact Storm Front gets the majority must simply attest to the incompetence of your company. And, may I add, doesn't KDP fund *your* party?"

The cat waved my accusation off with a hand. "Of course they do, we've never hidden that fact. But *I'm* not mayor, *I'm* not in a position to influence bounty hunting contracts."

"But I don't hand out contracts, I've never..."

My voice was washed away by a sea of catcalls and booing from the audience. It took the mediator dog a good two minutes to get everything back under control.

"I think, gentlemen," The dog's composure had never slipped, "That it's time for final words. Mr. Jameswell," his voice was ever so slightly gritted, "Would you like to start?"

The cat smiled to himself and took a deep breath. "Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, the current administration is incapable of acknowledging the obvious defects in his own government. We at the Progress party will let you live your own lives without interference."

I was sure he was going to say more, but the Bear, Jim of the Conservative party, stepped in before he could get it off. "And we, the Conservatives, believe that great progress has been made in stabilizing the city. We will take what currently stands and help every citizen, no matter of species, move forward into the world proper."

Almost without pause the ferret took over after him with an easy, practised air, "Where as the Liberal party see this as a wonderful foundation to go back to our roots and grow our technological edge."

I wasn't nearly so smooth.

"Mr. Taggart?" The mediator turned to me. "Your final remarks?"

"I... uh..." The crowd before me began booing again. It was all I could do to keep from cowering behind the podium. "All the Open party wants is peace, stability, and good governance." I could just see Jameswell roll his eyes. "We don't have any grand plans, we don't have any lofty ideals. All we want is to get the city back on its feet and moving again."

"Thank you, Mr. Taggart." The dog turned to the audience. "And that's all we have for tonight, folks. The election is in two days, make sure to cast your vote."

The lights went down on us a few moments later and came up on the bleachers to help the audience filter out. Dimly, I could make out Sayer sitting in the front row, watching me. About ten seats away from him was West. The raccoon was smiling.

The other candidates walked from the stage without another word. I stayed where I was, still clutching the podium.

Well, that could have gone better.

"Hey, mate..." English was beside me now, arm draped over my shoulder. I hadn't even heard him approach. "That wasn't so bad, now was it?"

I closed my eyes and let my head sink. "English, I think I just blew our chances at the election."

"Say what?" He was guiding me away now. "You didn't do *that* bad, mate." A slight, nervous chuckle worked its way from him. "Not as good as Max and I mind you, but you didn't do so poorly."

"I got flayed by Jameswell."

He shrugged, leading me back to the Open party's white tent. "That you did, mate. But it is your first time after all. You've got to start from somewhere. That bugger probably spent the entire last month practising for tonight just so he could rip a tender piece out of you."

"I don't know if it's worth it, English." I sat down heavily in the makeup chair I'd been in not an hour ago. "No matter what I do I'll never be a good mayor. I've just got too much they can attack."

This time the lion laughed for real. "And who do you think would be *good*, mate? No one's perfect. You've got a few more scars than most, but you're head and shoulders better than anyone else who'd want the job."

A moment later the flap of our tent flipped open and Rebecca walked in.

"Hey, Wolfy." She leaned on my shoulder.

"Babe," I turned my eyes to her, pleading, "Did I do as bad as it feels like?"

She looked away for a moment. "Public speaking really isn't your thing, Tommy. I'm sure that most of the people booing you were just doing it because they were paid to."

I let myself go limp in the seat. "Still doesn't make it feel any better though. This has been a disaster of a night." I looked over at English. "And speaking of which, how'd you like to be at Rebecca and I's wedding?"

The lion just short of doubled over in laughter. "You did it, mate? You proposed? Gods," He composed himself some small measure, just enough to catch his breath, "That's awesome, mate."

Seemingly just to get him laughing again, Rebecca held out her hand with the ring.

"That's it, mate?" He had Rebecca's finger pulled so close to his eyes that it brushed his nose.

"I can barely even see it? What was it, a discount special? They give it to you for a penny?"

Rebecca pulled her hand back before giving him a good poke to the snout.

"I like it." She paused for a moment, grinning. "Though we had to fight Smith over it. He did everything in his power to keep us from walking out with it."

That actually sent English off his feet to roll on the ground. "Smith was there? Gods! He must have had an aneurism when he saw that. It's got no style, no weight, no..."

"Extra zeros behind the price?" I offered.

"Yeah," He was struggling back to his feet now, "That too. But seriously, you two," He wiped tears from his eyes, "You're doing this? For real?"

I shrugged, taking the opportunity to reach out and pull Rebecca close. "Why not? It's not like we're not together already." I paused for a moment and steadied my face, but I couldn't wipe the grin away. "And we'd be honoured if you were there when we did this formally."

"You got it, mate. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Back in our apartment, Rebecca and I were alone again when I clicked the door closed behind us.

"Hey, Wolfy," Rebecca threw her coat across one of the stools, "I just realized that we only got one ring." She glanced over her shoulder at me. "That's not right way to do it. The whole idea is that we're in this together." I got a half smile from her. "It doesn't work if I'm the only one in this marriage."

I threw an arm over her shoulders and held my free hand in front of her face.

"Rings don't work so well for folks like me, babe." I wiggled my thick fingers. "I've got little stumpy digits as compared to you. It's a side effect of still being able to walk on all fours. My hands

can still double as feet. Imagine trying to wear a ring on your toe. Anyway," I wrapped one of her hands around mine, "My joints are too large. I'd never get a ring around them."

She snuggled back into me. "That's hardly fair." She twisted the ring on her finger. "I've got a symbol to show I'm with you, but you didn't get anything in return."

"I've got you, babe." I reached down and let the tip of my tongue flick her ear. "And anyway, there is an option if you *really* want it."

She twisted on the stool to face me, sensing the note in my voice. "What's that, Tommy?"

I gently pulled her from the stool and walked hand in hand with her to the nearby sink. Rooting through the cupboard, I pulled out a small parring knife with a dull silver finish.

"This, babe." I pressed the handle of the knife into her hand. "I can't wear rings, but we both know I can carry a scar if the cut is deep enough."

"What?" She pulled back from me, "Tommy, I don't want to hurt you."

I leaned forward to lick the tip of her nose. "You didn't seem to have that problem back in Calgary when you sliced my nose to ribbons."

"But that was different."

"Don't worry, babe," I pulled her close, "It will only hurt for a few seconds. If you cut to the bone, my fur will grow back with a silver scar. Go all the way around and it'll look just like a ring."

Looking out the window, I could see the full moon punching a hole in the night sky.

"Babe," I held my hand over the sink, "I don't want there to be any confusion. We're in this forever. I want you with me until the day I die." This time as I reached down I did kiss her. It was still a challenge with a face like mine, but we'd had more than enough practise to make it work.

Pulling away, I had just enough time to catch my breath before I winced as the cold metal cut into my flesh.

Rebecca was ready to pull back at my involuntary yip when I set my hand atop her's and gently pressed down.

We moved slow, so gradually as the pain was almost indistinguishable. I heard each and every drop of blood as they fell into the sink. By the time we were done my body had begun growing back, fur and all, leaving a nice silver scar around the ring finger of my right hand.

The last thing Rebecca did before dropping the knife was to prick her own finger. A single drop of blood welled out to fall among mine that coated the bottom of the sink. They were both an identical scarlet red. I couldn't even tell them apart as they merged and flowed together.

There was one last thing I had to do before I called it a night. Rebecca in my arms, I threw my head back and howled. It echoed around the room and carried out into the night. No one challenged my call.

We didn't get much sleep that night. We did however get a lot of... exercise.

The next morning came and I all but fell out of bed to go answer the door. This time I was smart enough to close to door to the bedroom to give Rebecca some privacy when she woke.

I wasn't expecting West to be standing there.

His goons had my dogs backed into a corner again, but the raccoon seemed to ignore it as he swept into my apartment.

"Tommy, my friend. I just had to come see you after that showing you had at the debate last night." I noticed he failed to mention whether had been a good or bad showing.

I just rubbed my temples and pointed at a stool. "West, why don't you sit down. We have some things we need to discuss."

He loosed a trademark blinding smile and took a seat. A moment later he was looking around

like he was expecting something.

"Do you have anything to offer a traveller? A drink perhaps?"

I shook my head and sat down across from him. "I told you the first time we met, West, I don't drink."

"Ah, yes," He rolled his eyes, "I'd forgotten about that." He wiggled a finger at me. "And I told you to call me Allen. But anyway, you seemed to have quite a night back at my place."

"That's part of what we need to discuss, *Mr. West*," I gritted my teeth. "Exactly what was I drinking? I was under the assumption it was water."

He shrugged offhandedly. "Wasn't it, my dear friend? You were the one drinking it, not I."

"Cut the games, West." I was fighting to keep my voice level, "Just tell me what you really want."

He rolled his eyes. "All I want, friend, is to continue business as usual. You've done a great job, I have hardly a word to say against you."

"Then what about the Progress party? They're underwritten by KDP, and you *own* KDP."

"I own a lot of companies, Tommy." He laughed. "Do you seriously think I know *everything* my money goes into? Hardly. The Progress party is just a..." He plucked at the air, "Alternative. We get along swimmingly, my friend, they just happen to be for if we weren't so amicable."

"So I'm going to assume you're not behind the masses of people out for my blood?"

He reeled back as if I'd hit him. "Tommy! How could you ever think such a thing?" His voice fell slightly, "Besides, it's bad for business. I stay completely within the law. I've never had trouble before. If I meet a law I don't like, I have it changed." His grin lit up for a moment before he hid it. "Though I get a feeling that it may be a little harder with you around. No bother though, I'm already comfortably set as it is. I haven't need to change anything." He levelled me with a steady glare. "And I would appreciate it, Tommy, if you weren't to mention that little misconception of yours to anyone else. I've worked far too hard to get where I am to ever risk it by trying to have someone murdered. I've butted heads with that dog Sayer and his predecessors on more than one occasion, and I don't fancy to do so again. I've done a lot of things, my friend, but I'll leave the killing to hunters like you."

"It's not... we don't... never mind." I had to fight back a migraine. "But what about Molly? Was she your doing, or KDP's?"

"Molly?" He laughed. "Tommy, you need more than that. I can think of a dozen Mollys I've dealt with over the last month." His eyes briefly took a far away look until he forced himself back to the conversation. "But I do recall something crossing my desk... oh yes, it was a report from the party. Sorry, friend, I don't recall what it said. Something passed up to me from Jameswell." He shook his head. "That cat is a bit of a prima donna. I would never have chosen him if I'd had more time. He's just my back up plan you see, I'd much rather it if he doesn't win."

"Then why don't you just pull them? You hold their strings, if you don't want them to win, all you need to do is cut them loose."

He waved a finger at me again. "Uh-uh, Tommy. I said they're my *backup plan*, they still are. I need something to make sure you stay in line." He laughed. "Besides, how would that look if the only credible opposition to you were to stop dead two days before the election? That would look like collusion, my friend, and we can't have that."

"Fine, fine." I waved a hand at him. "Can you just make sure Jameswell doesn't try to get me killed off before the election? I wouldn't put it past him."

The raccoon smiled again, but it looked fake this time, forced. "Like I said, Tommy, I *don't* do anything like that."