

The Diplomats



By: wwwolf

Table of Contents

Chapter 1:	A Growl in the Darkness.....	1
Chapter 2:	A Day in Jail (But I didn't do anything, honest!).....	14
Chapter 3:	The Boys are Back in Town.....	27
Chapter 4:	Brown Fur and a White Tie.....	45
Chapter 5:	In The Mix.....	59
Chapter 6:	Shaving His Mane.....	68
Chapter 7:	Dealing With Dominance.....	80
Chapter 8:	The Open Party.....	93
Chapter 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 13:	Jameswell.....	157

Chapter 13: Jameswell

I managed to chase West out of my apartment a few minutes later, but only after I'd closed the door did I realize that I'd never gotten a straight answer about the alcohol while at his party.

Rebecca was up and dressed now, and she managed to slip away from me.

"Sorry, Wolfy, but if we're getting married, there's a few things I need to get done."

"Like what, babe?"

"Well, I have to tell my old friends the good news, and," She winked, "We need to spread this through the humans. Who better to do it than me?"

I was half waiting for Sayer to arrive next. That's why I wasn't surprised when a police dog stopped by to deliver today's mail.

Heh, mail. The city must have just gotten the postal service back up and running -- this was the first standard delivery I'd had since getting back.

The first letter was, unsurprisingly from 'the office of Commissioner Sayer'. He was cordial enough, but it was a summons, simple as that. I wasn't surprised, he likely wasn't pleased with my showing last night.

The other letter did get a smile out of me. It was from my parents. In my mother's neat handwriting -- couldn't be my father, he was illiterate -- they congratulated me on my first public appearance. The message was written as 'from the hunter's alpha', congratulating one of the hunters under his command, but the wording was so sugary sweet and floral as to be little more than a parody of what a real hunter would get. They did mention that they were sorry that they had been unable to attend, but welcomed me by anytime for a meal.

I just shook my head.

Well, Sayer was waiting. I'd best not put him off, he could just as well die in the meantime.

It felt a little odd to step on the street with no one but my guards around me. Every other time I'd been out I'd had Rebecca, English or Jon with me. Speaking of Jon, I'd best drop by the hospital on my way back and see how he's doing.

I didn't have the slightest trouble getting into police headquarters. My guard walked me straight to Sayer's door.

Stepping into the front office, I was surprised to see the door to Sayer's inner room closed.

"I'm sorry, Sir." The dog who ran Sayer's personal reception said, clearing his throat, "The commissioner is currently meeting with an appointment. If you would like," He gestured back towards the hallway, "I can have a waiting room prepared for you."

"That's alright, I can..." I cut off as I heard a raised voice from behind the heavy door. I recognized it, and it wasn't Sayer.

I couldn't make out what they were saying, but my name seemed to keep coming up an awful lot.

Stepping forward, the receptionist tried to bar me from the door. I pushed him aside. The police are normally vicious in protecting their superiors, but this one seemed hesitant on laying a hand on me. I took advantage of the situation to barge on in.

Shoving the door open, I got just a moment to take in the scene before both heads snapped towards me.

Sayer was at his desk, strangely devoid of papers now, and Jon of all people was sitting opposite him.

Back in his police uniform, the only indications of his wounds were the bandages that puffed out under his shirt and the crutches that leaned neatly against the wall.

"Sir!" The German Sheppard almost sprang to his feet before realizing that he still hadn't healed enough for such displays. He was left hanging half in and half out of his chair, clutching at his gut.

"Just relax, Jon. Breathe." I helped him into his chair before leaning on its back and turning my attention to Dane. "I saw your summons, Sayer." I narrowed my eyes. "And since you were in here speaking to my *personal* attache, I just assumed that I was invited."

"Mr. Taggert." His voice was no more than a whisper, I had to strain my ears just to make it out, "Constable Oaks... Johnathan and I were having a closed door meeting regarding his future on the force. This does not involve you." He lifted one finger to point to the door. "If you would be kind enough to wait outside. In the waiting room across the hall."

"I'm being recalled to the force, Tommy." Jon's voice was low, his tail curled around his legs as he spoke.

"You have not been asked to speak, *Constable*." This was the closest to fuming I'd ever seen Sayer. His lips had risen just ever so slightly. "Do not endanger your future any more than you already have."

"Shove over, Jon." I nudged him to one side of the chair as I sat on the arm. "I'm getting the feeling I'm in on this discussion whether I like it be or not." I didn't even bother making eye contact with the Dane as I spoke. "Spill it."

"Mr. Taggert," Sayer spoke slowly, enunciating every word, "This is a matter between the two of us."

"It's alright, Uncle." Jon's voice was cracked, sounding like it was ready to give out.

"You will not refer to me by that title. Especially not in front of others!" The dog channelled every last mite of anger he had into that outburst. He had looked fearsome for a split-second before falling lifelessly back into his chair.

It was Jon who spoke now. His voice had regained some of the clip I associated with him. "The Commissioner," He glanced at Sayer who waved him on, "Has requested that I leave your staff and return to the regular police force. After last night's showing, it is felt that I'm not doing an acceptable job of preparing you for the election."

"Considering you've been strapped to a bed for the better part of the last week, I don't see how you've had much of a chance."

"That's not the point in question here." Sayer glared at Jon as he cut in, "Oaks had more than a month before he was shot to prepare you for this, and it's obvious he has done a poor job."

"Sayer," I blew out a breath as I turned towards him, "As far as I can recall, the police aren't allowed to help me with my reelection campaign. *Isn't that right?*"

He shifted nervously in his chair. "Mr. Taggart, above all else, the purpose of the police service is to promote and support order. You were the one who encouraged us to think for ourselves, take our own initiative. Shouldn't you be the one to encourage us to ensure your victory when it's obvious that you're the best choice?"

I laughed. "The best choice? Since when? Anyone would be better than the Progress party. Why don't you support the Liberals or the Conservatives?"

He didn't even bother pausing to consider. "Neither of them are you. And in any event, both the Liberals and Conservatives are tied at ten percent. You and the Progress party are both at forty. Even if we factor you from the equation, the Open party is the only group that has any chance of being a positive outcome."

"And you think that filing Jon away is going to help promote those odds? He's been the only thing keeping me afloat."

A pained expression crossed the dog's face. "I do like to think that the service as a whole has been more than supportive of you."

"In some ways." I rolled my eyes. "But, Sayer," I pointed a finger at him. "I want this to be a clean election. If I win, I don't want there to be even any *hint* of controversy."

"Mr. Taggart," he gritted, "I'm sure I haven't any idea what you're talking about."

I smiled, showing all my teeth. "Good. Now, getting back to Jon." The shepherd's ears perked up. "He stays with me. That or I pull out of this right now and run as fast as I can to the woods. You can have him back if I loose, but otherwise he's mine."

"This is most unusual..."

"But you'll deal with it. You want to help, Sayer? Get in contact with Max and the rest of the party. I'm sure you can put your support publicly behind us as an individual if not as the police commissioner."

I turned to Jon. "Can you walk?"

He lowered his eyes. "In a manner of speaking."

"Fine." I reached out a hand to help him from the chair and slung his arm over my shoulders. "Then you're good enough to stay out of the hospital."

I took a few steps towards the door before turning back to Sayer. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about anyway?"

The dog bit his lip, choosing his words before responding. "We've had a break in the cases regarding your attempted assassinations. Both the leads from Club Bedlam and the gun traces have lead us back to KDP. They were trading with the humans before they returned to the city."

I laughed. "I could have guessed as much. Can you pin it on West or the Progress party?"

He shook his head sadly. "That would simply be too convenient. We are still trying, Mr. Taggart. Perhaps we'll find it in time and be able to put this whole sham of an election to rest."

I *really* didn't like the top dog in the V-town police thinking of the democratic process as a sham. Then again... I never was quite sure how they promoted people in the force.

Nobody stopped us as we left police headquarters, Jon limping next to me. My honour guard formed a tight knot, and more than a few of them glanced at Jon, but we never stopped walking.

"You alright?" I asked him. "It really looks like you should still be in bed."

He shook his head. "I don't want to go back. I'm useless as long as I'm there. I want to be out here, I want to be doing *something*."

I shrugged. "Works for me. It's been lonely around the apartment without you."

"That's not what I've heard, Sir." A smile crept to his lips. "It sounds like I'll have yet another thing to organize once we get the election out of the way."

I laughed. "Sure. Anyway..." I glanced up at the sun, it was still early morning. "Feel like an late breakfast? Café Bristol shouldn't be too busy."

I was right on that account. The place wasn't even technically open, but they were more than happy to receive me once they recognized who I was. I got the feeling that English had put me on the gold list.

"With all the spare time you've had, Jon, I'm hoping you've got some idea for our next step."

He shrugged in the wrought iron chair across for me. "I don't want to step on the Commissioner's territory..." He eyed me for a moment before continuing, "But the only lead we have is back to KDP. Jameswell has a motive to want you out of the race. The entire Open party is all but based upon your personage. If he could remove you then he would be nearly uncontested."

"So we talk to Jameswell?" I took a sip of the bitter tea before me.

"It would seem we have little choice." A smile broke his lips. "Either that or you prepare for the election. I'm sure that Max and the party would be happy to have you."

I grimaced. "Off to see Jameswell it is."

The progress party was housed in the most upscale district of downtown. Its building was brand new, hastily constructed after the quake. I hated to think just how many of the 'reconstruction hours' had been spent raising it.

The front of the four story structure was all but pure glass, and the building seemed to loom forward over the street. There was no obvious security protecting it, but I was experienced enough to see each and every one of the personnel they had loitering in the alleys and byways. These men were no hunters, nor were they as trained as the Storm Front operatives.

In the front door, we were met with a lobby that made my jaw drop. Now, I'd thought that Storm Front had a nice lobby before their building had been totalled, but this was... heh, wow.

It looked like an overpriced interior decorator had had an orgasm all over the room. The floor was faultless marble that was so polished it was hard to keep my footing. The walls, where they weren't covered in animal skins, were decked out from floor to ceiling in flashing signs that showed the party's logo over and over again. There was even music looping in the background... it sounded like some kind of ultra-nationalistic anthem played by a brass band.

The lady at the front desk, a fox – of course – had a bust about the same size as my head.

"Good morning, how can I help you?" Her voice was high and sweet, but she hadn't yet looked up from her desk.

"I'd like to see Jameswell."

She didn't even flinch as she continued to work away at the papers on her desk. "I'm sorry, Sir, but Mr. Jameswell is a very busy man. As head of the party, he'll be booked solid until well after the election." She laughed. "Getting the government in order and sweeping away the old rag, you understand."

"Old rag?" I leaned on her desk so my shadow fell over her. Jon managed to straighten to his full height and stand alone. "I've never been called that before."

"Pardon?" She finally bothered to look up. I don't think she recognized me at first.

"My name is Tommy Taggert. The mayor. I'm here to meet with Jameswell." For just once in my life I wished that my honour guard had followed me in rather than hanging back outside the building.

"I..." Her mouth fell open like a fish out of water.

I smiled before turning and leaning on the desk again. "I'll wait. I'm sure he'll have time to see me."

She didn't even bother to try and compose herself before turning to scamper away. Even with Rebecca's image tucked in the back of my mind, I had to admit that the Progress party did have good taste in receptionists. Even if they didn't seem to hire them for their office skills.

Jon was still managing to keep standing upright. He was discreetly stretching now and seemed to be a little more limber on his feet.

"Can you walk?" I whispered to him.

He nodded. "Well enough for the moment, Sir. I'll need your assistance to return to the apartment, but I won't draw any attention while we're here."

A few minutes later I heard the click of claws on the marble floor. Jameswell came towards us, descending a grand staircase. He was dressed impeccably in a brand new suit.

"Mr. Taggert." He was calm and composed, voice – amazingly – holding a friendly note. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon after our debate yesterday. Coming to admit defeat already?"

I took the ginger furred hand he offered, forcing a smile to my lips.

"Not quite." I glanced about the near empty lobby. "We need to have a discussion. In private."

The cat's grin never faltered. If anything it grew wider.

"Of course, of course, Mr. Taggert. Please," He waved a hand dramatically, "Come this way."

His grin didn't last long. We didn't get any further than the top of the stairs before it fell to a scowl.

"Call your mutt off, Taggert." I was expecting him to growl, but it came out as more of a tired sigh. "I won't talk in front of a cop."

"He's not a cop, Jameswell. He's on loan to me as my personal assistant. Anything you say in front of him will remain strictly confidential." I glanced over at Jon. He nodded. "And," I added, "After two assassination attempts, it's not a good idea for me to go anywhere alone."

A dark chuckle came from the cat. "So you're learning. I thought I'd never see the day."

A few twists and turns down lavishly appointed corridors and he threw open a heavy oak door.

Jon and I took seats as Jameswell threw himself behind a massive wooden desk. The room around us was decorated in all manner of exotic things, enough so that the cat almost looked small, huddled in among them.

The office was nice, beautiful even, but it had the feeling of another hand having assembled it. Jameswell looked like he was more of a guest here.

"Fine." The cat set his elbows on the desk and leaned forward to rest his chin in his hands. I noticed that there were no papers crowding him. "What do you want?"

I cast a quick glance around the spacious room, there was no one to be seen but the three of us. Jon had taken the liberty of closing the door behind us when he'd entered.

"Jameswell..." I cleared my throat, "Dean, I need you to come clean with me. We've tracked both of the assassinations back to KDP. You and Hayfair are in charge of KDP these days, and you're the only ones with a motive to have me done away with. I need you to tell me what's going on."

The cat rolled his eyes, but I noticed he took the opportunity to avoid meeting my gaze again. He settled himself with staring down at the desk.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about, Taggart..." He paused. "Tommy." He let out a long breath. "I don't have anything against you. Really, I don't. I'm sure you don't have fond memories of me, but before the rebuilding I only knew you as some kid who tried to flip out at me when I gave you a bad review. Up until the election you were just another name to me."

"You're telling me you're not involved with this?"

He still wouldn't meet my eyes, but his gaze did flicker briefly to Jon.

"I don't have anything against you, Tommy. I'm just here because West's political advisers needed someone to figurehead the party. They needed someone whose name was already out, but who didn't have a history or past to exploit. They chose me because I'd just been promoted to the KDP board." His hands stretched out to take in the room. "I don't even *do* anything. I just sit here in my office all day, try not to touch any of the pretty things they surround me with, and receive visitor after visitor to entertain and extol our virtues to." He laughed. "I guess that's another reason why they picked me – I can talk. They give me a handful of speaking points and I flesh them out in front of an audience. At the end of the day I go home with my pay cheque and let the real party members decide what I'm going to say in the morning. That's about it."

I sat back in my chair and let my head fall to my chest.

"So you don't know anything?"

"Tommy..." He let out a long sigh, "I'm just following orders."

"You know, Dean," I leaned across the desk to lay a hand over his, "I'm starting to think you've got all the training you need to be mayor. Our days sound just about the same. I just get to doge the occasional bullet."

I got a smile out of him with that one.

"So who should I be talking to?" I asked.

He let out another breath. "Not West. He just signs the cheques and tells us to try and win. I don't even know who I report to half the time." He glanced towards the closed door, "I can't say... I really can't... but you need to dig deeper if you want to know what the party is really doing. They'd never put anyone of importance out for the public to see, that's for figureheads like me, but they wouldn't keep them too far from the power either."

I was starting to come up with images of a particular bull.

"Thanks, Dean." I reached across the desk again. "You don't have to stay here, you know. I can't say that the Open party is much better, bureaucratically speaking, but I do try to keep it going with a clear conscience."

He gave me a wan grin. "Thanks for the offer, but I signed my life away for the pay cheque I'm getting. They'd own my soul if I tried to leave." His grin grew a bit wider. "Some days it feels like they already do."

"Just hold on. This'll all be over in two days. One way or the other. Either I'll be out of the office, or the Progress party will be in limbo for a few years."

"Don't bet on it, Tommy." His smile was gone. "Just because you win the election, it doesn't mean you'll be mayor for your full term."

I was happy to be out of the Progress building soon after. Frankly, the whole place put my teeth on edge. I kept an eye open for Hayfair as we left, but the bull was nowhere to be seen.

We'd only just made it out the door when Jon began to waver on his feet. He hadn't shown a single sign of weakness while in the building. For a guy who'd been on crutches a couple of hours ago, it was impressive.

"Let's get you out of here, Jon." I waved one of my guard dogs over to help take his weight.

Together, the three of us made our way back to the apartment.

I couldn't help but notice that one of my guards still carried a rifle. He'd didn't look quite so nervous to be holding it now. The police must be doing proper firearms training now. I wasn't sure if that was a good sign.

Back at the apartment building, I set Jon in his office on the main floor.

"Are you going to be alright?" I took a seat across from him.

"I'll be fine, Sir." A smile touched his lips. "Anywhere is better than a hospital bed. At least I can breathe here."

I could agree with him on that one. No mater what they did, hospital air was always rank with the scents of sickness and cleaning solution.

"So now we hunt down the next person in the chain?" I asked as I idly flipped through the papers sitting on his desk. I noticed that Able's signature was scrawled across many of them. The other dog must have been working out of this office in Jon's absence.

"It would appear so, Sir." Jon grimaced slightly as he shifted in his seat. "We still don't have enough evidence to officially pry into the party without it looking like we're trying to force them from the election, but I'll enquire with the service to have a tail put on Mr. Hayfair." He paused for a moment, a pained expression that had nothing to do with his wounds crossed his face. "That is assuming that they are still willing to cooperate with me."

I set a hand on Jon's shoulder. "Let me guess, I bollixed that one up just as badly as I did last night. Jon," I knelt down slightly to meet his eyes, "I really hope I didn't mess anything up for you. What is it Sayer's trying to do? He won't acknowledge you're his nephew, but yet he's still trying to deem you his successor? Shouldn't Able or Baker take over for him?"

Jon turned his head away. "There is slightly more to it than that, Sir. You may have noticed that the vast majority of police officers are canine, and, more specifically, familiaris. While the force is not... discriminatory, there do tend to be only a handful of families that bulk out our ranks."

"Sayer was not technically the highest ranking officer when he was raised to the position of commissioner," he continued. "Able and Baker were already superintendents by that time. There is a tendency for particular lines to assume command of the force. Sayer does not have any children or close relatives. My own line is... less than well regarded, but I am Sayer's closest living relative, and my own record has been generally positive. My history is already widely known within the force, but the Commissioner still wishes to keep it as discrete as possible."

I just shook my head. "Okay, that's not going to work. The whole Open party *thing* is about getting rid of these backroom deals. Assuming that I don't get kicked out of office first, could I just promote Able or Baker to the post myself."

A look of horror crossed his face. "That would be most unwise, Sir." He paused for a moment to compose himself. "The force has always handled its own internal power structure. They mayor *may*," he put a heavy stress on that word, "have the right to select a police Commissioner, but I've never heard of it being done. In any event," He averted his eyes, "Able and Baker would not be appropriate choices."

I could feel the hair on the back of my neck begin to rise. "And why not? They seem perfectly capable."

A slight chuckle escaped his lips. "They are, Sir. They are both extremely good at what they do. They're brothers. Their family has held the post of superintendent for the last forty years. Frankly, Tommy," He raised his eyes to meet mine, "They would more than likely flatly refuse any promotion you handed to them. And they would be entitled to do so. No officer of the force can be promoted to a

position they do not want."

I sat back in my chair. "Fine. So, what do *you* want?"

He shook his head and laughed again. "I feel I can do more good here, for the moment at least. My uncle is not yet... ahem, dead. He is doing a credible job and I'm happy to see him carry on. My only wish is to avoid the problem for as long as possible."

I rolled my eyes. "You're starting to sound like me."

Leaving Jon in his office, I headed back up to the apartment. I was rather surprised to find the door open.

"Babe?" I poked my head in.

A single whiff of the air and I could feel my lips raising.

"Molly!" I had to force the growl out of my voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Calm down, Wolfy." Rebecca walked up beside me to throw an arm over my shoulder. "We're working together now." She smiled. "Neither of us wants to see you splattered across the pavement." Molly's eyes cast down as Rebecca spoke. "And have we got news for you."

"Oh yeah? I could use some good news."

"I was in the audience last night," Molly picked up. She came a step closer to me, but I noticed she stopped a respectful distance away. "While you were making your speeches." She grimaced. "I smelt him. I smelt the cat from the bar. The one who payed me to chase you."

I couldn't keep the smile from my lips.

"Molly met up with me this morning," Rebecca continued, "And we tracked him down. She'd got a good look at him yesterday. You'll never guess who he's working for."

"Oh, I could take a stab." I grinned as I walked over to sit down on one of the stools, Rebecca beside me and Molly across the counter. "Was he wearing a green jacket the same colour as money?"

"You're right, Reb," Molly's voice was a low chuckle, "He *is* a smart wolf. Smarter than when I knew him."

"You've got that right." Rebecca replied as she snuggled closer to me. "And it's all my doing. Isn't it, Wolfy?"

"Well, I wouldn't quite say that..." I didn't get out any more before she poked me in the nose.

"But sometimes he doesn't know when to shut up." Both of the women laughed at that one. I was starting to get the feeling I'd been ganged up on.

"Alright, ladies," I tried to sound macho and domineering, but that just got me another laugh, "What do we know now..." I paused for a moment before lowering my head to my hands. "No. First tell me what *you two* did. And please gods tell me it was legal. Or..." My whiskers twitched.

This time the slap came from Molly. "Don't even go there, Doggy."

I turned to Rebecca for sympathy, she just rolled her eyes.

"We cornered the pussy and invited him up to a hotel room for a little two on one." Rebecca's finger twitched up to flick my nose again. "The man was so stupid that he didn't even recognize us." Her voice fell slightly. She couldn't growl like a wolf, but her she had a menace all its own. "He didn't get quite what he was expecting."

"Wonderful." I rolled my eyes. "I thought we were trying to make the world better here, not smack people around with socks full of pennies. Please, girls, please tell me you didn't do what it sounds like you did."

Rebecca didn't meet my eyes. Even Molly looked away. "He's still walking, Wolfy, but he won't be reporting back to his bosses at the Progress party until after the election." She grinned. "Or until he manages to untie himself and grow his pelt back. You know," She raised a finger to her lips, "I

never knew that cat's were quite that scrawny looking without their coats. Almost makes me wonder what English would look like if..."

I pulled her closer as she trailed off, Molly laughing in the background. "I wouldn't try it, babe." I reached out to lick one of her ears. "I doubt he'd take it well, and I know for a fact he'd never forgive you."

"Anyway, Doggie," Molly chimed in, "We managed to get a little info out of him before he passed out from shame. It wasn't that he knew much, but at least we can prove it was the Progress people who sent me after you." She exchanged a glance with Rebecca, "And that was also the main hub that the guns were going through. That gives us a link to the latest attempt."

I shook my head. "No good. How exactly do you plan to get this information to the police? Tell them you left a guy tied up and naked in a hotel room just to coax some info out of him? No. The only thing that scares me more than the fact you did it is that Sayer would likely be more than happy to go along with you."

"We're doing this for you, Tommy." Rebecca pulled herself deeper into my fur. I didn't stop her.

"I know, babe." I wrapped my free hand around her. "I appreciate it, I really do, but we have to keep ourselves clean or we'll be no better than they are."

I didn't say anything else as I held her close.

"Hey, what about me? I did just as much as her! Don't I get any cuddles?" There was a lopsided grin on Molly's face as she made a point of complaining.

I reached down to tickle Rebecca's nose with a claw. "You're the one who brought her into this, babe..."

"I said don't even go there, Wolfy." She swatted my hand away.

Of all people it was Amstys and Renald who showed up at the door next. They were more than surprised to see Molly.

"Boss." Renald stood politely in front of me, lowering his head ever so slightly. "The hunter's alpha has decided, in all his wisdom, that with the election coming up so soon we should be spending more time in sight with you. To show the support of the hunters." A scowl crossed his lips. "He wants you to know that you, *of course*," he drew the words out, "Have the full support of the hunters in this election. He'll be expecting us all to vote for you." The venom in his voice was plain. "My vote, however," he added, "Is undecided."

"I'll vote for you, young master." Amstys chimed in. Well, I call it a chime, but with his voice it was more of a roar.

"Thanks." I ruffled the larger wolf's fur and did my best to ignore Renald. "But I've got a task for you, Amstys."

"Yes?" He looked at me with a cock of his head.

"Escort Molly home." I pointed my finger at her where she still sat at the table. "She's just helped us, and I want to make sure that no one is following her because of it." Well, that and I needed her out of the apartment before her scent drove me mad.

"I don't know Molly." Amstys' eyes narrowed as he stalked towards her.

Even sitting on the tall stool, Amstys' massive black form towered over her smaller white one. I'd forgotten just how huge he was. He just didn't seem to look as large when he was hunched over next to Renald.

I almost held my breath as he loomed. Molly, for a woman who had just done the gods knew what, looked like she was on the edge of screaming and fainting like an actress.

He leaned towards her, nose nearly brushed her fur before drawing in a long breath.

He grunted. "You're a woman."

Molly raised her head to look at him, a pained expression on her face.

"Of course I am!"

"The young master said I should take you home. Let's go."

A sly smile crept across Molly's lips as she slid from the chair.

"Tommy," She winked at me, "I'm not sure I want to know what this 'master' thing is... but can I keep him?"

A moment later she'd slid her arm around Amstys' and led him out the door. I just saw the black wolf's eyes turn towards me quizzically before they were gone.

It was all I could do to hold my laughter until I heard the door at the end of the hall bang closed. I was nearly falling off my stool I was gasping so hard.

"Tommy," Rebecca gave me a bop to the nose, "That wasn't nice saddling poor Molly up like that!"

I could only laugh harder. "Poor Molly? I'm more concerned what she'll do to poor Amstys! Did you see his expression when she led him away? We may not be the only ones in for a wedding in the near future!"

Glancing over at Renald, I noticed that even he couldn't help cracking a smile.

"Okay," I wiped a tear from my eye, "You can spill it, Renald. Why are you really here?"

He looked hurt for a moment. "I told you. The alpha feels you'll be in even greater danger during the election, so he wants us closer to you." He cast a glance towards the door. "Your whipped puppy there shouldn't even be escorting what's-her-name, we're supposed to stay with you." He rolled his eyes. "But I guess he's not *technically* a hunter, so, unlike me, he's not bound by the alpha's wishes."

I headed down to the second floor after spending an hour or so relaxing with Rebecca.

The second floor was where the Open party had moved into, it was a lot more crowded down here.

I could pick out a couple of the people that Max had introduced me to back when he started the party, but with over a hundred people running about, I hardly knew a soul.

What gave me the biggest kick was that more people seemed to recognize Rebecca than they did me. I got more than a few glances, but frankly, I wasn't surprised that not too many people knew my face. I'd only been out in public once, and that had been for the debate.

"Uh, babe?" I turned to Rebecca. "You seem to have some admirers." A handful of people waved to her as we walked through the busy office.

"Of course, Wolfy." She grinned. "What do you think I've been doing all this time, shopping? You've made one speech, I've made ten. Max and I have been doing our best to try and win this for you."

"Oh." Was about all I could say.

She took the lead now, pulling me down the hallway into a unmarked apartment that had been converted into an office suit.

She poked her head through the door. "Max, you in?"

"Over here." I heard his reply from behind a stack of papers that seemed to reach to the ceiling. There was so much paperwork in this room that someone had come by and reenforced the floor.

"I brought a guest for you, Max." Rebecca chuckled as she cleared a spot for us on the chairs in front of Max's desk.

"Uh... of course." He appeared a moment later, straightening the tie on his hopelessly rumpled suit. By the look of it, and smell, he'd likely slept in the thing.

"What can I do for you..." He looked up, a smile coming to his face. "Tommy!" He raced forward to take my hand. "Gods, it's good to see you."

Frankly, I was surprised the oni could see anything at all. The bags around his eyes had grown so dark as to make his normally cherry red skin almost black.

"Thought it might be a good idea to see how your party is doing." I took a seat in front of his desk in the hope that Max would follow suit. He looked like he was dead on his feet.

He collapsed into his seat a moment later with a thud.

"You mean *your* party, Tommy." He smiled. The grin was tired, but real. He waved a hand. "This is all yours. Well, yours and the lion's."

I shook my head. "I'm just the figurehead, Max." I closed my eyes for a moment before meeting his gaze again. "I'm finally getting used to that. This is your show, Max, not mine. If we win it'll be a feather in your hat. I'm just surfing the wave, nothing more. What are our chances? Really?"

He grinned slightly. "Not good. But not bad either. The city really is doing well. We don't have anything to fear from the Conservatives or Liberals, the only people who will vote for them are the die hards who've voted that way all their lives. We're neck in neck with the Progress party. Both of us still at forty percent." He paused for a moment before continuing. "We were starting to make gains before yesterday, but..."

I rolled my eyes. "I get it. I'm no good at public speaking."

"No." He shook his head slowly, "It's my fault as much as yours. I'm your party manager, I should have prepped you. So many people are looking up at you like the grand-high-mayor that I just kind of assumed that you would... well, be bigger than life." A sad grin edged onto his face.

"Although, do you know what people have taken to calling you on the streets over the last few days? 'The bullet proof boss'."

From behind me I heard Renald gag. I hadn't even realized he was still with us.

"It's true." Max's smile grew. "If anything the assassination attempts have helped us." He shook his head. "Before, you were 'the mayor'. Now your that guy who survived an attack. It rallies the people around you, make you look bigger than you really are."

I laughed. "Bigger than I really am? What next, ask me to grow a mane like English?"

For a moment it seriously looked like he was considering it.

"Anyway," Rebecca cut in, "He's our secret weapon." She poked me. "Let's get our wolf on the street for the final sprint to the election and see what we can drum up."

"Hey now," I swatted at her hand, "I've got things to do. We still need to track down Hayfair and figure out what's going on."

She gave me a hard glare. "No. We need to track down Hayfair. Jon's back now, so he and I will take care of that. What *you* need to do is win the election."

I did my best to make puppy dog eyes. "But, Babe, I *hate* public speaking."

"Then you shouldn't have volunteered for the job."

"I didn't!"

No one seemed to much care for my protests.

It wasn't much longer before I was led from the room by an 'appearance specialist', otherwise known as a makeup artist. She spent a good hour fussing with my fur before she was even vaguely happy.

I was rather surprised who walked in while I was getting power puffed.

English looked as good as he had last night. The lion came striding down the hallway looking a good ten times more mayor material.

"Mate!" He was beside me in the blink of an eye, shewing the makeup lady away. "I've still to receive my engraved invitation by mail. Hope I didn't miss anything."

"Nothing too big, buddy." I rested my hands on the arms of the chair to lever myself up.

I didn't even get the chance to move before he lunged out to grab my right hand, pulling it towards himself.

"Dude! Let go!" I struggled in his grip, but couldn't get enough leverage to pull myself free.

"Mate, you *are* serious about this!" He was looking at the new silver scar that encircled my ring finger. "You know, mate, that those things don't come off." He grinned, "Even for you."

"And I'm not planning on removing it, thank you very much." I finally managed to get my hand back.

Standing here, I looked out over the sea of bodies that ran up and down the main hallway on this floor. Everybody seemed to be sprinting somewhere, half of them were shouting or waving papers.

English laid a hand on my shoulder, almost making me jump.

"You've got a lot of people looking out for your best interests here, mate."

I shook my head. "No I don't. *You've* got a lot of people on your bankroll. There might be a half-dozen in the entire building who really care about me. The rest are just here to pick up a pay cheque."

A few moments later and English had led me into an empty apartment, closing the door behind us.

"Mate," He gave me a glare, "I don't know what you got stuck up under your tail, but these folks are here for you. My money just keeps them from falling over due to starvation. You didn't see Max when he was hiring them. Gods, mate, he went through a good two hundred people just to find one that actually *wanted* to be here. They aren't here for the money, mate. They're here because they believe in this."

I shook my head. "Anyone mind telling me what 'this' is? I've been too busy between getting shot at and political scrapping to even find out."

His glare softened. "Mate, it's you. Look at the other choices. The Liberals want us to all abandon our biffs and become just short of human again, the Conservatives the opposite, they'd just as soon abandon the city." A slight growl grew in his throat. "The Progress buggers don't care what people are doing as long as they're making their masters some money. Mate," He looked away from me now, walking over to stare out the window, "The Open party isn't some pamphlet that Max wrote up, it you." He smiled. "It's me, it's Rebecca. It's the fact we can make the whole idea of V-town work. We're balancing who and what we are. And as for the Progress party... we're not trying to turn this into some perverted darwinistic experiment where the rich float and the rest of us drown."

I walked up beside him, looking out into the street that stretched into the distance. Down below I could see people of all species walking shoulder to shoulder without so much as a scuffle.

"And how did it change from my whole idea of 'good governance' to some fairy-tale idea like that? Doesn't anyone even listen to me?"

He laughed. "Mate, you told Max to run the party as he saw fit. He did. I stepped in a few times to help him along, but he's the one who built this around you. And it's worked. We can win this, mate. We really can."

I slapped him on the back and turned to walk away. "You're starting to sound like a motivational poster, buddy. What happened to the killer lion that I teamed up with."

A slight pained expression crossed his face before he caught up with me, slinging a near

crushing arm over my shoulders. "He's still here, Mate. I've just set my sights a bit higher. I want to take over the city now, and you're my ticket."

"Lucky me." I rolled my eyes. "I knew there had to be some reason you were bankrolling this."

"Alright, Max," I was back in his office, Rebecca and English on either side of me, "What do we have lined up for today?"

He handed me a piece of paper. "We been waiting for this. You're the secret weapon that'll push us over the edge. The Progress party had the ticket last night, but we can make it up today by sending you out into the world to make back the votes we lost."

I ground my teeth when he spoke about the debate.

"And how, pray-tell, are we going to keep me from losing even more votes? I thought we'd already established I'm no bloody good at this."

Max smiled. "We already know you can shake hands. That's all we need. Go out, smile, kiss a few pups, and shake as many hands as you can. Don't stick around with anyone long enough to talk about policy. We'll load English up with a backpack of pamphlets to hand out, that should answer any questions."

I glanced at the lion. "So you're my chaperone?"

He snorted. "More like your bodyguard and manager rolled into one." He reached out a hand to muss my hair. I was too slow to avoid it.

"Fine." I looked to Rebecca. "And what will you be doing?"

She grinned. "What do you think, Wolfy? Trying to keep you alive. English already knows what we extracted from the KDP cat. He's got his people on the case, and I plan to join in."

"But, babe," I couldn't keep the whine from my voice, "We just got engaged yesterday and now I'm seeing even less of you!"

She leaned forward ever so slightly to plant a feather light kiss on my nose.

"But isn't it all worth it when you do see me again?"

"She's got a point, mate." English began dragging me out by the scruff of my neck.

"Shut up, English." I crossed my arms in front of my chest with a huff. "Just shut up."