

The Diplomats



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Chapter 14: Election Night

Max hadn't been kidding when he'd said shaking hands and kissing babies. Our first stop was Queen Elizabeth Park. A fitting destination considering English was in the lead.

It looked like they had everything planned out. There was already a pavilion setup, complete with a tent to shade me while still leaving me open to the public.

A line up had already formed before I'd gotten there, and there were callers yelling out my name on the streets.

Renald had taken up a position just off to one side of me and Amstys had tracked us down while we were on our way here. The large black wolf was standing on my other side. And was he blushing?

If I thought my previous handshaking sessions were bad, this was raised by a power of three. At least the other times I had the opportunity to sit down with each person for a few moments, now they were being pushed through like meat at a sausage factory.

And I've always thought sausages were disgusting.

I was only lucky that I'd had so much experience kissing Rebecca. Now I was not only pecking babies on the cheek, but fully grown women as well. I did notice more than a few humans in the crowd, each and every one of them took the opportunity to stare at my ring scar.

Heh, I suppose I should be glad they weren't staring at the scar next to my groin.

I wasn't actually saying much. It was English who was rattling off page after page of propaganda at the top of his lungs. Gods but he was putting his voice to good use, everyone in a three block radius must be able to hear us. I, on the other hand, didn't get much more than 'Thanks for coming' and 'Hope to see you on election day'.

Towards lunch I noticed another police dog work his way through the crowd towards me. He was dressed in the same black combat gear as the rest of my guards and carried an oversized rifle almost as tall as he was.

I didn't think any more of him. It was normal for my guards to be cycled in and out while I was on a long outing like this. It wasn't until he slid himself between me and the next person in line that I even bothered to look up.

"Yes?" This was odd. It was uncommon for any of the dogs to want to talk to me.

"I thought you might like some company, Sir." I couldn't see the dog's face behind his helmet,

and his voice was muffled.

"Yeah, sure. Thanks, officer..."

He flipped up his visor. I still couldn't see his face in the shadows of the helmet, but his scent spilt forth from the confined suit.

"Jon?" I couldn't keep a smile from my lips. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be taking it easy."

He shook his head, a quick snap, but I could still see the faintest grin on his face.

"No, Sir. My job is to keep you safe and help you win the election. I can't do either from back in my office." He hefted his massive rifle. "I may not be able to do much to advise you right now, but I *can* help protect you."

I shook my head with a laugh. "Fine, fine. Take a seat and join the festivities."

It was almost starting to feel normal again. The only person missing was Rebecca.

I think I sprained my wrist while shaking hands.

It was getting towards the end of the day, but the line hadn't slacked off at all. If anything it had grown longer.

I'd sent Renald off to grab some take-out for dinner. It didn't look like we were leaving anytime soon. He'd left with a snarl, but come back with his arms full of cub-caf boxes. I was good with that.

There had been a moan of disappointment from the line when I pulled the front flaps of the tent closed for a dinner break. Frankly, right now I didn't care. I needed a rest.

Even Jon joined in as we tore through the boxes. It wasn't until we'd filled our bellies that he quietly pulled me aside.

"Sir," He'd pulled off his helmet so I could see him clearly now, "I have a message for you from Sayer." He averted his eyes. "I am strictly forbidden from reading it." His voice was a low whisper.

A moment later he palmed me a letter, taking pains not to allow anyone else to see him do so. An arm on my shoulder, he turned me away from the rest of the tent as he, never looking back, returned to sit at the table with English, Amstys, and Renald.

'Mr. Taggart,' The letter read in a hasty scrawl, 'It has come to my attention that as a result of the information brought to me by Miss Rebecca there may be a traitor in your inner circle. We do not have conclusive evidence of this yet, but what we have been able to gather suggests that they do not plan to support your bid for reelection. I also have separate evidence to suggest it is not planned for you to survive election night.'

'I suggest you take extreme care, Mr. Taggart. I know that you trust those around you, but I can not impress upon you enough that it appears that *someone* has been compromised. I will do everything I can to increase your protection, but I do not wish to take any overt action as it may tip off whoever your assailant is.'

It was signed at the bottom with the same signature that I'd seen on a hundred documents before.

I crumpled the letter in my hand. The sound of the paper was loud in my ears. Behind me, no one seemed to notice, they were all finishing off the last of the food and discussing what they were going to do once the election was over.

I didn't even have a garbage can to get rid of the message. In the end I simply swallowed the bitter mass, shoving it in my mouth and forcing it down so that no one else could ever read it.

Returning to the table, I smiled and laughed like everyone else, but my grin felt like it might fall to the ground and shatter at any moment.

The evening went by in a blur. I kept shaking hands and nodding at people, but I was running on autopilot.

Who could be waiting to betray me?

Gods, it couldn't be English. I'd spent so much time with that lion over our journey to Edmonton that it felt like I knew him better than my own parents. He did run Storm Front though, and he was the one who bankrolled the party. If I was gone no one would dare stop him from getting everything he wanted.

Amstys? Okay, that one made even less sense. The wolf's mind was so broken that I doubt he'd even think about betraying me. He was as loyal to me as he was to my father and the hunters. But, then again, I hadn't seen much of him since we'd returned to the city. I couldn't truly say I knew the titan very well, and... well, he was only loyal to me as he saw me as a replacement for Al-Sedexterous, his former Mistress.

Jon? Now that was a stretch. Even if Sayer didn't trust him enough to let him read the message. I couldn't even come up with a reason, no matter how far fetched for him to betray me. He was next in line to command the police, but he seemed downright happy that I was keeping him from it.

Well, that left Renald.

I glanced over to the tan wolf behind me as the line moved forward. He sat there, staring out into the crowd, putting up a show of looking all 'hunter-like' and menacing. The only reason he was even with me was because my father had forced him to. He made no secret that he didn't want to be here. But that left a gap in the rational. If I died, he did too. My father would not spare him if I were committed to the grave, of that I could be sure.

Gods, why did everything have to be so complicated? Maybe I should just join the Conservative party and disappear back into the forest.

I couldn't keep the grin off my face. Well, that wouldn't be a bad idea... just Rebecca and I.

The next few people in line mistook my smile as meant for them. Not that I was about to correct them.

The line kept moving long into the evening. It wasn't until after the stars came out that Rebecca slid up beside me.

"Hey, Wolfy."

I gave her a quick kiss as I kept shaking hands and greeting people. I only had time to slip in a few words as the line kept moving forward.

"Babe. Gods, it's good to see you again."

At long last English called a halt to the parade of people at ten o'clock. I couldn't be happier.

How in the world could there even be a chance that I'd lose the election with the number of people who'd come by? It felt like I'd seen half of V-town.

I leaned on Rebecca's shoulder as we walked back to the apartment. I left as many people as I could behind to take down the pavilion.

"Babe," I didn't speak to her until we were safely alone, locked away in the apartment. "I got the message from Sayer."

She gave me a questioning look as she shrugged out of her jacket. "What message?"

I took the coat and tossed it in the general direction of the closet. "The one he wrote regarding the information he got out of the guy you and Molly found yesterday."

She froze. "What? We never told the cops. Did you?"

I shook my head. "Not even Jon. I just assumed you did while you were out and working this morning." I checked the clock. "It's close to eleven. We can't even hightail it over to the police building to ask him." A sinking thought crossed my mind. "Could he have someone following you?"

Despite everything, she grinned. "Wolfy, I'm your wife-to-be, and you've had how many assassination attempts on you? Of course he has someone following me. I just make sure to give them the slip once I leave the building." She frowned now. "Though that doesn't explain how he found out. We were careful not to let any of the cops see us. What did he tell you?"

I recounted, as best I could remember, what the letter had said. I now wished I hadn't destroyed it.

"There's not much we can do now, Tommy." She snuggled into my side as we sat on the edge of the bed. "I can't imagine any of us trying to hurt you."

I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close as I gazed out the window. Neither of us got much sleep that night, and this time we didn't have any fun doing it either.

It felt like I'd only just touched my head to the pillow when a sharp knock came at the door.

"Mate!" I could hear English's voice all the way from the hallway, "Get up, you bugger. We need to get you ready for the election!"

It took every erg of strength I had to pry myself from the soft mattress.

Looking out the window, the city looked the same as it did every other day. No sign that this evening would decide just where we would go from here.

"Mate!" He pounded on the door again. "Move it!" I opened the door a moment later to scowl at him. All he had to say was, "You look like hell."

"And you're a smiling cherub," I shot back.

The lion did in fact look rather good, and he carried two coat bags slung across his shoulder.

Muscling past me and into the apartment, he waved to Rebecca who was only half dressed. She waved back without a hint of modesty.

"You've got a long day ahead of you, mate." He grinned. "You don't go into overdrive until evening, but we need to get you ready. It's almost noon."

I rested my forehead on the back of a hand.

"Why? What happens this evening, other than me possibly losing office?"

He gave me a slap on the back. "Tradition, mate. The mayor always casts the final ballot before the polls close. Then we wait for the counts to come in." He threw a bag at me and tossed the other one through the open door in Rebecca's direction. "I even got Smith to do you up some new fancy duds just for the occasion. Even for Lass, you should have heard the screaming over that!"

I waited for Rebecca to disappear from sight for a moment before I took the lion by the shoulder.

"Buddy, I... what are your plans after the election?"

He gave me an odd look for a moment. "The same as before, mate, keep rebuilding the city. What else?"

"I... English, I got news yesterday that someone is trying to kill me before the election is over."

He laughed and slapped me on the back. "You just found that out now, mate? I would have thought the previous two attempts would have tipped you off. Gods, those smacks on the head must have cost you a few IQ points."

"No, English." I lowered my voice. "Sayer got a tip off that one of us..." I cleared my throat, "One of, you know, us."

"You serious, mate?" He lowered his voice, "Bob might be going soft in the head these days, but he's yet been wrong when one of his sources pings up on the radar. Wait..." He took a step back, "You're not thinking..."

I rolled my eyes. "You've got the muscle and the people, buddy," I tried to keep my voice light,

"and hey, you've already tried once, eh?"

The pain on his face would have matched me clawing his heart out. "Mate, please... that was totally different. I'd never try..."

I reached out a hand to place on his shoulder. "I know, buddy. It's just that all these games have me going cross eyed."

He laughed again, deep and real. "I can understand that well enough. Let's just win this thing and get you out of the city for a while on a vacation."

"Right... win this thing. That's still our first problem, isn't it?"

He gave me a slap on the back and pressed the suit bag into my hands again. "Just get on with it, would you? I'll keep you alive, and the Lass will too. We just need you to make sure there's something to stay alive for."

It must have taken a good two hours before we were ready to leave. I thought Smith was fussy when he dressed me up, he had nothing on English. Despite the fact the lion himself was wearing nothing more than his pelt and a belt, he insisted on making sure I was immaculate for my public appearance. Not to mention Rebecca.

I think she was just about ready to slap him when he tried to adjust her dress for the tenth time.

I caught Jon's eye while we marched towards the door. I pulled him aside for a moment. He was dressed in the same combat outfit as yesterday and carried the same overly large rifle. I was starting to think he was using it for a cane.

"Sir?" He gave me a friendly grin as we ducked into a side hallway.

"What's the word, Jon? I need to know how security is for tonight."

He lowered his brow. "I will be in charge, of course, Sir. It will be difficult to guarantee your safety with so many people coming to watch the election results," His face grew stoic. "But we will."

"Fine." I huffed out a breath. "Just be careful out there."

"Sir?"

"Sayer thinks that someone is going to betray me."

The dog's eyes narrowed. "No one will have the opportunity to, Sir. I'll stake my life on it."

I grinned. "I'm more interested in keeping my life than forfeiting yours."

Max met us in the lobby, he was dressed up in a suit the same as I. He'd either gotten a full night's sleep, or the makeup lady had done quite a number on him.

"How are you feeling, Tommy?"

I shook his hand as we walked to the front door together.

"I could ask you the same, Max. You're the guy who's been putting all the work in."

He smiled, but I could see the lines of stress around his eyes.

"It's going to be a long day, Tommy. No matter what happens."

Both Renald and Amstys formed up on us as we stepped out the door. I took a moment to sneak a glance at Renald, but he seemed as uninterested and annoyed as ever. If he was my new problem he hid it well.

The protesters were still outside the door, but they had changed. The crowds on both the for and against had swelled to five times the size I'd ever seen them before, but the KDP people were... apathetic.

That was about the only word I had. There were here and holding their signs, but that was about it. They hardly even bothered to look my way as I walked past.

Those on my side however... Yeah, the word to describe them was *creepy*.

Okay, I know it's not generous to describe my own supporters like that, but it's true. They cheered the moment I stepped from the door and kept on making a ear numbing racket all the way. They even began following us down the street.

This was one of the few times that I was glad I had the dogs to keep them back. The police protection left me feeling like I was living in a bubble most of the time, but now I just wanted to pull my ears back and slink away.

English on the other hand, was soaking it up.

For a man who had no official position in the party, he sure seemed to know how to make himself the centre of attention. Even Max, my official running mate, was overshadowed by the lion.

I really hadn't the slightest where we were going, I was just following Max and the rest of the pack. It wasn't that long before we were closing in on the ruins of City Hall.

Well, I still thought of them as ruins, but nearly all the rubble and debris had been cleared away. It was obvious that plans were in motion to put up a new building, but they'd only just finished laying the foundations.

This did make for a nice, level, open space, and the planners took full advantage of it.

There had to be over a thousand people out here, and most of them were in lineups to vote.

"Is this the only voting station?" I asked Max.

"No." He smiled. "But this is where the most people have come. With the change in the election laws, this is the first time most folks have ever voted in their lives. We're trying to push it to be as much of a social event as a civic duty."

"Heh."

It was plain that this was a first for a lot of people. I'd read all about voting back before the Cataclysm so I knew how it was done, but that wasn't the case for many of these folks. There were signs and workers with loudspeakers all over with example ballots in the air and demonstrating how to tick off a box.

A good percentage of the people in V-town were illiterate, so the ballots didn't have names or symbols, only colours. Red, blue, orange, and of course white.

From the corner of my eye I saw the grey pelt of my father as my parents slowly made their way forward in line. Well, there were two votes I could count on.

There was no 'official' duties for me to do until the end of the election, so I just found a soft piece of grass and sat my tail down on it. There was a stage set up for counting the ballots at the other end of the clearing, but I stayed away from it.

"Might as well get your say in, folks." I grinned at the small mob around me. "You never know, you could cast the deciding vote."

It was still early in the afternoon, the fall sun shining down on us. One by one, everyone slipped off to enter the lines. Even the dogs who guarded me were relieved so as to be able to cast their votes.

Speaking of dogs, bloody well near half the city's police force must be here today. There seemed to be a dog every two feet. Well, if someone tried to kill me they certainly wouldn't get far.

"You too, babe." I gave Rebecca a slight shove. She was the only one other than me who'd yet to vote.

"I'd rather stay with you, Tommy." Her eyes were scanning back and forth over the ever changing crowd around us.

Just about everyone I knew in town was gathered around by the time the sun was dipping towards the horizon. Sunset was selected as the official 'get your vote in' time.

I wasn't sure who it was, but someone had been kind enough to drop by with takeout. That made the wait easier. Nothing made that nervous feeling in your gut settle down better than hiding it behind a full belly.

As these things go, a while later I was up and off to the portable toilets that had been brought in and lined up to one side of the clearing. I was on my way back when a familiar grey form hobbled towards me through the crowd.

"Dad." I wasn't sure whether to smile or bow my head.

"Son." His voice was calm as he took my hand and led me away to a secluded corner. A moment later I realized why this little spot was empty, the wall of hunters that surrounded it, glaring at anyone who came close.

"Son," he continued, hand still on my shoulder, "I want you to know how proud I am of you." His voice was strong, but he didn't lift his eyes to meet mine. "But I don't want you to win, Tommy." His voice almost broke. "I don't want to lose my pup again."

I sat on the scrubby grass and helped him down beside me.

"Dad," I stared off towards the setting sun, "I'm not leaving you, I swear to the gods I not. I just have to do right by the people of the city. Like you have to do right by your hunters." A laugh escaped me. "That might just be why Sayer picked me in the first place, the pack instinct."

"Tommy, I have to tell you something," His fingers tightened around me like steel cables. "A man from the Progress party came to see your mother and I yesterday." I felt my blood run cold. "He was polite and cordial and such. He went down the street, knocking on every door, but it was obvious that he'd come to see us."

My father paused for a moment, clearing his throat and dragging his claws through the dirt between us.

"He offered me anything I wanted if I ordered the hunters not to vote for you, Son. I didn't even have to make them vote for the Progress party, just not for you." He looked towards me now, obviously expecting me to say something, but I remained silent. "He offered Aggy and I enough cash to live like royalty for the rest of our lives if I simply ordered the hunters not to vote for you."

I couldn't hold myself back now. "And what did you tell him, Dad?"

He puffed himself up regally. "I told him to get the hell out of our home before I flayed the bull's hide from his flesh."

I didn't bother trying to hide the gruesome smile that spread across my face. "Thanks, Dad."

He huffed out a breath. "That's not the end of it, Tommy. I did give the hunters an order." I felt a lump grow in my stomach. "I ordered each and every one of them to vote today, no exceptions, and to vote for who *they* thought the best candidate was. Not necessarily you."

I shook my head, smile growing softer. "Dad, that's exactly what I wanted, I--"

He cut me off, "And I didn't vote for you, Son."

"What?" I wasn't really angry... just surprised. "Who did you vote for?"

He lowered his head. "The Liberals."

Okay... that was just about enough to make my brain explode.

"Why? You spend your entire life living out in the forest. You hardly have anything to do with technology."

A smile touched his lips. "Because, Son, that's who you would have voted for if your party wasn't around."

I just shook my head and gave him a hug. Well, if this was the traitor in our midst... I could deal with that.

At long last nightfall came. The levelled City Hall was lit up with floodlights and torches. Rebecca in arm, I walked towards the stage to ceremonially cast the final vote.

English and Max were off to one side, Renald and Amstys to the other. I hadn't the slightest where Jon was hiding.

Gods, staring out over the dimly lit sea of people before me, it felt like I could be carried off by a living wave.

There was a small table in the centre of the stage. On it was a pencil, ballot, and a half full voting box.

I left Rebecca a few strides back and stepped up to the table.

Just like the thousands of other ballots, there were four colours. Red, blue, orange, and white.

I lifted my head to look back out over the sea of people that churned before me, then to look at Rebecca. She smiled warmly, but said nothing.

One more glance down at the paper and I scrawled an 'X' beside the red square for the Conservative party. It's what my father would have wanted.

Folding the paper in half, I slipped in into the voting box. A cheer came up from the crowd. It came up from all the people together, no matter who they supported.

V-town's first truly democratic election in a century, and it was all over but the counting.

Gah. And I thought the counting would be nice, simple, and above all, quick. I was wrong.

I'd forgotten just how many votes there was to count. It looked like it was going to be well past midnight by the time they got them tallied.

The mini-voting station that had been setup on the stage was gone now. It was replaced with a table for all the party leaders to sit at and await the results.

Both the Liberal and Conservative party leaders came and brought their seconds. Jameswell was here, but his extra seat was empty. I made up for it. Not only did Max sit to my left, but I'd also insisted that Rebecca join me on my right.

It was obvious that something like this had never been done before. We just sat there, twiddling our claws for hours as the counters toiled away in the background. It wasn't like we could even do anything of value with all the people watching us, scrutinizing our every move.

The members of the Conservative and Liberal parties chatted like it was old home time. They nattered on about the election, how they thought they were going to do, and congratulated each other on their tactics.

Even I got to shoot the breeze with Max and Rebecca. It wasn't that we had that much to talk about, but then again, it wasn't that we *didn't* have anything to say.

The one person who sat alone and stared out into the darkness was Jameswell. He hadn't a single person to relate to.

"Dean?" I leaned towards him, trying to keep my voice light. "You want to join us? You're looking a bit lonely over there."

Truth be told, I didn't *really* want to invite the cat to join in, but he looked just short of despondent.

"Uh... thanks, Tommy." He averted his eyes. "But I think I'll just stay over here. He scoched his chair a touch further away from me."

"Dean," I lowered my voice as I leaned towards him again, gently pushing Max out of the way, "You look even more nervous than me. What's going on?"

He still wouldn't meet my eyes.

"I'm sorry, Tommy. I... I can't say. I just hope I win the election."

There was something in the way he said it that left my fur standing on end.

"Yeah, sure." I tried to work up a smile. "Good luck to you."

I think it's safe to say that most of us were falling asleep by the time the count was ready. They had to get a band to play for a few minutes just to wake people up.

Much to my surprise, Hayfair had arrived while I'd been dozing off. He'd dragged a chair to sit on the far side of Jameswell, putting as much space between himself and I as he could. And he was staunchly staring out into the darkness.

The head electoral official walked up to the centre of the stage now. I assumed he was some kind of rat. They'd rigged up a makeshift loudspeaker so he could make himself heard over the crowd.

He didn't even have any preamble before he began rattling off the totals, his voice dull and lifeless.

"Conservative party, two thousand five hundred and sixty votes." A small cheer went up from the crowd. The bear down the table nodded his head.

"Liberal party, two thousand seven hundred and nine votes." A slightly larger cheer went up. Beside me, I saw the ferret make a slight bow.

"Progress party, four thousand two hundred and twenty six votes." This time the cheer was noticeably larger and more raucous.

"Open party," I held my breath as the reader shuffled his paper work. I could see both English and my parents standing at the edge of the stage. "Four thousand nine hundred votes even." I just about fell out of my chair.

"The Open party, mayor Tommy Taggart, wins."

From the corner of my eye I saw both Jameswell and Hayfair pull away.

Max pushed me to my feet as the crowd cheered. Heh. I do have to admit it was a rather intoxicating experience. There was hardly even any booing to be heard.

I got all of about two steps towards the election official and the loudspeaker when I heard a familiar boom.

This time I was smart enough to fall flat on the first warning. I hadn't the slightest where the bullet ended up, but it wasn't in me.

The audience must have heard about my 'shooting gallery' incident. They panicked.

Even over the sound of a thousand people scattering, I could still hear the bark of an even louder gun in the darkness.

For every five people who ran for the hills, one seemed to be sprinting towards me. I'd already been hauled off the stage by Renald and Amstys, and English and Rebecca were by my side again.

Interestingly, someone must have been thinking, they hauled Max, the deputy mayor, as far away from me as they could.

Two rings formed around me without even the slightest snarl. Both the police and the hunters closed ranks.

I could see my father off in the distance in one direction howling out orders, and Sayer, just barely standing under his own power, on the other side barking out the same.

There were three more snaps of gun fire, then the night fell quiet. Well, as quiet as one can hope for with so many people crammed into such a small space.

Eventually I heard a bark echo down from the roof top of one of the neighbouring buildings. A bark, a real one, not someone shouting. I'd never heard Jon bark before, but I knew it was him.

The crowd around me slowly dispersed. The police broke ranks and marched off, but the hunters were not so quick to follow.

Rebecca in my arms, I made ready to get out of here before anyone else tried to take pot shots at me. We were halfway across the courtyard before Jon materialized from of the darkness, walking our way. He was still using his oversized rifle as a crutch.

"Am I to assume that you took down my latest fan?" I pulled him along side me as we headed away.

He gave me a sharp nod. "Yes, Sir. He fired the first shot. I fired the next three. He won't be troubling you again."

I sighed. "What a wonderful way to start a new term."