

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 14:	Election Night.....	170
Chapter 15:	The Day After.....	180
Chapter 16:	Author's Note.....	182

Chapter 1: A Growl in the Darkness

The fur on the back of my neck stood straight up. We were racing down the mountain as fast as English's jeep could take us on the cracked and worn asphalt.

The road was already a hundred years without any maintenance, and the earthquake that had just shook us hadn't improved it any. V-town, Vancouver, lay off in the distance, I still couldn't see it. The world hadn't taken kindly to it when the Cataclysm had hit a century ago, wiping out most of the human populations and leaving us half-beasts in their wake. V-town was one of the only cities left in North America.

There was hardly any room in the jeep with the five of us crammed in here, and the rough surface of the road didn't help any.

English was driving, he was the only one who knew how. I could just see around his brown mane to the muscles bulging on his arms as he tried to keep us from flipping over. Beside him, in the passenger's seat, sat Amstys. The massive wolf was almost as big as English. Amstys wasn't as twitchy as the rest of us. He'd never even been to V-town before, but he kept glancing back to me every few minutes, taking cues from the fear that must have been written all over my face.

On my lap sat Rebecca. She was the only human amongst us. Without enough room back here for a proper seat, she was on my lap, my brown fur her only cushion. I had my arms wrapped around her, my nose pressed into her dark red hair.

"Don't worry, Wolfy," she whispered to me, "V-town's ridden out quakes before." Her words were a comfort, but we all knew that the massive shifting of the earth we'd just felt was far beyond anything we'd ever seen.

The last person in the vehicle with us was Jon, a German Shepherd and a member of the V-town police force. He'd been sent with us on our little excursion to the prairies in an effort to protect me.

"Bugger it all!" I heard English swear from up front as we screeched to a halt. A moment later his hands came down to smack the steering wheel so hard that I was afraid he was going to break it right off. "Okay, folks," He popped the car door open, "We walk from here."

Unlatching my own door and setting Rebecca on the ground outside, I followed. Well, it was obvious why we'd stopped. The road ahead had been torn to shreds. There were shards of pavement that shot up a good three feet into the air. Not even English's beloved jeep would be able to make good

time on that.

I didn't bother to wait for everyone as I pulled open the trunk of the jeep and began throwing the packs on the ground until I'd found mine and Rebecca's. Mine was sky blue, and twice the size of her smaller human one. I handed Rebecca's pack to her and helped her settle the weight on her shoulders before I quickly shrugged into mine.

"Hey Mate, why does she get all the special attention?" English quipped as he reached in and pulled his own massive pack out.

I just rolled my eyes at English as I began walking. "Because she's got stuff you don't, English." Rebecca elbowed me in the gut as we headed out. "And because she'd not a dude!" I dodged Rebecca's elbow this time, only to get smacked upside the head by English's paw.

Thankfully, we weren't far from V-town now, the trees were starting to look familiar. It was likely still a few hour's walk, but it was nothing to what we'd covered in the past.

V-town didn't have the same kind of technology that it'd had back before the Cataclysm, contrivances like English's jeep would be an oddity there, so we couldn't hear the city it as we approached. But still... I should have been able to hear *something* by now.

There was nothing but the whisper of wind in the trees and the fall of our footsteps on the soft ground beneath us. We'd said little on the walk, it must have been a good hour by now. The idea of coming upon a city full of the dead and wounded kind of killed most conversation.

I wasn't sure what it was, but I stopped dead so quickly that Rebecca almost ran into my back.

"Hey!" she squeaked. I had to reach a hand back to keep her on her feet.

English stopped next to me, eyes scanning the trees. "What is it, mate?" His voice was soft, not likely carrying more than a couple of meters.

"I don't know..." A scent had come to me on the wind. It still left my nose twitching. It was familiar... in a way. It shouldn't be alarming, whatever it was, but it was cut with a note of aggression.

Amstys was beside me a moment later, so close I could feel his fur brush up against mine. "I can smell it too, young master. We are not alone." Amstys was the only one among us who was a true hunter. I was a wantabe, and English and Jon were lost every time they set foot outside the city.

Oh, and I'd almost forgotten about the 'young master' thing.

I sniffed again, trying to place the scent... Nothing.

A moment later I heard a growl crawl through the trees.

Okay... that wasn't good. Who the heck was growling at us? It couldn't be one of the city's hunters, my father and uncle should have them under control.

A moment later a half dozen forms broke from the underbrush around us, completely encircling our little group. They were wolves and cougars, some of them I almost recognized -- they were definitely part of my uncle Gowan's hunters.

"Hey, what's--" I didn't even have time to speak before one of them leapt towards us, fangs barred.

Our little band might not look like much, but we packed enough fire power between English's claws and Amstys' teeth to take down bloody well near anything that moved.

The cougar who had been the first to spring found himself held fast in English's grip before he could even get a single swipe off.

One of the wolves from the group encircling us leapt, following the cougar's lead. He never even landed before, with a wet crunch, Amstys' fist connected with his jaw, sending him spinning back into the trees with a crash. There had been no competition, Amstys was huge, almost twice the size of the other wolf. His muscles rippled under his black and grey pelt.

That strike had pulled back the gates that had held the other hunters from coming at us. There were five of them now, and they set upon us full force.

"Wait! Wait! What's going on?" Nobody answered me as I yelled, ducking to avoid the claws of a wolf who swiped at my face. I had to scramble to get Rebecca behind me, to try and protect her.

Unsurprisingly, she would have none of it. The little human had pulled a knife free from her pack and was brandishing it at the cougar a menaced her.

"Wait!" I tried to strike at the wolf before me, but he danced out of range before I could reach him. My claws caught nothing but air. He was nimbler than I, forcing me back as the hunters pressed towards us. We were weighed down by our packs and wary from our hike. They moved faster, struck quicker. I could already see Jon from the corner of my eye, a shallow gash across his cheek.

"Who sent you?" I tried again, my breath was coming ragged now as I panted, "Did Griss send you? Gowan? What do you want!"

They started slightly when I said the names. A moment later I heard one of them, a tan wolf who was grappling with Jon yell, "Stop."

As one the pack stepped back from us, the tan wolf walking around to stand before me, sizing me up.

"How do you know who Gowan is?" He levelled his eyes at me, the were a dark, unblinking green. "Or better yet, Griss?"

I snorted. "Griss is my father. I'm Tommy Taggart." Now I levelled my gaze at him, though I doubt it was as intimidating. "The better question is who are you? And," I lifted one of my lips ever so slightly to show a tooth, "And what the hell are you doing?"

He raised his nose, defiantly flagging his tail as he all but dismissed me offhandedly.

"I take orders from Griss. Not you. He told me to keep people from flooding into the city, so that's what I'm doing."

I couldn't help the growl that was clawing its way up my throat now. There could be people dying in V-town, and this mongrel was trying to keep us out?

"I'm Griss' son. Let me pass."

He all but barked out a laugh. "Sure. You and a hundred other people. Take off, you hozer. Griss said to keep people out, and that's what I'll do."

All I wanted right now was to leap upon him and rip that smug grin off his face.

The thought scared me.

I wasn't like this, really. It was English who was more likely to reach out and tare someone a new one, not me. That wasn't who I was... I'd spent too much time in the wilderness with English, Rebecca, Jon and Amstys. They all treated me like an alpha. It was hard to admit to, but I'd gotten used to it. I didn't get the same respect from these fools.

"Fine." I had to grit the words out. My teeth snapped shut on every syllable, almost slicing off the tip of my tongue. "Take me to Griss. Take me to my father."

The tan wolf just grinned, holding his hand out before him and buffing his claws on his pelt. "What ya going to do to make it worthwhile? I'm a busy man, got lots of patrols to run out here."

It was English who spoke up now, his fake British accent plied smoothly over his cultured and rolling voice, "You know, friend," He took a step forward, pushing back the hunters who were crowded next to his bulk, "I'm sure we could find something you'd like."

"And what would that be?" The wolf just rolled his eyes.

"Don't you think ol' Griss would be happy to see his wayward son again? He'd be more that grateful to whoever brought him home."

"Grateful ain't going to fill my belly."

English paused for a moment, pulling the last of our rations from his pack. "I've got a couple day's food right here. We won't need it once we get hooked back into civilization. You can have it."

The tan wolf smirked now. "You might not be saying that once you find out exactly what's left of *civilization*." English tossed a pouch of dried meat at him. He snatched it out of the air in a single, fluid motion.

"Fine. Let's go."

Before I took a step, I caught the wolf's eye again. "What's your name, anyway?" I wanted to remember who this bugger was.

He grinned again, showing way too many teeth.

"The name is Renald, runt." He tossed his head and turned from me, striding towards the trees that lined the road, "Though I doubt a nobody like you would ever need to know that."

It had been the better part of six months since we'd been in the forests surrounding V-town. Winter had still had its hold back then, snow on the ground. We'd managed to completely miss spring and most of summer. The trees were full of life again, their leaves above us, providing shade for the moss and babbling streams that ran under our feet.

I hadn't known what to expect as far as 'camp' went, but it looked like it was a fair ways away. We'd been walking for at least a couple of hours now, long enough to loop around a good part of V-town.

I hadn't spent all that much time out in the woods with my father, but this area felt... *familiar*. More so than the rest of the wilderness. This had been my father's personal territory.

My ears perked up when I heard something move in the underbrush to our left. Not just one, a parade of footsteps. I could see Amstys twitch beside me. He'd heard it too.

No more than an instant later I was bowled over, laying stunned on the ground. I heard yelling, a snarl from Amstys and a growl of English. About the only thing I could focus on were the lavender eyes that were no more than a foot from my face.

"Lucy!" My voice was ragged as her weight pressed down on my chest.

"Runt," Her mouth dropped open in a grin, "It's good to see you again." The black furred wolf that now sat on my chest was my cousin, uncle Gowan's daughter.

I hadn't seen her in... gods, had it been that long?

The snarling and clamour around me had grown in my few seconds of inattentiveness. No more than a moment later I watched Rebecca slam her fist down, right between Lucy's ears. The wolf's eyes rolled up into her head as she slid off me.

"Wait! Wait." I had to reach up to grab Rebecca before she proceeded to pound the living daylights out of my cousin. No one could ever accuse Rebecca of not being ready to take on the world. She'd jumped right into to 'protect' me the instant she'd thought I'd been under attack.

Scrambling to my feet, I had to holler at the top of my lungs to try and make myself heard over the fisticuffs that had broken out around me. Not only were Renald and his pack here now, but Lucy it seemed had brought a pack of her own.

English, Amstys, and Jon might be more than able to hold their own, but even they would have trouble with the odds being two to one.

"Wait! Everybody, *just stop!*" My voice came out in a snarl that I hadn't intended. It reminded me of the way my father had spoken to his pack back in the old days, how he'd snarled when they'd disobeyed orders.

It was no more than a heartbeat before every one of the wolves, including Renald, had frozen in their footsteps. A moment later the cats followed suit. It seemed that the only people who were even

so much as able to move were my own little group. Everyone of them, English, Jon, Amstys, and Rebecca backed closer to me, forming a circle.

Well, there was one other person who seemed to have collected her senses. Lucy had pulled herself off the ground, holding one hand to the bump that was already starting to grow between her ears.

"Well, runt, you certainly know how to pick them." Her grin had grown, but there was no menace in it. Her eyes danced when she looked at me, just like they had when we'd played as pups. "I'd heard you'd shackled up with a human, but I never thought I'd ever get to meet her." She turned, "And I take it you're Rebecca?" Lucy winked. "Anyone who can bring out the wild side in my cuz here is someone to be reckoned with."

She took a step forward, holding her hand out to Rebecca. Rebecca paused for a moment before taking it, eyeing the wolf warily.

I had to step in, giving Rebecca a slight poke to the ribs as I whispered, "Don't worry, I've known her my entire life. We used to chase our tails together."

A smile grew on Rebecca's lips. She stepped forward to take Lucy's hand, but the wolf pulled her forward into a hug.

As quickly as it had started, the tension seemed to evaporate from the air. Even Renald's people backed off, though not far. It was obvious that Lucy was the ranking wolf here, Renald showed her the proper deference, exactly that he had refused to show me.

I glanced over at English. He was brushing the twigs and leaves from his mane. The cat couldn't seem to go more than ten feet in the forest without getting himself tangled in something. He shot me a quick glance before returning his gaze to the hunters around us. It was obvious he didn't trust any of them, but he was keeping his claws sheathed none the less.

Jon didn't give me any indication what he was thinking either way. He'd returned to his stoic, almost statue like demeanor the moment the other people had shown up. He was back to being a model police officer again.

Amstys was even harder to read. We'd only known him for a few weeks, ever since he'd wrestled his way free of the she-demon Al-Sedexterous. He hadn't said a word, but simply stood as close as he could get to me, between me and the largest group of hunters.

Stepping from my little circle of friends, I grabbed Lucy by the shoulder and hauled her off a few steps into the trees so we could speak alone.

My voice was hardly above a whisper as I spoke, "Okay, cuz, what in all the gods' names is going on here? We felt a massive earthquake, but that buggar Renald won't let us into the city."

She looked at me oddly for a moment, "You don't know? Things were going crazy even before the quake, there were riots and killings. The cops were doing everything they could, but the species protests had gotten so out of hand that it felt like a quarter of the city was on fire."

I wanted to roll my eyes and tell her to get on with it, but the story had still run my blood cold. "We'd heard reports of the riots, relayed over the radio while we'd been out traveling."

Her normally bright eyes clouded over for a moment as she spoke.

"It's true, Tommy. I don't know what you've heard, but it's likely even worse. We'd almost had things under control for a moment... then, then we'd felt it. Only the hunters seemed to notice. There was something *wrong*. Not just the fighting, not just the riots. There was something more. We all felt it. Every single one of us simply dropped what we'd been doing and made for the forest. We'd felt it coming, Tommy. We'd felt the quake. We... no, Griss, he'd tried to warn the police, the city, but no one believed us."

I felt the breath catch in my lungs.

"And that was it, Tommy. We ran, like scared pups. Gowan went back to get Griss from police headquarters, but the rest of us ran as far and fast as we could. The police couldn't keep order without us. It was two days before the quake hit, and the city was burning the whole time."

"What about now? Surly things must be back under control?"

She shook her head.

"Griss forbid anyone from entering the city. He says it's too dangerous."

I leaned against a tree, having to take a deep breath to steady my heart.

"Lucy, there could be people dying in there..."

I looked up at her and saw something that I'm not sure I'd ever seen before in those lavender eyes. Fear.

This was a girl who could play her father, Gowan the hunt master, like a harp. This woman was one of the best hunters in the city, and she was frightened.

"Your father took over the hunters as soon as my Dad pulled him from the city." She wasn't looking at me anymore, "He's running things now, not Gowan. He's the alpha. Griss says we're not to go into the city, so we don't. He says that we're not to allow anyone else to either, so we don't."

I let go of her arm. This couldn't be my Dad. It couldn't. He'd been the alpha of the hunters when I'd been young, but he'd had to give up that mantel years ago when he'd hurt his leg. My Dad was... my Dad. He'd never let people die like this.

I let go of Lucy's arm and turned to walk back to where everyone else stood. There was still an uneasy standoff. No one trusted anyone.

"Fine." I turned my gaze to Renald, then back to Lucy. "Take me to my father."

Renald laughed, "Sure, pup." He spat something onto the ground. "Whatever you say."

The camp wasn't much further away. Soon we were running into packs of hunters every few minutes. Some of them I didn't know, many of them I did. The more I met, the more who lowered their ears and tails to me. This was not what I'd been expecting. I had been hoping for a little more respect than I'd gotten from Renald, but they were treating me one step short of royalty.

Glancing back at the tan wolf, Renald was looking a tad bit unsettled now, and more with every hunter who bowed to me.

We finally entered camp. I use the term 'camp' loosely. There wasn't much here. Most hunters don't truly live in the wilderness. They work here, but returned to civilization every night. The small clearing before us was worn to mud by the passing of hundreds of paws, the grass lying trampled. In the centre was a small, hastily built cabin. It was no more than five meters square, and roughly framed, but it was the first real sign of civilization we'd seen since leaving Kicking Horse Pass.

We'd crossed half the clearing, no more than a dozen strides from the building when I heard a growl from within.

It was deep and low, more menacing than anything I could ever remember hearing. It rolled out of the dark, open door like a tide, pulling my tail to the ground.

Around me, I could see it had the same effect on every single one of the hunters. They all stopped dead, turning towards the cabin and lowering their eyes and tails.

Even English, a man who normally prided himself on being aloft and beyond such influences, seemed cowed.

I could feel Rebecca's grip come to tighten around my shoulder as she stepped closer to me.

"I don't care what you *think*! I gave you your orders. Get out there, get us some meat, and start following directions or I'll bust you down the same way I did Marcus!"

A second later a cougar ran from the cabin, ears flat and tail limp. He joined up with a group of

hunters as they melted into the trees without another word.

I was frozen for a second, my brain almost refusing to work. I knew that voice. It was the same one that had recited me bedtime stories and whispered me encouragements when I'd been learning to hunt.

It was my father.

Stepping forward, I noticed that no one else followed. Rebecca was still clutched to my arm, but I gently pulled her hands from me as I stood in front of the doorway.

There was no wind, and the presence of so many hunters milling about trampled any scents that I might be able to pick up. I couldn't see into the room, it was dark and shadowed.

"Who in the name of Hades are you? I didn't call for you. Get the bloody well out of here before I rip your tail off!" The voice was rougher than I remembered, lower and more ragged, but there was no mistaking it.

"Hi, Dad." My words were softer and meeker than I'd intended as I stepped into the cabin, the shadows closing in around me.

A strangled cough came from somewhere in the darkness. My eyes were just starting to adjust to the light when I saw his form hove from the shadows, limping towards me.

My father's smile was... well, there was no other way to describe it. Ugly. Well, terrifying might also be a good fit. His teeth were huge and sharp, weathered on more kills than I could count. And to me, it was beautiful.

Anyone else and I likely be running for the hills, but I knew my father.

An instant later he was upon me, arms wrapping around me as his weight bared down, almost forcing me from my feet.

"Tommy! Oh gods, son." For a moment I almost thought he was going to cry. I'd never once seen my father cry.

It wasn't that he was all that bigger than me, his grey furred body looked like a mirror image of my brown and cream one, but he was pure muscle, and his weight practically pushed me off my flat.

He'd been able to practically leap across the room at me, but now his leg gave out, he'd left his cane behind.

With a grunt, I was able to get him back across the room, helping him down on the rough wooden chair before my own legs folded.

He wouldn't let go of me, his arms wrapped around my shoulders like a steel trap.

"Oh gods, Tommy. I almost thought I'd never see you again."

I had to fight to get myself untangled from him. His voice had changed from the near feral growl it had been moments ago to exactly what I remembered.

"What's going on, Dad?" My blood froze for a moment as I remembered one of the reasons we'd been rushing back to V-town, even before the earthquake. "I'd heard you had a heart attack."

I was in front of him now, kneeling on the hard packed dirt floor. My eyes were still adjusting to the dim light, but I could make out his face now. It didn't look good.

My father had always had grey fur, he'd been born with it, but the grey that surrounded him now was more than that. He looked old. Old and tired.

He was panting for breath now, as if even his split-second burst of energy had drained him.

I could just see the glint of one of his teeth in the darkness before he began to speak. "You heard right." He let out a slight chuckle. "Retirement was not good for me. Aggie and I were holed up in the police headquarters when my soul decided to try and leave this world."

His hand was still clenched in mine. I couldn't help but squeeze it when he continued.

"I guess those mutts are good for something at least. I hadn't even hit the ground before there

were so many of them around me that I could hardly move. They have a whole surgical suit in the basement of that building, did you know that, son?"

I shivered slightly as I held his hand. The police had a lot of things in the basement of that mammoth headquarters of theirs. I'd had the misfortune of getting on their bad side once and they'd locked me away down there.

He brought his fingers up to his chest now, I could make them out in the darkness.

"They sliced me open, didn't even bother to shave away the fur." He barked out a laugh.

"Sliced me clean open like a butcher would some prey, and by all accounts fixed me right up."

I could see a line that ran down his chest, met by two more, one at the top near his collarbone, and one at the bottom near his abdomen. They formed an 'T'.

I was shaking now. I could feel the sweat between my toes.

"Are you okay, did everything work?" I couldn't keep the quiver from my voice. It made me sound like a pup, but in front of him that was okay.

Reaching down, he rested his mussel lightly between my ears and wrapped his arms around me. Just like he had when I was little, and he was the indestructible Big Bad Wolf.

"I'm still here, aren't I, son?" His voice was strong, but even I could hear the touch of fear. "I'm still here, still breathing for another day. That's what matters."

He relaxed his grip on me, but pulled me up beside him on the seat. I could feel the warmth of his body.

I saw his teeth flash again. "But how stupid can I be, Tommy? Your mother is out there somewhere, and she *will* kill me if I don't let her know you're here." He raised his head, looking towards the door now. When he spoke the growl had returned to his voice. He was yelling, ordering, and I doubt anyone had the backbone to do anything but obey. "Hey! Someone! Get in here!"

A moment later a hunter stood in the doorway. He was bent, nose nearly to the dirt. So submissive that it almost hurt to look at him.

"Sir?" His voice was little more than a whine.

"Find Aggie and bring her here. My son has returned." An instant later the hunter was gone.

I looked over to my father's face as he spoke. I almost wished I hadn't. Now I knew how other people saw him. His face was a mask of rage, fangs barred and ears back.

"What's going on, Dad?" I asked tentatively after we were alone again. "You don't lead the hunters anymore. Doesn't Gowan do that?"

He let out a slight snort as he sat back, eyes closing. "Don't forget, Tommy, that I'm the elder brother. Gowan is a good hunter and a fine leader, but I'm the alpha here."

"Fine." I huffed out a breath. "You're the alpha, he's the beta, what does that make me, kibble? I can't even get into the city. I just get kicked around by your lackeys out there."

A growl grew in my father's chest again. We were close enough together that I could *feel* it, not just hear it. It wasn't a theatric snarl like what he had been tossing around before. This one was real.

"You are my son, Tommy. You needn't be anything more." I could see another flash of his teeth. This time it wasn't from a smile. "And you haven't anything to fear from my hunters. You are of my blood, and they will treat you as such..."

He was about to say more when my mother arrived. She wafted silently through the doorway, as if carried on nothing more than a breeze. She looked human, but she didn't move like one, she was far too graceful. She was a sprigen.

"Tommy!" She was by my side a moment later, I hadn't even seen her cross the distance. Her hands ran over my face, as if making sure it was truly me. "We were so worried about you!" She sat on my father's lap, he let out a slight 'Oof'. "We weren't sure we were ever going to see you again."

We'd heard such things about your travels."

I couldn't keep the stupid grin from my face. "They were all more than likely true. I'm happy to be home... well, almost home." I looked back to my father. "Any chance I can slip past your goons and get back into the city?"

He rolled his eyes. "The orders are in place to keep out the looters. Gods, Tommy, you wouldn't believe what happened once the city began to break down. Society is gone, I swear it." A pained scowl crossed his face. "That and... we and the police force did not part on good terms. I can't afford to have any of my hunters dragged off by those dogs."

I had to fight to keep myself from just snuggling down and relaxing with my parents at my side. My father had always been such a titan in my life, it was hard not to just sit back and let him take care of everything.

"Dad, you should know that we have Jon with us. He's still technically part of the V-town police service."

I could feel him stiffen slightly when I said those words. His voice, however, was calm. "If he's with you, Tommy, then he's welcome." He shook his head slightly. "You've made some of the oddest friends that I could ever imagine. Then again..." He glanced over to my mother, "We did the same when we were young."

I forced myself up a few moments later. I sorely wanted to stay and feel some of the stress drip for me, but I couldn't bring myself to do it when I didn't know what was happening in V-town.

Bringing in my own little band of renegades to the cabin, it was a tad bit cramped now. My parents had already met Rebecca and English, they were both welcomed with open arms. Jon got a touch cooler reception, but it seemed to go well.

Amstys, however, bloody near got slack jawed awe from my father. You've got to realize that my father has been hunting his whole life, and he personally knew every single hunter in V-town, and I doubt he'd ever seen a wolf the size of Amstys.

And it didn't help that the freaking lug wouldn't stop calling me 'Young Master'.

I gave my parents a quick run down on what we'd been doing since we'd last seen them. Last time I'd seen my parents had been just shortly before we'd left V-town on our fool's journey. I decided to leave out that the map we'd been following -- the one provided by English -- had been a fake.

English took the opportunity to steal the thread of conversation from me a few times. He leapt about and made his voice a caricature of those we'd met. And he noticeably skipped past the part where he'd tried to kill me.

That was probably a good thing. Knowing my father, he'd likely try to return the favour.

It wasn't long before we'd come to the end of the story. My father's only question was, "And who was the mongrel who didn't recognize you as my son?"

I had to think for a moment to recall his name. "It was a tan wolf... he was running a pack of his own..."

My father rolled his eyes. Any pretence of being alpha, anything more than my father, was long gone. "That only narrows it down to about a half dozen, Tommy. I'm running all the hunters in the bloody city here. You've got to be more specific."

English gave me a good jab in the ribs from my side. "Come on, mate. Don't tell me you've forgotten that blighter already. And after he was so..." He paused for a moment, making a face. "Inhospitable. His name was Renald, mate. Renald."

I don't think I even knew half the curses that my father spat out. It was enough to make even English blush, and I'd seen his spit out some good verses of his own.

The next command out of my father's mouth was simple. "*Renald!*" His voice was booming, and enough to make even me pull back. My father's lips were pulled back so far now that I could see his pink gums, and his pelt stood on edge so that he looked twice his size.

I knew my father was lame, he couldn't walk more than two steps without his cane, but even then I wouldn't fight him for the world right now.

The form that came through the door was the same tan wolf that we'd seen earlier. Renald was bent so low that his belly nearly touched the ground. He was acting like a pup who'd just been caught with his nose in the pantry.

"Everyone out. Except," My father pointed a single cracked black claw at the tan wolf, "You."

I couldn't have told you how we did it, but every single one of us were up and out of that little cabin in the space of three heartbeats. I was surprised we could even fit through the door that fast.

All of us that was, except for my mother. She quietly shut the door behind us.

No one said anything for the space of five seconds, then English doubled over laughing.

"Did you see the look on his face, mate?" The lion had to pause for breath, he was leaning against the wall of the cabin now. "God, mate, is he in for it." He wiped the tears from his eyes for a moment before giving me an appraising glance. "I never knew you had it in you, mate. I wouldn't have thought you grew up with a father like that."

I had to grab English by his mane and start dragging him away. I could hear the muffled bellows of my father from the other side of the wall, and I didn't want to think about them.

"That wasn't the man I grew up with, English." Okay, I had to roll my eyes at that one. "Well, it was, but not like that. He wasn't like that with me."

Even Rebecca was laughing now. "Come on, Wolfy, you spent your childhood growing up under the alpha of all the hunters, and he never treated you like part of the pack?" She slipped her arm in mine now as we walked on.

I had to close my eyes for a moment to gather my thoughts. "No. I wasn't part of his pack. I wasn't a hunter when I was young. I was his son, his family. It's different."

English had stopped laughing now and extracted himself from my grasp. "It's alright, Mate." He gave me a glance that said much more. "We know. There's more to it when it's family."

It took me a moment, but I noticed that all of the hunters around us were treating me differently now. They had simply been wary when we'd walked in, now they were stepping back as I moved forward, whispering to each other.

I guess news travels fast. Folks must have heard about Tommy, the son of great Griss, back from his foolish escapades across the mountains.

The cabin was the only structure around, so I simply walked until I was back among the trees, and out of the mud, before throwing myself to the ground.

I didn't bother to look back at anyone else before I pulled open my pack and began rummaging around.

"Anyone got something to eat?" I asked. I was quickly getting to the bottom of my pack with no food in sight.

I could hear English's amused purr from behind me. "Don't look at me, mate. I gave the last of our chow to that bugger. I'm tapped out."

A second later I felt something wet and heavy hit the back of my skull.

"Heads up!" It was Lucy's voice.

I heard English scramble to catch whatever had thwacked me before it could hit the ground.

I was all but seeing stars, but I did manage to yell, "You're supposed to yell that *before* you throw something at me!"

She just laughed in the distance.

My nose began twitching almost before I got the words out. What ever it was, it smelt good.

Turning, I was happy to see that English had a leg of freshly killed venison cradled in his arms. It was even wrapped in wax paper, just like you'd find at the butcher's shop.

"Say what you will about the hunters, mate," English smiled, "But they take care of their friends. Hello, beauty," he purred at the meat, "Where have you been all my life?"

"Give it here." I snatched it from his claws. "You'll just eat it all if I leave it with you."

He put up a pained expression for a moment. "No I wouldn't. I'd just be... checking it. To make sure it's safe." He grinned at me, exposing more of his teeth than was strictly necessary.

"Yeah. Sure. You can check it *after* you've helped Rebecca get a fire going." I moved the leg of meat behind my back. "I trust you with food about as much as I trust Jon to take a joke."

The German Shepherd's head popped up at moment I said his name. "Sorry, Sir? I didn't catch that."

"Exactly." I stalked off into the underbrush.

Even from this distance I could nearly make out the occasional words that echoed from the cabin. I never knew my Dad had that kind of lung capacity.

At first I'd expected that this would be a big deal, something to turn the other hunters off me, but soon enough I realized that it must be at least a semi-frequent occurrence.

No one seemed to notice or care. All the other hunters just milled around and went about their duties.

It was the better part of an hour before the door to the cabin opened again. I didn't pay it much attention, I was too busy eating, until one of the hunters came up to tap me on the shoulder.

"You're wanted by the alpha," was all she said.

Back in the cabin, it was again hard to see in the shadowed darkness. I had to rely more on scent than on sight. My father was still there, but my mother wasn't. Renald was sitting huddled in a corner.

I was only relieved so far in that I couldn't smell the salty tang of blood in the air.

When my father spoke, he did so like an alpha. This was the first time he'd ever truly done so in front of me.

"Renald has apologized for his inexcusable behaviour towards you, Tommy." I could hear a slight growl in his voice, "And..." He paused for a moment, casting a withering glance towards the brow beaten wolf, "He will do whatever it takes to make amends."

"Uh, that's... great." Truth be told, I hadn't the slightest what to say. I'd never expected something like this to happen. Sure I'd been annoyed when Renald had acted the jerk, but he'd just been following orders.

"And that's why," my father continued, "He has begged for me to let him join you."

The expression on the young wolf in the corner suggested anything but.

"Dad, that's a nice offer, but--"

His growl cut me off before I could even finish. I'd done many things to annoy my father when while been growing up, but I'd never heard him growl at me. Not like this.

He turned a moment later, eyes levelling on the tan wolf. "Renald. Out." He lifted a claw, pointed towards the light streaming from outside. "And close the door behind you."

Renald scrambled past me no more than a second later, escaping as quickly as his feet could carry him. I did, however, still see a 'you're going to get it now' expression on his face.

The door clicked shut behind me, blocking out nearly all the light. It left me alone in the darkness with my father.

No more than an hour ago I'd been by his side, calm and content, just about ready to doze off in his arms. This hardly seemed like the same man.

Every motion, every twitch of his tail spoke *alpha*. Even his scent was different. He was the boss here, and he knew it.

His voice, however, when he spoke was a mix between what I remembered and what I had just heard moments ago.

"Tommy, come here."

I couldn't help but feel my tail fall as I stepped forward, within his reach. I wasn't sure why I was so scared... this was my father. But I was.

He reached out a hand, gently grasping my mussel and lifting my eyes to meet his. His voice was now back to that I knew well... but there was more. Like a velvet wrapped steel girder.

"Tommy, you're my son, and you know I love you..." His voice petered off for a moment.

"And you can say anything you want to me in private," His grip around my mussel tightened now, "But if you ever contradict me in public again, so the gods help me, I'll rip you apart like I would any other hunter." He let go of my face. "I'd cry about it after, but I would." He sighed, falling back into his chair. "There's too much happening, Tommy. Too many people."

Slowly, I sat down beside him, feeling his warmth again while he continued.

"I thought I'd given this all up, Tommy. The hunters, being the alpha. Gods, you have no idea how *good* it felt when I broke my leg, had to hand the reins over to Gowan." He let out a heavy breath. "To be able to just be myself again, not have to worry about being an alpha anymore."

"Then why'd you take it back again, Dad? Gowan's a good hunt leader, he really is."

He tossed his head slightly, teeth glinting in the darkness.

"Gowan is just that, son. He's a magnificent hunter, talented hunt leader, and a piss poor alpha. He always grew up under me. He's an old hand at getting people to do what he wants, even at coming up with tactical plans, but that's it. He lives in the moment, thinks for the hunt at hand. He's never been a strategic thinker. As long as the status quo is kept he's the best man you could hope for. But not now. We're dealing with something completely new, something we've never seen before, and Gowan simply can't deal with that. That's why he pulled me from the claws of those police dogs, and that's why he forced me back into the game. If I don't do this, Tommy, then people are going to die." He paused for a moment, a slight chuckle escaping his lips. "Truth be told, people are going to die even though I'm here, but I can only hope to try and reduce those numbers."

Almost without pausing he switched gears, nearly so fast as to leave my head spinning.

"Take Renald with you, Tommy."

"What, why? I don't want a jerk like that." I said.

"Because I can't keep him here." My father sounded old now, old and tired. "He's more talented than he looks. That little flea-bag can stalk like no one's business. His only problem is that he knows it. I thought I might be able to calm him down by giving him a pack of his own, occupying his time and focusing him. I can see it didn't work. I can't keep him here, Tommy. No matter what I do, short of killing him, he'll be a poison nettle in my side, undermining me."

"And so you're handing him off to me?" I couldn't help but roll my eyes.

He gave me a gentle cuff to the ears.

"You can look at it like that if you want to, but I've told him in no mean words that if he even thinks about double crossing you it'll be the last thing he'll ever do."

I'd never seen my father threaten a person's life, but the mere thought of it was enough to give

me pause.

"Is that the best way to do this, Dad?" I froze once I realized what I was asking. Sure, we were in private, but...

He looked down at me, curious, "What is it, son?"

I had to take a deep breath before I could continue. "The way you're running the hunters." I paused. "I... I haven't been here long, but it feels like you're running everything through fear, intimidation. Is that really the way to get people to do what they need to?"

He let out a long breath, closing his eyes. When he spoke again he sounded old, older than I'd ever remembered hearing him. "It's not what I want, Tommy, but we haven't any choice. People are frightened, scared for their lives. They had to leave a lot back in the city, homes, families... Aggie is one of the only non-hunters we have out here... well, her and your friends. Fear isn't the best tool to get people to do what they need to, but sometimes it's the only option. I don't want to have to do this, Tommy, really, I don't, but we just don't have the time to do it any better way."

Chapter 2: A Day in Jail (But I didn't do anything, honest!)

Night was quickly drawing when I left the cabin. Renald had been standing not far away, a wide grin on his face, but it faltered the moment I stepped out, my father leaning on my shoulder.

There were only three people my father would ever allow himself to lean on while in the presence of others. My mother, Gowan, and now me. It showed to the world exactly who he trusted.

Renald looked like I'd just force fed him a lemon.

Despite my rush to get to V-town, we stayed at the hunter's camp that night. Pitching our tents at the edge of the clearing. My father had offered me the choice of sleeping in the cabin, but that would have been... *awkward*.

Even in our humble tents we were still a step above the rank and file hunters. Everyone else had fled V-town when they'd felt the quake coming, taking little but the clothing on their backs. We on the other hand had the opportunity to pack. Sure there was little left after our months on the road, but even a simple bed roll was a good step in the right direction.

I spent the night in the little tent, cuddled up next to Rebecca. My parents knew we were together, they'd known for a long time, but it still felt odd to be doing anything but sleeping while they were no more than a dozen meters away.

Breaking camp that morning I was annoyed, but not surprised, to see Renald already standing on the grass before me.

He stood straighter today, eyes still narrowed, but tail held low in deference. He bowed his head slightly towards me as I walked towards him.

"Mr. Taggart." His voice held less of the snark that I'd heard yesterday, but was nowhere near as cowed as his posture.

"Gods, don't you start that too." I sat down beside him, motioning for him to follow. "I don't care what my father told you to do, but my name is Tommy. Nothing more."

He sat down, a slight grin edging onto his face now. "What, don't tell me that all the stories going around about you aren't true."

"Gods." I just held up a hand to cover my face. "Do I even want to ask what people are saying?"

He chuckled, an evil sound. "I got more good stories about you last night than I think I've heard about even the great Griss himself." He threw out a melodramatic hand, "Everything from you being a spoiled brat born with a silver bone in your mouth to a weak wristed, can't hunt pansy who's just clutching his father's tail."

I couldn't help but feel a slight growl work its way up my throat. "The second one is closer to the truth. But," I levelled a jab at his chest, "That was a long time ago. I don't know what my father said to you, but it looks like we're stuck together. Just do what I, English, or Rebecca tell you, don't piss with Jon or Amstys, and keep out of the way until I can get rid of you. Got it?"

He did a mock bow, voice dripping sarcasm. "Oh yes, great scion of the Taggart hunting dynasty. I'll do what ever you wish of me. Of course, it's my life's goal just to be bossed around by you."

I wanted to work up some annoyance at the way he was speaking, but, to be honest, I couldn't really blame him.

"Just don't piss me off," I replied, "Or I'll feed you to English. He'd likely be just as happy to make a duster from your tail."

I just about had everything packed away again for the last part of our hike when I stumbled across the bright yellow portable radio that Jon had brought with him.

"Hey, Jon. Does this thing still work?"

He looked over at me, his tight, exacting, police standard actions becoming more apparent with each passing moment. "I would assume so, Sir. There is no reason it should not."

I rolled my eyes. "Jon, didn't we discuss the whole 'sir' thing?"

He took a step towards me, voice lowering as he glanced at Renald and the other hunters milling around us. "Sir, Tommy, we're returning to the city. Or whatever is left of it. And it would not be... *appropriate* for me to address you in any other way." He pointed a thumb to the hunters. "They must treat their alpha and beta with proper respect when in public, I must do the same."

I raised a hand to my forehead. "But, Jon, I'm not an alpha."

He gave me a sidelong glance. "But you have been named the interim mayor by commissioner Sayer."

"Oh yeah. I'd forgotten about that." I'd been trying hard, really, really hard to forget about that.

Jon took the radio from me and punched the single button on the transceiver as he spoke into the small mic. His voice had returned to the perfect clip that was so representative of the service. It was even enough to make a few of the hunters turn and realize that they had one of the police among them.

"This is Constable Oaks reporting in. Requesting a status update. Over."

There was nothing but static on the line for a moment. Then a voice came on in the background, almost washed out. I couldn't make out a word it was saying, but it spoke quickly, rattling off what sounded like instructions.

"I repeat, this is Constable Oaks reporting in." He paused for a moment and glanced at me before adding, "I have Tommy Taggart with me."

There was a moments pause where only static came across, then it died away with a whine. It sounded like someone was tuning into our radio. The voice was clearer when it came again.

"This is dispatch. Please relay your code word and current status."

Jon glanced at me again before turning his back to me and taking a few steps away. He spoke now in a whisper, but I could still make out his voice.

"Code Janus, status successful."

I looked over at English, he's had his ears perked as well.

The radio crackled again, "Understood, Constable Oaks. You are advised to remain at your position. Do not enter the city. We have an unstable situation and it is not advised that you bring your cargo in."

Okay... did they just refer to me as *cargo*?

I heard English laugh. Yep. I was now officially cargo.

I walked up behind Jon, the dog nearly leapt out of his pelt when I laid my hand on his shoulder.

"Tell them we're coming into help, Jon. I'm tired of waiting out here."

He relayed the message through the radio, but all we got back was, "That is not advised. We cannot guarantee your safety."

It was less than an hour later that we began to see the towers of V-town poke above the trees. There were fewer than there should be.

V-town was one of the only remaining cities on the Pacific coast, one of the last bastions of civilization after the Cataclysm. But all I saw spiraling overhead were a handful of cracked and listing towers.

The quake had been less than two days ago. I could still hear screaming before we finally broke from the trees.

I hardly even noticed as the forest fell behind me only to be replaced by cracked asphalt under my claws. I was running now, and I could hear everyone, even Renald, doing the same behind me.

No more than a block into the city we came across the first of the collapsed towers. There were people working in the debris, but not nearly enough for the number of voices I heard from beneath the rubble.

And, oh gods, I could see body parts here and there. There was an arm without an owner off to one side and a foot without a leg to the other.

My pack fell to the ground as I ran to the nearest group of people, they were shifting rubble, pulling a woman from the wreckage and laying her on a makeshift stretcher.

"What's going on? How can I help?" They startled slightly when I came up to them.

They did react quickly, I'll give them that. The older one, a horse of some breed, simply pointed at the ground. "You can start digging. My family's still under there." Then he nodded at the body that now lay before us. "Or, if you know how, you can tend to the wounded. The General Hospital collapsed and all the triage camps are filled to overflowing."

I pointed back towards Jon behind me. "He should know first aid."

Less than a minute later English, Amstys, Renald, and I were digging through the rubble. Jon and Rebecca were tending to those we dragged out alive. Most of those we found we could no more than lay out and close their eyes.

I was hot and sweaty, my fur sticking down to me as I worked under the glaring noonday sun. English and Amstys were beside me, the three of us heaving chunks of rubble away to try and get at those beneath. We must have looked like ghosts by now, the dust and powder from the building having coated us a pale white.

I only looked up when I heard Rebecca yelling at someone. "Hey, get away from the bodies!"

Peering over, I could see a group of a half dozen people, lizards and cats mostly, picking through the dead bodies that we'd pulled out.

One of them, a skinny frilled lizard of some sort, just snorted in our direction and went back to stripping the corpse before him.

"Hey!" I was still covered in dust, my muscles aching as I walked up to him. "She said to back off. If you want to help, fine. But we don't need any corpse robbers here."

He looked up at me, slitted yellow eyes bright. His voice was dry and raspy when he spoke. "Piss off, fido. You want to dig 'em up, that's fine. But keep out of our way."

"I said get away from the bodies." I took a step forward now, my hackles raising. I could hear a growl, but it wasn't from me. It was from English who stood no more than a step behind.

The lizard looked up, his own group arraying behind him. "What, do we need to teach you strays a lesson? The city's gone to hell in a hand-basket and you're worried about us shuffling through a stiff's clothes?"

It wasn't the lizard that leapt towards us first, but a mangy dog of some description. The mutt was nothing but skin and bones, seemingly no more than a skeleton. If I hadn't seen him standing calmly a moment before I would have almost thought the glimmer in his eyes was rabies.

I braced, ready for his body to slam into me, but he never got that far.

It was Renald who met him in mid air. The mutt had moved fast, but Renald was far quicker. They went spiralling off to one side, rolling in the rocks and debris, teeth snapping.

I had only a moment to watch before the lizard I'd been talking to took his place, jumping at me.

The dog had been a concern, looking like he was ready for a fight, but the lizard... well, he was about as intimidating as a hundred and ten pound neon green coat rack.

Even when he pulled a blade from his jacket I couldn't even work up much of a concern.

Now that I looked at them more closely, they were all like this. Skinny. They were all little more than skin and bones, padded up where they could with jackets and clothing, they looked as malnourished as the kids you see on posters for food programs.

I will have to give it to the kid though, at least he knew how to use his knife. It was a switchblade of some sort, it made a clear slide-click when it popped up. A stabbing weapon, he didn't bother to wave it back and forth like a knife, he simply dove towards me.

One part of me wanted to leap forward, to meet him in the middle and rip that blade from his hand with my claws, but... but I couldn't. I could see a small and scared kid in there. Someone who was looking for nothing more than food to survive the day. He'd grown up in a city that had always been able to provide for him, and now there was almost nothing left. He couldn't be the only one, there had to be thousands of people like him, just trying to get from day to day until their lives returned to normal.

I danced back as he thrust the blade towards me. Reaching out, I tried to pull the weapon from his fingers, but he was too fast.

Backing away, I lured him from the bodies. It wasn't as easy as it sounds. The ground beneath us was nothing but rubble and debris, not exactly the greatest footing at the best of times, and less so when you're trying to avoid becoming a shish kabob.

I'd reversed up a small rise, but a touch too late I noticed there wasn't much of a way down. The fall wasn't far, only about four feet, but it was enough to throw me off balance and send me to the ground on my back.

From somewhere in the distance I could hear Rebecca yelling. Too bad I couldn't make out what.

I didn't even have time to get back on my feet before green-boy was upon me. I could hardly move with the ground shifting beneath me. His blade scored a hit on my leg. Right below my scar from where I'd almost managed to get it ripped off.

The blade wasn't all that sharp, but he had enough force behind it to drive it into my flesh until I heard it *ka-chunk* as it met bone. I say 'heard' because the pain hadn't quite reached me yet. It did a

heartbeat later.

I think that just about everyone in a three block radius heard me start swearing then.

Oh ye gods, oh ye flipping gods that *hurt*!

I'd never realized how tender it was there. I was born with regeneration, but even that can only do so much with a wound like what I'd taken back on the Diamond Dice.

The little bugger must have noticed my reaction to his jab. He twisted the blade.

Okay, I'm not ashamed to say it, I screamed. I did get even though, I socked him in the chin hard enough that my fist stung.

The lizard ended up a good few meters away, as flat out on the ground as I was. And he'd left his knife sticking out of in my leg.

Wonderful. This was *not* going to be fun. I considered leaving the blade in place for a moment, but realized that it would only hurt more when I had to start walking.

One more scream later and I'd yanked the knife free. I threw it away into the rubble, drops of blood spinning off it as it flew.

I had to reach out and grab some standing stones to lever myself to my feet now. My regeneration was good, but I was still leaking blood from my leg, and it would be some time before I'd be able to walk properly again.

I'd only just moved fast enough, the lizard was on his feet too.

Gods, I should have let him go. I really should have, but I was seeing red at the edges of my vision now. He was mine.

It took everything I had, but I slowly began limping towards him. His eyes widened as I closed the distance.

He didn't even say a single word as he turned and ran, deeper into the city.

I must have socked him a good one, he was moving even slower than I.

Off and shambling after him, it felt like someone was grinding mill grit into my hip with every step.

I couldn't even be bothered to lurch the last few steps, a quick one-legged jump and my black claws just snagged the hem of his pant leg.

It was him who was doing the screaming now. I had barely even touched him, yet he was already screaming like I was pulling his spleen out through his nose.

I was just about ready to give him a good thwacking in return for wound he'd given me when the lights went out.

Okay, that's not quite it, but that's sure what it felt like.

One moment he was in my grasp, screaming like an opera singer, the next I was laying on the ground clutching my head and feeling like someone had decided to play la-la-bumba on my skull.

I couldn't even raise myself above the rubble now, but I could recognize the barked voices of police dogs.

Wohoo, the cavalry has arrived.

I was about to try and pull myself off the ground when I got another thwack to the back of the skull.

"I told you to stay down, citizen." The hit was lighter this time, but it still left me seeing stars.

Now I could feel the weight of the dog kneeling on my back. He wasn't being gentle, but, then again, he wasn't trying to crack my spine in two either. The typical by the book of the V-town police department.

Wait a minute, where the heck was Jon?

"... you are already aware that looting the corpse of the dead is an offence. You are already

aware that public brawling is an offence. You are already aware that V-town is currently in a state of emergency..."

He went on and on. I assumed he was reading me my rights or something like that, but, to be honest, my brain was still too scattered to make sense of it.

The one thing I did notice was the click the cuffs made when he cinched them around my wrists.

Oh bugger.

"Just wait a second..." I was talking fast now, trying to think my way out of this.

"Citizen, you have the right to remain silent. If you choose to make a commotion I will have to mussel you."

"What!? Wait, just--"

"That was your last warning, citizen."

I didn't even get the chance to tell him my name. He moved faster than I ever expected. Snapping a band off his belt, the dog wrapped it around my mussel, looped it over the back of my head and hooked it in place.

It was hard black leather, and it kept my mouth firmly *shut*.

I hadn't been about to start cursing the mongrel cop before, but I would have now if I'd just been able to get my lips far enough apart to form the words.

Where in the name of all the gods was Jon? He was a cop, he should be able to get me out of this with a snap of his claws.

At least I wasn't the only one being rounded up. There were a dozen people in cuffs and shackles just like me, none of them I recognized.

Gods, at one point I would have sworn I heard Rebecca calling my name, but I couldn't see her, and this bloody mussel stopped me from doing anything more than whimpering.

They had us together like nothing so much as a chain gang. By the end there were a dozen cops, and a couple dozen of us. They gave a quick bat of their batons every time someone stepped out of line. I'd already gotten my fair share of whacks from those, thanks. I just did my best to stay in the center of the group and keep my head down.

Not that it was all that easy.

I could hardly keep my eyes in my skull. I'd been expecting V-town to be bad, but this was almost unbelievable.

Every third building was either torched from the riots or collapsing from the quake. The roads were all chewed up so bad as to nearly be unwalkable and half the people we saw on the street looked like they were homeless.

We crossed one of what I would only guess were the triage camps. They were little more than clear spots on ground where the wounded and dying were put out to lie. I could see doctors and nurses running from one person to the next, but I doubt they were doing much good.

The walk downtown shouldn't have taken more than an hour, but with the city the way it was mid afternoon by the time we got there.

The police headquarters was an imposing structure at the best of times. Taking up a whole city block, the three story, square, red brick structure was built like a fortress. And it was the only building I'd yet seen that seemed to not have taken even the slightest damage.

Okay, strike that. The small front doors, the only visible entrance, looked to have gone through a hard time. There were burn marks and gashes across them. A team of police dogs were replacing them even as we walked through.

I could remember the first time I'd been here. Even then, on a normal day, the police presence around the building had been stifling, but now there seemed to be a cop literally every couple of meters around the building.

Stepping through the front doors, we didn't even pause for breath in the small receiving room but rather were marched right on through.

My heart began to race when I thought about the possibility of being taken back into the basement again and locked away in one of their 'special' cells.

Thankfully, we were simply slotted into a holding pen in a large room a few doors back.

The room was just short of huge, a good twenty meters to a wall. There were no windows, and only a single door -- the one we'd come through.

Cutting the space up into a half dozen holding pens, there were simple bars that ran from floor to ceiling. And every one of the pens was filled to overflowing.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I'd been dragged in here, but this looked more like a line at the supermarket than a bunch of rough and tough law breakers. There were people here who looked more at home behind an accounting desk or checkout counter than iron bars.

It was obvious that things were well past the capacity they'd been designed for, folks were pressed up against the bars just to make room, and they never even removed our handcuffs.

The cop who had originally nabbed me was back behind me now. Or at least I thought it was him. The vast majority of police officers were dogs, and most of them were German Shepherd. All GSDs look alike to me, they all looked like Jon.

"This way, citizen." The dog grasped me by the shoulder and led me towards one of the cages. It looked to be a touch emptier than the others, but they were all packed full.

I could hear people shouting, pleading to get out, crying, but the officers seemed to do their best to ignore them. I couldn't tell you for sure, but it looked like the stress must be wearing at even V-town's finest. The institutional mask that they all wore seemed a little thin.

A good half dozen people must have tried to escape when they stuffed me in the holding pen. Or I think they were trying to escape, either that or they were just being pressed out of the cell by the sheer force of people behind them.

I slowly worked my way through the mass of bodies around me. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to who they'd stuffed in here. There were men, women, teenagers and folks old enough to be greyer than my father. We were all pressed in here together with our hands cuffed behind our backs.

Gods but this place stank. I don't think they'd ever intended the holding cells to keep people for this long. They hadn't included any toilets.

The bars that separated the cells were shared between pens. I was pressed up against the bars on one side and the folks in the next pen were up against me.

It took me a few moments, but I recognized the large red skull of Max. He'd been my friend and neighbour back when I'd worked at KDP.

"Max!" I tried to shout over the din of people around us. To be honest, I'm not sure it did much good. My voice seemed to be swallowed up as soon as I opened my mouth.

He must have better hearing than I'd given him credit for. He turned a moment later. I would have waved to get his attention if I hadn't been cuffed. All I could do was jump.

"Tommy!" He shouldered his way towards me until he was standing on the other side of the bars. "Gods, man, it's good to see a friendly face."

I couldn't help but smile. It had to have been at least six months since I'd last seen him... that had been just right when the riots were first starting.

"Max, you okay? What's going on? I just got into the city and they hauled me here."

His face looked weathered, like he was about ready to breakdown. "Gods, Tommy. It feels like the world is coming to an end."

Max had been the one running the radio while I'd been out of town, he'd been my lifeline to what was going on.

"It almost looked like we were getting things under control, Tommy. Then the hunters stormed in one day and made off with your parents. Just like that. No words, just growls and snarls as they carried them off. The next day the quake hit."

"How did you get in here, Max? I thought you were with Storm Front when they merged with the police."

He gave me an uneasy half-grin. "I was. I couldn't stay here after the quake, I had to go back to my apartment and see if it was still standing. Kate and I," He paused for a moment, drawing in a breath, "We went back for a look, but there's almost nothing left of the building. We were digging through the rubble when a patrol came. They accused us of looting and dragged us both in here. That was yesterday. I don't even know where Kate is anymore. Gods, Tommy, what's happening? They're pulling people off the street if you so much as look at them funny. I tried to tell them that I was working the radio for them but they won't listen."

I wanted to answer, but I really didn't know what to say.

I hadn't any idea how long I was in there. There were no windows, and the lights never changed. All I knew was that every so often the police would come by and stuff a few more people into the holding cells. They never let anyone go.

Someone must have noticed the stench. They did finally come by with some small portable toilets, then later food and water.

Now, keeping in mind that pretty much every single one of us in were wolves, cats, lizards or daemons like Max, but I'd never really thought of us as *animals*. The moment there was food and water... well, that opinion changed.

I can't say that I really blamed them. I hadn't been in here long compared to some people, but seeing the rush once there were handouts... I was just amazed the people weren't killed.

Even then they still didn't remove anyone's cuffs. That was an interesting sight, watching a couple hundred people try to drink with their hands cuffed behind their backs.

I heard a slight commotion among the guards sometime later. I was pressed too far in the back to see a thing, but something was happening.

One of the officers began shouting a few moments later, but I couldn't make him out over the din. They must have noticed, for a few seconds later all the officers in the room began shouting in unison, almost as if they were singing.

It was my name.

This was either really good or really, really bad.

"Over here!" I shouted back, for all the good it did me.

I began muscling my way towards the front of the pen now. It was slow going, but I made it there eventually.

The one thing that did make me laugh was there seemed to be at least one person from each holding cell that was pushing their way towards the front, yelling, "I'm Tommy Taggart!"

One of the German Shepherd police dogs was walking from cell to cell, checking the people who claimed to be me. It wasn't until he got to my pen that he nodded at the other dog who was holding the keys.

"Step forward, Sir. We need you to stand in front of the door." The officer's voice was calm,

clipped, and neutral.

"Hey! Why does he get out!"

"Yeah! We've been in here longer!" voices called from around me.

"You will all be processed in due time," the dog replied.

It did little good. The crowd had been frightened but calm before. Now that nervous fear was turning to anger.

"Sir, I'm going to need you to stand in front of the door *right now*." His neutral voice had slipped a measure as his eyes watched the press of people behind me.

No sooner had I gotten to the entrance of the cell than the other dog yanked it open. Two more dogs reached through and pulled me out as the door clicked back closed so fast it almost caught my tail.

It was a good thing that the wound in my hip had healed over. No sooner was I out than two dogs seized me by the elbows and began double timing me out of the room, following the one who had identified me.

It was a good thing they were moving so fast, but even then it was the longest walk of my life. I could feel the eyes of all the people who were still trapped in the holding pens. Many of them were pressing their hands through the bars, grasping at me. I don't think I'll ever be able to forget their cries of 'Help us!'

And I could still see Max, pressed in the back towards the wall. Just watching me.

Out of the holding cell and down a half dozen corridors, the dog in the lead eventually opened a door to a nondescript break room of some sort.

"Place him in here." The clip on the dog's voice was so tight that I was surprised he didn't bite off his tongue.

"Are you sure, Constable? It's against standard protocol to leave a single officer alone with an suspect."

"He's not a suspect anymore," the lead dog replied. "The charges against him have been dropped."

I couldn't see the faces of the dogs who held me, but I could feel them tilt their heads to the side in almost perfect unison.

"Dropped the charges, Sir?" one of them asked. "I wasn't aware that the courts had been restarted."

"They haven't," the lead dog replied, his voice taking on an edge. "This is by special order of Commissioner Sayer."

"Understood."

As one they released me and filed out of the room. I was alone with the lead dog as he clicked the door closed behind him.

For a moment it was all I could do to stretch. I know it sounds silly, but that's the truth of the matter. I'd been holed up in that cell for so long that bloody well near every single one of my muscles had cramped.

And that was when I realized that the dogs had taken my cuffs with them when they'd left.

Now *that* was something to celebrate.

"It's good to see you again, Sir."

I'd almost forgotten that there was still one dog left in the room with me.

Turning slowly, I took a good look at him. He was the picture perfect image of a police officer. A German Shepherd dog in a precisely pressed uniform and an exact clip to his voice and manner.

In fact, he was a to perfect. All the other dogs I'd seen today were a little warn, a little rumped,

having been out working in their uniforms.

"Jon?"

He smiled.

"Sorry it took so long to retrieve you, Sir." He chuckled slightly.

I had to keep myself from wrapping my fingers around his brown furred neck and strangling the life out of him.

"Where in all the gods' names were you back there? They took me into custody and I didn't see hide or hair of you!"

His grin grew slightly. "Might I remind you, Sir, that it was your decision to get into a scuffle and attract the attention of the passing patrol. In any event, if I'd come to aid you in the field my credentials would have been refuted and I would have been in there right along side you."

Sighing, I sat down heavily in one of the plain wooden chairs that littered the room.

"I had to check in with the service," he continued. "Then meet with my Uncle Sayer, then find you. And might I say that locating you was no small task." He shook his head. "We have over one hundred holding cells in this building. You were in number eighty-seven. I trust you had a pleasant stay."

I just laid my head back and closed my eyes for a moment.

"Where's everyone else? Did they get arrested too?"

He shook his head. "No. You were the only one taken into custody. I was able to effect a retreat before anyone else was apprehended. They are waiting for you in one of the receiving rooms." He paused for a moment, glancing quickly over his shoulder to the closed door. "And I don't mind telling you, Tommy, that your new companion, the hunter..."

"Renald?"

"Yes, Mr. Renald, was uncharacteristically distraught about your disappearance."

I raised an eye ridge at that one. "Really? I would have just as well thought that he would be laughing all the way back to the hunter's camp if I got steamrolled."

He just shrugged. "It would appear not."

"Well," I struggled up from the chair, my muscles had already gone stiff from the time I'd spent in the cell, "I guess I shouldn't keep them waiting." I let my tongue hang out. "And I'll be more than happy to see Rebecca again after all this."

I wavered slightly on my feet, Jon wrapped one of his hands around my elbow, steadying me. His grip was a little tighter than it really needed to be...

"I'm sorry, Sir," His professional mask had slipped a small measure while we'd been talking, it was back in place now, "But I can't let you see them just yet."

I twisted slightly in his grip, turning to see his face. "What now, Jon? I thought you were on loan to me, anyway? Don't you have to take me where I want to go?"

Just the barest of grins slipped onto the dog's face. "I was on special assignment to you, Sir. That ended once I reported back in. But anyway," He began walking me forward out into the hall, never letting go of me, "I doubt that you'll have much issue with the situation. You have an appointment with Commissioner Sayer."

We worked our way through a countless number of near identical corridors, slowly climbing stairs here and there. Now and then I could see the occasional group of dogs working frantically to patch up some bit of damage to the building.

Figures, leave it to the police to worry about patching up their home fortress before actually going out to... oh, I don't know, *fix the city*.

We were up on the third floor now, the top level of the building. I'm pretty sure this is the flag floor, the one that houses the offices for all the top dogs, but it looked the same as all the others. I never was able to understand how the police were able to find their way around the inside of this maze. There were no signs anywhere, not even on the doors, and all the unadorned, whitewashed halls looked the same.

Stopping in front of a simple, unmarked door, Jon pushed it open without knocking. Within was a small reception area. There was another German Shepherd sitting at the desk here. For all I knew it could just as well be Jon's clone.

He glanced up without a word. One look at me and he disappeared through a door in the other end of the room.

"This should only be a moment, Sir," Jon said from behind me.

A second later the dog was back, he held the door to the inner office open for us.

I wasn't too sure what to expect. Last time I'd seen Sayer the man had been little more than a ghost, a scarecrow. The thin, sheet white Great Dane had looked like he'd only had days left to live, and that had been months ago.

The office, likely the top one in the entire building, was as empty and spartan as every other room. The only thing that gave any indication that there was anything important were the stacks upon stacks of neat papers. They filled every square inch of desk space, some piles over three feet tall, and all of them impeccably squared. I got the feeling that the dog planned to read each and every page, too.

The dog himself... well, it looked like it hadn't been a day since I'd last seen him. He was still pale as a sheet and thin as a ghost. He was propped up in a simple, unpadded wooden chair behind the desk, his grey eyes watching me keenly as I stepped into the room.

The moment we crossed the threshold I could feel Jon's grip drop from my arm. He stopped by the entrance, closing the door behind us and standing in front of it without a word.

There was a single chair before the old dog's desk. I took it.

I wasn't sure what to say for the longest time. I was half expecting Sayer to start the conversation, but he simply sat silently.

"It's nice to see you again, Sayer." I fumbled the words out. Every other time I'd met with the dog I'd had English with me. English and Sayer went way back, they'd bounty hunted together years ago. "I, uh, got a tour of your holding cells."

I wasn't quite sure what reaction I been expecting to get from that second line, but the dog pulled back like I'd slapped him.

"Yes..." His voice was only slightly above a whisper, but it was stronger than last time we'd met. "That was... unfortunate and unintentional. The officer who failed to recognize you has been reprimanded. You can expect a formal written apology within twenty-four hours."

I just shook my head. "Reprimanded? Apology? What in the names of the gods is going on here? You've got thousands of people down there! Who's apologizing to them?"

He didn't seem to understand what I was saying.

"It is unfortunate, Mr. Taggert. The service understands that, in your position as Mayor during a time of crisis such as this, we must allow you to take the prerogative, but you must understand that we need to follow our disaster contingency plans."

"Contingency plans?" I slammed my hands down on the desk before him. Hard. It sent papers flying off in all directions. The dog on the other side didn't even react. He simply watched me levelly with his watery grey eyes as though he'd predicted my every move. "It feels like you've got the entire city locked up down there for little more than jaywalking!"

"I can assure you, Mr. Taggert, that we have less than ten percent of the city's population

currently incarcerated." He said it so smoothly that it made my blood run cold. "And every single one of them has preformed an act that permits me to do exactly that under the city wide sate of emergency declaration. In fact," He paused for a moment, eyes focusing slightly, "I have little choice to do anything else. I did not write these plans. I am simply the senior surviving officer after the riots and quake. These plans were written by those who came before me, and I am bound to follow them. That is the law, and I will enforce it."

"The law!" I'd raised my hands now to wrap them around my head. I could feel the beginnings of a migraine coming on. "You really think that some paper pusher planned for something like this? I haven't even seen this 'contingency plan' of yours, but I can still tell you it's nothing more than best guesses and wishing thinking. People don't *plan* for things like this, they just pray they don't happen. You can plan for a power outage, you can plan for a fire, you can't *plan* for half the city in shambles!"

"None the less," His eyes hadn't flinched from me, "The plans are the law, and I am bound to follow them."

"Fine, fine." I let out a huff of breath, "You said I'm the interim mayor, right?" He nodded. A short and quick motion that almost seemed enough to snap his thin neck. "Then I want to change the law. Get those people out of there and focus on just the people who are causing the problem."

He gave me an odd look. "They're all causing a 'problem'. They all broke the law."

"You know what I mean, Sayer." He cocked his head slightly as I spoke. "You've got people locked up in there for nothing more than trying to salvage what's left of their homes."

"But they were breaking the law." He repeated flatly, like an automaton.

"Use your discretion!" I almost screamed it at him. "Your cops are smart." I pointed a thumb at Jon behind me. "Let them figure out who needs to be taken in and who's just trying to collect their lives."

"But... but... that would not guarantee rule of law. How can we maintain a society if everyone is not treated equally?"

I just about began whacking my head on the desk in front of him. "Things aren't exactly *normal* right now, Sayer. Just do the best you can." I levelled a glare at him. "The police service is here to serve the people, not the law. Start doing it."

With the way he looked at me one might have thought I'd grown a second head.

"What?! We... we can't operate without the laws!"

I rolled my eyes. "Not without the laws. Just do your best to keep the peace and let the city get itself back under control. You can do it, you've got some of the best people in the city."

He brightened slightly at that. "No, Sir, I've got *the* best dogs in the city. And, speaking of that," his gaze shifted to Jon standing behind me, "We still have the matter of your security detail to discuss." A pained look crossed his face. "Your parents who you asked us to protect... they..."

I cut in with a wave of my hand. "They're fine. I spoke to them on the way in to the city."

A palpable look of relief crossed the dog's face. "Very good. Will we, uh, be hearing from the hunters again soon? Our supplies of food are running low."

I couldn't keep a grin from my face. "Well, that depends on how soon you send an envoy out to open the lines of communication with them. I'm sure they'll be happy to come back into the city once they've heard you've released all the people in the holding cells."

A slight look of pain crossed the dog's face. "Yes. We'll get to that immediately. We'll have all the detainees processed within twenty-four hours."

I sat back, slumping in the chair. "Good. Now all I need is a hot meal and a hotter shower."

Even Sayer cracked a grin at that one.

"As you say, Mr. Taggert. I'll have a security detail escort you wherever you need to go."

Constable Oaks will, of course, be remaining here for a full debriefing."

My ears perked up at that. "No you don't. No, no, no. You are *not* going to be ordering another pack of dogs to start tagging along behind me like you did last time. You've got more important things to do with your men than send them chasing my tail." I levelled my eyes at the old dog. "Like getting people out of lock up."

"Very good, Sir." He gulped slightly. "But I can't leave you walking the streets of the city alone."

I didn't think I'd ever be saying this, but... "Fine. Then leave Jon with me." I grinned now, my lips raising. "But I want him reporting directly to me. No skulking around, Sayer. Jon can stay with me, but he works for *me* now."

The old dog's eyes widened slightly, and I could hear a strangled cough from Jon where he still stood behind me.

"This is... highly unusual. There will be a large amount of paperwork to be filled out to move him under your jurisdiction..."

I waved a hand. "That I'm sure you can do after we leave. Is it a deal, Sayer?"

Chapter 3: The Boys are Back in Town

I will give it to Sayer that he's good to his word. Leaving his office, Jon lead me back to the main floor. I could already see people trickling out from the holding cells.

Opening the door to another room, I expected Jon to be ushering me into the waiting area with Rebecca and English. Instead it was empty.

Turning back to Jon, he'd already closed the door behind himself, standing between me and the only exit.

"Sir..." He coughed, clearing his throat, "Tommy, was it real what you said back there with my uncle?"

I cocked my head at him. "Said what?"

He looked surprised, like it should be obvious. "That you want me to stay on with you. That you want me transferred out of the standard police force."

Oh. I'd never thought of it that way. Maybe Jon wasn't so hot for the idea -- I'd never bothered to ask him.

"If it's what you want, Jon. I just... well, kind of assumed that you'd want to keep on." I let my lips part in a grin. "It was either that or try my luck with a new dog, and I'm not much interested in that."

His tail curled slightly. Jon was one of the best actors I'd ever met -- likely better than even English -- I'd almost never seen him express his mood. His tail was normally so tightly held in check that it might as well be a prosthetic.

"I would very much appreciate the honour... Tommy. The mayor's private detail is one of the most prestigious positions available. It's normally held by at least four officers at any given time."

I just waved my hand in the air. "Fine, congratulations on the promotion. Just remember that this means that you're working for me, not Sayer." I paused to scratch at my chin with one claw. "And I wish folks would stop calling me 'mayor'. It's just Sayer who thinks that. It's not like I've done anything to earn it, or that I've even gotten any power."

Jon straightened, whatever small glimmer of the real man had been there slid away behind his mask again. "That is not the case, Sir. As you recall, City Hall was destroyed in the riots. As far as we know all of the top government officials are dead. Commissioner Sayer is the ranking official at the

moment, and he has jurisdiction to appoint an interim mayor until the state of emergency has passed. He has, in his wisdom, selected you."

I just rolled my eyes. "The old dog thinks that just because I killed Vanderhoom and touched off the riots that I can be mayor? He's more decrepit than he looks. I've got no experience and no desire for the post. Sayer can do what he wants, but I'm out as soon as things stop collapsing."

"As you say, Sir." I could see a small sliver of a smile peek through his lips again. "But by that I assume that you've accepted the role until then?"

"Doesn't look like I've much choice," I replied. "The hunters have gone xenophobic with my father leading them, and the police have taken rule of the law to a whole new level. Am I the only one with even half a brain left?"

With a completely straight face Jon looked me in the eye and said, "You could always suggest Mr. English run things for a while."

Two heartbeats later the dog had to look away. Even I could hear him snicker.

Out of the room and down a couple more twists and turns of the hallway, Jon threw open another door. The room was bare of even the traditional spartan police decor, but Rebecca, English, Amstys and Renald were there.

I had to laugh when I saw Amstys. The huge wolf looked almost despondent. He was about the same size as English, but where the lion had spent much of his adult life in V-town, the wolf had never set foot in civilization. Amstys' black and grey form was folded up on one of the small chairs, scrunched in with the wood creaking beneath him. He looked up the instant the door opened. For a moment I thought it was going to be a race between him and Rebecca to see who could get to me first.

They both lost out to Renald.

I hadn't even seen him lurking on the side of the room. He'd reached me before the other two could even get out of their seats.

I was almost knocked off my feet as he slammed into me, sending us both to the floor.

"You're alive!" His voice was breathless, like he'd been predicting his own demise.

"Renald? Dude, get off me! Personal space, man!"

I practically had to fight the wolf away. He wouldn't back off until I finally growled at him. "Renald, what's your problem?"

He seemed to suddenly realize what he was doing and stepped back, tail to the ground. "I... well, I'm just glad you're alive... that's all."

English had still to get from his chair. His voice came across as an amused purr. "The woof's been on pins and needles ever since you disappeared, mate." He grinned, showing each and every one of his teeth. "I had to beat it out of him to get an answer." He looked over at Renald. "Spill it, mutt."

"It's well..." The tan wolf looked up at me, "If anything happens to you, alpha Griss will have me killed."

"What!?! We're talking about my father here."

He wouldn't meet my eyes. "He's already had two hunters killed for disobeying him. This is my last chance."

My brain didn't seem to want to click in. My father had *killed* two people? I knew that things worked differently in the hunting packs, civilization's laws tended to break down when you were out in the wild... but killing two people?

I felt Rebecca's hand on my shoulder a moment later. "You okay, Wolfy."

"Uh, yeah," I had to fight down the lump in my throat. I'd assumed that my dad had given Renald a good thrashing, but threatening his life? "Let's just get out of here."

English was out of his seat and ushering us through the door a moment later. "Sure, mate. Now, the million dollar question is: Where do you want to go?"

Oh yeah, I'd kind of forgotten about that.

"Anyone know if the apartment is still standing?"

English just chuckled, but it was Jon who spoke up.

"I took the liberty of checking the building inspection logs before I fetched you." He cleared his throat. "The report states that there is 'significant cosmetic damage, but the core structure is still sound'." He paused for a moment. "I also noticed that Commissioner Sayer has placed increased patrols in that area to deter looting."

I just about face palmed. Had he put cops on the beat in my neighbourhood just to try and keep my apartment safe? Of all thing things he could be doing with his men, he seemed to have an unhealthy obsession with keeping tabs on me.

"Fine." I'd just stepped through the front door of the police headquarters building now. It felt good to have the sun in my face again. "Let's get back there and plan our next step."

The walk to the apartment was long and gruelling. We had to detour about four times as we found streets impassable, choked with rubble or blocked off by people doing rescue efforts. There were a couple of times that patrols of police officers veered our way, but they backed off as soon as they saw Jon in his crisp new uniform.

I felt a pull to dive into the rescue efforts, but, to be honest, I was just short of walking dead on my feet.

Rather surprisingly my apartment block, Moreau hall, was still standing and seemed not so worse for ware. There were cracks up it's plaster, but the thing was still in one piece. Chock one up for the police and their inspection report.

The power was even on inside, though most of the lights were either burnt out or shattered. I guess someone must have gotten electricity back up and running.

Heh. I'd never even noticed it at police HQ, but their power and been up and running too. Electricity was just one of those things that you never realized you used so much of until you don't have it. Good thing the dams outside the city were still running.

None of us were stupid enough to try and take the elevator, so up the stairs we went.

I didn't see a single soul the whole time. I hadn't the slightest where all the other tenants had gone, but I had a sneaking suspicion that the police had been keeping them away. Hopefully they'd be returning before too much longer.

The third floor was much as I remembered it. There were a few cracks in the drywall and a few stains on the floor, but it was better than I had any right to expect.

My nose twitched as I walked. I could smell police dogs. They had been here. But, strangely enough, it didn't seem as though they'd entered the apartments themselves.

Once again I'd managed to lose my key to the door. This was becoming a habit.

I put by weight into it, but the door wouldn't budge. Gods, with the way my life went I should just replace the lock with something made out of Styrofoam.

"Step aside, mate." English picked me up by the shoulders. "Let an old hand take care of this."

The lion was about to set me down when Amstys stepped up to the door and kicked it in with a single fluid motion. The wood of the frame splintered as the door bounced against its stop.

The wolf just looked over to me. "What? You wanted the door open."

Things were more or less exactly the same as we'd left them when we departed for our trek

across the mountains, other than all the food in the fridge having gone green and hairy.

It was the most I could do to simply flop on the bed and pull Rebecca to my side. I hadn't the opportunity to sleep on anything soft in months. The sun was just beginning to set in the sky, but I was already out like a light.

The next morning came far sooner than I would have liked. Rebecca was still asleep beside me when I was awakened by the sounds of yelling on the street.

My blood ran cold for a moment as I sprang to the window, fearing that the riots had started again, but it was someone hawking fresh meat.

Meat? That meant the hunters had to be working again. Popping open the window, I peered down the street. There were people here and there, some of them were picking up rubble, others were prying the boards off shops and reopening.

I couldn't keep the silly grin from my face. Well, this was better than I'd ever expected.

Rebecca still hadn't awoken as I turned and snuck from the bedroom. Amstys and Renald had crashed out in the front room, and I could hear the sound of English's snores coming from across the hallway. Jon was nowhere to be seen.

Emerging out onto the street, I had to pick my way through the rubble to make it to the man who was shouting out his wares.

"How much for a side of venison?" I asked him.

"What ya got? Money ain't much good yet. Can you trade?"

I hadn't much with me, but I was able to make a deal for some of our camping supplies. A few minutes later I had about as much meat as I could carry and the merchant was walking off with a couple of our bed rolls.

Everybody was still asleep when I got back. Frankly, I'll take my meat raw, and I think most people will agree with me, but Rebecca had this odd fetish for cooked food.

I gave the little stove in my apartment a kick. It took a while, but it sputtered halfway back to life. I guess they must still be working on getting the gas back up and running.

As if on cue, English sauntered through the door. I'd left it open behind me. His eyes were a touch bloodshot and his mane looked like the world's biggest bed head, but it was obvious that he was as happy about having spent the night in a real bed as I was.

"Morning, mate." He took one look at the meat before tearing off a chunk nearly the size of my head. I swear that he took half of it down in one bite. He must have all but unhinged his jaw to be able to do that. "I see you're already out and providing for us mere mortals."

"Don't you get started." I waved a claw at him while I fought with the stove. I hadn't much experience working these things, and it was being even pickier than usual. "I don't care what Sayer has to say about this, I just want to get back to life as normal."

"Normal, mate?" He laughed, voice loud enough to make Amstys snort and roll over in his sleep. "Just look out the window, mate. Can you tell me *that* will ever be normal again?"

I just sighed. "You know what I mean, English. I don't want any more treks across the frozen mountains, no more fighting off she-demons, no more ghosts or magic machines. And especially no more race riots."

"Heh." He chuckled as he tore off another hunk of meat -- I'd just realized that I hadn't yet had a chance to get any for myself. "Well, mate, you might just get that wish. You notice that there isn't a single human among them? My money's on them all still being holed up in Horseshoe Bay."

Ah, gods. I hadn't thought about that. The humans had all been pushed out of the city when the riots had first begun. They could be dead for all I knew.

"Do you think they're okay..."

I trailed off as I saw Amstys' ears twitch. No more than a heartbeat later he was on his feet, stalking towards the door with a growl in his throat. A second later I heard the doorway to the stairwell open.

I could have told you they were police dog before I even saw them. The click of their claws came in perfect time as they marched down the hallway.

I couldn't say I was surprised when they stopped at my open apartment door and politely knocked.

Amstys was still there, barring their way and growling from deep in his gut.

"Down, boy, back!" I grabbed the huge wolf by the scruff of his neck and hauled him a few steps from the door. I could see English grinning from the corner of my eye.

Amstys looked about ready to take a chunk out of the two cops who stood before me, but had to content himself with glaring while I stood between them.

Neither of the cops were Jon, I could tell that much. They were both German Shepherds, but they were just different enough that I could tell them apart.

The only other thing I knew for sure was they were of higher rank than Jon. All the police uniforms are identical; Sayer, the top cop, was dressed the same as the dogs who walked the beat. The only difference between them were the small pips of rank that they had on their lapels.

Frankly, I had no clue what the different ranks were, but these two, by the amount of brass they were wearing, were closer to Sayer than Jon.

"Mr. Taggart, Sir." The two of them spoke and nodded to me in unison, as if of one mind.

I just leaned on the door frame and glared at them. "I thought I told Sayer that I didn't want a guard. What are you two doing here?"

They glanced at each other nervously before one of them spoke. "We're, uh, not guards, Sir. I'm Superintendent Able, and this is Superintendent Baker. We're here to provide you with your daily situation report and to return your instructions to Commissioner Sayer."

"What?" It was all I could to lean my head against the door frame.

From behind me I could hear English burst out laughing.

"Oh you shut up!" I called at him over my shoulder. He just laughed harder.

The dogs wouldn't go until they had 'briefed' me. Amstys didn't care for them much, but the wolf quieted down once I gave him some breakfast to occupy his mouth.

"I'm assuming that you would like the short version, Sir?" Able was seated at the kitchen table now. Both he and Baker had refused any meat.

"Yeah, that would be good." Sitting across from them, I was gnawing away at a tough piece of what was left of the venison I'd bought. I'd been too slow at getting to it and was left with what no one else had wanted.

"Very well, Sir." The dog nodded at me, "The orders you gave yesterday have been carried out, all the citizens in the holding cells have been released save for those accused of serious crimes. We used our discretion."

"Good, good." I was only half listening to them as I gnawed away.

"The release was in exchange for signed agreements that they would donate one fifth of their time to the municipal reconstruction project, of course."

"Huh?" I almost dropped the meat in my hands. From beside me I could feel Rebecca looking up from her own meal.

The dog stopped for a moment. "We were under the impression that you were already aware of

that..."

"Fine, fine. Discretion. I'm going to have to have a talk with Sayer about that." Was all I could get out though gritted teeth.

I was about to break into a tirade about the difference between 'discretion' and 'forced labour' when Amstys perked up again behind me, a fresh growl in his throat.

"What is it now?" I lowered my head to the table. "More of you're police dogs to come give me a migraine?"

I could just see the two dogs exchange a glance. "No, Sir," began Able. "The force is under strict orders to respect your privacy."

The footsteps that came down the hall this time most certainly didn't sound like the police. They were neither tight and exacting nor in perfect time.

"What a dump," one of the voices muttered from outside my open door, "What room is he supposed to be in anyway?"

I recognized that voice. It was... it was...

A dark furred bull strode abruptly into the room.

It was Hayfair. My old boss from KDP.

You've got to be kidding me. You've got to be freaking kidding me. I just about burst out laughing.

The bull had a few extra scars and grey hairs on his face, but he looked almost exactly the same as he had when I'd last seen him a year ago. When I'd threatened to kill him and he'd fired me.

Behind him was Jameswell, the same cat I'd last seen him with.

I was at a loss for words. The bull and cat simply waltzed into my apartment like they owned the place. Not even Able or Baker said a thing.

Amstys sat in the corner of the room, his growl slowly growing in volume.

"You." Hayfair pointed at Able, "We heard the new mayor is here. Where is he?" His manner was not that of a humble question that one might ask another person, but like he was addressing in inferior.

The way he'd used to talk to me when I'd worked for him.

I did have to give it to the cops. They turned to face the men as one, raising from where they sat to place themselves between me and the interlopers.

The police weren't aggressive, not as such, but you could see in there every motion that they were as ready to spring as Amstys was. Or Renald for that matter.

"Do you have an appointment with the mayor?" Able said, his voice calm.

"I don't need an *appointment*," Hayfair snuffed. Beside him, Jamewell was grinning. "We're here as representatives of KDP. We're still the largest employer in the city."

"That may be so," now it was Baker speaking. They were so alike it was hard to tell them apart. "But *we* are currently meeting with the mayor. Unless that is," He paused for a moment, but didn't take his eyes from the two, "You would like to speak with them, Sir."

I could feel Hayfair's and Jameswell's eyes scan the room. They dismissed Amstys offhandedly, Renald and myself a moment later. I don't even think they so much as acknowledged Rebecca. That just left English.

Well, the lion was certainly looking like royal material. He'd managed to get himself cleaned up since we'd returned to town.

"Don't I know you?" It was Jameswell speaking now, his voice was as slimy as I remembered. "I've seen your face before... Weren't you a bounty hunter?"

The two police officers didn't move to to block him as Jameswell stepped up to take English's

hand.

"I'm sure we'll get along perfectly, Mr..." The cat continued.

English glanced my way for just an instant, his eyes mischievous. "You can just call me 'Sir'." His normally slightly nasal, British accent was replaced with a deep booming baritone that perfectly fit the stoic expression he now held.

It was all I could do to keep from laughing. The cat and bull were rambling on to English about something or other, but every few moments the lion would shift, posing like he was in a photo op.

"... So I'm sure you can understand, Mr. ... uh, Sir, that KDP is fully at your disposal. We had an excellent relationship with the previous administration, and we've been sent by the board of directors to ensure that we can work hand in glove with you."

"Unrmph." Was all they got from the lion as he melodramatically rubbed his chin.

"To start with," Hayfair cut in, "We'd just like to ensure that KDP employees have been, of course, exempted from this *reconstruction* plan of yours." The bull rolled his eyes. "You just can't expect that the company could ever allow its employees the time off to rebuild civic buildings. We are, obviously, working on contract for you anyway, so it just doesn't make sense."

"Contracts, yes..." came English's voice from deep within his chest.

I glanced over at Able and Baker who were still standing motionless as stone between me and Hayfair and Jameswell. Their training was too good, they had hardly moved, but I could see the telltale signs of their mouths all but hanging open.

"There is much that must be considered first," English's voice slid back in, smooth as syrup. "But I am not the one you need discuss it with."

Hayfair's eyes narrowed slightly. "Yes, I'm sure you would prefer we go through your *underlings*, but KDP is the largest employer--"

English waved his hand, silencing them, "Yes, yes. I completely agree." His grin widened, becoming predatory. "But I am, as you say, an *underling*. You will have to speak with the mayor himself if you want anything done." I could hear a purr start in his chest as Hayfair's jaw dropped.

"But... I thought you were..."

English just shook his head slightly, slowly raising a finger to dramatically point in my direction.

If Hayfair's jaw had been open before, it practically fell from his face to clatter on the ground once he recognized me.

"You! You're..."

I couldn't keep a slight wag from my tail as I met his gaze. I guess this whole 'mayor' thing did have a few benefits.

"Hello again, grass-muncher." It took everything I had to keep an amused growl from my voice. "Remember me?"

"What are you playing at, Taggart?" Hayfair was just short of trying to leap over the kitchen table to get at me.

It took Jameswell a few more moments to realize who I was. It made sense, I'd only ever met him once before.

The cat laid his hand on Hayfair's shoulder, reining him in somewhat. "I'm sure Mr. Taggart here is a reasonable man. After all," He gave me an appraising glance, "He must have been selected as the new mayor for *some* reason." He paused for a moment, clearing his throat. "I believe we were discussing exempting KDP from the reconstruction program."

"Yes." I let out a breath. "By some archaic definition of 'discuss'."

He didn't even seem to notice what I'd said.

"Very good. The board of directors has determined that the restrictions placed on our time would make an unacceptable reduction in the corporation's profits. Not to mention," He turned up his nose slightly, "No small number of us in the management groups are expected, *ourselves*, to be involved in the effort. Without pay."

I couldn't keep my lips from raising. Though, to be honest, I couldn't tell you if it was in a smile or a snarl.

"So you'll call this whole silly thing void then?" Jameswell finished, a self satisfied smirk on his face.

I glanced over at English. He was grinning from ear to ear, loving this.

"Of course, Jameswell," I began, choosing my words carefully, "I'll make sure that KDP is released from its obligations..." Able and Baker's faces were falling now. "As soon as the project is complete and not a moment before."

I set my hands on the table before me, sorting the scraps of meat I'd held out between us. "Do you seriously expect me to release you from public service when we need you most?" I blew out a breath. "You said it yourselves, KDP is the largest employer in the entire city! If I released you it would take twice as long to rebuild. I don't care what this does to your profits, you can help us rebuild the same as everyone else."

Hayfair's face hardened as I spoke. "Listen here, you little runt," he began, "I don't care who you think you are--"

Amstys' growl cut through the room like a knife. "Do not threaten the young master." His voice was little more than a snarl, deep enough to feel in my bones.

"Master?" Hayfair's eye's almost bugged out. "Is that what you're playing at?" He spat, a glob of mucus falling to the floor in front of my toes. "You disgust me."

I couldn't hold back my laughter. "You're still as stupid as last time I met you, grass-muncher." I levelled a glare at him. "Get out of my home."

He took a step back in surprise. "Are you a fool, Taggart? You can't hope to run this city without the support of companies like KDP."

I just waved my hand in the air, dismissing him as I began gnawing on my haunch of meat again. "I don't plan to run the city, just keep it from imploding. I think we're done here."

"You'll regret this, Taggart." He looked at me suspiciously. "How did you become mayor anyway? I didn't vote for you."

I laughed again. "Good question." There was the sound of ripping flesh as I tore free of hunk of meat. "Let me know the answer when you find out, I know about as much as you do," I spoke through a mouthful of food.

Another growl from Amstys and they were on their way out a second later. Remind me that I *really* have to get my door fixed. I couldn't even slam it behind them.

"Are you sure that was a wise choice, Sir?" Superintendent Able had returned to his seat across from me, his expression guarded.

I rolled my eyes. "Probably not. But I don't expect to stay mayor for long anyway, just until a real one can be elected." I smiled, "They can suck it up and help rebuild. Sayer came up with the idea, didn't he, and I'm not about to nay say him." I tore another chunk of meat from the bones before me and tossed the rest of the stingy thing into the garbage. I was still hungry. "Okay, boys," I levelled my eyes at the two dogs, "I'm assuming that you came all the way out here to tell me more than 'everything's going great'. Out with it."

They sighed in unison. One of them pulled a stack of papers from a briefcase that I hadn't even noticed he'd been carrying.

"There is the matter of some paperwork and procedures you'll need to sign off, Sir..."
From behind me I could hear English laughing.

It was almost a good week before I could get my nose outside the apartment again. I hadn't the slightest why they'd glomped on me so, but the police and civil service couldn't seem to so much as brush their own tails without me signing for it.

The cops weren't the only ones who liked me now. Everyone from the department of water and sewer to agriculture seemed to want a piece of my time. They kept cycling through my apartment to the point that I was seriously considering getting a revolving door installed.

At least the police had decided to punch up security a bit. I still didn't like having them around, but they did keep KDP from coming back after a couple of cops had taken up residence in the lobby.

The worst part was that it wasn't as though I was actually doing much. It would have felt better if I'd known I was making a difference, but all the stuff I signed off on was about the equivalent of 'invoke the disaster recovery plan and try to stop things from catching fire'. Well, okay, for the water and sewer people it was more like 'try to stop things from flooding'.

I hadn't the slightest where English had scuttled off to. He'd spent the first day laughing at me, then disappeared when I wasn't looking. Amstys seemed to be slowly transforming into nothing more than a guard dog, and Renald had managed to hide himself in a corner and do as close as he could to nothing at all.

Rebecca was the only one who was doing me the least good, and she didn't look happy about it. With each new person who tried to batter their way in she was there, holding them back and helping me sort out who really needed to talk to me vs. who was just trying to get some face time.

I would have been swamped if not for Rebecca, but every day she seemed to slowly drift further and further from me. We barely said anything at night, the both of us just falling asleep, dead tired after yet another day that never seemed to end.

She was in my arms now, the night having fallen and the endless line of people having been beaten back.

"You okay, babe?" I whispered, my lips no more than a hair from her ear.

She murmured slightly, almost as if asleep before answering. "What happened, Wolfy? What are we doing here?"

I really wish I had an answer to that.

"It's like we're not doing anything at all," she continued. "We've just been caught up in the machine, like were cogs spinning in place and not getting anywhere."

I wrapped my arms more tightly around her, pulling her to my chest. Her naked skin was warm to the touch.

"I know, Babe." I let my lips raise slightly as I kissed the back of her neck. "You're always right, eh?" She giggled slightly. "What do you say we tell all these folks to stuff it tomorrow and go see if we can get a look at what's going on in the real world?"

She wriggled slightly, turning over to face me. "Are you serious, Tommy?"

I rolled my eyes. "Why not? You just said that we're not doing anything of true value here. Let's go get our feet on the ground again. I wasn't born for this," I reached over to lick her nose, "And I doubt you were either."

Able and Baker returned the next morning with a fresh briefcase of papers to sign. I could have framed their expressions when I told them to bugger off.

"Sir?" Able's eyes were wide as he watched me work my way through my breakfast, another

plate of venison. This time I'd been able to buy it from a proper store.

"You heard me, Able. Get someone else to sign your papers. I'm out for the day."

He almost looked like he was going to panic. "But, Sir, we need the authorizations..."

I didn't even bother to look his way. "I'm the boss here, right?" I could hear him murmur an affirmative. "Fine." I waved a hand in his and Baker's direction. "You two have authorization to sign on my behalf. Do what you think I would." I grinned slightly, "You're smart people, you can likely make better decisions than I. It's not like I even know what I'm signing half the time."

"But, Sir, what about all the people waiting to speak to you?"

I laughed. "They can speak to *you*, or whoever else we have left in the government. Anyone who wants to talk to me personally can wait. I'm closed."

I watched the dogs nod in perfect unison.

"And one more thing," I added, "Where's Jon? He's supposed to be my personal attache, where's he gone?"

Able cleared his throat nervously. "He's, um, well, Sir..."

Baker cut in, "He's been managing the security of the building."

"Fine," I waved a hand, dismissing them, "The two of you can handle the signing. There's two of you, so it shouldn't take long. And send Jon up here while you're on your way out."

They were gone a moment later.

I looked over at Rebecca. "Care for a walk, babe?"

She smiled as I took her hand and helped her to her feet.

My mood fell a moment later as Amstys and Renald were at our shoulders.

"No." I turned, waving a finger at them. "Not you two. You're staying here."

"What?"

"Young master?"

I pushed them back, away from the door before they could get anything more out.

"That's an order." I tapped Amstys on the nose as I gave Renald a glare. "We'll have Jon with us, we'll be fine."

"But, but, young master..." Amstys looked like he was on the edge of tears.

I just smiled at him while I gave him a pat on the shoulder. "You can stay here and keep Renald company, big guy." The tan wolf scowled at me for that one. "And," I was probably going to regret this, "You're welcome to anything in the fridge."

That lightened his mood slightly.

Jon met Rebecca and I before we'd even made it to the stairs. The power had been steady, but I still didn't trust the elevator.

"Can't we just get away by ourselves?" Rebecca whispered into my ear.

I just laughed under my breath. "With our luck, someone would have a heart attack if we tried to slip off alone." I eyed her critically, "You're ferocious, for sure, but I'm not convinced you'd make much of a bodyguard."

She bopped in the nose with one of her fingers for that comment.

Jon stood in front of us now, holding the stairwell door open.

"Good morning, Sir, ma'am." He bowed his head slightly. His uniform was so sharply pressed around him that I could almost hear it creak. "I'm under the impression that you're looking for a tour of the city," He paused for a moment and winked at us, "To view your reconstruction efforts first hand."

I just sighed. "Yeah, sure. That's it." I glanced back at him while we worked our way down the stairs. "Say, Jon, any chance you could ditch the uniform? I was kinda trying to leave this whole

'mayor' thing behind for a while, and having you in uniform attracts a little too much attention."

He paused for a moment on the stairs behind me. "That can be arranged... Tommy." His mouth dropped open in a grin. "If you'll be so kind as to wait for me on the main floor before stepping out into the lobby." He turned and was out of sight before I could say another word.

"He's not going to be back in the chains and leather that I first saw him in, is he?" Rebecca sounded almost worried.

The first time we'd met Jon he'd been assigned by the police force to escort English and I as we'd tracked down the human minority. Apparently Jon's definition of 'undercover' was a little more extreme than most. He'd looked like a whipped puppy. If he dressed up like that again we'd be attracting even more attention than if he was in uniform.

Down on the main floor, I could hear a commotion outside as we waited in the stairwell. I couldn't make out what was going on, it must just be construction. I hadn't been able to hear it from my apartment as I was on the other side of the building.

Jon was back with us a moment later. He looked... normal.

Normal was not a word I would often use to describe Jon. The dog was a good man and a trusted friend, but I'd never thought of him as *normal*.

All he wore now was a simple closed front forest green vest over his brown and black fur. The pockets in the vest bulged just enough to make me wonder what he might have concealed in there.

When I'd first met the dog he'd had a dozen tattoos cut into his pelt, they were all but invisible now. He looked like anyone else I might expect to meet on the street.

Even his voice had changed. It wasn't nearly as dramatic as what English was wont to do, but he'd managed to file the edges from his normal police clip when he spoke.

"Tommy, Rebecca." It felt odd to hear him refer to us by our first names for a change. "We can depart whenever you wish." He paused for a moment, peering out the stairwell door towards the front entrance. "Though I might suggest that we exit through the rear of the building."

I blinked at him. "Why, whats going on?"

He wouldn't meet my eyes. "It might be best if I let you see it for yourselves."

He lead us through the hallways of the apartment building to a small rear door that I'd never even knew existed. It dumped us out into a cramped alleyway. I noticed that there were two police dogs standing guard at the door. They eyed Jon until he flipped open one of the pouches on his vest to display a badge.

Coming out of the alley, Rebecca in hand and Jon in tow, I made a lazy circle back towards the front of the building.

Half the street was choked with protesters carrying signs and shouting slogans.

I was about to suggest to Rebecca that she slide back into her cat disguise, these could be more anti-human protesters for all we knew. She already had.

Tapping a hand on Jon's shoulder, I tugged him into a small niche in a building across the way.

"What in all the gods' names is going on here?"

He could only just meet my eyes when he responded.

"It's... well, it you, Sir."

"What?" I had to fight to keep my voice down.

"They appeared five days ago. They're protesting your position as mayor."

Before he could say another word I'd gently pushed Rebecca into his arms and turned to walk back out onto the street. "Stay here," I hissed.

I was clad in nothing more than my brown and cream pelt, not a single scrap of clothing upon me, nothing to show my so-called position of 'mayor'.

In only a few strides I'd joined up with the crowd. They didn't seem overly organized, I couldn't even make out what was going on. There was about five dozen people here, of all species and creeds, and they were working their way through three or four different chants at the same time.

The mob was bumping up against the front doors of the apartment building, but there were a dozen police dogs there, big ones, who were keeping them back and in order.

Fighting my way to the front, it took a few moments before I was able to work out the signs that were scrawled across their placards.

At least a third, possibly half, of all the people in V-town were illiterate, so it wasn't much of a surprise that the signs were a challenge to make out.

'We want free vote'

'Old government was better'

And, rather eloquently, 'Flay the wolf, we won't be run like a pack'

I was starting to feel a touch light headed now. These people were here because of *me*? I hadn't even done anything of note. All I'd been able to do was sign a few papers saying that we should begin the reconstruction and let folks out of jail!

I was milling my way back through the crowd, rather pleased with myself that no one seemed to be able to recognize me, when I noticed one of the protesters pausing for a break, sitting leaned up against the side of a building. The sign next to him read: 'No dictators'.

I fell heavily to sit beside the feline. He was a cat of some sort.

"Hey." I nodded to him.

He looked over at me, yellow eyes tired but friendly. "Hey." He angled his ears towards the group. "You here for the rally too?"

I nodded. "Something like that. I heard about it from a couple streets over and came to take a peek."

He looked surprised. "Oh. So you're not on the clock?"

"The clock?" I couldn't keep the suspicion from my voice.

"Yeah." He nodded. "Aren't you with KDP? They're paying us overtime to come on over here after our shifts and carry the picket signs. Not too sure what it's for, but any money is good after all this." He stretched his back, I could hear his spine pop. "Gods, it's murder after a day's work, then the hours moving rubble around, but I can barely put food out for the kids with how much the prices have gone up."

I forced a smile to my lips. "Yeah, ain't that the truth. But no clue what the whole deal is?"

He shrugged. "Who knows. The high mucky mucks at the 'P are always riled up over something or other. It's the first time I've ever heard of them pulling something like this, but it's none of my concern. They told us that the new mayor is bad for business and that he stole the job. That's all we need to write up some signs." He yawned. "Not that it matters much anyhow. As long as we're here and we're loud, that's all it seems to take to get the cop's blood pressure up." He grinned. "Who cares about the mayor, I'm just enjoying the chance to square one away with the mongrels without them having a chance to fight back."

"Anyway," He continued, cracking his back again, "I better get back on it, protesters don't get coffee breaks." He pointed a thumb to the sign. "Do you want to carry the placard for a while? The bloody thing's heavy."

I held my hands up in front of me. "Uh, no. That's okay. I gotta get back to work too."

He shrugged. "So be it. I'm not sure I'd be out here either if I wasn't getting the kick for it."

I was off and back with Rebecca and Jon a moment later. None of the 'protesters' even payed us

the slightest bit of mind.

Jon didn't say a word as I returned, but Rebecca just sort of grabbed me by the tongue.

"Spill it, Wolfy. What's going on over there?"

I couldn't keep the scowl from my face. "You remember the two jerks I kicked out a week ago? The ones from KDP?" She shook her head. "Anyway, it looks like it wasn't the greatest idea. The whole thing is staged. They're payrolling the people to march around over there and shout."

"What?" Jon's jaw nearly hit the concrete.

I glanced over at him. "Didn't you know? They were more than happy to tell me when I asked."

He shook his head. "We don't open dialogues with protesters." He looked down at the ground for a moment. "It's not part of procedure. We simply contain, direct, and disperse them."

"A whole week, and you didn't even try to figure out what they were protesting about?" I couldn't hold back my shock.

The dog's eyes were firmly in place on the ground now. "We... I never thought to. There have always been protests under the previous administrations. They were dealt with more harshly then, forcefully dissolved. I let this one sit as... as I thought it would be what you wanted."

I sighed. Well, I couldn't fault him on that. The only thing that could have made it worse than to let that little boil of hate sit, would be to stir it away with a stick.

I set my hand on the dog's shoulder. "You did the best you could, Jon." I tried to relax my voice, "We'll deal with this after we come back, it can sit until then. You did good." His face brightened. "Now, let's get out of here."

Before I could get two steps the dog cut in again, "I was expecting that you would want to do something like this eventually, I took the liberty of setting up an itinerary for you."

"What? Gods, Jon..." I raised my hand to my forehead as Rebecca giggled. "This is my day off! I don't want an *itinerary*, I just want to relax."

I'd never realized it before, but Jon had just about the best puppy dog eyes I'd ever seen. Gods, a full grown man, who I'd seen take down people twice his size and stare down death without flinching, looked like he was about to burst into tears.

"But, Sir, I've..." he trailed off.

Rebecca elbowed me in the ribs as I tried to resist. With a sigh, there was nothing more I could do. "Fine, Jon, what do you have planned?"

His face lifted in an instant as his tail began to wag -- that might be a first for him.

"Well, Sir, I was planning our first stop could be the local police station, to demonstrate the reconstruction of the service on a local level..."

Gods.

It's been four hours and Jon had dragged Rebecca and I from one building to the next, most of them police oriented. With how many stations we toured it was like the dog couldn't get enough of the simple, spartan buildings.

I will give it to folks though, it had only been a week, and no small amount of the damage from the riots and quake had been repaired. In between stations we'd taken trips though a half dozen stores and municipal building.

Thankfully, the only people Jon identified us to were the other police officers, and that gave us more or less free run of the city.

It was sometime near noon now and we were picking our way down one of the main streets of V-town. There were a half dozen folks to either side clearing rubble as we passed.

I thought I saw something from the corner of my eye, but it was gone before I was able to track it. It reminded me of when Gowan had given Rebecca and I a hunter escort through the city. I could almost swear that there was someone out there, at the edge of my sight -- but I couldn't quite prove it.

"Everything alright, Wolfy?" Rebecca's arm was linked in mine.

"Yeah, babe." I forced a grin to my lips. "Just a bit jumpy being back in the city is all."

She smiled now, poking me in the chest with a finger. "You'd hardly been outside the city when we first met. Quite a change, huh?"

I rolled my eyes. "You've got me there, Babe." I turned my head towards Jon and raised my voice a notch, "Hey, does this tour include a lunch break? I'm running on empty over here."

The German Shepherd wagged his tail slightly as he continued on. "I planned for that, Sir. We have one more stop before your reservation at café Bristol."

"Bristol?" I had to laugh, that was English's hang out. "The place is still standing?"

The dog let his jaw drop open in a grin. "It would appear so, Sir. As my understanding goes, a private citizen made a substantial cash investment to it so as to insure it would continue operating. I believe he is the new owner."

I just shook my head. "Fine. Let's get going, I'm hungry."

The last stop on our morning tour was apparently a massive pile of rubble. Well, okay, that may not quite be accurate, but it was all I could make out of the mass of collapsed walls and the throngs of workers that swarmed over them.

"Where are we, Jon?" I asked.

He cocked his head at me, as if in surprise. "You don't know, Sir?"

I shook my head. "All I know is that we're up somewhere near Charlson park. Other than that I've no idea."

"It's, um, City Hall, Sir."

"This was City Hall?" I took another look at the mountain of debris that stood before us. Not twenty feet away people were pulling a body from the wreckage. "But... but there's nothing left. All the other buildings at least have *something* still standing. This has nothing..."

Jon nodded gravely beside me as Rebecca held fast to my arm.

"You are correct, Sir," the dog continued. "The building was a primary target during the riots, and sustained a significant amount of damage..." He glanced over at me. "And it was of the most modern construction."

I knew what *that* meant.

Modern construction was a euthanasia for cheap, shoddy, quick, and above all, form over function. That was the reason why we still had more buildings standing from before the Cataclysm than after it. The humans who had come before us had long known the fundamental rules and techniques for building. And we, seemingly, had forgotten them.

The City Hall had been a perfect example. It had been made of billowing towers of glass that soared into the sky. It had been as impressive as anything you could imagine, but that was just about it. It had likely been easily overrun during the riots, then crumbled to dust when the quake hit.

A chilling thought hit me.

"Jon... is that the reason why no one from the government survived?" I could only get the words out through clenched teeth.

The dog steadfastly kept his gaze locked on the debris before us, refusing to look my way.

"The disaster plans of the previous administration stated that all members of the government and their families were to seek shelter in City Hall in the event of a civil disturbance." The dog paused,

clearing his throat. "It was advised against by the police service, but the mayor believed that the only safe place would be a building constructed by our own hands..." His voice petered off.

As we watched, another three bodies were pulled from the rubble before us. Two of them were kids. They were all dead.

A sudden thought flashed through my mind. I nearly fell back on my tail.

"Jon, all those disaster plans I've been signing off on... were they..."

Now he did turn to me. His eyes were soft, not something I thought I'd ever seen on him before.

"No, Sir." His voice was low. "As your personal liaison, I've been taking the liberty of speaking to each and every ministerial head before they saw you." For the first time I realized how tired the dog looked. "And I informed them of your strict policy of safety compliance."

Now I couldn't help but smile. "I don't know how much I'm paying you, Jon, but I think you earned a raise."

He smiled. "Thank-you, Tommy," A slight chuckle escaped his lips, "But I, like every member of the service, am payed a single base wage."

The city hall site was huge, it took us the better part of half an hour to just circle around a quarter of it.

Jon had set off to find the foreman to provide us with an update. Rebecca and I were finally alone for what seemed like the first time in weeks.

"So, babe, what do you think about all this?" I whispered.

She giggled slightly as my tongue came out just a fraction to lick the inside of her ear.

"I haven't the slightest, Wolfy." She kicked some random piece of debris on the ground before us as we slowly walked onward. "Everything's moving so fast. We only just got back to the city a week ago, and before then we were both nobodies."

I had to grin at that. "I guess it goes to show you the difference that being in the wrong place at the wrong time can make." I paused, grinning at her. "That, and one insane police commissioner who seems determined to make a messiah of me."

I could see her opening her mouth to say something, but it never got out.

The first thing that hit me was a sudden ringing in my ears. Then the world seemed to slip into grey for a moment as the ground rushed up to meet me. Then it struck me... I'd been, well, struck over the head.

It felt like someone had just tried to bash to top of my skull in with a rusty pipe. It didn't help that a second later I was face-planting onto the hard, cracked concrete. A canine's face isn't flat. Now I had a cracked skull and a broken nose to boot.

I almost thought I could hear Rebecca scream something, but there was nothing but the ringing in my ears.

My regeneration was likely the only thing keeping me conscious, I could almost feel it rushing through my skull, trying to keep me from blacking out.

I couldn't raise my head, but I could just keep my eyes open enough to see the shadows that danced on the ground before me. One I recognized immediately, Rebecca, the other was almost half again her size, and it had a tail.

"Uhhg." I rolled over, cradling the back of my head in both hands. I could just make out Jon in the distance, sprinting towards us.

My assailant was a ruddy furred bobcat. He still had a short length of iron pipe clutched in one hand. The rusted thing was dripping blood, my blood.

Rebecca was grappling with the man, and doing a surprisingly good job of it, but she was still

being forced backwards.

Another groan escaped my lips and the bobcat's head twitched my way. A moment ago he'd simply been trying to beat back Rebecca, now I could see his eyes widening as I slowly staggered to my feet.

His moment of inattentiveness made him the perfect target for Jon who leapt upon his back.

I'd only ever seen Jon fight once before, and that had been up in the snow covered passes of the Rocky Mountains. He'd been smoothly cold and clinical then, almost taking his opponents apart like he'd been giving instructions in martial arts.

Now the dog moved fast, nearly too fast for my still hazy and unfocused eyes to follow.

One moment Rebecca and the bobcat had been grappling, the next she was away with a savage kick as Jon joined the fight. Jon and the cat were squared off, the feline seemingly having forgotten about the length of iron bar as he tossed it over his shoulder.

If you'd asked me in that moment, I would have put every dollar I had on Jon taking the cat apart in ten seconds flat. I would have lost.

Jon launched forward, claw tipped limbs flashing, and the cat met him blow for blow.

I hadn't the slightest what style Jon followed, but I knew the cat's moves. He was a hunter.

There was just something about the way a hunter moves. It wasn't that we were *trained* per se, but rather that all hunters seemed to adapt certain styles and moves as we learned how to chase down prey.

And this cat was a hunter of the first order. He could give my uncle Gowan a run for his money.

The world was just starting to come back to me now as the ringing fell from my ears. I could hear people shouting and screaming from around us.

I was on my feet now, still a little unsteady, but just about ready to jump the cat from behind when Rebecca beat me to the punch.

She'd found the iron bar that the bobcat had tossed aside. She made him regret that decision now as she swung it, aiming at the back of his legs.

The cat must have heard her coming. He jumped the pipe as she swung, throwing Rebecca off balance as he dived towards Jon.

I'll give Jon credit, he'd been able to hold his own against the cat, and that's something I can say for few non-hunters. But the bobcat had switched tactics now. Before he'd thought he could win this battle, but now realizing there were three of us he swiped his claws towards Jon's face and turned to run.

I could hear a sound like tearing silk as one of the claws caught Jon's mussel. There was a flash of red from the dog's face, then the cat was off.

For just a split second I was torn. Rebecca was laying on the ground, struggling to her feet, Jon was clutching his face, and the cat was running off to the north.

It didn't take long to decide. I normally like to keep my hunting reactions held strictly in check, but I let my chase instinct take over as I sprinted after the cat. He'd hurt both Rebecca and Jon -- I would have him.

My head was clearing just enough now that I could begin to think rationally again. I still let my wolf side, 'biff' as English had once called it, guide my feet, as I tried to think critically.

We were heading north, sloping downhill from City Hall towards the water, buildings and trees flashing by past us. Around me I could hear the barking of police dogs as Jon called out to them, they were converging on us.

This was Cambie Street... it should keep heading north until it got to the bridge. Was the bridge still standing?

It was all I could do to keep the bobbed tail of the cat in sight as we sprinted on. Gods but that feline could move! The tongue was lolling out of my mouth now as I scrambled for breath, my heart racing in my chest. How long could a bobcat keep up like this? Almost any cat could run faster than a wolf like me, but they usually couldn't do the distance.

A second later Cambie bridge reared up ahead of us. I couldn't see it through all the signs and barricades on the street. The cat simply leapt over them. There was nothing I could do but follow.

From the corner of my eye I saw something golden flash between the buildings. I didn't even have time to make it out before it was long gone behind me.

We were on the bridge now, water opening up around us. The cat came closer with every heartbeat. He was tiring as I closed the distance.

A few more strides and I could see the dark blue of the surf open up ahead of us. The bridge was out.

The concrete and steel beneath us fell away like a splintered piece of wood, falling to the waves a good hundred feet below.

The cat skidded to a stop just inches short of the drop off, almost slipping over the edge before his claws caught. I slowed more carefully, leaving a good ten meters between us.

This was a man who had fought Jon to a standstill. I didn't want to take him on if I had a choice.

"Wait... don't..." I could barely speak as I panted for breath. "Don't jump."

The cat looked little better than I felt. His tongue was hanging from his mouth and his hands shook so violently that I almost thought he was going to have a heart attack.

The fear I saw in his eyes didn't help much either. It was like he was looking upon the face of death every time he glanced my way.

"You can't take me back..." His voice was high and reedy, with a slight surfer's twang, "He'll kill me if he finds out what I've done." He paused for breath again, flecks of white saliva foaming at the edges of his mouth, "I... I needed the money... I needed the food for--"

His voice cut off as his eyes focused on something over my shoulder. He'd been scared when he looked at me. Now it was like he was staring at an on coming freight train.

The roar almost deafened me, leaving me seeing double and feeling like I'd just been thwacked over the head again.

The glint of gold I'd seen a moment ago came back again in force. English rocketed over my shoulder, arcing through the air to land upon the smaller cat.

The bobcat was strong, fast, and incredibly talented, but he didn't last ten seconds against the lion.

By the time I'd crossed the distance between us English already had his hands wrapped around the smaller cat's neck, squeezing the life out of him.

"English, let go!" I yelled it at him, but he didn't even seem to hear me. His was focused on the other feline, yellow eyes contracted so tight that I almost couldn't see the pupil.

"English!" I tried it again, but this time I smacked him on the back of the head as hard as I could with my fist. "Let. Him. Go." My voice had fallen to a growl.

Almost as if he'd just realized I was there, the lion looked up at me, grip on the bobcat loosening slightly.

For a moment the only sound was that of the bobcat's pained gasps for breath.

"Uh... Sorry, mate." English's accent was wavering as he got back to his feat, dragging the bobcat behind him. "Got a little over excited there." The smaller feline tried to gasp out a few words, but English cuffed him over the head roughly enough to send his eyes rolling up into his head.

"English!" I had to hold myself back from smacking the lion. "He was just going to say something!"

"Uh... Sorry?" Was all the lion said.

Before we'd even got the chance to move around I could already hear the scrape of claws on the bridge behind us. Lots of claws.

Turning, there were at least two dozen police dogs there, all standing with their fangs and claws barred. Jon was in front of them.

"Sir. Mr. English." His voice had a slight lisp. The slash that lead from his left ear down to his chin was still oozing. "I see you have apprehended your assailant." He threw English an odd look.

"You will hand him over to us." He paused for a moment, eyeing us both. "Now."

"Hey, now," English began, "You can't just--"

I'm not sure if I'd ever heard Jon growl before. He did now. It was not a pleasant sound.

"There has been an attempt on the life of the mayor of V-town. You will hand him over to us for proper interrogation immediately." The way he said the word 'interrogation' sent chills down my spine.

"Do it, English." I didn't even bother to turn back towards the lion.

A moment later I heard the limp body of the bobcat hit the concrete.

"Good choice, gentlemen." Jon's features had fallen back into place as though nothing had happened. If not for the slash on his face he would have looked like this was just another day at the office.

"Now," He continued, "Shall we move onto lunch?"

Chapter 4: Brown Fur and a White Tie

The cops quickly closed ranks around the near lifeless body of the bobcat, but I noticed that a dozen of them still followed me as I walked from the bridge, English and Jon in tow.

I glanced over at the lion. "What are you doing here, English? I haven't seen you in a week."

He grinned, shrugging off the events with the bobcat like they'd never happened. "I got a mysterious message this morning that I had an appointment at the café. I was waiting there when the dogs around me started getting twitchy and began running this way. Thought I should take a peek."

Jon was watching him a touch more intently than normal, but I was preoccupied as soon as I saw Rebecca coming our way.

One of the police dogs tried to step between us, but she levelled a glare at him that made even the dog back away.

"Tommy!" The tone of her voice gave me the distinct feeling that I'd done something wrong. "What the heck was that?" She noticed the police behind me as they quickly carried away the limp body. Looked back at me, her face held a touch of uncertainty, "Is he dead?"

I shook my head as I closed the last of the distance, putting my arm around her shoulders. "No. The golden lug here just knocked him out."

She glanced over at English, as if noticing him for the first time before putting me back in her squarely sights. "And he was trying to kill you?" One of her fingers came up to poke me in my still bruised nose. "Spill it."

I just held my hands up in surrender. "I haven't anything to spill, babe." I tried to make puppy eyes, but accomplished little more than pulling a muscle in my face. "I know as much as you do. The first warning I had was when he whacked me over the head with that pipe."

Jon's ears perked up.

I turned to him. "Yeah, there was a weapon. It's probably back there somewhere."

He gestured at a couple of the dogs around us and they took off at a run.

Now that I thought about it, that *was* weird. As far as I knew, it was uncommon to use a weapon in an assault. The bobcat had his claws, there really hadn't been much use to hitting me over the head with a pipe when he could have just as easily tore a hole in me.

I'd just stepped foot off the bridge, heading for a little patch of grass by the sidewalk when I

stumbled, my vision blurring.

I could feel something *pop* in the back of my skull -- Like the bone was snapping back into place.

When I next opened my eyes I was kneeling on the ground, my stomach heaving as I vomited all over the asphalt.

"Are you okay, Tommy?" Rebecca was by my side, holding me from falling face first into the technicolour puddle I'd just created.

"I'm..." I had to gasp for breath as something else *popped*, "I'm fine... it's just the regeneration."

A moment later I could feel her fingers pressing through the fur on the back of my head, sliding over the blood that coated me there.

"Gods, Tommy... I can feel the bone!"

I could see lights dancing before my eyes every time her fingers moved.

"Just... just... give me a moment."

My body felt like it was made of marrow jelly as I slipped from her arms to fall to the ground. It took everything I had just to keep my eyes open.

A howl went up around me as Jon and the police dogs closed in. A moment later all I could see was the brown and black of their furred bodies and the blue of their uniforms against the sky.

"Gah!" The breath came hot in my lungs as I spat out a mouthful of ice cold water.

"Told you, Lass," I could hear English's voice from somewhere a few feet ahead of me, "He's right as rain." There was a chuckle, "I've seen him walk away from worse."

"Tommy?" I could feel fingers lightly gripping my face, they were long and slender. "Tommy, are you awake?"

Thoughts rolled around my mind like marbles for a moment before I opened my eyes. I did a quick check to make sure that all my limbs were attached. Yep, all five. Two arms, two legs, and a tail. The pain of my bashed in skull was little more than a distant memory now. The only thing left to show for it was the telltale itch of my regeneration having stitched me back together once more.

I could hear the slosh of water in front of me, a warning that English was likely planning to douse me again.

I pulled my eyes open, the world was prenatuerly clear. "Yeah, yeah, I'm here. No need to drown me."

English's bright white teeth glinted back at me, not a foot from my face. "Aww, you take all the fun out of it, mate."

He was shoved aside by Jon a moment later. The dog reached out his hands to grope around my head, feeling the bump that had gone down and checking for any new ones.

"I would still feel better if we were to take him to one of the remaining hospitals. We should not be leaving such important matters as his health to chance."

I fought to push the dog away.

"No, Jon." I was pleased to notice that my voice wasn't slurred. "I'm not going to the hospital. Leave that for the people who need it."

I still had yet to move when Rebecca shoved the dog from view. She was sitting beside me a moment later.

"You feeling alright, Wolfy?" Her voice was quiet and calm. It wasn't until a moment later that I noticed her fingers were sliding through the fur on the back of my head just as Jon's had. She just happened to be more subtle about it. I also noticed that someone had managed to wash all the blood away.

We were in café Bristol, the familiar wrought iron chair under me. Laid out before us was a half finished feast. Yep, English was definitely back in town, there was enough here to feed half an army.

"I'm fine, babe." I gently pulled Rebecca's fingers from my skull, looping her arm over my shoulder. I may be healed, but it still itched back there every time someone touched it.

"Anyone get the number of the steamroller that tried to do me in?" I continued, "That bugger packed a wallop."

Helping myself, I pulled a chunk of whatever meat was closest to me on the table, chicken by the taste of it. I'd never cared much for birds, but I always ended up famished after my regeneration healed anything this major.

Jon cleared his throat as he took a seat beside me. I noticed at least a half dozen more police dogs milling about from the corner of my eye.

"We are currently interrogating your assailant," He began, but I held up a hand before he could continue.

"Wait." I looked him in the eye. "What do you mean when you say 'interrogate'? English and I had a bad experience once with one of your police interrogations."

He looked away from me, refusing to meet my eyes.

"I... I was not involved with that, Tommy... Sir." He still couldn't look up. "The individual who, uh, interrogated you on that occasion was not a member of the police service." He cleared his throat nervously. "That was an outside contractor."

I refused to look away, the dog blanched under my glare. I had the distinct feeling that he wanted to start whimpering.

"And what about the bobcat? Is he getting a going over by an 'outside contractor' so you can keep your hands clean?"

He didn't answer me.

"Look at me, Jon." I demanded, "Tell me what's happening to him."

Slowly, his eyes came up to meet mine. His ears were pulled back flush to his skull, and, although I couldn't see it, I knew his tail was flat on the ground.

"I, uh... I don't know, Sir."

I could feel a growl working its way into my voice. "Then guess, *Constable*."

If anything he became more submissive. This time I could hear the whine in his voice.

"Standard procedure would have him... questioned by someone who is not a member of the police force." His voice was ratcheting up higher with every word, "We only do it when we feel there is a major and immanent security risk." His voice suddenly cut to a whisper. I was sitting right beside him and I could barely hear it. "We don't want to lose you, Tommy. We don't want any of the other candidates to become mayor."

It took everything I had to keep my lips from pulling up over my teeth. Even then my voice came out as a snarl.

"No, Jon. This stops now. Right. Now." I slammed my fist down on the table hard enough to make a platter rattle and send a shot of pain up my arm. "Call headquarters and make them stop." He looked like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming train. "Now."

I bit out the last word like a curse.

"Yessir." The words escaped his lips so quickly as to run together.

He was up from the table an instant later. Two steps and he was whispering into the ear of one of the uniformed police dogs that stood in attendance around us. That dog was off like a shot, sprinting down the street in the direction of police headquarters.

I felt suddenly drained. With a sigh, I sunk back into the hard iron seat. Rebecca's arm was still around me.

English was chowing down across the table from us. I don't think he'd stopped since I'd woken up. He only paused long enough now to speak.

"Your first major change as mayor, eh mate?" He laughed. "Why couldn't you have done *that* a year ago?" He held out one of his arms. Looking closely, I could just make out white lines against his golden pelt. "I've still got the souvenirs of our little tour through their sessions." He paused for a moment to sip a cup of tea. His hands shook ever so slightly. "That, mate, is not something I'd ever wish upon anyone. Not even my blackest of enemies."

I had to focus on the lion to keep the tingling on the back of my skull from driving me crazy. It always itched worst just before the regeneration was finished.

"Where have you been all this time, English? You up and abandoned me right when the paperwork started falling down like rain."

He grimaced slightly. "I didn't abandon you, mate." He looked down into his cup of tea for a moment, "Well, okay, perhaps I did. But gods, mate, I needed to." He'd stopped eating now, almost looking like I'd put him into a panic. "I couldn't stay there, mate, too much bureaucracy, too many stuffed shirts. Anyway," He gave a quick wave of his hand and tried to effect his more aloft air, "I had to get things done too." A slight grin edged on to his lips, "Had to get the jeep, my beauty. Had to go check on my own pad, and lets not forget, had to get Storm Front back up and running."

"Storm Front?" I cocked my head, "I thought we killed them dead."

The lion laughed, "Nah, mate. You only killed Vanderhoom. That sly lizard had been turning the company inside out, but there was still enough left for me to salvage. We're not the size we were before, but we're still in the game."

He laughed again before continuing, "And that reminds me," His voice lowered conspiratorially, "Seeing now that your the great high mucky muck in the government and all that, what say you help send a few contracts my way, eh? We could really use the work."

I had to blink and replay the lion's words a couple of times in my head to make sure I'd heard them right.

"English, are you asking me to play favourites with Storm Front?"

He just smiled.

"Dude," I lowered my head to the cool wrought iron table before me, "I threw KDP out of my apartment because they were asking for just the same kind of thing."

A quiet, strangled sound came across the table from his direction. "Tommy, mate, it's nothing like that."

I raised my head just enough to glare at him. "This is exactly the same. You laughed with me when I tossed out KDP, and now you want the same thing."

There was a pained expression on his face, his whiskers drooping. "Mate, after all we've been through, you can't just toss a couple contracts my way? Its not like it's a big deal."

I had to take a deep breath before I could respond. "No, English. No." I lowered my head back down to the cool metal. It felt good against my fur. "And, English? Please don't ever bring it up again."

When I looked up again the lion's eyes had narrowed to slits.

"Perhaps you're right, Tommy." The lion's voice was immaculate, fux British accent perfect. "I think it's best if we don't speak of this again." There was the harsh sound of scraping metal as he pushed his chair back. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some work to get to. *I* still need to earn a living."

"Are you alright, Wolfy?" Rebecca was still at my side. She paused for a moment, a quick look around. The only one in hearing range was Jon, and he sat silently. "Did you just tell English off?"

I slowly raised my head, the lion was nowhere in sight.

"Yeah." I rubbed the back of my head. The tingling was gone now. "I guess I did."

I could feel her arm tighten around my shoulders as she whispered in my ear, "I never thought I'd see the day." Her tone wasn't mocking or sarcastic, it bordered on frightened. "I always thought he was your best friend."

It took everything I had to keep my voice calm. "He was..." I could have slapped myself, "He is. I guess money does change a lot of things." I sighed, "And speaking of money--"

I'd just realized I was naked, I didn't even have my vest on. And that meant I didn't have my wallet.

"Uh, babe?" I glanced over to her, "You wouldn't happen to have any cash on you, would you?"

Her expression turned a touched panicked. "I haven't a dollar. I left all my money back in Horseshoe Bay."

I was just about ready to let my head sink back down again. The table was filled to overflowing with food, just the way English liked it, and I hadn't seen him pay the waiter when he left.

Jon gave me a light tap on the shoulder, his voice pleased.

"You needn't worry, Sir." His lips twitched up in just the merest hint of a smile. "You haven't been taking your wage as mayor. And, in any event, this can be drawn from your expense account."

I really didn't feel like going back to the apartment, but I could see Jon's point on wanting to get me off the street. We'd already had one person try to knock my skull in today, I didn't feel like giving anyone else the chance.

With a dozen police dogs in formation around us, we headed back towards the apartment.

"Hey, Jon?" I tapped the dog on the shoulder, he turned to look at me, "I'd rather we head back in the way we went out. I don't really feel like dealing with the mob just yet."

He nodded.

It was like someone rang a bell the moment I stepped back in the apartment. I hadn't even the chance to speak to Amstys or Renald before the first government bureaucrat arrived, wanting my attention.

I was just about to get back into the swing of things when Amstys got to his feet and slammed closed the newly reinstalled door. I could hear the click of a deadbolt sliding into place.

"I smell blood." The black wolf's voice was level, but deep enough to send chills down my spine. "It's yours." He levelled a blue eyed glare at me.

Renald was beside him a moment later. But where Amstys was almost serene, Renald looked like he was ready to freak out.

"Uh, yeah," I self-consciously scratched the still tender back of my head. "We ran across a cat who didn't seem to like me much." I wasn't sure why I was so nervous about telling them this, it was like they were my parents. "He tried to bash my head in with an iron rod. It's alright, Jon took care of it."

Amstys didn't move, but Renald practically fell off his feet.

"Who was it?" The smaller wolf's voice was rushed and frantic, "Are they dead?"

I shook my head. "A bobcat of some stripe. Fought like he was a hunter."

Renald's eyes shot open. "A hunter? Where is he now?"

I shrugged. "The police took him into custody. Probably somewhere under police HQ."

"I have to report this." The tan wolf was gone a moment later.

I couldn't call the next three days quiet, but at least no one tried to kill me. I worked my way through at least two good oceans worth of paperwork.

There were fewer of us in the apartment now. Amstys still sat in a corner watching everyone, but other than that it was mostly Rebecca and I.

Rebecca was smiling less and less these days. I tried to get her out of the apartment, there was no reason that she needed to be swamped like this, but she was as determined to see it through as I was.

Looking up from yet another one of the endless forms that covered the counter in front of me, I noticed something through the open door.

There were two police dogs standing guard in the hallway as usual, but a black panther stood talking to them, waving his hands. The cat was dressed in a red blazer.

Where had I seen that before?

It wasn't until the cat turned away in disgust that I saw the yellow lightning bolt emblazoned on the back, with the words 'Storm Front'.

"Wait!" I tried to make it to the door before the panther could leave, but the towers of papers piled on the floor kept me back.

I only made it to the hallway to watch the door to the stairwell close behind him.

One of the dogs stationed here looked over at me. "Is there something wrong, Sir?"

I didn't bother running to catch up to the panther, my legs were already cramping up from days without exercise.

"Who was that?"

The dog shrugged. "I couldn't rightfully tell you, Sir. He just arrived, having somehow gotten past security on the first floor, said he had a message for you."

"What was it?"

The dog shrugged again. "Don't know, Sir. He hadn't an appointment. My orders are to not allow folks in without an appointment."

I just about smacked my head against the wall. "Did you at least ask if it was important? He was from Storm Front. It could have been a message from English."

The dog had the good sense to look a little abashed. "Sorry, Sir. I have orders to allow Mr. English to enter should he arrive... but dare I say, Sir, that *everyone* says that their problem is important." The dog's face was still as stone, but I could detect just the slightest roll of his eyes. "I've been assigned to guard duty of the sitting mayor for four years now, Sir. Never once have I seen someone barge in only to say, 'well, it's not really that important after all'. It just doesn't happen, Sir."

"Fine." I couldn't keep the scowl on my face after an explanation like that. "But send someone to try and find out what the message was, would you?"

The dog nodded and gestured at another of his kind down the hall. The other was off like a shot.

It was a few more hours before I had the opportunity to be interrupted again.

The sharp, polite rapping at the door could be no one other than Jon.

"Sir?" He was back in his police uniform, as crisp and pressed as the day I'd first met him.

I looked up. Bad choice, I could feel the vertebrae in my spine pop. I had to fight back a wave of light headedness.

"Uh. What is it, Jon? Another truckload of paperwork?"

He shook his head. "No, Sir. You need to get ready for your engagement tonight."

Okay, what's it? I couldn't keep my head from cocking to the side.

Even Rebecca seemed to be surprised. "*Engagement?*"

Jon nodded. "Didn't you read the entry in your schedule?"

Now I was laughing. "I have a schedule?"

The dog dug around on my paper covered counter for a few moments until he uncovered a leather day-timer. It was the first time I'd ever seen it in my life.

"Jon, you might want to start telling me about these things."

The dog nodded curtly. "Yes, Sir." His lips twitched slightly towards a grin. "This is your first formal social engagement as mayor. A number of the surviving social elite have staged a 'reconstruction' party at the home of one Mr. Allen West. You, as mayor, received an invitation three days ago."

I let my head sink down to the papers before me. "I'm guessing this isn't just going to me a nice, informal, little get together where I can lay back and relax?"

The dog did grin now, but only just for a moment before returning to his normal stoic demeanor. "No, Sir, I would think not. Do the words 'white tie' mean anything to you?"

I just groaned.

Jon tried to drag me off to some official 'Police Tailor', but I would have none of it. If it was anything like the people who made the police uniforms, I might just cut myself on the seams.

We were out on the street now, and despite my best efforts I could neither get Jon's honour guard, nor Amstys to stay at home. Oddly, I hadn't seen Renald since he took off days ago.

"Where are we going, Wolfy?" Rebecca was by my side, stretching her muscles in the cool afternoon air.

I grinned. "You remember when you first met me, Babe? I had a suit back then."

She smiled back, taking my arm. "How could I forget, Wolfy? You looked so cute all dressed up like that."

"Well, it was the only suit I've ever worn." I turned a corner onto a tree lined street. All the shops here were small and discrete. "It was made by a friend of..." I paused for a moment, "A friend of English's. The guy was Smith Arrow."

Rebecca perked up when I said that name. "Arrow? I know him. He was the tailor who made my dress back when I was working on the Dice."

"Really?" I glanced over at her, "I thought he only did men's clothing."

She blushed slightly, "Normally. I was hired on short notice, and," Her voice fell a notch, "I'd spent so much on my disguise that he was the only place I could afford."

"Afford?" I laughed. "Last time I saw Smith's prices you'd have better luck affording a small island."

She gave me a light punch to the gut. "I only got the dress for cheap because he'd never designed anything for a woman before." Her voice fell again, "He was one of the only people back then who knew what I was. He..." She blushed slightly, "One of my ears fell off when he was measuring me."

I couldn't help but laugh at that thought. "Good thing we don't have to worry about that now, babe." It took me a moment to even realize she had her cat disguise back in place again. "You, uh, don't really need to wear that anymore. The riots are over."

She gave me a hard look. "That's easy for you to say, *Wolfy*. You're not a human, you don't have to be worried about being the only of your kind in the city."

"Oh, yeah." I pulled her a bit tighter to me. "We'll have to send someone out to Horseshoe Bay

to let them know that they can come home now. It should be safe again."

She didn't look up at me, but I could hear soft voice, "We're *working* on making it safe, Wolfy. I doubt it's safe yet."

We were in front of the store now. It looked much the same as the first time I'd been here with English, a year ago. Most of the boards had been taken down from my last visit, and I was thankful to see there hadn't been too much damage.

I felt a little naked coming here. Smith Arrow was one of English's oldest friends, almost a second father to him... I'd never been here without the lion.

Walking up to the scarred, dark wooden door, I pulled it open and stepped within, Jon, Amstys, and Rebecca at my back. The rest of the police waited outside.

The inside was darker then I remembered. Shadows seemed to envelop nearly everything, only a couple of lights glowed weakly. One was above the front door, the other over the desk.

There was no one in sight.

"Uh, hello?" I felt a little nervous to be speaking in here, as if it were a mausoleum.

The only answer I got was a sputtering cough from the back room.

"Smith?"

I walked around the counter, careful not to knock any of the mannequins that were lined up with suit after suit upon them.

Another fit of coughing let me home in.

Through a doorway and around a corner, I found a small work room. If anything it was dimmer in here.

"Go..." There was a sticking wet sound as he tried to pull in a breath, "Go away. We're closed."

The fox, Smith Arrow, sat on a small stool in the workshop. His pelt had been formerly red, now it was as light as silver.

"Smith, uh," I looked down at the withered fox before me. His hands were clasping a pair of scissors and a measuring tape. "It's me, Tommy. Tommy Taggart."

"Tommy?" He began groping around on the desk in front of him for a pair of glasses.

I reached out and gently pressed them into his searching hand.

"Remember me? I'm English's friend."

"Bah. Of course I remember you, young wolf." His lips lifted ever so slightly in a smile, "Everyone in the city knows your name by now." He looked over my shoulder, seeing no one but Jon, Rebecca and Amstys. "Where is that no-good pussy cat, anyway? I should have seen him by now."

I shrugged. "I, uh, haven't seen him in a while. But, Smith, I need to talk to you about a suit. It's urgent."

"Bah." He took my hand in his weak grip as he slowly fought his way to his feet. "It's always urgent when someone wants something." He grinned again. "There's a big to do coming up, I haven't been this busy in years. I've been booked solid for the last four days."

"Oh." I felt my ears fall. "I was going to ask if I could have a suit made for this evening."

He patted my arm. "Never you worry, young wolf. I take care of English's friends. And anyway," His grin widened, "You have access to the city purse, I can charge you whatever I want."

I tried to pull away from the fox's grip. "Uh, Smith... I'm trying not to use up the city coffers." It seemed like every time I went to talk to someone they wanted to milk me for everything I was worth.

Jon set his hand on my shoulder, quieting me, "That won't be a problem, Mr. Arrow. I checked your account with the government. Will standard payment terms be acceptable?"

"Yes, yes. Fine, fine." The fox fell into another fit of coughing. "Lets get on with this, shall we, young wolf? I knew you'd be coming here. Every time there's a big too-do my list fills up. I made

a deal with one of the staff. He got a repair on his suit for free, I got to see the guest list -- and your name was near the top." He began leading me back further into the store before turning and waving a finger at everyone else. "You three stay here. We're going for a fitting and I don't need peeping toms."

I decided not to mention that I couldn't exactly take off my fur coat.

Smith really must have been expecting me, for a few moments later he had me slipping into one of the strangest garments I'd ever seen.

He started off by stepping me into a pair of trousers. These weren't just pants... well, I guess the right word for them really was *trousers*. They were jet black, and I swear to the gods that I think they were made of pure silk. The backs of them were the oddest part -- they came up in a V shape around my tail, and the whole thing was so loose that I had to hold them up with a hand.

Next came a spotless white, button up shirt. The neck of the thing was so stiff that it instantly began chafing against my fur. I didn't get much sympathy from the fox.

You know, I think this is the first time I've ever seen suspenders, likely so much as warn them. I'd only ever read about them in my old books, something that the humans used to wear. Now I had a pair of them looped around me, holding my pants up.

"Do I really need these?" I asked as the fox fashioned them in place.

I got a growl at that. "This is a white tie event, is it not? You'll wear what is appropriate. Just remember," He held back a cough long enough to poke me in the nose and lecture, "Suspenders are *underwear*. No one should ever see them."

"Uh... sure."

Next came a vest to go over the shirt and suspenders that were already on me. Gods, he was layering on enough clothing to boil me alive.

He disappeared around the corner, into another room. When he came back, I swear to the gods, it looked like he was carrying a garrote. It was white cotton, and he had it wrapped tightly around his fists.

"Give me your neck," he commanded as he came forward.

I stumbled back, almost falling on my tail.

"Careful you stupid cur!" he nearly shouted. "You'll rip the suit!"

His hands reached out towards me, wrapping around my neck.

"Hold still!" His voice was weak, but the command caused me to fall as still as stone.

His hands pulled and tugged at the cloth he'd wrapped around me until at long last he seemed happy with it. Gah, it was just tight enough to make me feel my own pulse.

I brought my hand up to it, tugging and pulling, only to realize it was a white bow tie.

"Stop that!" He slapped my hands away. "You'll ruin it."

I was just about to start complaining when he held out a jacket to me. It was as dark as the pants, and just as impeccably cut. He forced it onto me before I could utter another word.

"There." He sounded almost satisfied now. "We just need a hat and shoes and you'll be set." He turned, reaching towards a selection of top hats hanging on the wall. I noticed that they all had holes cut in them to accommodate upstanding ears.

"Uh, no thanks, Smith. I think I'll do fine without."

His face fell. "But you'll look so much better in a hat and shoes."

I couldn't even bear the thought of spending an evening walking around in a pair of over designed formal shoes. And, knowing my luck, he'd try to get me into a pair of opera pumps or dancing shoes.

I wiggled my toes at the fox, but did my best to keep my voice firm. "I'm good, Smith, but

thanks for the offer." I let a grin cross my face now. "But I do have a challenge for you though."

His brow lowered suspiciously.

"And what would that be, young wolf?"

I pointed a thumb out towards the front room. "Rebecca said she once bought a dress here. Could you set her up too?"

The fox shook his head. "No. I rarely do woman's fashions. They're too trendy, change too often. I only did it once before as a favour."

"Come on, Smith," I tried to put a whine in my voice, "I remember the dress I saw her in when we first met. She looked spectacular." I couldn't keep my tongue from coming out to lick my lips.

"That she did, son. But I simply don't have the time, your party is in just a few hours."

I let a grin spring to my lips. "Come on, Smith. We don't need much, just a nice little black dress. Just like the one I met her in."

The fox threw his hands up into the air. "Fine, fine, my son. We'd better get started. I'll have to make it from damn near scratch."

I let the fox lean on me as we slowly made our way back out to the front room.

He wasn't kidding either. It took him a good two hours of non stop work to get a dress ready for Rebecca. I was only glad that I wasn't paying for this out of pocket. I had the sinking feeling that this one dress would have made for a good down-payment on a house.

Jon disappeared while we were waiting, leaving us under the watchful eyes of the police dogs who still waited outside. For the first time I felt almost lonely.

English and Renald were AWOL, Jon was off doing whatever, and Rebecca was in the back getting fitted. That just left Amstys and I.

I looked over at the corner where the huge black wolf stood. He'd hardly moved since we'd entered the shop, and he hadn't said a single word.

"You doing okay over there, Amstys?" I asked him. "You can come up here if you want. There's a free stool."

The wolf watched me in silence for a few moments before coming forward.

This was to the point of getting creepy. He hadn't been like this when I'd first met him. Amstys had always been a bit of a mental case, anyone would after having lived under Al-Sedexterous for so long, but he'd been relatively talkative back then.

"What's wrong, buddy?" I reached out a hand to lay on his arm. He didn't flinch back, but nor did he seem to even acknowledge it. "You've been growling at everyone we've met since we got to the city, and I've barely even heard two words out of you."

His eyes stared firmly out into the middle distance. It took him a long time to reply, I almost thought he hadn't heard me.

"I don't like it here, young master. This city... it makes me feel cramped. Cramped and dirty. I wish you'd return to the country side again. I liked hunting, back out on the plains. You were a good hunter. Why can't we go back there again?"

I sighed. "I wish I could, Amstys, I really wish I could, but the people here need me."

He looked over at me, his eyes coming into focus now. "But *you* don't need them. Why does it matter if this city stands or falls? You have me, you have..." He almost said 'mistress', but that word had too many meanings. "Rebecca. Why do you need to stay here?"

"This is my home, Amstys."

"My home was..." The wolf's ears pulled back as he spoke, "Gods, why can't I remember my home, Tommy?" In a matter of seconds the giant had gone from just short of stoic to nearly in tears. "I

had one... I know I did... why can't I remember it? Why can't I remember anything before Mistress?"

His free hand came up to grasp mine, clutching so hard that his claws began to draw blood. The wolf's eyes were wide now, pupils so huge that I could hardly see any blue around them.

"Amstys..." I hadn't the slightest what to say. I hadn't met him until years after he'd been caught in Al-Sedexterous' trap. That she-devil had been able to do things to men's minds... it hurt even for me to think about her.

"Why, Tommy, why can't I remember? I had a family, I know that, I had a wife." His voice was raising now, his words coming faster and faster, "I was happy. I was. Why can't I remember, why did I leave them?"

It took everything I had not to cry out when he squeezed my hand. I could hear drops of blood falling to the counter.

"Amstys... please," I gritted my teeth, trying to keep my voice calm. The wolf was huge, almost as big as English, and he could swat me like a fly if he turned on me. "You were caught in her spell. We both were. It wasn't your fault."

His eyes narrowed as he looked at me. I could feel him probing my face. When he spoke his voice was cold. "I was there for years. Why were you able to resist her when I couldn't? Why were you able to save who you cared for? What makes you so special that you can do things I was forbidden to even dream of?" His grip ground into my hand. I could feel his claws against my very bones.

"Amstys, you're hurting me."

"Why, Tommy!" His voice was a whisper now, but loaded with so much venom that I would have pulled back if he hadn't held me so. I realized that this was the first time I'd ever been alone with him since I'd broken the spell.

"I was..." I had to pant to catch my breath, to force back the pain that was shooting up my arm, "I have regeneration. It helped me fight her. It cleared my mind." I sucked in a deep breath, "And Rebecca. She came for me."

The wolf's hand sprang open like it was spring loaded. For a moment it almost felt like it hurt more to have his claws suddenly gone from my flesh. I had to scramble to pull a bolt of cloth from the counter before I began bleeding over everything.

I could barely hear the wolf when he spoke again. It was hardly more than a whisper. "That's it. She came for you. Annabelle never came for me." Now I did see tears on the wolf's face. They were almost invisible against his dark coat. "I loved her, Tommy. Gods, I loved her and she never came for me. Annabelle never came for me."

Cloth bound tightly around my hand, I slowly approached the wolf. "She never knew were you were, Amstys. I'm sure she loved you just as much, but there was no way she could have found you."

The wolf slowly raised his eyes to me, he almost looked like a puppy.

"Thank you, young master."

Putting a hand to his shoulder, I slowly eased him to the floor, then came to sit beside him.

"You could go there you know, Amstys." I grabbed his chin gently, forcing him to look at me, "You don't have to stay here. You don't owe me anything."

He sighed heavily. "Perhaps someday, but not now. I'm not the same man I was when I last woke up in Brooks. I'm... damaged. She doesn't deserve that. She deserves better. If she and the children are even still alive, they deserve better."

I was about to say more when my ears twitched. A moment later Rebecca and Smith walked into the room. Amstys' face instantly fell back to a bland neutral, as though nothing had happened.

Not that I noticed Amstys much. Rebecca wasn't just in a dress, it was a *dress*.

I didn't really have many words to describe it other than 'wow'. There was nothing there but a

single piece of sheer black silk, and not much of it at that. Strapless, hemless, and pretty much every other 'less' that I could think of, she was one, very classy, step from going nude.

But, oh boy, this was waaay better than nude. I was suddenly hot, and it had nothing to do with the suit that surrounded me.

"So, Wolfy, what do you think?" Her voice was coy and teasing.

"I... whoa... oi!"

She just smiled.

"What are you doing on the floor?!" Smith was in front of me a moment later, spoiling the view. "You're getting my suit all dirty! And what happened to your hand?"

The fox was all over me now, fussing with the suit like it was his baby.

We were out of the store a few moments later. Smith hadn't even asked me to sign anything. I did ask him to relay a message to English if he dropped by. The lion and I needed to talk.

Jon still had yet to return by then, so we simply headed back to the apartment. I certainly hoped the dog knew what he was doing. Jon was the only one who even knew where this 'engagement' was. I'd be lost without him.

We got a few whistles and catcalls on the street, but they quickly cut off once they saw Amstys standing guard.

Coming up to the apartment building, I noticed that most of the protesters were gone. There were only a couple left, and they didn't seem to have their hearts in it. They didn't even bother saying anything as we walked in the front door, police escort and all.

Back in the apartment, I couldn't bring myself to even look at the paperwork that continued to pile up around me. I could, however, stand to leer longingly at Rebecca as she adjusted her dress.

There were a lot of things that dress made me want to do, and paperwork wasn't among them.

I hadn't seen her look anywhere near this good since the night I'd first met her aboard the Diamond Dice, and she'd been working back then, serving drinks to rich gamblers. Heh, I suppose she was on the other side of the table now. We were off to a party where there would be people doing much the same job she'd done.

I had to keep my hands firmly in my pockets just to hold myself from walking up to her and tearing that dress right off her body. The measure of a good dress isn't what it shows, it's what it hides. And Smith had done possibly the best job in the world. There was almost nothing to the little black thing, but it kept you always wanting to see more.

I'd almost forgotten that we weren't alone when Amstys let out a huff of breath. He wasn't crouched in the corner now, but sitting like a man on one of the stools by the kitchen table.

"Uh, Amstys," I walked up beside him, slowly unwrapping the bolt of cloth from my hand to see my wounds had healed. "You want to stay here for the night? I don't even know how many invitations I got."

He gave me a cold glare.

"Last time I left you to yourself, young master, you almost collapsed your own skull." A slight smile worked its way to his lips, "I will not be attending your party, but I will be near by in the event that you should need me."

Okay... that wasn't creepy at all. Now I had my own personal stalker.

I'd only just had enough time to sit down and let my mind wander back to Rebecca and that little dress when I heard a sharp knock at the door.

"Come in, Jon." I didn't even bother to wonder who it was.

The dog entered a moment later. His normally impeccably crisp blue police uniform had been replaced with something almost identical, but in immaculate white. Even down to wearing white gloves.

I couldn't help but laugh. "You look like a ghost, Jon."

His ears fell slightly. "I will grant you, Sir, that it has been some time since I last wore my dress uniform, but I don't think I cut a bad figure."

I laughed again as I stood up. "I didn't say that, Jon. You look great. Are we ready to go?"

He nodded, then turned to see Rebecca. I'll give the dog credit, his jaw didn't fall open, but his eyes did bug out.

"You, ah... you look spectacular, Ma'am," was all he could get out.

I suppose I should feel good for Rebecca. That was, after all, what the dress was for. But I couldn't suppress the urge to want to growl. A moment later I was by her side, taking one of her arms possessively in mine as I gently rubbed my face into hers.

"Yeah, babe. Amazing." The growl that worked its way into my voice now wasn't threatening.

We departed soon after. I noticed that this time my police guard stayed further back, more discrete.

I hadn't even the slightest where we were going or what I was supposed to be doing, all I could do was follow Jon.

"Hey, Jon," I tapped him on the shoulder as we walked, "I've never been to a *formal* party. I'm assuming that it's not exactly a good idea to get drunk and trash the place?" His face was steady as I spoke, but his eyes widened. "So, what am I supposed to be doing?"

He calmed slightly. "Well, Sir, this is a formal engagement. The primary purpose of the party is to see who survived the upheaval,"

"Upheaval?" I cocked my head, "Is that what they're calling it now?"

He ignored me as he continued on, "And assess the new power structures. This is likely to be a first time for a fair number of the attendees, you are not the only one to have a change of position as a result of the last year." His voice softened as he lowered it, "All you really need to do, Tommy, is shake hands and let people see your face. Make vague promises to meet with them in the future and ensure that they all come away with a positive impression of you. The police service can not directly help you with your election strategy, but we *can* aid you as the incumbent."

"What? Election strategy?"

The dog continued as if I hadn't said anything. "You'll see more than a few familiar faces there. It seems that there has been no shortage in shakeups. Although," His face fell for a moment as he lowered his eyes to the cracked asphalt beneath our feet, "I won't be able to help you. Uncle... Commissioner Sayer has explicitly requested my presence with him." The dog shook his head slightly, "My uncle is... grooming me as his successor and wishes that I use this opportunity to introduce myself as much as you do."

I was just about to grab the dog by his neck and see if I could choke an explanation out of him when we turned a corner.

Now, I've been in some pretty ritzy parts of V-town, heck, I'd even done some bounty hunting in them with English, but nothing like this.

The estate -- there was no other word for it -- that sat before us had to take up the whole block if not more.

"Wow." Was the only word that escaped my lips.

Merely the walk up the front lawn took a good ten minutes. The house was huge and pure

white, looking like a roman fortress. There were pillars on either side of the entrance door.

"I'm sorry, Sir," Jon said, making a slight bow towards Rebecca and I, "But this is where we'll have to part ways. I may work for you," He grinned, "But I was invited as the guest of police commissioner Sayer, and I should arrive with him."

"But..." I pulled Rebecca more tightly to me as the dog turned to walk away.

"Don't worry, Sir," he said over his shoulder, "I'll see you inside." And he was gone.

"Looks like it's time to sink or swim, Wolfy," Rebecca whispered in my ear.

"Easy for you to say, Babe." I forced a smile. "With a dress like that, people would cross the Pacific to come to your aid."

The large, stained wooden door in front of us had a simple brass knocker in the centre of it. The thing was polished to a mirror shine.

A couple quick knocks and we stood there. We didn't have long to wait.

I had no idea what to expect on the other side of the door, and, I'm not ashamed to say, I was frightened. This was the first time I was going to be in public not as Tommy Taggert, but as the mayor of V-town.

My arm was already snaked around Rebecca's waist, I pulled her so close now that it almost hurt.

The man who opened the door had a studied mask of indifference on his face. I almost laughed. It was an ape, and he was wearing a black tie monkey suit.

"Yes?" His voice held what I was sure was a completely fake accent. He sounded like the east coast equivalent of English.

"Tommy Taggert and guest, Rebecca." The words came from me smoothly, far more calm than I felt.

"Yes?" He repeated again. He didn't step aside or invite us in. He didn't even make a single motion.

I took a deep breath. "Tommy Taggert. The mayor of V-town."

"Ah, yes." His face finally showed a hint of life. "You're on the list. Please," He stepped back with a slight bow to usher us in, "Come inside."

The inside of the home was as imposing as the outside had been. It was huge, spacious, and uniform white. There were pillars here and there to hold up the ceiling far above, and objects-de-art in alcoves scattered across the room.

It was only a few steps before we began to meet other guests. I hadn't a clue who any of them were, but we got more than a few glances. Well, I'm not so sure if it was me as much as Rebecca.

There was a short staircase, no more than a half dozen steps, to the main floor. Our greeter scurried up to stand beside it and waited for us to catch up to him.

He didn't speak until we'd reached the top step of the little staircase. It seemed like the only purpose for the thing was to elevate us enough so that everyone on the floor could get a clear view.

The ape's voice was a booming baritone when he spoke. I had no doubt that everyone in the room could hear him.

"Mr. Tommy Taggert, mayor of V-town, and his guest for the evening, Rebecca."

I'm not ashamed to say that I felt the blood drain from my face as every single face in the room turned to watch us. And there were a lot of them. There were at least a hundred people here.

I would have frozen solid right there if not for Rebecca slowly pulling me forward.

"Come on, Wolfy. You don't get a second chance to make a first impression."

Chapter 5: In The Mix

Walking down the staircase, hand in hand, I could feel everyone's eyes on Rebecca and I. Quickly scanning the crowd, I could see a few familiar faces.

Most of them I couldn't put names to, but one in particular, a lion, caught my attention.

He was in the far back of the room, but his bulk loomed over all those between us. Unlike everyone else, he wasn't wearing a formal white tie getup, but rather the same suit I'd seen him in back on the Diamond Dice.

English still managed to look better dressed than everyone else.

He was steadfastly keeping his head turned away from me while everyone else openly stared, but I could still see the glint of his eyes as he glanced my way.

I tried to make a beeline towards him, but I'd no sooner set a single claw on the floor than a flood of people began to swirl around me.

I'm not normally one to suffer from claustrophobia, but this was enough to leave me gasping for breath in seconds.

The people only parted when a raccoon in a suit that left even mine looking like trash stepped forward.

The crowd parted around him like waves. It wasn't that he pushed them back, but they just seemed to move from before him like magic.

"My dear friends," His voice had that same stereotypical east coast accent that the man at the door had carried, "Tommy and Rebecca, I'm so glad that you could make it." He took a hand that I hadn't even realized I'd offered.

"Thanks, uh..."

"How impolite, I haven't even introduced myself!" The crowd around him laughed as though he'd made a joke. "We have so many new friends here today that sometimes I get ahead of myself." He smiled, showing off a set of perfect, white teeth. "It's just that I've heard so much about you, Tommy, that it practically feels like we've already met. I'm Allen West. Your host for the evening."

"Thanks." I wasn't sure what to say. "I, uh, hadn't realized that I'd made that much news." The crowd around us laughed again.

West didn't even seem to notice my words, he'd already shifted his focus to Rebecca.

"My dear, I most certain we haven't met." He lifted her hands elegantly to his lips. Rebecca just blushed. "There is no question that I would remember you." I could only just keep my teeth covered as I felt a growl build.

I snaked my arm back around Rebecca's back, pulling her close to me.

"Yes, well, it's good to have met you, Mr. West..." I began pulling away.

"Nonsense, nonsense, you must join me." His grin flashed again. I had a feeling the cost of his dental work alone could buy me a whole block of V-town. "You're the mayor. Please, be my guest of honour."

He swept his hand out and an opening appeared through the people gathered around us. It led to a table tucked neatly against the far wall. I noticed that the table was about as far away as possible, and our path lead us past almost everyone in the room.

"Come, you must join me." He was behind us now, gently pushing forward. One of his arms was over my shoulder and the other over Rebecca's. I could only just hold myself in check at the thought of him touching her.

I felt like a piece of meat, being paraded around by West in front of his guests.

From the corner of my eye I could just see English, standing head and shoulders over the crowd, he was watching us intently now. His golden eyes were cold.

We were at the table soon after, and West clapped his hands for 'refreshments'. One sniff of the drinks that were set before us and I lost any appetite I may have had for his offerings.

The raccoon watched me closely from over the rim of his own glass as he took a sip. I noticed that Rebecca took a polite taste of hers.

"Tommy, my friend, you insult me. Won't you at least try your drink? It's the finest scotch I have, almost as old as the Cataclysm itself."

"Thank you." I pushed the glass away from me ever so slightly. "I know I must be performing a major social gaff here, but I really don't drink."

He levelled a steady gaze at me, watching closely. I noticed that all the people we had passed by to get to the table had conveniently stepped back, though none so far that their cocked ears couldn't make out every single word.

"Why would that be, Tommy?" West's voice was smooth. "Everyone drinks. It's a sign of civility."

I pushed the glass further away. "Sorry, Mr. West..."

He held a hand up. "Please, please, Tommy, call me Allen."

"Sorry, Allen." I shrugged. "I really can't. It's, well..." I was stretching for an excuse. I didn't just want to say 'I don't trust you enough to get drunk here'. "It's my regeneration. It causes a bad reaction with the alcohol." That was just short of a lie. I could drink just fine -- though I didn't care much for it -- the problem was that my regeneration would clear away the buzz in seconds, leaving me with nothing more than the hangover.

"Ah. I'm so sorry, Tommy. My sources have failed me, I hadn't heard that."

I didn't like the sound of him having 'sources' about me.

I tried to steer the conversation into something a little safer.

"You'll have to excuse me, Mr. West, but I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage." I let one of my lips raise in a half grin. "You seem to know all about me when I know nothing of you other than your name."

He smiled again, teeth almost blinding me. "Yes, I'd forgotten that you are so new to this world." He laughed. "I tend to keep away from those below us. Not to put too fine a point on it, Tommy, but I'm the richest person in all of V-town."

Well, that explained the smile.

"I'm not much of one to flaunt it, Tommy," he continued. "What's the saying? If you've got it than there's no need to show it? Yes, that's the one. I own shares in a huge number of the most successful companies in the city, Tommy. I have a feeling we'll be working very closely together." I got another look at that smile. "The last administration was so jaded, so difficult. You're fresh and new. I'm sure we'll get along wonderfully."

He snapped his fingers and the glass in front of me was replaced with water. Then a heartbeat later West was gone.

It took me a moment to simply catch my breath. I sipped on my new drink. Gods, I must be more nervous than I thought, the water burnt as it went down.

"Rebecca," I looked over at her. She was still snuggled up beside me, right where she should be, "I hope that made more sense to you than it did to me."

She shook her head and whispered in my ear, "I've heard of Allen West, lots of the richest men on the Dice used to talk about him, but I've never met him before. He wasn't the type to gamble."

She didn't get another word out before a shadow fell across the table. Looking up, a pair of bulls stood before us.

"Hiya, Mr. Mayor. Beatrix and I are up from the south side, we're a couple of your biggest supporters..."

Twelve rounds in and I was already starting to see double. Who *were* these people? I'd been through everyone from farmers to bankers, to road builders. They'd all wanted a piece of my time and a promise for even more of it.

I looked up, rubbing my eyes as the next couple sat down. Oh bugger, I was seeing spots.

No, wait. They were dalmatians.

"Hey," the man said. There was no sales pitch, no come on.

"Hey," I said back.

He smiled, glancing over to the other dog who I assumed was his wife. "You have no idea who I am, do you?"

I rolled my eyes. "Let me guess, you're the owner of some big corporation and want a contract from me."

He shook his head, grin growing. "You really should take the time to get to know your people. Acting fire chief Will Hamish." He reached out a hand across the table.

I took another look at him. The dog was dressed nicely in a tux, and his wife in a clingy black and red dress, but it was clear they weren't on the same level as the folks who filled this room. They *worked* for a living.

I smiled and shook his hand. "Nice to finally meet you. Let me guess, you're on my list of people to meet – about two months out?"

"Pretty much. Figured I'd best catch you when I could. It's nice to be able to put a face to the name in case I have to save your tail one of these days. Young wolves have a knack for getting themselves in trouble."

I chuckled and took another sip of my drink. "No argument there. I can use all the friends I can get. So what's the story, Will?"

He shrugged. "Most of the top brass bought it in the quake, I'm the best the fire department's got left. Over half the fire fighters are dead or missing but..." I braced for it. I just knew he was going to launch into a spiel to try to wring some money from me. "We're doing not too bad."

Huh?

"Wait. You're not going to give me a hard luck case and try to get more funding?"

He snorted. "Nah. You're new at your job, I'm new at mine. Thought I'd just drop by and let you know we're making due. From what I hear you're getting along not so bad yourself. You just let us know if there's anything the fire department can do for you. Otherwise, you just sit back and worry about what political fires you need to put out. We'll deal with the real ones.

His wife glanced over at him. "Come along, *Dear*. I think we've taken enough of the Mayor's time."

"But.." he began to protest.

She slipped a finger into the collar of his shirt. A moment later they were gone, like she was leading him on a leash.

I shook my head. Dogs are *weird*.

Next I blinked two dozen more folks had come and gone. I couldn't even remember when Rebecca had slipped away. It had been wearing on her even worse than I, and I'd quietly whispered in her ear that she might not need to come straight back after making a trip to the ladies room.

I didn't even look up as the next group sat down. It was all I could do to take another sip of water. I'd worked my way through half a dozen glasses by now.

"Good evening, Mr. Taggart."

Huh?

Looking up, I met the grey eyes of Sayer. The dog was dressed head to claw in a perfect white uniform that mirrored Jon's. Speaking of Jon, the other dog was seated next to him. The shepherd had a slight smile to his lips.

I just shook my head.

"Sayer." I couldn't help but giggle. "The first friendly face I've seen all night. Don't tell me the two of you are here to try and weezle some cash and contracts out of me too."

The old dog laughed. It was an odd sound coming from such a worn and weathered body. "No, Mr. Taggart. We've just stopped in to see how you're holding up. I've thrown you to the sharks, and I want to make sure they leave me something to put back to work tomorrow."

I stretched my neck. Ye gods but I had a migraine. That and it felt like the lights in here were about three times too bright.

"I'll be fine, Sayer. But thanks for stopping by." I waved my hand, "You better get going or the next person in line will start getting uppity."

The dog didn't move.

"There was one small request I would like to make of you, Mr. Taggart."

Oh gods, here it comes.

"And what would that be?" I lowered my head to my hands.

The dog leaned forward, lowering his voice, "The assault from a few days ago." He paused for a moment to make sure I was paying attention. "We've been doing our best to keep it quiet, does no one any good to know that the mayor is in danger, but word has gotten out that it was a hunter who attacked you."

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, so what do you want me to do about it?"

The Great Dane looked nervously from side to side before continuing. "With the, ahem, *restrictions* you've placed on his interrogation, we've yet to extract any useful information from the suspect. This wouldn't be a problem, except for the fact we've received formal request from the hunters to have him transferred to their custody."

"From the *hunters*?" This didn't make sense. He was speaking about the hunters as if they were

another country, not just a loose group of people who worked out in the woods.

"Yes, Sir," Jon cut in. "There are a number of old laws from shortly after the Cataclysm that grant the hunters rights in areas where their own are involved. As this was a case of one hunter attacking another, they believe they have jurisdiction."

"But I was the one who was attacked... oh, yeah. I guess they're right."

Sayer was speaking again, his voice even softer now. "The request came directly from the hunter's alpha. As this appears to be a... *personal* matter, I decided it best to leave it in your hands." He paused for a moment to look me straight in the eye. I had trouble focusing on his face. "We do not want to relinquish him, Mr. Taggert. I'm old enough to know what happens to a hunter who attacks one of their own." His face pulled into a painful expression. "You may think what we have done in the past revolting, and it has been, but we have done nothing compared to what the hunters do to themselves."

Sayer abruptly moved to stand up, Jon instantly at his side. "I'll leave it in your hands, Mr. Taggert."

A dozen more people passed through the chairs across from me before the torrent slowly began to let up. I'd worked my way through another two glasses of water by then. Gods but my throat must be dry, the water felt like fire as it went down. Every time I drained a glass another one would appear as if by magic.

Forcing myself up from the table, I waved a hand at the next person in line. I got a bit of a disgusted look from them for making them wait, but my bladder was filled to overflowing.

The building must have been specially designed for parties just like these, there were a half dozen commercial style washrooms spread about. It took me a few moments to find a quiet one.

Gah, one more thing I hate about having to wear a suit -- the fly. Humans must have a better time at this, but I've got fur down there. It took me a half dozen tries to get zipped back up without getting caught.

I took a moment to splash some water in my face at the sink. Gods but did I look half dead. I looked even worse than I felt. My eyes were bloodshot and a vein was standing out in my nose. I just wasn't cut out for this political garbage.

I heard the door to the washroom slam behind me. A moment later a grey shape appeared in the mirror.

"Hello, Son."

"Gah!" I nearly leapt right out of my suit. Falling back to the floor, I had to grip the sink just to avoid landing on my tail.

"Dad, what are you doing here?"

I couldn't remember my father ever looking like this. He was completely nude, as per normal for him, but his fur was brushed out and cleaned until it glowed. He looked nearly regal. Even the walking stick he clutched at his side was immaculate.

"You didn't think you were the only one invited to this little get together, did you, Son?" His lips rose in a slight smile. He took a step forward and the grin evaporated. "Gods, Tommy, you look like hell." He brought a hand up to brush my face. Any other man and I would have pulled away, but my father brushed at the fur of my mussel without a thought. "What have you been drinking?"

"Nothing, Dad. It's been water all night. You know I don't drink." I gently pushed him back.

All I got was a "hurmph" in response.

"Is Mom here? What's going on?" I had to lean against the counter to keep my balance.

He nodded. "We just arrived, and don't plan on staying long. We had to come or risk a whole out incident. One does not ignore an invitation from Allen West with impunity. And..." He paused for

a moment, eyeing me critically, "I heard a rumour that Sayer and Oaks had already spoken to you tonight."

I bowed my head slightly, not sure why I was ashamed that they had gotten to me first.

"Then you know what I want." His voice was hard.

I looked up at him. He'd once again changed from being my father to being the alpha.

"Dad," It felt wrong to call him that when he looked like this, "It's a police matter. I told them they couldn't torture the man. Can you promise me the same?"

His gaze fell upon me like a ton of bricks, cold blue eyes seemingly unblinking.

"One of my hunters attacked you, Tommy. They attacked *you*. My son. My own flesh and blood. I won't provide any comfort for someone who has done that. We *will* find out who did this, and we *will* make them pay."

"I won't give him to you, Dad." I had to look down, I couldn't meet his eyes. "I won't give him to you if you're going to kill him. We're not animals..." I was struggling for breath now, as if his presence alone was smothering me. "We're not beasts. I won't let you kill him."

"What?" His voice was nothing more than a whisper, but it filled the room around us like he'd screamed at the top of his lungs. "Do not disobey me, Tommy." His hand shot out, wrapping around my mussel and forcing my eyes up to meet his. I couldn't look away. "You are my son. More than that," his voice fell to a growl that left my legs trembling, "You are a hunter. I am your alpha, and you will do as I command you."

Oh gods. I wanted to be anywhere but here. Lost in the mountains, falling off a cliff, even bleeding to death in the ocean. I wanted to be anywhere but here.

I'd never seen my father like this. Never. Not when I was growing up, not even when he'd been screaming at people in the cabin. This was beyond all that.

The only thing that kept him from ripping out my throat right now was the fact I was his son. I was a hunter, and I'd disobeyed a direct order. That was the same as challenging him.

"You are the alpha." I tried to look down, to wrap my tail around my legs, to do anything to show submission. "But whether I want it or not I'm the mayor now. I have to protect the people of this city. That cat tried to kill me, but I can't allow him to die in retaliation. That... that would make me no better." I could barely speak as his claws cut into my face. I could feel the blood as it began to drip, running down his arm.

His hands fell from my face a moment later as he turned his back to me. "Be grateful for who you are, my son. That's the only thing keeping you alive." In an instant he turned, claws outstretched. They tore bloody gashes down the side of my cheek.

I yipped, pulling back, fully ready to believe that he was about to pound me into submission. I'd never seen it, but that's what alphas did. That's how they kept order.

For a handful of heartbeats I laid curled up on the floor, expecting to feel my fathers fangs tear into me at any moment...

I heard the popping of his knees as he slowly lowered himself down to the immaculate tile floor. His soft arms curled around me a moment later to pull me to his chest.

My face was still bleeding, but he cradled me in his fur anyway. I could just make out his voice, "I'm so sorry, Son. I'm so sorry."

I wasn't sure how long we laid there, but neither one of us moved until my face had healed. He helped me wash the blooded cheek and suit, but didn't bother with his own fur. I tried to rinse it from him, but he just pushed me away.

"Aggie and I will be leaving now. We've done all we came here to do. We'll be staying at the

house tonight and returning to camp tomorrow afternoon."

"Camp, why? Aren't all the hunters back in the city now? I thought the camp was long gone."

He gave me a hard glare. "I have yet to allow the hunters back into the city. The flow of fresh meat has returned, but the hunters remain with me, out in the forest."

He gave me a sharp shove towards the door and a second later I was standing outside the washroom.

It was quickly obvious why we hadn't been disturbed. There were two wolves standing guard outside the door. They were both nude and stood out like chipped claws among the formal wear.

Renald and Amstys.

I wasn't sure how much they knew. I walked past without giving either of them a glance.

Back at the table again, it was like nothing had even happened. The line had grown longer, but other than that it was unchanged.

I sat through another dozen handshaking sessions, but I was pushing them along faster now. I didn't have the patience.

Just about all the people who had come to see me had been in couples. That was why I looked up when only a single person sat down.

Her scent hit me a moment later. The last time I'd smelt her musk had been just before she'd thrown wine in my face.

"Molly?" My jaw nearly dropped open.

"Hello, Tommy."

I'm sure I must have made sounds of some sort, but I doubted that any of them were words. I couldn't seem to force my lips to move.

Molly and I had been a package back in collage, a couple of years ago. The pure, snow-white wolf sat across the table from me now, wearing a dress that was in every way a match for what Smith had slid Rebecca into.

She just smiled. Opening her mouth, her voice was huskier than I remembered, deeper, more wild. "It's been a long time, Doggie."

Gods, 'Doggie'. I'd hated that nickname. I'd gotten it the day she'd learned I couldn't hunt. But those days were long behind me now... yet I couldn't get my tongue back in my mouth long enough to correct her.

It felt like I'd only blinked, but she was around the table now, sitting next to me. I could feel her fur rubbing up against my suit as her face slowly came up to caress my neck.

"I heard you were here, Doggie, and I just *had* to come and see you." She giggled. It was deep and slow. There was no trace of the young girl I'd known. "You're big and powerful now. I just had to come and see you. And you're all alone."

I wanted to say something... anything, but her scent wove around me. It mixed with the migraine I'd had before, growing, swirling into something much more.

Oh gods. My body was reacting to her so close to me. My trousers were rapidly becoming far too tight.

"Molly." I finally got a word out past my numb lips. It sounded like more of a strangled cough.

She must have taken the single word for something much more, because she began unbuttoning my vest and the shirt underneath it. Right there, in public with people standing in line not ten feet away.

And I swear to the gods that I couldn't move a muscle.

"Ahem." In the blink of an eye Jon was standing before us. Someone shouted at him from the line, telling him to wait his turn. The dog looked down at me, his dark fur a near perfect counterpoint

to the spotless white suit. "Sir. It's been a long time since you've last seen your guest for the evening. Rebecca. Would it not be a good idea to go find her?"

Rebecca.

It took everything I had to focus on Rebecca's lingering scent. Her real one, not the fake feline she wore while in disguise.

I still couldn't speak, but I was able to shoot out one of my arms. Molly fell back with a squeek, nearly tumbling off her chair. The same chair that Rebecca had been on not so long ago.

I was disappointed that Jon didn't reach out a hand to steady me as I stumbled to my feet. He'd turned to the line.

"I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but they mayor will not be receiving anyone further tonight. You are welcome to request an appointment with his official office."

There was a chorus of moans and a few cat calls, but I was too busy to notice. Molly had me by the tail.

"Doggy, come back here." Her voice was coy as she tightened her grip.

I suppose there was one saving grace, her grip had kept me from falling over flat on my face as I'd stood up. I wasn't sure what was wrong with me tonight, but I could barely walk.

"Molly..." I had to pause for a moment to collect my thoughts. Just the simple act of breathing brought her scent to me, sending my already clouded mind spinning. "Let go. I have to find Rebecca."

She pouted. It wasn't a becoming expression on a canine face. "Rebecca? Is that the name of your new squeeze? What's she got that I don't?"

It was all I could do to keep myself from lashing out at her.

Tail grasped in both my hands, I pulled as hard as I could. I could hear my fur coming free in her grip, and a moment later I felt fire run up my spine, but by then I was already stumbling away.

I hadn't the slightest where Rebecca might be. This place was huge, and the party must span a dozen rooms. I couldn't find anyone I knew, yet everyone seemed to want to pull me aside and talk.

It didn't take long for my temperature to rise, trapped as I was in this gods awful suit. I spotted a door leading out into the gardens. I fought towards it like a drowning man.

No sooner had I gotten five feet out than my stomach rebelled. I was on my knees now in the dirt, doing my best to toss up my socks. It wasn't that there was even much of anything to toss, really. I hadn't had anything to eat since lunch, but my body refused to stop trying.

It must have been a good ten minutes before I was able to stumble to my feet again with the assistance of a nearby tree trunk.

The night was quiet out here. The door back to the party had swung shut and I could hear the wind rustling through the branches. Almost like I was back out in the woods again.

The effect was only magnified when I heard Rebecca's soft voice coming from up ahead.

Pulling myself together as best I could, I walked slowly down a small gravel garden path. The stones didn't even crunch under my paws. I might just be whacked out of my mind, but my stalking instincts didn't seem to be hampered much.

I heard her again, her voice low, too soft to make out any words. She was talking to someone.

A few more steps forward and I could make them out. They were sitting close together, side by side on a bench that overlooked a small artificial pond. For a moment I almost thought there was three people, the bulk of the second person was so great.

Then he moved and there was no doubt. Suit or not, there was no way I could ever mistake English after having spent so many months with the lion.

Why were the two of them out here all alone in a secluded little spot in the garden?

I wanted to say something, wanted to be mad, furious. To yell and scream and work out all the pain, fear, and frustration that this night had brought on.

Instead my hand simply slipped from the tree branch I'd been using to hold myself upright and I fell into the dirt with a thunk.

I could almost see English's ears twitch as I hit the ground a few feet behind him.

"What was that?"

I couldn't see him anymore, my face was covered in wet sod. His heavy footsteps came towards me. I could hear Rebecca's shoes behind him.

"Mate?"

He had his hands around my collar a moment later, pulling me from the dirt as though I were nothing more than a sack of kibble.

"Gods, mate, what happened to you?" He had me sat up on the bench a moment later. I couldn't even keep myself straight, I would have fallen right back down if he'd removed his paws.

"Tommy?" Rebecca was in front of me now, patting my face and wiping the mud away. "Are you okay? Talk to me."

I opened my mouth to speak, to accuse them of being out here alone, but my tongue couldn't form the words.

They both pulled back as soon as my mouth fell open, English more so.

"Gah, mate! What have you been up to tonight? You stink like you're one step away from a self embalming."

It took every fibre I had to deny it, even then it came out slurred. "Nothing but water."

He just shook his head. "Right, mate. Right."

I watched the two of them exchange a glance.

"We can't walk him out the front door like this," Rebecca whispered. "He's supposed to be the mayor. How would that look for him to be carried out of his first formal engagement? Could we just tell people he's sick?"

English shook his head, his mane rustling in the darkness. "Not a chance, lass. You might not be able to smell it, but his breath stinks like a devil's backside. Anyone within five feet of us would know he's stone drunk. Anyway, lass, I doubt you could *carry* him out, and he hasn't seen fit to be around *me* in a while."

"English," I could hear the strain in her voice, despite a cloud of fog growing on my brain, "I told you that's not--"

The door to the mansion clicked open. There was the sound of footsteps in the gravel.

"Just go." I could feel her soft hand on my forehead, pushing me back, towards the lion. "I'll cover, say he had to run on some business."

She was gone a moment later.

I could feel English's hands encircling my chest as he hefted me into the air like I weighed nothing. I was just glad he was back on my side again.

I think I lost consciousness somewhere around the point that he jumped the ten foot high stone fence that surrounded the property. His landing wasn't as soft as I would have liked.

Chapter 6: Shaving His Mane

Alright, who was playing with the jackhammer inside my skull? AND COULD HE PLEASE STOP!

The simple act of opening my eyes took way more effort than I'd ever like to admit. It was like someone had attached two tone steel weights to my eyelids, than welded those weights to the foundations of a skyscraper.

"You're awake, mate." I'm sure the lion was doing little more than whispering, but his voice boomed through my head like he was shouting from a megaphone. "I'm guessing that you don't much care for the whole hangover part of being drunk."

I opened my mouth to say something, but my gut took the opportunity to try and make a run for it.

The lion was faster than I was, thankfully, and had a bucket up to my face as I bent forward.

"And that, mate," I could hear him laughing, "Will make number seven. Gods, what were you drinking last night? It looks like you were run over by an elephant with a bad case of flat foot."

It took me a good few breaths until I could pull my head from the bucket, so much as speak.

"I was drinking water. That... *hurk*... that was it."

"Is that what the trendy people are calling it these days, mate? 'Water'?" He shook his head. "I think you'll want to stay away from this so-called water."

I lifted my head from the rather pungent smelling bucket just long enough to get my bearings. The only clue I had was that I was on a white bed with white sheets in a clean, near empty white-washed room.

English's house, guest room. I'd been here once before.

I noticed a long crack that ran up one wall, neatly splitting the paint. I guess this place hadn't quite been immune to the quake.

The only thing I could remember from last night was something about Molly. Oh gods, Molly. Please tell me I hadn't... No, I was pretty sure I hadn't been *that* far gone.

But speaking of far gone, what in all the gods names was I doing at English's place?

I took another look at English, he was leaning back nonchalantly on a chair, within easy reach of me if I should start heaving again. His golden eyes were watching me. Just watching.

Working the words slowly, I had to ask, "Just how stupid was I last night?"

He gave me a full, toothy grin and threw his head back with a laugh. "You're asking the wrong person, mate. You weren't much interested in talking to me, remember?"

Okay, that, I knew, was wrong. "What do you mean? I've been trying to get a hold of you for the better part of a week. You're the person who buggered off one day and I've hardly heard from since. Except for a demand for money."

I could have just punched myself in the mouth as soon as I said the words.

His expression didn't change as I spoke, but rather froze solid on his face. He'd been calm before, relaxed, but now he was still as stone.

"I didn't demand *any* money from you, Tommy." He nearly spit the words back at me, "You have no idea what's happened to Storm Front. Our building's gone, half of our people are dead, and the police department appropriated everything they could to keep *themselves* going." A slight snarl escaped his lips before he spoke again. "That's what we got for serving the police when the riots started. Every member of Storm Front fell into ranks with the cops, they gave them all they had, and now we're practically beggars on the street."

I lifted one hand to my head. The lion's voice had risen, and it felt like a drill to my brain.

"Since when did that happen, English? I thought things were going well for you. I could have sworn I saw a paper I signed a couple of days ago with a dozen new bounties on it."

He did calm some small measure now, though his tail had begun to lash back and forth.

"We got bounties to track down, that's no problem, mate. We've got lots of bounties with all the chaos from the rebuilding, we just don't have the tools to catch them." He threw his hands out to the cracked building around us. "This is the last thing I've got under my own name, mate. I'm not a poor guy, I had bank accounts full of cash a few months ago, but it's taken every dollar I had to get the company back up and running."

I scratched my head. "Huh? How can it be so bad? You and I went out on the lamb with no problems."

He stuck his tongue out at me, a silly expression that thankfully suggested he was calming.

"That was just the two of us, mate, and we weren't exactly ordinary. It doesn't work that way when you've got a hundred employees to take care of. A little band like our wouldn't have been able to deal with the whole city by itself."

"Fine, fine. I get it, you haven't exactly had a good couple of weeks. Why are you mewing to me?"

His eyes narrowed now. "Because, mate, you seem to be bloody good at avoiding me. You've made real good pals with your cop friends. Enough to forget about me?"

"What!?" I almost threw the bucket at him. "Me? You're the one who never came by! I'm stuck in my apartment, weighed down with a tone of papers, and I'm the one who's being a bugger?"

He dismissed me offhandedly with the wave of a paw. "I've tried, mate. The gods know I've tried. Every time I get within a hundred meters of your apartment some dog jumps out of the wall and barks at me about needing an appointment. I even tried sending some of my bounty hunters, but they don't even get that far."

I let my head sink to my chest now. "Jon knows that you're allowed in whenever you want. You're one of the few people I'd actually *like* to see walk through that door."

"Mate," He leaned forward, putting his hand on my knee, "You know I'd do bloody well anything for you, but this job is killing you. Everyone knows it but you. The dogs are playing you like a bell, Tommy." I looked up, he was closer now, his eyes staring straight at me. "You're not going to survive long if you keep at this, mate. You're just not cut out for it." He grinned now. "Come on back

to Storm Front with me. You got rid of VanderHoom and the company is mine again, you can make a proper living."

I had to laugh at that one, even though it made my head hurt. "Bounty hunting, English? Aren't you the one who told me that most people don't even survive to their fifth contract?"

He looked stricken at my words. "Not you, Tommy. You're better than that, you know it."

I shook my head. "I can't, English. To many people are counting on me. The city is in chaos. It wouldn't take more than a nudge to push us off the cliff right now."

"If you step down, mate, they'll always be someone to take your place. Someone will always want the job."

"That's the problem, English." My voice was stronger now, the headache slowly pulling back, "Anyone who would replace me would do it *because* they want the job. Every single person I've talked to wants a special deal out of me, and they're willing to cut me in to get it. Nobody seems to actually expect me to run a level game, everyone just expects that I'll be corrupt. That's the whole thing, English, that's how people like VanderHoom got into power. I don't want to live in that world again." I shook my head and let out a breath. "Tempt me again when the reconstruction is over, buddy. I'd really, really like to be tempted then, but I just can't walk away until things at least start off square."

He just sighed and settled back into his chair. "You are one stubborn little wolf, you know that? I thought it was supposed to be us cats who were vain."

I shook my head gently. Even then the room still began to spin. "You don't need to tell me, buddy. My father already nearly cut me open for defying him as the hunter's alpha."

"You did *what*?" He was back at my side again, closer now, almost as if he was afraid that people were about to storm the room. "You seriously disobeyed the hunter's alpha? Gods, Tommy, even if he's your father that's still bad mojo."

I just set my head back and closed my eyes. "Don't I know it." I opened one eye to give the lion a glare. "And I'd appreciate it if you kept that under your mane. Dad doesn't *have* to tear me apart as long as no one knows I've disobeyed him, but if it got out it would undermine his whole base of authority."

English's expression was sober, almost carved in stone, "I know a thing or two about dealing with fathers..." With an effort, he forced a grin to his lips, banishing the memory that had been playing across his face, "You already know too much about me, mate." He held a finger up to the side of his flat nose. "It's as safe as in a vault, safer. But anyway," He moved towards me again, "Let's get you some fresh air."

The lion could just have easily carried me out in his arms like a cub, but he gave me the dignity of throwing my arm over his shoulder and letting me at least try to walk. He was so much taller than I that he had to almost kneel down so I could reach over his shoulder.

I couldn't much deny it now, I was hung over. How I'd gotten this way I had no idea.

I recognized all the symptoms, but only in a clinical way. I'd never gotten myself smashed like this before. There had never been any reason too. The amount of alcohol it took to get me drunk was astronomical, and, despite what I'd always claimed, the hangovers never did last *that* long.

I was just short of blinded when English shouldered open his back door to land us on the deck. There were a couple of chairs here, I sunk into one gladly.

"Let me get you a cop 'o tea, mate."

"Isn't it supposed to be coffee that you offer to the recently drunk?" I said as I raised a arm to shield my eyes.

"Urban legend, mate." He laughed and patted my shoulder. "A dietetic is the last thing you'll want after being strung out. Speaking of which," He pointed to a pitcher of water on the table next to

me, "Help yourself. I'll be back presently."

The door clicked closed behind me and I was left alone with the chirping of the birds and the far, far too bright sun light.

It only took a second glance at the pitcher of water before I realized just how dried out I was. My tongue felt like sandpaper.

The lion hadn't seemed to have remembered to include any glasses, but that was fine by me, I just stuck my head straight in and began lapping until I'd done away with half the jug.

Sitting back, I took a deep breath. This really was the first time in almost longer than I could remember that I had a moment to just relax. No one making me sign papers, no one trying to kill me, no one wanting to shake hands and forge a deal.

I'd slipped into it so fast that I'd hardly even realized the change. English had been right about one thing, I was just this side of being burnt out, and it showed.

I'd only just awoken minutes ago, but I yawned and stretched out on the chair, feeling my eyes fall closed.

The next thing I knew, my nose was twitching. Raspberry and lemon. English must be back.

Opening my eyes, I could see him sitting next to me, a pot of tea and two cups on the table between us. They weren't from his good set. The lion was simply staring out into the trees around us.

He didn't even look my way before saying, "Drink up, mate. It'll make you feel better. Take it from a man who's lived through enough hangovers to know."

I grinned and wrapped my hands around one of the steaming cups before taking a tentative lap. It was harsh and bitter, but it made the last of the nausea flee back some.

"Is it really as bad as you say, English?" I asked him, having to force down a lump in my throat after drinking some of the tea. "I've barely been on the streets. Things seemed okay from where I stood. I thought the reconstruction was going better than we had any right to expect."

"It is, mate, it is." A sad chuckle edged into his voice, "The reconstruction is going swimmingly, better than anyone could ever have imagined. It's only been a couple of weeks and the city is already getting back on its feet, shops reopening. It's amazing, mate, I'll give you that. But you're not out there, mate, you're not seeing what's happening first hand. The police and bureaucrats are feeding you reports showing the good work you're doing, and it's all true, but there's always the piper to pay."

"What is it, English?"

"Consolidation, mate. Even I'm guilty of it. V-town has always been built on the backs of small businesses, entrepreneurs, but the big folks are taking this for all it's worth. The big fellas, Tommy, they're the ones who've been able to ride out this wave in style. Folks like Allen West and," he coughed, a strangled sound escaping his lips, "Me. We've got the funds and the backing to build ourselves back up after a catastrophe like this. It's not just sheer money, Mate, it's who you know. None of West's companies had to worry about getting building supplies, or even food. He owns businesses in every sector, and he makes sure his interests are well taken care of. Even I, mate. Do you know how I got Storm Front back on its feet?"

I shook my head.

"I emptied every cent I had into buying half of the other bounty hunting companies in the city. I could afford them, they'd almost gone under anyway. I bought them up, stripped what I wanted from their supplies and personnel then dropped the rest in the street. I never left enough of the original company behind to have to worry about them coming back to compete."

I sighed. "I'm guessing that not everyone is quite so ethical and bothered about this as you are?"

He let out a laugh. "You could say that, mate. Your new best friend, West, he already had his

hands in a quarter of the companies in the city. Now he must own bloody well near half of V-town. Everything from KDP to Cub-caf, he owns almost as much as the government."

I shook my head. "Fine. Why don't I just let him run things? He'd likely be better at it than I, anyway."

"You never know, mate. But I don't think that's his style. He doesn't come out to play with the common man. He's one of those who pulls his strings from the back rooms." The massive lion stuttered for a moment. "I met him when Storm Front first hit the big time, years ago. He wanted to buy us out then, when we were still fairly small. Hoof, antler, and handcuff, he wanted us in his pocket and he was willing to pay for it."

I looked up at him. "What happened?"

The lion let out a huff. "Did I ever tell you what happened to me after I left India, mate?"

I shook my head.

He settled back into his chair, taking a sip of tea and sunning himself in the slight morning breeze. I'd almost thought he'd forgotten about me until he began speaking, accent gone.

"It was a year or so after I'd left India and Jasmine behind me. I hadn't the slightest where I was going, so I headed east." He grinned. "It wasn't exactly the easiest journey of my life. Central Asia isn't flat. I got a fair bit of climbing experience there, travelling with a handful of trading caravans, working as a guard to hold back the bandits on those isolated rural roads."

"Anyway, mate, the end of the line was at Kunming, China. It was a fair size city, and had weathered the Cataclysm not too poorly. I set down there for a while and tried to make a place for myself. I'd picked up a touch of Cantonese while I'd been on the trip, just enough to make myself understood. I couldn't chit-chat much with the locals, but I could order a beer at the bar and throw people around enough to get a stint as a bouncer."

"After about a month or so I ran across a sign that was hawking a company looking for bounty hunters. This was the first time I'd really had the opportunity to ply the trade I'd learned from Jasmine's family. I jumped at the chance. Didn't really know what I was getting into, and, frankly, I didn't much care. I figured that they needed men to hunt, and that's what I wanted to do."

"It was short order before I found the guy in charge. He was a bear with some name that to this day I still can't pronounce. He was more than happy to snap me up, I was a good shade better than the average man he had on staff. I was young then, mate, and hardly had the experience to find my tail with both hands, but I was willing."

"I didn't much care for the papers and oaths I had to sign off on. This was only a job, after all. I just wanted my pay-cheque at the end of the day. All went well for a month or so. They got contracts, handed them to me and... well, you know the rest. I did my job. The company did well, and I got paid."

"Things changed before too long. The city grew, the bounties went up in value, and our little bounty hunting business began getting attention. Keep in mind, mate, that I was good, but I wasn't *that* good just yet. I was in the top five of a roster of thirty, no more."

"We eventually caught the eyes of a larger bounty hunting company. They took us over in a matter of days. Everything, poof, just like that. I hardly noticed, and cared even less. This wasn't *my* town, and as long as I got paid, who cared who handed out the cash?"

"For a while it seemed that it was going to be welcome to the new boss, just the same as the old boss. Would have well just have been. There was one little hitch though, mate. These companies were run a little bit more... *empathetically* than around here. If you were with a company, you were *with the company*, come hurricane or high water. My old crew didn't cause me much trouble, but the new ones did. One specific problem, they all shaved their heads."

"It was a loyalty thing. I never did understand it, but there you have it. You worked for the company, you shaved your head in allegiance. No one else seemed to care much, but I didn't take well to the idea."

He paused for a moment, just long enough to give me a chance to imagine the lion with his mane shaved clean off. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Don't you start, mate." He wagged a finger at me. "Say what you will, but it wasn't my cup of tea. Unfortunately, I didn't have many choices. They hadn't exactly said it in so many words when I'd signed up, but they expected me to stay. Permanently. They could fire me, of course, but quitting just wasn't in their vocabulary."

"I spat and cursed them out in a half dozen languages that I doubt they could even understand, but that didn't stop them. I can still see it, mate, there wasn't a cloud in the sky that day when they held me to the ground, six of them, and shaved me bald."

"They did it, mate. With a pair of rusty scissors, they held me to the dirt and cut my mane off." His hands had risen to his head now, twining with the long brown hair that lay there, as if he were afraid it would happen again. "Gods, mate... it would be like... like someone slicing off your tail. It's not just hair, it's a symbol of who I am." He paused for a moment before taking a deep breath. "My father had the most glorious mane I've ever seen. Mine was just starting to grow in when I killed him."

"Anyway," He gave his head a quick shake like he was throwing water, "I, as you can guess, didn't take to kindly to the haircut. They likely thought it was over as soon as they'd stopped cutting. They let go of my arms and started laughing at me. That was a mistake. I'm not proud of what I did, Tommy, but I didn't kill anyone. Heh. I gave them more than a few scars and a couple of broken bones, but I didn't kill anyone. They'd jumped me the first time, but I didn't give them the opportunity to hold me down again."

"That was about the time I wore out my welcome in Kunming. I hightailed it out of there that very night. Made it to Qianxinan before too long, then joined a caravan heading east to Bose and on to the coast. The bounty hunters sent a couple of people after me, to bring me back, but I dealt with them with few problems."

I just shook my head. "And this applies to me how, English?"

He frowned. "Just watch yourself, Mate. I'm hardly perfect, but you've earned *my* loyalty. I like to think I've done the same in kind. Sayer and the dogs, West, and..." He sighed. "And even the hunters will use you in every way they can. You're a tool now, Tommy. Something to help them achieve their goals. A lot of people died in the riots and quake, and now there's a power vacuum. Just watch who you sign up with, mate. It could come back to bite you."

We spent the rest of the morning out on the back deck, talking. English had more than enough storeys about his adventures trying to pick Storm Front up from the ashes. Then more tales recalling his latest bounties. He was working alone these days.

"You sure you won't come back, mate? I'm risking life and limb going out by myself."

I shot him a glare. "You got the pick of the whole company for partners. Choose one of them."

He huffed, sticking out his tongue. "You've got me spoiled, mate." He grinned, "It's you or nobody."

"What about Brown?"

The smile faltered on his face. "He didn't make it through the quake so well. A ceiling came down on him." I winced in sympathy. "He's still around, but in no condition to be out on the prowl."

I heard a loud knock come through the open door behind us. English startled slightly.

"It's not often I have visitors out here." The lion's home was out on the edge of V-town, tucked

away and hardly easy to find. "You just stay here, mate."

He was gone an moment later, but left the back door open.

"What is it? What do you want?" I could hear the lion shouting as he walked through the house. There was no response other than three more precise raps on the door.

"Go away! I don't want any of what you're selling... Oh. You." English didn't sound pleased.

"Good morning, Mr. English." The clipped voice of Jon was unmistakable.

"Dog." The relationship between the two of them had mellowed while we'd been up in the mountains, but I don't think the lion had ever forgiven Jon for turning us over to the interrogators back when we were hunting down the humans. The lion's voice had turned suspicious when he spoke again. "Where's your pack, dog. One never just sees a single cop."

Even from this distance I could hear Jon's teeth grind together. "I'm am not here on police business, English." This might just be the first time I'd ever heard Jon address him without the 'Mr.' attached. "I'm here as a member of Tommy's staff. And his friend."

"Is that so?" The lion sounded amused.

"Yes." I could feel the dog's nerves from here. "He didn't return to his apartment last night. I'm searching for him."

English laughed. "Try talking to the Lass. She'll tell you everything you need to know."

I could almost hear Jon growl.

"I have spoken to Miss Rebecca. She was... uncooperative. The simply states that Tommy is, and I quote, 'taking the day off'."

English laughed again, louder this time. "That would sound like something Lass would say. Why don't you take the hint, dog, and bugger off."

I could hear a whine Jon's voice now, almost see his tail resting on the ground. "Please, English. Last I saw him was in the home of Mr. West. I don't trust that man."

English paused now, his words coming slow and careful. "Come on in, dog. We'll share a cup of tea and then we'll talk about finding ol' Tommy."

The door to the kitchen was right next to me, leading in from the deck. I could see the two of them plain as day, but Jon had been seated with his back to me.

"I really don't have time for this, English." Jon's voice was meek. "I need to get back to work."

"You are working, dog." English poured two more cups of tea from the same kettle that we'd just used. "You want help finding him, you'll have to play nice with me first."

"Of course... Sir." Jon paused for a moment to lap from his cup. "But you know I can't speak for Tommy. You really should come to meet with him." His voice lowered a touch, as if he were being conspiratorial. "I do get the feeling that he misses having you around."

English set his cup down on the table between them before giving Jon an icy stare.

"I'd be happy to, dog." There was an edge of a growl in his voice, "But you don't seem to like having me around."

Jon pulled back almost as if he'd been slapped. "Pardon? I've never once spoken poorly of you. I can assure you, Mr. English, that I've never stepped between Tommy and his personal relations. All of the police detail supplied to me have specific orders to allow you in with no questions."

"Right." English raised a finger to his lips, claw extended to work something or other from between his teeth. He took the opportunity to show off his arsenal fully. "Those would be the same dogs that Sayer provided to you with no strings attached? Just who do they answer to, these officers, you or Sayer?"

I could see Jon swallow a lump in his throat. "I'm sure I don't understand what you're suggesting, Mr. English. All the dogs are loyal officers of the police service, they all answer,

eventually, to the Commissioner above all else."

"And you... Jon?" The lion leaned forward across the table, his nose almost touching the dog's. "Who do *you* answer to?"

He didn't answer for a long moment, just shrunk back into his chair. "You can't ask me to split my loyalties, English. I'm a member of the police. I'd be nothing without them."

"Who do you answer to, Jon?" English's voice had fallen, it was hardly a notch above a snarl now.

The dog swallowed again, trying to divert his gaze from the lion's eyes. "I nearly handed in my resignation to follow you, Tommy, and Miss Rebecca into the mountains. I am a loyal member of the police service, and I'll obey every order I'm given, but I'd resign before betraying Tommy."

"You're a queer one, Jon." The lion had pull back to sit in his seat again, voice swinging back to playful. "Wait here and drink your tea. I'll go see if I can find our wayward friend."

He was just about out of his seat when I walked through the door.

Jon's head had already spun around at the sound of my footsteps. His eyes widened when he saw me.

"Sir!" He was about to get to his feet when I set my hand on his shoulder, gently keeping him in place. "It's, uh, good to see you again, Sir. We were just talking about you."

"I'd gathered as much." I cast about the room for a chair, but it seemed that English had only furnished his house for a maximum of two people. Jon tried to stand again, but I shoved him down as I lowered myself to my knees and rested my elbows on the worn wood of the kitchen table.

"Am I correct in detecting a sign that there may be more to this problem than we first thought?"

Jon was torn. "I can't believe that Commissioner Sayer, my uncle, would ever do such a thing. We had a discussion on your safety, Tommy, and he gave me authority to protect you *carte blanche*."

English raised one hand to rub the bridge of his wide, flat nose. "I think that dog's been howling at the wrong moon for a few months now. He never did seem right after the whole VanderHoom incident."

Jon nodded, a quick abrupt motion of his chin. "He was... troubled with the fact that he had been a part of the disaster. He sees Tommy as a way to absolve himself of the issue, to return things to their proper order."

"So I was right," I lowered my head to the table as I spoke, "He does see me as some kind of messiah. The wind-up kind. Every piece of paper that gets brought to me is filtered through the police bureaucracy, every person I meet is cleared by them. He's making all the decisions and I'm just signing the ink."

"That's not quite true, Sir." Jon cleared his throat, "I also review your paperwork and clear your visitors."

I just lifted one eyebrow. "Not helping."

"Oh... yes. Sorry, Tommy."

"So what's the goal, dog?" English broke in. "Are we looking at a police state? A power grab? I've known Bob for years, and I haven't the slightest what he's up to."

Jon shook his head. The dog's face had taken on a weathered appearance now. "No. I know him too well for that. There has been no, absolutely no, growth in the powers of the police. All in all there have been almost no direct changes to the underlying power structure of the city at all. All he seems to want to do is bring us back to order as quickly as he possibly can."

English snapped his claws together. "And that may just be it. Jon, is old Sayer still as close to the grave as last I saw him?"

Jon huffed out a breath. "Closer. But his mind still functions."

The lion turned to me. "Than I think we've got it, mate. Sayer really does feel he's responsible for this. It was under his watch that so many humans died. Gods, mate, he's trying to get the city rebuilt before he packs it in, and I doubt he cares how many cracks show through."

"The rebuilding?" I cocked my head, "I thought that was my project."

English just raised his eyes to the heavens with a 'why me?' look. "Mate, how many of those papers did you write? How many did you even *read*? It's not your plan, it's his." English paused for a moment, "And I will say that all things being equal, he is doing a rather good job of it."

"So what's the problem?" I asked. "Sayer plays god until he kicks the bucket, we force him to ease off on me, and the city gets the best it can."

"Nice plan, mate, but you're the mayor. Not him. If he messes up or goes senile in his dotage it's you that people will be flocking to for a tail to pull. And don't your forget that this 'reconstruction' is going a bit faster that might strictly be a good idea."

"Still doesn't answer the real question," I let my head sink back to the table, "What do we do? You just said it, I haven't done a thing since I got this title dropped on me. If we piss off Sayer the whole city will be in the bucket. I don't exactly see any options here. The best I can do is just resign and leave it to someone else to hold the bag."

"I don't think that's possible, Sir." The skin around Jon's eyes had gone a shade of white. "My uncle... well, he ascribes to you quite a bit of importance. I'm not sure he'd just let you walk away."

"And what would he do? Put me under house arrest for trying to walk out?"

Jon's ears folded back to his skull. "Tommy, you forget that your apartment is surrounded by police dogs twenty-four hours a day. Not even English with all his skills was able to get in. I'll do everything I can to help you, Tommy, but I know for a fact that there are at least fifty dogs assigned to the detail. I may command them on paper, but I have no doubt that their final loyalty is to my uncle."

I could feel the blood draining from my own face. "Isn't Rebecca back at the apartment?"

Jon set one of his hands over mine in an obvious effort to try and calm me. He wasn't doing a very good job of it. "There is no need to worry. Miss Rebecca is perfectly safe. Commissioner Sayer still has complete confidence in you. He has absolutely no reason to act."

Call me crazy, but 'haven't given him a reason to go nuts' wasn't very high up on the list of assurances in my book.

"Can't go, can't stay... I'm feeling a little trapped here, folks." My voice was weak.

Jon cleared his throat. "As a police officer, I'm forbidden to give you any direct advice on your..."

"Spit. It. Out." Was all I could get out between clenched teeth.

"We need to expand your political base, sir. I've been doing everything I can to cover for you, but even I can only quickly skim your papers. You need to build a base, a party. You need to be able to know every move my uncle makes, and be able to make your own. Plus..." He cleared his throat again, "You'll need to take control of your platform for the next election."

"The what?" Both English and I spoke in unison.

"The election. The law states that an interim mayor can serve for no more than six months. You're close to four."

"Whoohoo!" I nearly howled. "I can just loose the election and get clean away."

Jon shook his head. "Not so simple, Sir. I can't divulge too much about the confidential meetings I've had with the Commissioner, but suffice it to say he does not plan for you to lose."

I nearly choked. "The police department is going to rig the bloody election?"

Jon averted his eyes from me, looking down at the table. "Not as such... he plans to take control of your election platform and guide it to ensure your victory. Anything illegal would only be as a last

resort."

"Got to admit, mate," English's paw came out to cover my other hand, "It's the perfect go. He already controls the government *and* the police force. Even if someone found out, who would they go to?"

The walk back into town was slow. I was still fighting off the last echos of the hangover, and neither English nor Jon would let me out of their sight.

The first police dog we came across took one look at me and turned tail to run in the direction of police HQ. I could see Jon wince.

"What do you figure Sayer is going to do when we get back?" I whispered.

"To you?" replied Jon, "Nothing. He won't touch *you* unless the situation becomes dire. I am the one he charged with protecting you."

"Oh." I felt a shiver run down my spine. I could only hope that discipline in the police force was more lenient than it was among the hunters.

Back at the apartment building, the strike had regrown. There were picketers now with signs that read 'We don't want a drunk dog for a mayor'.

Through the front door, I took a moment to notice the long look that English got from the dog guarding it.

Reaching out, I pulled the dog aside.

"What are your orders regarding English?"

The dog averted his eyes. "Sir. I have a very limited list of people I'm permitted to allow through."

"You didn't answer my question, officer."

He gulped. "Mr. English is not on my list of approved visitors."

I could hear just the slightest growl from Jon. The guard in front of me looked like he was ready to wet himself.

"From now on English is allowed in here any time of the day or night."

"But, Sir, he's not on the list..."

Now it was I who growled. I didn't bother to try and keep my lips from raising. "You will never turn him away. Understand?"

"Yessir." The dog's tail was flat on the ground.

Back up in the apartment, I was surprised we were alone.

"Fine, it's time to start acting like the mayor." I flopped down on the stool I'd used as my makeshift office for the last two weeks. "Jon, find out what other surprises Sayer has in store for me. English, you've got the resources. Think you could start searching me out some people to make a political team without raising too many red flags?"

The lion smiled. "Storm Front is already on a hiring spree. Anything of mine is yours."

"Great." I waved a hand at the two of them. "You'd both best get out of here before Sayer finds out about too much. I've got a ton of papers to sign to keep up appearances."

The two of them disappeared and I picked up the pen that lay on my desk -- the bane of my new existence.

I'd been able to unload much of the paperwork to the two police superintendents, Able and Baker, yet they'd always found ways to keep me so occupied that I never left the apartment. Now I knew why.

An hour or so later I heard the tread of feet in the hall. It wasn't the clink of claws, only boots made that clomping sound. I only knew a single person who wore boots.

"Have a relaxing night, Wolfy?" Rebecca didn't even bother to look surprised that I was back. "I saw Jon on the way up here. I'm guessing his detective skills panned out."

I dropped my mouth open in a grin. "Something like that, babe." Reaching out an arm, I pulled her close. "And thanks for the distraction last night. I really needed that. Gods, I never realized just how deep a hole I'd managed to dig myself in to until I got a chance to look at it from the outside."

She was leaning into me now, I could feel the warmth of her body through my pelt.

"What happened last night, Wolfy? I've never seen you drunk before. I thought it wasn't even possible for someone like you."

I shook my head, long having given up my defence. "Not a clue. A doctor told me once that the only way I could ever get hammered was to drink near pure alcohol. The amount it would take to give me a buzz would kill English."

She snorted. "Don't tell *him* that. From what I've heard, his mangeyness is rather proud of his drinking prowess. You figure West was trying to get you drunk?"

I shrugged. "Guess so. Either that or his staff can't tell the difference between the faucet and a bottle of pure spirits. Wait a sec... weren't the protesters holding a sign about me being drunk this morning?"

Rebecca snuggled up closer against my chest. "I think so."

"How would anyone even know I got hammered? The two of you got me out of there before anything went too wrong, and I didn't think I was *that* bad at shaking hands."

I could feel her brow furrow as her face pressed softly against my neck. "I guess someone could have been out on the streets, spreading rumours..."

"And English mentioned that West owns KDP."

Rebecca pulled back out of my arms, sliding onto the stool next to me. I wanted to talk to her, but I was still sad to have her move away. I had to content myself with keeping an arm over her shoulder.

"He probably does. I did a little asking around about him today while I was out." She shot me a grin. "It took me a while to lose the police dogs that had been sent to tail me, but I did it. West really does seem to have his hands in just about everything. I think he is the majority owner of KDP."

"Okay," I just wanted to slump down over the counter in front of me. "He's big and rich, has his people from KDP out there protesting me, tries his hardest to get me piss drunk, then invites me to his home and tells me what good friends we're going to be?"

"You're asking the wrong woman, Tommy." She tossed a lock of hair over her shoulder. "I just used to serve drinks to rich people. I never moved in these kinds of circles. You need to talk to someone else who was important enough to get invited to that party... and no, English doesn't count." She rolled her eyes. "He'd just as likely suggest you rip the guy apart."

"There's only one other person I know who has that kind of status." I sighed. "And last time I saw him he was just about ready to kill me."

Rebecca didn't even try to hide her confusion. "Who? I thought we'd already dealt with most of the people who wanted you dead."

"My father."

Rebecca had refused to let go of me until I'd filled her in on the events of the party. After that she's did her darnedest to still keep a hold of me.

I had to just short of growl and snap to get away from her. In the end I had to play the 'you're not a wolf' card. That went over about as well as could be expected. I was just glad that she hadn't started throwing anything.

Out and down the stairs, I could just see Jon from the corner of one eye. A group of almost half a dozen police dogs formed up on me the moment I set claw outside the building.

"Take off, you hozers," I snapped at them.

They took a step back, but refused to leave. Eventually one of them came forward.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but we're under strict orders to protect you after..." He cleared his throat, "After what happened at the construction site."

"Fine." I turned and started walking. "But keep out of my way, and don't you dare set foot on my parent's property."

It was a fairly long way to my parent's house, the better part of across town. The first few blocks were interesting, I got to see how the city was coming back together. The next few blocks were tedious, I just wanted to get this over with.

After that I did something that I hadn't done in a long time. I fell to all fours and I ran.

Last time I'd done this was out in the forest, chasing prey. In fact that was the only time I'd ever ran on all fours. I suppose it was symbolic enough. I was running like a hunter to go show my belly to the hunter's alpha.

I snorted off the idea. I was just tired and wanted to get there as fast as possible.

Chapter 7: Dealing With Dominance

Even after everything the city had been through, the old street looked just about the same. The road was a little more cracked, and some of the houses saw a touch more wear and tear, but it was just like I remembered it.

I could hear the police dogs panting and gasping as they struggled to catch up with me. None of them had been willing to run on all fours.

I rose back upright now, slowing as I came to a stop before the house. My parents were getting older, and the lawn was a touch overgrown, but it was still *home*.

Three paces up the walkway and I was standing before the sky blue front door. I almost expected my mother to open it the moment I stepped up. Not today.

A quick knock and I waited.

The door cracked open a few moments later. More hesitantly than I was used to.

"Yes?" It was my mother's voice. She sounded tired. I couldn't see her around the door. "Tommy?"

A heartbeat later the door was wide open and she'd pulled me silently into the house, her arms wrapping around me.

"Tommy." Her voice was near silent, hardly above a whisper. "Gods, Tommy, I've been so worried about you."

"It's okay, Mom. I'm here now." I wrapped my arms around her. "I... I need to see Dad."

She stiffened slightly in my grasp. "He's out back, Tommy. But... I don't think you should..."

I pressed my face into her hair for just a moment before letting go.

"I need to do this. I can't afford not to." I was rambling now as I walked through the house.

Gods, I really did need to do this. Though I wasn't quite sure what *this* was yet. I had too many enemies, and I couldn't afford for my own father to be one of them.

My mother stepped away as I neared the back door. She didn't even have to tell me where I'd find my father.

Two steps down the stairs at the back of the house and my claws sunk into the soft earth.

Every other time I'd been here, bar none, the familiar memories of this small yard had never failed to wash my fears away. Now they magnified them.

My father's grey body was laying under his favourite tree. The same place I could remember him from a million times in my youth.

I padded silently across the turf. My body very nearly moved of its own accord. My tail was down, ears back, eyes to the ground. Even in the most sacred of family places I couldn't ignore that he was the alpha.

His eyes never opened, he never made a single move to acknowledge me as I came to stand beside him.

I could feel a whimper growing in my throat.

"You shouldn't be here, Son. I still haven't decided what I'm going to do with you." His voice was dry and cracked. It was only then that I noticed the gashes that covered his body. He was torn by claw marks and bites. None were enough to inflict any mortal wounds, but he was still bleeding.

"Dad! What happened?" I didn't lay in my normal little dell in the earth beside him, but rather fell to my knees, my fingers probing at his cuts.

He didn't complain or shake me off as I gently touched him. He hardly moved at all.

"Your Uncle Gowan and I got in a disagreement after the party last night. About your place in the pack." He winced slightly as I shifted his arm to find more wounds underneath. "It seems that he doesn't see pack law in quite the same way I do."

I didn't say anything. It was all I could do to keep my eyes focused on his blood matted fur.

"Gowan thinks I should release you from your status as a hunter." He coughed out a laugh, "He doesn't truly think you were ever a hunter to start with."

"And what do you think, Dad?"

One of his hands shot out lighting quick to grab my mussel, forcing me to meet his ice blue eyes. "You're my son. I plan on keeping you as close to me as I can." His lips raised, revealing the cracked and yellowed fangs beneath. "I've almost lost you too many times, Tommy. You can play the world however you like, but I'll be here for you until the day you have to drag me out into the forest and bury me."

His hand didn't come free from my face until he'd pulled me down to lay beside him.

"Does this mean you're no longer deciding whether or not to have me killed?" I asked meekly.

There was a growl in his voice when he responded, but I wasn't sure if it was directed at me. "I was never going to *kill* you, Son. There were a great many things I might have done to you, not the least of which was paddle your tail like a two year old, but I wasn't going to kill you." He laughed now. "I've invested too much in you, Tommy. I'm too old to make another son. You'll just have to do."

"Gee, thanks, Dad. That makes me feel so much better."

His arm came out to fall across my chest. A year ago it had pinned me. It didn't anymore.

"Though I still need to decide how I'm going to deal with you for disobeying me."

My ears pulled back even further. "I can't let you kill him, Dad." I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to relax. It did little good. "But I will admit that I didn't pick the best friends."

I brought him up to speed on the current plan with Sayer. He didn't say much as I spoke, just huffed out a breath every now and then. He waited until I was done before he responded.

"I never was able to understand those domestics." His lips rose in a snarl. "The dogs. They look so much like us, Tommy. But every time I kid myself into trying to think we're the same, one of them goes and pulls something like this. They're not wolves. We need to remember we're not the same."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My father, the man who had married a sprigen, put up with me not hunting for most of my life, and now he was speaking like this?

"It's not the dogs, Dad..." I stammered out. "It's just Sayer."

He waved a hand at me. "Fine, Son." A sigh escaped his lips. "You've gotten yourself dug into a deep den this time. How was it that only a year ago you were still a pup who'd yet to make his first kill, hadn't even become a wolf?"

I could feel myself blushing under my fur.

"Dad..."

He chuckled. "Very well, what are we going to do now, *mayor*?"

I wrestled his hand off me, slowly getting to my feet. "Well, I thought the first thing we should do is make a visit to police HQ."

He was struggling to sit up beside me, but he still managed to cock his head.

"I'm the mayor, the guy he tried to kill, and you're the hunter's alpha. I don't see anyway they could refuse to let us see him."

I reached out a hand to pull my father from the ground. He took it without a second thought. I handed him his cane, but he chose to lean on me instead.

"Very well, my son. Perhaps it is time the mayor and the alpha made a joint visit to jail."

Saying goodbye to my mother, we left the house. I could feel my father's fur rise when he saw the dogs who waited for us on the street.

I tightened my arm around his shoulders and walked on.

The lead dog bowed his head to me. "Sir." Then looked to my father. "Sir."

"We're going to HQ," I told him offhandedly as we began to walk down the street.

"Sir? Uh, are you sure that's a good idea? I'm sure there is much pressing business waiting for you back at your office."

I had to suppress the growl that grew at the back of my throat. It took everything I had to keep my voice light and unconcerned. "No, I don't think so. This is part of my official duty."

We walked on without a backward glance.

The journey to the police HQ was shorter than the run from the apartment to my parent's house, but it took far longer.

As the alpha, it took everything my Dad had to admit to weakness in public. He'd had to give up the post in the first place because of his leg, but now he held it again, and needed to project the proper image of strength.

We did make it in due time. The walk took long over an hour, and we didn't say much as it wore away. I had a million questions I wanted to ask him, but the presence of the dogs behind us made me wary. I had to content myself with just having the warmth of his body next to me.

I'd taken the liberty of ordering the dogs in attendance to *not* to run ahead and alert their brethren. I was pleased to see the shocked reactions on the police officer's faces as I got closer to HQ.

It wasn't that there should be any real alarm at seeing the mayor and alpha together, but... how could I say this... the mayor tends to represent the city, the civilized and academic side of society. The hunter's alpha? Not so much. The fact that he was my father just made it that much more complicated.

I let the door of the station boom open in front of us as we stepped in. There were a half dozen people queued up to talk to a representative of the force. They peered our way for a moment before dismissing us. All they saw were a pair of unremarkable wolves.

We didn't bother with the line as we walked past the front desk. "We're here to see the man who tried to assault me."

The nearest dog had been helping someone at the desk. I could see the skin around his eyes go pale as I kept walking.

"S-sir. I'll, uh, get Commissioner Sayer for you if you'd just wait a moment."

"I don't want Sayer." We kept walking towards the small door behind the desk. It was the only other exit from the room. "Sayer can hang. We're going to see the man *now*."

Two steps further and the dog had completely abandoned his post at the desk to usher us deeper into the building. I heard someone complaining from back in the waiting room.

"This is most unusual, Sirs." The dog had regained some small measure of his composure. "It is highly ill-advised for people of your rank to be meeting with a man accused of attempted murder."

It was my father who responded. His voice was so low, so tinged with menace that not even the prim police dog could avoid bowing his head and acknowledging the alpha.

"An 'attempted murder'? Do you even know of what you speak, mongrel? He is one of my hunters, and he attacked a fellow hunter. This is not a matter for your civilized laws. His status is for me to decide alone."

The dog bowed back, his tail on the floor. "Of course, Sir. It was simply assumed that Mr. Taggart's position as mayor superseded his status as a--"

My father's hand had shot out to wrap around the dog's neck in the blink of an eye, pulling him close. My father no longer leaned on me, but stood straight under his own power.

"My son was *born* a hunter. Never forget that."

"Of course, Sir," was all the dog could squeak out before my father released him.

We were handed off to another dog who took us underground. Our new guide noticed the other's sore neck, but he didn't say anything.

It was three levels down. Gods, this must be close to where they'd stored English and I. I was beginning to fear for what condition we might find the bobcat in.

"Have you been able to get any information out of the suspect?" I asked our guide.

He shook his head, a sharp, hard snap.

"No, Sir. I've been given explicit orders on what methods I may and may not use." He paused, choosing his words carefully, "Most of our interrogation for suspects of this importance are handled by... outside personnel. I am the service's top interrogation officer, but I am unsuited to perform work of this calibre."

I let out a small sigh. Well, that was a good sign. It looked like I at least had some small measure of real power if I could keep the cat's pelt intact.

"What do we know?"

The dog shrugged. "Little of use. His name is Quin Logan, he's a hunter, and he's thirty-one years old."

"I already knew that." My father's voice was little more than a snarl. "He's one of my own. I know who he is. I just need to know why."

The dog shrugged again.

About ten minutes later he stopped in front of a thick steel door. Just like the ones that had held English and I.

"If you would just wait a moment, Sirs, I'll call an escort to secure the cell for you."

My father didn't even bother with words. All that made it from his lips was a growl.

"It is fine as it is, officer." I shot the dog a glare. "We'll handle this alone."

"But, Sirs..."

I held his eyes until the dog was forced to look away.

"I said, we'll handle this. Open the door."

"Yesir."

The dog's hands were shaking as he pulled out the keys. He may be loyal to Sayer, but there's a

lot to be said for paying allegiance to the people who are within arm's length.

The door swung open with a screech that set my teeth on edge. Within was the cat. He must have been sleeping, but the shriek of the door was more than enough to awaken anybody.

He saw me and went still. He saw my father and began to shake.

I pulled the door closed behind us without a word, sealing the dog away.

My father was standing under his own power again. He walked forward smoothly, not a hint of weakness showing.

"Hello, Quin." His voice was level and smooth. There wasn't a hint of growl or anger. That made it all the more terrifying.

"Alpha." The cat's eyes were firmly set on the floor.

Felines were always an odd ingredient to add to the hunters. There were far fewer of them than there were canines in the ranks. They didn't see the structure as a pack like we canines did... they saw it as something *different*.

"Are you here to kill me for my crime, alpha?"

Kneeling down, my father took the cat's chin gently in his claws. "Perhaps." He paused. "Most likely. You will tell me what happened. Then, once I know your crime, will I decide the sentence."

"Yes, alpha." The cat tried to look away, but my father held him firm. The moments dragged out. My father didn't say anything, and I hadn't the slightest what I should do.

In the end, it worked. The cat began unbidden, speaking quickly, in starts and stops.

"Please... I just needed the money for my wife and kits. Our home was destroyed in the quake, we don't have anything. I needed the money to put a roof over our heads, to feed them." He looked up pleadingly into my father's eyes. He didn't say anything. "I got the offer from a man in a bar. He just told me to wait outside that apartment building for a wolf and kill him. He was willing to pay me enough to last months."

It was only then my father spoke. His voice was a calm monotone, as though mechanical. "You were in a bar. I assume you were drinking. But yet you didn't have enough money to feed your family."

The cat still couldn't look away. It was all he could do to close his eyes to hide from my father's gaze.

"I had too... had to relax, you know. I love them, alpha, please believe me. Gods, I love them. But..."

My father simply remained silent again until the cat resumed his story.

"The guy at the bar offered me the job. It was a fellow cat. That's all I know. He gave me a thousand bucks, an address, and a photograph. That was it. And... he told me not to use my claws, not to get too close, not to touch him directly."

"That was all, alpha. I took the money... had a few more beers and set out. The next morning I saw the wolf from the photograph." He nodded his head towards me, "You. I didn't even think anything of it, alpha. I thought the hunting laws would protect me. Gods, please," He looked at me, eyes wide. "I thought I could blame it on you, say that you'd provoked me and get away scot-free."

"I followed and waited until you were alone, just you and the woman." He looked back towards my father, "He'd picked a construction site, so I just grabbed the first thing that came to hand. I thought he was dead on the first blow. No one should have been able to survive a strike like that." His eyes were closed tight now. "Then the woman attacked me, then the dog. Then..." He shuddered, opening his eyes and looking towards me once more. "You... you stood up and the wind shifted. Then I could smell you."

"Who is he, Quin?" My father's voice was as cold as the Pacific in midwinter.

"He's your son, alpha. I didn't know, I swear I didn't know. I knew you had one, I'd even heard he was back in town, *but I didn't know*." His voice had become shrill.

"And what did you do, Quin? Did you fall to your knees and beg forgiveness once you realized you had done wrong?"

"No, alpha." His eyes were open, staring straight into my father's now. "I ran." He let out a sigh. "I knew I'd done wrong, so I ran. I thought that if I could just escape capture I could escape my punishment."

"And did you, Quin?"

"No, alpha."

"What else do you know, Quin." My father's voice was slow, detached. It could have frozen the nose of a polar bear.

"I don't know anything else, alpha. I swear. I was hired by a cat in Club Bedlam, downtown. He offered me money, and I took it. I didn't know what I'd done until it was too late."

My father didn't say anything for a long time. When he finally spoke it was like a judge passing down a sentence. I could hear the weight it put on him with every word.

"Quin, you know that I could pardon you for what you've done. You know that I could make this a hunter's matter and set you free." The cat didn't say a word. "You've made a mistake Quin. You've told me how sorry you are for trying to kill my son. You've told me how you realized you did wrong when you discovered it was him." His voice fell to a snarl now. "You've never once said that you feel regret for accepting the contract in the first place. If it were not my son, had you not been caught, you would feel nothing for the one you murdered."

Only then did my father turn to me. His eyes were as cold as his voice.

"Tommy, leave."

"But..."

"Now." His voice didn't raise to a snarl, yet there was little I could do but obey.

Out through the door, the hinges screamed to high heaven as I swung them back shut behind me. The two of them were alone now.

The dog was out here, but I didn't say a word to him.

I was leaning against the door, ears straining against my will to pickup even the slightest sound from within.

I heard the whisper of my father's voice. Then nothing.

The door screamed behind me, but my father pulled it shut again before I could see within.

There was the heavy copper scent of blood in the air.

The police dog's mouth was agape, but I didn't give him the time to question us before, taking my father's shoulder, we began towards the surface again.

The dog was well behind us when I whispered in my father's ear, "What did you say to the bobcat back there?"

My father's voice was soft, like he'd aged a decade in the last few minutes. It was only now that I noticed the blood on his teeth. "That there is no dignity in death, but there is redemption." He sighed. "The pack will be looking after his family now."

The climb to the surface was long and slow. Every step seemed to be a challenge for my father.

We just about made it, too. It was only scant feet to the receiving room, then on to fresh air.

The foot steps of all the dogs in this place sounded exactly the same, yet I still recognized the pair coming up from behind.

Jon was beside me, opposite my father. He wasn't silly enough to try and stand between us and the doorway.

"Sir." He almost stammered it out. "What did... did you... please tell me you didn't."

My father shot him an angry glare. "This is hunter's business, *dog*. Stand aside."

I almost had to force myself between them to keep my father back as Jon shyed away.

"Dad! It's Jon. He's on our side."

"Sir," Jon continued, making sure to stay out of the other wolf's reach, "Sayer just heard what happened and he's furious. I highly suggest the two of you get out of the area *right now*."

I felt a small, perverse smile slip to my lips. "Jon, take my father home. Sayer and I are going to have a chat."

"What?" The two of them spoke nearly in unison.

"Sir." Jon paused for a moment to clear his throat, "I'm sure you must be mistaken..."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm the mayor, aren't I? That means I'm his boss. I plan to start making him regret it."

"Son, the top dog of all the police isn't someone you want to make your enemy... just yet, anyhow."

I shrugged out of my father's grasp, grabbing Jon by the arm and pulling him closer.

"Jon, take him home."

"Now wait a minute! I'm not going to be carried around by--"

I forced myself to hold my father's eyes. "Jon is my friend, and I trust him with my life. You're a wolf, he's a dog. Get over it."

I turned and was off before anyone could get another word in.

I hadn't any idea where Sayer's office was, but I doubted that was going to be a problem.

My suspicions were confirmed a moment later when a patrol of dogs came marching double time around the white washed corner.

"Sir, we're under orders to escort you to Commissioner Sayer immediately."

I just smiled. "And away we go."

I took a slow and meandering pace down the hallway. It drove the dogs mad, but none of them would so much as say a word.

Much like last time, there was no indication when we'd reached Sayer's office. He was the top dog, but his room was unmarked and hardly different from any other.

His receptionist didn't even bother to stop me. He just looked up and instantly sprung from his seat to open the inner door as I walked in.

This may be the first time that I've truly been alone with Sayer. Either Jon or English had always had my back before. I'm not sure if it felt liberating or just downright scary.

The Great Dane didn't even bother to stand up as I stepped into his office. His spindly arms rested limply on the desk. I wondered if I stripped away that impeccable police uniform if there would be anything left beneath.

"Hello, Mr. Taggart." His voice was a dry whisper.

I took a seat across from him, moving through the room like I owned it.

"Hello, Sayer. I've been told that you wanted to talk to me." I lifted my lips in what could be interpreted as a friendly grin.

"Yes..." He petered off, almost seeming to fall asleep for a moment. "I've had a disturbing report--"

"Please do tell," I cut him off. "I'm so burred in paperwork back at my place that it seems folks are trying to smother me. I swear to the gods that I sign so many papers in a day that I hardly know what's going on in the world anymore."

"Yes," He continued, pushing on as if trying to block my chatter from his brain. "I've heard reports that you're starting to act... *erratic*. As mayor, I'm sure that you can understand that the municipality needs a stable figurehead to look up to."

There it was. He'd used the word himself. *Figurehead*.

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that, Sayer. The reconstruction seems to be coming along great, better than anyone could ever have expected." I almost saw the dog smile at that. "I'm figuring it's time I reached out and spread my wings a bit. I'd have assumed that you'd be the first to back me. You were, after all, the one to put me in this position."

"I... yes, I did." He nodded his head grudgingly. "I'm just not so sure about your timing, Sir. We've been pushing incredibly hard to keep the reconstruction going at this speed, it's a very delicate matter... and I'm not sure about your little *indiscretion* at the party last night."

I groaned. Had everybody heard about that? I hadn't even done anything!

"Sayer," I levelled a glare at the dog. He held up under it well. "May I remind you that it was the decision of *your* men that I should attend? That they failed to give me proper warning or prep?"

"Yes," Sayer finally averted his eyes. "I've realized that. I've had a long talk with Constable Oaks. It will not happen again."

"It's not Oaks who's the problem here, Sayer." I forced him to look at me again. "Oaks is *mine*. Not yours. His discipline is my concern." Did I detect a ruffling of the dog's coat at that comment? "I'm more concerned with your men making me a prisoner of paper in my own home."

His face screwed up. "Everything you've been doing has been vital, Mr. Taggert..." He let out a huff, the straight lines of his body softening. "Tommy. You were the one who brought this down on us, we need you to help us heal, rise from the ashes."

"If I'm the one you need, Sayer, then let *me* do the job."

I could hear his teeth grinding together. "So far, Mr. Taggert, you don't appear to be doing much of a job by yourself. I introduce you to possibly the most important man in the city and you get drunk off your tail and disappear. I had four squads out looking for you."

I smiled. "And it was Oaks who found me."

He continued unabated, "And now I hear that you've stormed into *my* building and interrogated *my* prisoner using the very techniques that you forbid me? And you brought in a *hunter*? You brought a dirty beast into *my* home?" His voice had risen.

I wasn't far behind. "I brought my father. The hunter's alpha. You'll watch your tongue when calling him a *beast*. I'm every bit as much of a wolf as he is. If you don't like the idea of a beast being in your midst, then you shouldn't have put one in office!"

I was leaning forward across the desk now, nearly pressed nose to nose with him. I hadn't fallen to a growl yet, and my teeth still covered my lips, but I wasn't far off.

Second by second, I could hear the gears grind in the old dog's head. The only question was if my perceived worth was greater than the trouble I was causing.

"As you say, Mr. Taggert. I apologize. I was out of line."

The scary thing was that I think he was being honest.

"But I must insist," he continued, "To know what you learned from the feline. Your safety is the utmost concern to me, and I simply cannot allow you to roam the streets if there is a danger."

Well, that was the trick. He hadn't quite said it outright, but if I didn't tell him what the bobcat had said, he'd more than likely find some obscure law to allow him to lock me away in my apartment for good.

I paused for a moment, deciding what to say.

"Commissioner," I sat back down in my chair and reigned my voice to a civil tone, "I'd be more

than happy to share what we've learned... assuming that you can meet a few requirements set out by the Executive?"

The dog's eyes narrowed, but the barest of smiles touched his lips. "And what would the *executive* branch of the government be requesting?"

"Not much, I can assure you." I mirrored his grin. "One: We're both going to be carrying out investigations. You have your police force, and I have my... resources. This is my life we're talking about here, so I expect us to share information."

The dog nodded. "As long as you understand that we are doing this for your own safety. I expect to be keeping you from danger. And," He pointed a finger at me, "That this *sharing* goes both ways."

I nodded. "Two: You've run the government, and frankly, you've done a good job. But *I* am mayor. You want to protect me? Fine, it's part of your job, but call off the mother hens. This is my life and my show. Stop locking out the people I want to see, stop sanitizing what I get to know, and stop burying me in meaningless paperwork."

The dog's already ghost white face paled even more at that. "Every paper I've sent you has been absolutely critical."

Now it was my turn to wag a finger at him. "Then only send me the *most* critical. I already told Able and Baker to use their brains... but I see that's not a problem for you. I'm willing to read and sign ten pieces of paper a day, no more. You'd better make them good, Sayer, or I'll do what English does with his paperwork, use it for kitty lit--"

"Yes, yes. I understand. So, *mayor*, have we come to an agreement?" I nodded. "Very well. What did you learn from my *former* inmate?"

I gave him a quick run down about the assassination contract, the club, and the cat who had handed it out.

"And you're sure there was nothing more he was hiding?" The dog shook his head. "I would have been able to discover far more if you'd just let me--"

I loosed out a growl. "I already feel bad for what was done to the cat. Don't make me feel worse for what I could have allowed."

"Very well. If there's nothing else, I have an investigation to conduct."

I stood to walk out, but couldn't resist tossing over my shoulder, "And ten pieces of paper to pick."

I don't think I've ever heard Sayer curse before.

I hadn't gotten a block from the police HQ before I felt a shadow pull up alongside me.

"Hello, Renald. I haven't seen you in some time."

"Boss." The wolf's voice was hesitant.

I turned around a moment later to see a fresh scar down the side of the wolf's face. The pelt hadn't even had time to heal over it yet.

"Did you get that from who I think you did?" I asked.

He nodded meekly. "The alpha granted me leniency this time. If you had died, I would have as well."

I sighed. "The *alpha* is getting out of hand."

He pulled back as I spoke. If anyone but I had said that it would be dangerous ground. Heck, it probably still was.

"So I'm going to assume that you were the one to go tattle to my father when I got thwacked, shall I, Renald?" I began walking again, weaving in and out of people on the street.

"I wouldn't quite call it that, boss. The alpha assigned me here to do a job. You might have a following, but I'm here to do a job." I could hear the detain in his voice. "Frankly, I find the rest of your so called *friends* creepy. They might treat you like a descended god, but I'm just here because I have to be."

"Well," I laughed, a real one, "It's probably a good thing. I've got too many people treating me like I'm either made of glass or diamond. A reality check isn't a bad thing."

I noticed that the police around the apartment were a little less obvious now, though there were just as many. The protesters were taking full advantage of that. They still didn't seem to know who I was, yet they were out there with their signs and slogans.

One of these days they were going to begin recognizing me, then they'd become a pain.

Renald disappeared as soon as I stepped through the front door without so much as a 'bye', but he was quickly replaced by Jon.

"Everything go alright with my father?"

"As well as can be expected, Sir. A pack of hunters appeared as soon as we were out of sight of the other police. They were not pleased that I insisted on following, but you father didn't attempt to countermand your order." He paused for a moment, clearing his throat. "And how did your... meeting with Commissioner Sayer go?"

I let myself grin. "We have a bit more breathing room. I still want to get a political party together, but we shouldn't be hearing too much from him for a while."

A full smile grew on the dog's face. "That's wonderful, Sir. You see, you're not so bad at the political part of the job."

I just rolled my eyes as I began climbing the stairs. "Sure. Gets my blood pressure up, causes me to just about have a heart attack, nearly brings the world crashing down, but I'm not so bad at it."

"As long as it's only 'nearly', Sir."

The apartment was empty when I stepped in. The first thing I did was to clear away all the papers that had been piling up.

Gods but it felt good to sweep them off my counter-top and watch them fall into a box. I took the box and unceremoniously dumped it in the hallway next to the one police dog who now stood guard out there. He gave me such a confused expression that I wanted to frame it. Guess he hadn't gotten the memo on the change in priorities yet.

Back in the apartment, the place looked positively bare now. It was kind of scary to think that I'd been back for the better part of a month and I'd yet to do anything other than eat, sleep, and give myself writer's cramp.

I poked through the fridge and cupboard. There were still traces of the panther I'd taken this place over from. The most disappointing part of the explorations was the emptiness of the fridge. More surprising was what I found in the closet.

Almost everything in there was from the apartment's former occupant, but there was a single, dark blue vest that hung in the exact centre.

The thing was so new it practicably still had the tag on it. Raising it to my face, I took a sniff. It smelt of Rebecca.

Now Rebecca isn't exactly... how do I put this diplomatically? *Classically feminine*. What can you say about a woman who will attack a fully grown tiger with nothing more than a knife, then polish it of by pushing her one and only wolfy off a bridge?

I didn't tend to wear much if any clothing at the best of times, and I'd worn even less since we'd

come back from Alberta. The fact she'd buy me anything like this at all was... surprising.

I slipped into the rough blue fabric. This was most certainly not one of Smith's suits. The design was simple and basic, something you could pick up at any corner market or store. It looked almost identical to the vest I'd had a year ago -- that one had been lost somewhere along the way.

Frankly, I didn't care much what it looked or felt like. It smelt of Rebecca, and she'd bought it for me. I'd be happy to wear it.

Well, there wasn't much more for me to do around here. I'd spent far too much time in this building over the last few weeks, and now that I didn't have a mountain of papers to distract me I was quickly going stir crazy.

Out the door, I made my way down the street. The cops tailing me at a respectful distance. I hadn't any idea where Rebecca or Amstys were, and didn't feel like chatting with Jon or Renald. That left one option.

And in any event, I was curious to see just how trashed the Strong Front building was.

Well, I wasn't disappointed. Even from blocks away I could tell it was going to be a mess. The Storm Front headquarters had been located in one of the newest and trendiest districts of the city. The buildings here had seemingly all gone the way of City Hall.

The SF building itself had been hit hard by the riots. Many of its reenforced windows had been smashed out and it looked like there had been a minor civil war on the property.

The greater damage had come from the quake. English must have invested in construction, because the building itself was still standing. Too bad I couldn't say as much for the others around it. At least two other, taller, buildings had come toppling down over the shorter SF structure.

It looked like there were the better part of two hundred people picking through the rubble, trying to get things upright again. Storm Front, for the moment it seemed, was officially camped out in a series of brightly coloured tents on what had formerly been their front lawn.

I only got within a hundred meters of the place before a brown bear in a standard issue red Storm Front blazer stepped in my way.

"Sorry, buddy. Only employees beyond this point. No sightseeing. We handle dangerous criminals. Folks like you need to stay back." He was polite, but the words came out like a recording. I'd bet he'd said it a thousand times today alone.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm just looking for English."

He didn't even bother to look interested. "If you want to meet with a member of the staff you'll need to make an appointment."

Okay. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Listen, friend," I just shook my head as I continued to laugh, "I'm betting they hired you on after the quakes, right?" He didn't say anything, "English is the guy who owns the company. Big, scary looking lion who talks like a stuck up British aristocrat and has a tendency to spontaneously break into bouts of tea drinking. Just tell me if you've seen him."

The bear didn't say a word, but I could tell I'd hit a soft spot with the 'new hire' jab. I was about ready to break into a round of cursing to see if I could force myself by when I saw a familiar spotted grey pelt behind him.

"Graham!"

I had to wave my arms to make myself seen over the bear's bulk, but I don't think that was much of a problem.

The snow leopard leapt a good four feet in the air when I called his name, his fur poofing out to nearly double his size.

"Tommy?"

The leopard turned to face me. It wasn't until then that I realized he'd changed. His left arm was missing.

"Tommy!" He jogged forward to meet me. I had to keep from pulling back. All cats had a way about them when they moved. It was almost a slink, a fluid motion to their bodies. Seeing Graham walk without his arm threw me off in ways I couldn't put words to. His body was still upright and perfectly straight, but his tail hung to one side, off balancing his shift in weight. "It's great to see you again, man!" He pushed the bear out of the way.

"Graham, what happened?" His shoulder still had a massive bandage roped around it, I could see spots of blood.

"Oh, that." His face fell. "It was back during the riots. I... uh, fell in with the wrong crowd and... things didn't go so well." He forced a smile back to his face. "But I came back to Storm Front and they gave me my old job again. It was English who took to me no less!"

The cat had a salesman's smile, but I couldn't help but grin back.

"That's great... I guess. I'm looking for English myself, can you point me his way?"

"Yeah, sure. He's in the big tent over there." He pointed awkwardly with his one hand. "We're going big today. He's started another hiring drive. Not sure what he's up to, he's not looking for hunters this time."

Looking that way, I could see a large yellow tent. There was a line of people leading out of it and stretching down the street.

"What's with the lineup?" I asked.

Graham did an odd half shrug. "Work is easy to find these days if you're a labourer or a builder. Not so much if you're an administrator or office type guy. The moment English put out the call for admin type people the line started forming."

I rolled my eyes. "I guess the poof-tailed tomcat really does know what he's doing."

Graham's mouth dropped open when I said that. To the leopard, the lion was still just short of a king. He wasn't used to hearing me talk about him in such terms.

"Uh, sure." Graham began digging around in his pockets. "You better take this or no one will let you in. We've got so many new people on staff that no one recognizes any of us old guard."

He pressed a small square of leather into my hand. It was embossed with the Storm Front name and logo.

And he was right. Not a minute after we parted ways I was stopped by another guard who demanded my ID. Just getting into the tent was a challenge. I had to prove who I was to five different people before I could even get within sight of English.

The lion was seated at the head of the line, reclining in an oversized easy chair. One by one people trickled forward. They only got to him after they'd passed through a gauntlet of a half dozen others before him who were weeding out the ne'er do wells.

"Next!" His voice boomed.

I slid into line, jumping ahead of the next candidate. I heard a voice shout out behind me, but I was off before he could begin cussing.

English didn't even open his eyes as I stepped up.

"You've made it this far, fella," His voice was slow and disinterested, "You already know we're looking for politicians, smart guys. What'da got?"

I had to hold back a laugh. He still hadn't bothered to look up.

"Well," I pitched my voice into a pup like whine, "I've spent a year sorting paper at KDP, I hope to be a hunter someday, and my parents tell me I'm the specialest person they've ever known."

All he did was snort and recline back on his upholstered thrown. "How did you even get this far? Next!"

I couldn't help but stifle a laugh. "But I'm really good, honest!"

A slight growl worked its way up the lion's throat. "I said next!"

I stepped forward, flicking a claw gently against his flat nose. His hand shot out to grab me, but he missed as a sneeze wracked his body.

"What in the gods' names..." He finally bothered to open his eyes. "I should have known." He fell back in his chair with an amused huff. "How did you even get in here, mate? I thought you were booked solid playing with his highness Sayer today?"

I just stepped forward and leaned on the back of his seat. "We came to an... understanding."

"Great. Now if you can just find a diamond or two among the riff-raff we've got here, we'll be set." He barred his teeth for a split-second. "Do you have any idea how many people I've been through today? Gods, they were lined up out the door almost by the time I was done putting up the signs. We've got the bureaucrats and the managers, the wanna-bes and the hasbeens. Even with all the people I've got filtering out the chaff I can't seem to hit better than one in a hundred."

I grinned. "We're looking for folks to overthrow the government."

He snorted. "You *are* the government."

I did have to admit that my opinion of the candidates quickly fell to match that of English's. It looked like everyone who had a scrap of sense had already gotten a job elsewhere. All we were left with were the folks who were willing to take *any* job.

Twenty candidates and twenty bellows of 'next' and I had to stop for a break. English kept right on going, but I needed a snack.

Storm Front really did know what they were doing. They had just about everything you could ever want in their tents. That included freshly hunted meat.

I was back at the lion's side a few moments later. I couldn't see who he was interviewing now, but his voice sounded familiar.

"I worked as a manager at KDP for five years. I helped manage their human tracking program. Before that I was a mid level adviser to one of the smaller political parties back in Tsu, Japan."

I was just stepping up behind English as he paused for a moment before bellowing, "Next!"

"Wait," I scrambled forward to see a familiar red face. "Max?"

The oni glanced up at me. "Tommy! I thought you were working at Storm Front again, I'm just trying to get rehired."

I didn't even bother turning to English as I grabbed Max's hand and pulled him forward. "You're in."

Chapter 8: The Open Party

"Mate, what?" English hadn't moved from his chair, but his hands came up to rub his temples. "I thought I was the one bankrolling this little dance. Aren't I the one making the decisions here?"

I gently cuffed his ears. "You're money, buddy, my plan. I'm the one spending it for you."

He just sighed. "Since when did we get married?"

"Fine," I gave him another cuff to the head, "Call me your work-wife." I cocked an eyeridge at him. "I'll spend all your money, just don't expect any benefits."

The lion made a slight choking sound at that line.

Max was still standing in front of us. His expression having gone from joy at getting a job to flat out confusion.

I pulled him aside and gave him a quick update. "Long story short, Max, I'm mayor, but it's not going to stay that way for long. I need to get together a party strong enough to actually run the government and take it away from the... people who are currently keeping it going. Feel up to it?"

He shrugged. "It'll be the first time I've gotten back into politics in years. But, Tommy..."

I turned him around and marched him back to the seat where English still sat with a bemused expression.

"Move aside, your majesty," I jacked my thumb at him, "I just freed up your day. Max is going to hire the rest of the crew."

"What?" English was surprised, but I couldn't exactly call him annoyed. He was more than happy to get off the seat without a contest.

"All yours, Max." I led English away to leave the Oni looking confused on his new throne. There was already a candidate fighting for his attention.

"Thanks, mate." English stretched his back as we walked, almost bending over backwards. "I needed that."

I just shook my head. "Consider it repayment for getting me away from Sayer." I grinned, "You up for a hunt with your old partner?"

The lion's tail twitched. "I thought you were out of the game, mate."

I shook my head. "Just a little rusty. I got a lead out of the bobcat who tried to smash my brains

in. Ever heard of Club Bedlam?"

"Nada, mate. What is it?"

I shrugged. "No clue. The most I know is that it's down in the lowlife section of Gastown. That's where our friend got his contract to kill me."

"What ever happened to the cat, anyway?"

I shivered slightly. "Don't ask. Really. Don't ask."

Our first challenge was to get free of the police dogs that were tailing me. They'd stayed back when I'd entered the Storm Front compound, but it was obvious they were keeping an eye on me. Trying to conduct an investigation with them running about like keystone cops would be like trying to light a jellyfish on fire.

Thankfully, English was in control of the whole of Storm Front now. He pulled me aside into a small tent and the two of us were sealed into a packing container. English must have his staff well trained. No one even gave us a funny look.

It was about a twenty minute ride as a horse loaded the crate on a cart and pulled it a half dozen blocks away.

It wasn't like this was my first time alone with the lion, but gah! I really, really, didn't need to get my nose jammed quite so close to his body. The fact that I could smell the last half dozen meals on his breath should have been an indicator that this little box didn't exactly offer enough personal space.

In due course the lid was lifted off and I throw myself out, gasping for breath. English followed along behind me with only the comment that, "Be glad I didn't have Mexican for lunch."

Sticking to the alleys and byways, we were able to make it to Gastown without picking up any police attention. For all they knew I was still in the Storm Front complex.

Club Bedlam was... well, is dive bar too nice a term? It was... downtrodden.

It couldn't have been later than the early afternoon and there were already drunks stumbling from the door at regular intervals. The remains of a half dozen brawls were laid out in the street, no one seeming to care enough to sweep away the glass shards or mop up the blood.

English took the lead. What started off as a nonchalant stroll towards the door of the club devolved with each step. His back hunched, his arms clenched, and his lips rose into something that was almost, but not quite a snarl.

In the space of a dozen strides he'd gone from a captain of industry to a seaside brawler.

He pushed the door open with a sharp shove, the smell of gods know what spewed out at us. Even English had to pause for a moment to collect his breath.

The inside was dark, but my night vision snapped in after only just a few seconds, washing the room in shades of grey. Neon signs, advertising different brands of 'manly' beer seemed to be the only illumination.

That alone was almost enough to make me laugh. This place couldn't afford lighting, but it could put up neon? That should say something about its aesthetic.

The place was three quarters full, and by the look of it most of them were among the unemployed. Not even a single head turned towards us as we walked to the bar.

The bartender was an ursine of some description, but beyond that I couldn't tell in the darkness. All I could see was the glint of his eyes.

"'es?" His voice was a low rumble.

"Two of wha'ver your house is." English's voice had lost its accent... or more to the point morphed. I had no idea of what he was putting on now, but it sounded like a mixture of every street dialect I'd ever heard.

"'ay up." The bar tender tapped a claw on the counter.

A handful of coins should have covered the cost of anything this place carried, but English slid four bills. He kept them hidden under his palm so I couldn't make out their denomination.

They must have been impressive. The bartender's eyes widened slightly. His hand shot out to grab the bills, but English's claws only let two of them slip away.

"What else c'n you give me but beer?" The lion's voice was just above a whisper now. His demeanor hadn't changed, he still lounged at the bar as if only waiting for his drink, but his eyes glinted in the darkness.

The bartender waited a long moment before answering. "Name's Ted. For that amount of cash, pal, I can get you a lot of things." He laughed. "That can get you and your friend a night with as many of my ladies as you want, and I'll keep the candy box full as you like."

A growl grew in the lion's throat. "Not what I'm looking for. I want information."

Ted's grin grew wider. "I'm an open book, pal. Information don't cost me anything."

"There was a bobcat in here a couple weeks ago, ginger, down on his luck and..."

Ted laughed, a little too loud for my taste, it attracted the attention of a few of the nearest patrons.

"A bobcat, pal? Couple weeks ago? You don't have any clue how many people we push through this place in a single day. Keep ya bills, pal, you ain't going to find what you're looking for from me." He snorted. "Finding a single cat in this place would be like trying to find a snowflake on Mt. Logan." He reached under the bar, making English bristle. "Take ya drinks and get out of my face."

He turned and walked to the other end of the bar.

"That, mate," English grumbled as he grabbed his glass and walked off to a nearby booth, "Is the most I've ever paid for a couple of beers."

The booth was nothing more than a couple of hard plank seats with high backs to separate us from the people on either side, but it did a good job of keeping our conversation private.

There was a single, almost burnt out bulb dangling from the ceiling above us. It cast just enough light that I could make out the outline of English's face. His eyes were completely in shadow except for the occasional glint.

"Well, mate," His voice was low, "You're the smart one. What's the plan now?"

I shook my head as I gently pushed my glass forward to sit next to his. "I haven't the slightest. This was all we got out of Quin. This bar, and the contact was a cat. It's not like I can go back and pump him for more information."

English huffed and tossed back his drink in a single gulp. It was followed soon after by mine. I was more than happy to let him have it. It hadn't exactly gone over well last time I'd had a drink.

We sat in silence for a while, our ears swivelling to try and pick up the conversation from the other patrons. Nothing more than bar gossip.

Eventually English slowly got to his feet. "Back in a sec, mate. I've got to recycle the booze."

I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the sounds around me. It seemed like only seconds later I heard the seat across from me creak.

"Back so soon, buddy?"

Her scent hit me an instant later.

"Hello, Doggie."

Molly.

My eyes snapped open. I couldn't make out her face any more than I'd been able to see English's, but she was leaned forward over the table towards me. Our noses almost touched.

"What are you doing here, Molly?"

I will give myself at least enough credit that I was able to keep my dick under control this time. It helped that my head wasn't spinning this round.

She kept just a hair's space between us as she bent over the table, waiting for me to make that final move.

"I heard you were in the neighbourhood, Doggie, and decided that I needed to come and say hello. Is that such a crime?"

It took everything I had to keep the growl out of my throat. "You've said it. I don't have time for you, Molly. As I recall, the last time we dated it was you who broke up with me. I think it ended with you throwing a glass of red wine in my face in the middle of a party. I've got a girlfriend now, you're too late."

Her large eyes blinked slowly at me in the darkness. "But that was so long ago, Doggie. We were young then, I was foolish. How was I ever to know you'd grow up to be such an important, powerful person."

It looked like she'd gotten tiered of waiting for me to make my move. Her hands came up to rest on my shoulders. I tried to shrug them off, but she pulled me forward. Too fast to even realize what was going on she'd pulled me in.

Canines don't really kiss. We just don't have the jaws for it. Even Rebecca and I had a hard enough time. Molly pulled me forward while she raised her head, exposing her throat to me.

It may seem odd to a non-canine, but the throat is a truly erogenous zone for people like us. It's... well, it's a vulnerable area. To offer it to another is to submit to them. Plus, it didn't hurt that it just tended to smell *divine*.

My tongue was already out by the time she'd pulled me in. I couldn't help it. Before I even knew what I was doing I was nuzzling her, lapping at her throat, feeling her pulse against my tongue.

But there was something in the scent... something that reminded me of Rebecca.

With a snarl, I pushed back. A flame of anger had grown in my mind when I thought of Rebecca, anger and shame of what I was doing. Rebecca was mine. That was it. The flame burnt away whatever fog had grown in my mind.

"Tommy!" Molly's voice had risen to a pained whisper. Only too late had I realized that I had pulled away so quickly that I still had a small tuft of her fur between my teeth.

I spat it out, it fell to land on the table between us. Her scent still weaved through my mind, but I did my best to push it away.

"What the hell was that?" Her dulcet tones had failed, a shrill coming to her voice.

"I have a girlfriend. Rebecca. Go away, Molly. I'm not interested."

"But, Doggie," Her voice had fallen again to a seductive moan, "I just want to..."

I pushed her away and got to my feet.

Where in all the god's names was English?

Walking away before Molly had the chance to follow me, I tracked down the toilets. They weren't hard to find -- all I had to do was follow the reek.

"English?" I pushed on the men's room door. It swung a foot or so before coming to a halt with a solid thunk. I heard a moan from the other side.

"English!" I shoved my way around the door until I could get in.

There was even less light in the bathroom than there was out in the bar, but I could see English's golden body well enough. He was sprawled on the filth covered floor.

And he'd vomited all over the place.

"Are you alright, buddy?" I was by his side, pulling his massive head from the tiles and trying to wipe some of the yule from his mane.

"Mate," His voice was rough, "Did you get the number of that mountain that sideswiped me?"

I opened the tap on the least disgusting of the sinks and dunked the lion's head under the stream. It washed away most of the vomit and gave him a chance to drink some water.

He threw up twice more in the next ten minutes, but each time his eyes cleared a measure.

"Gods, mate, what was that stuff? I haven't been on a bender like that since I was a kid."

When he was finally able to stand I threw his arm over my shoulder and dragged him out of the bar as quickly as I could manage. Gods, he was even heavier than my father.

Out in the street, I hailed a passing horse. He'd been drawing an empty cart behind him, and it hadn't taken much cash to convince him to pull us back to the Storm Front complex.

English was almost back to the land of the living by the time we got there. I didn't even need to support him when he stepped from the cart.

"New plan, mate." He still leaned on me slightly as he walked. "I don't ever want to get into a drinking contest with you. I think we now know how they got you hammered last night. How many glasses did you say you had back at the party."

"At least half a dozen."

The lion laughed. "A half dozen of those and I'd be dead."

My police guard closed in on me as we returned to Storm Front. They were less panicky than I'd expected. I guess my escape hadn't been a complete surprise to them.

I grabbed one by the collar, "Get Able or Sayer or whoever's handling my assault case and tell them to lock down Club Bedlam. Question everyone there, especially the bartender Ted." I decided not to mention Molly. I didn't even want to *think* about Molly.

Dropping English safely back among his staff, I checked in briefly on Max before I headed out. The oni cast me a slightly desperate look when I waved at him, but I was pleased to note that it appeared that he'd already found a half dozen candidates.

Clicking the door open on the apartment, I was more than happy to see Rebecca sitting on a stool by the counter.

"Hey, Wolfy." She stood up, by my side in seconds. "I see you found the vest I bought... gods," She backed away, holding her nose, "What did you roll in? You smell foul."

Huh? I had a far more sensitive nose than her and I hadn't smelt a thing.

"Uhh... English and I had a bit of a run in at a club and he wasn't able to hold his liquor."

She took a step back towards me and sniffed again before pulling away and waving a hand in front of her nose. "Nnrg!" I don't think I'd ever seen her face pull up quite that violently. It looked like someone was trying to force a bristle brush up her nose.

"That's not it, Tommy. I've smelt English, and nothing *he* can't make anything that foul." She laughed. "Even his musk doesn't smell that bad." She paused, almost in mid word before grabbing me by the hand and forcing me into the bathroom. "Go, go, go."

"Hey!" I hardly got the word out before she shoved me into the shower stall, vest and all. "I don't think I smell *that* bad!"

She snapped the water on full the moment I stepped in. She didn't seem to care much that it was just short of ice cold.

She didn't even bother waiting for my fur to wet down before upending an entire bottle of soap on my head. Her own clothing was getting soaked as she began scrubbing my face, focusing on my nose.

"Hey!" I couldn't speak without getting suds in my mouth. It was getting hard to breathe, but every time I tried to protest she just worked harder.

It felt like an hour before she finally let me move again. We'd worked our way through two whole bottles of soap, a month's supply, and she still wouldn't let me step from the stream of water.

It was getting a little annoying as I'd begun shivering a long time ago.

"Uh, care to tell me what's going on, Babe? I don't mind a nice shower with just the two of us, but this isn't quite what I was envisioning."

She'd backed up a step, but never took her eyes off me.

"Where were you, Tommy? Who did you talk to?"

Okay... this was getting a little odd.

"English and I were tracking down the people who tried to kill me. We got as far as a club in Gastown before the trail went cold."

"What else, Tommy, who did you talk to?" Her voice had softened a half measure, but she still made sure to stand out of arm's reach.

I blushed slightly under my coat. "I... uh, ran into my old girlfriend from collage, Molly. I saw her last night at the party, too." I'm not ashamed to say that I was... well, a little ashamed. That was just one of those facts about wolves, we do the whole 'mate for life' thing. It's not something we *try* to do, it's just natural.

"Did you do anything, Tommy? What happened?"

I expected her voice to be accusing, angry, typical 'mad girlfriend', but it was... it was more than that. It was cold. Scary.

"Nothing, I swear, babe." I held up my hands as the water continued to fall down around me. The cold had soaked into my fur now, it was making my teeth chatter. "Last night she tried to hit on me after I'd gotten... well, drunk. It didn't go anywhere. Ask Jon, he was there." She dismissed it with the wave of a hand, unconcerned. "Today, well, she appeared out of nowhere after English had tossed back the two drinks we'd been given. He hit the can and Molly was there a second later. She... uh..." I had to avert my eyes from Rebecca, "She offered herself. Her neck." Rebecca and I had been together long enough that she knew what that meant. She might be human, and not into such things, but she knew exactly what I was talking about.

"I was tempted," It was hard to get the words out, but I had a feeling it was better to do it now than let Rebecca find out on her own. And I *knew* she'd have some way to find out. "But I walked away. That's when I found English passed out. Now," I held my hands to her, soaking wet and dripping, "Can I get out of the shower? It would also be nice if you'd tell me what's going on."

She finally took a step towards me, snapping off the water, but keeping me in the shower to drip dry. I didn't bother mentioning that most of her clothing was soaked as well.

"Last time I smelt anything like that, Wolfy, I almost lost you." She was up against me now, pressing her face into my fur. I noticed she took a not so subtle deep breath, smiling when she didn't wince. "It reminded me of the scent of the she-devil in Calgary."

Al-Sedexterous. She had used pheromones to entrap men, control them. She'd been the one to mess with Amstys' mind.

"You can't be serious, babe..." My blood ran cold, and not just because of the ice water that dripped from me. "If a creature like Al-Sedexterous is loose in the city..."

"No," Her arms wrapped around me. I could feel the warmth of her body now, "It wasn't the same. It was just *kind* of like that... like my own perfume that I use to disguise myself as a cat."

"Oh... okay..."

I wanted to finish the conversation, but frankly I had better things to worry about. Rebecca was still pressed up against me, but she'd stripped off her wet top now. Her pants were following a close second.

To bugger all with how Molly had smelt, I'd take this every time.

It was another twenty minutes until there was any hot water to shower with, I didn't much mind the wait.

As my grand right as mayor, I locked the door and took the rest of the afternoon off. Gods, this was the first time I'd actually been able to lay next to Rebecca and not be as dead as a log in thirty seconds.

"So what have you been up to, babe?" My voice was slurred as I pressed my mussel into her hair while she lay beside me on the bed.

"You know, Wolfy..." She wiggled slightly, trying to roll over and face me, but I held her tight, "Hitting the streets, seeing how the city's doing. Checking up on my old contacts and friends."

"Bugger." I rolled my eyes. "We still need to get out to Horseshoe Bay." I forced myself up on one elbow to peer out the window. "Do you think there's time to get out there and back before it gets too late?"

She laughed. "Remember, last time I was out there you carried me back." She shrugged. "We could make it if we want to."

I looked over at her, the light streaming in though the window set her pale, hairless skin almost shimmering. She was likely the only human in the entire city.

Reaching forward, I pulled her into a kiss. "We'd better."

I made sure to grab Jon as we walked out the door. I wasn't sure where Renald was, but he likely wasn't far away.

I was slightly surprised when I finally saw the room the Jon had set up as his office. The dog was always incredibly neat, hyper-efficient, but his office looked more like what I'd expect from English.

The space was small, tucked into a back corner maintenance room of the main floor. There were papers spread across the desk and maps and charts pinned to the walls. The cramped room was in total disarray.

The German Shepard was laying fast asleep, sprawled out across his paperwork.

I was just backing away, leaving him to rest when his head popped up off the desk.

"Sir!" He was on his feet an instant later, hands brushing down his chest to smooth away the wrinkles in his uniform.

"It's okay, Jon." I waved a hand as I stepped back. "We're just off to Horseshoe Bay, you can stay here."

The dog glanced down at his desk, then back up to me. "Are you sure, Sir? I, uh, wouldn't mind coming with you."

I took a quick glance at the papers that were spread out before him. Frankly, not a single one made any sense to me.

"I'm sure you would, Jon." I reached out to pat him on the shoulder. "Come along if you want," I gave his rumpled uniform a critical eye, "But you might want to get changed. I doubt that the human's have many fond memories of the V-town police."

The walk out to Horseshoe bay took a couple of hours. It was easier than last time we'd made the journey. It had been winter then, and progress was faster when I didn't need to slog through snowdrifts.

The police escort that had tailed us shyed back once we left V-town. The forests were the

domain of the hunters, not the police. The dogs wouldn't dare to tread here.

The signs of civilization around the human encampment had grown in the last few months. At first there had been little here but a collection of almost collapsed buildings, now there were fields and fences.

And they still had sentries.

They, thankfully, didn't try to smack me with a rock first and ask questions later this time. A half dozen humans armed with spears stood on the road before us. They'd been sitting in a small watch station.

They didn't look overly hostile, once you got past the knives and spears they were holding. I couldn't help but notice they were all male.

We were still a fair ways off when they began shouting at us.

"Take off! We don't need your kind here." It wasn't until we'd gotten closer that their tone changed. "Hey... don't I know you?"

Frankly, I wasn't sure if they were referring to Rebecca or I. She didn't have her cat costume on anymore.

One of the humans waved a finger at me. "Yeah, you're the wolf who was camped nearby last winter. What ever happened to you, furball? We almost starved when you stopped bringing in food." His voice wasn't quite accusatory, but he didn't sound happy with me either.

"I had to leave." I shrugged. "There was a problem back in V-town and I had to go."

"And leave us?" One of the other humans laughed. "Darn good thing too. The morons running this place had to start getting along once they didn't have you to fight over any more." He grinned, "Though I wouldn't mind you bringing in some meat again. I never expected to become a vegetarian when I came out here." He pointed a thumb towards a field off to one side of the road. It hadn't existed a year ago. "Farming is hard work. I'd almost rather be back in V-town, even if they were trying to kill me. Being a banker was a cushier living."

All the men laughed along with him.

I waited until they died down before speaking again. "I may have an offer to interest you then." I had their attention now. "There has been a... policy change in V-town. Things didn't go well after the quake, and we might be ready to start taking humans back in." I paused for a moment, a slight grin creeping to my face. "Those of you who want to come, of course."

One of the human's rolled his eyes. "Bugger it all, man. Do you know what we've had to go through to survive out here? I'd take my apartment any day over the hole in the ground I'm sleeping in now."

I held up one hand. "Sounds good to me, but let's not all run back just yet. Who's in charge now? I need to get the lines of communication open."

One of the guards just flicked his head back towards the village. "The elders. Same as always. We've got a few new ones since you were last here, but you should be able to find them no problem."

Some guards these were. They let the three of us pass without so much as a 'by your leave', not even bothering to escort us.

Walking into town, I noticed that *someone* had definitely been here before us. It wasn't that the place was exactly built up now, but there were things that could only have come from V-town.

Cloth and fabric, small pieces of furniture. Someone had been trading here, though for what I couldn't imagine.

Jon and I got no shortage of nervous glances as we walked down the streets, being the only non-humans here, but no one screamed and ran away.

It took me a moment to remember where I was going. The place wasn't large, but it had been a

while since I'd last walked its dirt streets.

One of the larger and better kept up structures had been designated the 'town hall'. It was more of a catchall building, but the folks who ran the town seemed to be there more often than not.

Stepping into the shadows, my eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light. I could make out a dozen men and women seated in the room. All conversation stopped the moment we entered.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything." My voice was weak as I searched around the room for the old woman I'd seen every other time I'd spoken to the consul. She was conspicuously absent.

"You're the wolf," one of them said.

Well, I guess I was going up in the world. I wasn't just *a* wolf anymore, I was *the* wolf. At least according to the humans of Horseshoe Bay.

I shuffled nervously on the dirt floor. "Yeah. I am,"

One of the men in the back stood up, levelling a finger at me. "You abandoned us when we needed you! You were supposed to teach us how to hunt, help us drive these other morons from the consul. I lost my son because of you!"

"Shut up, Dave!" the man beside him hissed as he pulled him back into his seat.

A man at the front stood up, more calmly than the other. His hair was grey and thinning, but he'd grown out a formidable beard. He took a few steps towards me. It was only then that I noticed Rebecca and Jon were still hanging back by the door, leaving me alone in the centre of the room.

"You've returned, wolf. Why did you come back after all this time?"

I let out a huff. "I have a name. It's Tommy."

The human rose his gaze to look me in the eyes. "Right now you're *wolf*. You're not one of us. You have to prove that we can trust you."

I felt a growl claw at the back of my throat. "Trust me? I was the one who saved you lot and got you here in the first place! I was the one who helped hunt to keep you alive in the winter! *I'm* not the one who has to earn anyone's trust around here. You'd all be dead if not for me."

"That is true." The man held my gaze, "But were you not the one tasked in killing us? Did you not lead at least two of our kind to death before your... change of heart?" He eyed Rebecca wearily.

I let out a sigh and forced myself to calm. "I'm here on official business anyway." I extended a hand to the man, slowly, palm up. "I'm here to invite all the humans of Horseshoe Bay back to V-town. I can't completely guaranty your safety from any and all, but I can promise you that it is now the government's official stance that you are full citizens again and you won't be hunted for what you are."

"That's a charming offer," came the man from the back, "But why should we believe you? For all we know it could just be a trick to get us back in the city where you'll kill us all."

I couldn't keep my fur from bristling out now. "This is no trick. Do you really think that we'd need to get you back into the city to kill you? The hunters could pick you off without a thought out here if the order had been given. The government wanted you dead, but that's changed now."

"Changed?" The man who stood in front of me fought for attention. "How?"

I stepped back slightly, lowering my head, feeling a bit embarrassed.

"I'm mayor now."

A murmur quickly broke out among the humans. There was no attempt to silence it.

"You'll have to excuse us." He gave me a push back towards the door. "But we are on a busy schedule and have much to discuss."

I was back out of the building with Jon and Rebecca, standing on the street before I even had a chance to utter a word. The door slammed behind us.

"Well, that went... not quite as expected," was all I could say.

Rebecca took my arm, pulling me gently down the street. "You've given them a lot to think

about, Wolfy. We're confused enough, and we've had a couple of weeks to deal with this. They've had all of two minutes."

I smiled, pulling her closer. "Well, as long as everything goes well and they come back to V-town. I Don't like the feeling of having them out here all alone."

Rebecca shook her head. "We're not defenceless, Tommy. Just look what's been done here in only a year. The place may not be thriving, but everyone is getting by."

I huffed out a breath. "It's not Horseshoe Bay I'm worried about, babe. It's V-town. Things haven't been the same. We're all human, Babe, in at least some small way. I'm afraid that without the real humans folks will start to forget that."

We rounded a corner, there was a group of children here, rolling pine-cones in the dirt. They could have been kits or cubs from any street in V-town, but they were all human. The only difference was that those back in town would more than likely be playing with bones.

"What do we do now, Sir?" Jon asked from behind me.

I shrugged. "Who knows. I guess we hang around and see if any good comes from this, then we scamper on home."

It wasn't that I was expecting much, but *something* would have been nice. We stayed until the sun kissed the horizon, but the elders never came out of their hall. I almost got the feeling the they were waiting for me to leave.

The walk back to V-town wasn't quite as exciting as the journey out had been. On the way north I'd been excited, happy to stretch my legs and see the humans again. Now it just felt like I was weighed down with infighting.

Not to be confused with the weight of Rebecca on my arm -- that I was more than happy to bear.

My stomach was growling by the time the weathered spires of V-town were poking over the trees. Gods, the last thing I'd had to eat was... I wasn't even sure, I hadn't even had my beer back at the bar.

The police didn't seem to be around when we stepped back into town. No real surprise, we'd come back a different way then we'd left.

Ducking and diving through the streets, I realized that we were getting close to my old place. And the street full of food venders near by.

"Hey, babe, feel like a bite to eat?"

She eyed me wearily. "You tend to go for the *odder* fair, Wolfy. I'm not sure I quite trust you."

"Aw, babe," I pulled her closer to me, feeling her press into my coat, "We've together this long and you still don't trust me? I'm hurt! Besides," I couldn't help the laugh the sneaked into my voice, "A little raw meat is good for you, it'll put some fur on that pale skin of yours."

She made a slight 'eek' sound and tried to pull away. I didn't let her escape.

"I thought you liked me just the way I was, *Wolfy*." She reached up to poke my nose.

I just chuckled. "I do, babe. Just the way you are. But, hey, a guy can dream, can't he?"

It was well after supper hour by the time we made it to the food district. Most of the venders were still open, but they were in the process of cleaning up.

"Grab what you want, babe. Meet you back here?"

She nodded and headed off towards one of those odd places that sold cooked food. Even with my brief time as a human I still didn't care for the stuff.

I was just about to head off to my old standard, Cub-caf, when I began patting down the pockets of my vest. Oops. A half dozen pockets in this thing and I hadn't a dollar on me.

I didn't even have a chance to turn around before I felt Jon discreetly press a small wad of bills

into my palm.

"Thanks, Jon. You're a lifesaver." I grinned at him. "Do you want me to pick you up anything?"

He shook his head. "We may look similar, Sir, but we have... different tastes. I don't care for raw meat as my only meal."

He headed off towards another stall as I bellied up to Cub-caf and ordered a slab of moose and a side of mice.

Gods but it's been a long time since I'd been down here. I used to practically live off this stuff. The last time I'd been here was... it was with English, just after our first hunt.

Huh. I took my food and began looking for a place to sit down. There was plenty of space now, most of the benches were empty.

I didn't have the willpower to keep from digging into my meal the moment I sat down. Frankly, it didn't taste as good as I remembered. I thought I'd been spoiled before when I'd been growing up with the meat my father had brought home -- it was worse once I'd gotten used to hunting for myself. It just wasn't the same when you didn't chase down your own dinner, there was no sense of *accomplishment*.

I had my head buried in the wax paper, ripping the meat within to shreds when a boom echoed through the street.

My head popped up. Huh? What was that? Looking around, everyone else on the street was as confused as I was. That almost sounded like a--

I didn't even have the time to complete my thought. Another boom and my right shoulder lit up like someone had stabbed me with a hot poker.

A scream escaped my lips as I fell from my seat and rolled under the bench. Okay, now there was no doubt. That was a gun.

The street around me had been curious, but not worried. My cry had sent them over the edge. I still doubted that anyone else truly realized what the sound was, but they were running and screaming now.

"Tommy!" I looked up to see Jon's face inches from mine. "It's not safe to stay here, Sir."

"Really? You think?" I had to speak through gritted teeth. I could feel each and every beat of my heart as my wound throbbed.

"Can you walk?" He was already pulling me towards him, dragging me to my knees.

"I can try." I looked over at him. "The real question is can I run?"

The answer, it seemed, was yes. We set off at a sprint, dashing across the narrow street into one of the shadowed alleyways. Another shot rocked the air as we ran. It kicked up a spray of concrete a foot to my left.

With me safely tucked behind a heavy metal garbage bin, Jon popped his head out to see what was going on. It was almost knocked off when Rebecca came hurtling in. She skidded to a stop and pressed herself in next to me.

"Tommy! You're wounded."

I couldn't help but grin. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

The bleeding had already begun to slow, but the bullet had gone all the way through the meat of my right shoulder. It had only just hit me, leaving a furrow in my flesh. Rebecca had pulled off her jacket and wrapped it around me.

"Thanks, babe." I winced when she pulled the makeshift bandage tight.

"The service should be here in moments, Sir." Jon's voice was calm, but I could hear the slightest note of panic. "This is already an unusually long delay in response time for a major public

disturbance like this."

A couple of minutes passed and there was no sound of dogs running our way. There was however the boom of a half dozen more shots. They were getting closer, forcing the three of us further back into our little safe-haven.

"Jon," I had to clench my teeth as I felt my shoulder start pulling back together, "I don't think they're coming. Do you know where the shooter is?"

The dog's eyes were wide. "I... yesir. The assailant is across the street. On the roof of the third building to the right."

"Okay." I took a deep breath as my shoulder popped. "Can we get to him?"

He shook his head. "Physically possible, Sir, but I can't leave you here."

"Jon," I reached out my good hand to grab his mussel, "How about I make that an order? Either you go up there or I do."

"Yesir." He shot Rebecca a quick glance, than was off down the alleyway, keeping out of sight of the sniper.

"Come out, you worthless wolf!" Much to my surprise our attacker's voice was feminine. And... sounded human.

Voices were funny things, sometimes you could tell a species by them sometimes you couldn't. She didn't have the underlying growl of a canine, nor the rolling purr of a feline. There were a dozen species our attacker could be, but she *sounded* human.

I glanced over at Rebecca, she gave me a puzzled shrug. "Well," she whispered, "I guess that would explain the gun."

I just shook my head.

"We need to keep the shooter occupied long enough to let Jon sneak up on her." I just realized that we could have more than one person trying to kill me this time. Yeah, that would just be great.

I poked my nose around the edge of the garbage bin for a quick peek. I was rewarded with a jolt of pain as my whiskers were shot clean off.

"Gah!" I pulled back in.

Rebecca almost thought I was wounded again before she saw what happened.

She laughed. "You look unbalanced."

I rubbed my lip as I rolled my eyes. "Thanks for the sympathy." Leaning forward, I pressed a finger to her chest. "You stay here. You can't regenerate from a bullet hole, I can." It was true, my shoulder was halfway to healed.

"But..."

I didn't give her a chance to argue as I leapt out from our hiding place, drawing the fire away from her as I sprinted down the street.

Three more shots rang out in quick succession. Oops, I hadn't counted on the shooter being able to do that. What was it, an automatic? Gods, the only other gun I'd ever seen was Renfru's up in the mountains, but of course *this one* has to be military grade.

Flecks of concrete and wood flew into the air around me as I ran. They erupted so fast that I could feel the flying shards slice into me, even through my fur.

I dove behind a tree that was growing in the centre of the street. Well, that wasn't a good idea. Not only was it not large enough to hide behind, but the shooter's gun pierced right through it. She almost gave me an unwanted haircut as one of her bullets flew between my upright ears.

"Would you stop shooting?! What do you want?" I was nearly out of breath as I yelled. I'd only just dived behind a concrete flower box when another round of shots rang out.

"Come out here and face me like a man, you dog! Or is that too much for you?" She was

laughing now. "I'm going to get well paid for this, but killing you is worth it alone."

I poked my head above the box and felt a bullet graze the tip of one of my ears.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Now I was laying on the ground, as far in the safe shadow of the box as I could, clutching my ear. When am I going to learn to stop poking my head out for a look *when the other person has a gun?*

Some days I just *feel* dumb, other days it's proven to me.

I heard something from the direction of the shooter. The gun went off again, but it wasn't directed at me.

A scream, and I heard the wet crunch of a body hitting the ground.

"Jon?" I decided to play it safe and stay in my hidy-hole.

There was no answer.

"Jon?" I shouted it again, louder this time. Still no answer.

I snuck a quick peak over the edge of my cover. No one shot at me. A couple dozen meters away I could see the body of a human laying twisted and broken on the ground. The blood had exploded from her when she hit. It reminded me of my first hunt with English.

I shook my head. "Jon," I shouted up to the rooftop, "I would have preferred if we'd taken her alive. You know, for questioning."

There was still no answer.

Oh no.

"Rebecca!" I yelled as I began running. A moment later she was by my side.

We ran to the fire escape up the back of the building -- likely the same way Jon had gone up. Unlike him, we didn't mask our footsteps as we climbed.

I leapt onto the roof, not sure what I'd find, and not sure I really wanted to know.

At first I didn't see anything on the loose gravel roof. It took me a moment to find Jon's brown furred form. He was crumpled on the ground, laying motionless near the edge. Even from this distance I could smell the blood.

"Tell me you're okay, Jon." I reached out my hands tentatively towards him. He lay on his side, back to us. I couldn't even see him breathing.

His body was still warm when I rolled him over. It wasn't until I'd put him on his back that a shuttering breath came from him.

His eyes were clenched shut but his lips were moving. He was saying something, but I couldn't make out the words.

Turning to Rebecca, I pointed back at the stairs. "Go. There should be a police station two blocks east."

She didn't even say a word before she was off, feet kicking up gravel as she sprinted across the roof.

"Just hold on, Jon. We'll get help."

I didn't know much first-aid. I'd never had to learn, as I tended to regenerate, but I had picked up a little while I'd been looking after Rebecca last winter.

Jon was clutching his gut with both hands. Ever so gently I pulled them away to get a look at his wound.

He'd been shot. There was a puncture mark in his abdomen. There was blood leaking from his back. The shot had gone right through him.

Pulling off my vest, I ripped it to shreds with my claws. Jon wasn't wearing anything but his own green vest, I slowly peeled it from his damp fur.

"Just hold on, Jon. Help is on the way."

His voice rose slightly when I said that.

I began binding the shreds of my vest around him. Gods, I didn't even know how tight to make it. Every time I tried to cinch the bindings Jon winced. He even began to whimper. I'd never heard the dog whimper.

It took everything I had to pry Jon's hand from the wound and bandage my fabric in place.

He was muttering louder now. I soothed the fur of his brow back as I waited. I'd done everything I could.

I almost leapt straight into the air when one of his hands wrapped around mine.

"Tommy," His voice had become clearer, more focused, "I'm sorry. I failed."

"What?" I knelt down before him, trying to meet his eyes. They were foggy and unfocused.

"I'm sorry, Tommy. I was supposed to protect you. I've failed."

"You've done great, Jon. You've been good."

His body was beginning to tremble now, his muscles convulsing and shuddering.

"Stay with me, Jon." I set my hand on his shoulder. "Help is on the way, stay with me."

It couldn't have been more than a half hour before I heard the sound of feet running up the fire escape, but it felt like days.

Jon had stopped shaking now, and I doubted that was a good sign. His breathing had become shallower and shallower, to the point now that his chest hardly lifted.

"Stand aside." I was roughly pushed out of the way by a... something in a paramedic's uniform. I was too strung out to even see who or what he was.

A moment later I felt a pair of hands on my shoulders, pulling me back. I spun with a snarl only to see Rebecca's pale face.

"It's okay, Tommy. We have help."

I looked behind her to see at least two dozen police officers fanning out over the rooftop, they were followed by another half dozen paramedics.

It was all I could do to pull Rebecca into my arms and sink slowly to the ground, feeling the rough gravel shift beneath me.

It was nothing to fear for my own life, but when those around me began to fall...

I clutched Rebecca tighter.

Chapter 9: Something Blue

For once, I didn't mind the police presence as they closed in around me. More than once the pack of them tried to shuffle me off, but I wasn't leaving without Jon.

A stretcher arrived eventually, carried by two horses dressed in white. I was just glad they weren't wearing black.

I couldn't even see Jon for the mass of medics that surrounded him. I tried to fight my way closer, to get a look at him before he was taken off, but I was stopped in my tracks when I saw his arm fall limply off the side of the stretcher.

I only caught a glimpse of it for a split second, but it ran my blood cold.

Rebecca clutched tightly to my side as we followed the stretcher up the street. I was expecting them to make a beeline to the nearest hospital, but instead they ran non-stop all the way to the still being rebuilt V-town general.

Into the emergency, I was stopped after a few steps by a rather large orderly.

"Don't care who you are, no one but the doctors and nurses get into the operating room."

We took a seat in a small private waiting room, the dogs standing guard outside.

I hadn't the slightest who designed these rooms, but they seemed to do their best to *not* make you feel any better.

A couple of sofas, an end table, and a few pieces of gods awful art were all that could be found. Well, that and a pamphlet entitled 'How to deal with a loved one's loss'.

I didn't bother with the pamphlet. It got crumpled into a ball and thrown across the room.

There was no window into the operating room, no indication what was going on. There wasn't even a clock.

One of the police dogs did poke his head in, carrying a pitcher of water and two glasses. I wasn't sure if I wanted to rip his whiskers off or hug him.

And still we waited. It must have been two hours by now. I'd been dozing off, Rebecca on my lap, when my ears twitched at a scuffle outside.

"Sir, you can't..."

"... bugger off!"

There was the thunk of someone being pushed up against the wall, then the door opened.

English strode in with a bag in his hands, shouldering the door firmly shut behind him.

"Mate, Lass." He was sitting on the threadbare sofa beside me, almost before I had time to blink. A second later I felt his arm over my shoulder.

"Came as soon as I heard." A grim smile was pinned on his face. "I guess this is your first time, eh?"

"Huh?" I was just waking up, it was an effort to focus on him. Rebecca was still asleep on my lap.

"First time waiting on the ER." He angled his head towards the wall. "You weren't in the bounty hunting biz long enough to have to see many people go in." He paused for a moment, raising a claw to his lip. "But I do distinctly remember you doing something like this to the Lass and I not so long ago." He laughed, a hard and sudden sound in the small room. "And, if I recall correctly, it was for something a touch more serious than having a small hole poked through you."

"It's not the same..." I tried to shake my head, but I could barely move. "He can't regenerate like I can." I paused for a moment, sucking in a long breath. "And I ordered him to do it. Gods, English, I ordered him to go up there alone. We could have run, we could have hid, but I ordered him to go up there alone and fight, unarmed, with someone *I knew* had a gun."

The lion's arm tightened around me. "You did what you thought was best, Tommy." His accent was almost completely gone. "Run and she would have followed you, hide and it would have just been a matter of time. Jon agreed to take the job, we all know what it means to protect someone. Bugger, Tommy, I can't even count the number of partners I've sent to the ER. Most of them for something stupid I did. You don't *try* to hurt people, but it just seems to happen. You did the best you could." He paused for a moment. "You just have to keep telling yourself that. It's the only thing that makes it bearable." He forced up a smile with some effort. "That, and a good waiting spread."

He pulled open the bag he'd brought with him, dumping it on the table. It was loaded with all manner of food and treat. Every kind of sugary confection and sweet tooth aching delight I'd ever seen. It even had a fist sized chunk of chocolate.

"Happy food, mate." He'd affixed his accent firmly back in place. "Just remember that he's the one in there, not you. I'm not worried whats happening to Jon right now, that's the doctor's problem. I'm more worried about whats happening to the two of you."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he simply reached out and shoved a chunk of chocolate in.

"Eat up, mate. You're not getting out of this room until you've gained ten pounds. Jon will do as he will no matter what happens over here. Just be glad I brought my kit dry this time. I normally load up with scotch, but I figured we've both had enough to drink over the last few days."

I had no idea how long we spent in there. The next thing I knew I was being gently shaken awake by a police dog. Both Rebecca and English were sprawled out asleep on the couch to either side of me.

It took me a moment to realize it was Able.

"Sir." His face was unreadable. "I assumed you wanted to be notified as soon as Constable Oaks was out of surgery."

I felt my fut tighten.

"How is he?"

The dog's face softened slightly. "Stable. He's under heavy sedation, but he's asking for you."

I slowly got to my feet, doing my best not to wake either English or Rebecca. I did notice the lion's eyes flutter as I stepped away. He didn't make any motion to stop me.

The ICU was located right next to the Emergency suite. The number of beeping machines in

here set my teeth on edge the moment I stepped through the door.

They had Jon down at the far end. I wasn't surprised to see two uniformed police dogs standing at attention on either side of his bed. They stepped away as I approached.

"Hey, Jon." I opened my mouth to speak, but almost couldn't get the words out. The smell of drugs, along with omnipresent sickness and decay, was so strong that I could barely breathe.

I wasn't sure what to expect from Jon. He was laying still in the bed, a bleached white sheet pulled up to his chin.

I'd only just stepped up beside the bed when one of his hands shot out, faster than I ever would have expected. It was enough to make the dogs around me jump.

"Tommy," His voice was rough and cracked, like he'd be gargling on razor blades, "Are you alright? I was afraid she'd gotten you. I was..." He paused for breath before a cough wracked through his body. A small device mounted on the wall began beeping.

I laid my free hand over Jon's, his flesh was frighteningly cool to the touch.

"I'm alright, Jon. It's you we're concerned for. Just take it easy, you did a good job."

"I failed." A grimace pulled at his face, exposing his teeth. "I can't protect you while I'm in here."

I clenched his hand tighter. "That's alright, Jon. Perhaps it's my turn to protect you for a change."

"You?" His lips pulled up in a weak smile. "Tommy... Sir, I mean this with all due respect, but you won't last a day trying to run the government without me."

I smiled back. "I kind of expected that. We're already pulling together a party to try and get things going. It won't be the same as having you, Jon, but we'll make due. Don't worry about me. Just focus on getting back on your feet."

The machine above him beeped a few more times and a nurse ran over. When next I looked Jon's eyes were closed. He was breathing peacefully.

I gave English a shove when I got back to the waiting room. He opened his eyes without complaint.

"All go well, mate?"

I shrugged. "As well as could be expected." I turned back to Able. "What time is it?"

He answered without hesitation. "Four fifteen in the morning, Sir."

"Fine." I slipped my arms under the still sleeping Rebecca. "I'm heading back to my place, English. Do you want to crash there?"

"I thought you'd never ask, mate."

I couldn't help but notice how close the lion kept to me as we walked down the street. The dogs had a duty to protect me. English, he did it because he chose to.

Shouldering open the door to my apartment, I didn't get more than two steps before my nose began twitching at the scent of blood.

Both Amstys and Renald stood waiting for me, their chests soaked.

"I don't think I even want to ask." I pushed past them to set Rebecca down on the bed before returning to the main room to take a seat on my stool. It was rapidly becoming crowded in here. Not only was it Rebecca and I, but Amstys, Renald, English, and Able had followed me back from the hospital.

"Alright," I set my elbows down on the counter, "Anyone want to tell me what's going on *this time*?"

Not even English cracked a smile.

I had to level a glare at Amstys before he began to speak.

"I... uh, young master... I was contacted by the hunter's alpha and requested to help keep you alive." I rolled my eyes. Everyone seemed to want me either 'alive' or 'dead'. No one seemed to be interested in the 'left alone' option. "Renald and I followed you on your trip. We were about to... leave you after you'd returned to the city, when we realized you were being followed."

I cocked an eye ridge at him, "Followed?"

Renald butted in, "Yeah boss, by a couple of humans. We didn't think much of them at first. They weren't exactly scary looking. They kept their distance until the commotion began, then they pulled some tools from their clothing and began running towards you."

Three guesses on what the 'tools' were.

I let my head sink to the counter top.

"So I am right," I didn't bother to look up, "The whole of the world does want be dead."

I wasn't even looking his way, but I could still hear Amstys gasp. "No, young master, not me."

I waved a hand. "Out. Everyone out. You too, lion-boy. Able, deal with the extra two bodies and see what you can find out." I raised my head. It took everything I had to keep my teeth covered. "Now everyone out."

It was probably six o'clock by the time I slipped into bed beside Rebecca. I could have cursed the sun that was just beginning to peek over the horizon.

Rebecca was still in my arms when I woke, her face pressed against my chest.

"We're back home, Wolfy. Does that mean Jon will be alright?"

"Don't know." My lips were heavy with sleep. "He woke up for a few moments. All I know is he's not dead."

"Gods, Tommy." She pulled into me a hair closer. "What's going on? It feels like it's the genocide all over again." Her grip on my fur was so tight it was becoming painful. "That could have been you. I don't want to lose you... I've already lost too many."

I raised one hand to sooth back her hair. "I don't plan on going anywhere, babe."

I could hear shouting from out in the hallway, raised voices. One was definitely the police dog stationed out there... the other was harder to identify.

A moment later the front door to the apartment boomed open.

"Tommy! My friend, where are you?" Allen West.

I could feel Rebecca stiffen beside me as he invaded our home. It was no more than a heartbeat before I was on my feet and prowling out of the bedroom. I made no effort to make my coat lie flat or keep my lips down.

"What are you doing in here!" It wasn't even a question as the words snapped from my mouth.

The skinny raccoon was dressed in an immaculate suit, looking every bit as perfect as he had the evening I'd met him. I'd caught him rustling through some of the papers that the police dogs still brought every day. He didn't even have the decency to look ashamed, he just kept on flipping through them as he turned to greet me. He almost acted as though this was his own home, and that he hadn't just barged in on Rebecca and I.

"Tommy, Tommy," He was grinning ear to ear now, "I heard about what happened last night, and I just had to come and see you with my own eyes, to make sure you were safe."

I stepped up beside him and snatched the papers from his grasp. "You've seen me. Now, *get out*." My voice rose to a snarl.

The grin stayed plastered on his face like I'd met him with a handshake and a back slap. "But,

Tommy, my friend, I've come all the way to see you, I can't leave now when we have so much business to discuss." He sat himself down at the counter, in *my* chair. "We'll be having the election so soon, and by all means it looks like you might very well win. We have so much to discuss."

I turned my back to him. From the corner of my eye I could just see Rebecca, still in the bedroom. She was naked, and there was no way she could get to her clothes without exposing herself to West.

"Then you can make an appointment like everyone else." My voice was still rough, but I'd forced some small measure of civility into it.

"I did, my friend, but that blasted valet of yours just seemed to always be unable to book me. Tommy, I know you're a busy, busy man being mayor and all that, but can't you just make a little time for me?" He smiled broadly and winked. "I could be useful to you, my friend. I'm not all good looks, you know."

My urge right then and there was to turn around and rip the smile right off his smug face.

"My friend," he continued, "I'm willing to put an awful lot of money behind you." He rubbed his fingers together. "You and your pet dog Sayer have been doing a wonderful job of putting the city back together for me. It's been very... lucrative. I'd be willing to help make sure you win if you'd be interested the keeping the job."

Even if he'd been standing I would have had a good foot and a half on the raccoon. Sitting as he was I towered over him.

"I've already had *offers*, West." My hands were firmly at my side. I was afraid anywhere else and they'd be wringing his scrawny neck. "I didn't want their help, and I don't want yours. I don't even want this bloody job. Look what it's done to me! It's hurting everyone I love, driving me ragged, and not even getting me a shred in return."

The raccoon grew serious for a moment, the smile disappearing from his face. "You know, Tommy, that's only because you choose not to be rewarded for your efforts. Anyone working as hard as you deserves to get something back." The mischievous grin returned. "I have more money than I know what to do with, and yet," He waved a hand to the room around us, "You live in this near hovel. There is no need for someone of your talents to subsist on such base fare. I can provide you with everything you need." He cocked his head, "Your lion friend seems to do well enough, he's been quite a thorn in my side on more than a few occasions. I can offer you more wealth than he's ever seen."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I'm sure you could try, but knowing English he's likely seen a lot. Take off, West. I don't grovel to people like you."

The smile hardly seemed to move on his face. "I don't want you to grovel, Tommy. I recognize talent when I see it. You'll work with me, not for me. I don't treat my partners as anything less. And you're a partner, Tommy. Someone as dangerous as you could never be anything but." He cocked an eye at me. "Take it from someone who's been the target of more than his fair share of assassinations, friend, I know what you're feeling. The fact you've survived so much alone speaks for you."

"I said take off, West."

He shrugged, still smiling, seeming unconcerned with my dismissal. "As you wish, friend. But I only ask you to keep an open mind. You've done so much for me already, I'd hate to lose such a valuable tool as you."

Peering out the door as West left, I could see a pair of large bears backing my police dog into a corner. They fell into line behind the raccoon as he walked down the hallway.

Sayer was the next to arrive. He, however, came at a more godly hour, and had to good sense to knock first.

I was quickly getting sick of all these comings and goings. It felt like I was back in the conga line again, shaking hands and kissing babies.

"What?" I didn't even bother to look up from the leftover leg of chicken I was gnawing my way through. There were hardly more than scraps left, but it was my breakfast.

"Commissioner Sayer here to see you, Sir," announced the dog in the hallway.

I just rolled my eyes. "Fine."

It took the old Dane a good five minutes to cross the few strides from the doorway to me. I used it to finish my meal.

With deliberate carefulness, the old dog slowly slid onto the stool across from me.

"I hear, Tommy, that even my best guard cannot seem to keep you safe."

I just shook my head. "From what, Sayer? The renegades out to kill me, or the mavericks out to recruit me?"

He ignored me as if I hadn't said a word. "So I'm sure you can now see why I take such precautions."

"Fine." I lowered my bone. "If you're putting so much effort into this, what do we know about the trouble makers?"

The dog avoided my gaze. "I'm not in the habit of discussing the particulars of ongoing cases..."

I slammed the bone down on the counter with enough force to make the dog jump. "Spill it, Sayer. We had a deal. I told you what we got from Quin, you tell me what you know."

"Very well..." He whetted his lips, "We took everyone from Club Bedlam in for questioning. There were... a large number of people we unavoidably ended up prosecuting for unrelated charges."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You can't tell me your dogs didn't know that place was there. It was as plain as the wet black nose on my face what they were up to. They even tried to offer to English and I while we were buying a drink."

The old dog huffed. "We are aware of certain spots of... contention. It is not possible to eliminate vice. We can only contain and control it, shape it."

"Shape it to your needs, Sayer? Gods, that sounds positively Machiavellian."

The dog wouldn't look up. "We do what we can, mayor. But may we return to the matter at hand, that of your safety."

"Yeah, yeah." I waved a hand. "Did you happen to bring in a woman named Molly?"

He looked at me suspiciously. "No. Should we have?"

I shook my head with a grim smile. "No. I'm sure it's nothing."

I could see the dog noting her name. That would make for a good time if Molly ever came my way again.

"What we did find, Sir..." He cleared his throat. "Was a cache of weapons. Unlike what has been seen in V-town for quite some time. I'm sure you're aware of their type."

"Guns." I nodded my head. "Human weapons." I'd never even seen a gun until I'd encountered Renfrew in the mountains. No one used guns when they had fangs and claws. Guns were too bulky, too obvious, too... artificial.

"Yes. It appears that there was an effort to stockpile them. They hadn't gotten far. The entire collection numbered less than a dozen, and it appeared that they were having difficulty acquiring more."

"Where are they now?"

He shrugged offhandedly, unconcerned. "They are under our control."

"And by 'ours', I assume you mean 'yours'."

He shrugged again. "I am a servant of the government. There is no difference."

"Right." I threw my head back and yawned. "And as for my latest encounter?" I paused for a moment. "No, first tell me how Jon is doing."

Sayer's eyes cast down for a moment. "He is better. My reports state that Constable Oaks was awake again this morning. His stay at the hospital will be extensive, but he is expected to be able to return to duty."

"A full recovery?" I couldn't help but hold my breath.

"My report would suggest it is a likely."

"Your report?" It just clicked in. "You mean you haven't gone down to see him?"

He didn't bother to look up. "It is not standard procedure for the police commissioner to go to the bedside of a mere constable."

"Mere constable?" The dog studiously avoided my eyes as I spoke. "Since when was Jon a *mere constable*? He's your nephew, isn't he? Throw it to the gods, I've never even heard him talk about his parents. As far as I know you're the only family he has, and you're not going to see him?"

The dog cleared his throat. "I'd prefer you didn't discuss his parents. You are not familiar with their lives. They were an... embarrassment. Young Jon developed his undercover persona from a childhood that I would prefer not to review. It would be inappropriate for me to bring up our relationship. I am the Commissioner of the V-town police force, and Constable Oaks is just that, a constable under my command. Nothing more."

"Listen, you sheet faced mongrel," Reaching out I grabbed the pale dog's mussel, dragging it up until he was forced to confront me. "I don't care who you think you are, but you're his only family. Either you go down there under your own power or I'll drag you there in front of your force."

The dog hardly even blinked. His composure didn't even slip a notch. "Mr. Taggert, I have done my best to ensure that I remain out of your personal life. I would be grateful if you were to do the same."

"Out of my personal life!" I nearly raked my claws down his face. "I don't even have a personal life any more thanks to you. You dragged me into this knowing full well what was going to fall on me. You didn't warn me, you didn't even give me the slightest choice. You pitted me against everyone I love to further your own ends. You can't even leave me well enough alone with the hunter's alpha, my very own father. To the renderers with your dirty little family life. Either you go down there or I'll drag you by your tail like a delinquent pup!"

I finally let go of him. He hung there for a moment longer, like time wasn't moving.

"Very well, Mr. Taggert." He slowly pulled back. "I will visit my nephew. But I do so as my own choice." He raised his eyes to me now. His body was so frail that I almost couldn't believe the steel in his gaze. "Not because the mayor of V-town has ordered me. I will serve you in every capacity I am able, Mr. Taggert, as I do each and every citizen, but you will not presume upon my personal life."

I laughed. "If you'll do the same for me, Sayer, then we have a deal."

For the first in a long time, I had a few moments to myself. Rebecca had disappeared across the hall to her old apartment, and no one else seemed to want to bother me just yet. I didn't even have any mountains of paperwork to distract me.

I wanted to be out, away, anywhere but here, but not even I was stupid enough to try that after yesterday.

Looking out the window of the bedroom, I could still taste Rebecca's scent on the air. Heh, I guess that was about the only thing going well these days.

Behind me, out in the main room, I heard a loud knock on the front door. The perfect measured

rap of a police dog.

"Yes?" I called.

"Sir," his voice was muffled by the door, "I have a collection of people down in the lobby who claim to have reason to meet with you. Their spokesperson is an oni named Max..."

I opened the door before he'd even the chance to finish. "Send them in."

If nothing else, I had to give Max credit. He certainly knew how to spend English's money. I hadn't given him any real directions on what he was supposed to do other than 'make me a party'. He seemed to have taken the cause to heart.

A dozen people were pressed into my small room now. Max had introduced them all one at a time as they'd entered, extolling their virtues. I wasn't sure if he was expecting me to reject any of them, but just about everything he was saying about 'campaign adviser' and 'five years experience with the Conservative party' went over my head like a paper airplane.

I almost felt like I was back on the conga line, I shook hands and exchanged pleasantries until everyone was either seated or at least fighting for a place to stand.

"So, uh, Tommy. What do you think?" Max was shifting nervously from one foot to the other in front of me. I was on my stool again. There were few places to sit, but I made use of the 'this is my apartment' rule for getting a seat.

I shrugged. "Can you guys win me the election?" There was a round of murmurs and a few nervous smiles from the men and women around me. My only response back was to nod at Max and to say, "Works for me. Get to it."

His jaw dropped open. "But don't you want to interview people first? Get to know them, craft a platform?"

I shook my head. "Not in this lifetime. You picked them, Max. That's good enough for me. You know who I am, you know how I think, *you* make the platform. I've had gods know how many people try to kill me in the last few days. I'm going to worry about staying alive and keeping the city from crumbling. You guys figure out how to keep the real monsters from getting the office while I keep *this* monster from doing anything stupid."

"But... but..."

I held my hand up to Max.

"English is paying you guys, right?" Everyone nodded. "Then consider yourselves Storm Front, political division. Everyone else just has to worry about blood and guts, you guys need to deal with the truly dirty stuff -- politics." A couple of folks grinned, but most of them looked at me like I was speaking martian. "Everyone here does what Max says. Any questions, go to Max. Any concerns, go to Max. Any problems, go to Max. Any death threats, come to me. Get the picture? Good. Now go off and do whatever it is you need to do to win a clean election. Except you." I pointed at the oni.

Everyone else filed out of the room while Max took a seat at the table across from me.

"Are you serious about this, Tommy? No one can win an election this way."

I shook my head. "I don't want to win, Max. I just want to make sure none of the real monsters do. Any idea who's running against me?"

He rolled his eyes. "That was the first thing I checked when I walked downtown to make sure you were registered to run. Gods, Tommy. You hadn't even registered to formally run as a candidate in the election." I didn't even bother to respond. "Anyway, you have four other major parties. The two three shouldn't be a problem. The first is the V-town Conservative party lead by Jim Clark. The next is the V-Town Liberals with Paul Khrétien. Neither of them are organized enough anymore to be a major problem. The real issue is going to be the Progress party."

I rolled my eyes. "And who do they have running."

Max paused for a moment. "They presented their candidates yesterday. Jameswell, with Hayfair as his vice."

I just about choked on my own tongue. "You've got to be kidding me! I just can't get away from those two. I told them off back at KDP and now they want to run the city? What's their platform, 'vote for us, we'll ruin the place'?"

Max struggled to hold back a grin. "No one knows yet. None of the parties have released much. Especially us. All I know for sure is that one of the major backers for the Progress party is KDP."

"Figures." Wait a second... isn't KDP owned by West? Gods. I sunk to the counter before me, letting my forehead rest on the cool surface.

"What is it, Tommy?"

I let out a groan. "I snubbed West, the owner of KDP, this morning. He must have heeled those two in an effort against me. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. I really need to learn not to piss off people with wads of money larger than my head."

I felt Max's hand on my shoulder. "That can't be it. They announced Jameswell and Hayfair yesterday."

I lifted my head. "Then why would West come to me this morning and offer to back me when he's already got the Progress party in his pocket?"

Max shrugged. "Don't look at me. You're supposed to be the boss here."

I levelled a finger at him. "I'm formally giving that title to you, Max. You're the one with at least *some* political experience, this is your game now. Do what you think is right. I'll go in public and read whatever speeches you want me to, do whatever you think is best. This is your game. I need to worry about staying alive."

Max grinned, though the smile looked haunted. "That might be a good idea. I can't sell a dead candidate, even if he is the sitting mayor." He paused for a moment, eyeing me critically. "But how did you do it, Tommy? The city truly is doing better than anyone ever expected."

I shook my head. "It really wasn't me. Sayer did everything. I'd let him keep it, but I doubt he'll live to see it through."

Max was gone soon after. I sat at the kitchen counter for a few moments longer, gently twisting my claws back and forth over its hard surface. I didn't really want to be mayor anymore, but I couldn't give it up to someone who would do something like what Jackson the Cat did. I shuttered at the thought of another genocide.

The door whispered open behind me again. It had to be Rebecca returning.

"Hey, babe," I said as I continued to drag my claws back and forth on the counter.

"I know we're close, mate, but doesn't calling me 'babe' break just a few too many boundaries?"

English whispered it in my ear as he wrapped his arms around me. It wasn't a totally bad thing, it kept me from falling off my stool as I yipped and leapt into the air.

"Gods, English..." He poked me in the nose until I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Gods, English, what are you trying to do, give me a heart attack?"

He grinned for a moment. "Nah, mate. You're harder to kill than that. I know. I've tried." His eyes darted back to the front door. "We need to talk."

I rolled my eyes. "Then lets stop whispering and start talking."

He gave me a quick glare. "Not here." His face pulled into a grimace. "Not near the Lass."

"What?" I nearly shouted that one. "Anything you can say..."

He clamped his hand around my mussel.

"Trust me on this one, mate, you're going to want to hear about this without needing to worry about the little lady walking in."

He was pulling me out of the room before I even had the chance to think twice. I only just got two words in edgewise with the dog guarding the door to let Rebecca know I'd be back.

Out on the street, the police honour guard closed ranks around me. There were more of them now, and they were... armoured.

Even during the riots I'd never seen the police in anything other than their simple blue uniforms. Now they were dressed in all black, the word 'POLICE' written across their chests in bold white type. The uniforms themselves were padded and fitted with sheets of metal. They looked like walking tanks. Though, I noted, only a single dog carried a riffle, and he looked uneasy about it.

It looked like there were starting to hand out training in how to use firearms.

The riots in front of the building had grown, there must be fifty people now, though they hardly looked anymore enthused than before. They tried to surge in our direction when they saw the mob of police dogs, but they were pushed away. Honestly, the cops didn't seem to be holding back. There were no claws, but I had a feeling that no too few people got elbows to their guts.

I pushed on, following English. The faster we walked the sooner we'd be away from the protesters. I was just short of sprinting.

Around a couple of corners and the protesters were left behind. The dogs fanned out around me, checking every alley and scanning each roof.

"English," I whispered, shoving the lion beside me, "You going to tell me what's going on, or do I have to beat it out of you?"

He laughed. "I don't think you could, mate." He reached over and poked my shoulder. It was still a bit tender from the thwacking I'd received yesterday.

"This hasn't been a good week, English." I let out a huff. "And even if I can't, I seem to have a personal army who'd be more than happy to grind you into the ground if you even look at me funny."

"That they would, mate." The lion laughed again, but there was no humour in it. "Just come down to the café. I need a good breakfast, and I've a feeling you do too."

I couldn't argue with that. I'd hardly eaten anything since the goody bag English had brought with him yesterday. I'd pulled down enough sweets then to sate me for a month, but my body needed something more substantive for building my shoulder back up. I could heal from bloody well near anything, but it wasn't magic -- I needed the energy, and even just plain bulk, to put myself back together.

The lion didn't say a word as we walked down the street. Slowly, the roads became wider, tree lined boulevards replacing apartment blocks. Around here the signs of the quake were just about completely gone.

I took a moment to relax and enjoy the walk. A cool breeze was blowing in off the ocean, and the fall colours were just starting to show in the trees. Had it been that long? A year ago Rebecca and I were fighting for our lives. She'd been struck down just before winter had reared it's head for the first time that season. It was hard to think it hadn't been so long, yet in many ways it felt like it had been forever.

A few moments later the wrought iron gate of Café Bristol came into view. There wasn't a single person out on the patio at this time of day.

One of the guard dogs stepped in front of me just as I was about to pass through the gate.

"Please wait, Sir." His voice was low and muffled under his helmet. I was surprised he could even breathe in the thing.

Almost a dozen of the dogs ran into the café, spreading out and scouring every inch. They leapt into the small building like they expected to be pushed back by an army. A few moments later they came back out again with a handful of staff, a cook, a couple of waitresses, and a kitchen boy.

"You are the owner of this establishment, Mr. English?" One of the dogs had turned to him. His voice was flat and I couldn't see his eyes beneath his visor.

"Yes." English was taking this surprisingly calmly. "I purchased it after the quake."

"Are these your staff? No one is missing? There is no one here you do not recognize?"

"Yes. They're mine. All of them are mine." He nodded, voice slow and clear.

"Very well." The dog turned to the people that had been rounded up. "You may go about your business."

The other guard dogs had finished ransacking the building by now. They gave a thumbs up in our direction. All of the police fell back to positions around the edge of the café. I noticed that there were teams patrolling the streets around us.

One little attempt on my life... okay, two, and you'd think the whole city was at civil war again.

English selected a table in the middle of the patio, we had our choice as there was no one else here. A few seconds later a young rabbit waitress was out by our side.

"Morning, E." She winked at him. "Is this that little surprise you warned us about?"

He nodded. "And aren't you glad I gave you a heads up?"

She snorted.

"We gotten to expect stuff like this every time you come around. Shall I just get you the usual?" She grinned when English winked. "And what about your friend?"

"I'll just have a--"

"He'll have the same," English said, cutting me off. He poked a finger at my chest a moment later as the rabbit scampered away. "No friend of my is going to go hungry in my very own restaurant." He laughed, "Even if he is the good for nothing mayor."

I leaned back against the hard iron of the seat, closing my eyes for just a second as I spoke, taking in the moment of peace. "So, are you going to tell me what the big deal is?" I opened one eye, glaring at him. "And what you couldn't say around Rebecca?"

He steadfastly ignored me, sitting back himself and letting his mane ruffle in the cool breeze.

"You know I picked this place up for a song, mate? After the quake the owner was dead and there was no one left to run it. I picked it up for a song, really, I told them a grand tale about how I wanted to keep the place open and the staff jumped to follow me. I hardly had to spend a dime to get ownership of the land and everything on it. A good replacement chef, that, mate, that was a whole different problem. You should have seen some of the hacks..."

He was rambling on when I reached across the table to give him a good jab in his flat, upturned nose.

"Get to it, pussy-cat. You didn't drag me out here to show off your burgeoning culinary empire. What's going on?"

He huffed out a breath. "You know how to ruin a good lead up, don't you, mate? I was going to loop around with a story of how I found this place, the way they'd originally been serving Indian food..."

I jabbed him again. "Last chance, feather-duster-for-a-tail, before I start carving it out of you."

That got him to stick out his tongue at me for just a moment.

"All right, all right. I had some of my bounty hunters doing extra duty ever since I heard about your last little encounter. Seeing how it was humans who attacked you, I decided to put my men around the edge of the city -- a little ways further out than the police like to go. They caught and talked

up every human who came by."

"And by 'talked up' you mean?"

"Just that, mate." He let a slight smile creep to his lips. "I'm no monster. They were under strict orders just to talk, to chat up a conversation with any human who came by, and fish out whatever information they could. And, mate, did we get something juicy."

I let my head sink to the table. I still couldn't get English to the point. A moment ago he wouldn't talk about it, now he wouldn't stop. He knew he had something good, and he was going to draw it out for all it was worth.

"First off, mate, whatever you said out at the 'Bay, it must have worked. There are what, a thousand humans at most out there? At least six hundred are back in town. They've been trickling in at all hours, slowly filtering back into the city like they'd never left. It's scary, mate. We could all feel it when the humans were gone, but now they're back and you couldn't tell it for any other day."

"Anyway," He cleared his throat, "Not the least of the people we found coming on back was that group of elders. They caught on real quick that you were the new mayor, and even quicker that there's an election coming up. You'd almost think they were sharks, mate, the way they moved. They knew there was a shift in power coming up, and they were going to do their darnedest to be right in the middle of it."

"The key point, mate, is they want to see some commitment from you before they'll vote your way. They're just as likely to field their own candidate if they could, but we all know that's not going to happen. Gods, mate," He shook his head, "We saved their hairless little hides and they still won't vote for you unless you show them some commitment to their grand human design."

My head was still resting on the cool metal of the table. I didn't bother to look up as I spoke. "*Commitment?* What do they want from me, English? Shave myself bald in solidarity? I saved them, kept them alive through the winter, then welcomed them back with open arms. What more do they want?"

I could hear him chuckle. "You weren't listening, mate. I told you exactly what they want. *Commitment.* They think that little fling you're having with the Lass is the only reason you care about them. They think it could end at any time as soon as your little romantic interlude sours."

I just put my hands over my head. "That's not the way it works, English. I'm looking out for the humans because..." It dawned on me. I raised my head to stare into his wide grin. "Oh gods, you're not telling me they won't support me unless I..."

He nodded. His grin was so wide now that I could have fit a building into it.

"You got it, mate. They want a physical sign of your position. They want something you can't just drop and walk away from."

"But..." My mind was spinning, I could hardly think. "But I'm a wolf... we mate for..."

"Yep." He leaned back again, kicking his feet up on the table. "You already made the decision from your kind's point of view. Humans are funny people. They don't seem to think it's real without a ring."

"Gods..."

Chapter 10: Bent Knee and a Bruised Head

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who is it?"

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

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

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

I gave him a quick swat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The human sighed and slouched back on his box.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wonderful.

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

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

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

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

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

I could hear him getting to his feet behind me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A walk, yeah, a walk sounded good.

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

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

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

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

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

green eyes and auburn hair.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I got a jab in the nose for that one.

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh gods.

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

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

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

took her eyes from the rabbit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Heh. Yeah."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I shrugged. "Fair enough I guess."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 11: Father's Blessing

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

Rebecca shivered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

dignitary from one of the churches."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What was all that about, Wolfy?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Heh, yeah. Imagine that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So, was it worth it, Wolfy?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I couldn't keep from laughing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Heh. I guess Max had been doing his job.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

count down to nine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Heh, you got it, babe."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Heh. Yeah."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

that first night in the tent with me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beside me, Rebecca giggled.

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. Taggart?" 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. Taggart, 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."

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 Taggart. 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. Taggart." 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. Taggart. 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, Taggart." 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."

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."

Chapter 15: The Day After

We made the rest of the way back to the apartment without incident.

To say that I was surprised to see Hayfair and Jameswell waiting for us in the lobby would be an understatement.

The cat was grinning from ear to ear. The bull not so much.

They were flanked on either side by police dogs, so tight that they could hardly move.

"Congratulations, Tommy." Dean waved to me. "You did it!"

I wasn't quite sure which 'it' he was talking about, winning the election or surviving. I decided not to ask.

I did, however, take the opportunity to go nose to nose with Hayfair.

"Fancy seeing you here." My voice was level.

"Taggart." I didn't know a bull could snarl. "What do you want from us?"

I cocked my head. "Me? Nothing."

"Your lackey dogs dragged us here. You can't pin the shooting on me, Taggart. You don't have a shred of evidence."

"Maybe not." I grinned, "But maybe I do." I turned to Jameswell. "Hey, Dean? You feel like a new job? The Progress party is out of commission, you can join us."

His whiskers perked up. "I can?"

I waved a hand to the dogs who guarded him, they backed off a step.

"Sure. You just go with the nice officers here. Tell them anything you think they should know and I'll guaranty that not only will you not see the inside of a jail cell, but you'll have a nice, safe office job waiting for you when you're done."

Hayfair tried to force his way towards the cat before the dogs restrained him. "Hey! You can't just--"

"Get him out of here." I order the officers, "But not too far." I added with a smirk. "We might want to talk to him again in a hour or two."

We didn't even get our clothes off after we got to the apartment before falling to bed.

When next I opened my eyes the sun was already filtering down from yet another new day.

Gods, for just once I'd like to get a full eight hours sleep without being woken up by someone pounding on the door.

Throwing open the front door, there was already a lineup.

West was dressed as immaculately as ever, but I noticed that his normal bodyguards were missing. Now he was accompanied by a pair of police dogs, and his escorts seemed to be more worried about keeping me safe than him.

West's smile, however, was as bright as ever. He moved forward to shake my hand, but one of the dogs put a restraining paw on his shoulder.

"Tommy, my friend! It's so good to hear you're still the top dog." The raccoon's voice fell quickly as he eyed his new companions. "But I really must ask you to give me a little hand with something. These *brutes* arrived at my home this morning. They won't tell me what's wrong, but they won't leave me in peace either." A growl entered his voice, "And they ran all my guards away!"

I smiled back. "Sorry, Allen. I'm not involved in police matters, you know that." I couldn't keep my teeth from showing. "I'm sure Sayer must have some reason for sicking them on you. You do know that Jameswell resigned from the Progress party last night? As I'm aware, he just finished having a good long chat with the cops."

West's eyes grew wide. "Tommy, you can't be suggesting..."

"I'm not suggesting anything, Allen. Only stating the obvious. Now, I'm sorry, but you'll have to go. I really am terribly busy."

The dogs half dragged him out the door a moment later.

Chapter 16: Author's Note

Well folks, here we are again for a three-peat. *The Hunters* is a trilogy.

With this book we've now reached the midpoint of the series. *The Hunters* and *The Explorers* helped to set up the world and introduce all the main characters. Now with *The Diplomats* we've had some fairly major shifts in plot.

The Diplomats was a fun story to write. And a fast one. Coming off of writing *Little Brother to a Lion*, I'd just finished a two book break from the series and was ready to get back to Tommy and Co. with a vengeance.

The Explorers was written over a vacation. In less than two weeks I bashed out the entire 110,000 word story. To this day my record still stands of 10,000 words written in a single day. I wrote more in one day than most folks read!

This may be a little telling for the direction the story is going to go, but I binged on the old British television show *Yes, Minister* before and during the writing of this book. I don't think I really managed to capture the political nuances and infighting of the TV show, but I did manage to replace them with way too many different sides, all trying to pull Tommy to their advantage.

A number of new factions were introduced in this book, and a number of them returned from the previous two stories. For those of you who thought the line about Tommy being named mayor back at Kicking Horse Pass was a throwaway, you'll likely be surprised.

The hardest part of this story was the... ahem, politics. Give me a story about racism, or just a flat out fight scene, and I'm in my element. Trying to create huge, multilayered quagmires of political intrigue take way more effort. I'm only lucky that Tommy's out of his element too.

The three major factions in the story are the Government, the Hunters, the Police, and Business. I'm not sure if they map too closely to the real world, but they seemed a good fit. It was a bit of a

stretch to get Tommy settled in as mayor, but the old dog Sayer managed to take most of the strain of the transition away.

This was one of my few attempts to write a mystery – my previous one being *Police Dog*. Frankly... I think it'll be some time before I try again. Mystery just doesn't seem to be my thing. I can do the set up alright, and I can even pull off some minor intrigue for a short time, but it just never feels like I can make any real drama on the *whodunit*. Perhaps it comes off better when your reading it, but from this side of the keyboard I just can't seem to work up any real drama when it comes to mystery.

As for Tommy and Co. you'll be seeing them again, but after a short break. I've got a few super secret projects in the pipeline now...

When next Tommy returns he'll be square in the sights of a new villain... and this one won't be as easy to take down. All the power and guile of West, the strength of English, and coupled with regeneration that beats out even Tommy's own.

They're going to be in for a fight in *The Pathfinders*.

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