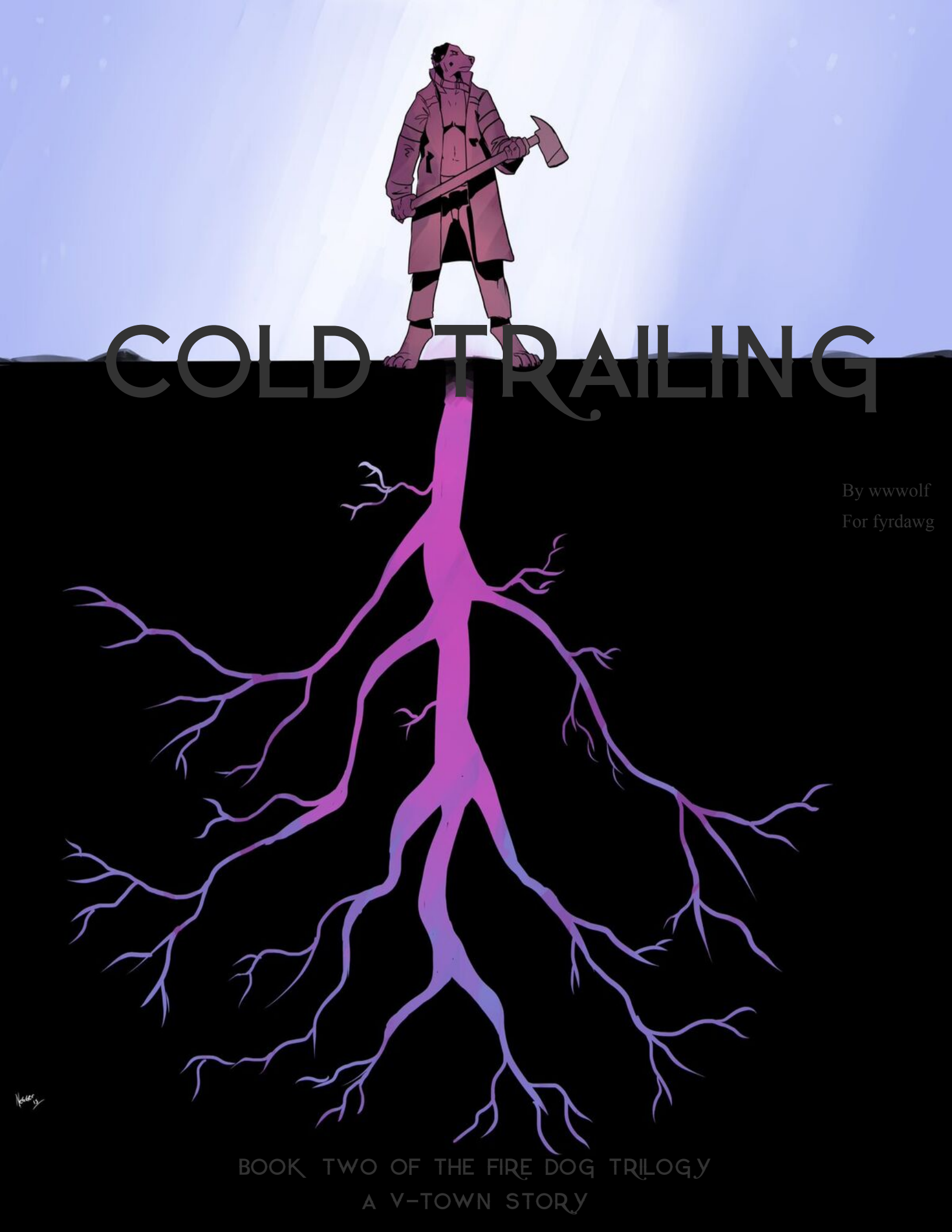




COLD TRAILING

By wwwolf
For fyrdawg

BOOK TWO OF THE FIRE DOG TRILOGY
A V-TOWN STORY

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Chapter 2: The Cracks Run Deep

The night passed quickly, and in Will's opinion at least, pleasantly. Then why couldn't he sleep?

Laying awake in bed, Will stared at the ceiling. He was happy, warm, and at his Mistress' side. But something pulled at his gut. A feeling of dread, like the scent of an oncoming storm.

The unease growing in his belly, Will rolled over and closed his strong arms around Anne. Whatever was coming, he had her. And if nothing else he'd make sure *she* was safe.

The next morning came bright and clear. A rarity for V-town. Will could see out his front window all the way to the mountains. The sun was warm, the air sweet. It looked like a perfect day.

But yet Will still couldn't shake the feeling that hounded him.

"What is it, my pet?" Anne asked, sitting across the table from him.

Will blinked. How could she not feel it? She was a dog, just like he, wasn't she?

Taking a deep breath Will tried to find words to explain the feeling that pulled at him, a nervous twitching, a low buzzing in his ears. A feeling of... *doom*.

"I'm sure it's nothing, Mistress," Will lied. He immediately felt a pang of guilt for not being truthful to her, but he simply couldn't put into words the unease deep in his gut.

Anne raised a perfect eyebrow but didn't press further. "Are you working again today?" she asked, changing the topic. "I don't believe you've had a day off in months."

At that Will was able to smile.

"And I doubt I will in some time, Mistress. *My* station may be operating as it should, but a single station isn't enough to service the entire city, no matter how many men may show up each day. I'm still fighting with the mutts that used to run the other stations to bring them back on-line. Once we have some real coverage I can afford to spend some time with..." He gulped slightly. "Uhh, with you."

I might be changing the shifts to twenty-four hours to reduce the strain on the men.”

She toyed with the leftovers of their meal from last night as she looked idly over his shoulder and out the window. A moment later she went stiff.

“What...” her voice was cold, “Was *that*.”

Spinning, Will turned to look out towards the street. For a long moment he could see nothing, then the shadow of someone racing through the trees flashed past.

A growl slipped into Will's throat. This was *their* land.

A moment later another shape sprinted past, then another. Will was about to stand when a blond wolf broke from the trees and sprinted headlong across their drive before disappearing again.

Will blinked.

The wolf hadn't given two shed hairs about who's property he'd been on. He'd been running flat out. He'd been running from something. He'd been terrified.

Will's hand slipped down unconsciously to cup his belly and the unease that continued to grow.

“What in the name of god is going on?” Anne whispered. She'd yet to move from her seat, but her voice dripped with venom.

A moment later the two of them were standing on the front porch. From here they could make out the main road through the trees. Every few seconds another man, woman, or the rare family ran down it, away from the city.

And from the set of their tails if nothing else Will could see their fear clear as day.

He frowned, squinting.

Wolves, cougars, a rare dog here and there... They were all carnivores, and unless Will missed his guess, they were *hunters*.

Why in the gods' names were the hunters evacuating the city?

He didn't get an answer to his question, but perhaps another one cropped up. Will wasn't a part of the hunters, but even he recognised the hunter's alpha. The wolf was a bit of a recluse, and it was rumoured he was bordering on insane, but something about that wolf made him instantly recognisable.

From where he stood Will could feel the power and control the single wolf radiated, even as he was being carried down the street.

And was that the same black wolf Will had seen yesterday?

“Anne...” The fear churning in Will's gut was enough he forgot something even so base as her proper title, “You better stay here. Something's not right...”

For that she cuffed him across the muzzle. Hard.

“William,” her voice was cold, “Don't you ever suggest I run from danger. I chose you because you *protect* the city. I will do the same, in my own way.”

Shrugging into his gear, Will hefted his axe.

“Isn't there a saying about people who run *towards* danger?” he said with a grin.

Anne smiled. “They're the ones who are trying to make a difference.”

Putting out his hand to her, Will helped her down the steps of the front porch.

The moment his toes touched the soft turf he could feel *something*.

At first it was little more than the softest of vibrations. Will could almost trick himself into believing there was nothing there at all...

“*Quake...*” The word came as little more than a whisper from his lips. They'd all been trained about this back at the academy, but never anything this large...

In perfect time the two of them leapt forward into the middle of the yard, aiming for a spot between the house and the trees should either of them fall.

No sooner did they land than Will would have sworn the world came to an end.

He glanced over to Anne, but she lay serene and collected on the grass beside him. Will would almost have sworn she'd ridden out worse.

“And here it comes, my pet,” she yelled over the roar.

With that they were thrown into the air, the very earth bucking beneath them. Will's head hit the ground hard, his helmet flying free.

When next he came to the world had stopped shaking.

Uncurling from the tight ball he'd reflexively taken, Will looked about.

“Frig...”

At least one thing was right in the world, Anne still sat beside him on the grass. Her black dress showed a few stains, but other than that she seemed unaffected.

A quick look about and their property was still serviceable enough, no immediate dangers. A few trees had been uprooted, and Will was sure there were a couple new cracks in his foundation, but nothing of immediate concern.

A quick glance to Anne and she nodded. A moment later the two of them were on their feet, jogging towards the city.

It took every ounce of willpower he had not to break into a sprint, but Will knew that even on a good day the journey in was long. Any attempt to move faster would only result in both of them ending up breathless and slower than if they paced themselves.

Stepping out onto the main road, Will's lips rose. The hunters that had been running from the city were acting like mindless beasts, continuing to run, continuing to try to escape from the city that they depended on. They streamed down the road, racing headlong past him.

And he could tell you sure as day they had no idea where they were going. Acting on nothing but instinct.

A moment later a harsh and world-weary howl broke the sudden silence that had come since the quake. It sent chills down Will's spine, left his fur standing on edge.

He'd never once in his life heard that voice before, but he could tell you in a heartbeat who it was. The hunter's alpha.

And every single one of the hunters on the road stopped dead.

The howl took on a new quality, an angry snarl, a threat. There was an order in that call, but Will couldn't tell what it was.

He was a dog, but he wasn't a hunter. To him it was simply a howl.

Pushing the frozen in place hunters aside, Will cleared a path down the street, shouldering his way towards the city.

His mouth was dry and his heartbeat like a chipmunk after an all-night coffee bender.

His city was falling apart and he was *out here*. There was no functioning government, no functioning police, and barely any fire response.

His city needed him.

Clutching his axe in one hand, Will had to hold back a growl. Not half a kilometre up the road they came to a dead stop.

A tree had fallen across the road. That in and of itself was little of note. What mattered was *who* lay trapped beneath it.

A hunter, bear, lay face down on the hard packed gravel road, the trunk of an aged spruce across his back.

Will wouldn't admit it, even to himself, but the urge to continue on, to get to his city, pulled at him. Thousands needed him, but this single soul needed him *right now*.

Stepping forward, Will set his axe down in the dirt.

"Sir?" the dog's voice was soft, "Sir, can you hear me?" There was no response. A curse slipped from Will's lips.

Before he could even ask her for help Anne was already at the tree, checking to see if any of the branches had entered his body.

"Clear," she said, voice steady. "No intrusion into his torso. And the branches may have taken most of the weight. He's pinned, but he may not be seriously wounded."

Will nodded. "Spinal damage?"

A moment later Anne's hands had run down the bear's back. "Unlikely. He should be safe to pull."

Taking a deep breath, Will stepped up to the trunk where it lay across the poor sod. He gave it a tentative tug.

It didn't move one inch.

A moment later Anne stood on the other side, hands next to his.

"On three," she said, looking him in the eye.

Then they had the tree in the air, if only by a few inches.

"Pull him," she ordered, voice strained.

"But..."

Her eyes narrowed and Will's tail tucked between his legs. Letting go, he was amazed to see her hold the trunk aloft by herself.

A moment later, as softly as he could, Will dragged the bear to safety. The man let out a moan of pain, but seemed well enough, save a few bruises.

"Carry him," Anne ordered, letting the tree fall back to the ground with a thump that echoed about them.

"Pardon?"

She turned and began walking again. "We can't leave him here. He needs attention, and no one but us and the hunters will be coming down this road now. And you saw what *they* did for him."

Hefting the bear over his shoulder as gently as he could, Will let out a grunt. Bears were *not* known for being petite. And combined with his equipment Will almost felt like his feet were sinking into the gravel.

None the less he hurried to catch up to his mistress, never saying a word of complaint.

The breath was coming hot in Will's chest when they rounded the next bend. Just up ahead was the store Will had stopped at so recently.

He closed his eyes for a moment. There was little left here but a pile of rubble.

Setting his casualty down in the soft grass, Will started forward again. He *knew* what he'd find. He'd only been in the store for a few short moments, but he knew the owner's family had been living above it.

The dog's lips were a straight, grim line. As he neared he could hear the cries for help.

"Mistress," he said, sparing a glance at the dog that matched him step for step.

She looked him in the eye, not a hint of hesitation. "I chose you, my pet, because you help people. This is your chance to do what you're here for."

For just a moment Will smiled. The world was a grim place, but at least he knew how to make it that slight bit better.

Dropping his axe and pack in the soft grass, he continued towards the broken structure wearing nothing but his helmet and gloves. His pace wasn't hurried, wasn't frantic. He was needed, but it would do him no good to leap into the situation and become nothing but a casualty himself.

"Can you hear me?" he called, voice level. "This is the V-town fire department. I'm here to rescue you. Remain calm."

A smile slipped to the dog's lips. Somehow, with just those very words, he knew he'd soothed those who lay trapped, their frantic cries quieting.

"Over here!" he heard the voice of a male, the shopkeeper he'd met so recently if Will guessed

right. "We're over here!"

Will cursed softly as his paws slipped in the loose ground. A dog's feet were designed to walk all four down. His paws were tough, worn, and well clawed, but they were simply too small, too little surface area to keep from sinking into the soft dirt.

"Keep talking," Will ordered. The shop had been dilapidated before, but now there was simply nothing left, not a single wall stood. Will's ears swivelled as he tried to track down the source of the cries.

"Here... here..." the man's voice cut off in a ragged cough. A moment later he heard the whisper of another voice, a woman.

Will gritted his teeth. He wasn't moving fast enough.

Soon Will stood atop the featureless mound the voices came from. It looked no different from all the other debris that choked the area.

With no digging tools Will set about pulling the rubble aside with his gloved hands. His tongue came out but he never slowed, breaths coming steady and measured.

If he'd had the time he would have cursed leaving his shovel back at the station. There hadn't been any reason to bring it to a dockside fire. But yesterday who would have thought he'd be dealing with *this*?

Will would have liked to have said he sent dirt flying through the air as he dug, but that image was for the theatre, not real life. He moved slowly, methodically, ensuring that nothing he did sent unstable rubble down to crush those below.

But he would admit he smiled when a dirt stained hand thrust up from the darkness to clasp his fingers.

"Nice to see you again," Will said with a grin.

In the grand scheme of things there wasn't *that* much to move, but it still took well over an hour to clear enough for the family of four to squeeze to the surface. They were only lucky there hadn't been that much to come down atop them.

"What happened?" the father asked as Will set a scavenged blanket over his thin shoulders.

Will shrugged. "A quake." He said the word simply, with no emotion, but the urge to race back to the city, *his* city, pulled at him. Yet he couldn't until these folks were safe.

He spared a glance over to Anne. She stood not ten paces away, cleaning the wounds on one of the children. They'd all escaped, but some better off than others. Will had offered to help her, but she'd sent him to comfort the parents.

He had to admit she was skilled, he hadn't heard the child cry out once.

The shop kept shivering. "We've never had a quake like that before..." He looked out into the blue distance, at the vague silhouette of V-town skyline. Will took a deep breath and looked with him.

The dog had made a point of not looking too hard at the skyline. He wasn't sure, but there didn't seem to be as many buildings as there had been yesterday.

And one building in particular was missing. One of the greatest and grandest structures in the V-town. The central nervous system for the entire government.

City Hall.

“What do we do now?” the shop keeper asked, pulling Will back to the here and now.

The dog cocked his head. “What?”

“What do we do now?” he repeated. He swept his hand back over the ruined and broken mess where his store had sat. “That was everything I had in the world. What now?”

Will sighed and stood up.

“I'm sorry,” he said, “I really am. But I'm just emergency services, a fire fighter. You need the...” He sighed. “You need the government to help you now.” He spared a quick glance over the treetops towards the city, “And right now the government needs all the help *it* can get.”

“Anne?” he called. It took everything Will had not to call her *Mistress* in front of the others. “Are we ready to go?”

She stood up, brushing her hands against her black dress. Will was surprised to see how well the fabric hid the stains, even the blood, of the day. It almost looked clean.

“Yes, dear,” she said, voice as smooth as calm as if this was just another day. The way she acted it almost felt like she'd ridden through worse...

With a heavy hearts the two dogs left the family to pick through what remained of their lives. The bear was left with them, slowly gathering his senses. Will only wished he could do more, but he knew that this was only to be the start of his day.

The scent of smoke came to their noses as they neared the edge of the city proper. And the scent of concrete dust, and sewage. And blood.

Taking that final step from the countryside into the city, the tree lined road dropped away behind them, and so did it's soundproofing.

The sounds of hundreds of people screaming, concrete grinding, and dozens of forms running back and forth was nearly overpowering.

Will grimaced, his ears pulling back. He wasn't happy, but he *was* in his element.

Stepping forward, axe clutched in one hand, he started towards the nearest clump of people.

“What's happening?” The pitch of Will's voice was set to make them respond. Not a growl, but a low, in control command.

Much to his surprise, and pleasure, he recognised two of the dozen men, fellow off duty fire fighters.

The rest of the crowd backed away, cowed into submission by someone who simply took the reins. The fire fighters, on the other hand, stood their ground, backs straightening.

Will couldn't put names to their faces, but he'd seen them before. They'd come from the other stations.

"Sir," one of them said, nodding. "We... uh, have a *situation*."

Will just rolled his eyes. "I can see that, man. How bad is it?"

The other dog's tail curled around his leg. "The apartment is pretty damaged. We all had to evacuate just in case. And the place across the street..."

Will raised an eyebrow as he glared at the man. "I meant the city. Every building's been damaged. How's *the city*. What was worst hit? What orders have come down?"

The other fire fighter's ears pulled back.

"I... uh, don't know, Sir. We only just got out. We've been waiting for help to arrive."

Will let out a strangled sigh. "You *are* the help, man. I don't care if you were on the clock or not, you're working now. Get moving and make sure everyone has been evacuated. Your orders are to secure this street. Check every building. Those who need it, have them sent to the General."

"I... Yes, Sir," the dog said, taking a step back. A moment later the two of them were gone, leaving Will and Anne alone with the crowd of bloody and dust stained bystanders.

"You're in charge here?" one of them asked. Will had a sinking feeling. "What's going on? Where's the *real* help? A couple of you can't do anything! Where's the government?"

Will closed his eyes for just a moment, taking in a deep breath.

"I'm sure the main force is on the way. I'm just coming in from the countryside. We'll have everything sorted out as soon as we can--"

"*Soon* isn't enough," one of them said, stepping forward, a short female shrew. "I have a business to run! How am I going to do that with the city looking like *this*? You're the emergency services. *I pay my taxes*. Do something!"

Will's expression was placid, but he was holding back the instinct to throttle the woman. He'd only known her for ten seconds as he was already on the verge of reaming her out.

"We're doing everything we can, ma'am," he said before turning briskly and walking away.

"Get back here, dog!" she called after him. "I'm not done with you! What are you going to do?"

Will nearly leapt when Anne set a soft hand on his shoulder.

"You're doing well, my pet," she whispered. "I've seen strong men crack under less..."

Five blocks further and the two of them were deep within the city. Though from the wreckage around them it looked more like a rubble pit.

They'd passed no less than three collapsed buildings. Will's instincts had pulled at him to stop and render assistance, but the further he got the more he realized he was desperately needed at Fire Station Six. The response from all government departments, be they fire, police, or utility were little more than a random hodgepodge. There was no plan or direction. The problem was too large, too great and horrible to be left to chance who and what was saved.

Continuing at a jog, Will could taste the dust and ash on his tongue.

Not two blocks from the station Will and Anne were stopped dead. The looters had returned.

“Well *that* was quick,” Will growled. “Didn't even wait for the dust to settle.”

Anne still stood beside him. “Tragedy brings out the true human spirit,” she whispered. “Sometimes it's a beautiful thing. Sometimes...” She just shrugged.

Axe held tight in his hand, Will stepped up to the clothing store the mob was ransacking. If it had been food, medicine, or even fuel he might have kept walking.

They were robbing an upscale dress store.

“Everyone out,” Will yelled. “Now. We don't have time for this.”

The mob paused for hardly a heartbeat before returning to its spree. Will could hear a rack being overturned within the shop.

A growl formed in the back of his throat.

“It was a *quake*, not a *sale*.”

Anne chuckled.

A moment later Will heard the soft pad of footsteps behind him. Turning, he raised his axe, only to break out in a smile.

The expressionless face of Elm was no more than an arm length from him.

“Sir,” the dog said, voice fighting to stay neutral despite the stress that pulled at it. “I do believe you're attempting to do *our* job.”

Will's lip raised in a grin. “Oh? I haven't seen hide or hair of you mutts in weeks.”

Elm's ear flicked for just a moment. “We've only recently been released from HQ, Sir...” He took a deep breath. “We have a job to do here.”

Lifting his chin, the dog let out a short, harsh howl. A moment later it was picked up by a dozen more dogs. It sent a chill down Will's spine.

In no more than a minute a dozen police officers stood in perfect formation. The mob was just realizing what trouble they were in when the men sprung upon them.

Will smiled. “When you're done here, Elm, there's a building back up the street that--”

The dog cut him off with nothing more than the weary raise of a single brow.

“I'm sorry... Sir, but we have our orders. We're to maintain order, not rescue citizens.”

“*What?*”

The dog simply stood there, face expressionless, but Will knew the man well enough to guess what was going through his mind.

With a sigh Will turned. “Fine. Okay. Whatever. That's *our* job. You just do what you were ordered to and I'll do what *I'm* here for.”

The dog was gone a moment later, but Will would have sworn he heard a sigh of relief from the other man.

“So that's your friend?” Anne said from beside him.

Will glanced over, a slight blush touching his cheeks. “I wouldn't quite say...” He paused for a moment, for something else to talk about. “He's, uh, not like Davies...”

She took a step towards him, setting a feather light hand on his shoulder. “I know that, *dearest*.” There was a chuckle to her voice. “I simply don't have the opportunity to see you on the job often.”

Grinning, Will unconsciously raised a hand to tug at the collar that sat safely under his uniform.

“Perhaps that will change someday, Mis--” He had to cut himself off from using her *proper* title in public. Instead he simply smiled.

It didn't take the police dogs long to clear up the looters. Will would bet his spots they got every single one. Even dishevelled and out of sorts as they were the dogs still moved with military like precision. Will had to admit a touch of jealousy as he watched. As proud of the fire department as he was, they couldn't move like *that*.

“But,” he muttered to himself, “We have the flexibility.”

Another half block on and Anne called him to a halt.

“And this, *dearest*, is where we part ways.”

“What?” Will's tail wrapped about his leg and he had to fight to keep the whine from his voice. “Why? Where are you going?” In private this may have gotten him a reprimand, but in public she simply cocked her head.

“To help who I can,” she said, voice soft. A moment later her soft fingers ran across Will's muzzle, drawing a trembling gasp from his lips. “You can best serve at the station, my pet. Me? I have other strengths. It's been a long time since I've set foot in a hospital, but I think it's time to again. I'll come get you when the time is right. The city needs us both, William. Do not disappoint me.”

With that she was gone. Will watched as she disappeared amongst the smoke and debris, slipping between the milling people as if they weren't even there.

Taking a deep breath, Will could taste the bitter ash on the back of his tongue.

“I have my city to rescue.”

Starting off down the street, Fire Station Six was no more than a half block away. He was passed by a team as he approached.

“What's the situation?” The words came smooth and sure from Will's lips as he slammed open the main apparatus doors like they weighed nothing.

At least a half dozen people leapt clear into the air. Not the least among them a goat. Oscar had been born with white fur, but none the less it seemed to have gone grey in the last twenty-four hours.

“Will!” The goat was by his side in a heartbeat. “Where in the gods' names have you been?”

Will favoured him with nothing more than a neutral expression.

“Where are the teams?”

The goat just scoffed. “*Teams?* What teams? The only men we have are those who were here when the quake hit. Only a couple others have been able to make it in. Everyone else has either been cut off or are looking out for their own.”

Continuing on, Will walked smoothly across the bedlam of the main floor, Oscar following. He took the climb to the second floor slowly, looking out at the men working below him.

“Where’s Davies?”

Oscar just shrugged. “He was off duty when the quake hit. I haven’t seen anyone from his part of town show up. For all I know...”

Will turned, giving him a glare. “If you say it I’ll rip your horns off and shove them--”

The other man took a step back, raising his hands before him. “I didn’t mean it like that. You know I’d never...”

Before he could even finish the sound of someone clearing his throat came from behind Will.

“You know, you really shouldn’t talk about a guy like he isn’t around.”

Will turned, a smile creeping to his lips. The cougar was lounging, wearing nothing but a torn and stained tee shirt, across Will’s desk.

“A bit under dressed, aren’t we?” Will asked.

Davies just grinned as he reached down a hand to slowly, and very deliberately, scratch between his legs. “Hey, don’t blame me. The guy lived clear across the city, I got here as soon as I could. Just be glad he could lend me this shirt. Pants were out of the question. You should have seen his--”

“Yeah, okay, I think I’ve heard enough,” Oscar said, all but sticking his fingers in his ears. “I’ll leave the planning in the hands of you *adults*. You’ll find me on the floor if you need me.”

“So this is it?” Will asked, taking a seat at his desk and glancing over the maps.

The cat hopped off the desk and moved to stand behind Will. He chuckled softly as he set a hand on the dog’s shoulder. “Is there anywhere else you’d rather be?” he asked, voice soft.

Will glanced over his shoulder at him.

“Me?” He paused for a long moment before letting out a sigh. “No. This is *my* city. I’m not leaving, and I have everything, and everyone, I need to do my job. Any word from the government?”

The smile that had pulled at Davies’ lips was gone in a heartbeat.

“I walked past City Hall on the way here.” Will waited for his friend to continue. “And I kept walking. There... there was nothing left. *Nothing*. We won’t be hearing from them for a long time. As it stands right now we’re on our own.”

Will went still for a long moment.

“How many people were in City Hall?” he asked.

Davies turned, looking out the window. “The gods only know. One-thousand, two? All the politicians were in there. So were their families. The Mayor called them all in. Thought it would be the safest place.”