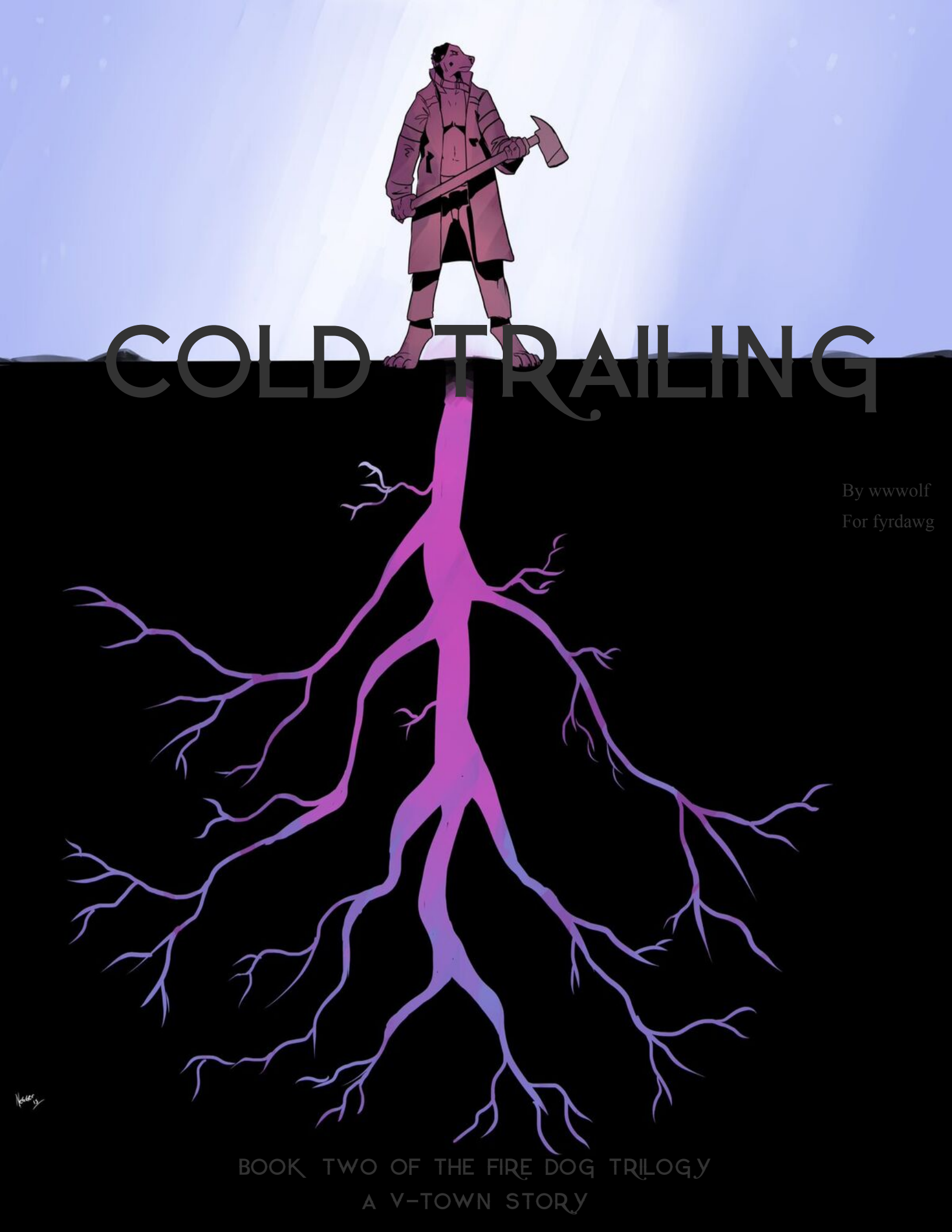




COLD TRAILING

By wwwolf
For fyrdawg

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

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Clean-up Duty.....1

Chapter 2: The Cracks Run Deep.....11

Chapter 3: Some things Never Change.....22

Chapter 3: Some things Never Change

Over the next month Will fought to find an upside to the quake. Tried to find a silver lining to the devastation that was crumbling the city around him. He kept telling himself that *something* good had to come out of the misery. All the bodies they were pulling from the rubble, all the people being pulled off the street by the police. Something good had to be coming from it.

There was none.

Will had taken over Masterson's old office, throwing all the bull's old things – quite literally – out the window to crash into the back lot. Davies and Oscar were sharing his old desk, and Will had taken over official control of the station.

The dog laughed. It was better than crying when he looked at the sheer amount of work that spread out before him. *Official* was a nice sounding word, but anything *official* he did went only as far as the door of this office. He was still nothing more than a joke. There was no one left in the government to give him a promotion if he even wanted one.

The four of them, Will, Davies, Anne, and Oscar had gone to the site of City Hall three weeks ago, at noon. Davies had said there was nothing left to salvage, but Will simply had to see for himself. He couldn't at least *try* to save one of the thousands that had been holed up in that glass and cheap steel coffin.

There had been... nothing.

Will had heard of structures collapsing before. He'd had more than enough experience dealing with fires weakening critical supports. But this... there was nothing left.

Last time Will had stood here City Hall had been one of the largest, tallest, most awe inspiring buildings in the city. It had been the crown jewel of V-town. Its huge, perfect, glittering windows were gone now, reduced to nothing but sand and jagged shards.

Picking his way carefully over the perimeter of the ruins, Will touched his nose to the devastation, searching for any scent, any sound that might suggest there were survivors.

Stale blood... Rotten flesh... Dust, fear, and splintered wood, and... He sighed and stood up. And death.

"Who do we have we can spare?" Will asked to no one in particular. "We can't leave them like this. We need a crew to dig them out. Even if it's nothing but bodies. There... there could still be *someone* left alive. Someone might still be in the sub basements... somewhere."

A moment later he felt a soft hand on his shoulder. He expected to hear Davies' gravelly voice beside him, but rather it was Anne's smooth whisper that came to his ear.

"You've done everything you could, William. They knew the dangers when they ran here seeking refuge from those they claimed to rule. They made their choice."

A sigh came from his other side. Then the cat's slow, heavy, weary voice did break in a moment later. "We'll make sure they get a proper burial, buddy."

Reaching down, Will picked up a single shard of perfect, crystal clear glass, as long as his finger and razor sharp. It caught the sunlight as it cut into the soft pads of his fingers. A single drop of blood slipped from it, staining the already fouled ground.

"This won't happen again," Will said, voice nothing more than a whisper. "Not in *my* city."

The walk back to Fire Station Six was a long, slow one. On their way they saw no less than three chain gangs being led by police dogs. They had become common sights. No matter where you went people were trying to dig themselves out from the rubble. And it was a given that some would try to take advantage of other's misery.

Though the sheer number of people being dragged off to Police HQ left a bitter twinge in the pit of Will's stomach. There was no way *that* many people could be breaking the law. Not in any meaningful sense.

Thankfully though they'd left the fire department alone. And right now that was all Will cared about.

The chain gang trudged past them. Foxes, oni, dogs. A single scrawny brown furred wolf was at the end of the line, a thick leather muzzle clamping his lips shut. Will would have sworn he recognised the man, but before he could get a word in the group was gone, hustled on by the officers.

Will could see a shiver pass through Davies' body, causing the black tip of the cougar's tail to twitch.

"I don't like the way this is sliding," the cat said, voice kept low enough the cops couldn't overhear. "That isn't the same P.D. I grew up with. From what I heard part of their fortress collapsed, taking most of their top brass with it. And whoever is running the show now is playing like the deck of cards has been dipped in cobra venom."

Will shrugged. "And we're much better? I doubt anyone looking at the fire department from the outside would have many good things to say about *us* either. I'm sure whoever the new top dog is, he's just doing what he thinks is best to protect the city."

For just a moment a touch of the cat's normal bravado slipped to his lips. "Speak for yourself, tail-sniffer. Anyone looking at *me* knows for sure I'm the best there is." His grin grew larger, exposing a sliver of his fangs. "And not just at stomping out fires..."

A soft, demure chuckle came from Anne. The sound was so petite, so feminine and inoffensive, but Will could *feel* the undercurrent of power beneath it.

“Mr. Gladstone,” she said, voice soft, almost bordering on weak, “I’m sure we have *no idea* what you’re suggesting.”

Davies raised an eyebrow. “Oh? I’d show you, but you’re just... not my type.” His tail twitched again. “Your boyfriend on the other--”

“Isn’t it time we got back to the station?” Will cut in.

Behind him the cat and dalmatian exchanged a glance, both of them grinning.

That had all been a month ago. As far as Will was concerned things were still in the catbox. City Hall was still flat and the government in chaos, but at least the folks the cops had rounded up were back out on the street.

Something pulled at Will’s gut though. There had been talk of ‘reconstruction’. The dog was all for getting the city back on its feet, but something in the way it was being done just didn’t seem right. He could feel the strings being pulled.

All the men and women who’d spent time in the holding cells had been released on the condition they support this ‘reconstruction’. And an order had come from Police HQ that *every* man and woman was to devote a portion of their time to cleaning up the city.

Charity and civic duty were all and fine, but Will felt a touch of unease when the government started legislating good will.

He sighed. Under other circumstances he might have raised a fuss – though to be honest with himself it was unlikely – but with his work so thick and heavy Will didn’t even have time to get excited about it.

Fire Station Six wasn’t the only standing station any more. Over the last couple of weeks the mutts who’d run the stations before the quake began worming their way out of the woodwork. Will was happy for all the backup he could get, but every time he tried to find out where they’d been when they were most needed the men had just looked away and muttered something under their breath.

That had been why Will had sent out a letter yesterday to the five other fire houses that had come back online. Stations Two, Three, Four, Five, and Seven.

Station One... No one would be hearing from it any time soon. Station One had been adjacent to City Hall. Any brothers who’d had the misfortune to be in there during the quake...

Will shook his head and stood up.

The invitation had been for the other Station Chiefs to meet Will here in Fire Station Six at noon. Under more favourable conditions he would have preferred to meet on neutral ground, a conference room or something of that sort, but that wasn’t likely to happen.

For just a moment Will smiled. He could still remember the curses that had come full volume from Oscar when he’d told the goat they’d need to clear the main bay for the meeting. The Chief Engineer had *not* been pleased when he’d been told he – and his men and equipment – would be forced to clear out for four hours.

Davies on the other hand had, the cat had just about had a riot.

Where Oscar had been tasked with keeping up to the never ending stream of calls, Davies had taken it upon himself to – Will just shook his head – *arrange* the meeting.

Where the working gear normally stood Davies had dragged in a large polished oak table and a set of stiff, hard, high backed chairs. Even now the cat was down there, buffing it to a last minute shine and setting out rawhide place mats for the Station Chiefs.

Though Will had to smile. Davies was many things, but he was *not* stereotypical. No matter what one might say about the cat, he was hardly playing the interior decorator role. Instead Davies was strutting about, having the time of his life making this look... manly. The only thing missing from the 'lodge' motif was a boar's head hanging from the wall... they already had a pair of axes over the doors.

Stepping onto the main floor, Will looked over to his friend. "Are we ready?"

The cat smiled. "I hope so. The mutts are lined up outside."

Will blinked. "*What?* You're making them wait on the street!"

Davies didn't even bother to grin. "The invitation was for noon. That's when I'm opening the door. Until then they can rot. They all buggered off when we needed them most. They are *not* getting in here until I let them."

A growl grew in the back of Will's throat. "And who decided it was *you* calling the shots?"

Slowing to a stop, the cat turned to look at Will. "Buddy..." He took a deep breath. "You know I love you... and I *mean* it. But sometimes you can use a little," he coughed, "Help asserting yourself."

Will's growl grew. "I *do not* need your help in this. I am the Station Chief around here."

Davies grinned. "And there we go! See, now you're in the right frame of mind to deal with these buggers!"

With that the cat spun on his toe and strode towards the main apparatus door. Pulling it wide, the ushered then waiting men in.

"Chief Hamish will see you now," he said without a trace of irony.

Suddenly Will felt very, very small.

He knew each and every one of the men who stormed into the room, and they all, to a man, glared daggers at him.

"What in the name of the gods is going on here, Hamish?" the first one asked. A reed thin rat, Station Chief Atom had been in charge of Will's first posting.

The dog swallowed hard.

"Glad you could all, ah, make it," he stammered out. "Please, take a seat."

Behind them, the apparatus door boomed closed.

"Okay, dog, who died and made you god?"

Will had to fight to keep his forehead from sinking to the table. It had been two hours. Two frigging, gods forsaken hours.

And they still couldn't even agree on enough to *start the meeting*.

"I'm just acting as a moderator," Will ground out between his teeth. "Fire Station Six was the only one to keep running during the emergency. We're all just here to keep things functioning."

The other Chiefs, an oni, a rabbit, a hippo, and a mangy looking ferret, stared at him, out for blood. It was the ferret, a man by the name of Stone, who was center stage now.

"Wolf dung! You're just using this as an excuse to do a power grab. We all know it," the ferret spat. "You think you're going to take over the department just because your station was the only one not to get overrun? We were still doing our jobs."

Atom cleared his throat. "Were you, Stone? If I remember correctly *you* were off at home, cowering with your girlfriend when the riots started up. Didn't you leave your Assistant Chief to fend for himself?"

Before Will could even get a word out the chiefs had descended into an all out screaming match. It was all the dog could do to sit back, his mouth agape.

These were *fully grown men* arguing and screaming like spoiled children. Any slight they could dig up, any grievance they could bring to light, was hurled across the table like so much mud.

"Gentleman, please..." Will tried to cut in.

"Shut up, mutt," the hippo snarled at him. "You're not even a real chief. Keep your nose out of this or we'll have you thrown out."

Will blinked, his lips slowly raising as a growl grew in his chest. "Gentleman..." his voice was calm. "Gentleman..." his voice was wracked with a low growl. "*Gentleman!*"

In a single motion Will stood, hooking his hands beneath the large oak table. A moment later the table was sent flying, overturning with all the paraphernalia that had sat atop it crashing to the ground. The chiefs scrambled back, rushing out of the way.

"*That is enough.*"

Stepping forward into the void where the table had stood, Will stalked towards them, his fur standing on end. "Would you flea-bitten morons shut up for *just one minute?*"

The sudden silence that fell over the room was nothing short of oppressive. The only sound to be heard was Will's low, steady growl.

"The lot of you can fight amongst yourselves once the city is back up and running," Will said, words coming out slowly, carefully formed. "You can play your power games, do your politics. Me? I don't care. I don't gods damn care. Got it? I'm here to do a job. A job that *none of you did*. You want to be the Fire Chief when this is all over? Fine. Take it up with the Mayor. When we have one. Until then? Until then you can shut your filthy mouths and do your bloody jobs! The only reason your stations are running again is thanks to Fire Station Six. You're using our surplus equipment. We were the ones who directed your staff when you bugged off. You want to play? Fine, let's *play*. I'll take on anyone who thinks they can do a better job than I can."

Lips pulled all the way back, Will turned in a slow circle, glaring at the men who stood around him, daring a single one of them to challenge him.

Atom sat back in his chair, a hint of a smile to his lips. The rat raised an eyebrow.

“You think you're up to this, *kid?*”

Will spun on him. “You can do better?”

Atom crossed his arms. “Frankly? No. None of us have ever been in a situation like this before. Training is one thing. Dealing with it is something totally different. You want to take on the mantle of Fire Chief? You have *my* blessing.” The rat cocked a half smile. “I wouldn't want that job at the best of times.”

Will opened his mouth, but nothing would come. He'd been prepared for the rat to contest him, to belittle him, to... anything but *support* him.

“So,” Atom continued, “Anyone else have something to add, or shall we conclude this charade? The dog was running the show before we ever got here. If you've got something to say, we might as well get it over with. Me? I just want to get lunch, then back to my station. We're still draining the sewer backup out of my office.”

Will fought to hold his lips up as he made a slow circle, staring down each chief in turn. Stone glared back at him, but didn't say a word.

At last returning to his seat, Will took a deep breath. Only then did he realize the expensive oak table still lay off to the side. In pieces.

“Frig.”

Not at all to his surprise Davies appeared at his elbow not a heartbeat later, hefting a tray of sandwiches.

“That,” the cat whispered, “Is coming out of *your pay cheque...*”

The rest of the day went quietly enough. Well, *quiet* being a relative term.

There were still more calls in a single afternoon than they used to get in a week, but at least they were back to dealing with problems that Will was used to.

Though, the dog noted, paperwork started to arrive almost the moment the other chiefs walked out the door. Equipment requests, personal reports, and status updates. Will had written these types of things dozens if not hundreds of times. But this was the first time he'd ever had to *read* them.

Setting the papers aside for a moment, he turned to focus on the here and now. A hundred requests for new equipment weren't of much use when there was no place to buy from.

The familiar ring of an alarm and Will glanced up. Out his window he could see Oscar leading a crew out the main doors. The men were tired, but they still performed exactly as they should.

Things were getting better.

Taking a deep breath, Will mulled over the words that Atom had said just moments before he'd left.

You were wrong about one thing, Will, he'd said. There is a new mayor. I saw him. Hand picked by the Police Commissioner he was. I think the two of you will get along... fine.

A slight shudder ran down Will's spine. He hadn't liked how the other man had said *fine*. He could only imagine what kind of mutt had the top job now.

Letting out a sigh, Will turned back to his pile of papers. He'd worry about that later. Right now he had work to do.

The day seemed never to end. With the time the Chief's meeting had set him back Will was working long into the night. Davies had gone back to his flat, arm in arm with his latest hook up, and Oscar had just clocked out after a fourteen hour shift, walked home by his wife.

Will, he was still at his desk. The night shift were in and the sun was well past down.

"Uh, Sir?"

Will glanced up as one of the men knocked on the office door. *His* office door, the dog had to remind himself.

"Yes?" Will's said, tired and groggy. Letting out a yawn that made his jaw ache, he managed to make the other man shy back a step.

Pensively stepping through the doorway into the dim office, the man held out an envelope. This just arrived via courier, Sir."

Will shook his head. "The courier services are working again?"

The man just shrugged. "It would seem so. He said the letter was for you, personally."

Will instantly felt a knot of stress form between his shoulder as he reached out for it. What in the gods' names was it now? Another power play by the other chiefs?

The man was gone before Will could even thank him. Will rolled his eyes. Smart man, he could likely guess this was trouble.

The envelope was made of heavy paper. And there was no address on the front.

Will's brow pulled down.

Slipping the claw of his thumb under the flap, he gave it a quick tug. A moment later it gave.

No more than a heartbeat after that he knew who it was from. The stress that had bunched his muscles was gone.

Her scent was unmistakable. No other man may be able to pick it up so quickly, but Will could always tell it was *her*.

Moving slower now, with an air of formality, Will unfolded the letter.

Anne's perfect handwriting was like none he'd ever seen. Her letters were smooth, elegant. As far as the dog knew not a soul in V-town wrote like she did. Cat's had a scratchy, hard hand, dogs a lazy and looping scrawl.

Anne, her handwriting was clean and fine. Of all things she looked most like...

Shaking his head again, he forced himself back to the here and now.

The letter was short and simple. At the same time it made him both whimper and smile.

She'd found employment at V-town General, just shortly after the quake. They were looking for anyone they could find, and she was more than qualified. She, like him, worked all hours of the day and night to help the city back to its feet. And it seemed that she would be working all night this time.

She wouldn't be home, and her suspiciously gentle words suggested that Will not bother with the long walk himself. There was no reason for him to take the hour's journey to find nothing but a cold, dark house.

Just the softest shadow of a whimper worked its way from the back of Will's throat. This would be the first evening since they'd moved in together that he wouldn't be with her. That he wouldn't feel her soft body, run his hands down her...

Like the steel jaws of a trap, Will put an end to *that* line of thought. Going down that road would do him no good tonight. All it would do is end him in a useless state of self-pity.

Holding the letter close to his nose, Will took a long, deep breath, pulling her fleeting scent from the paper. Even that tiny respite put his heart, at least to some small measure, at peace.

Rising, Will walked over to close his office door and turn off the few remaining lights. Now the only illumination came from the large front window that overlooked the street.

Pulling off his shirt, Will stepped up to the window, setting his fingers on the hard, cold glass. At least for a moment the city looked still. The world was still in chaos, but this small block was in peace.

The thought of trekking to Davies' flat for the night slipped through Will's mind, that that was quickly put to rest. The cat had left arm in arm with only the gods knew who. Will was sure even his best friend wouldn't appreciate his sudden appearance.

Clearing a small space on the bare floor, Will lied down, tucking the tip of his tail against his nose. No blankets, a shiver ran through his body.

Outside a soft rain began to fall, but the dog didn't hear it, having fallen into a light, fitful sleep.

The next morning came, in Will's opinion, far too soon.

A crick to his spine and a whimper still lingering in the back of his throat, Will slowly uncurled as the light of morning woke him.

Stumbling slowly down to the kitchen on the main floor, Will still had yet to button up his rumpled shirt, pausing only long enough to hide his collar. His dishevelled appearance raised a few eyebrows from the men but not one of them said a word.

Pulling open the station refrigerator, Will was disappointed to find it almost empty. Not a single cut of meat or long forgotten sandwich he could scavenge for a quick meal.

But, despite it all Will's lips did flick up for just a moment. Back, pressed up against the very bottom rear of the fridge, sat a small cache of cans. Around them wrapped a neon red sheet of paper. The message was written in thick, black, bold letters.

Drink one of these and I will stuff the can up your--

The message continued around the curve of the cans.

Pulling one of his precious Pepsis from the stash, Will didn't have to think twice before pulling the tab. If any morning deserved a pick me up this was it.

The slightest touch of disappointment crossed Will's face when the can failed to pop as it

should. Only one in ten cans still held its proper fizz, and it looked like he hadn't lucked out this time.

Cola in hand, Will took a slow walk out the back door of the station. Pulling down a long drink, he savoured the touch of sweetness.

Then his nose twitched.

Lowering the can, Will had to fight not to spit. His brief moment of respite was shattered in an instant.

There was a stench out here. A sharp, sour, rotting reek that cut through every other scent like a sharp claw through fat.

Forcing the mouthful down, Will fought to keep his face placid.

Walking slowly, he stalked around the corner of the building, out to the side where the alley entrance waited.

There huddled a skeletally thin rat. The man was hunched forward over the door, hands jittering back and forth against the lock.

"What in the gods names do you think you're doing?" Will's voice was calmer than he'd expected it to be, but there was still enough of a growl to it rumble in his chest.

The rat's head snapped up. Even from ten feet away Will could see the creature's pupils contract to pinpricks.

Though Will was, frankly, more concerned with the sad state of affairs the rest of the man's body was in. Even wearing a heavy sweater in the summer heat, Will could instantly see there was little more than fur and bones to him.

A high, unintelligible shriek escaped the rat's lips. A heartbeat later he was sprinting headlong down the alley, away from Will and towards the street.

Not five feet before he reached it a dark shadow loomed across the entrance.

"Oof!" The rat and the newcomer fell sprawled out in a heap. "Hey! Get off, get off!"

There was the sound of fist hitting flesh and the rat was sent flying out of sight, around the corner.

Setting his cola on the asphalt, Will ran as fast as his stiff legs would carry him. A moment later the dog rolled his eyes.

Davies, clad in nothing but a pair of light black leather pants, lay dazed on the ground. The rat was nowhere to be seen.

"What in the gods' names was *that*?" the cat yowled.

Will just shook his head. "My best guess? A druggie." Will snorted, trying to get the scent out of his nose. "Or at least that's what I'd say by the stench."

Taking Will's offered hand, Davies was on his feet a moment later. The cat took a deep breath. "If you say so, man. I can't smell a thing." He paused for a moment and grinned. "Then again, that brute last night did have quite the aftershave..."

Will rolled his eyes. "Don't need to hear it," before grinning. "Hope he was worth it. You had

him in your bed last night rather than *me*.”

Turning, Will was pleased to all but hear the cat's jaw hit the pavement.

“*What!*”

Will kept walking.

“*What? Wait, Will! Get your spotted tail back here and--*”

The rest of the morning passed as casually as Will could hope for. A half dozen calls, shortages of every kind, but he managed to keep his head above water.

The post, it seemed, truly was coming around again. Or at least the government post was. A nervous looking hare showed up with his sack that morning to drop off a handful of letters.

One in particular caught Will's eye. 'From the office of Police Commissioner Sayer'. Will couldn't even remember an officer named *Sayer* likely so much as a Commissioner.

Slitting it open with his thumb, Will read through the pages and pages within. This man, it appeared, was just as anal as his predecessors. He covered everything that had happened since the riots had begun. Including the quake, death of the police brass, and the arrest and subsequent release of nearly a fifth of V-town's population.

And, Will noted, in a small addendum at the bottom, the Commissioner had used his emergency powers to name an interim mayor. Some random man by the name of *Thomas Taggart*.

Will just sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Wonderful. Likely picked the poor sod so he'd have someone under his thumb.”

“What's that?” Davies asked from Will's old desk, just the other side of the door.

Will made a paper aeroplane of the page and sent it coasting in the cat's general direction.

“This. Looks like the mutts have taken it upon themselves to set up a new Mayor. Knowing them, they'll have picked a pure-breed tail kisser with a spine of gelatin.”

Davies snatched the paper out of midair.

“Taggart? Haven't I heard that name somewhere before?”

Will shrugged. “Probably. Knowing life around here he's likely a career politician. Or, as I'll repeat, *a mutt*.”

Davies shrugged. A moment later the paper was firmly in the trash can.

“I wouldn't worry about it, buddy,” he said, sauntering into the office. “With life around here it doesn't matter much who sits in the big seat. They're just a useless figurehead anyway. That's why we don't even have real elections any more.”

Will grinned as Davies leaned on the front of his desk, not surprisingly offering him a perfect view of the cat's leather clad backside. For not the first time Will had to wonder how the feline was even able to *fit* in those fur tight pants, likely so much as walk.

“Guess so. But at least I've got you, right man?”

Davies laughed. "You'll always have me. You couldn't get rid of me if you tried." He grinned over his shoulder. "You'll always be my best friend," the cat added with a wink. "You know too many of my secrets for me to ever let you out of my sight. Plus," his voice fell to a coy growl, "How will I ever get a chance to make a pass at that spotty tail of yours if I let you go?"

There was a long pause before Will chuckled. "Heh. Yeah." He cleared his throat before standing up and walking around the desk. "Davies, I... I just want to let you know how much it's meant, having you beside me since all this started. You and Oscar have been the only two people who've stood beside me through all this. Just, just *thanks*. If there's anything I can ever do to make it up to you..."

Davies smiled. Softer, less predatory than before. "Buddy," reaching out, he slung a hand over Will's shoulder. "I'll always be here for you. That's what friends are for, eh?"

The rest of the day went smoothly enough, but Will couldn't wait until it got closer to five o'clock. Tonight he had a plan to ensure he didn't spend the evening alone.

He wasn't sure if Anne would approve, but a nagging, tireless, needful itch pulled at the back of his mind. He *had* to see her again, if only for a moment.

Oscar was off duty, so Will handed the station off to one of the Sub Chiefs. The man was competent enough, and Will was more than relieved to get away from the building. Dressed in his civilian clothing, a simple button up shirt and a worn pair of bluejeans, the dog took to the street, in the direction of V-town General.

There was a smile to his lips, but part of his purpose of going was less uplifting.

The walk to the General was long and gruelling. It was a bit of a hike on the best of days, and this was far from them. Dozens of roads were still closed from the quake, and he was forced to detour or just plain *climb* over heaps of debris.

Though even with the sorry state of the city, Will was still amazed how quickly things were springing back. Stores – if few in number – were already open, and people were working on all sides to clean, patch, and repair.

The dog even noticed some folks that looked suspiciously organized. He had a feeling they were the Mayor's much vaulted *reconstruction* teams. Will eyed them suspiciously. He'd yet to hear much about them, but what little paperwork he'd received suggested that a fireman's overtime hours counted towards time on a reconstruction team. At least that would mean Will wouldn't be short-handed.

A few moments later the old, weather beaten walls of V-town General came into view. There were more scorch marks than Will remembered, and spider web cracks running up no too few walls, but it stood.

And, to Will's dismay, there was a line of sick and wounded running out the door, across the street, and around the corner.

Standing there watching, Will saw no fewer than three emergency service teams run past, carrying the wounded on stretchers. They bolted past the line, heading for emergency.

“Well,” Will muttered, “Looks like we're not the only folks who are busy.”

Following a team in, nobody stopped him. Long ago the dog had learned to walk, to act, to move, in control. It didn't matter if he was in uniform or out, he was still a fireman.

It took some time to find the room he was looking for. Every bed was booked, and some double booked, but this particular patient had arrived before the quake had hit.

The gift shop was just as overcrowded as the rest of the building, but Will managed to exchange a few dollars for a honey-oat bar. He had no idea if that was what the kid was into, or even if he was fit enough to eat, but it was the best he could do.

Third floor, very back. Will had never seen a room so small. A bed, a window, there wasn't even enough room for a chair.

“Hey, Kid,” Will said, giving the door a soft knock. “You awake?”

The chestnut brown form under the covers stirred.

Stepping in, Will looked for somewhere, anywhere to sit. The bed was too small to share, and it wasn't as if there was any other furniture to be seen. At long last he propped his rump up against the windowsill. The hard trim bit into his jeans, but he wasn't about to complain.

Will had gotten reports on the horse's progress from the other men over the last couple of weeks. Will had to glance away for just a moment.

Not so long ago Zack had been a handsome young stallion. One of the youngest members of the department, he'd stuck with Will until...

The dog took a deep breath and looked the horse up and down. Well, at least he looked better than when he'd been dropped off here.

There were still long gashes down the colt's chest, and his arm was in a cast, but what pulled at Will the most was the wire that held the kid's jaw shut.

Reaching out, Will set a hand on his shoulder.

“You're looking not so bad there, Zack,” he said, forcing up a smile.

For all the world it looked like the horse wanted to tell him something, but the mumble that came from between his lips was next to useless. Instead he sat back, listening to Will tell him of what he'd missed.

Leaving Zack's room an hour later, Will had to admit he was feeling better. The kid may not be looking great, but he *was* getting better. He was a good kid.

He'd almost felt guilty to give him the honey-oat bar with his jaw wired shut, but seeing his eyes light up at the sight of it made Will chuckle.

“Now,” the dog muttered, heading off down the hallway, “How in the world to find...”

Pausing at one of the nursing stations, Will caught the attendant's eye.

“You wouldn't happen to know where I could find Anne...” he trailed off, realizing to his horror that he didn't even know her last name. “Uh, *Anne*. A dalmatian. She's volunteering.”

The nurse, a soft furred cat, looked up, blinking slowly. “You mean Doctor Hamish? Her office is in the recovery wing. Second floor.”

Will cocked his head. “Oh. Thanks. Doctor Hamish. Yeah.”