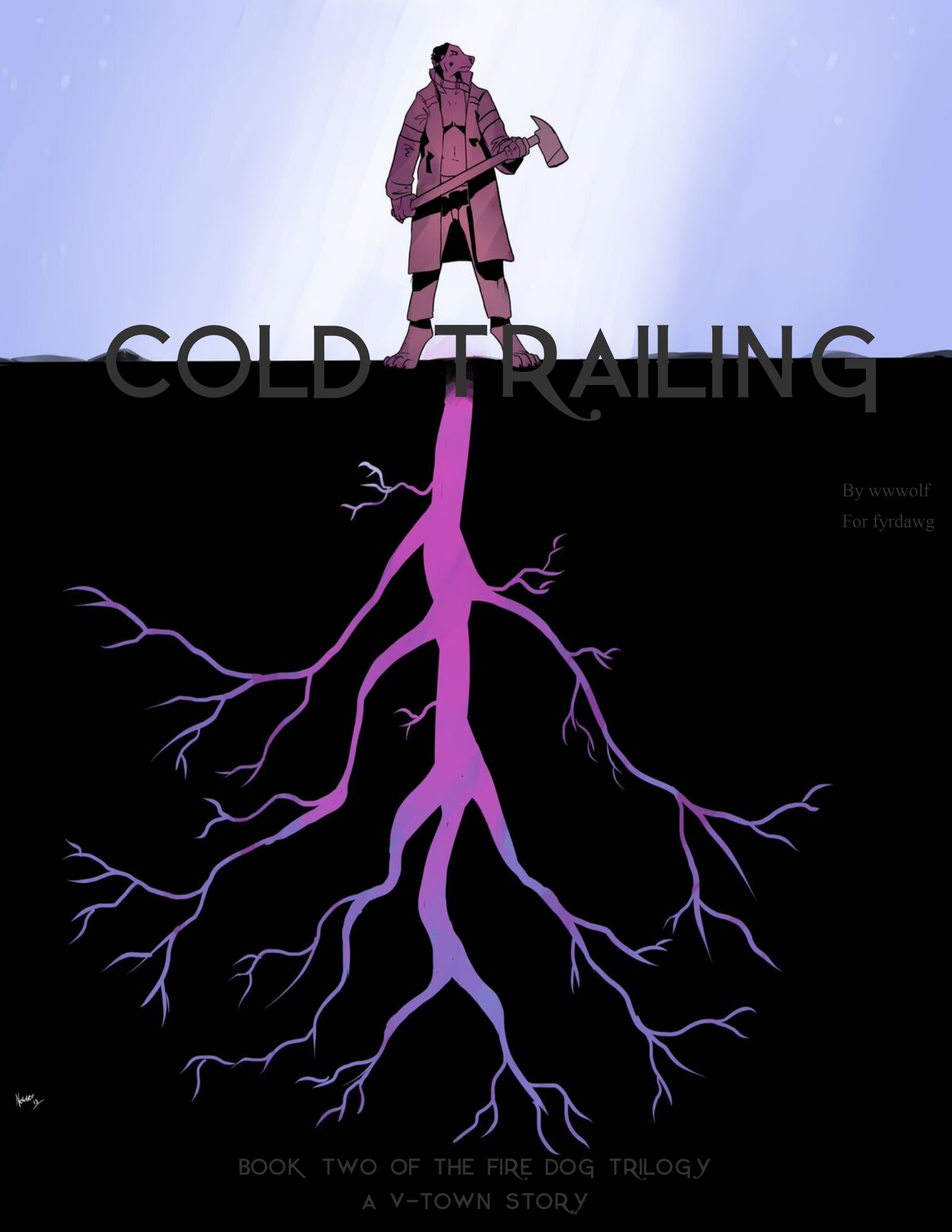




COLD TRAILING

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 4: Meet The New Boss, Same As The Old Boss.....35

Chapter 5: Longhorn.....46

Chapter 5: Longhorn

At long last Will made it once again back onto the street. Rebecca was nowhere in sight. He had to hand it to the woman, she could move when she wanted to, even weighed down as she'd been with enough papers to choke a horse.

Running a hand over his nose, Will had to fight back a sneeze. There was a sour scent to the air. It permeated the building, in fact it had been hanging around *all* the government buildings he'd stomped through that day. He pushed it aside. It, more than anything, smelled like sewer backup.

Down the busy street, Will had to take up the dance that any urban dweller is well familiar with. Dodging to one side, weaving to the other, stopping dead to let someone with a baby stroller past. The mill and churn of hundreds of bodies, all going in different directions, was unending.

Out of the corner of his eye Will would have sworn he saw a shadow detach itself from the aged and pitted brick wall of a building.

A scent hit him flat across the nose.

Will stopped dead. A mole that had been behind him ran flat into his back, letting out a curse.

Changing direction a heartbeat later, he fought against the current of traffic, forcing people as gently as he could from his way. His eyes locked to where that shadow had been not a moment before.

Taking a deep breath, he could pick up something beneath the milling scents of the populace.

It smelled of... He took another breath and a sneeze nearly lifted him from the ground. It smelled of... He didn't have words to put to the scent.

But it drove him to move faster.

Not seconds later he was in the mouth of the alleyway. There was no one to be seen, but Will could pick up another scent here, a mortal one.

Pressing his wet black nose to the old stone where the shadow had been, Will closed his eyes for just a moment and breathed deep.

The dog's tail unconsciously slipped down to wrap around his leg. The scent was that of a wolf. But no mere man. Any canine can tell you just how much a scent can convey. Species, sex, age, health, mood. Size.

This wolf. This wolf was *huge*.

And, Will's lips rose, exposing his fangs, he was a threat. Will couldn't place the corruption that hung heavy in the wolf's scent, but it was there. He *knew* it.

The wolf was a threat.

Moving slowly now, Will began down the alleyway, taking in a breath with every step, following the wolf's scent. For any other it would be all but impossible with the whirlwind of the city ripping it to shreds, but Will could follow the stench of corruption like a trail of neon paint.

Will's fingers itched for his axe, but it was far away, resting against his desk back at the fire station. He'd wanted to bring it to his meeting with the mayor, but Davies had talked him out of it.

Another step forward and Will saw something move in the corner of his vision. Spinning, the dalmatian sprinted towards the retreating shadow. Will prided himself on being more than fit enough for his job, but the shadow moved far quicker than he could ever hope to.

Will had to blink to make sure he was seeing it right. It was, true as he could tell, a *shadow*. All but dark as the night, there were only the slightest flecks of grey lighting up the coal dark pelt like stars.

It disappeared down a curve in the alley. Will grinned.

Whoever this was, it was obvious they didn't know the city well. Will took the other turn, sprinting until his toes were sore and cut on the hard pavement.

Just up ahead...

Not a heartbeat later Will could hear the soft pant of a canine coming this way. Yet even on the hard ground the creature's footfalls were silent.

Will shivered for just a moment. Was this a hunter?

Tensing, Will leapt. The wolf streaked around the corner exactly as he'd expected. Will slammed into him like a freight train.

They went down in a heap. Will growled and snapped, but the titan of a wolf never fought back. He hardly moved, going limp under Will's weight.

Will expected he'd have to hold back from gagging, expecting the wolf's scent to be as bad as that of the junkie's. In that, at least, he was relieved. There was still the bile like stench of... something, but it was light and fleeting.

Hitting hard to the pavement, Will fought to remember basic training he'd received so long ago. Taking someone down wasn't normally part of being a fireman, but he'd received other training before settling on this career.

The wolf didn't put up so much as the thought of a fight as Will grabbed his wrists, pinning them behind his back.

"Who are you?" Will asked, trying to keep the snarl from his voice. There was no answer. "Who are you?" the dalmatian repeated, a growl growing.

The wolf turned his head. Will could just see one of his clear blue eyes.

Somehow Will knew the wolf was judging him.

Will could feel the wolf's body roll like a tide beneath him, taking a deep breath. With that the creature went stiff.

He didn't know how, but Will *knew* the wolf had fixated on his scent, as he had the other man's.

"*Let me go,*" the wolf said. His voice was deep as a well, slow and steady. There was no emotion to it.

Will's mind was racing, trying to decide what to do with this wolf. He couldn't take him to the cops, he'd done nothing wrong. Will narrowed his eyes. He'd have to take him to Mistress.

"You're coming with me," Will began, but he never had the opportunity to finish.

The wolf took a breath, and his expression changed. The man's whole demeanour transformed in a heartbeat. Where a moment ago he had been browbeaten, soft, almost submissive, that was no longer.

The wolf was huge to begin with, but now with his fur standing on end he seemed to fill the entire alley. Will had been sure, confident when he'd held the wolf's wrists in a lock. Now he knew he'd been nothing but cocky.

In a single smooth motion the wolf stood up and tossed Will aside. Will was hardly a lightweight, but the dog near offhandedly threw him to smack hard against a dirt stained brick wall.

Vision blurring, Will looked up as the pitch black shadow stalked towards him. He fought to focus on the flecks of silver, fought to make out the clear blue eyes.

A moment later one hand closed around Will's throat. The wolf's fingers were long enough to encompass the dalmatian's entire neck.

Leaning close, their noses almost touching, the wolf took a long, deep breath.

And sneezed.

Blinking, Will sneezed too.

There was a long pause. When the wolf spoke Will could hear something else in his voice, something familiar.

"No. You will come with *me*. Young... Young Master will see to you. He'll know what to do with your kind. He's dealt with them before."

Will *did not* like the sound of 'Young Master'. The way the wolf said it reminded Will of...

Striking out with his foot, Will slammed his clawed toe into the wolf's exposed groin.

For just a moment the creature didn't seem to respond. He almost didn't seem to notice. Then his head cocked as though he'd never felt such a thing before. As if it were an unknown.

Then his pupils dilated.

A heartbeat later a scream of pain escaped the wolf's lips and Will found himself unceremoniously dropped to the ground.

Vision still clearing, he just saw the shadow streak off down the alleyway. It was gone not a

moment later.

Will fought to follow, one hand reaching out to lean on a nearby wall, but the creature was gone, disappeared into a busy thoroughfare.

Will could track his scent anywhere, but not here. He'd know the man when they crossed paths again, but for now he was gone.

Will's footsteps smeared the wolf's blood for a good hundreds strides after that, but it was long gone by the time he returned to Fire Station Six. And that was good. He could hear Davies' voice from a half dozen blocks away.

No one can yowl like a pissed off cat.

Will had learned long ago that Davies was about as even tempered a man as he was ever likely to meet. He could count on one hand how many times he'd heard the cat get *this* worked up.

Padding quietly up the street, Will couldn't see anything obviously wrong. The building still stood, and the main apparatus doors were open, allowing in the warm summer air. There weren't any flames to be seen and no teams were rushing madly about.

It wasn't until Will was practically upon them that the stench hit him like a hammer to the face. It was like that of the wolf, but worse. A hundred times worse. And far more familiar.

Lips peeling free of his fangs, Will stepped around the door. He wasn't the least surprised what he saw.

The bull Masterson stood in the middle of the main floor, a finger pressed into Davies' chest. He and Oscar were blocking the bugger from climbing the stairs to the second floor.

"This is still *my* station, Mr. Gladstone," the bull said. Will was surprised how calm the man's voice was, how smooth and unhurried his words. It was as if this was a different person. No bulging veins, no screamed obscenities, no idle threats.

It was Davies who looked ready to snap. The cat's tail swished back and forth behind him, and Will wouldn't have been surprised to see him leap upon the bull, ready to take his pound of flesh.

"Ain't no more." Davies' voice was slipping, falling back into a streetwise twang Will only heard when he was under stress. "Ain't your house no more. Straight from the mayor. Will's running this place now. You're out on your tail."

"Yes..." Masterson's voice was smooth and coy. "Where is our good friend? I've been looking for him. He's not in his apartment."

Davies' eyes narrowed. "You keep away from him or I'll--"

Will cleared his throat.

"You were looking for me?"

Will could almost hear Oscar sigh in relief, but Davies only seemed to tense up further. "Go 'way, Will. I got this."

Masterson for his part turned smoothly to look Will up and down. The bull looked just as good as last time Will had seen him. Better.

Lost ten pounds, and with his coat brushed and horns shined, he almost looked like he was running for office.

“William...” His voice was smooth and calm. Like he was inviting him to tea. “I haven’t seen you in some time. Congratulations. I hear you’ve had a promotion.”

Will narrowed his eyes as he took a step forward, trying not to gag on the bull’s scent.

“What do you want, Masterson? You’re not welcome here.”

The bull just shrugged. “So I see. I was just stopping by to pick up a few... personal things I left in my office, but it seems I won’t be getting up there for a while. How about we have a chat?”

Will cocked his head. “A chat? About what?”

Will glanced over as Davies took a step towards him. “No. Don’t do it, Will. I’ve got a...”

“Don’t listen to that stray, William,” Masterson said, voice smooth as he threw an arm over the dalmatian’s shoulder. “I just want to talk, that’s all.” He smiled, favouring Will with a near blinding view of his perfect, square, bleached white teeth. “Is that so bad?”

Glancing over his shoulder, Will nodded quickly at his friend. “I’ve got this,” he said. Even from this distance he could hear the cougar growling.

Five steps and they were out of the station, heading down the street. Will nearly had to blink, the bull could *move*.

“So, Will,” he continued, as if they were long lost friends, “A lot has changed since we last talked, hasn’t it?” He chuckled softly. “But a few things... haven’t.” He could see the bull pull in a deep breath through his nose. “You’re still with...” He said the word like a curse, like her name was a dark omen.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Will said. His words were quick, tight. The simple act of taking a breath this close to the bull was like standing next to an open sewer, the sharp, biting stench pulling at the back of his throat.

A moment later Masterson lead him in one last turn, down an alleyway and just out of sight of the main street. As far as he could tell they were alone.

“Alright, Will,” for once Will thought he saw something in the bull’s eyes. A spark of comradely, honesty, no matter how twisted and perverted it might be. “No games. You are an avatar. So...” he took a deep breath, “So am I. How it happened I haven’t a clue. You won’t believe me, but I don’t have anything against you. Well, not you *personally*. You’re a dog, a...” He paused, searching for a term, “A commoner. We’re different types of people. You’re just a fire fighter. Me? I’m bound for more. You know that. I’m not sorry for the way we worked together, but you have to admit I made a better station. A better man out of you.”

Will stood silent.

Brow drawing down, Masterson took a deep breath, coughing slightly. “Fine. But we still have to work together. For the betterment of the city. You hate me, I hate you. Fine. But there is still the city to worry about, right?” Eyes narrowing, Will nodded his head. “The government’s in shambles, we can both agree on that. The city won’t last long the way it is. It needs a strong head, a person who can take it under control and... guide it the way it needs to go. We both know that people are stupid and prone to panic. It’s a miracle we survived the quake at all. For the city to return to its former glory

we're going to need someone to rule the city properly. Someone to put it on a leash. We're going to need a... *master*."

Will blinked when the bull said that word. There was something more to it, something greater. He said Master the same way Will said Mistress. But more. Will worshipped his Mistress, loved her, needed her. The way the bull said *Master*... there was a tone, an inflection.

Will shivered.

There was something not right there.

"All you need to do," the bull continued, "Is think about it logically. We're already in control. We already run things. Just think about it. Do you want to be on the winning side for once? All you have to do is tell me about... *her*?" His voice raised slightly. With mild amusement Will realized he wasn't even sure of Anne's gender.

Shrugging the bull's arm off his shoulder, Will took a step away. "You think I would betray her trust?" Pausing for just a moment, he realized he'd answered at least one of the bull's questions. "Get out of my sight, beefsteak, before I serve you up as a main course at dinner tonight."

There was a long pause. The only sound was that of the city going about its business, that sounded so far away.

A cold smile slipped to the bull's lips. "Stupid, stupid, William. I gave you the offer. I knew you wouldn't take it, but he insisted I try." Will could just hear the inflection on 'he' wasn't the same as *master*. "I gave you the choice to join the winning team. Stupid, moron dog."

Will took a step forward, ready to brush past the man and back out onto the street, when a hand closed around his wrist.

The dog's nose twitched.

The scent of open sewage had grown.

Another hand closed around his other wrist. And a pair of arms about his waist.

Struggling, Will fought to escape as Masterson took a step forward, coming nose to nose. "Now, you dirty mutt, you're going to learn to respect your betters." He smiled. "We'll see how strong you are when you meet your proper *Master*." His grin widened, eyes dancing. "You'll forget your current bitch before the night is through." Reaching down, the bull scratched at his crotch. "And once you've been drained dry of information he'll give you to me, broken and willing, as my toy." Glancing over Will's shoulder, he barked an order to the men who held him. "Take him away."

Straining against the hands that held him, Will barred his teeth at the bull. "I'll make you regret this. I'll make you--"

Masterson reached out, setting a single finger on Will's nose. "No," he whispered, leaning forward until their lips nearly touched. "I'll make you *mine*."

With that the bull turned and walked away, his perfect, polished hooves clomping rhythmically on the concrete.

Sparing a glance over his shoulder, Will could see the rat from before, along with a ferret, and a coyote wearing a red blazer. The coyote was dolling out a length of rope, preparing to bind Will's hands.

"Keep still," one of them said, "And this won't hurt." There was a soft laugh. "You might even enjoy it..."

The thought of being separated from Anne, his Mistress, all but stopped Will's heart. No growl came from his lips. No sound came from the dog at all.

They pulled at him, fought to drag him back deeper into the alleyway, fought to take him back to whatever foul, bloated, and unnatural place had made them.

Slowly, softly, the edges of Will's vision grew white.

When at long last the dog spoke his voice was soft and measured, calm and assured. "Masterson did get one thing right," he said to his captors. "I am her Avatar. You, you are nothing but *scum*."

The rat pulled at Will's arm, cracked and filthy claws digging into the muscle of his bicep, drawing blood. His arm was as still as that of a statue.

Slowly, Will began to pull back, dragging the rat forward, until the thrall's face was next to his.

"My Mistress might take mercy on you, *but I will not*."

Fist snapping back, a loud crack echoed through the alley as the back of Will's hand slammed hard into the rat's nose. There was the sound of crunching bone and the hot salty scent of blood in the air as it splattered across Will's white coat. The sewer scent grew until Will was nearly left gagging.

The rat let out a high pitched scream as he felt back, clutching his muzzle. He hit hard against the concrete street, tears streaming from his face.

Lips still down, the dalmatian spun, now that one arm was free, turning on the ferret. The other man's eyes were wide. In an instant Will could tell he was no fighter. This was a clerk, and accountant.

No. Eyes narrowing, Will knew who he was. A government official. Low level, hardly anyone of importance, but he was a government salary man.

None the less the ferret held tight to Will's arm with all the strength his feeble arms had. Will's muscles bunched and coiled like steel cables under his fingers, but he held on none the less.

With his free hand Will reared back to punch the man, take him out the same way he had the rat. But the clerk seemed smarter, if by only a half measure. Dodging to the side, he fought to keep the bulk of Will's body between them, pulling him off balance at every opportunity.

Patience running low, Will struck out with a foot, sweeping the other man's legs. A calculated move, the ferret took Will down with him, but the dog was on top.

Landing hard on the ground, Will's weight drove the breath from the smaller man. Down here Will had all the advantages. His one arm may still be bound, but now the ferret had no room to dodge. Will's fist came down hard on the round of his skull. Only by sheer luck did he not crack it clear open between his knuckles and the concrete.

Drawing a deep, foul breath, Will threw the man's limp fingers from him and prepared to stand. Before he ever had a chance his back lit up with fire as five sets of claws ripped down his back, slicing through his shirt and rending his flesh.

The cry of pain that escaped the dog's lips was a half howl, half string of curses.

Will had almost forgotten the coyote in the red blazer. Now the man was upon him, and this was no lightweight like the others.

Rolling to face his attacker, the man's expression was much like his own. Placid, calm, sure. There was no anger or malice in his motions. No hate. He was doing a job, fulfilling a task. He took no pleasure in it, but he was driven to do it by the one who owned him.

For just a moment Will wondered if this man loved his Master as Will did his Mistress.

The man's hand raised, honed claws slicing down towards Will's face. The dalmatian blocked them with a forearm, the contact of bone on bone making them both flinch.

For just a moment there was a shadow of emotion in the coyote's eyes. Will could see something there, a sadness, a horror. Something that whispered, *Please, don't make me do this.*

Drawing another deep breath, Will bunched his legs and kicked straight up, throwing the man from him.

Scrambling to his feet, Will stared across the narrow alleyway at the coyote. For just a moment there was a silent stand off.

"Do you mean to your Master what I do to my Mistress?" Will whispered.

A shiver went through the other man's body. "I mean nothing to him."

With that the coyote threw himself at Will. Arms wide, hands grasping, he leapt straight towards him, as if to embrace the dog.

There was only a single heart's beat the coyote hung in the air, but in that instant Will could see clear as day. The man came at him, honestly trying to kill him, honestly fighting to do as he had been ordered, but at the same time knowingly leaving himself open to counter attack. Knowing that Will was capable of stopping him dead.

Will looked into the other man's eyes. He saw no love there, he saw no contentment. All that stared back at him was a cold, hungry, unnatural need to do as he was ordered. The man who had been there was gone, consumed by the need that had taken him over like a virus.

The white that had clouded Will's vision was gone. The world was crystal clear, motionless and exact.

Reaching out, Will closed one clawed hand around the coyote's throat as he slowly drifted towards him. He could feel the man's frantic pulse under the pads of his fingers. Feel the soft shift of his muscles as Will took what was offered to him.

Closing tight, Will stepped aside as the coyote flew past, and with a single tug of his arm plucked him from the sky to slam him down spine first onto the concrete.

There was only the softest of smiles to the other man's face as Will's lips rose. He didn't want to do this, but it was what he was asked to do, it was what the coyote pleaded him to.

Five seconds later Will's lips were bloody. Sixty seconds after that the last of the spasms had left the coyote's body.

When Will left the alleyway there was not a soul living to tell of what had happened there. The three had all been loaded into a bin, ready to be taken to the dump with the rest of the trash.

Returning to the station, Will made a beeline for the showers. Not only did he want to wash the stench of the men from his fur, but their blood from his hands.

"You okay, man? You've been in there forty-five minutes," Davies called from the door. Will was just drying off. The dog noticed a note of sincere concern in his friend's voice. Echoed by the fact he didn't try to sneak a peek into the shower.

"Yeah," Will replied. "I'll be out in a second. I just wanted to..." he fought for an excuse, not sure how much he should reveal, even to Davies. "Just wanted to wash the bull's stink from me, that's all."

A moment later he walked out the door, wearing nothing but a pair of sweatpants and a high necked tee shirt, still fighting off the urge to shake.

The cat took a sniff. "You smell clean to me." He smiled. "Though you could use a touch of cologne."

Will led the way back up to the office. He noticed the staff had turned over. It was later than he'd thought. Checking about quickly to ensure there was no one in hearing range, Will turned to his friend.

"Something big is going down," he said, voice soft. Davies raised an eyebrow. "I..." Will sighed. "I can't say much, but the grass muncher is in on something bigger than it looks. I think it was attached to the riots."

Davies leaned on the side of the desk. For once he wasn't preening and posing. "What are you talking about?" The cat's normal brash tone was subdued, soft. "He was a moron. Nothing else. He got what he deserved, kicked from the force. He's just looking to get his job back."

For the first in a long time Will felt the pain of split allegiances. He'd known Davies all his adult life. There was no other man he'd rather have by his side, no one else he'd truly call brother. But he wasn't *her*. Anne's scent wove around him, pulling him tight. He knew she would disapprove of him telling anyone, even Davies.

A deep breath, Will pushed his Mistress' whisper to the back of his mind. The simple act caused him physical pain, made his hands shake.

"Man," Will reached out a trembling hand to set on Davies shoulder, "You don't understand. It's..." He was at a loss for words. How could one explain this to someone who'd never experienced it? "Masterson... Anne... There's..." The pain that wracked through Will's body paralysing his tongue before he could get out another word. Davies reached up to take his hand, holding it tight.

"You've been working too hard, buddy," he whispered. "Go home. Take a day off. You've earned it. You *need* it. Spend some time with Anne. She'll set you straight." He grinned, showing his fangs. "If I were a little *different* I might just be angling to spend some quality time with her as well."

Much to Will's surprise Davies managed to all but boot him from the station, sending him home. The walk was long, but it gave Will time to think.

Anne had warned him about things like this. She's said little, but the word *thrall* had come up. That's what they were, thralls in service to a Master. Will raised his lips. A Master that was

incomparable to his Mistress.

By the time the roof of his home poked over the trees Will was, at least comparatively, calm. He still glanced over his shoulder every ten steps, and he'd taken the long way home, but the blood that hung about under his claws was something he could deal with. At least for the moment.

Stepping up to the front door, he bowed his head without thinking and knocked softly. From within came the reply, "Enter, my pet."

Stepping in, Will peeled off his clothing, returning to the well worn rituals that they both knew.

She smiled. "Welcome home, my pet. How was--" She stopped mid sentence, freezing solid as a statue.

Her eyes narrowed.

Moving more quickly than he could track, she was out of her chair, standing before him, hand wrapped around his collar and all but lifting him from the floor.

"*Have you been corrupted?*" Her voice was colder than the winter's wind, straight down from the Arctic. Her free hand was closed around Will's throat, a claw resting above his jugular.

"No, Mistress, Please..." was all Will could choke out.

Pressing her nose to his chest, she drew a deep breath. "No..." her voice was thoughtful, "No, my Will. But what *have* you been doing?"

Still held on his toes, Will quickly croaked out the story of what had happened that afternoon. Masterson, the men, and what had become of them.

Anne smiled when he told her of the men's final fate.

"Too bad," she mused, "That you didn't do the same to the bull. Or perhaps captured him. He could tell us much before I allow you to..." Her words died away as she lowered him to the floor.

Reaching up to gently rub at his neck, Will fought to remember what he should do, should say. In their months together she had never once acted like this.

Turning from him, she strode into one of their storage rooms. There lay the many unopened boxes from her old apartment. Without pausing so much as to read the labels she ripped one open. Within was a change of clothing and a backpack.

Will blinked. It was all ready, folded and clean. All she did was pick it up and slip it on.

Turning, there was no smile to her eyes as she adjusted the pack to rest on her shoulders. "You will stay here, William." Her voice was hard. "You will continue to do your duty, and you will be diligent. I will return."

His ears pulled back, a whimper tugging at his throat, forcing its way past his training. "I'll come with you, Mistress..."

For just a moment there was a flash of anger in her eyes, something deeper, something more primal. He had attempted to disobey her.

"No." A heartbeat later her expression softened. "No, my pet. You have your duty, and I have mine. I owe it to those I have wronged..." For just a moment her eyes focused on something far away and long ago.

Then, turning, she stepped out the door. She was gone.

Standing by the window, he watched her strong, quick stride as she walked down the front path. Will then scrambled to the second floor to watch her as she continued down the tree lined street, towards the city. Only once she had finally slipped from sight did he step away from the window.

Will, for seemingly the first time he could remember, was alone.