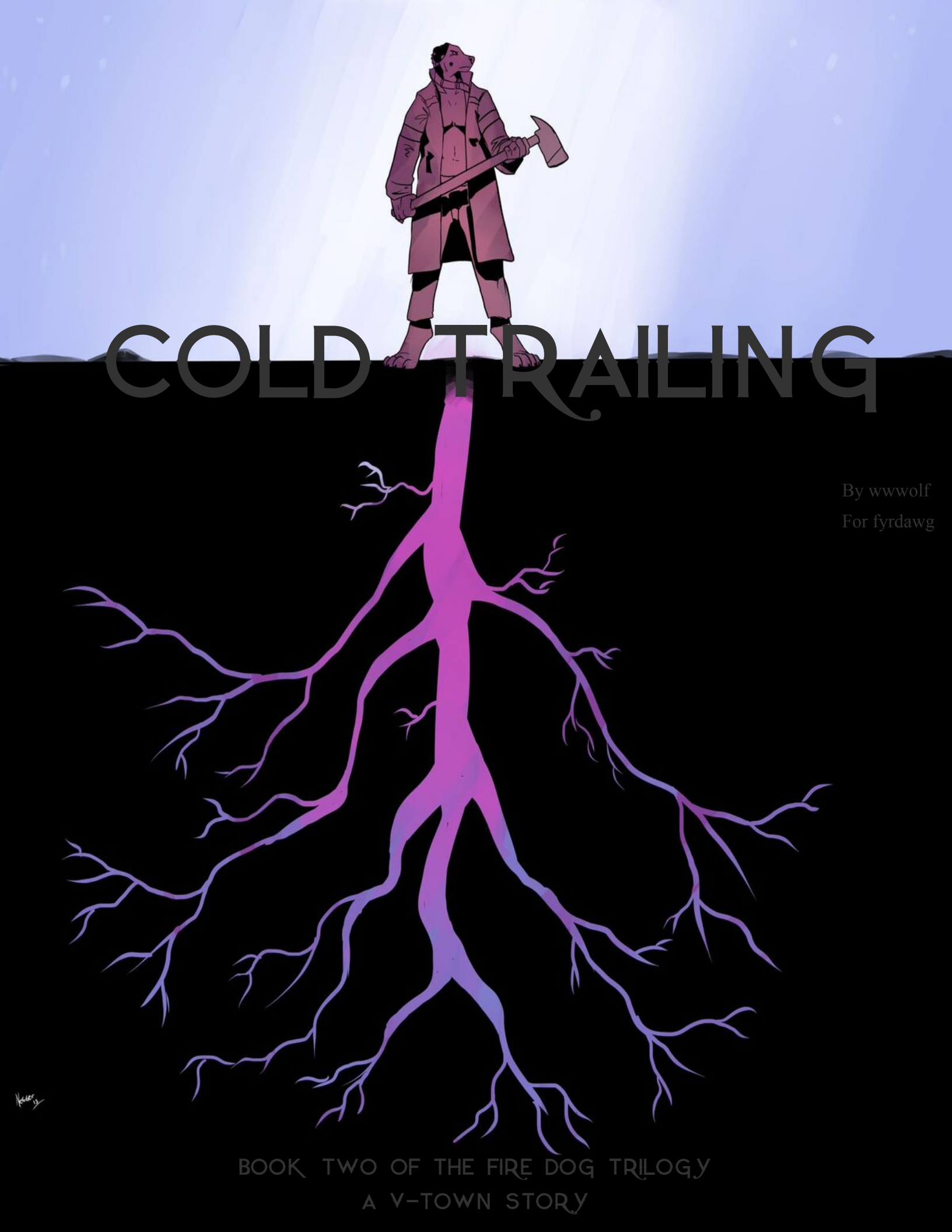




COLD TRAILING

By wwwolf
For fyrdawg

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

Heiser 12

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Chapter 6: A Man Not to Annoy

The next morning came cold and dark, or at least that was how it felt to Will. He'd spent the night curled up in bed, twisting and turning, unable to find rest without her reassuring strength beside him.

The alarm went off for him to rise, but it took the dog long minutes to respond. It wasn't that he didn't feel his duty pulling at him, but that it seemed pointless without having her here as his foundation.

At long last he responded to the incessant ringing. Moving slowly, the dog dragged himself to the bathroom, switching on the light. For just a moment he was blinded as he looked into the mirror.

Looking back into the bloodshot eyes, it took him a moment to realize this was the same dalmatian he'd stared at just yesterday. A single night alone had aged him. Running a hand down his muzzle, Will wiggled his whiskers and fought to return some vigour to his body.

"She'll just be gone a few days," he whispered, "She wouldn't abandon me..." The thought continued naggingly on, but he quashed it before it could drag him any further down. "She'll be back. She wouldn't leave her pet." His words grew stronger. "She *loves* me. I'm her perfect pet. She said so. She *wants* me, she *loves* me." A growl slipped into his words. "She'll be back. *She'll be back.*"

Turning, he lashed out to turn on the shower.

It wasn't long before Will stepped out into the bright sunshine, but to him the morning still felt dim, cold, and miserable. Not to mention this was the first in sometime he didn't have a breakfast to eat on the walk.

Starting off at a brisk pace, Will began on his normal route. Mistress or not, she had given him a task before she'd left. He still had a city to protect. And he would not fail her.

A different type of growl pulled at Will's gut as he neared the station. Hunger.

Sighing, he turned and ventured down a different street. It had been a long time since he'd had to pick up fast food. Almost... the shadow of a smile crossed his lips, almost exactly since he'd met Anne.

Bellying up to the first kiosk he found, Will ordered whatever the breakfast special was. It wasn't a heart burger, but with the slightest luck it would be enough to calm his complaining gut.

It didn't take Will long to regret that decision. The wax paper wrapped lump that was deposited on the counter before him did *not* look like anything fit for a dog.

Despite his reservation Will picked it up anyway and continued off, the paper in his hand dripping grease with every step.

Entering Fire Station Six, Will was at last able to take a deep breath. There was no scent of *her*, but the familiar smells of the station, steel, canvas, sweat, and flame retardant brought him some small measure of calm.

Like yesterday, people reacted as he walked past, but not the same way. Yesterday they had bowed their heads, a calm and automatic submission. Now Will stormed past, a scowl to his face. People still submitted to him, but now they backed away, eyes flicking nervously about to find somewhere, anywhere, else to be.

Reaching the second floor, Will dismissed the night chief with nothing more than a grunt as he took a seat at his desk. He sat his 'breakfast' down on a sheet of papers. They were soaked through instantly with grease.

Will wasn't sure how long it was before Davies stepped through the door. The cat had the most infuriating grin to his lips. He looked primed and perfect, not a hair out of place, no bags under his eyes, and his tail flicked lazily back and forth like he'd just gotten his rocks off.

"Hiya, buddy," he said, leaning on the door frame. "How goes the battle?"

Despite his best efforts Will couldn't hold back a snarl. "Why do you care?"

For just a moment there was nothing but silence, they could hear the sound of people passing in the street outside, jakes working downstairs.

At long last Davies blinked. "Hey, just asking, that's all. Something wrong?"

"No." Will turned to his paperwork, noticeably ignoring the pile with the cold hunk of congealing grease still sitting atop it. "No."

The cat just stood there as Will turned, ignoring him. Ten minutes later he'd yet to move.

"Don't you have work to do?" Will muttered, never looking up.

Davies continued to lean on the door frame, watching. "I am. In case you forgot, I'm the *de facto* assistant chief. And part of my job is making sure you're fit to do yours. Now," he took a step forward, setting his palms on the edge of Will's desk, "What's going on?"

Still staring down at the status report that sat in front of him, Will let out a growl. "*Nothing*. Now get off my case. Either you get out of my office or I'll throw you out." One of the cat's hands reached forward, but Will caught him by the wrist, gripping *hard*. "I said get out. *Now*."

Mid morning one of the jakes from the main floor came up with a letter. "For you," was all the man said. It seemed news of the Chief's mood had gotten around.

Ignoring the man as he retreated to a safe distance, Will ripped open the envelope. He felt a pang of guilt about Davies, but the cat was out on a call now. He'd taken the first one that had come their way, and stayed out.

The letter caused Will's brow to pull down. It was an official police document. 'From the desk of Commissioner Sayer' if the monograph was to be trusted. Will scanned down the paper.

It was balled up and airborne towards the trash can seconds later. Will didn't even bother to dignify it with a snort.

"No."

He turned, setting back to work. It was a request for a meeting, if you could use the term 'request'. The dog wanted Will to see him, in his office at Police HQ. Any other day Will would have been happy to oblige, even if just to put a face to the name. Today, today not so much.

Especially what had happened after he'd tried to oblige the mayor with a meeting.

"What are you still standing here for?" Will growled, glancing up at the jake who loitered just outside the doorway. "Get back to work!"

Lunch came and went. At long last Will broke down and ate the... he refused to call that lump of grease he'd bought this morning a 'meal'. It sat cold and heavy in his gut like a lead weight.

Davies had returned, but only for a moment. The cat had stepped up to his desk in the hallway to grab an axe. There was still a smile on his face, but it looked a touch strained when he glanced Will's way. His offer to pick Will up a proper lunch had been declined.

But at least Will had managed to decline him politely.

Two that afternoon another jake came up from the main floor. The rat looked a measure more nervous than the last had.

"Yes?" Will ground out between clenched teeth, slogging his way through another form.

"Uh, Sir? There's a man here to talk to you."

Will glanced up, heaving a sigh. "I'm not taking visitors. Send him somewhere else. Davies can talk to him when he's back."

"Uh, Sir... it's a cop." Will blinked. "And he's asking for you in particular."

The sharp, precise clicks of a police dog's claws could be heard on the stairs a moment later. Will sighed.

"Good afternoon, Chief Hamish," the german shepherd said a moment later. He was pressed and precise, like all the dogs. Though, Will felt a glimmer of pride to be able to note, this was *not* Elm.

The jake took the opportunity to disappear. *Wimp*, Will thought to himself before admitting he'd do the same.

Setting his paperwork aside, Will worked up his best alpha stare and glared at the dog.

“What can I do for you, officer?” His words were polite, but the tone of Will's voice made it obvious he felt the other dog was little more than a nuisance.

Much to Will's annoyance the man hardly seemed to notice. He stood still and straight, as if Will had said nothing at all. “I trust you received the letter from Commissioner Sayer this morning?” Will nodded slowly. “Then,” said the dog in his precise and clipped words, “I am simply here to ensure you are able to meet at the soonest convenient time.” Will's brow drew down. “I am under orders to remain here until you are ready to travel to Police Headquarters.”

“You've got to be frigging kidding me.”

The dog looked at him, face expressionless. “No, Sir. Those are my orders.”

Will threw up his hands.

Even then the dalmatian refused to be pushed around so easily. The police dog stood and waited for an hour and a half as Will completed the paperwork on his desk. In the end Will felt a pang of guilt that he never so much as offered the man a chair.

Davies returned while the dog stood there. The cougar spared the cop a single glance as he walked to his desk, then ignored him as only a cat can.

Finally, only when there was nothing left to do, Will stood up. For perhaps the first time in a month he was up on his paperwork. His foul mood had been good for at least one thing.

“Fine,” he said, glancing at the police dog. “Let's go.”

The dog didn't even smile as he followed Will out.

If nothing else the walk gave Will a chance to see the city, it wasn't often he headed down around Police HQ. That building brought up bad memories for him.

With the reports Will had heard about the police building he'd expected to see it still in shambles. The dalmatian stopped dead when he stepped around the corner, the huge, three story brick building hoving into sight.

It looked... untouched.

No, change that. Looking closer Will could just make out the seams. He could just make out where the repairs had been made. But compared to the rest of the city the Police HQ looked exactly as it had been, as if the riots and quake had flowed about it, like an age old rock in the surf.

They approached the main door when a silhouette pulled at the corner of Will's vision. A moment later the dalmatian was grinning. He pulled his escort to a stop.

“Elm!”

The dog who'd been walking on the other side of the street came to a sudden stop. Turning, the shepherd looked at him. For just a moment Will wondered if he'd picked the wrong man. The dog was out of uniform, nothing but a belt around his narrow waist. There were more grey hairs on his back than Will would have expected, and a crook to his walk.

The dog's face didn't quite light up when he saw Will, but there was the small smile the man gave him that was more than enough. A soft smile touched the officer's lips and he raised a hand before continuing on.

Will on the other hand had no such compunctions. A wide, silly grin spread across his muzzle. This may still be a fool's errand, but at least *something* good had come from it.

"Okay," Will said a moment later, "Let's get this over with." There was still a growl to his voice, but it was more for show now.

They stepped through the front doors. Will knew this room. He'd been here before, but now he was no mere pup.

The first officer handed him off to a second who checked his credentials. Will raised an eyebrow. He hadn't even known he had *credentials*.

Most notably, they checked him against a full sized mugshot. Will tried to ask where they had gotten *that* from, but got no answer. They wanted to check each and every one of his spots as well, but the dalmatian gave them a firm, and less than polite, response to *that*.

At long last he was handed off again. This dog had some extra brass on his shoulders, a crown and pip.

"You will be meeting with the Commissioner," the dog said, voice a perfect clip as they walked down the whitewashed hallways. "You will not speak unless asked a direct question. You will answer every question completely, fully, and succinctly. You will not volunteer any opinions or suggestions--"

Will stopped dead in the middle of the hallway.

"Say what?" He kept his voice mild, but the edge of one lip rose ever so slightly. "He's the Police Commissioner, I'm the Fire Chief. Unless I'm mistaken that sets us on an even keel."

Will couldn't help but smile. For just a moment it looked like he'd shoved a whole lemon down his escort's throat. The dog's eyes bulged and his jaw – for a police dog – hung open.

"I... I..." He paused for just a moment and shook his head. "I'm sure I can't comment, Chief Hamish. It is not my place to make judgement calls on such things. Only the mayor can decide..."

"Sure, right, the *Mayor*." Will rolled his eyes. "Why don't you just show me to Sayer's office and keep out of the way?"

Another staircase and what felt like a quarter mile of hallways and they stopped in front of an identical plain white door.

Will smirked. He knew at least this much about HQ. The entire place was a maze, designed to confuse and intimidate anyone foolish enough to enter, to mark the territory as property of the pack.

What they didn't know was that Will knew how to read the signs at every intersection. Well, at least *some* of them. He was still lost, but at least he could read the big 'EXIT' signs scattered about.

He almost laughed. One of these days he'd have to send a compliance officer to this place. He could only imagine what the force's reaction would be to having proper safety signage and fire

escapes...

"Commissioner Sayer will see you now," the dog said, opening the office door.

Stepping through, Will continued past the outer office and into the dog's inner sanctum. He paused for just a moment, seeing the ghost white Great Dane that sat across the desk from him.

"Ahh, Mr. Hamish. Thank you for joining me." The dog's voice was soft as a whisper, reminding Will of nothing so much as the scrape of autumn leaves against the ground.

Taking a seat without being asked, Will sat his elbows on the dog's desk. "That's *Fire Chief* Hamish, Commissioner."

"Ahh... yes." The dog glanced down at a sheet of paper on his desk. There was something to the dog's watery blue eyes that sent a shiver up Will's spine. The canine was old, ancient, and likely as frail as starched lace, but his mind was still with him. "Or should I call you applicant one-seven-nine-four?"

Will had to swallow back a snarl, feigning confusion. "What does that mean?"

"You've forgotten?" He reached out with a trembling hand and made a mark on the paper. "Your application number for the service some twenty years ago. You do remember, don't you? You applied through the community outreach program."

Forcing a nonchalant smile to his lips, Will sat back. "That was a long time ago, Commissioner. I was a different dog back then." *Literally*, Will added to himself, *I hadn't met Mistress yet...*

"Very good," Sayer whispered. "As I'm sure you know, I've been... interviewing the different heads of the civil service to ensure they..." there was a long pause as the dog drew in a shaky breath, "Conform to the needs of the new mayor. He is more than capable in his duties, but I am taking it upon myself to ensure that he is not bothered." He raised one eyebrow, a piercing blue eye staring straight at Will. "Any requests you have for the mayor are to go through me, understood?"

Will had to admit the soundproofing was good in the dog's office. He could almost hear the beat of the other canine's heart.

Leaning forward, Will nearly touched his nose to the other dog's. "Who died and made you a god? You're not my boss."

The other man's expression never changed. "Who? Would you like me to name them? At last count there was more than one-hundred members of the police service that were in line to become commissioner before me. And as for mayor..." the dog's eyebrow raised. "I believe there were over five-hundred people in City Hall when it collapsed. *I*, Chief Hamish, am the reason this city is still standing. It was *my* men to maintain law and order during those dark days..."

The dane was cut off when Will began laughing. It was clear from his expression he was *not* accustomed to such things.

"You?" Will didn't even bother to coach his words, they came hard and blunt. "Your men? If I remember, the cops were nowhere to be seen after the quake. It was the fire service that was still out on the street, it was the fire service that continued to respond to calls. It was the *fire service* that never stopped. Or at least Fire Station Six. We never closed for a *single day*."

"That is inconsequential--"

“Save it.” Will sat back and crossed his arms. “You’ll not giving me any of this bull. You might be able to push around the city accountants or the road builders, but not the fire service.” He raised a lip in a grin. “You have my profile in front of you? Then you know I passed every test the police academy sent me. I was among the best of the intake that year. It was the police service that passed me over. And you know what?” Will’s grin grew, “You made the right decision. I would have been a piss poor cop. But I’m the best jake the city has ever seen.”

There was a long pause. Sayer simply stared at him, not saying a word. Reaching out slowly, the dane marked an 'X' on the page before him. Craning his head, Will could just make out the word 'Combative'.

“Be that as it may, *Fire Chief*,” he said, stressing Will’s title just enough to make it clear he was giving it as a concession, “I was the one who recommended you for the post. It falls to me to ensure you were the right choice.” He coughed and glanced down again. The sound was dry and rough. “My reports suggest you are doing an... adequate job, but you were, as you say, promoted from the ranks. This meeting is simply to ensure you are... *correct*.”

There was something more to the way the old dog said the word. He wasn’t simply looking for someone who could do the job. He was looking for something more. Something deeper.

“The Mayor is young,” he continued. “*He is the right choice*, but he is inexperienced. I am simply ensuring he has the tools and support to do his duty. The right information to come to the proper conclusions.”

“You mean the conclusions *you* want,” Will interjected.

Sayer never skipped a beat. “I can assure you, Mr. Hamish, the Mayor, much to my annoyance and blood-pressure concerns, does not typically follow my recommendations.” Did the hint of a smile slip to the dane’s lips? “He’s too much of an alpha for that, too much of a Taggart. He takes after his father in that regard.”

Something pulled at the back of Will’s mind. Where had he heard that name before?

“Fine.” Will let out a sigh. “So lets get this over with. Sounds like your in the new mayor’s fan club. Far as I’ve seen he’s done donkey squat. He invites me for a meeting and then stands me up. No one can even find his office in City Hall anyway. I doubt he’s anything more than a paper hound.”

Sayer blinked. A moment later he laughed. Will hadn’t even realized he was still capable of doing it.

“I can assure you, Mr. Hamish, Tommy Taggart is *not* a bureaucrat. It has taken a concentrated effort by me and my men to keep that wolf on even an exceptionally long leash. And as for his office... I’m not sure he’s even set foot in the new City Hall complex. He has, as far as I can tell, an aversion for all things paperwork. His acquaintance, a human, assists him where my men are unavailable.”

Falling silent for a moment, Will blinked.

“Frig.”

“What was that, Mr. Hamish?”

Will sighed. “Nothing, nothing at all. Just getting a good taste of toejam.”

“In any event, Mr. Hamish, there is one more thing left for us to discuss.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Fine, what?”

Pulling out a small box, the dog set it softly on the table, a soft clink echoing about the room.

“It has been reported by my men that the city is currently undergoing another challenge. A...” he paused for a long moment, honestly looking as if he was rolling the word about on his tongue. “An *infestation*. It appears there are subversive elements active in the city.”

Feigning innocence, Will raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Isn't that always the way? There's always a shadow or two for us to chase. It's almost always our tails.”

“Yes, very droll, Mr. Hamish.” He opened the box, hinged top towards Will. “But I can assure you that this threat is founded. Anything that can compromise *my* men is a force to be more than simply concerned about.”

A moment later there was a glint of light off a glass vial. Within was what looked to be a drop of half congealed blood.

“This will be just a moment, Mr. Hamish.”

Without any obvious signal a half dozen police dogs silently entered the room to stand behind Will. A heartbeat later their hands were closed like steel clamps around his shoulders.

“Hey!”

Glancing up, Will's blood went cold. The women – and they were *all* women – were wearing heavy cloth masks over their faces.

“I apologise, Mr. Hamish, but we must be sure.” Sayer was slowly donning a mask of his own, but it was three times thicker than those of the females. Will had to wonder if he was even able to breathe beneath it.

There was a soft pop and suddenly Will knew why. In an instant it smelled as if someone had plunged him head first into a rancid sewer in the middle of July. After the annual chilli cook off.

Rising slowly from his seat, Sayer's hands were now clad in thick rubber gloves. He held the vial before him as if it were a living thing, a creeping horror only just held in check.

“Restrain him,” the dog ordered. His voice was stronger now, as if twenty years had dropped from it. “If he shows symptoms, kill him.”

Will's pupils contracted to pinpricks.

Stepping before him, Sayer held the vial under Will's nose. It was blood, there was no doubt of that, but from *what* Will couldn't even hazard a guess. He fought to hold his breath, gagging at the stench, seemingly a living thing, writhed and wove about him.

The dogs, oddly enough, didn't seem to notice. He couldn't believe their cloth masks were enough to block out a stench that horrific.

“Odd...” Sayer's head cocked slightly. “Hold him.” A moment later two strong hands closed about either side of Will's head, forcing his nose above the vial. “Now,” the dog whispered, “Breathe.”

Fight as he might, his choices were to take a breath or pass out.

A gagging snort and Will's gut clenched. Sayer had only just a moment's notice before the grease covered meal Will had so recently choked down made its triumphant reappearance all over the

office floor. Even then Will was still left hacking and gagging.

"Enough. Whatever his reaction is, he is not under their control. Release him." Slowly, stoop returning to his step, the dog returned to his chair. "And get this mess cleaned up."

Gasping, fighting for even a single clean breath, Will was left to slump in his seat. He did have to give the police service props for one thing. The air in the office cleared in moments.

"What... *the hell...* was that?" were the first words from Will's mouth as soon as his throat had unclenched enough to grind out the anything beyond a gag.

"A sample of the blood from our compromised officer," Sayer said, expression placid. "You passed the test, Chief Hamish, but in a most unexpected way... Tell me what you know about Alberta." There was something to the dane's voice that made a shiver run down Will's spine.

"Alberta?" Will wiped the back of a hand across his stained lips. "Province to the west. As far as I know it was evacuated after the Cataclysm."

Sayer arched an eyebrow. "What else?"

A growl grew in Will's chest. "What? Nothing! What in the god's names is going on here? What--"

"Allow me to repeat, *Chief* Hamish, you passed the test. Two top civil servants did not. Neither left this building. Do not give me reason to further investigate your unusual reaction to the sample. But," his eyes narrowed, "You can tell me about your... girlfriend? I am aware that you recently met with a female canine. Anne..." he paused for a moment, flipping through his papers before continuing on. "Tell me of her."

The shiver that had run down Will's spine froze solid. "What do you want to know?" he replied, mind running a mile a minute. "I met her before the riots. We've been living together for a few months now."

"How long has she lived in the city?"

Will shrugged. "Don't know. Entire life? I never asked."

"Is there anything *unusual* about her?"

Somehow Will's lips moved before he could even form a thought. "Unusual? Like what? She's a dalmatian. We're not that common." A grin pulled at Will's lips despite his best efforts, words continuing to tumble out as if he was on autopilot. "She's got a thing for seafood, and a bigger appetite than any of my other girlfriends for--"

"That will be quite enough, Mr. Hamish."

"What, you don't what to know about what younger dogs can do that you can't?" Back in control again, Will's grin grew, he wasn't going to let the mutt go so easily after what had just been done to him. "You should see her leather collection. Straps like that can make any man--"

"*Enough.* Please. The test was regrettable, and I do apologise," Will could hear the effort the words were taking, "But necessary. And," his expression changed, "I trust you won't tell the mayor about it."

Now it was Will's turn to raise an eyebrow. "What? If there's a threat to the city then the top dog has to know about it."

“No.” There was something to the dog's voice, a near whimper. “No. That is not his duty. I am in charge of the Police Service. It is my duty to protect the city from all physical threats, whether they be from within or without. The mayor's duty is to unify the city, to guide it. I will keep him free from corruption, the service will protect the city. You would not expect the Mayor to pull a man from a burning building, I do not expect him to stand between the city and the unknown. He has...” Did the dog chuckle? “Already done that far too many times.”

“And if I tell him?”

Sayer shrugged. “I can't stop you, but it would benefit no one. We must all work together, shouldering our own burdens.”

Will let out a sigh. “So that's why you brought me here? To ensure I wasn't part of some nameless, faceless conspiracy?”

“In part, Chief Hamish. It had come to my attention that you did not hold the Mayor in high esteem. You *must* work with him. We are in historic times, and have only a single chance to rebuild the unity the city requires.”

Will snorted. “So what you're telling me is that he has a clutch of incriminating photos of you? Give me a break, mutt, no one talks like that. He's no saviour, no descended god. He's a man, and from what I've seen the mongrel is angling to build the government out. That's not my thing. This whole *reconstruction* is nothing but a power grab on the part of the government. He's just another want-to-be. Even if I've yet to lay eyes upon him.”

Sayer laughed softly. Will had to strain his ears to hear it. “You are the *mutt* here, Mr. Hamish. He may not meet your interests, but I can assure you Mr. Taggart is most certainly the proper man for the job. He was born for it. A hunter.”

Will blinked. “A *what*? How in the gods names did a hunter get to be mayor? The hunter's alpha keeps them on a shorter leash than--” he coughed. “A really short leash. The hunter's alpha would never allow one of his men to outrank him.”

Sayer cocked his head ever so slightly. “You haven't realized? Taggart. The hunter's alpha is Griss Taggart. His son is Tommy.”

The choking sound that came from the dalmatian was eerily like that from when he'd been subjected to the vial of blood.

Sayer smiled ever so softly.

“Yes, he often causes me the same reaction.”

Ten minutes later Will found himself standing out in front of the station. His escort had fallen away the moment he's stepped onto the sidewalk.

He was just starting down the street when a shadow fell across his back.

“I wouldn't have expected to see you around these parts, Will.”

Glancing over his shoulder, Will was only half surprised to see Elm. The man's greying fur was even more noticeable in the late afternoon sun. It contrasted with his face where not a single strand of grey could be seen.

“Let me guess,” Will said with a roll of his eyes, “Sayer tasked you to hang around and ensure I don't cause trouble.”

The dog shook his head almost imperceptibly. “Hardly, I'm off duty. I'm nothing but a beat cop. I doubt the Commissioner even knows my name. Here, let me treat you to a meal...”

Will shook his head. “Sorry, I have to get home. My...” he petered off. “I... I have to get home. That's all.”

Turning, he began off slowly down the street. It was a long walk back home, but he'd take it. He had to touch the soft sheets of their bed, had to smell her lingering scent one more time before it was gone.