

FIRE BRANDED LEATHER

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



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NeGger
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Chapter 5: Fire-breather

There was a smile on Will's lips when he woke the next morning. Even with a day of work ahead of him it never faltered.

The walk home last night had been an embarrassment, but it had been worth it. Even now he laid back and basked in the afterglow of that one moment.

His tail twitched at the thought of her soft fingers against his fur. Not to mention other parts of him...

With a sigh he rolled out of bed and started the day.

Still no food in the fridge, it didn't even slow him down, Will went straight to the weight set. Doing his normal exercises, he paused at the end and looked at his body.

His smile never flagged.

Ten more reps. He had to make sure he was in good shape for next time they met.

Lost in a warm shower, Will touched gently where her fingers had been. He wanted desperately to feel them again.

The slightest of growls touched his lips, sending the droplets of water dancing on his chest. He didn't know what she wanted from him, but he'd prove he was worth her time. He'd prove to her he could do whatever it was she wanted of him.

He'd almost swear he could still smell her scent on his fur.

Taking the long way to the station, Will swung by Davies' apartment. The cat was the same pay-grade as Will, but he lived in a higher rent district. Where Will saved his money, Davies spent every cent he earned.

His apartment was on the second floor of a building called Moreau Hall. Davies had moved in last year.

Will paused for a moment to hold the door for a brown furred wolf with his leg in a cast. The pathetic creature was dragging it down the sidewalk, hardly even able to walk.

"Thanks," the wolf said, stumbling forward.

Will took the stairs, leaving the elevator to the wolf. There was something about the other

canine that sent alarm bells ringing. He seemed nice, but Will was sure the kid was a lightning rod for trouble.

Springing up the steps, Will wasn't even breathing hard as he stood before Davies' door.

"Oi, man! You in there?" Will had long ago learned not to knock. The cat ignored anything so polite.

There was a chuckle. "Yeah, come on in."

A moment later Will was in Davies' apartment. His nose twitched.

"Dude, did you..."

The cat just smiled as he wrapped a compression bandage around his still swollen wrist.

"What can I say?" he said with a smile. "One of the guys we rescued last night wanted to show me his gratitude." His grin widened, becoming predatory. "It wouldn't be gentlemanly for me to kick him out so early in the morning."

Will had to fight back the temptation to peek around the corner to see who was sleeping in the cat's bed *this time*.

Will just sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Come on Casanova, it's time to get to work."

"How's the hand?" Will asked as they neared the fire house.

Davies' shrugged. "It'll be okay. I was a moron yesterday, pulled a muscle when I swung my axe."

Will snorted. "You weakling. You just need to work up your muscles." The dog flexed.

"You'll never see something like that happen to me."

Before he could back away Davies raised a hand to cup around Will's bicep.

"Ohh, me big strong 'ero, come to save me!" he said, laying on the accent thick enough to cut with a knife. "Whatever would I do without you to save me?"

Will gave him a playful shove. "You'd have to look out for your own furry behind is what."

The cat grinned, fangs showing. "I'll have you know a lot of men would be more than happy to look at my fuzzy little behind, thank you very much!"

It was a rare clear day as they stepped up to the fire house. The sun was shining, a clear breeze was rolling in off the coast, and the world seemed a good place.

Then they heard Masterson's voice.

Will sighed. Davies gave him a pat on the shoulder.

They began to make out what the bull was saying as they got closer. Not that it helped it make any sense.

"What in the gods' names am I paying you for? You can't even clean up the place! That's your job! I don't care if you're a *firefighter*. You're the night shift. You're the cleaners. Clean!"

A growl began to grow in Will's chest.

The captain of the night shift was a panther named Jim. He was a nice guy.

This was not going to end well.

Neither Will nor Davies could make out Jim's response. They didn't need to.

The panther stalked past them as they crossed the threshold. Jim hadn't even bothered to remove his uniform.

"He's all yours," the panther spat.

Will stopped dead, his eyes going wide.

The night shift at fire house six was among the best in the city. And they had Jim to thank for it.

Will reached out a hand, setting it on the panther's shoulder.

"What happened?" Will asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

All Will got for his trouble was a sucker punch to the gut.

"Get your hands off me, you boot licker! You're his lackey, you're the guy who made it possible for him to get this far. Here's your reward. You can deal with the night shift now too!"

Even doubled over in pain, Will held up a hand to keep Davies from leaping in.

"Jim... wait..."

By the time Will could stand straight again the panther was gone.

"Frig."

Will didn't even bother entering the station until he got his breath back. He would have to be ready for whatever it was Masterson was going to send at him next.

A deep breath, with a tickle still pulling at his lungs, he walked once again into the station.

He glanced over at Davies. The cat had gone on ahead. He didn't look happy.

Climbing the stairs to the second level offices, Will did his best to put on a calm face. He'd learned long ago that it did no good to take Masterson head on. The department would be just that much worse off if he sacked Will too.

The door to the bull's office was closed.

Heaving a sigh, Will sat down at his desk. Just a glimmer of his previous good mood shone through. Maybe, just maybe, Jim would come back. Everyone – even Masterson – knew how good the panther was. No matter what had happened it couldn't be worth running him off.

Will looked down at his papers.

He rolled his eyes, but smiled anyway. The stack of work to be done was as thick as his arm.

It was another two hours before Masterson's door finally opened. The bull no more than poked his nose out.

"Hamish. In here. Now."

Will sighed. Here it was.

Shuffling his papers away, Will walked slowly into the Chief's office. The room was as meticulously clean as last time he'd been here.

"Why aren't your men doing their job?"

Will blinked. Masterson was getting right to it. Whatever *it* was.

"Pardon?"

"Why aren't your blasted men doing their bloody jobs!"

Will took a seat across from the bull without being asked.

"They're firefighters," Will said slowly. "We've been putting out fires. What else were you expecting us to be doing?"

Masterson narrowed his eyes.

"The rumor is that the Mayor might be doing a tour of the fire stations. Why aren't your men *cleaning*?"

Will had to fight back a laugh. "Cleaning? We already have likely the cleanest station in the city. What more do you want from us? We've been run off our feet. There have been more fires this last week than we normally have in a *month*!"

Masterson didn't even skip a beat. "That's not my concern. Your men aren't doing their jobs. You can play with your fires. That's *your* concern. I need to have something I can show the mayor."

It took every ounce of strength Will possessed not to snap in the way he imagined Jim had.

"We're... firefighters..." he said slowly. "Not cleaning staff."

For just a moment Will almost saw a man behind the bull's arrogant mask. For just a moment he almost saw someone real.

"And that's all you'll ever be." Masterson's tone was softer than Will expected. "You're just jakes. You don't see the whole picture. Who do you think signs your pay cheques? Who do you think pays for all your equipment? The government. The Mayor. If you want to keep working you need to keep up appearances. You can go off and fight your fires, but you need to keep the money flowing. You're too disconnected from the real world. That's why you need me."

Will grimaced. It felt like the bull was shoving a lemon down his throat.

"And what about Jim?" the dog whispered.

A flash of pity could be seen in the bull's eyes, but it was gone as soon as it appeared.

"Sometimes people have to leave. He wouldn't do his job, so he had to go. Maybe he was a good firefighter – I'll never know – but he couldn't follow orders. If I tell him he needs to make the wagons shine, I need a man who'll make the wagons shine by the time I come in the next day. He didn't."

Will had a sinking feeling.

"Who's taking over the night shift?"

There was a long pause. Will could hear his teeth grinding together.

"You seem to be doing a good job with the day shift..." The bull raised an eyebrow.

For perhaps the first time in months Will sat up straight.

"No."

Masterson's brow went higher.

"No," Will repeated, voice growing stronger. "I'm already working overtime. There's no way I can manage another shift."

Now a smile slipped to the bull's lips. "What about that cougar? David, Donovan..."

"Davies," Will gritted out. "He can't either. He doesn't have the command training."

"Such is the pity," Masterson said, a chuckle to his voice. "Ah well, I'm sure we'll think of *something*. Now, we have today to plan out..."

Half an hour later Will was sitting back at his desk, wondering what had happened. They *still* didn't have anyone to manage the night shift, and on top of it Masterson expected Will and his crew to get the station ready for a possible surprise inspection by the Mayor.

Only through sheer force of will did the dog had not to start banging his head against the desk.

Why, he asked himself, *do I get myself into these things?*

Much to everyone's relief, Masterson decided to take the rest of the day off. He was out the door long before lunch.

And, better yet, the day was looking quiet. Not a single fire had been called in.

It took an hour of convincing and coercion before the men were polishing the station. Everyone was happy to keep things in order, even go above and beyond when they had the time. But after what they'd all seen Jim do, no one was in much of a mood to bow to Masterson's orders.

But Will had a secret weapon.

The promise of entertainment that afternoon got everyone whipping out their buffing cloths in record time.

Perhaps *entertainment* was a bit of a strong word, but everyone was happy to take their minds off Masterson. And training was always time well spent.

The large back lot behind the fire house had originally been earmarked for use by a police station, but it would have made too much sense to have the fire and police so close together. The police had pulled their forces back into the main HQ and only placed small community stations around the city. But they'd never sold the lot, hence a large, scrubby patch of land, just ripe for the purpose.

The fact the police had constructed the concrete framework of a building before pulling out made it all the better.

"What do you think, Davies?" Will asked, eyeing the structure.

The cat snorted. "You have to ask? If we'd had proper ladders yesterday we would have done the job in half the time."

Will grunted. He remembered *that* conversation. Masterson had steadfastly refused to purchase even a single ladder wagon as long as they had men who could climb. The bull didn't quite seem to be able to wrap his head around the idea that a firefighter could climb *up* a wall easily enough, but not many men or women could climb back down while carrying a panicked civilian.

"Do we still have those old ladders stacked up in the back of the hall?"

The cat smiled. "Under about a foot of dust."

Twenty minutes later everyone was milling about the back lot. The only staff still in the station were waiting for calls. Will knew from experience that a fire *always* broke out in the middle of a training exercise.

"Alright folks," Will hollered, trying to be heard over the general conversation, "Fall in line. This isn't a social call!"

There was a touch of grumbling, but all of it good natured. Masterson would have been yelling obscenities and threats. Will got everyone moving just by asking.

"We've got something new here," the dog said, trying to pitch his voice a touch lower than normal. It was amazing what you could get done if you just *sounded* dominant. Dogs reacted automatically, felines... sometimes. "It's been a long time since we've done any training. And longer since we did any exercises with ladders. It's time we brushed up."

The cats in the crowd snickered. Ladders had long since earned the nickname 'dog bone'. All the non-climbing species used them, but the dogs had become most associated with them.

For once Davies was showing a glimmer of leadership. Perhaps because his wounded hand prevented him from getting in the exercise himself, he was ordering a squad to drag the ladders out from the station.

Three, varying from two meters to ten, they were all made of strong, fire treated wood. A cloud of dirt flew up into the air where they dropped.

Will shook his head. Half the crew looked like they'd never seen a ladder in their lives. The dog still had to ask what in the gods' names they covered back in training.

"Why would we need that?" one of the engineers asked. "The cats handle getting to the upper floors. It's always worked before."

Will sighed. "But we don't always have a climber when we need one. What if we get into a situation where we need to evac two dozen civilians from a fourth floor window? We don't have enough climbers to deal with that, and the time it would take to run everyone down the zip lines would get people killed."

The rat shrugged, ceding the point.

The next part was one of Will's favorites. It's not often he got the chance to set a building on fire.

The concrete husk of the unfinished police station had been set alight dozens of times before, covering it nearly from foundation to crown with scorch marks. Will planned to add a few more today.

Stacking up wood and dousing the whole place in kerosene, he reached down to his belt to pull out a road flare.

“Frigging...”

Only then did he remember he was in his sweats, his proper equipment still in the station.

“Looking for this?” Davies asked, holding up a flare of his own.

“How do you do that?”

The cat just smiled. “I’ve known you too long. Care to do the honors?”

A snap-hiss and the flare was alight. Will tossed it atop the nearest pile of wood. It went up in seconds, trails of kerosene leading off to the other piles.

“Alright folks,” Will called as soon as he’d made it back out of the building, “We’re doing mixed teams. One climber, one non. I want to see folks who haven’t worked together before. That’s what training is for!”

There was a collective groan as people were forced to make teams outside their own species. Will and Davies were an oddity – in more ways than one – in the department. It was hardly official, but most groups tended to stick along species lines, or at least along genus.

In due time everything was off and running. That gave Will the cover to sneak off while Davies supervised.

Training was good. Training with a reward at the end, that was better.

Few foods from before the Cataclysm had managed to survive. But pizza was one of them. The food seemed to be the Teflon of the culinary world, all but impossible to destroy.

Not to mention the range of toppings available meant you could get a pizza that would meet just about *anyone’s* tastes.

The guy at the counter looked like he’d stepped in front of a charging horse when Will placed the order for twenty extra-larges, but was more than happy to oblige when Will handed over the cash.

The fact the money was coming from his own bank account made it slightly painful, but it wasn’t worth the effort to fight with Masterson over it.

Loaded down with food, Will left the pizza parlor with a lighter pocket, but happier.

Everyone knows the reaction you get when you walk into a room carrying pizza. Now imagine a good thirty firefighters, exhausted from a morning’s training, picking up the scent of fresh pizza over the stench of burning kerosene.

Will smiled. That was exactly the reaction he’d been looking for. They’d been moving fast before, but the promise of food, and the fire was put out in record time. People who’d never climbed a ladder before were scaling them like monkeys.

And the monkeys were already reaching for their slice of pizza.

Davies was by Will’s side a moment later. He had a slice of steak and pepperoni. Trust a cat to dive into the meat lover’s.

“Keep this up and you’ll spoil them,” he said around an over-sized mouthful.

Will grinned. “I think they could use some reward after putting up with Masterson for so long. With the way things are going around here we’ll have to do our best not to lose any more folks. If any more people like Jim walk out we’ll be in serious trouble.”

Davies just grunted.

Lunch was a surprisingly calm and relaxing affair. Sitting out on the scrub grass, the department formed a circle around the ever dwindling boxes of pizza. For the first time Will could remember, everyone was smiling.

Oscar was chatting with one of the scouts about finding the hydrants ahead of time on the next call, and Davies was chatting up one of the engineers about getting the ladders in play.

"Thanks, Sir."

Will had to look about to find who spoke to him. It was the horse he'd helped out a couple of days ago. He still couldn't remember the young man's name.

"Don't mention it," he said with a grin. "It's worth the cost."

The horse blinked. "The food budget isn't covering it?"

Will snorted. "There's hardly enough money in the budget to pay for beans and rice, likely pizza. This one is *my* treat."

The horse smiled. "Thanks."

Trying not to be obvious, Will squinted to read the name tag on the horse's uniform.

"Don't mention it, Zack. I'm just doing my bit to be a good part of the team."

Another couple of hours passed. Lunch was long gone, and the team was back to training. Will left command to Oscar. The old goat wasn't the perfect leader, but getting him comfortable in the role was all part of the exercise.

Back to his office in the firehouse, there was a spring to Will's step. He was smiling. For once things were going well. All they'd had to do was get Masterson out of the building.

His thoughts drifted back to last night, and Anne...

A blush coloring his cheeks, Will reached down a hand to cover his crotch. Anne was *not* a good person to think of while he was wearing sweatpants.

The papers covering his desk were mundane. Will worked through them, a purely mechanical action leaving more than enough time for his mind to wonder.

What if he'd promised Anne he could show the commitment she was looking for?

Just how much commitment did she want?

How much was he willing to give?

His hand slipped up to rub his nose. It had still been itching, but not so badly now as it had been. He could almost imagine he could still smell her scent.

He sighed.

Looking out the window, only now did Will realize evening was upon them. The shifts were changing.

Almost as if on cue Davies wandered in, already changed back into his street clothes.

"Still wrestling with the paper tiger?" the cat asked, picking a sheet off of Will's desk. "It's all just dead trees to me."

Will rolled his eyes. "And that's why you're not doing my job."

Davies was about to retort when he stopped dead. A moment later Will could hear it too.

They stared at each other.

Moving slowly, they walked side by side to look out the front windows.

"Frigging..."

Coming down the street, a mob of at least a hundred people... the only word Will could come up with was *flowed*. They just seemed to flow towards them like a dark, oncoming tide.

Will glanced to Davies. "Make sure the main doors are closed. We don't need them coming in

here.”

The cat was gone in a heartbeat. Soon after Will could hear the creek of the big main doors closing. He had no doubt they'd be locked tight soon. This may be no police HQ but it was built to at least be able to keep the occasional person out.

Folded arms on the windowsill, Will stood and watched.

“So this is what it's come to.”

The dog nearly leapt out of his spots when Oscar stepped up beside him.

“I thought you were long gone,” Will said.

The goat pulled a face. “I should be, but I was cleaning up after the exercises today. Seems like you're making an instructor out of me.”

Will wanted to smile, but the sight of the mob growing ever closer robbed him of something so simple.

Seemingly in no time at all they were at the doors.

Will heaved a sigh of relief when they kept on walking. It was short lived though. The mob just seemed to keep on coming and coming.

He didn't even know what they were protesting.

There were chants and catcalls, but no matter how hard he tried, Will couldn't make out what it was they were so worked up over.

He glanced over to Oscar.

“You don't know?” he asked. The goat seemed to have aged twenty years in the blink of an eye, weariness pulling at him.

Will shook his head.

“I guess you're just lucky like that,” Oscar said. “My kid, he's in on it. I had to forbid him from going out at night any more. It's a foolish thing to start with at all if you ask me.”

“Your kid? I thought he was only thirteen.”

The goat shuddered. “Yeah, he is.”

“What are they protesting anyway?” Will tried to puzzle out the catcalls and slogans the mob called as they stumbled past. Most of it sounded more like drunken caterwauling.

Oscar shrugged. “They need something? As far as I've heard it's the humans.”

Will cocked his head. “The humans are causing this?”

“Hardly. It's the humans they're trying to run off. No one quite seems sure why. Sometimes it's that they cost the government too much, sometimes it's that they're *wrong*. Last theory I heard was that they were an evolutionary dead end and should be put out of their misery.”

Will sighed. “It's always fun to beat up on the little guy. Isn't the police force supposed to stop stuff like this?”

Leaning forward, Oscar scanned the street below. A moment later he pointed to a shadow across the road.

Will frowned.

Hidden, all but invisible in the darkness, stood a police dog. If anything he was the most picture perfect example Will had ever seen. Not a hair out of place.

And he just stood there, watching. Not doing a thing. Will would almost swear he wasn't even breathing.

“What in the gods' names is tying their hands?” He thought back to the dog he'd befriended at the fire. Will frowned. “I'm guessing they've got their own problems.”

Oscar sighed and turned to walk away.

“I'm getting out of here,” the goat said, voice soft. Will could hardly make it out over the din of

the mob outside. "You want to lock the back door behind me?"

Will had to fight back a growl.

"I'll do better. I need to get out of here too."

Two blocks down, Will would almost swear there wasn't a mob running roughshod over the streets at all. Over here there wasn't a shred of evidence anything was wrong.

"You want dinner?" Oscar asked. "It's on me. The missus is out working tonight, and I'm not making a meal for that ungrateful kid."

Will shrugged. "Sure."

Ten minutes later they were sitting on a bench in the middle of the food district. Will had his perennial heart burger and Oscar was holding a taco the dog would swear was filled with cooked grass.

"How do you eat that?" Will asked. "Gods, it smells like lawn clippings."

Oscar just grinned and took a bite. The filling fell down his shirt. "I could ask you the same, *carnivore*." He said the word like an obscenity.

Will shrugged. "If the gods hadn't intended for animals to be eaten, they wouldn't have made them out of meat."

He smiled at the grimace he got from Oscar. The two of them had been doing this back and forth for years.

Forcing down a swallow, Oscar managed to speak again around his meal. He had to fight to be heard on the noisy street. The night was still young and people milled about them like sand in a storm.

"Did you see the latest procedure updates to come in today? They were straight from City Hall."

Will shook his head. "Too busy... Wait, how did you get them before me?"

The goat raised one hand and wiggled his fingers. "You have to ask? Nothing gets past me. I get my fingers into everything."

Will rolled his eyes and sighed. "Fine, sticky-fingers, what did it say?"

The smile fled from Oscar's lips. "You'd best finish your meal. I don't want you choking."

Will scowled and set his burger in his lap.

"Say it."

Oscar took a deep breath. "New priority, by order of City Hall, his honorable Mayor's office. Here forth and immediately, all new fires are to be re-prioritized. Top priority is to be given to government buildings and institutions," Will nodded, that was normal, "Second is to be given to critical infrastructure, third to..."

"Just get to it," Will muttered.

Oscar rolled his eyes. "Of reduced priority are any buildings, businesses, or infrastructure owned by humans."

Will cocked his head. He'd heard the words, but they just didn't click. He couldn't wrap his head around what the goat had said.

"Seriously?"

Oscar shrugged.

"Seriously?" Will repeated. "We're supposed to know who owns everything? Gods, whose fool idea was this?"

Parting ways with Oscar, Will started off home. He got a block and a half before realizing his condo sat on the other side of the ever present mob.

And the mob had grown.

Heading north, he tried to skirt the drunken hooligans, but every time he thought he'd managed to find their edge he always ran into more.

A growl pulled at the dog's lips.

"Hey, buddy, ya got a drink?" One of the mob tried to reach out to him, as if welcoming him into their ranks.

"Not for you," Will snarled, fighting not to spit.

It was an otter. For a long moment the other man seemed not to even register what Will had said.

"What are you?" the otter said at last, his voice a single long slur. "You ain't one of those monkey-bangers are ya?"

Will took a step back. He never backed away from a fair fight, but this was nothing of the sort.

"Hey! Get back here! I'm talking to ya!"

Turning down a side street, Will tried to slip away, to disappear into the shadows as the police dog had.

He, unfortunately, hadn't the same training.

"Get back here, ya mutt!"

Ten strides down and Will turned. The otter, staggering and barely on his feet, was hot on his heels.

"Go home, friend," Will said, fighting to keep his voice calm. "You're drunk."

He didn't even get a warning before the otter's fist flew through the air towards him.

Will's arm shot out.

The shock of impact ran down the dalmatian's arm as he took the force of the otter's clumsy and drunken blow.

A growl hovered just behind Will's lips.

Arm drawing back, Will could smell blood when his fist hit hard against the otter's muzzle. The protester was flat on his back a moment later, falling bonelessly to the ground.

Will fought to turn, to simply walk away. There was nothing more to be gained here...

Instead he followed the otter down, kneeling on his chest. Will could hear the other man's labored breaths.

"You think you're so strong, chanting and breaking windows when there's no one to stop you?" he whispered, lips an inch from the otter's rounded ear. "It's not the humans that are the dead end here."

Raising his fist again, Will cuffed him hard against the side of the skull. The otter's eyes rolled up into the back of his head. He was out cold.

Will looked down at the creature. He had to fight back the urge to spit.

Another ten minutes and Will gave up. Despite his best efforts the mob was between him and home. He'd have to dive through it.

Squaring his shoulders, Will walked briskly towards the knot of people. The mob wasn't very deep, but it seemed to snake through half the city.

He raised an eyebrow as he noticed yet another police dog skulking in an alleyway. The officer looked about as happy about the mob as Will did. They shared just a split second glance.

And with that Will stepped into the mix.

The smell of alcohol was all but overpowering. If Will didn't know better he'd had thought every single person was running on pure ethanol.

Getting through them was – rather to his surprise – easy, not a soul stopped him. They just kept

drinking, kept yelling, kept staggering down the street in some animalistic, some gods' damned foolish, plan.

Will pressed through them, in one side and out the other in little more than the blink of an eye.

The rest of the walk home took only moments. Will kept looking over his shoulder, kept nervously glancing back. It was times like this he was glad his parents were dead.

Closing his eyes, Will sighed.

Up to his second floor condo, the keys jingled as he unlocked the door. He slammed it behind him in an effort to block out the city.

And realized moments later he still hadn't a scrap of food to eat. The pizza from lunch was long gone, and he brought nothing home.

Taking a seat by the front window, Will looked out over the city. He watched people scuttering up and down the street, watched the stars so far above, and heard the not so distant chanting of the mob.

Will closed his eyes.

What in the gods' names was going on? Why weren't the police stopping this? *This was their job.* Every police dog Will had ever met was more competent than he had any right to expect. He hadn't a doubt it would take no more than a dozen officers to quell the entire riot.

They could have it wrapped up and the instigators in jail in under an hour. Why weren't they?

He closed his eyes. The fire department had orders to treat humans like second class citizens. It had come straight from the Mayor's office.

This was an anti-human riot.

The police weren't doing anything about it.