

# **Candles & Storms**

BY  
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*With the arrival of the Census and the gathering of all inhabitants for a mandatory registration process that was way overdue, Calum was now given a chance to finally have a go and find a real job*

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# C1

## Calum

Moving across the concrete tiles, the dense forest of legs and dangling arms and bags, Calum glanced up to a structure of concrete and glass, catching fragments of its visage as he stepped and ducked and weaved through the masses. On its roof, a row of gently flickering floodlights. The sky beyond painted perfect blackness.

Irritation flicked in Calum's mind. There was supposed to be a sign. Was this the right place or... no, it had to be, crowds never gathered this big reasonlessly. If only he could figure out why they were standing around in lines so.

No matter. He couldn't be lost again. He just had to find the way in.

Legs buzzing with fatigue, Calum kept up his pace. One hour before the darkening, that's when they shut the doors. That had once been many hours away, but since stepping out from his home that morning, his window had grown slimmer and slimmer and slimmer.

This was the first, probably the only city-wide census he would see in his lifetime. At least that's what Grandma had told him, and she would know, as she used to work at the place, or... he hoped it was the right place after all.

Having lain for several sleepless nights wondering what the outcome of the Census could be, Calum had finally grasped the idea of what a census was. But what would

come of it, this record of every creature living together, he had no idea.

Although he was certain that it'd bring work with nice benefits and nice food. Somewhere to be with a heater, a light and, and yes! A doctor he could go to whenever the stomach pains struck him.

Roughly shouted came a call from someone behind, a voice that drove Calum's ears to flatten as he turned to gauge if that shout was directed at him.

A burly man with a uniform of dark blue came at him, pushing through the crowd. Calum didn't see a face, just a glint of black boots thumping as they approached.

Why did this always happen to him?

Dropping to all fours to the dusty rock, Calum left the voice easily behind, a creamy-brown blur through a narrow thicket of legs. A scent of clean fabrics rushed by his nose, a whiff of smoke, then something sweet that stuck at the back of his neck.

Darting and twisting, Calum dodged his toes from the crushing step of a woman's heel, gave wide birth to the legs of an old man who smelled of urine, and broke out into the open.

*"Cheese bread, come get your cheesy bread here!"* came the shouts from the middle of the square where tables and smoke rose to a scent of to-be-liquidated hunger.

Calum climbed to his feet, trying to cough away that nasty taste of perfume that was scratching at his throat's back in mingle to the salivating food. He rubbed at his

nose and dashed to the unwrapped stalls of pastries. Humans babbled and exchanged paper for hot piece of bread wrapped in molten cheese. If only someone were to drop some of that on the ground, he could have it all for himself!

He was to ask if he could have just a little bit, but one of the women in a yellow-stained apron from behind the stalls shouted, "Ew, rat! Rat, shoo, shoo!"

A piece of rock was thrown Calum's way. Of course his reflex was pawy as always and he got out of harm without much thought, putting some distance from that person as he didn't want someone else joining in the activity of having things thrown at him.

At this new pause of hungry sigh, he gazed up.

There above him, white letters upon rusty brickwork, 'Office of Citizen Records' just as Grandma had said.

The building was long, stretching all the way to the start of the crowd with a grid of squat windows, although here at the front were the only doors he had seen.

A murmuring grew amid the backgrounding crowd, a thumping of boots followed by huffing breaths.

The lines of people all ended here; terrans from all walks of life, with their scuffed shoes, polished boots, torn jeans and flowerful dresses. All lines led to a row of black doors.

They were open: yellow hue shining from within. A smile crept across his features as Calum took his first steps towards them.

He'd made it.

The smile upon his muzzle fell to shock at the hustle of huffing behind him. His startled turn and skittering of feet were all a moment too late to avoid the grabbing hands of the burly man he'd thought long escaped-from.

Clamping around his tail, Calum found himself dangling upside down. His eyes caught on the sight of blue cloth wrapped around the man's arm. Grandma had said to trust people with blue bands, so he tried to form a polite smile as he looked up into the scowling beard that held him.

"Where do you think you're going, rat?"

"I'm no rat. I'm a mouse," he clarified. Calum didn't like it when people made the mistake. Was it really so confusing? Grandma always got it right.

The beard was scowling at him harder now.

Reaching up, Calum tried to pry himself form those bulky sausages. They didn't seem in the mood to budge. He could have started clawing, biting, but somehow that didn't feel... right.

"I'll miss the Census!"

"This is the human area. Your kind goes through the back."

"Oh, okay..."

Bringing his paws in front of his chest, Calum wondered about his next step. It wasn't so bad being held upside

down, just a little confusing that the man wanted to talk like this. It was also rather interesting. A different perspective!

The only problem was this 'something' on the terran's finger, a ring maybe. It was itchy-cold on his tail.

"I don't know where it is. I got lost, and my foot hurts, and my tail is itchy."

Calum gazed his brown eyes with a hopeful smile into the man's gruff face. The terran's eyes glared even harder, until their brow softened to a long sigh as Calum was put down. "Follow close, little one."

Weight yet again touched on his thighs and he didn't exactly like being on the ground again. The base of his tail itched a lot from all his weight hanging from it, but a little scratch soon fixed that. Looking back, the man was already pacing away, back through the crowd, so Calum took quick step to catch up. "What about the Census?"

"That's where we're going," he said.

Calum noticed he had a sort of stiff walk where his hands stayed beside his sides. He had a long black stick hanging off his belt and two loops of metal connected by a chain, but that didn't really spell much to Calum's mind.

"Wha's that?" Calum peered in focused curiosity.

"Hm?" said the man with a glance.

"Is it like a... ughm, like a neckle-necklelace?" he asked with a pointed finger.



The man chuckled, then patted the dangling gleam of metal. “Nah, is like bracelets, for bad people.”

“Oh.” It didn’t make much sense to Calum why bad people would have their own jewellery. He was about to ask more about it, when the man answered with a question of his own.

“Where did you learn to speak our language so nicely?”

“Grandma, she reads to me lots!”

“Ah, good-good. Polite young rat, aren’t you? It’s a nice thing to see.”

Just as Calum opened his mouth to correct the man’s blatant mistake, they rounded the corner at the edge of the building. The crowd of terrans left behind, they had traced all the way back to the start of the long row of windows.

The change in scent was instant, an earthy smell of **breath** and musk.

Calum noticed a change in the man’s walk. His shoulders tensed. His arm was no longer swinging but was clutching the black stick on his belt.

A crowd of animals stood, arranged in long lines just as the terrans had been. Calum’s tail twitched in toe.

“Too many of your kind, they don’t get taught to read, they don’t get taught manners, they don’t get taught getting along with **humans**.”

They were wolves mostly. Gigantic things, broad and hunched. A few turned in their direction, sniffing the air with those big, black noses. Muzzles long enough they could crunch him in two.

Certain air trebbled above and around this mass, a sort of undescrivable hostility without reasonable explanation. They were all clothed with baggy-hooded scraps that masked their wide and slim bodies. Fangs contrasted against their dark and gray chins, and the sort of hushed chatter rumbled as indecryptable cohesion.

Calum wanted to flee, escape these invisible claws that tickled his scented nose, this danger that spoke to him on a deep and unexplainable level. But the man before him kept that from happening just by being close. It was odd how no matter what the humans did, they always seemed the least harmful and would never (when the speech happens is when Calum realizes humans are the most dangerous) make him feel like what right now offered.

As they passed the pack of predators so did they pass packs of prey mals of different species, each keeping to ther respective groups. He wondered if the man was trying to find the mouse one, and it did make sense, so long as he wasnt led to the one with the rats. That wouldve been annoying after the many reclarifications.

Calum's sightseeing was harshly cut short as he collided into tha man's leg, stumbling back an falling on his rump.

"We is getin hungwy. I is getin hungwy." It was a tall wolf, its hood off and body blocking the way ahead into the building. The man's hand was resting on his stick at the

belt, and Calum swore he could see his tension steaming all around him.

"What are you complaining to me about?" the man blurted in harshness, then proceeding to reject, "Whats that there? Telling me that aint food?"

"Muncher, grass garbage from buncho foxes. I want flesh."

"Well there aint none so shut it."

"That rat there looks perfect, come here, handful," the wolf didnt even finish as it tried to grab at the sitting, mortified Candle. Clawed tendowns of gray-deadly fur were coming swiftly for grip and Candle knew he had to escape even before the word came about.

But before he could blink that clawed paw was crunchily smacked to a yelp by a hazy blur of the man's stick.

"Not happening, savage damn animal!" he shouted with the thick stick risen in the air. The wolf was whimpering, but then it growled and bared its teeth with these horrible gurgles that salivated at its maw. But just as that happened the fury got cut off and its ears fell is some kind of remorseful deproach. Its tail fell and it gloomily retracted back into the pack of grumbling predators.

Man did not follow, just breathed out a long sigh and gave Calum a glance. His heart was in his ears and he was looking for any reason to just run, but none came about.

"Come, this isnt a good place for you."

They passed by the mobile food stand serviced by several foxes, fumes of tasty food tickling Calums temptations. He dared dream of reaching out for the piece of bread or even the raw onions, but the overbearing fear of falling behind the man disabled his ambitions.

"Officer, special deal for you, come!" shouted warmly and eloquently the front fox.

"Later."

"Later it is, officer. Dont deprave your tongue of these delightful tastes."

"Can I--" Calum tried to say but an incoming wolf at the stand made him squeek and run away, getting a strange glance from the smaller predator who did not have those dangerous qualities and even felt friendly.

Calum tried not to overthink the difference and walked a little closer to his new friend.

"And they complain when they're not treated equally? Well maybe *they* need to make more of an effort to... Anyway, through here."

Calum was escorted through the dark door, down a short corridor with panels on either wall and into a large room. He wasn't sure how it would be called, but there were tons of doors, cabinets, terrans bustling to and fro. The floor was shiny and smelled like lemon. Would it taste like lemon too?

Such luxury did these terrans surround themselves by!

Allowing himself a small moment to test his curiosity, Calum knelt and unabashedly lapped once at the floor, only to stand against instantly, trying to scrape his tongue off against his teeth. It tasted of... of dirt and mud and other nastiness that sizzled on his flesh in a ticklish manner.

What a filthy lie. How could something that smelled nice not taste nice? What was the point of a nice scent without a taste to... oh, wait, where was his friend?

Peering around through the ton of noise and crowding, Calum slipped in between mals' legs as he looked for his guide. Nobody even gave him a second glance. He couldn't see much of the area through the crowds, but the vibrant blue of the man's sash managed to dance for his attention.

Pattering towards him through the ruckus of steps and wheels and swinging doors, he stopped by the man's side, by a door with a tall window of an odd kind of glass that Calum couldn't see through.

The man seemed to be considering something. Calum watched as he glanced around, before untying the blue sash from his arm, which he pushed into Calum's paws.

"You put this around yourself, rat."

Calum followed obediently, grasping the cloth and draping it over his shoulders, letting it fall down over his back while he held it up over his face. The fabric obscured his brow. He peered out from its folds with a little grin on his creamy-white muzzle. All he received in return was a low grunt from the terran.

“No-no, tie it around your waist, with a knot.”

Pulling the blue from himself, Claum turned it over and over in his paws. If he could just find the corner, he could... But it seemed to go on and on for... Well, maybe if he'd put it in half, and then make a tie?

“Lemme”, sighed the man, grabbing the cloth from Calum's paws and pulling it around him from behind. He did some motions and the cloth grew tight about his waist. The feeling was strange and rather dislikeable. Was it necessary?

Calum tried to push it off but it was fixed firm, so he twitched his nose and looked up at the man, only to see him staring back expectantly.

“You say, ‘thank you’.”

Calum glanced around himself, then looked back up with wide-open eyes. “Why?”

“It's what you do when someone helps you. I've given you some clothes. Not much, doesn't even reach your knees, but you're a little more presentable.”

“Clothes?” Calum giggled. “Has master freed me?”

“Erm, what?”

“Oh, it's from a book. didn't get that part either, the first time.”

His face held in a baffled expression, the man leaned into the dark door he was stood behind. It opened slowly, a scent of stuffy air drifting from within.

Not sure if he really liked the smell that much, Calum glanced back at the lemon-scented floor. A cacophony erupted from behind, he flinched with pivoting ears to see two trollies of papers colliding.

The door already swinging closed, Calum made up his mind he would much prefer the stuffy quiet than the noise, or the lying floors out here.

He dashed inside, although the cloth around him wasn't making his movements easy.