

The Proginers



By wwwolf

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Chapter 3: A New Breed of Cop

The next morning was, also, quieter than I would have liked it.

It wasn't that a dark cloud had fallen upon us, but simply that neither knew what to say.

That, and there was nothing left in the apartment to eat.

"Feel like breakfast out, Babe?" I asked.

She smiled as she pulled on a thin black top. "I don't think we have much of a choice, Wolfy. And," she paused for a moment, "I heard what the doctor said to you yesterday. Thanks for not believing him. You know I'd never do that."

I snorted.

"Babe, we've been together long enough now that I think it's just short of physically impossible for either of us to even think that." Reaching out, I kissed her forehead, pulling her close. "At least it is for me. Don't thank me, Babe. It's all just a matter of trust. You've saved my life enough times that I'm pretty sure you would have let me know if you were unhappy, eh?"

She just shook her head and punched me in the gut.

It was past rush hour by the time we got out on the street, but most places were still serving breakfast. I tried to get Pine to stay back at the apartment but he insisted on tagging along.

He must have heard about the pregnancy by now, even if he didn't mention it.

Stopping by one of the endless number of stalls, I picked up a pair of wraps that included everything from fried eggs to bits of apple in them. I figured we could both agree on that.

Taking another turn as we munched on our wraps, I must have misjudged. I *thought* this was the way to Stanley Park. Instead we found ourselves smack in the middle of an open air market.

I was about to turn around when Rebecca took my hand and led me forward with a laugh.

"Come on, Wolfy. We could use a little socializing after how long we spent up in the mountains."

The market was packed. Gods, I never remembered anything like this from a few years ago. Most of the people here spoke other languages I couldn't even begin to make out.

Bobbing and weaving through the crowds, I think we just about gave Pine an aneurysm as he tried to keep us in sight.

We were just passing yet another set of stalls when Rebecca came to an abrupt halt.

"What is it, Babe?"

She pointed out a hand to a pair of pint sized pajamas on display. One was blue, the other pink.

I just started laughing, pulling her close.

"Gods, Babe... I almost forgot. We'll have to remodel the apartment for *two* kids now!"

Her face pressed deep against the fur of my chest, I could feel her start to cry.

"What is it, Babe?" I whispered. We were surrounded by hundreds of people in the market, but for just that moment we were alone. I led her off to a corner of the street. Pine stepped up silently to make sure we had some space.

"It's nothing... nothing, Tommy." She worked a smile to her lips as she looked up at me. "It's just that things are getting crazy again. I'm worried for the babies now. A day ago everything was normal, now we're back into the gods know what."

I grinned. "Well, what were you expecting? I don't think we've had a *normal* thing happen to us since we met."

I kissed her cheek.

Turning, we were about to head off back through the market when my ears twitched.

What in the world?

I could hear the sound of running feet. That alone wasn't much, but these were no normal feet. I'd spent enough time around police dogs to know the perfect measured sound of their stride even when they were in full sprint.

The saving grace was that there only seemed to be one of them.

Pine picked up on the sound a moment after I did, his head jerking to the left.

Coming through the crowd full tilt was a German Shepard. Odd, despite the fact he showed every evidence of being a cop he wasn't in a blue uniform. Rather he was in the white dress shirt and dark slacks of a government employee.

Pine stepped up to intercept him as he came closer. The two dogs had a quick whispered conversation as Rebecca and I looked on.

Well, if there was any doubt about this guy being a cop it was gone now. The police had half a language to their own and this new dog spoke it fluently.

"Sir," Pine turned to me, "It would appear that this messenger has been sent to find you. There is a matter of some importance at City Hall that requires your immediate attendance."

I just let out a sigh.

"Fine." I spared Rebecca a peck on the cheek before stepping forward. "Pine," I looked to the police dog, "you'll watch Rebecca, won't you?"

"Of course, Sir. I guard her with my life."

I walked away shaking my head.

City Hall, thankfully, wasn't far from the market. We were there in about ten minutes.

The building wasn't grand and regal, not like the old place before the quake, but it was stately enough, in a downplayed and sedate kind of way.

Walking up the front steps, it felt like a equal parts of coming home and stepping into a dungeon.

The fact I'd helped build this place notwithstanding.

The number of people I recognized, and even more who recognized *me*, on the way through the halls was uncanny. It was like it hadn't been a day since I'd stepped down.

Up on the top floor, I tried to straighten my fur before turning the last corner to the office

labeled 'Mayor'.

What in all the gods' names was Max getting me into *this* time.

Alright, that was anticlimactic.

Why in the world had they called me in the first place?

"Sorry about that, Tommy," Max said, sitting down in his richly appointed leather chair. The mayor's office wasn't all that plush, but his chair was the exception. And I could forgive that. I knew from past experiences that the one thing you really needed after fighting your way through hour after hour of endless bickering meetings was a soft seat to plant yourself in.

Max didn't look as run out as he used to, but the lines were still apparent under his eyes.

"I guess I dragged you all the way up here for nothing," he continued. "It's just whenever we have a problem involving the cops I really don't feel all that confident handling it myself."

What Max was politely saying was that he didn't want to step on the toes of the V-town police department, and would rather have me do it now that I was friends with their commissioner.

Max knew just how powerful the cops could be.

I waved him off as I took a seat across from him. My chair was nice, but nowhere as awesome as his.

"Don't worry about it. I know things can get a little... complicated when the cops are involved. We can just be glad it was a case of mistaken identity. But, then again," I said, stifling a yawn, "Why in all the gods' names did *we* have to deal with this? Issues like this are the kind of things the cops should be dealing with internally. Or at least you should just be able to pass the message on to Jon and wash your hands of it."

Max frowned, folding his hands on the desk before him.

"That's a good question, Tommy. You haven't heard anything from Police HQ lately, have you?"

I cocked my head. "No. Why, should I have? I just got back into town yesterday."

Max sighed. "Something's gone strange. The cops are still out there doing their job, but... it's not quite right. I haven't heard from the Commissioner, or anyone in his office for that matter, in over a week."

That made me sit up and take notice. The Commissioner and Mayor should be talking almost every day.

"That's a good question, Max." I set my jaw. This wasn't going to be fun. "Let's find out."

Finding the dog who had led me here, I tried to get the story out of him. He was about as helpful as a paving brick. At first he denied even being a cop, he claimed just to be an aid. I blew that story apart quickly enough when I started barking orders at him. He reacted just as a police dog should.

Next he told me he was under orders not to discuss the matter. When I asked him *who I could ask* he refused to answer even that much.

To say I was pissed off when I left Max's office would be an understatement.

He was a police dog for the gods' sakes. I was the City Administrator. They were supposed to answer my questions. I just wanted to know where Jon was. It wasn't like I was trying to pry into their deepest and darkest secrets.

I'd already done *that* last year. I didn't feel like taking that particular tour again anytime soon.

I'd already been in a bad mood when I was led here. Now, stalking back out, I was just a hair

away from growling.

All the people who had smiled and waved at me on the way in kept their distance now. I didn't have much of reputation around City Hall, but everyone knew to leave this unassuming little brown wolf well enough alone when he was pissed.

It wasn't far to Police HQ, only a few blocks, but it gave my temper enough time to cool off a few degrees.

And I noticed something as I walked.

This was the heart of downtown, accordingly there was a police dog at almost every intersection, standing in the shadows. Watching.

It's been that way since before I was born. Most of the time we all just took it for granted. Now I watched them a bit more closely as I passed by. And there was something not right.

Now don't get me wrong, it wasn't anything big and noticeable. But there was just *something* there. The way they stood, the way they shifted their weight. There was something just not right. The normally rock solid mask of the police force was still in place, but it was just a hair loose and trembling ever so slightly.

I walked faster.

Police HQ was a truly massive building. It took up a whole city block, its unassuming red brick walls rising three stories up and dove at least five underground.

I trembled slightly as I thought of some of the things that had been done in the cold, dark depths of those basement floors.

There was only a single public entrance to the building, a small wooden door in the center of the front wall. All the other entrances and exits were disguised, scattered throughout other nearby buildings that the HQ connected to via underground tunnels like a massive red brick octopus.

Stepping thorough into the simple, nearly unfurnished waiting room, I was rather surprised how empty it was.

The room could easily hold a hundred people between its plain red brick walls, and I'd seen many a person waiting for help on its worn wooden benches. But today there was only a single other person in here with me.

A fox stood in front of the service counter, talking to the police dog on duty. I couldn't help but pick up on their conversation as I lined up behind him.

"I just want to know where my son is!" the man said, his voice was frantic. "He was arrested for stealing a candy bar. I'll pay bail, I'll do whatever you want, I just want to know he's safe."

The officer on duty was, unsurprisingly, another German Shepard. He looked just like all the other cops. His voice, when he spoke, was near perfect and clipped, but I could detect something *off* with it.

"I understand, Sir, but I'm sorry to say I can't help you at this time. I can assure you that if your son was arrested then he's perfectly safe, but the service regrets to inform you that we can not help you at this time."

"Why?" The fox sounded like he was on the verge of leaping over the counter and throttling the cop.

"Because we have more important things to worry about!"

The fox and I must have jumped a good six inches in the air when the officer snapped.

That's... that's just not something the police did.

The fox didn't say another word as he turned around and made for the door as fast as his legs

could carry him. The cop couldn't have gotten him to move faster if he'd slapped him.

For the span of a handful of seconds I simply stood there, stunned.

The cop stayed where he was, planted behind the desk, and raised his shaking hands to smooth down his pelt that had raised during the outburst.

And it was then I realized he was the only cop in sight. I'd never seen the HQ's reception room, no matter how busy or quiet, with less than three officers manning it.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward.

"How may I help you, citizen?" came the police officer's familiar opening. Only I noticed his words were quivering.

"I'd like to see Commissioner Jon Oaks," I said, keeping my voice level.

"No." The man's response was instant and unequivocal. But more than that... I could hear the fear come bubbling up. His eyes narrowed when he spoke.

I couldn't see it, but I'd bet you whatever you want his tail curled around his leg when I said Jon's name.

I narrowed my eyes. "I am City Administrator Tommy Taggart. I am formally requesting a meeting with the V-town commissioner of police."

"And you have been denied." His voice was firmer.

You know, I really didn't have any idea what to say now. I'd never had a police dog deny me something like this since becoming Administrator.

But I'd be buggered if I was just going to give up and walk away.

"There is something wrong with the force, officer," I said, lowering my voice to let in just the hint of a growl. "You *will* see to it I have a meeting with the commissioner."

If I'd been expecting the dog to cower before me I was good and well mistaken.

The police dogs always walked around like someone had shoved a iron rod under their tails, but now this one straightened like I'd just told him I'd raped his mother. I wasn't sure what words were on his lips, but I never got the chance to find out. A heartbeat later the door beside him banged open.

And into the waiting room marched Assistant Commissioner Baker. "Mr. Taggart, if you would be so kind as to follow me." It wasn't a request, it was an order.

I decided this wasn't the time to complain. Any progress was good progress.

Following the Assistant Commissioner deeper into the building, I had just a moment to glance back at the dog that still stood behind the reception desk.

He looked as mortified as I about what had just happened.

But that was the key. What was it that had just happened?

Following Baker down a few twists and turns of the Police HQ, it became obvious we weren't on our way to Jon's office. He was on the third floor. We were only on the second.

The fact I knew the way to Jon's office in these unmarked, whitewashed hallways was testament to how many times I'd made the journey.

"Baker..." I reached forward to grab the dog's shoulder. He flinched away before I touched him.

"If you'd just humour me for a moment, Sir." There was a tremor to his voice. I decided not to object.

A moment later we were through yet another unmarked doorway and into a – like all the others – sparsely appointed office.

Though I could tell you this had to be Baker's office. It was a touch bigger than the normal officer's offices I'd seen before. And had a bigger desk to hold all the paper work.

"Please, Mr. Taggart," he said, letting out a long breath, "Would you take a seat?"

For just a moment I smiled. This office was one of the most – if you'll pardon the term – *human* I've ever seen in Police HQ. The walls were as bare as every other, but the mass of papers that covered the desk made it look like a man worked here, and not an automaton.

The hard wooden seat was uncomfortable, but I was used to that my now. The only office in the whole place with padded seats was Jon's, and that was at my insistence.

"Alright, Baker," I said, keeping my tone civil, "Are you going to tell me what in all the gods' names is going on?"

The dog's already pinched face grew more strained. "I'm sorry, Mr. Taggart. You know I would do anything I could for you, but you must simply take my word for it that Commissioner Oaks is unavailable at the moment and may remain that way for... some time."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "Is Jon dead?" I had to suppress a shudder.

Baker's reaction was visceral enough to answer my question. His mouth nearly dropped open. "No! That is to say... no, Sir. You have my personal word that Commissioner Jon Oaks is alive. Simply... unavailable."

I sighed. "Then what's happened? He's my friend, Baker. You know I have the right to be told. And whatever happened to him is affecting the force's performance. We had a problem down at City Hall Jon could have sorted out in seconds. Instead it took me a good hour."

Baker averted his eyes. "I'm sorry, Mr. Taggart. I can't tell you. You simply need to take my word for it that he is alright and the force is doing *everything* we can to help him. That is... ahem... why we are operating at reduced capacity."

I lowered my head for a moment. "So you brought me all the way up here just to tell me you can't tell me?"

At that the dog worked up at least the shadow of a smile. "I had to, Sir. The officer at the front desk was not trained to answer sensitive questions like this. And, to be honest, we're all under undue stress at the moment."

I took a closer look at him as he said that. I could see the bloodshot veins in his eyes and the worn way he held his ears.

There are some battles, I've learned, that I'm just not going to win. At least not just now.

"Fine." I stood up. "Will you at least pass the message I was here onto Jon?"

He nodded, the relief of my acceptance obvious in his motions.

"Of course, Sir. I'm sure he will be happy to hear you were looking for him."

I was just about to turn and leave the office when a thought came to mind.

"Oh, and Baker, where's Able? Shouldn't he have been the one to receive me with Jon out of action?"

Baker's tongue came out to lick his nose. "That *would* be proper procedure, Sir. But I'm sorry to say we've had to make some changes. Assistant Commissioner Able is occupied at the moment. I am the most senior officer available."

And that was pretty much that.

Next thing I knew Baker had escorted me out of the building and I was once again out on the street, alone.

Okay, now what?

I was starting to wander my way home when I realized I was close to a house I hadn't been to in sometime.

My uncle Gowan, the current Hunter's Alpha.

I had no idea if he'd be at home at this hour, but there was only one way to find out.

His home was, unsurprisingly, somewhat like my parent's.

Off on a small side street, it was, however, quite a bit larger and more impressive.

Now don't get me wrong, it's no mansion, but it's a fair bit nicer than the modest bungalow my Dad bought so many years ago.

Walking up the gravelled front pathway, I took the ten strides to get to the big white door.

There was one thing that both this home and my parent's had in common. The sense of peace.

I paused there in front of the door for a moment, listening. We were in the middle of the city, but yet the only sound that came to my ears was the gentle brush of the wind through the trees and the occasional call of a bird.

Some small measure of the stress dropped from me as I rapped my knuckles on the door.

A few moments later I heard something heavy crash to the ground followed by a muffled curse.

Too be honest, I was a little surprised. I hadn't really been expecting Gowan to be home.

A few moments later the door clicked open. Within stood my uncle, leaning on the frame and holding one foot clenched in a hand.

"Tommy!" His face alight when he saw me. "What are you doing here?"

I smiled as he ushered me in to the spacious front room. Everything was neat and clean and trendy. Gowan, a beta to the bitter end, was always one to keep up on the latest fashions.

"I was just in the neighbourhood," I replied. "I thought I should drop by and let you know I was back in town." The next words took some effort to force from my lips. "I am a hunter, after all. And you're my alpha."

His eyes clouded over when I said that. He shook his head. "Don't you get started too, Tommy. You know..." He sighed. "You know I'm not a real alpha."

I cocked my head as we walked deeper into the house. He was limping, leaning on my shoulder to avoid putting weight on his wounded foot.

"You're not giving yourself credit, Gown. You ran the hunters for years after Dad hurt his leg. There's no one else in the city who's anywhere as qualified as you."

He snorted.

I was about to head into the front sitting room when Gown gave me a tap and we turned to the kitchen instead.

"You know Griss never really left the hunters, Tommy. This is... well, this is the first time I've been alone. Even on his death bed your father was helping me run things. He did things I never could. Inspire people, lead them, plan. That's just not the kind of stuff I'm good at. He always planned. I made the plans happen." For a moment he laughed. "That's likely where you got it from. Only the son of an alpha could ever be mayor."

We were in the kitchen now. It was a big, fully furnished room almost the size of my whole apartment. A flagstone floor and dark, wood paneled walls complimented the brushed steel appliances.

And sitting on the table was the better part of a ton of paper. The whole surface was covered with reports, maps, and books.

And laying on the floor next to a table was a tome that looked like it weighed a good fifteen pounds.

I reached down and put it back on the table. It was aged and leather bound. The plain writing on the cover read 'The laws and customs of the Hunters of the Greater Vancouver Area'.

Gowan chuckled as I brushed a hand over it.

"Your father wrote that a good forty years ago. Well, he *started*. We've been adding to it ever since. I had to look back at the laws. I've got some young cat who's contesting the hunting range assigned to him. The gods only knew how your dad was able to remember all the rules and bylaws."

"What's he contesting?" I asked. "Is someone else hunting in his territory?"

"Yeah," Gowan replied, limping to a chair. "He thinks someone else is poaching in his range."

I flipped the book open, feeling it's worn pages slip between the rough pads of my fingers.

"That's chapter twenty-seven. Disputes on territories and pack granted lands. Right here." I pointed to the passage with a claw.

Gowan's eyes grew wide. "How did you find that? I've been looking for that for two hours!"

I took a seat next to him and shrugged. "I grew up with my dad. I was there when he wrote some of these laws. They're practically bedtime stories to me."

I stopped to snort for a moment. The term 'wrote' is a little bit of a misnomer here. My father had been illiterate. Many of the laws were written in english, but not by my father's hand. All of his work had been in pictograms and drawings.

About three hours later we had worked out his answer to the territory dispute.

Gowan may have his answer, but it was I who found the proper passages. And it was I who told him who was in the right and who was in the wrong.

And the smile on the other wolf's face couldn't be wider.

"You're more like your father than anyone's ever told you, Tommy," Gowan said, leaning back in his chair, picking the last scraps off a bone he'd pulled from the refrigerator as a snack. "Having you here, it's almost like..." He petered off after that, voice fading away. "Tommy. I'm sorry."

Huh?

"About what?" I asked.

Closing his eyes, he sat up straight.

"Last year. The poisons that almost killed you. The ones that devil Brian Ferguson found. He stole them from me."

I shook my head. "Don't worry about it. Really. I came out of it okay, and it's not your fault someone robbed you. You had them just as safe as my dad did. It could just as well been him."

"Thanks, Tommy." He looked at me, eyes tired. "You don't know what that means to me. The thought I almost caused you to... I couldn't have lived with myself if I'd been responsible for your death."

Reaching out, I set my brown furred hand atop his black. It was only then I noticed the traces of grey showing through.

Back out on the street again, it was getting close to five. I'd best be heading home if I wanted to catch Rebecca in time for dinner.

And bugger it all, *this* was supposed to be the day we sat down and talked about the babies. How in all the gods' names had I managed to forget about *that*?

The walk from Gowan's place to mine was a bit of a hike, but I made it in good time. I'd almost forgotten what it was like to just be able to walk from one place to another without a guard watching over my shoulder or some new crisis demanding my attention.

Stepping through the front doors of the lobby, Pine was there waiting for me.

"Is it even worth me asking you what happened to Jon?" I said, not really expecting an answer.

"Commissioner Oaks?" He cocked his head. "I'm sorry, Sir. I really don't know. Has something happened? I've been isolated from the force somewhat since taking on this position. I've not been informed about anything happening to the Commissioner."

I just sighed and shook my head. Sometimes the cops were just a little too efficient for their

own good.

Into the apartment, the scent of takeout was heavy in the air.

"Babe," I stepped up behind Rebecca sitting at the kitchen table, "whatever did I do to deserve you?"

I was just about to break into the little white boxes when something nagged at the back of my brain.

There had been a scent out in the hallway, just outside the door.

I hadn't noticed it at first, it had been so familiar that it just faded into the background. Now that I thought about it there was something... wrong with it.

"Just a second, Babe," I said, heading back to the apartment door.

She put down her fork and turned to me. "What is it, Wolfy? It must be something big to distract you from food."

I didn't answer. Three steps from the door, I heard a knock.

And now I knew something was wrong. The scent I'd picked up before was stronger now. Whoever it was stood just on the other side.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door.

And there stood a human.

I blinked.

He was tall and thin with tightly cropped brown hair and piercing blue eyes. His skin was a pale white as though it'd never seen the sun. He stood still as stone, watching me.

And he was dressed in a baggy police officer's uniform that was at least three sizes too big for him. There was no name on the breast.

"May I come in?" His words were perfect, but his diction was off, as though he wasn't used to speaking.

I took a deep breath. I *knew* him.

Flexing my fingers, making sure my claws were free, I asked, "Who are you?"

He took a glance up and down the hallway nervously. "Please, Tommy," his voice was little more than a whisper, "let me in."

For just the flash of an instant I saw the scared, defenceless face of a friend in need under the soft lights of the hallway. "Get in here." I stepped aside.

He skuttered in, and with that motion I recognized him.

Rebecca was standing now. "Who is it?" She looked at him at a loss.

I closed the door softly behind me and the human jumped as if I'd slammed it.

For a long moment he didn't speak. He simply walked about the apartment, pulling down blinds and making sure all the windows and doors were locked.

When at last he stilled I could see the effort it took him to sit at the table and fold his hands before him.

His voice was soft and trembling when he spoke.

"I am Jon Oaks."

I pulled up a stool next to him as I glanced over to Rebecca.

There was only one question on my lips. "Project Phoenix?"

He nodded glumly.

'Phoenix' was what the police called their attempt to recreate the technology that had caused the Cataclysm in the first place. Rebecca, English, and I had discovered the computers that had caused it. For the better part of two years the police had been working to understand the phenomenon. I was

getting the sneaking suspicion they'd had a breakthrough.

"Prove it," Rebecca said from beside me. Her voice wasn't hard, but it was obvious she didn't believe him. She couldn't smell his scent like I could.

For just a moment he had that deer in the headlights look. Then, like the man I knew he was, his brain kicked into gear.

"Tommy," he turned to me, "I was the one to call you over the radio when you were in Edmonton. I was the one who doubted you when you said you'd been turned into a human and Rebecca into a cat. I... I was the one to relay it when your father had a heart attack."

I glanced over to Rebecca. She nodded, satisfied.

"Welcome to the transformation club, Jon." I put my arm over his shoulders. He shied away for just a moment before relaxing. "It's a pretty exclusive group."

We welcomed Jon to our takeout. I wasn't sure what he was eating these days, but he took to the food like a drowning man to a lungful of air. I think he managed to eat more than I did.

It was only between mouthfuls of chowmein that we were able to get the story out of him.

"The machinery came in last spring," he said, "You know that much. But it took us months to get even a single one of the systems operational. Even getting them adapted to the power we use here in V-town was a challenge. The systems are all over a hundred years old. The fact *any* of them work is a miracle."

"And that's what we've had the finest minds on the force working on for the last year." He paused for a moment to chew on a bun. It was obvious he didn't know how to get it down. I felt pity for him. Trying to get used to a whole new set of teeth is not fun.

"Why'd it take a year?" I asked. "The three of us were able to get the systems up and running in a day when we were in Edmonton. All we had to do was radio Ornithi and he walked us right through it."

Jon looked away, blushing. I'd never seen him blush before.

"You got it right there, Tommy. I didn't even know of the project until right before I took over the force. My uncle had... his own opinions on exactly how it should be handled. He wanted it to be controlled from beginning to end by the force, no outside influence whatsoever. He even made the hunters who helped us carry it here swear to silence."

"And that, in a nut shell, was why we didn't get anywhere. Not a single member of the force has a sufficient education in electronics. We were all at a loss but too proud to admit it." He snorted. "Or, I should say, we *were* at an impasse. I resolved that as soon as I took control."

I shook my head. "Jon, why didn't you tell us what was going on?"

He sighed. "I was going to, Tommy. Truly I was. But you already knew we had the equipment and until just recently we'd yet to accomplish anything of value."

I gave him a look up and down, taking in his dead-fish white skin.

"I'd say you managed to accomplish *something*."

He laughed. The sound was uncanny coming from him. I'd heard Jon laugh, rarely. This was nothing like the soft chuckle I remembered. He laughed so hard tears came to his eyes.

"You're right, Tommy. Oh gods, you're right. I was invited down two weeks ago to witness a demonstration. It didn't," he laughed again, tears coming freely now, "it didn't go as planned. I was in the front of the crowd, given the best view of the machine. When I came to," he closed his eyes, "When I came to I was surrounded by dogs."

"What?" Rebecca asked.

Jon shrugged, forcing a watery smile to his lips. "When I came to again I was one of only a

handful who'd changed. Almost everyone else in the force was unaffected. When I woke up again, it couldn't have been more than a minute later, I wasn't surrounded by the force anymore, not my friends and extended family. I was surrounded by a pack of dogs."

"It wasn't them who had changed, Tommy. It was *me*. They were exactly the same as they'd been before. But I was no longer one of them." The sucked in a deep, trembling breath. "They knew who I was, and I them, but the *connection* was gone. Tommy, I've been trapped, just short of a prisoner of my own men because I can't *communicate* with them. They know who I am, on an intellectual level, but they can't accept I'm still the Commissioner."

I cocked my head. "Why?"

He gestured to me. "There. That. I know that motion, but I have to *think* about it. A cock of the head, the folding of an ear, the twitch of a whisker. *I can't do that anymore. It's no longer part of who I am.* And that's not even to include the scents and unconscious twitches of a tail. I'm no longer what I was. Practically the entire force is canine. You once asked me why that was. Now, now I know. We all speak one language."

Reaching out, I set a hand on his. "But *I* can understand you well enough."

He shrugged. "You're not a officer. The force is a strict hierarchy. There are expectations and obligations. To us it's quite literally second nature. Now it's lost to me. And," he worked up a grin, "You have more experience dealing with humans and their idiosyncrasies than most people."

Sparing a glance over to Rebecca, I snorted. "Well, you could say that."

Getting up from the table, I walked to the window, tugging the blind aside with a claw.

Down below I could see at least three different packs of police dogs scouring the street. They all had their noses to the ground.

I'd never seen the cops move like that. Their actions were quick and frantic, missing all their normal precision.

"Jon, did you cover your trail on the way here?" I asked.

"No," he said from behind me. "It... it never occurred to me. I'd forgotten about my scent."

I let the blind fall back into place as I returned to the table. "Then we'd better keep the conversation going while we still have time. What have you been doing since the transformation? Gods, don't tell me they locked you in a cell."

Jon shook his head. "Nothing quite so barbaric. I am still the commissioner, technically. No one will follow my orders directly though. I was put on a leave of medical absence and reprimanded to a secure holding zone in the third sub-basement. They weren't *trying* to impresen me, but they couldn't let me free and had no idea what to do with me in this form. I'm the Commissioner and the force *needs* a commissioner, and alpha."

"And that's where Able was?" I asked.

He nodded. "He was there with me. I'd write an order, and he'd issue it. Translating it into a proper command for the force, so to speak."

"Then how'd you get here?" Rebecca asked.

Jon hid a shy smile. "I was told you'd come to see me today, Tommy." The smile died away as quickly as it'd come. "And when they wouldn't allow me to talk to you... That's when I knew I was a prisoner no matter what they said."

For just a moment a glimmer of pride appeared in his eyes.

"I decided it was time I took leave of the station." There was something in his voice as he said that. It was *Jon*, don't mistake me, but it wasn't the *police dog Jon*, it was the *human Jon* who said those words. The dog I knew would never have betrayed the force like that.

"They never even expected it," he continued. "I waited until Able was away, then crept out

behind the very backs of those set to watch over me.” The smile that slipped from him now would have looked predatory if he'd still been canine. “It was only a matter of moments until I was free. I have no doubt the force will be by presently to collect me, but I escaped. That's what matters.”

And, by the sound of the footfalls out in the hallway, I'd say Jon was right. The only people who could ever step so perfectly were police dogs.

A moment later there was a polite knock at the door.

I glanced over to Jon. He just shrugged, not getting up.

Opening the door, Pine stood at the head of a column of dogs. He was doing his best not to make it obvious, but he was holding them back.

“Mr. Taggert,” his voice was strained. “The officers here would like to speak to you. They are searching for an escaped...” he coughed before he could say the word *prisoner*.

“That's fine, Pine. Let them in. I have nothing to hide.” I stepped aside, letting them see Jon sitting at the table. “Rebecca and I were just having dinner with our good friend Jon Oaks.” I lowered my voice, “The Commissioner of Police.”