

# The Proginers



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## Table of Contents

|            |                                                               |    |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Chapter 1: | The River may be Running, but I have no Urge to Chase it..... | 1  |
| Chapter 2: | To Say This Was Unexpected.....                               | 12 |
| Chapter 3: | A New Breed of Cop.....                                       | 25 |
| Chapter 4: | Pot Marks and Ashes.....                                      | 37 |

## Chapter 4: Pot Marks and Ashes

That was a month ago, and right now I had problems closer to home to deal with.

Namely rearranging the furniture *again*.

“Rebecca, Babe,” I pleaded, trying to catch my breath as I moved one of the cribs against a different wall, “Aren’t *I* supposed to be the one with the denning instinct?”

That got me a soft slap across the back of the head.

“We were only planning for *one*, Tommy. And a wolf at that. You know we have to get this right.”

I grinned and rolled my eyes. “Whatever you say, Babe.” Reaching forward, I had to lean in to get around her bulging belly to kiss her.

She had another appointment at the hospital, but I promised to keep working.

Out in the kitchen, not even *that* room was free from getting rearranged.

Reaching down to move a stool, I noticed it felt heavier than it should.

That was odd.

Flipping it over, I noticed the padding under the seat had been sliced open and was now over stuffed.

Worming a hand into the opening, I could hear the rustle of papers.

What in all the gods' names?

A moment later my hand came back clutching a dozen or so sheets. And in their top left corner was the logo of the V-town police department.

I had to pause and blink for a moment. This was the same seat Jon had been sitting on. What was he playing at?

It was about a half hour later English arrived. I'd sent out a messenger to find him.

“What ya got, Mate?” He asked, stepping into the apartment. “The bloody rabbit would just tell me that you had something you wanted to show me.”

I was starting to feel a bit like Jon now, going around the apartment, checking to make sure all the blinds were closed.

I handed him the papers I'd found. He just about went cross eyed.

"Uh, Mate, that's great. What are they?"

I scowled. "What do you think? There from the police department. Jon must have left them here." English was one of the only people I'd told about Jon's visit.

He sighed. "That's great, Mate. So what? In case you haven't noticed, I don't do paperwork. Or have your forgotten what got us in that mess with Vanderhoom?"

I growled.

Okay, I'll admit it. Maybe the golden lug had a point.

I'd thought reading these papers wouldn't be much of a problem. Hey, I'd been *mayor* for gods' sake. I should be able to decode just about any overwrought jargon.

Yeah, I got about three paragraphs in before getting good and truly lost.

I was able to pick out references to 'Prometheus' every now and then, and I knew that was the police department's plan to develop the Cataclysm technology, but there were also references to 'Iapetus' whatever in all the gods' names *that* was.

"I think, Mate," English said, stifling a yawn, "That you called the wrong person. Neither you nor I were there when the dogs salvaged this stuff. We used it, then we broke it. That's where our story ends. You need someone who was there when they tried to get it back up and running again."

I was just about ready to start snapping. "Who we need is *Jon*, but there's no way the cops will ever let me talk to him again."

English raised an eye ridge. "Didn't you say something once about your cousin tagging along on the cop's journey to Edmonton?"

And that was how I found myself, an hour later, with Lucy sitting in my kitchen.

"What is it, 'cuz?" She was older now, but still spoke and moved like a teenager. One of the best hunters in the entire city and she looked like she was barely eighteen.

"You were with the police when they went to Edmonton?" I asked.

She shrugged and nodded her head. "Yes. Didn't give them much choice. Good thing too. They didn't know how to survive outside the city. They never would have made it there, likely back, without help."

"What happened out there, Lucy?"

She reached up and scratched behind one of her upstanding ears.

"Well, that's the stick. I had to sign off on a paper when we got back saying I wouldn't tell anyone about it."

I sighed and leveled her with a stare. "Lucy, you know I'm the City Administrator. The old dog Sayer wouldn't let me retire. That's makes me the single ranking government official in the city. Above the cops."

She grinned. "I never was much of one for following orders."

I smiled back. "Must have something to do with being the daughter of the beta."

She cuffed me in the ears before settling back down.

"Sorry to tell you there's not much to say, 'cuz. We went up there, followed your trail and spoke to most of the same people you did." She paused for just a moment when English and I exchanged glances. "Except in Calgary. There was no one there."

"Once we got to Edmonton," she continued, "We found the same hole in the ground you did. I'm not too sure what happened after that, only the dogs went down. They came back up with a good dozen crates full of the gods knew what and we all had to strain our backs to haul the stuff back here.

And I'll tell you, whatever they were, they were *heavy* pulling them across the Rockies.”

I huffed out a breath. “That's all you know? No idea if any of the stuff was still working or what they took?”

She shook her head. “Sorry, Tommy. They wouldn't let me look in the crates no matter how hard I nagged. And the one time I tried to sneak a look they threatened to arrest me.” She laughed. “Right out there in the middle of nowhere, they threatened to arrest me.”

She was gone soon after, out hunting again. That just left English and I alone in the apartment with the papers.

“Any idea what 'Iapetus' is?” I asked.

English shook his head, mane rustling.

“Not a clue, Mate. Sounds like it might be Greek or something like that. You want East African, Japanese, or British mythology and I might be able to help you, but Greek isn't my thing.”

I sighed. “We'll just have to get a hold of Jon again and figure out what in all the gods' names they have going on in that HQ of there's.”

Not having anything better to do with the papers, I stuffed them in the bottom of one of my government dispatch pouches. That was as good a place as any. *No one* ever looks there.

I was just about to invite English out for some lunch when a knock came at the apartment door.

Opening it, I already knew who'd be standing there. It was the hard, perfect knock of a police dog. Though, oddly, Pine wasn't among the half dozen officers standing in the hallway.

“Sir.” The dog at the front of the pack nodded to me with a sharp, quick motion. “We are here to ask you about your... visitor.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What about him? What happened to Jon?”

The dog ignored me as if I hadn't said a word.

“We have discovered documents missing from Police Headquarters. It is possible that the person who visited here may have had them. We need to search the premises.”

I narrowed my eyes. “And why should I let you do that? This is my home. You have no right to come in here.”

It was a foolish response, I knew, but the thought of the dogs pawing through *my* things caused my hackles to rise.

“Sir,” he pulled a paper from one of his breast pockets, “We have a order from Assistant Commissioner Able to search your apartment.” For just a moment his face softened. “I'm sorry. This is critically important.”

And that was pretty much that. They didn't push me aside, but neither would they move until I let them in.

English stood off to one side, watching. He didn't say a word.

I'll give the dogs credit, they knew how to do a search.

The six of them managed to cover every square inch of the apartment in less than half an hour. And when I say every square inch I mean *every* square inch.

With the exception of my government dispatch pouches. They looked under and around them, but never so much as asked to see what was within.

That was the one thing I could count on with the V-town police. They followed their orders to the letter. They weren't allowed to look at classified government documents, so it was as if the pouches didn't even exist.

They found the slit under the bar stool, but there was nothing there now.

"You know, Mate," English said around a mouthful of cold cuts, "I would have smacked them a good one for trying a trick like that, order or not."

We were seated in Cafe Bristol, a platter laid out before us. I was working out some of my stress by tearing apart a leg of beef.

"Don't get me started, buddy. I'm going to be heading back to Police HQ and see if I can force my way in this time. I already know what happened to Jon, so it's not like they can hide him from me again."

English snorted. "To each their own, Mate. Their den would be the last place I'd be headed. The mutt might be a decent enough fella, but the rest of them are still downright buggers as far as I'm concerned. Sure you wouldn't rather go on a hunt with me?"

I cocked my head as I ripped a shred of beef off the leg before me.

"A hunt? I thought business was down."

He shrugged. "It is. Just not as down as it was a few weeks ago. We're still below average, but things look like they might be ticking back up again."

Bidding English farewell, I tried not to think about what broken bones the lion might sport next time I saw him. He'd still shown signs of what happened last time we'd gone hunting.

Police headquarters was no small number of blocks away. Cafe Bristol was downtown, but it was located about as far away from Police HQ as it could get.

That was likely for the best. They didn't care much for English, and English didn't care much for them. But yet the lion's entire income was based on the bounties the government and police put out. Go figure.

I didn't really care for downtown too much myself, too many people all crammed into one place.

Taking the long route, I struck out east a couple of blocks to where the boulevards were a bit wider and the trees a bit more abundant. I was still well in the city, but at least now I had a little elbow room.

It was about five blocks from Police HQ I stopped dead.

No.

Whipping my head around as quick as I could move, I caught just the barest of red flashes from the corner of my vision.

There was no way. There was no bloody way. I'd *seen* him die.

No more than a heartbeat later I was on all fours, racing towards the glimpse of red fur that had disappeared around a distant corner.

Brian Ferguson could not be alive.

Skidding to a halt in an alleyway, I lowered my nose to the ground and took a frantic breath.

My blood went cold.

I'd sworn once before, a year ago, that I'd never forget that wolf's scent. He'd broken into my home, violated everything I had. I'd sworn to kill him.

And it was his scent that clung ever so faintly to the pavement here.

But yet it wasn't. There was something more to it. I had to still my nerves and force myself to take another long and slow breath. There was Brian, of that there was no doubt, but it wasn't *him*.

I didn't know how to describe it. The wolf had been here, but yet the scent wasn't quite right. Like it had been changed somehow, if ever so slightly.

The last time I'd seen Brian Ferguson he'd been dead. I'd thrown him out of the window of a

twenty story building. I'd *seen* him hit the ground. I'd seen the blood explode from his body as he touched the pavement.

But yet now I could pick up his scent clear as day.

I didn't have a choice. I had to follow the trail. It was a fine V-town day, but the clouds above threatened rain, and I couldn't afford the possibility that there was the slightest chance the trail might be washed away.

Nose to the ground, walking on all fours, I made slow progress.

The only thing I was thankful for was that there was no one here to see me. The streets were bare and I was still far enough from Police HQ that there wasn't a cop every block.

Then again, this would be the perfect time to encounter a cop. If it was Brian I was tailing I could *really* use the backup.

Last time he'd very nearly been able to overpower both English and I at the same time.

If I didn't know better I'd just as well say whoever laid down this trail was drunk. It weaved back and forth, went up one street and then down the other side. The only thing I could tell for certain was that it kept away from the forest. Every time the path got anywhere near the edge of the city it turned away as if the man had been burnt.

I followed it anyway. One saving grace was no matter how careful it was to avoid the forest it was at least equally careful to avoid the busy streets and byways as well. Brian seemed to be trying to keep a low profile. That was good for me. If he'd crossed through a market or main thoroughfare the scent trail would have been torn to shreds and that would be the end of that.

It took me something like two hours, and we were well into the afternoon by the time I looked up from the pavement again.

My eyes were bloodshot and I could feel my nose swelling. I hadn't had to do anything like this in years.

Oh gods.

Looking up into the sky, I knew where we were. The twenty story behemoth of Brian's old home towered before me.

The sun shifted slightly as I stood there, casting me into the long shadow of the building.

I shivered.

Whispering a prayer for whatever good it would do, I stepped forward.

Brian's apartment building had been completely closed off after my battle with him, but it did little good. The homeless had been living in the first few floors of the place when I'd first tracked Brian here and they'd never truly moved out.

Their scents tore Brian's away, killing off any trail, but at this point I didn't care. I knew where I had to go.

Twenty stories is a long climb. It's made ever worse when you're on the ladder inside an old elevator shaft with not even a sliver of light to be seen. I couldn't have been in there for more than forty minutes but it felt like hours.

And I didn't want to think about what I might find at the top.

Prying open the doors on the top floor, I immediately saw familiar police tape.

I'd been up here once more after Brian's death, to show it to the cops. They'd immediately

cordoned the area off, but none of us had any idea what to do with it.

I'd left it in their hands, and it seemed their best idea had been to just leave it be.

I'd have to have a talk with Jon.

There was enough light streaming through the windows out front to paint the antechamber in shades of septa and grey. Last time I'd been here the room had been bright and clean, lit by incandescent light bulbs in the ceiling, and spotless to the point of obsession.

Now... not so much. There was police tape up, but it was obvious that I wasn't the first to force my way through it. Though I did have to give the dogs credit. None of the vagrants from below seemed to have come up here. The place looked nearly untouched.

But then again, that may be less due to the police tape and more the large handwritten sign that still stood here.

It promised a death most foul to anyone who dared enter. And I knew Brian well enough to know he hadn't been lying. He'd likely killed off more than a few explorers who'd decided to ignore the warning.

The light was dim now, all the power on the floor out, but yet in some ways the place looked less disturbing.

The months of emptiness had allowed the building to reclaim this space, pull it back to reality. There was dust collecting in the corners of the room and I could smell the scents of police dogs having been up here.

Last time I'd been here it was like stepping into a time warp, jumping back to a point before the Cataclysm.

Now, now the place was just empty.

Pushing forward through the dark, I followed my footsteps from my last visit. Up the main hallway and out into the living room, this was the outer edge of the building. There was a set of floor to ceiling windows here covering the entire wall.

I knew those windows well.

One of the panes was sealed over with plywood. Heh. I'd been the one to knock it out, Brian and I as we'd flown through it.

Stepping hesitantly up to a remaining window beside it, I set my fingers to the cold glass. It smudged.

Looking down, twenty stories to the ground far below, I could see the pavement where Brian had impacted. I would have been there right next to him if English hadn't plucked me out of midair.

There was no sign of where he'd hit. No blood and guts, not even a dent in the blacktop where he'd smacked it. It had been months ago and all evidence of him was long gone.

Only now did I realize that I'd never asked Jon what they'd done with the body.

Drawing in a shuddering breath, I pulled back from the drop off. I'd never had much of a problem with heights before, but then again I'd never had to return to a place I'd nearly died.

Casting about the room, I didn't really know what I was looking for. I'd come here following a scent, but now the trail was too mangled and chaotic for me to track anything. The smell of Brian was everywhere, but it was all old, in the background and pulling my mind in a dozen different directions at once.

With a laugh, I realized that the cups that Brian had served English and I with were still here, laying discarded on the floor. The table they'd sat on had been thrown aside when English had shot at the wolf. It seemed the police dogs who'd been up here had either been fastidious in keeping the space as it was or just hadn't bothered to investigate it fully.

Reaching down, I picked up the glass Brian had served me. There were still crimson stains in it

from the blood he'd expected me to drink.

I shook my head. I still couldn't understand him. He'd known me well enough to predict my actions, beat me at every turn, but yet he'd looked down upon me from his home up here in the sky and thought I drank blood, that I was a beast.

He'd thought I'd been everything he'd feared in a wolf. He'd thought I'd been him.

Ranging back and forth through the apartment, I explored every room. Brian's world had covered the entire top floor of the building, there was no shortage of things to discover.

What amazed me most was just what he did with the space.

He had his kitchen, bathroom, dining room, and bedroom – I hadn't dared look into the bedroom yet – but that took up less than ten percent of the floor space. The rest of the rooms were given over to storage.

It looked like a museum up here. I only regretted there was no power for me to turn on the lights.

The first storage room I poked my nose into was covered from floor to ceiling with paintings. There was hardly a scrap of space on the walls.

I don't know much about art, so it should tell you something when even I was able to recognize a few of the paintings.

And there had to be at least twice as many paintings stacked up on the floor. Rifling through a few of them, I had the feeling I was looking at the pick of the old Vancouver Art Gallery here.

The next room was filled with computers and electronics, the room after it was filled with tools and machinery.

And the room after that... well, Brian may have been a monster, but he went up a few notches in my estimation.

The next room was filled to bursting with books.

It was dark, so I couldn't even make out the titles on most of the spines, but the room had a good dozen bookcases in it and each one was quite literally filled to bursting. It was to the point that the floor beneath them was bowed.

I was positively *drooling* at the thought of getting my hands on those books, and even more at the thought that each and every one of them was likely pre-Cataclysem, but that wasn't what I was here for.

Forcing myself away, I continued on to the one room I hadn't checked. The bedroom. Brian may have been a psychopath, but it felt wrong – from one canine to another – to intrude into his inner sanctum.

Hey, *wait a second*. The memory of him breaking into the apartment and pissing all over my bed when Rebecca and I had been away last year came to mind.

Suddenly it wasn't nearly so hard to cross the threshold.

It was pitch dark in here, but I didn't need too see for my fur to stand up on end.

Three steps to the far wall and my hands were clutching at the blinds. I needed light. I needed it *now*.

I didn't bother pulling them open properly. In about three seconds I'd ripped the satin blinds free from the wall. Their heavy cloth puddled around my feet as I tried to step away from them, nearly engulfing my legs in their pale white fabric.

There was no one in the room save me, *but I could smell him*. He'd been here not an hour ago.

All the other scents in the apartment had been old and faint but his presence here was unmistakable.

And it was him. By the gods I swear it was Brian Ferguson. His new scent overlayed the old near perfectly. They were different, in some tiny way I couldn't put my claw on, *but it was him*.

"Bugger... bugger, bloody bugger!"

My heart was racing now as I tried to calm my breathing. He could be anywhere.

That wolf had nearly killed me a half dozen times. If he got the drop on me now, alone as I was and in his territory...

My heart was beating frantically, but I heard no other motion around me.

I needed to get out of here. Right now.

I'd been a fool to come here alone. The scent of Brian was weaving in my nose, scaring me stiff as I fought to untangle my feet from the drapes that still twisted around my ankles.

I could have come up with a few choice words for the oversized bed that sat up here between a pair of elegant mahogany end tables, I could even have stood in slack jawed awe of the stunning piece of art that was hung over the head of the bed, but I never noticed any of it.

A growl pulling at my lips that was fighting to hide a whimper, I reached down and began clawing at the drapes. They came free only reluctantly.

I was running before I even came totally free, dragging them behind me for a half dozen steps.

I don't remember most of my sprint to Police HQ.

I must have made at least three wrong turns as I headed back to the elevator shaft in Brian's apartment. And I'd bet that was a new world's record. I doubted there were even that many intersections.

Breaking out of the building and back onto the road, I had to pause to peer into the shadows around me. It took everything I had not to see a pair of all too human eyes looking back.

It was a good twenty blocks to Police HQ. I think I made it in something like ten minutes.

Breaking through the front door and into the waiting room of the police building, I was greeted with a little more activity than last time. There had to be a half dozen people in here, all of them in line.

There aren't many times I shove my way to the front of a line, but this was one of them.

I'm not sure if people recognized me as the City Administrator or just saw me as a half feral wolf with the whites of my eyes showing, but no one seemed to want to get in my way.

The raccoon standing at the counter talking to the dog on duty stepped away just in time.

I took one look at the dog there and had only a single thing to say.

"Get me the SERT team. Now. Brian Ferguson is alive."

SERT stands for Serious Emergency Response Team.

It's one of the few things Jon and I were able to set up before he got pulled too deeply into the machinery of the police department. Basically, it's the go to team of the very best the cops have to offer, along with a handful of English's bounty hunters and even a couple of Gowan's men.

Things had spun out of control far too many times in the last couple of years in V-town. The SERT team had been hand assembled to make sure things like that could never happen again.

Brian Ferguson was exactly the type of threat they'd been designed to deal with.

The dog's eyes dilated when I called for the SERT team. There were only half a dozen people in the entire city who could call them into action. I was number one on that list.

The dog didn't even say a word as he turned from me, sprinting out the door behind him.

I took a deep breath and leaned on the counter.

Now it was only a matter of time. This was *their* problem now.

It had been about ten minutes and I'll give Jon credit. He'd done most of the work setting the team up, and he'd done a bloody good job.

The dog I'd spoken to returned to the counter a few minutes later to resume his normal duty, but at the same moment a good half dozen more arrived to escort me deep into the station.

They'd sat my furry behind in an office and debriefed me on what I'd found.

And by their expressions I had no doubt they were taking it just as seriously as I was.

And, well, that was about the last I heard of it.

They came in, pumped me for information, then left. I was alone in the little office with no one more to keep me company than a desk, chair, and a small glass of water one of the cops had brought in when my voice had started going rough.

They'd been more than eager to pay attention to me and hang on every word as long as I was talking about Brian Ferguson, but now that my story was done they'd all cleared out. The last thing any of them had said before they'd closed the door behind them was, "Please remain here, Mr. Taggert. We are aware of your history with Mr. Ferguson and can not guaranty your safety anywhere else."

That had been about an hour ago.

At first I'd been more than happy to stay right where I was. Brian, quite honestly, scared my tail straight. I'd been more than happy to stay where I was. Now, not so much.

Call it the sheer boredom, or perhaps the effect of sitting under an unblinking florescent light for so long, but the memories of Brian's scent, and the fear it had brought with them, were starting to fade.

That, and my legs were falling asleep.

Then, rather suddenly, I wasn't able to take it anymore. Standing, I walked to the door and poked my nose out into the hallway.

"Hello?" My voice echoed softly off the whitewashed walls. There was no one here.

Okay, that was odd. This was *Police HQ* for the gods' sakes. There was no excuse that they should leave me alone here. They *never* let anyone go unescorted in the middle of their den.

Stepping out into the hallway, I started off down one of the paths, expecting at any moment an officer would appear around the corner and politely escort me back to the waiting room.

None did.

Rather to my surprise, I wasn't all that far back from the service counter I'd come in by. It was only a couple of turns before I began recognizing the near featureless hallways.

There were only two locations I knew how to find in Police HQ: The service counter and the Commissioner's office.

Well, I'd been telling myself I had to see Jon again sooner or later.

It took me a few wrong turns, but at long last I was able to bumble my way up to the third floor, and the door I was convinced was the Commissioner's office. Then again, I'd been convinced the last two doors had been right, too. They'd only held storerooms.

Stepping through bold as day, I was pleased to note I'd gotten it right this time.

The outer room to the Commissioner's office held a reception desk for his private secretary. Every time I'd been in here before there'd been a dog diligently working away at that desk.

It sat empty now.

And more to the point it, along with every other surface in the room was covered with papers and files.

This was *not* the way Jon ran things.

Picking my way across the paper strewn floor, I managed to make it to the door to the interior office without knocking anything over.

Across the Commissioner's desk lay a police dog, fast asleep and snoring.

Unsurprisingly, it wasn't Jon.

I cleared my throat loud enough to wake the dead. It did the trick.

He snorted awake in a moment. For just a second I could see the German Shepard sit up, parade ground straight, but there was nothing alive in his eyes. The dog was running on autopilot.

Two blinks and his brain seemed to reboot. I'd expected him to yip when he saw me, or perhaps snort. Or at least *some* reaction.

All I got was a clear and precise, "Administrator Taggart? I don't recall us scheduling a meeting."

Able looked, at first glance, every inch the perfect police dog – and he was – but it took no more than a instant to see he was very nearly run flat.

Sitting down in the chair across from him, I levelled him with a glare.

"Where's Jon?"

He didn't even flinch. "I'm sorry, Sir, but I can't tell you--"

"Shove it," I growled. "The force is running like a three legged horse, *you're* in the Commissioner's office, something you'd swore you'd never do, and now I've got *Brian Ferguson* cavorting around out on the street."

I watched him flinch with every word like I was slapping him. The dog who had looked so perfect and professional just seconds ago seemed to implode now.

"Mr. Taggart... I'm sorry. I'm doing everything I can. It's just that things are so... unconventional."

"Able," I tried to lower my voice as I reached forward to set a hand on his, "Where's Jon? I know what happened to him. Let me help."

His eyes clouded over for a moment. "This is a police matter. We take care of ourselves..."

I let out a long sigh. "Able. You're not an alpha. You told me that once long ago. You're not cut out for this job. No one's blaming you for doing the best you can. Let me help you."

He looked down at his desk for a moment and the papers that covered it.

"Mr. Taggart... Tommy, I *should* be able to do this. This is what Commissioner Oaks has been telling us for months now. He's not an administrator but yet he can run the force. If he can do it, why can't I? Or at least why can't I long enough for him to recover?"

I snorted. "Able, this is your first time running the force by yourself, isn't it?" He nodded. "Take it from someone who had the experience, it's sink or swim. I didn't do so well when I first got dropped into leading either. And I'd had a whole lifetime training for it. And more than a few good friends to help me along. It's not your fault. You're just doing the best you can."

A small smile slipped to his lips. "Thank you, Tommy." Standing up from his desk, he sent the papers flying. "Please come with me. I'll take you to see the Commissioner. I'm sure he'll be happy for the company." He paused, then added under his breath, "I'm sure he'd be happy to see *anyone* outside the force."

Leaving the office, I followed Able down the whitewashed hallways. I was lost in fewer than three turns.

All I knew for sure was that we were going down. Deep down. I was no stranger to the many sub-basements in Police HQ, but I couldn't say for certain that I'd ever been this far down before. We had to be somewhere around the fourth sub-basement by now.

Stepping from the stairwell, we were immediately set upon by a pair of guards. They weren't normal police dogs. They looked just like any other officers, but were dressed completely in black. And the way they moved... I'd never seen the cops move like that. They moved more like hunters.

Able barked at them. And I don't mean that figuratively, he really barked. That stopped them dead.

A few sharp words and the guards backed away, but only a few steps. They were happy enough to let Able through, but they didn't care much for me.

Through a heavy iron door, we found ourselves in a small room. The only way out was an equally heavy door on the far side.

The first door slammed shut behind us.

For a moment nothing happened. I stood next to Able who waited in the centre of the small space.

Then, a time later, I heard a soft grating sound. A small viewing window opened in the far wall.

"State your name and clearance code."

That was unmistakably the voice of a police dog. The words were so clipped and perfect that he was nearly biting off his tongue.

"Assistant Commissioner Able. Clearance blue. Code," he glanced over at me before continuing, "New dawn."

There was a slight pause, then the voice returned. "Valid. But the other stays here. No non-force personal are permitted into a blue clearance zone. Especially not during lock down."

At this Able stepped forward, his voice dropping. "I *know* that, Maple, but this is Administrator Taggart--"

"No non-force personal are permitted into a blue clearance zone," the voice repeated.

Able's ears lowered as he turned back to me. "One moment, Mr. Taggart. If you'd be so kind as to go wait out in the stairwell?"

I shrugged. Frankly, I didn't feel much like arguing. I'd never seen this face of the police force before and I didn't want to antagonize them.

Stepping back into the outer room, I was once again in the company of the two black uniformed police dogs.

And these guys gave me the heebiejeebies big time.

The door slammed closed behind me, and through it I could hear the other door grinding open.

Then, much to my amusement, I could just at the edge of my hearing make out what were unmistakably raised voices.

Looking over to police dog standing closest to me, I suddenly realized why he set me on edge.

He wasn't standing ram rod straight.

That might not sound like much, but *all* police dogs stand like they're in the middle on an inspection. These two dogs didn't. What was worse was how they *were* standing.

Hunched forward slightly, weight centred and low, their eyes were constantly in motion, their ears twitching.

They didn't stand like police dogs, but nor did they stand like a normal person on the street. They stood like hunters.

The actions would be lost to anyone else, but I'd spent my life around hunters, and I'd grown up

under the most famous hunter in V-town history.

But even more than that... it wasn't that they stood like *hunters*. They stood like one particular hunter.

They stood, moved and breathed like my father had when he'd been in his prime.

I had to hold back a shudder.

"So, uh," I forced a watery smile to my face, "You guys the elite guards or something?" I asked.

They both turned their faces to me, but their eyes kept moving. For a long moment neither of them spoke. When on did his voice was smoother than I expected. Even their speech was less like a police dog than it was a hunter.

"We are members of the Joint Task Force," was all he said.

After that the conversation more or less died.

There was one thing to keep my attention though. I could still hear the raised voices through the heavy iron door.

It was then my ears twitched. A third voice appeared. It was far softer than the other two, and somehow its tones seemed to clash with them, but yet I could still hear it.

The other voices went silent for a moment when it began. But then they started up again, even louder now.

And that was all there was for twenty minutes.

I stood out here with two police dogs that *weren't* police dogs, and listened to voices I couldn't make out.

It was sudden, but the next thing I knew there was the screaming of worn hinges moving. Soon after the door behind me opened.

Able was standing in the lock, not a hair out of place.

"Administrator, if you would be so kind as to join me?" His voice was mild. "I've had the confusion sorted out. You're welcome to enter the blue zone at your convenience."

I had a bit of a sinking feeling as I stepped through the chamber, but anything was better than staying here with the two black clad ghosts. Once again the doors screamed, but this time the inner one opened obligingly for me.

There was a gust of stale air as it opened. I was reminded of nothing so much as Ornthi's under mountain fortress.

I wasn't sure what to expect in here, bare stone walls perhaps? A nuclear fallout bunker?

Whatever it was I'd hoped for I was disappointed. All that greeted me past the massive doors was yet another plain whitewashed hallway. I could still be on the third floor for all I knew.

No, strike that. I *knew* I was underground. You can just *tell* by the way the sound echoes. Or rather, here, where it doesn't. The sound just kind of hits the wall and goes thud.

I'd heard a third voice when people had been arguing, but now whoever it was had gone. The only person who stood on the far side of the interior door was yet another nondescript police dog. He had more pips on his shoulders than the dogs I saw on the street, but nothing more than that.

Able led me down the hallway, but not before I got a dirty glare from the dog manning the door. He, it seemed, still didn't like the idea of letting me in here. Wherever *here* was.

I'll admit one thing surprised me. There didn't seem to be a lot on this level. I was still used to the layout of the upper floors with offices and hallways ever few feet. That wasn't the case here. There was only a single hallway, meticulously clean, that led straight into the living earth.

At long last we stepped up to yet another door. Only this time it was something closer to a

normal office door.

"Welcome to the blue zone, Administrator Taggart," Able said, voice solemn. "You are the first member not of the service ever to set foot here." His face was weary when he turned to look me in the eye, but I could feel the tempered steel of his training just beneath the surface. "I won't ask you to swear, but I trust you won't speak of this to anyone."

I nodded.

Without further adieu he pushed open the door.

And once again I was rather underwhelmed.

There was a large room in here, perhaps a good two-hundred meters square, held up by bare iron columns evenly spaced here and there. Between those columns were work tables covered with computer and electronics equipment.

Most of it I recognized. It was the system from Edmonton.

Or at least what was left of it.

I was just about to step towards the long tables piled high with circuits when something more caught my eye.

Off in the corner of the room, in shadows, a couple of wool blankets had been tacked to the ceiling to hang down. They formed a private room of sorts.

And from that room came a scent that didn't belong here. That of a human.

Turning away from the equipment, I walked towards an opening in the blankets. From beyond it I could hear a vaguely familiar voice cursing.

Well, I say familiar, but I recognized it more from its words and rhythm than the voice itself.

"Jon?" I stopped at the edge of the makeshift door, not taking that final step to look in.

The swearing cut off abruptly. It was replaced with a long drawn out sigh.

"Hello, Tommy."

I lifted the sheet and stepped through.

Sitting on a small field cot was a human of medium height, medium weight, and near perfect build. I could tell, he was only half dressed.

He looked up at me with big blue eyes. I wasn't sure if he was begging me to say something or to stay silent.

I sat down on the cot next to him as he fumbled with his shirt. Only now did I recognize it as a police uniform.

It didn't fit him.

The proportions were all wrong. When the dogs wore them they were a perfect fit, exactly tailored to their near uniform bodies. But now, on Jon's human form, he could hardly even get his arm down the sleeve.

With a sudden thrust he forced his hand through the misshapen cuff. The sound of ripping fabric was loud in the underground room.

There had to be a dozen dogs standing just outside the flimsy blanket walls, but I couldn't hear them. For all the world it felt like we were alone.

"So Brian's back," Jon said, glancing away from me.

"Smells like it," I replied. I tried to keep my voice neutral but it was hard with the pain in his words.

"I should be out there. I should be organizing the force and bringing him in." He paused for a moment to laugh bitterly. "I'm the Commissioner, it's my job. But instead I'd trapped down here by my own men, and at the same time cut off from them."

Reaching up a tentative hand, I set it on his too thin, hairless shoulder.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I was brought down here to witness a *demonstration*," he said the word with what for a canine would have been a growl. "I was assured it was absolutely safe. They were positive that the Phoenix project was ready to produce results." He turned to look me straight in the eye. "I was even on the cusp of calling you, Tommy. Despite what it looks like Phoenix wasn't *supposed* to be a secret. Just secure. You discovered the technology, you, English and Rebecca."

He paused for a moment before continuing. "But things didn't go as they should. Everything looked fine until the last moment. Then," he shrugged, "The bubble in reality that they'd told me they'd so carefully calculated began to grow rather than shrink. We had to abandon the room, but not everyone could get out. I wouldn't leave my men in here, so I and two others were caught."

I cocked my head. "Two other cops were transformed? Where are they?"

He cast his eyes down. "In the police graveyard at the edge of the city."

I froze.

"It didn't kill them," he whispered, "They became just as human as I. But..." he shrugged again, "Where I haven't taken to the change well, they didn't take to it at all. Two of my best men, trained and polished to a perfect shine. They knew as well as I did what they were doing when they hung back to get everyone else out. But... they couldn't handle the change. Less than four hours later Beech was found dead. Slit his own wrists." He shuddered. "The next day Cedar followed him. The man escaped the building and ran off into the forest. They found his naked body floating in a river soon after."

"That's why you're being held?"

A watery smile slipped to his lips. "It would seem. I may be human, but I'm still the Commissioner. There's no one to replace me. They can't afford to lose me, and I can't properly tell them I have no intention of offing myself."

I scratched behind one of my ears. "You can't tell them? What, they just don't believe you?"

He snorted, an odd sound coming from him.

"In a manner of speaking. You should know well enough, Tommy. We were both canine. There's so much more to communication than just words. There's your tone, your voice, things I can't replicate with this human body. Then there's your scent and even the way you hold your tail. I can *speak* to them, but I can't *tell* them. And after the first two they won't take any chances."

I shook my head. "Then I guess you're just lucky you've happened upon one of the only men in the whole city qualified to translate human to canine."

Yeah, that was a nice thought.

If I'd had any illusions that I'd just be able to clear this up right away they were quickly squashed.

It wasn't that I didn't make things *better*, but the force was dead set against letting Jon anywhere near something he could hurt himself with. They wouldn't even give him have a knife to eat with for the gods' sakes.

"What about running the machine again?" I asked. "We know that'll change him back."

"That's our goal, Sir," one of the dogs said.

The officer standing next to me was different than most other police dogs I'd met. He was dressed in a lighter blue uniform than the beat cops. The name stenciled on his breast read 'Technician First Class Hickory'.

"But there is an impasse with that plan," he continued. "The machinery we were using was damaged during its last activation. We believe that's what caused it to act unexpectedly."

"Fine," I rolled my eyes, "What does Ornthi have to say about this?"

"Ornthi, Sir?" The dog cocked his head.

"Gods, you haven't even contacted Ornthi? He's the... guy who got it working in the first place."

All in all the process took something like three months.

At least I *think* it was three months. The dogs only let me out of the sub-basement four times, and getting back in became more and more of a production.

I wouldn't have left Jon's side if it hadn't been for Rebecca. Her pregnancy was progressing every day, and it felt flat out wrong not to be with her during this time.

But the thought of Jon sitting cold and alone down there, an alien among the force, kept me coming back.

It didn't take long after I contacted Ornthi to figure out why the machines down here hadn't operated the way people expected.

Ornthi's normally disturbingly calm voice came across the radio strained as he patiently taught me – and the technical dogs standing around me – that, no, the odd ball one-fifteen volt current the Police HQ was wired with *was not* what the computers expected, and the fact they'd juryrigged up a two-twenty system that only kinda worked did *not* cut it.

I was getting the impression that Ornthi was feeling a bit of the pain we'd put the computers down here through. I guess he sympathized for his digital countrymen.

From that point on we had the A.I. check and double check every action the dogs took. At first they seemed to resent this disembodied voice leading them about by the nose, but it was only a matter of time before they realized Ornthi was in a whole different class.

Ornthi had been created before the Cataclysm, he *knew* how things like this worked. He'd had over a hundred years to understand this type of stuff.

Somewhere around the two month mark I sat down with Jon in his little makeshift room. He wasn't helping much with the efforts to rebuild the computer. It seemed like every time he tried to get involved he just couldn't sync up with everyone else – even me – and that left him like an out of time dancer, breaking the whole choreography.

"How are you holding up?" I asked.

He sat down on the cot next to me, holding a cup of water in one hand and a bowl of police standard kibble in the other.

The police were the only ones I knew who ate kibble. The only ones who *liked* it. It was palatable for me but tasted like reconstituted cardboard.

"Well enough," he said. "I've been keeping in touch with the force as well as I can. Thanks," he added, "For helping... translating to Able for me."

I shrugged and smiled. "No problem. That's what friends are for, eh?"

He smiled back, an easier motion than I'd seen from him in weeks.

"Anyway," he continued, "I suppose in some ways it's a good thing to have you down here. As long as you're with us we don't have to worry about Brian targeting you."

I grated my teeth. "Don't remind me. Have they found anything yet?"

He shook his head. "They confirmed your finding in his old apartment, but nothing else has been discovered." He, haltingly, put an arm over my shoulder. "And you needn't worry about Rebecca, I've made sure the very best officers are protecting her. And," he winked, "I've heard Mr. English has assigned some of his bounty hunters too."

I sat back and closed my eyes for a moment as I tossed a chunk of kibble in my mouth. It crunch wetly before dissolving into a thick paste I had to force down.

Jon looked at his own kibble sourly for a moment before setting it aside.

"I used to like this stuff," he said. "It used to be nearly the only thing I'd eat." He snorted out a laugh and took a drink of water. "Now I had can hardly force it down. And they won't bring me anything else in fear I might somehow poison myself."

I smiled and shook my head.

"Well," I replied, "now we both have reasons to get out of here. I want to see Rebecca, you want a proper meal."

"Are we ready?" I asked.

"Assuming you have provided me with all relevant information, it would appear so," the cool, disembodied voice of Ornthi came from somewhere above me. We'd patched his radio link into a set of loudspeakers in the ceiling a few days ago.

I still wasn't sure I liked the feeling of him being able to hear everything we said.

"Fine," I said. I glanced over to Jon. "Ready?" He nodded mutely. I could see his pale white, hairless hands shaking ever so slightly.

I looked over to Hickory. "Ready?" I asked. He nodded with a firm and quick motion. His whiskers were trembling.

"Can't we test it first?" Able asked from behind me. "We really can't afford to risk the Commissioner's life like this. I'm sure we could find an officer who'd be willing to..."

I sighed and glanced back at him. "We've gone over this. Multiple times. The equipment was damaged from your last try. We might not get another chance at this."

"But then it makes even more sense not to risk..."

I looked over to Jon. "Tell him."

Jon narrowed his eyes. "We're doing this." There was a slight growl in his voice.

Able shut up.

I'd been working with Jon to be able to communicate with the force again. It looked like it was finally starting to pay off. Just in time to become useless.

"If you're ready, Commissioner?" Asked Hickory. "We'll evacuate the room and you can engage the mechanism. Ornthi will remain in contact with you and inform us when the process has been completed."

Jon nodded, stepped up to the control panel.

He was buck naked. Skin dead fish white from so much time here underground, you could see each and every one of his muscles as he moved now that their was neither coat nor clothing to hide them.

He'd never looked so vulnerable.

Leaving back out through the doors of the lock chamber, they were left open behind me. The first time I'd ever seen both open at once.

We all retreated up the stairs, up two levels to the sub-basement. The field shouldn't reach nearly this far, but no one wanted to take any chances.

I remembered this floor. This was where they'd held English and I.

Thankfully, the cops were smart enough to bench me down in a different room. There was a clock on the wall.

"He's started the process," came Ornthi's voice from a speaker on the desk next to me.

I pressed a button on the clock.  
It began ticking down from three hours.

That was perhaps the longest three hours in my life.

Well, I shouldn't say that. It was likely longer when it was English, Rebecca, and I waiting for the computers back in Edmonton.

The last of the seconds ticked away and a small buzzer sounded. I reached out and silenced it with a weary hand. I should have caught some sleep while we waited, but that was out of the question.

I glanced over to Able who sat beside me.

Neither of us said a word as we stood up.

"I'm sorry, but the field seems to have knocked out my microphones in that area," Ornithi said as we descended the steps to the blue zone.

I took a deep breath as Able and I stepped through the two security doors and into the chamber.

The other dogs hadn't wanted us to be the first in, they'd been concerned about health and safety hazards. I'd borrowed a few words from English's dictionary and told them to sod off.

The master control panel that Jon would have triggered was just around this bank of computers.

Poking my nose around the metal box, I was greeted with a picture perfect image.

Standing straight and tall, the German Shepard looked like he'd just walked off a recruiting poster. Already dressed in a perfectly creased uniform that someone must have left for him, the only things missing were his rank pips.

"Mr. Taggart, Assistant Commissioner Able," his voice was clipped and hard, nearly sounding as manufactured as Ornithi's, "I believe we have work to return to."

That had been two hours ago.

Jon had politely asked me to wait for him in a secluded office as the force pressed him through a set of physicals.

Then, after they were content he was in fact Jon Oaks, he gave them no small amount of reaming out.

I was a floor away and I could still hear him screaming.

And Jon wasn't a man to scream.

We were on the street soon after, just him and I.

The normal procedure would have been for the commissioner to have *at least* one aid with him, and perhaps a guard or two. I think Jon had some choice words for that protocol.

I wasn't quite sure where to go, but Jon needed a good meal and there was only one place for that, Café Bristol.

It was early afternoon when we stepped from the front door of Police HQ. Jon took a deep breath as we walked down the street.

"It's good to be able to smell the world again."

I didn't bother asking him if he was talking about being outside again or being a canine.

Unfortunately, English wasn't hanging around when we sat down at the café. It didn't matter much, all the staff here knew Jon and I. We didn't even have to order, they just brought out a platter without a word.

And, perhaps for the first time, I got to watch as a dog ate like a lion.

I said *watch* because I wasn't dumb enough to get my hands anywhere near the food.

Waiting until Jon had taken his fill, I was about to tuck in when the sound of running feet caused my ears to twitch.

It was a cop.

I was already standing when an officer came to a halt before us, panting.

And I was rather surprised when he ignored Jon in favor of me. "Sir..." he had to pause and catch his breath as he leaned on the side of the wrought iron table, "Ms. Taggert. She's..." My heart went cold. "She's in labor."

I blinked once and was off before my brain had even caught up.