

The Proginers



By wwwolf

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Chapter 6: Dirty Politics

The next morning came just *perfect*.

Not too early, not too rude.

For the first time in months we didn't have kids to feed, I had the day off from hunting, and Rebecca didn't have anywhere to go.

It was ten thirty in the morning and we were still snugly in bed. The covers were warm around us and the sun slanting in through the window was all there was to wake me.

I'd been awake for fifteen minutes now and hadn't had the faintest inclination of moving.

Rebecca was soft and still in my arms and the world was a good place.

And that's when a soft knock came at the door.

Bugger. It. All.

For a long moment I thought about just ignoring the thing. But it came again.

And this time I could hear the perfect, measured, sharp knock. It was a police dog.

Moving slowly, I carefully untangled myself from Rebecca and closed the bedroom door behind me as I walked into the main room.

Whoever was out in the hallway must have heard me coming, they didn't knock again.

Gathering a good scowl to my face, I opened the door.

And let out a long sigh. It was Pine who stood there, and he already looked suitably chastised, ears down and tail curled around his legs.

"What can I do for you?" I didn't even bother sounding annoyed. After Jon, Pine was the only police dog I truly trusted. He wouldn't be here if I wasn't needed.

"Sir," he lowered his eyes, "I received this summons for you from City Hall this morning."

I blinked. A 'summons'?

Taking the pre-opened envelope from the dog's hands I quickly unfolded the paper.

And started growling.

I only just remembered to leave Rebecca a note before storming out of the apartment. Pine was smart enough to keep out of my way. This wasn't his fault, but I could have just as easily unloaded on him as anyone else who crossed my path.

Last time I'd been here I'd taken a moment to admire the architecture when I entered City Hall. This time I simply stormed through. Not so many people stopped to smile at me now. I almost didn't even notice all the people gathered around the front steps. I only took note of them when they blocked my way into the building. I had to go in via a back entrance.

Up the steps to the third floor, I was at the door to mayor's office before reception even had time to tell him I was here.

I at least managed to get my anger under control as I walked the last few steps. Max's office was set well back from reception. Well, I should say *my* office was set well back. I'd made that design decision myself. I just hadn't stayed in the position long enough to reap the benefits of that extra breathing room.

The door to the mayor's office was a simple wooden affair. No name plate, no expensive carving or gilding. It could just have well been the entrance to a broom closet.

Okay, I had to stop and chuckle at that thought. Even if it did put a damper on the perfectly good rage I was in. City Hall had still been under construction while I'd been mayor. The comparison to a broom closet was an apt one. That's where I'd had to set up shop while I'd been running things. There'd been nowhere else while City Hall was still little more than a pile of rubble and twisted girders.

Taking a deep breath, I fought to work up some of the righteous indignation that had fuelled me just moments ago.

Baring my teeth and raising my hackles, I started forward again.

It was more of a show now than anything else, but I was still pissed off at Max for 'summoning' me.

Throwing open the office door, I made a point of only just avoiding having it bang.

It still gave me the intended effect though. Sitting within were Max and some bureaucrat I couldn't quite place. They both jumped in their seats when I entered, turning to face me.

"Mr. ... Mr. Taggert," said the bureaucrat. I recognized his voice. I think he was a minister of internal relations or something like that.

The back of my mind nagged. I *should* remember him. I'd been the one to found that department and hire him. His job was to keep the inter species tensions under control in the city.

Out of the seat in a heartbeat, the man, a nagga, bowed to me as he mumbled something. He was around me and out of the office before I could even blink.

I'd hired the guy because he could think fast. It seemed he could move just as quickly.

And he'd closed the door behind him.

"Max," I turned to the oni who sat behind the desk. He hadn't moved. "What in all the gods' names is this?" I tossed the letter I'd received, envelope and all, onto the large oak desk.

It fluttered across a sea of papers before coming to land before him, almost lost among all the other paperwork.

It was only then I notice the dark circles under Max's eyes.

"Bugger." I said. Taking a deep breath, I took a seat across from him, dropping heavily into the padded chair. "What's gotten all shot up now?"

Max was a good guy, and likely a better mayor than I'd ever been, but it was obvious these weren't normal times for the city. This wasn't the first time – by a long shot – that something had gone wrong.

Max leaned forward to pick up the letter, his eyes scanning it as he pulled it open. A moment later he shook his head and set it back on the desk. "Sorry, man," he said. "Things have been going in a hand basket for the last couple of days. I've been trying to get a hold of you, but your dogs kept brushing me off."

I cocked my head. "They were brushing off the *mayor*?"

He laughed. "Yeah. Told me that you had better things to worry about right now. Said that between your kids and the return of Ferguson I should leave you alone unless it was an emergency. Well, I asked one of my aids to draft something up that was an emergency letter." He shook his head. "I guess this was it. Sorry," he laughed again, "I guess I should have read it before I signed the bloody thing." He pointed down at the bottom of the page where his signature was visible.

I grinned, letting the anger fall from my body like a lead weight. "Don't worry about it. I know about signing things you haven't had time to read. Remember, I used to have your job. But what's gone so wrong it constitutes an emergency?"

He looked at me oddly. "You didn't see it on the way in?"

I snorted. "I was so rip roaring pissed off I could have walked past a riot and not noticed."

He smiled glumly at that.

"Tommy, follow me."

Out of the office, he led me along one of the hallways until we were in a little meeting room at the front of City Hall. It had a great view of the plaza.

And right now that plaza was filled to the brim with people. Angry people.

"They've been calling for the mayor for hours," Max said, a chill to his voice. "I went out to talk to them, but it seems I'm not the mayor they want."

I cocked my head. "Then who are they looking for?"

He looked me in the eye. "You."

"Oh bugger."

Back in Max's office, I had my head in a stack of papers taller than I was. Gods, I'd thought I'd been able to get away from this when I stepped down. "Okay," I said, "short version. What in all the gods' names went wrong?"

"As far as we can tell," Max said, sipping on a cup of black coffee, "Brian Ferguson."

"Huh?" That was enough to knock me for a spin. I sat up so suddenly I nearly sent papers flying.

Max shrugged. "Keep in mind that everything is speculation, but we think it's Brian's death that caused this."

I took a deep breath. "Brian's not dead."

Max looked around nervously. "Sorry. Brian's... uh, incapacitation seemed to be what caused this. Did you know the government finally got access to that wolf's apartment a couple of months ago?"

I just groaned.

I was about to let lose some choice words about how the police service had been running with Jon out of commission when Jameswell crashed through the door.

Jameswell was the assistant mayor. A cat, and a nice enough guy. I'd run against him when I'd first gotten the job, then he'd switched sides.

He wasn't exactly an unflappable fellow, but I'd seen him stare down more than a few crisis without flinching. He was a career bureaucrat. And after I'd turned him to the light side he'd ended up being an asset.

Right now he looked like he'd just had the wrong end of a red hot poker shoved up his tail... not that there's a *right* end.

Stumbling into the office, his fur was immaculate, but his eyes were wide and bloodshot. He didn't even notice me as he dove for a pile of papers on the side of Max's desk.

"Minutes of the HDL meeting from last week..." he mumbled.

Max leaned forward to pull a handwritten page from a stack in front of him.

"This?"

Jameswell paused for a moment, eyes blinking slowly before focusing on the paper.

"Ha!" His voice was just this side of exhausted hysteria. "This'll do it! I *knew* those morons had agreed to the terms last time. They were trying to change them on me..." His voice petered out to a growl as he turned on toe and began stalking out of the room.

"Oh." He paused mid stride and glanced over, as if seeing me for the first time. "Hi Tommy."

And with that he was gone.

"What," I asked with my mouth agape, "In all the gods' names was *that*?"

Max just sighed and shook his head.

"I've got Jameswell doing the talks with the Human Defense League. They've come back in force."

"But... how? I thought they were just about gone after Brian... oh."

Max shrugged.

"The records we have from Brian's apartment suggest he did quite a bit more than we thought. He was... active in the V-town government. Just not in ways that anyone could see. It seemed he had a lot of experience in keeping things balanced. He was able to keep the human population here in V-town safe right up until the previous administration began its purge. After that," he shrugged, "Brian didn't seem to be doing such a good job anymore, but he did still help to keep the city together."

I closed my eyes for a moment. "Then I guess that brings up the question, just how much good did I really do while I was mayor? Was it *me*, or did Brian bring the city back together?"

A slight smile slipped onto Max's face. "Don't discount yourself too much, Tommy. From what we could tell you did most of it. It doesn't look like Brian was too active right then."

"Fine." I looked Max straight in the eye. "You've got protesters out front. What can I do to help?"

About twenty minutes later I was dressed in a suit – though not one as good as what Smith made – and half a dozen people were busily bustling me towards the front door. I was, it appeared, about to give a speech.

I had a bad feeling about this.

Max was by my shoulder as I stood just inside the door. He pressed a sheet of paper into my hand.

"Here, Tommy. This should do it." I looked down at the script. It was handwritten, quick and messy. "It's by my best writer. I told him you needed something to say. It should be good, he had a whole half hour to work on it."

I didn't even get a chance to skim the paper before the door opened.

Max at my shoulder, I was all but shoved out onto the front steps of City Hall.

Someone had been out here before me, getting ready. There was a small wooden podium set atop on the landing. Nothing fancy, all slapped together, but it had the logo of the city government tacked onto the front of it.

"Here we go," I muttered.

Stepping up to the podium, I set my papers on it and looked out over the faces before me.

By the gods, there were a *lot* of people here. It wasn't up to what I'd had to speak in front of when I'd been running for mayor, but I hadn't been up in front of this many people in ages.

And, much to my surprise, they weren't all human.

It must have been Jameswell talking about the HDL back in Max's office, but I'd had a mental image of most of the crowd being human. Not so, we had a pretty clean mix of just about everyone in V-town.

I forced a smile to my lips, though I didn't feel it.

Taking a deep breath, I glanced down at the speech before me and started out.

What in all the gods' names was this hogwash?

I'd had to read pre-written speeches while I was mayor, but whoever wrote this was a hack of the first order.

There were so many 'my fellow citizens' and 'we have to look towards the future' that it felt like I was reading a parody of a speech rather than the real thing. None the less I slogged through the lines, reading them off one at a time even though half of them threatened to gag me.

And, by the looks of it, the crowd standing before me wasn't so enthralled by it either.

Coming to a close, I stumbled over the words, but was able to get out an appeal to the people to hold on, stay the course, and keep calm.

I breathed a sigh of relief the moment I finished.

"Now stop reading a script and tell us what's really happening!" came a voice from the crowd.

Oh bugger.

"Yeah! We voted for you, not the oni! What are *you* doing?"

Throwing the papers back to the podium in front of me, I took a deep breath.

This had been a bad day. I had to keep my temper and not make it worse.

"What about the humans," came a gruff voice. "You seem to like giving them so much. What about the rest of us? You only give them so many considerations because you're sleeping with one!"

A general murmur came up from the crowd with that.

I could feel my fur stand up on end.

"And what in all the gods' names is wrong with trying to maintain the human population?" I said before I even knew what I was doing. "We were the ones trying to kill them off. And *what* considerations are you talking about anyway? Other than watching their numbers the government isn't treating them any different than any other citizens! That was the whole point of the reintegration. It doesn't matter if you're human or not, you're still a citizen."

I can't say I remember too much of the next five minutes, but that's how long it took Max to drag me away from the podium.

Who'd brought the vegetables to City Hall I'd never know, but now I knew how a bad comic felt. I'd always thought the old line about throwing things at people on stage was a joke.

Is it wrong that the first thought through my head as Max dragged me away was 'I'm glad this isn't *my* suit?'

Max shoved me through the door and back into the relative safety of City Hall before returning outside to talk to the crowd.

His voice was more soothing than mine had been.

"Come on, Tommy. Let's get you cleaned up before that stains."

I jumped when Jameswell set a hand on my shoulder.

That was the moment it all came crashing down on me.

"Oh bugger," I whispered, "I really blew that one."

The cat smiled as he led me downstairs to the nearest washroom.

"Don't worry about it," he sighed. "It's our fault. We never should have sent you out there on such short notice." He chuckled. "And don't feel so special. The mob has been out there for a couple

of days now, just not as large. Both Max and I tried to talk them down. I... can't say we got quite as visceral a reaction from them as you did, but then again neither did we ad-lib it either."

I snorted. "Yeah, I've got to remember just how bad I am at public speaking."

I was just getting out of my stained, and rather pungent, suit when I heard a sound from outside.

Stepping over to the narrow washroom windows, I had to stand on the tips of my claws to get a view of the world.

And what I saw chilled me to the bone.

There was a pack of police dogs out there. They were closing on City Hall with riot shields and batons.

"By the gods..." I didn't even have the words.

A moment later Jameswell was by my side. He was half a head taller so he didn't have to strain quite so much to get a view. "I guess Max gave up," he said. "We were hoping not to have to do this. We talked to Baker yesterday just in case. He had a riot squad overnighted in the station down the street in case things got out of hand."

It didn't take long for the dogs to close on the building. They didn't run, but walked sure and inexorable as the tide.

"Come on," I said, turning from the window.

A couple of moments later Jameswell and I were in a third floor meeting room with the view out front.

I'd left the soiled suit downstairs, but I still felt dirty.

The protesters hadn't fled when the cops arrived. Rather they'd pulled in around themselves and put up a strong face.

I couldn't make out the force's words through the thick glass, but one of the dogs carried a bull horn.

He addressed the crowd, but they didn't move.

Someone threw some spoiled meat at the officer. It splattered harmlessly against his riot shield.

I'll give the dog credit, he handled it better than I would have. It was like he didn't even notice the dark red stain on his clear plastic shield.

There was a long pause after the officer stopped speaking. Then a single bark came from somewhere.

The cops began advancing once more.

There wasn't much space between the two sides, only a dozen meters. In little more than seconds the calm, precise leading edge of the police riot squad came in contact with the rough, uneasy wall of protesters.

And then it all went to hell.

Not on the cop's side, of course. They had Jon back in charge of them, even if he wasn't anywhere to be seen. The police were perfect and by the book.

Too bad the protesters had never read the book.

"I see my men are performing their duty," came a voice from behind me.

I nearly leapt through the ceiling, Jameswell on my heels.

"Jon!" I had to fight to keep my heart from beating out of my chest as I reached out a hand to lean against him.

Jon, looking poster perfect, had been standing no more than a stride behind us. He was dressed in full riot gear, fold down mask and baton. The only thing he was missing was the shield.

He was even wearing body armour. And at his side, unlike the officers down on the street, was strapped a firearm.

"Commissioner Oaks," said Jameswell respectfully from beside me.

Jon nodded to him quickly as he stepped up to stand silhouetted by the window. He didn't say anything as we watched the force meet the protesters.

Oddly, they didn't seem to be pushing them back.

"Why aren't the cops winning?" Jameswell asked. "They're just standing there. They're not fighting."

Jon glanced over to him, clear blue eyes unreadable. His voice was little above a whisper.

"There is no *win*, Sir." Did I hear just the slightest venom as he said that? "We do not *win* by beating them back. Every act of violence the force displays is a loss for us. We can only hope to contain the damage, both to the city and to our own reputation. If a single member of the public were to be knocked down it would be worse in the end than if a dozen members of the force were wounded."

He took a deep breath before continuing. "I can control my force, *Sir*. I can only guide the public. You should know better than anyone that no one *controls* the public." He turned back towards the windows. "Should one of my men be wounded, it is in the line of duty. All the members of the riot squad are volunteers. They are here because they see the value in maintaining order. I can visit them at their bedsides should they be hurt. I can congratulate them, reinforce their belief that we are fighting for the right. But," he paused for a moment, letting the sudden silence draw out as we watched the chaos separated from us by not more than a few centimeters of glass, "Should one of the citizens be wounded... it will not be I who stands at their bedside. To wound an officer will only strengthen their resolve. To wound a protester will simply encourage them to fight again. We wound one and their story will embolden ten more to fight in his place. It is a difficult battle we fight, *Sir*, there is no way to win. All we can do is hope to tie. Or at least lose gracefully." He turned again to Jameswell. There was something in Jon's eyes now. They showed a steel I hadn't seen for a long time. "I can contain the damage, but it is your job – that of the government – to heal this wound."

The three of us stood there. There were chairs not ten feet away, but it would have felt disrespectful to sit while the battle played out below.

I hadn't noticed it before, but there was a radio on Jon's belt. He lifted it to his lips every so often to bark out orders, moving men from one engagement to another.

Mostly it seemed he pulled the force away from the hot spots, kept the protesters off balance not by attacking, but by retreating. He pulled them from where the mob thought the cops would be so that the officers were always nipping at their heels rather than facing them head on.

The only place he kept a thin blue line of men was in front of City Hall. But then again, the mob, for all it was worth, didn't really seem to want in here anyway.

We were looking down at the chaos below us when something caught my eye. There was a cop element of five dogs working its way slowly across the plaza. It wouldn't have been anything of interest, except I'd noticed that all the packs were in even numbers.

Looking back along their path, I saw a single officer stranded among the mob. It seemed his team hadn't yet noticed him missing.

I couldn't look away as the men and women closed on him.

The police were fearsome fighters. I knew this first hand. The dog down there should have been able to claw his way through to freedom, hardly breaking a sweat.

Instead he stood there, backing up against a wall and holding his riot shield out before him.

And he clipped his baton onto his belt as the mob advanced, leaving himself weaponless.

I wanted to cry out, but I couldn't find my voice.

It seemed I didn't have to. A moment later I felt Jon jerk beside me. He pulled the radio from his belt.

"Command to elements sixteen and twenty-three. Emergency response. Redeploy to the north-west edge of the plaza. An officer has been isolated and requires assistance." I couldn't make out the voices on the other end, but they sounded like barks. Jon swore under his breath. "They won't make it in time."

On the other side of me, Jameswell stepped forward, raising a hand to touch his fingertips against the cool glass. For just a moment the cat closed his eyes.

The protesters descended upon the lone police officer like a pack of wolves on a defenseless rabbit.

No. Wait... that comparison was all wrong...

I wanted to close my eyes too, but I just couldn't.

The first to strike a blow was a woman. A rat, possibly.

The hit itself was meaningless, her fist simply bouncing off the riot shield. But it was enough to embolden the rest of the mob. A second before they'd all been hanging back, not quite sure what to do. Now they surged forward, washing over the cop like a living wave.

Jon swore.

"Command to elements sixteen and twenty-three. Get a move on. Elements two and nine, redeploy to north-east corner of the plaza. Medical team alpha, we have an officer down."

His voice was so cool and mechanical as he spoke that I could have confused him for Ornthi.

No... change that. Ornthi *tried* to sound human. Jon... I think he had the ability to just turn that part of his mind off.

I began counting the seconds in my mind as the rescue teams pushed forward. I only got up to half a minute before they made it to where the officer had fallen. We watched them drag the protesters off him. Even from this distance I could see the blood staining his uniform.

And the baton was still clipped to his belt.

Jon let out a sigh.

"Element sixteen. Report."

I could only make out a few words over the static. "*Waiting for medical team.*"

I glanced over to Jameswell. The cat's eyes were still closed.

That was roundabout the point I realized I was done here. It didn't matter what I did, the game was in Jon's hands now. And he was a player on an entirely different level than I.

And I didn't want to join him.

Turning, I walked from the room without a word. Jon was still standing at the window, giving terse orders through the radio. "Five to plaza east. Thirteen to twelfth ave. and Yukon..." It reminded me of a chess game.

It wasn't until I closed the door behind me that I realized Jameswell had followed me out into the hallway.

"Sorry for getting you into this," I mumbled as I started off. Like the meeting room, the hallway was almost perfectly silent.

It was only now I realized why it unnerved me so. All the people that should be milling about City Hall on a normal day weren't here. It just as well could have been midnight.

Jameswell matched me step for step, our claws loud on the stone floor.

"Don't blame yourself," he said. "It was a long shot. We were hoping you might be able to calm them down. No one really expected it to work. If it hadn't been you that it would have been Max or I who set them off."

I picked a hallway at random. Jamewell stayed at my heels.

"You're following me." There was no reason for it, but I had to suppress a growl.

I guess I just wanted to be alone right now.

He fell back step.

"Yeah," he worked out a half hearted laugh. "You're the City Administrator. It just doesn't feel right to have you wandering about alone when there's a riot right outside. You're the highest ranking man in the city."

I snorted. Turning, I looked at him,

Okay, I'll admit it, I laughed.

Louder, perhaps, and longer than I really should have. I got a good belly laugh out of that.

I really needed it.

"You... you're going to protect *me*?" I said between gasps for air.

Jameswell might be taller than me, but he likely weighed even less than I did. And I'd been able to beat him up even years ago, before I turned to hunting. Jameswell was an accomplished bureaucrat, but a fighter he was not.

He glanced away nervously, staring intently at a featureless point in the wall behind me.

"Uh, well, I guess it's not really like that. I just don't want to be alone while... they're, you know..."

I smiled.

"Fine," I said, setting a hand on his shoulder, "Where were you heading?"

He shrugged. "Home, I guess. There's not really anything more for either of us here."

The cops really were doing a good job of keeping everyone out of City Hall. We didn't see a single soul all the way down to the main floor. Then again, with Jon commanding them, I had no doubt they were well on their way to quelling the riot.

We didn't dare go anywhere near the front entrance, but there was a side door to Yukon and Eleven A Ave that was placed just so to allow people like the mayor a discrete way in and out of the building when he wasn't looking for the press of crowds.

We were about a dozen paces from the exit when a door in front of us opened.

I'll admit I just about jumped when a shadow fell across the hallway.

"Mr. Taggart. Mr. Jameswell." It still struck me just how close Pine looked to Jon.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"Pine? How in all the gods' names did you find us?"

He cocked his head slightly. "I am your *attache*, Sir. It's my *job* to know where you are." He smiled. "That, and Commissioner Oaks contacted me. He suggested you and Mr. Jameswell might do well with an escort."

From the office behind him three more dogs stepped out. They were all dressed in their normal police uniforms, not the riot gear of the officers outside.

I nodded.

"Let's get out of here."

It was three blocks before I was brave enough to talk again.

Stepping out of City Hall, we'd found out firsthand just how good the sound proofing was. And

the air filtration.

The first thing to come to me were the sounds. Screams, growls. And behind them all the barked orders of police dogs.

Second, and far more powerful, were the scents.

I'd been expecting fear, even blood, but they were all secondary. First by a far margin was confusion. It smelt like these people were more confused than anything else.

"Dean," I turned to Jameswell as we stopped for a breather in an alley, "Be honest. Just how much of our success rebuilding the city was due to Ferguson? First he disappears, then we have an influx of immigrants, then the riots start up again."

He shrugged, pulling a hand down the side of his face to try and straighten his fur.

"Might I suggest, Sir, that you just answered your own question," Pine said, making me jump. "The riots have started *again*. There were riots far worse than these while Brian Ferguson was still alive. That suggests he was not as omnipotent as you are considering him."

"Heh, you might be right," I said.

Jameswell glanced from Pine to me and threw up his hands. "I don't care *who's* responsible, I just want to calm things down again." He paused for a breath. "Anyway, this is where I get off." He pointed a thumb down a side street. "My place is off that way. How do you want to split the guard?"

I glanced over to Pine. He nodded.

"You can take the officers, Dean. I'll head on with Pine. We'll be alright."

There was just a flicker of a smile before he turned away. "I pity anyone who tries to take you down, Tommy."

Things got a bit easier after Jameswell went his own way. It's hard to describe, but that cat was just so... *domestic*.

I don't mean to say it like a dirty word, but there's just no other way to describe him. He can run circles around me when it comes to paperwork or bureaucracy – and I'm no slouch – but he wouldn't know the right end of a deer to spring on if I let him feel it out with both hands.

Pine on the other hand... he might be just as domestic a breed as Jameswell, but the police were a species onto themselves.

I stalked forwards, moving from shadow to shadow without even really thinking about it. Pine followed me step for step. And that was something there. Pine, at least when he was following me, didn't move like other police dogs. If I didn't know better I'd have guess Jon had him trained by the hunters.

Yeah, fat chance of that.

But that did remind me...

We were far enough from City Hall now that the riot was a distant memory. Far enough that I felt comfortable stopping off at one of the fast food vendors that lined the streets here.

Cub-caf. I'd frequented this chain since I'd been working at KDP.

Pine stood a respectful distance away as I stepped up. That was after, of course, he slipped some bills into my hand.

Two orders of beef. It didn't cost much. I left a tip on the counter. I always felt bad for the poor folks who had to man these stalls, they reminded me of myself when I'd had to work a minimum-wage job.

That was one of the reasons I'd upped minimum wage while I'd been mayor.

Stepping over to where Pine stood next to a strand of trees, I found a bench in the shade and sat down.

"Come on, Pine." I flicked an ear to the space beside me. "You're making me nervous standing there."

He took one last look up and down the street before joining me. His motions were still stiffer than a normal person's, but not nearly so as your average police dog.

Smiling, I shoved one of the orders of beef into his hands.

"Sir?" He almost dropped it.

I bit a chunk out of my meal and swallowed it down. "Think of it as a thank-you for being in the right place at the right time to get me out of City Hall, eh?" I'd learned long ago that it was good planning to butter someone up when you wanted to get information out of them.

It's hard to make idle conversation with a police dog, but Pine wasn't too bad. And anyway, I'd had lots of experience with that art getting to know Jon.

And that brought us to what I really wanted to know.

"Hey, Pine," I said, keeping my voice just low enough not to carry, "I saw some odd dogs while I was down in HQ. They were guarding the sub-basement and were dressed all in black. Know anything about them?"

I'd tried to ask Jon about them while we'd been down there but the other dogs around us had always intervened before he could answer.

Pine went stiff. Not much, but just enough I could feel him move on the bench beside me.

"Sir," his voice had gone formal, "You know I'm under orders to work with you in any way I can..."

I sighed. "But you're not allowed to tell me," I finished.

I was surprised when he laughed. "Not quite, Tommy." He'd lost some of his formality. "I'd tell you if I could, but I *don't know*. The blue zone, the area you were in, is the highest security location the force has. Even more so than our archives. It's grounds for dismissal for an officer to even wander down there by accident."

"Heh." I closed my eyes for a moment as I rolled a morsel of beef around on my tongue. "So I'm guessing those guard dogs aren't exactly common knowledge."

Pine nodded, pulling a strip free from his meal. "Yep." His voice became even more casual, almost sounding *normal*. "I'd likely be in danger of losing my job by even knowing they exist if I wasn't assigned to you. Well..." he cocked his head slightly, "I would have. Commissioner Oaks appears to be running things a bit differently now that he's in charge, but old habits die hard. *He* wouldn't likely fire me for something like that, but the dozens of officers below him would without him ever knowing."

I snorted. "Yeah, I could believe that. I've had some experience trying to steer a bureaucracy. Even if everyone can see the jagged rocks ahead it still takes forever to turn, and don't even bother thinking about a complete one-eighty. Folks would die before they ever allowed that."

Pine snorted. The sound almost made me jump, coming from a police dog.

"Yeah, I could imagine that. Same as my old job," he said.

Alright... *that intrigued* me. Most police officers were born to families that had served for generations. Almost none of them went anywhere but the service.

"What was that?"

He paused for a moment, as if realizing he'd said too much.

"Oh, my dad was in the service, but my mom worked in the public sector. She could have been an officer, but was born lame." He winced slightly at the memory. "Anyway, you can't join the service until you're eighteen. My parents thought it might be good for me to get some 'real world' experience so they had me work at the same place as my mom for a few summers."

I grinned. "That company was a bit of a mess?"

He shrugged. "In a way. The worst bit was what they did *right*."

I cocked my head. "How's that?"

A sad grin tugged at his lips. "You may have noticed, Sir, that I'm a mere constable. There's a reason for that. The force does not take kindly to those on the bottom who think they know better than their... betters." He chuckled softly. "I knew Commissioner Oaks when he was still a cadet. He was in the class behind mine. It seems he didn't forget me."

"How so?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Attache to the City Administrator is quite a select posting. It's," he smiled, "The previous posting of the Commissioner. Some people think it might be the new gateway to the position."

I narrowed my eyes. "But I thought a lot of the higher ranks in the service were biased to family."

He nodded. "They were. Are, still to some degree. But there just aren't enough folks of the old families to fill them all. We may be police officers, Tommy, but we are still – in our own way – human."

I didn't head straight home. It was time to pick the kids up anyway, my wonderful *day off with Rebecca* was coming to a close.

I'd almost forgotten we were supposed to have had today to relax.

Well, I hope Rebecca found something to do.

I was a little put off when we rounded the corner to my parent's place. There were police dogs stationed here.

"Just as a precaution," Pine whispered.

Thankfully, Mom wasn't as sensitive to them as Dad had been.

Gathering the kids into my arms, I stopped to chat with Mom about their day. They were still young enough that they hadn't been *too* much of a handful.

Walking down the street, the kids nestled in the crook of each arm, I looked out at the setting sun.

Gods, was it the evening already?

I couldn't help but wonder what kind of world it was the two would inherit.