

The Proginers



By wwwolf

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Chapter 8: From a Single Drop of Blood

It was two in the morning and I'd only gotten home from yet another day of hunting and paperwork perhaps an hour ago. It had taken me that long to finally get into bed. Well, at least it was warm.

The night was dark and quiet, but I just couldn't sleep.

There was no reason for it. Really, none at all. The day had been no better and no worse than any other, the children were quiet, and Rebecca was warm and soft next to me. But yet I still couldn't sleep.

Rolling onto my back, I stared up at the ceiling as the flickering lights of the city played out in shadows across the ceiling.

Twitching my ears, I could now feel what it was that kept me on edge.

The fact there was *nothing*.

Well, more than that, it was the fact I couldn't hear *anything*. Other than Rebecca's breathing, the only sound around us was that of the building fans.

"Hey, Babe," I gave Rebecca a nudge, "Wake up."

A moment later she opened her eyes without a word. Old habits die hard, and we'd been in so many life or death situations that we'd almost gotten used to having to wake up at a moment's notice.

"Something doesn't feel right," I whispered.

She didn't question me. Thirty seconds later I was tiptoeing down the hall to check on the kids and she was getting dressed. I noticed she made a point of pulling her knives from the dresser drawer.

Thankfully, everything was quiet in the apartment.

Poking my head out into the building hallway, I expected to see a police dog over by the elevator.

The hallway was empty.

I pulled my ears back. "Babe," I said, closing the door again, "I'm going to head down and find a police dog. Can you stay here and watch the kids?"

She furrowed her brow. I knew as well as she did that staying here was the last thing she wanted. We'd discovered long ago I had a talent for getting into new and interesting types of trouble when we were apart.

At long last she nodded, but not before pulling on her familiar red leather jacket. With that I knew she felt it too. Something was wrong and she wanted to be loaded for bear.

“Come right back, Wolfy.” She reached up and kissed me on the lips.

I worked up a grin.

“Babe, where else would I ever want to be?”

Alright, this was downright creepy.

They always dimmed the lights in the hallway at night to save on power, but the effect now was more like something out of a horror story. It wasn't dark enough to put anything in shadow, but rather *everything* was in that odd half shadow that washed away the colour, even from my night vision.

For half a minute I considered taking the elevator, but the sound of it in the night somehow instinctively turned me off.

Down at the far end of the hallway were the stairs. I slipped through the door silently, my claws not even clicking on the polished concrete.

Down to the main floor, I didn't see a soul. But then again, neither did I smell anything of note.

That was until I open the stairwell door.

There wasn't much blood, but I was hyper sensitive to it as things were.

Stepping out into the lobby, even without the scent I knew something was wrong. There should be a cop stationed by the front door twenty-four seven.

Creeping forward another step, I couldn't help my claws as they clicked softly on the tile floor. There was something poking out from around the corner up ahead.

Something brown.

I wanted to break into a sprint, my heart racing so fast I could hear the blood pounding in my ears, but I wouldn't risk it.

Inch my inch I moved forward, one foot carefully placed in front of the other.

There wasn't the slightest sound from anywhere. Even the faintest click of my claws echoed around the lobby like gunshots.

Closer now, I could make out what it was that poked around the corner.

It was the brown furred toe of a police dog.

Oh bugger.

It felt like it took me forever to cross the ten meters that separated us. I looked over my shoulder so many times I was starting to develop a tick.

Crouching down, I reached forward a hand to the motionless foot.

And let out a soft sigh.

Good, it was still attached to a body, and felt warm.

Poking my nose around the corner, I used an old trick of first lowering my head to the floor. It would be less likely anyone watching on the other side would notice me way down here.

The hallway was empty save for the police dog who laid sprawled on the floor. The hallway led to Pine's security office. And the cop laying before me wasn't Pine.

My twitch was growing worse.

Pausing by the officer in the hallway just long enough to check if he was alive – he was – I continued on. Faster now, I no longer cared if anyone heard me.

Anyone who could take down a trained police dog was obviously a match for me. I'd have better luck calling reinforcements.

I passed another two police dogs on the way to the office. Both of them were out cold.

That wasn't what made my blood run to ice.

It was the fact that all three dogs had obviously been in a fight, but they'd all lost swiftly and conclusively. And there wasn't a mark on them.

I could only think of a half dozen people in the entire city who could take on three police dogs *at all*, and I *thought* they were all on my side.

The door to the security office was slightly ajar. I could see the light on inside. And I could smell the scent of blood.

Pushing the door slowly open with the tip of a finger, I peeked around the corner.

Jon had used this office once, and Pine hadn't changed it since he'd moved in. There was a desk in the centre of the room and maps and charts pinned to all the walls.

Now there was a form thrown over the desk. His legs were laying atop it and his upper body was hanging down the far side.

It was Pine.

I didn't even bother swearing as I stepped into the room and closed the door silently behind me. There were three independent dead bolts on the door. I locked them all.

"Pine? Talk to me, man." I took a quick look around the office as I stepped up to him. We were the only ones in the small, windowless room.

He didn't respond.

Above us, the steady building light cast everything in harsh, sharp edged shadows.

Taking gentle hold of the dog's shoulders I lifted him from his awkward position and laid him out on the floor. His breathing was rough and shallow, but here was still alive.

Unlike the dogs out in the hallway, he was covered with blood. All of it his own by the smell of it. Unlike out in the hallway the air in this room was thick with the scent of battle. It very nearly blotted everything else out.

The other police dogs had been taken by surprise, unable to mount much of a defense. Pine had seen it coming. Whatever *it* was. And he'd fought for all he was worth.

But from what I could tell all he'd managed to accomplish was to hurt himself.

I didn't know what to do. *Something* was in the building, and it was one of the most deadly things I've ever seen... except it hadn't killed anyone.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to steady my nerves. And my eyes fell across the radio sitting on the table behind Pine's desk.

It wasn't a little handheld unit, but one of those massive boxes that takes up a whole table.

Sitting down in front of the monster, I suddenly realized I had no idea how to use the bloody thing. Well, only one way to find out.

Pulling the headset uneasily over my ears, the sound of static blotted out the silence of the night.

It didn't make me feel any better.

There was a button next to the microphone that sat before me. I pressed it with a mechanical click.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" My own voice came back over the headset a moment later. It sounded small and frightened.

For a long moment there was nothing but white noise.

Then, just at the edge of my hearing, I made out a familiar sounding voice.

"This is a restricted frequency. Sign off immediately." I'd never been so happy to hear the clipped voice of one of V-town's finest.

"This is Tommy Taggart. I need help. Now." I tried to keep the edge of panic from my voice. I failed miserably.

“Taggart?” The voice sounded suspicious. “Contact your local officer. Pine is on duty.”

I ground my teeth. “Pine is out cold, a bloody mess. So are the other dogs here.”

The voice came in clearer now. They must be adjusting the set on their end.

“Repeat. Officer Pine is down? So are Winterberry and Larch? Understood. Contacting reinforcements now.”

There was nothing but static for a long moment. I knew there was a police station just down the road. HQ must be calling there.

When the voice came back even I could hear how shaken he was.

“The nearest station is... not responding,” he said. “We are redirecting officers from HQ.”

A chill ran down my spine. An entire station taken out? Just like that? It was one thing to take down three officers. The idea that someone, *anyone*, could take down a whole station of dogs was...

I took a deep breath.

“Are you still there, Sir?” came the voice over the radio.

“Yeah.”

There was a couple seconds pause. “Very good, Sir. I’ve been advised to ask you to remain where you are. I assume you are in the security office? That room has been fortified. You should be able to isolate yourself and wait for support.”

The image of Rebecca and the kids flashed through my mind.

“No. I’m not leaving my family.”

Again there was a pause. “They should not be in danger, Sir. As long as they are in your apartment they should be safe. That area has also been fortified.”

Huh? I hadn’t known that.

I let out a long sigh. “Fine. Just let me drag in the dog from the hallway. I don’t want to leave them in the open.”

The man on the other end of the radio said something, but I didn’t bother listening to it.

Carefully unbolting all the locks, I stepped back out into the hallway. It was a breath of fresh air out here after the growing scent of blood in that confined little room.

The fact Pine hadn’t moved the entire time hardly made me feel any better.

Dragging the bodies into the security office, I was just about ready to button down and wait for backup when I noticed something.

There was a pegboard in the back of the room, it held the keys to all the different parts of the building. There was one missing.

The master.

And the splatters of blood about the room suggested this was where Pine had made his final stand, defending the keys.

I didn’t even bother to swear. Anyone with that key would be able to walk right through any defenses put in their way. Including into the apartment.

Shutting the door to the security office, I didn’t bother locking it this time. It wasn’t like it would do any good.

Switching into hunting mode, I no longer moved like a scared pup. I still hadn’t the slightest who or what was in here with me, but I had my family to protect. There was no room to be scared when I had to think about them.

Casing the main floor, I kept my nose to the ground to try and pick up any scents I could. It was no good, too many people walked these halls everyday for me to lift anything.

It wasn't until I opened the door to the back stairs that it hit me flat in the face like a mallet. I knew that scent.

Brian.

Jon had been hunting him down since we'd found his place way back when, but no one had seen hide nor hair of him. Now it seemed he was coming for me.

My blood went cold as I began to run.

I made it to the third floor in a matter of seconds. I could have howled in joy when his trail went right past it.

Even then I poked my nose into the hallway to make sure the apartment door was untouched.

Drawing what should have been a deep and calming breath, I couldn't keep Brian's scent from running about inside my head. He *knew* where the apartment was. He'd broken in at least once before. There was no way he'd miss it so easily.

Turning back to the stairs, I began following the trail again as it wove up and up.

It didn't take me long to reach the top of the stairs, this building wasn't all that tall.

At the very top there was a door to the roof. The master key from the security office hung from the lock here. I pulled it free.

Opening the door to the outside, a cold gust of night air hit me hard in the face. It felt like it should be raining, but the sky was crystal clear. A strong wind came from the west, the direction of the sea.

Stepping out, I realized I'd never been up here before. The footing was rough and uneven, tared gravel and roofing shingles biting into the pads of my feet.

There was a strobing red light off behind my left shoulder, alternatively bathing me in blood red and pitch darkness.

I honestly hadn't the slightest why we still used those. They were originally for airplanes, but no one had used those in decades.

Stumbling forward, the wind shifted slightly, bringing a scent to my nose. I began growling.

But... there was something wrong. It was Brian, I *knew* it. But yet it wasn't.

The light behind me strobed again, giving me a short burst of red tinged vision.

A dozen or so meters away, sitting on the edge of the building with his legs dangling over, sat a wolf.

I stepped forward, ever so slowly edging towards it. My feet made enough noise in the gravel to wake the gods but he never turned, never seemed to notice.

Every time the light behind me faded away I was left in darkness, near complete blindness. My eyes were better than this, but I just couldn't adjust it things didn't stay the same.

At long last I came close enough I could make him out clearly.

An average wolf, with red fur not so unlike my own brown, he was a touch on the thin side, muscles showing though his coat in a way that wasn't completely healthy.

He had changed, but yet I knew it was him. It was Brian Ferguson. The man who had tried to kill me and threatened Rebecca. The man I'd thrown from the top floor of a thirty story apartment building to watch hit the pavement far, far below.

I couldn't hold back the instinct. Raising my hands, I got ready to push him one more time. The fall wasn't as far, but perhaps I might be successful on the second try.

I was inches from giving him a sharp, swift shove when his voice came to me over the gusting wind. It was high and pained, sounding more like a pup's than a man's.

“Who am I?”

I stopped dead.

He didn't turn towards me. Still sitting on the edge of the void, he looked out over the lights of the city spread out below. They looked so close that one could almost reach out and touch them.

That had not been the voice of Brian Ferguson I'd heard.

I knew Brian's voice. It was mild and condescending, the inflections were different. Brian had grown up in the same place but in a different time. His voice was unique.

This voice... it was more like anyone else in the city.

“I've seen things,” he continued, worlds still little more than a whine, “I've seen... people. But they weren't. Bears, monkeys, birds... things I can't even describe. They've all been here, walking the streets like a dream I keep returning to every time I wake up. What kind of world is this where I wake into a dream and my dreams return me to the real world as it *should* be?”

He reached out a hand, as if trying to grasp the air. The long, slow strobe of the light behind us came and went three times before he spoke again.

“I know the streets of Vancouver. I've walked them. They're down there somewhere. I can feel it. I... I used to walk those streets. I used to have a... beat. But I just can't remember.” He reached out and picked at the sky again, as if trying to pull memories from thin air. “Why can't I remember? I... I remember being able to *remember*. But it's all gone now.”

I was still standing no more than a stride behind him. My arms were still outstretched to mercilessly shove him over the edge to – once again – his doom. But I couldn't.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to keep his scent from filling my mind. I'd spent so much time and effort memorizing that scent, linking it to all my fear and hatred that having him so close to me was like standing next to my own darker self.

Stepping haltingly to one side, I got a better look at him. He was still the same red furred wolf I remembered, hardly any different than when I last saw him plummet away from me, but there were hairline scars along his fur, spiderwebs of grey.

“Why are you here, Brian?” I asked, my voice weak.

He cocked his head slightly. “Brian? Yeah, that sounds about right. Brian.” He rolled the name around on his tongue a couple of times, as if trying it out. Then he smiled. “Yeah, that feels right. None of the letters ever said what my name was.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Letters? What's going on? Why are you here?”

At long last he glanced over to me. I couldn't make out his eyes in the darkness. There were just deep shadows where they should be. Occasionally I could see the faintest of glimmers.

“Brian,” he said again, a pained smile spreading across his lips. “It feels good.” For a moment he shook his head and groaned, as if experiencing a migraine. “Uhh.. yeah.” Then it was gone again.

“The letters? Don't you know those?” he continued, seeming to only pick up on the occasional thing I said. “Doesn't everyone have those? How else would you know who you are? I remembered the first one day, a few months ago... it was... it was under a paving stone. It was from me, from before.” He raised a hand to smack himself on the side of the head before continuing. “It told me who I was. Reminded me I was... me.”

I furrowed my brow and forced myself to sit down on the roof next to him. Unlike Brian, I sat back a few feet from the edge. I didn't trust him not to do to me what I'd been planing for him.

“You're Brian Ferguson, aren't you?” I asked. He looked like him, smelt like him, but in no way acted like the man I'd so briefly known and hated.

“Ferguson,” he repeated. Once again he played with the name before smiling. “Yeah, that's me, I guess. I mean, who else would it be, right?” For the first time he turned his head and looked at me.

“And you... you're Tommy Taggart.”

I nodded.

He furrowed his brow. “I know you. I remember you. I think. I know your face, your scent, your name. But I don't remember *you*.”

I snorted. “We didn't meet that many times.”

His eyes widened. “But... but, you're... *you*.. You have to be. You're the only one I remember.”

“I'm what?” I asked, pulling back a step.

He let out a long breath. “Aren't you... *family*?”

I nearly fell right over. I was only glad I wasn't sitting on the edge.

“Me?” I felt a growl growing in my throat. “*Me*?”

He shrunk back as if I'd slapped him. A moment later a whine escaped his lips.

“I'm sorry. I... I just don't remember. You're the only person I can remember at all. You, you and the woman. I thought you might be... might be my... father.”

I snorted.

This man, who'd tried to kill me on no too few occasions, now thought that I was his *father*. The wolf over a hundred years old and he thought *I* was his dad? I was just about to start laughing when I stopped dead.

Brian was crying.

“I remember falling, Tommy,” his voice was rough, “I remember it. I fell for longer than I ever imagined I could. I could see the ground rushing up to meet me. The... the only thing going through my mind was your name.” His closed his eyes for a moment and shivered. “I guess that's why I remember it. I remember your face.”

Wrapping his arms around himself, I could help but think he looked like a scared and lost pup.

Taking a deep breath, I moved closer to him, sitting out on the edge of the building and letting my legs dangle out over the void. I couldn't even see the road beneath us in the darkness.

I hadn't realized just how small his little ledge was. Even a slight shift in weight and it felt like I could go sliding right off into the empty sky.

“But you're not, are you?” Brian said.

I jerked back to the here and now. Brian was still seated beside me. He was looking at me now, watching my face.

“Not what?” I replied, fighting to keep my tone neutral.

“Him.” He let out a long breath. It steamed up in the night. “You're not my father. I should have realized it long ago. It's just... you look a little like me. And I remembered you. I don't remember anyone else... except that woman you're with. I thought that if I remembered anyone it would be my parents. Or my wife. I had one. I think. God, Tommy, why can't I remember?”

There was no more than inches between us, but yet I'd be careful not to touch the wolf.

I reached out towards him, now. Slowly and hesitantly. He didn't flinch away.

Gently, and more than a little tentatively, I set my arm over his shoulders.

He felt cold, even under the fur coat.

And more than that, I could *feel* his body moving, and not in any normal way. I would have pulled back in horror if not for my own regeneration.

Brian Ferguson was – from the point of regeneration – the single most gifted person I'd ever met. Likely the greatest to ever live.

His body was slowly shifting and twisting under my fingers, his flesh molding and reforming like clay.

“It's been like that since I woke up,” he answered my unasked question. “I don't remember

waking up well. I was out on the road. I couldn't think, all I did was drag myself away. I was... scared. I don't know why. I knew *they* were out to get me."

I swallowed down a lump in my throat and asked the obvious question.

"Who?"

He shrugged. That made the feeling of his regeneration all the more unreal.

"Don't know. Everyone. Those... those *dogs*." The way he said that word was like spitting venom. "They call themselves cops but..." He cut off suddenly, hands flying up to him temples as a whimper escaped his lips. "Why can't I remember? I know... things, but it's like wandering through a foggy maze. Sometimes I can see clearly, but then the wind shifts and the walls move. And then... and then when I think I'm getting... it hurts."

Sliding closer, I tried to warm his cool body. Now I knew why he was so thin. His regeneration was likely using up every calorie it could find, repairing him.

"Brian, sush," I lowered my voice, taking on the tone I'd learned over the last few months when speaking to Ging and Beth.

Gods.

The flash of their faces through my mind nearly made me shove Brian right off the edge. Then he whimpered, just like a pup. And I couldn't do it.

"Sush, Brian, you're alright now. You're safe."

He looked at me, eyes wide. "No... I... there's more. But I just can't *remember*."

"It doesn't matter, Brian." I pulled him back from the edge a bit. More for myself than him.

"You've been through a lot. You can't just pick up from that and move on. It takes time. It'll all come back."

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was what I was afraid of. The thought of Brian Ferguson alive again, with his memory back.

As harmless as this pup in a wolf's body may look, I could only imagine the horrors he'd put me through when he remember it was I who'd murdered him.

"What do you remember, Brian?" I asked.

He took a deep breath. There was something in that action. He didn't breath through his nose the way a wolf should. He breathed like a human.

"I remember Vancouver." His voice was little more than a whisper. "I remember tree lined streets, endless cars on the roads, and more people... *real* people, than you could ever imagine. I remember life the way it should be. But it's all like shadows. I can make them out, sometime in finer detail than should ever be possible, but yet when I try to bring them forward they disappear like smoke. And every time my head hurts."

I looked down to the street below us. I could see something moving in the darkness.

It was hard to make out, but it was like water running through a stream. Still far away, but a flood of blue uniformed dogs were sprinting this way.

I didn't say a word.

Off on the horizon a crescent moon was rising. It was too overcast to truly see it well, and the wind pushed the clouds around making it appear and disappear as it pleased.

This was the first in a long time – perhaps since my dad died – that I've felt like howling.

Raising my head to the stars, I started low, soft and quiet so as not to startle Brian. Even then he jumped, almost sliding forward. The cry wasn't perfect, and hardly poetic, but it came out clear enough. I was rusty, but not that out of practice.

Coming back up for air, I glanced over to Brian. He was looking at me dumbfounded.

"How did you do that?" his voice was breathless.

I smiled. "You're as canine as I am. It's nothing." In truth there had been more to it, though I'd never admit it to him. The cops knew my voice. They'd recognize it as they raced down the streets. Them knowing where I was would save them the time it would take for them to search the building.

"I'm not... I'm..." He was about to say 'human', I knew it. But instead he looked down at his hands. "This."

I tightened my grip around his shoulders. "It's nothing, really. It's built into us. Just," my mouth dropped open in a grin, "Relax and do what feels natural."

Well, that had been how my dad explained it to me.

Lifting my head back to the stars again, more slowly this time so as to allow him to watch, I opened my mouth to howl.

There's more to hollowing than I've explained. You don't use your vocal cords the same way as when you speak. There's a bit of a trick to it that you can't really explain. It's a canine thing. Also, there's a language to the howl. Nothing like english, but enough to get a basic message across.

Right now I was holding a single, strong tone. No waver to it, no snarl or growl of dominance.

I knew for a fact that the cops would be able to pick up on the message – they were canine after all – as well as Rebecca. I'd helped her learn how to read howls a couple of years ago.

A how can carry a lot further than a yell.

It wasn't long until another cry came up to rise with mine. It took Brian more than a few tries, and his was coughing up a fit between them, but at long last he was able to match my note.

And that, in and alone, was how anyone could tell he wasn't a true wolf. No wolf holds the same key as the leader of the howl.

It's in part a dominance thing. You don't challenge your alpha, but on a deeper level it has to do with the pack. A pack wants to look big, strong. That's why wolves always howl off key. It's to allow each and every one of them to hold their own note. You never match each other because that would make the pack sound smaller, sound weaker.

Brian, after a few tries matched my howl near perfectly. He was about my weight, about my apparent age. It sounded like I was listening to myself on a recording.

I had to fight with my instincts to keep from hopping to another key and solving the problem.

Beside me, Brian cinched closer, leaning into my side. His body still felt near deathly cool to the touch.

Then, a few seconds later, another howl joined us.

It wasn't the same as ours. A wolf's howl is different than other canines, more ragged and less cultured. The howl that came up to meet us now was more like a text book example of how a proper howl *should* be rather than how a real person did it.

Jon.

I'd never heard the dog howl before, but it could be no one else. It was a police dog for sure, and none of the cops would be so bold as to try and join the howl of the City Administrator.

He didn't match the cry Brian and I raised. His howl was softer, and slightly higher in pitch. There was a wavering of uncertainty to it.

He was asking a question.

Now I did shift my own howl slightly, making it higher and less aggressive. Brian matched a moment later, following me like a lost puppy.

I held the note as long as I could, to the point that when I finally broke off I was gasping for breath.

Brian cut off right after me. His eyes were dilated and his hands were shaking.

"I've... I've never done that before. I know it."

Still sucking in air, I grinned at him. "I thought you couldn't remember."

Any return grin died on his lips. "No. I *know* I've never done anything like that before."

My ears twitched. I could hear someone coming up the stairs behind us. No, strike that. I could hear a *lot* of someones.

And by the gods did they sound *pissed*.

I was getting the feeling that half of the entire V-town force was here tonight. Brian hadn't noticed, but I'd been watching as the blue uniformed wave washed along the street below us. There was hardly enough space between them to see the pavement.

At long last Brian seemed to hear the footsteps as well. He pivoted around to look curiously at the open door.

"Do you hear that?" he asked.

"Yeah," I replied, standing up. "You might want to stand away from the edge. It's the cops. And I don't think they're going to be gentle when they show up."

He looked over to me, eyes wide.

"The police? Why? What have I done?"

I was *this* close to face palming.

"Well, for one thing, I'm guessing it was you who took out the three of them downstairs. Not to mention the entire station that isn't responding."

"Oh." He looked down at his surprisingly bloodless hands. "I'd forgotten about that. They were between you and me. I just wanted to see you. And.." he laughed softly, "And then when I got all the way here I lost my nerve and came up to the roof. *You* came to see me."

The stomping feet were just about at the top of the stairs now.

Turning to Brian, I had just the time to one last thing.

"Stay calm," I said, patting him on the shoulder before stepping away. "They're as scared as you are. Keep calm and everything will be--"

I didn't get a chance to finish.

Like a bullet from the muzzle of a high power rifle, a police dog lunged through the door and across the roof. I don't think his feet ever touched the ground.

Brian barely had time to turn and see his attacker before he was flat on his back. He would have smacked the back of his head against the roof, but he was hanging half way out over the void.

He would have gone tumbling over if I hadn't had the foresight to have him step away.

The cop growled something, but I couldn't make out the words. This was *not* the response I expected from the normally calm and hyper efficient police force.

Then, poking out from under the blue uniform, I noticed a black bodysuit.

I backed away without saying a word and waited for the rest of the force to arrive.

They weren't long in coming. About thirty seconds later the main body of the force all but exploded out onto the roof. They must have figured out Brian was here. No small number of them were armed with shotguns and rifles.

Firearms weren't normal issue for any cops.

As if he was being drowned, Brian disappeared behind a sea of blue.

"Hey, wait," I said as I tried to step forward. I didn't even make it two feet before the wall of bodies firmed up. "Take it easy on him. He's not..." I didn't even know what to say. "Be gentle with him. He's hurt," I finished lamely.

A moment later I felt a hand on my shoulder.

Behind me stood a dog, the same as all the others. From the tip of his toes to the top of his ears

he was as close to identical to all the others cops as you could ever hope to imagine.

I recognized him at once.

"Hi, Jon," I said.

He didn't say anything for a long moment as he stared past me, out into the milling bodies that centred around a single unresisting form.

"Is it really him?" he asked.

I nodded my head. "I think so. He regenerated."

Jon coughed. "No one could regenerate from a fall like that. Not even you."

I sighed. "*He* did." I turned to the dog, catching his clear blue eyes. "Jon, there's more to it than that. It's Brian, I'm sure of it, but his mind isn't there." Jon cocked his head. "I don't know how to explain it. His body's regenerated but his mind is a blank slate." I let out a long breath. "Don't hurt him. Everything he's done in the past... it's not *his* fault."

Jon looked at me for a long moment, studying my face.

Then he let his hand fall from my front shoulder without a word and waded off into the sea of blue.

A moment later I heard him barking orders.

Descending the steps back down to the third floor, I noticed there were police dogs stationed at every intersection now.

And there was one particular dog standing guard at the door to my apartment. He had a bandage over the back of his head and looked a bit unsteady on his feet.

"Sir," he said with the perfect clip of the service as I stepped closer.

"Pine," I responded, leaning against the wall next to him. He wasn't talking like a man anymore. He was talking like a police dog.

"I... I'm sorry, Sir," he began. There was something in his words that reminded me so much of Jon. The way his duty and his personality mixed. "I've failed you." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I can understand if you'll be requesting a replacement officer. I let both you and your family come to danger. That was unacceptable."

I rolled my eyes and snorted. Yep, just like Jon.

"Give it up, Pine," I said, reaching out to give him a gentle shove. "There were two other dogs down there and you were the only one to put up a decent fight against Brian." His pupils contracted when I said that name, like he was reliving a bad dream. "That guy took out a whole *station* and you think I'm going to be mad at you for not wiping the floor with him?"

"I'm not quite so proud to think I could do *that*, Tommy," A hint of the real man slipped back into his voice, "But I was brought here to protect you. I failed."

I threw my arm over the man's shoulders. "Pine, you're my attaché, not my bodyguard. There's a difference. I'm sure Jon tasked you with both roles, but I need a helper – and a friend – not someone to beat people up." I grinned. "I've already got a lion to to *that* for me."

Back in the apartment now, I found Rebecca sitting in the front room, keeping an eye on the kids through an open doorway.

"Everything settled, Wolfy?" she asked.

I signed and sat down heavily beside her. "Yeah, Babe." I gave her a quick review of the night's escapades.

She'd met Brian before, too. She shivered.

We spent the night sleeping in the front room, watching the doorway.