

POLICE DOOG 2

HER MAJESTY'S FINEST



By wwwolf

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Chapter 4: Up The Drainpipe

June 8th 1988
09:00 Hours
London, England

The first thing to come to me was the scent. It was human. More than that, it was a familiar human, one that promised safety.

Slowly, I opened my eyes. It took long moments for me to realize where I was. A whimper pulled at my throat, but I forced it back. I was stronger than that. I was a Police Dog.

I was prepared for anything when the hazy shapes in the morning daylight came into focus. I was ready for anything but Richard Hyatt sitting calmly next to me on the asphalt. He pressed a foil wrapped package into my hands. It was still warm.

Question pulling at my lips, I fought to speak but the words wouldn't come. My tongue would hardly move. It was as if all the engineered parts of my mind devoted to speech, my forced humanity, had fallen silent.

"Eat up," he said, voice soft.

I did just that.

Peeling back the foil pouch in my hands, I found a breakfast burger of some sort. It smelled absolutely rancid, but I ate it none the less. It had to be better than the dustbin scavenging I'd been reduced to last night.

Only after finishing it off in a few quick bites did I begin to think critically again. A quick glance around, I searched for any sign of the officers that *must* be waiting for me. There was no way Richard could ever have found me by himself.

We were alone.

"How?" I managed to scratch the single word from my rough and torn throat.

He shrugged. "You thought there was even the slightest chance I would possibly go home?"

They drove to London to question me about the murders – I was in the truck right behind you on the trip down – then let me go yesterday. The cops barge in again in the middle of the night, before I can even leave the city, and drag me from my hotel room to put me under lock and key but won't say why. I knew it was you. Half of London knows something happened last night, just no one is saying what. The police aren't talking.”

I nodded.

“Then at six this morning they barge into my room and tell me it's time to go home. I'm dumped into a rental truck without so much as a how-do-you-do. They have a cruiser follow me to city limits, then bugger off.” He grimaced. “Maybe that's enough for some big city folk, but I wasn't about to leave until someone told me what was going on. About you. I drove for an hour and parked. Took the bus back.”

“What about Marry and Trevor?”

He grinned, but the lack of sleep was clear in his eyes. “I made a call to some friends up north. They'll be dropping by in person to relay the news. And if anyone asks, I'm on my way up.”

I blinked.

“Sir, you are aware that lying to a police officer is an offence.”

He smiled back. “And whatever it is you're doing, Jonathan, I have a feeling may not be looked upon favourably either.”

I didn't smile back, but my whiskers did twitch. “As you say, Richard.”

“So,” he said, pulling another burger from a brown grease-spotted paper bag and tossing it to me, “What have you found, yourself, this time? I have a sneaking suspicion it has something to do with that little secret from the graveyard.”

It was only then I saw the cuts and bruises that snaked across the man. It was a wonder he could still stand upright.

I chose my words carefully. I was no longer bound by the rules that Proust had set upon me, that much was obvious, but it was not healthy for Richard to know too much.

“Your guess is on the mark. Some of my past... history will come to light if I am examined too closely by the force. I...” I gritted my teeth. “I should be dead right now. I disobeyed a direct order from my Handler to end my life.”

He blinked. Some of the colour draining from his face.

“Was that the Master Constable who we saw not so long ago?” I nodded. He let out a snort. “That man is a right arse. You should be proud of being able to tell him to bugger off.”

I blinked again. A wan smile slipped to my lips. “No comment, Sir. But that doesn't answer the question of how you found me.”

He leaned back against the brick wall of the pub and turned his head to catch the morning sunlight.

“Not that hard, actually. *Everyone* knows something is up. And the news isn't shy of saying what part of London it is. I simply came downtown and began searching.”

“But then the force...”

He rolled his eyes. "I've hardly seen a Police Dog all morning. Word is the Kennel recalled almost all of them in the city. I did find one though. I followed the Dog here."

I turned to him. Despite my best efforts I couldn't help slipping back into the interrogation procedures that had been hard beaten into me.

"This Dog. How tall was he? Did you see his name?"

Richard smiled. It was obvious he was proud of himself, having predicted my questions.

"He was short for a Dog. And I tried, but I couldn't catch his name. He did seem odd though – as he didn't move like one of you, something about his walk. And he led me *right here*. I mean literally. I ran across him over a dozen blocks away. It was like he wanted me to follow him. He led me right here. Even made a show of pointing out where you were. How he didn't see you I'll never know."

I had a feeling I knew what Dog it was that had brought Richard to me. Who he was and why, I wasn't yet aware.

I tossed my foil wrappers in the nearby bin and stood up.

My uniform was still wrong, but if I brushed it off I could pass well enough in front of an uninformed public.

"What now?" Richard asked. "We can hide you at the farm if you need it. You'd be safe..."

Reaching out, I set a hand on his shoulder. The small contact felt good. I could feel the warmth of his body.

"No. That's exactly where they'll look for me. I can't go home."

He paused for a long moment, realizing the significance of that one word. "Then where?"

I did my best to shrug. "I don't know. And it'll be safer if you don't either. When... when things improve I'll try to contact you."

There was a tear in his eye. "We've fought so hard to keep you, Johnathan."

I tightened my grip on his shoulder. I didn't want to let go. "I'll come back to see you again," I said, my voice rough. "I don't know when, but I will. I promise."

My heart beat fast as I reached out, pulling the man into a hug. I had to be careful not to crush him.

I felt his hands wrap around my back. "You be careful, Johnathan. And if you need me. Need *Anything*, you know how to reach us. We're here for you."

I closed my eyes. "Say goodbye to Marry and Trevor for me. I'm sorry I won't be able to see them for some time."

I shewed him away shortly thereafter. I wasn't sure where to go next, but I needed to make sure we didn't leave together. I didn't want any more suspicion on Richard or his family. They meant too much to me.

I waited a good hour before slipping out from behind the pub. I'd been watching the street the entire time. This was London, I should have seen a half-dozen Police Dogs pass by. I hadn't seen one.

Brushing back my fur and making my imitation uniform as presentable as possible, I stepped out among the mass of humans that milled endlessly back and forth.

I got exactly seven paces before someone tugged on my cuff. It took everything I had not to leap straight into the air.

"Hey, officer," a young woman said, "Can you help me read this map? I'm trying to get to the Tower of London." It took me a moment to place her accent. She sounded like a tourist from the Continent.

I took a deep breath and forced my face into a mask of detached calm, like a proper Dog. "Of course." My words were clipped and precise. "Please, show me your map."

Before I'd even finished aiding her another person had queued. He was looking for an address. He didn't have a map.

I was near panicking. They thought I was a London Dog. All the Dogs stationed here were expected to hold an encyclopedic knowledge of the city in order to aid tourists. I didn't. For just a moment I froze up.

He looked at me, waiting for his answer.

Scrambling for *anything* to say, I tried to conjure forth the image of the map I'd seen just moments ago. "Five blocks north," I said. "And two blocks east. That's where you'll find your hotel." I had no clue if I was telling him the truth, but I planned not to be here if he came back looking for me.

I felt dirty.

I tried to turn and leave but a young girl was standing before me. She was holding a scratched arm. She looked close to tears.

"Can you help me?" Her soft voice cut through the roar of street noise like a knife.

I glanced behind her. The girl's mother was standing there, waiting for me to render assistance. I nodded calmly as I looked down at her. She was bleeding. First-Aid.

The back of my mind tickled at the scent of blood. I *should* be horrified. I *should* be fighting the beast that they'd made me into.

I felt nothing but calm. I was doing my duty.

Glancing along the street, I searched for a proper police box, my false uniform carrying nothing of use. There were none in sight. There were, however, small blue boxes bolted to the lampposts.

Stepping up to the nearest one, I looked it up and down. It was little larger than a breadbox. I was unused to them, but they had been part of my training.

Yet another difference between the London Dogs and those of the greater world. London Dogs did not have police boxes like all the others. The Dogs of London returned to sleep within the Kennel every night. Hence they had no need for boxes like the rest of us. In their place they were provided with these small blue containers to hold their daily supplies and equipment.

There was a lock on the container, a five digit combination. And, as was proper procedure, the dials had all been set back to zero after its last use.

Scowling at it, I cocked my head. I needed what was within it and had no clue as to the combination. And, if it had been set properly which I had no doubt it was, the code was a random number.

I rested both hands on the faceplate of the box. A quick glance behind me and I ensured I was blocking the view with my too-large body. The muscles in my arms flexed as I closed my thick fingers around the metal. I was far stronger than any mere Dog. The seams in my shirt popped as my muscles stood out in far too stark definition. I narrowed my eyes. I had a hurt girl behind me, and the medical supplies were in this box.

With a snap, the lock popped.

Just the barest shadow of a smile passed over my lips. I had to fight to keep my tail from wagging.

My fingers didn't even ache as I set the now broken cover down on the pavement. The supplies within were textbook perfect. Unlike my box up north had been.

It almost felt odd to have everything as it should.

Grabbing a set of disposable bandages and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide, I turned to the girl, my mask of calm professionalism firmly back in place.

"Here we are, ma'am."

I knelt down before the little girl. She still held her scratched arm. In reality it wasn't bad, but it oozed blood and likely stung something fierce.

Looking her in the eyes, I twitched an ear. When she didn't respond to that I let the corner of my mouth pull up in a tight-lipped smile.

"Don't worry," I whispered. "I'm here to help. You'll be fine." I was horrified at the imperfection of my voice. It didn't hold the proper clip at all.

She sniffled and nodded.

I splashed a few drops of the peroxide on a cotton swab and used it to wipe her scrape. There were specks of dirt and gravel from the street embedded in it. My touch was so light she never even flinched.

Pausing, I turned my head.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing with the flick of an ear.

She turned and my hands flashed out. By the time she looked back from traffic I had the bandage secured in place.

"That wasn't so bad, now was it?" I asked.

She looked at me, eyes wide, then down to the clean white bandage that now covered her forearm.

Standing, I addressed her mother. "Your daughter appears to be alright, Ma'am. I recommend you clean her wound and replace the bandage when you return home. The likelihood of infection appears to be low. If the wound persists more than a week, please consult a doctor."

She nodded, smiling as she reached down to take her daughter's hand. "Thank you, Officer.

You have no idea how hard it was to find you. Normally your kind are on every street corner. It took us half an hour to track you down.”

I cocked my head as if this were a surprise. “I’ll have to report that. I apologise for the inconvenience.”

Once again I turned to set off, only to discover a cue had formed behind her. It was already a dozen deep and growing fast. It appeared people were accustomed to having Dogs to rely on.

It had been mid-morning when I’d first stepped out from behind the pub. It was well after noon by the time I got away from the line of people, and that was only when a bystander raced up to grab my arm with news of a vehicle crash, two blocks north.

My heart raced as I followed him back. And not from the pace he was setting.

Where were all the Dogs? Had they truly been recalled?

I skidded to a stop in front of the accident, and let out a sigh. Two vehicles had come to impact in an intersection controlled by stop signs. It was obvious neither had halted.

Dashing the final few steps, I could clearly see a smaller car and a large delivery truck. The car’s bonnet was nearly completely under the truck’s thick wheels. And the passenger compartment...

I set about to work.

I spared a glance at the truck driver. He appeared stunned, but alright. There was only one me. I would be where I was needed most.

I picked my way carefully through the scattered debris towards the vehicles, expecting to hear the sound of an ambulance at any moment. The background noise of the London street stayed preternaturally quiet, save for the screaming.

“Help! Anyone! I... I can’t move!”

I was next to the car a moment later. “I am here, citizen.” I had to yell to make myself heard over his screams.

“Help. Just please help me.” He began to cry.

Another two steps and I’d splashed through a leaking puddle of petrol. The car was nothing but a mangled wreck.

But even through the stench of fuel and charred electronics I could smell the blood. At least he’d been wearing his seatbelt.

The compartment looked, at first glance, to be reasonably intact. But that was nothing more than an illusion. The weight of the truck pressing down on the bonnet and crushed the entire front of the car – including where the driver’s legs had been.

I paused for just a moment, planning.

Pointing directly at one of the bystanders who stood by, watching idly like this was nothing more than entertainment. “You. Yes, you with the red shirt. Call emergency services. We require an ambulance immediately. There is a life-threatening situation. Report back to me with their expected arrival time.”

"But I..." he tried to back away.

I narrowed my eyes. "That is an order. Ignore it at your own risk."

He nodded. "I'll call them."

I turned back to the car and the man trapped helplessly within. His screams had been reduced to tortured sobs. "I will assist you as best I can," I said, trying to comfort him with nothing more than my words. I wasn't sure if he heard me. He may have slipped into shock, wounds overcoming him faster than I could work.

Pulling hard on the twisted metal, I levered myself up onto the car to peer within, and felt the breakfast burger twist in my gut. At least the worst of the bleeding had been cut off by the compression of the truck above, but the man could not stay here. The car continued to slowly give way, and petrol dripped down onto him.

"I'm going to get you free," I said matter of factly. The man didn't respond, but I could see his eyes flutter.

From behind me I heard another truck pull up. I could only hope it was the ambulance.

Reaching down, I quested my fingers to find what held him.

I was able to work one of his legs free with little trouble. It had been pinned, but not badly. I was able to free it by simply shifting the wreckage. The man let out a moan of pain as he was moved. I turned my attention to his other leg.

Oh dear.

This was where the reek of blood had come from. The leg was impacted between two beams, that had originally been part of the car's superstructure. His thigh had been compressed to less than half of the size it should be.

I took a deep breath and tried to free it. Nothing moved. I pulled at the metal again. The car let out a long, drawn-out groan, but nothing moved.

I looked down at the man. Petrol continued to rain down upon him, poisoning his wounds. The colour was bleeding from his face. He had to be freed or he would quickly be dead.

Setting my teeth, I turned back to the metal bar.

In the distance I could hear the siren of an ambulance.

Bracing my legs, I grabbed the bar with both hands. No Police Dog could ever have lifted this. It didn't hold the full weight of the truck upon it, but it still was well over a tonne.

The joints in my fingers felt as if they would pop free.

Throwing my head back, I pulled.

The world around me seemed to go quiet. There was still the never-ending hum of the street, but the bystanders stood silent, watching. The metal groaned and shifted.

It moved no more than a centimetre. But it moved.

I pulled again. A whimper escaped my lips as the steel bar bent beneath my fingers. I could feel it give.

The driver let out a scream of pure, unadulterated pain as his leg came free.

My ears pulled back and I scrambled forward. Supporting his mangled leg, I dashed from the car to set him on a clear patch of pavement.

Blood oozed from him like an oncoming tide. It wasn't arterial, but it was more than enough to concern me. I glanced about for another blue police container. There were none in sight. If there were any about I couldn't see them through the press of people who huddled close, watching me.

Without thinking I pulled the shirt from my back. I didn't care what happened to it, it wasn't even mine. The cloth was hardly sterile, but it was better than nothing. The thin fabric ripped easily under my claws, in seconds I had it wrapped around the worst of the wound, staunching the flow of blood.

I looked down at my now soaked hands.

A quick sniff and the intoxicating scent fought to weave its way into my brain. I pushed it aside almost offhandedly.

A few moments later the siren of the ambulance grew louder. I looked up. It was driving on the sidewalk, the only way past the massive gridlock of vehicles. The moment it came to a stop a pair of human paramedics sprung from the back.

They were far better equipped than I, so I simply stood back and let them do their work.

One of them pressed a pen and notepad into my hands as he rushed past, not saying a word. It was obvious he wanted me to record my notes of the event.

I did so.

Falling back into my time-worn procedures, I began writing down all I knew. I made a point of not mentioning how it was I'd come to arrive here. At the bottom was a space to sign my name. I simply scratched a line through it.

My timing came out well. They were just hustling the injured man into the back of the ambulance. The other driver was already safely in their care. I handed him the paper just before he shut the door.

"Where in God's name are you Dogs?" he snapped before the door slammed closed. "We're worked off our feet without you!"

I felt rather good having returned to the proper duties of a Dog, but my brief elation quickly flagged. Through the press of people around me came the glint of a film camera.

"Dog!" It was the well-trained voice of one who could only be a reporter. "Dog! Over here! We have some questions!"

I didn't know where I was going, but I turned my back to the camera and began walking away as quickly as I could through the mob. Even under normal circumstances Dogs were strictly forbidden from speaking to the media.

"Hey, Dog! What's your name? We'll have you on the evening news! Hey! Don't ignore me!"

I made it a block and a half, enough that the crowd of people had dispersed, when I felt a hand fall on my shoulder. It took every nerve I had to hold back the reflex to turn and throw my attacker to

the ground.

I stopped dead.

“Remove your hand. It is not appropriate to touch an on-duty police officer.” I didn't have to turn to know it belonged to the reporter. I could hear the camera running not feet away.

“Appropriate?” He snorted. “Sure. Like how it's appropriate that the entire canine police force has disappeared and we haven't gotten a so much as a peep from the Commissioner?”

I stood there in the middle of the sidewalk. I could still hear the soft whirr of the camera running. It was no good to try and run.

First ensuring my calm, emotionless mask of the service was in place, I turned to face him. “I'm sure I'm not aware of what you're referring to, Sir.” My voice was smooth and perfect, but my mind was running flat out searching for an excuse as to why I was here. The more boring the better. “I've simply been recalled to the Kennel. I'm sure I'll be briefed on the situation once I arrive.”

A smile pulled at his lips. Unlike Dogs, he had no desire to hide his stained, blunt, white teeth.

“The Kennel is *that* way,” he said, pointing a thumb over his shoulder. He turned to look back at the camera, mugging for it. I simply stood behind him, saying nothing.

“What's wrong, Dog?” he asked with a chuckle, taking a step closer. “Cat got your tongue?”

Despite the massive difference in size between us he had no fear going toe-to-toe with me as I towered over him. He knew I wouldn't hurt him. He *thought* I couldn't hurt him.

“It is inappropriate for me to be speaking to the media.”

I turned and began walking once again.

The reporter had gotten his clip of me. He'd never truly expected to learn anything. He knew that Dogs were loyal to the Service above all else.

I heard him calling from where he stood. “Oi! Dog! The Kennel is *that* way!” He thought I really was lost.

I headed east. Not that I *chose* the direction, but simply as it was *away*. Away from the reporter, the accident, and the Kennel.

I was still stopped every other block, but fewer citizens had the nerve to request my help now that I was out of my proper uniform. They still did as it seemed there wasn't another Dog in the whole city to ask.

Out of London, I walked through Brentford, still following the setting sun. I continued through the night. It was well past midnight now.

I was in Colbrook before I realized something was wrong.

I had only a heartbeat to dive into the bushes before a police cruiser sped past. A split second glimpse in the cab showed one human officer and one Dog. The human was kitted up in body armour. A rifle lay ready on the seat between them. A sinking feeling rooted itself in the base of my gut.

Another two blocks and I crossed in front of a shop with tellies still on in the front window display. They were tuned to a late night news show. My face graced the screen.

"The Kennel is that way..."

I closed my eyes, but I could still see the footage that showed me walking away, down the street.

"This is the only Dog we've been able to track down all day, Jim," a reporter said from on screen. "We've still had no official word from the Commissioner, but they've been off the street all day. Most of the human forces have been overworked, and things are quickly slipping. We have, thankfully, seen the canine forces reappear in some limited positions. Dogs outside of the London area appeared to be unaffected."

The shot switched to the studio. "We have a guest with us today. One of the foremost experts on the Dog program, and a tireless crusader of their emancipation, Professor Adam." The way she said *emancipation* you knew she saw it as just short of a joke.

The man next to her wore a conservative suit and wire rim glasses. "Well, Diane, it's obvious that something has gone wrong at the building that's so often referred to as *The Kennel*. We all know that Dogs are intelligent creatures. It appears likely one of them has, how shall we say, gone outside the lines."

The reporter stifled a laugh.

"You mean the unsubstantiated reports of a rogue Dog? One of the few things the Commissioner's office has assured us is not the case?"

The man gave her a sour look. "Then what would you suggest..."

I walked on.

Above me dark clouds began to gather.

Another hour and I was out of Brentford and into Windsor.

The police presence here was all the stronger. I began to fear that they were narrowing in on me. Not only were their cars on the streets, but Dogs roamed the alleyways. More than once I only slipped away by good chance.

I had to blink the first time I saw a Dog walking the street alone. It didn't make sense. They'd switched tactics to sending combination of human and Dog teams now that I'd managed to escape my fellow Dogs last night. Why would they return to Dogs alone?

At every turn I found a silhouette just around the corner. It almost seemed as if I were being herded, if I were being directed, but I hadn't a clue as to where. I'd long ago lost my sense of direction. Now I simply darted from shadow to shadow, avoiding the other Dogs as best I could.

At long last I found myself up against a tall stone wall. I had nowhere to go. The road was a dead end and I could hear the *click-click-click* of claws on the street behind me.

Breath hot and ragged in my chest, I leapt against the wall, digging my claws into any tiny cracks I could find to pull myself up and over. It had to be a good twenty feet tall and topped with decorative cold iron spikes. Whatever lay behind this barrier was well protected. I scrambled at the stone for what seemed to be minutes. The footsteps behind me never stopped, but never came any closer. With one final gasp my hand crested the top. I was soon over.

I spared one final glance back the way I'd come.

It was more than a silhouette now. I could see a Dog standing in the middle of the road. He was watching me. There was a calmness about him, he didn't carry himself like the Dogs I knew.

I didn't take the time to think it over. The moment my toes touched the soft sod on the other side of the wall I began to run.

My footsteps were silent on the thick, manicured grass, and I could see no more shadows behind me. I slowed for just a moment to try and draw a raw and gasping breath.

I had a feeling I should know where I was. It was hard to tell in the night, but the building that loomed in front of me was far too large to be merely yet another home or office complex. Its form was familiar, as though I'd seen it before...

I'd passed through Colbrook and been heading west. That would leave me near Windsor.

No.

It simply wasn't possible.

I looked again at the shadow-shrouded silhouette that loomed before me.

No.

Absolutely not. It was impossible that I could be on the grounds of Windsor Palace.

I took a deep breath and looked about again.

A whimper came to my lips.

Tail wrapped around my leg, I began back towards the wall. If I climbed out now I could forget this, pretend I'd never been here, never intruded...

The scrape of claws on the cobblestone road beyond was far too loud, too obvious. There was a Dog just on the other side of the wall and he *wanted* me to know he was there.

For just a moment I entertained the idea of leaping the wall and catching the creature. Of *forcing* him to tell me what was going on. But rather I did what it was obvious I was being ordered to.

I turned and began the long, slow walk across the perfectly tended lawn of Windsor Castle.

No matter what may be pushing me here, I was not foolish enough to attempt to step in through the doors.

A drainpipe snaked down one wall. I grasped it in both hands and began to climb. It warped and creaked under my weight, but held nonetheless.

Up to the third floor, I reached out a hand to grasp at a nearby window. The decorative stone windowsill was difficult to make out in the night.

The tell-tale sound of stonework grinding underfoot spurred me onwards, leaving me fearful it might slip from beneath my paws. I scrambled forward, pulling at the window. It had one of the silly little decorative locks that were hardly more than bronze clasps. It bent easily under by fingers.

I all but tumbled into the hallway. It took what little presence of mind I had not to slam up

against a table across the way and send everything on it crashing to the floor.

Hands shaking, I began down the semi-darkened hallway, choosing a direction at random. The door leading onwards was locked.

Half blind in the darkness, I turned, trying the other direction. It led into yet another lavishly appointed corridor. And so it continued. The only path was forward, pressing further into the labyrinthine castle. Going back, it seemed, was not an option.

The next hallway came to an end, leaving me no way to go deeper. I scrambled on silent feet, searching for a way out. The only path onwards was a small, unmarked door. I slipped it open and peered inside.

There was nothing but darkness.

Stealing forward as silently as my too-large frame was able, I searched through the darkness in vain. There had to be a way out, even if only another window.

The darkness was close, cloying, and complete. Not even my finely-honed eyes could make out the faintest image. From no more than a couple meters away I heard someone move. I stopped dead.

“Hello?” It was a woman's voice, groggy with sleep.

My heart stopped.

No.

There was the rustle of cloth moving. A moment later a bedside lamp clicked on. Its incandescent bulb slowly began to glow, filling the room with a rich golden light.

I refused to turn, refused to look at who lay behind me.

My ears were pulled back against my skull and my tail was limp.

A moment later she spoke again. Her voice was unmistakable. I'd never met her, but I knew her voice. We all did. Still I refused to turn.

“Who are you?” Her words were soft, far softer than I ever would have expected. She still had the perfect dictation of her broadcasts, but at the same time it was less polished, more... *human*.

“Forgive me,” I whispered. “Please... please forgive me.”

There was another rustle. I could hear her standing up. The fabric of her nightgown was loud in the still air, but her footsteps were silent.

I'd refused to turn and face her, so she walked about to stand before me.

She was shorter than I'd imagined, but all humans were short as compared to me. And she looked older. Her nightgown was modest, but of impeccable tailoring. Her grey hair was tussled from sleep, yet her face was still instantly recognisable. I doubt I'd gone more than a day without seeing it somewhere.

“Ma'am,” I whispered, falling to one knee. I had been trained in what to do. There were procedures if one were to meet her, but no Dog ever expected such an honour.

I was not being honoured.

Once again she asked. There was no anger in her voice for me having intruded on her privacy, but neither was there fear. "Who are you?"

My eyes were cast down. "I am Forty-Two, Ma'am." My voice quivered, nearly breaking.

She touched my shoulder. It was fleeting, but I felt the warmth of her body. "Rise, Forty-Two. You are my loyal servant. I have heard of you. You were the talk of the Kennel some years back."

My mind stopped dead. *She'd heard of me?*

"Yes... yes, Ma'am."

Once more reaching out, there was no hesitation in her motions. She placed a single finger under my quivering chin and raised it until I met her eyes.

"And I've heard of you more recently. It appears you've caused some commotion."

"I'm sorry."

"Do not apologise, Constable. You may be the single most important person to emerge from the Kennel in a very, very long time."

Petrified in fear as I was, it took me long moments to realize what she'd said. She hadn't referred to me as a 'Dog' or 'thing'.

My mouth opened, but no words escaped.

She walked about, as if inspecting me. I suddenly had flashbacks to my time with the Handlers. Her inspection was no less exacting than what they had given at the Kennel.

When she returned to stand before me there was the slightest hint of a smile to her lips. That was the moment I saw behind her mask. We were both bound by our duties, the roles we'd been born into. The masks the Dogs wore were second only to her own.

"I've waited a long time to meet you, Forty-Two. I was greatly disappointed when fate determined you would not be assigned to the Royal Guard."

Turning again, she walked out of sight. I dared not move a muscle without her consent.

"But not even the greatest of us can control everything. In this case, though, fate has brought you where you're needed. If only slightly behind schedule."

I heard her lift an object from the bedside table.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Jonathan."

A moment later the world lit up as something heavy slammed home on the back of my head. I had just an instant to glimpse a large hard cover book tumble to the floor beside me before blacking out.

The title read, *'The History of Dog Breeding'*.