

POLICE DOOG 2

HER MAJESTY'S FINEST



By wwwolf

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Chapter 5: A Private Breeder

June 9th 1988

04:30 Hours

Somewhere beneath London, England

I came to slowly, like surfacing from a deep, dark pool. It felt as though someone had stuffed my head with cotton batten, like I was awakening from one of Dr. Brophy's sessions.

For just a moment I lay calm. I was back at the Kennel. None of it had ever happened. I was still home. Forty-One was still alive.

"Hit him again," came a voice.

I opened my eyes just in time to see something huge and black shoot towards me. I didn't even have a chance to roll with the blow. The world tilted uncontrollably. I fought to reach out and steady myself, but my arms and legs were bound.

I, and the heavy metal chair I was lashed to, flew sideways and crashed to the ground.

Opening my eyes slowly, the room was far too bright. I could just make out the silhouettes of two Dogs standing over me. One reached forward and, with a grunt, pulled my chair back upright.

"Glad to see you've decided to join us, Forty-Two."

I shook my head. Something wasn't right.

Correction, I'd yet to even finish counting the things that weren't right. But the one that nagged me most was the Dog's voice.

I looked up at the two that stood before me.

Neither were in their proper uniforms. If anything they seemed to be dressed in a parody of human fashions.

The one who'd spoken was in a dark green camo shirt and a pair of combat shorts. They'd both been modified to fit his inhuman frame. The other was naked save for a belt and bandoleer wrapped about his chest. Hanging from them were a collection of weapons.

I blinked.

"Hit 'em again, Baker. I don't think he's quite awake yet."

The larger one in the belt reared back a fist.

I levelled him a glare. "I can assure you I am awake."

The first one smiled. "Good to hear, gov." His voice was unlike anything I'd ever heard before. It came from a Dog, it had our baritone and rough edge, but it seemed all but untouched by the careful training of the Service.

Grabbing a chair of his own, he dragged it in front of me, adding a spin and a flourish to his motions. Instead of simply sitting upon it he perched, legs pulled up under him. He was a smaller Dog than I, likely the better part of a decade my junior, but this let him tower over me, if only by a couple of inches.

"So, gov, sounds like you've made a splash for yourself."

It took me long moments to parse what the Dog said. The words came from the lips of a fellow canine, but were so... *wrong* they were difficult to understand.

"Who are you?" I said. "Where am I?"

He smiled, showing more fang than any proper Dog would.

"Hey, Baker, why don't you get our friend here a welcome platter. This'll take a while."

He waited for the other Dog to leave the room, closing a heavy steel door behind him.

It was only then I noticed the next of many things amiss.

The scent of Dogs in the room. That was of itself was normal, but that was *all*. I could smell the scent of a half dozen Dogs who had been here, but no humans. Not a single one.

"Let's get something straight, *purebred*," he said, spitting the word, "I don't trust you. I've heard about you, the great Forty-Two. You were the talk of this place for bloody *years*. I think you're a little tail kisser who managed to ace his tests, only to fold when it came to something important." He reached out and gave me a jab in the middle of the chest, causing my chair to rock dangerously backwards. "But the Lady decided you should be here."

I narrowed my eyes. "I don't take well to threats, *brother*." The word had the desired effect on him. He reared back as if slapped.

"Don't you dare call me that, *purebred*. I'm no brother of yours. My name is Archer."

I let slip a small smile, the shadow of a tooth showing. "And you can call me Jonathan."

He cocked his head. "You have a real name?"

My voice was dead calm when I replied. "I *earned* my name."

"You've got more backbone than I was expecting, *purebred*. Welcome to The Pack."

It was obvious he expected me to ask. I didn't grant him the pleasure.

With a snort he still started into the speech I was sure he'd long prepared.

"You're part of the Queen's Pack now, Jonathan." I softened slightly when he used my name. "We've been around almost as long as the *official* program. The Queen likes to have an alternative to

the public force when discretion is needed.”

I looked at him and took a breath. I knew his scent.

“You. You're the one I fought last night.”

He smiled again.

“I'll grant you, you're a good brawler. You've got moves I've never seen before.”

I nodded to him. It was all I could do, still bound. “You are proficient, yourself.”

His eyes narrowed. “I better be. I'm the best there is.”

I couldn't help it, a laugh barked from me before I could even think. “You?” I looked him up and down. I had no doubt he was talented, but he was far from perfect. Too short, too squat, his face was too narrow, ears too big. “You're nowhere close to the standard.”

The moment I said it I knew I'd made a mistake. A major one.

Archer went still. He looked at me, I could see the fire burning in his eyes. “Don't you,” he whispered, bringing his face an inch from mine, “Don't you *ever* compare me to your so called *standard*. I'm the first Dog in twenty years to be born outside your so perfect *breeding program*. I'm the first of our kind to be born free.” He brought himself yet closer, our noses touching. “I'm a British subject.”

At that I stopped dead.

“A Dog can't be a subject of the Empire. We're not human.”

He smiled, lips peeling back to show every fang he had. “I'm not like you, Forty-Two. I was born free. I'm equal to any human.”

I wasn't sure what to say.

“Congratulations.”

Apparently that was the wrong choice.

Pulling back, he spat me on the face. His saliva trickling down my cheek. I couldn't wipe it away.

“Don't patronise me.”

I looked up at him. “What do you want me to say? You're the only Dog in the world to be what you are. You achieved it by your birth. Much as I was born a near-perfect Canis Superior.”

He opened his mouth to let loose what I was sure was to be a tirade like I'd never heard before, but stopped short.

He smiled. “Fine.” He walked behind me. I felt a slight pull as his claws cut through my bonds. “Welcome to The Pack, Jonathan. I'm sure you won't fit in at all.” Something about the way he said the words made it sound like a compliment.

My hands were free. I let them fall slowly to my sides.

“So now what?” I asked.

The click of his claws on the unfinished concrete floor was the only sound as he walked back around to stand before me. He cocked his head. “What do you mean? You're part of The Pack now.”

“What now? I've changed no allegiances. I'm still an officer of the force.”

He rolled his eyes and took a seat across from me again. As last time, he made a point to tower over me.

“We know.”

Those two words were enough. “You don't know anything.”

He smiled at me, expression growing wolfish. “Don't we? You're recalled and Master Constable Proust – who's an asshole by the way – tries to kill you. He fails and runs like a bugger. We get ahold of you and your tests come back... unique.”

I didn't even bother to feel shame.

“You know?”

“You better believe it, purebred. Proust told us *everything*.”

My head shot up. “Wait. What? You have him?”

The Dog smiled. “In a manner of speaking. Maybe, if you're good, we'll let you see him someday. Right now he's in a hole so deep God doesn't even know he's still alive.”

A grin tugged at my lips, but I wouldn't let it out. “I never want to see that man again.”

A moment later the door opened. In stepped the Dog wearing nothing but a bandoleer and belt. “Sorry, Archer. Someone forgot to restock the kitchen again. This was the best I could do.”

He set a tray down on a small table next to us. It was heaped a foot deep with food. I blinked. Everything from cold cuts and bread to sweets and pastries could be found.

“I'm sure our friend won't mind, Baker. We've still to wean him from kibble yet.”

Archer reached back and grabbed a slice of cake without even looking. With the air of one taunting me, he raised it to his lips.

“I'll bet you've never eaten *real* food before.”

I snorted, surprising myself. “For all you seem to know, you know surprisingly little at all,” I said, reaching for a cold cut. “I've likely eaten better than you. This is nothing to a *proper* country fryup.”

I was rather pleased I was able to make the Dog cough his cake back up.

“What?” He had to turn, hacking up half the slice all over the floor. “You've eaten *real* food?”

I had to fight not to gag on my slice of meat. Frankly, it tasted more like plastic than the roast Mary had prepared.

“You claim to know me so well, I'll leave it up to you to answer that question.”

Baker began to laugh. I don't think I've ever heard a Dog laugh like him before. It was deep, and *real*. I rather liked it.

“We answer to only one person,” Archer continued between mouthfuls. “The Queen. Not the Prime Minister, not the Commissioner, and certainly not each other. We exist to watch over the world. The *Service* was created to deal with normal problems. Mundane issues. We exist to deal with the *real* problems.”

Something tickled at the back of my mind. “What about the Highway Patrol?”

He all but dismissed them offhandedly. “They're just another arm of the service. Nothing important.”

I thought back to the Highway Patrol Dog I'd met, but decided not to bring him up.

“So what has The Pack accomplished?” I asked.

He sat back with a smug expression. “Have you ever heard of the case of the Five Orange Pips? How about case of the Norwood Builder? No? What about the case of the Bruce-Partington Plans?”

I frowned. “Should I have?”

His smile grew. “No. And I aim to keep it that way. We're here to do a job. And if we do it right and proper no one will ever know we exist at all.”

Out of the room at last, I was given a tour of the complex. The place, quite frankly, looked like something Trevor would have dreamed up on a rainy day.

Located underground, it was within walking distance of downtown London – and in fact had a passage leading to the London Underground tunnels. Sprawling, and painted in bright colours, it had obviously once been a military installation. Now it was the play zone of Dogs with no sense and far too much money.

I'd already been shown three training rooms and two lounges. There was enough here to keep even the most hyperactive eleven year old entertained. And, to be frank, that was how the two of them acted. They ran about, breathless, eager to show me every new toy they had. What suspicion Archer had held over me was quickly pushed aside when he had something shiny to display.

I was introduced to a half-dozen more Dogs, both male and female. Charley, Emma, Duncan, and Frost.

I kept my eyes open for one Dog in particular. The one I'd encountered with the mutantly long claws. None of these Dogs were even close.

The first Dog I'd fought had been deformed and broken. All of the Dogs I saw here were at a minimum healthy, most near-perfect.

“Where's the other Dog you sent after me?” I asked Archer between him showing off their latest telly and computer games.

He turned, raising an eyebrow. “What other Dog? We work alone. I was the only one involved in your case.” He let out a growl as the moment of distraction cost him a man in his game.

I stood behind him nervously as he focused on his toy, all but ignoring me. “There was another Dog that hunted me down last night. He most certainly wasn't from the Service.”

He paused his game and turned to glare at me. “Alright, now you're just taking the piss. There was no other Dog.”

I stood in front of him, ramrod straight, as if trying to make up for his slovenly behaviour. “There was another Dog. And he found me before *you* did. How else do you think I got the uniform I was wearing that night? I left the Kennel fur out.”

He grunted. "Fine. We need to look into this." He stood up and led me to another room.

"Aren't we going to tell the rest of The Pack?"

He shot me a glare over his shoulder. "No. We're not police Dogs. We work *alone*." There was a stress put on the word that made me stop. "You weren't born into this. You don't understand."

"No," I replied, "No I don't."

The next room was obviously an outfitter's. There were lockers along both walls, and police uniforms hanging by the dozens, all sizes ready to take. Each and every one already had a name on it and a shiny badge pinned to the breast.

I stopped dead.

The sight of all those badges just hanging there... I'd spent the majority of my life in pursuit of a commission, and now all those badges hung like tinsel, like they meant nothing.

"Well come on," Archer called as he stepped up and grabbed a uniform, shrugging it on. "You're the one that wants to track the mutt down."

Tentatively, I stepped up to one of the uniforms. Pulling it from its hanger, I tried to shrug it on as he had. It didn't fit.

I heard a mild exclamation from Archer. It was obvious I'd surprised him.

"How big *are* you?"

A moment later he was behind me, pulling the back shirt off. His fingers tarried ever so slightly longer on my back than I expected.

He stomped back around to stand before me, eyes narrowed as he inspected my body. It was only then I noticed his eyes were blue, like my own.

"Proust wasn't kidding when he said they changed you." He sighed. "Come on, let's get this tailored."

"Pardon?"

He let out an exasperated huff, but it didn't sound as angry as I expected.

"We're not going to be going out with you naked. There's already too much attention with people looking for you."

Down another hallway and we were in what I'd swear an oath appeared to be a teenager's bedroom. There was filthy clothing thrown over every surface and posters tacked to the walls with pins. I noticed all the posters were for bands and movies, no centrefolds to be seen.

In the far corner of the room – beneath a layer of discarded clothing that quickly became airborne – was, of all things, a sewing machine.

"What size are you?" Archer asked.

I blinked. "I don't know."

He gave me an exasperated sigh and snatched a tape measure from the desk next to him. A moment later he had it wrapped around my shoulders.

Dogs can't whistle, but he made a creditable attempt. "Man alive. What did they pump you full

of, pure steroids?" He moved on to measure my bicep and just about choked.

The rest of my measurements were taken somewhat more slowly. He made sure to write them down. His touch was nothing like what I'd felt before. He didn't move like Brophy or Proust. They were quick and efficient, but nor did he move like General Train had – that man's touch had been fleeting and cautious.

Archer's fingers ran up and down my body, almost seeming to tarry longer than strictly required. When he reached the inseam I spread my legs without thinking.

He slowed to a stop.

He was crouched before me, looking up into my eyes. Then he glanced away.

"I have everything I need," he muttered.

A moment later he was seated before the sewing machine. The image was incongruent on so many levels. Police Dogs were never taught to sew – it wasn't deemed a useful skill for us. But more than that. This Dog I'd only known so briefly, he'd done everything in his power to project an image of strength, of masculinity, independence. Everything from his tone of voice to his army-inspired clothing seemed to be a calculated effort to scream his uniqueness and disregard for authority. But here he was hunched over a sewing machine, altering a uniform just for me.

He glanced up a moment later. "What are you looking at, purebread?"

I turned away. "Nothing, I assure you, Archer."

In a surprisingly brief time the uniform was ready, both shirt and trousers.

"Here." He threw them at me. I snatched them out of mid-air without a thought. "Try these on."

I did as he asked. They fit perfectly. The only thing I'd ever had that suited me better had been my dress uniform.

He grinned. Once again he walked about me, giving me an inspection. This time, however, it was not *I* that he was looking at.

"Not bad if I do say so myself." He gave me a pat on the shoulder. Softer now. "Come on, let's get going."

Back to the outfitting room, I was already dressed and prepared to go.

I glanced down at the badge on my chest. It read Sixty-Six.

I looked over to where Archer was slipping into his own false uniform. He let out a yip when he saw me watching him.

"Hey! Some privacy here!"

I blinked. "Pardon?"

I'd caught him in the middle of slipping his shorts down. His shirt already lay discarded on a bench.

"Dude. You *don't* stare at someone when he's changing!"

I didn't bring up the fact he'd just run his hands all over me while I'd been fur out.

A quick step and I spun on toe, turning my back to him. "Understood. Inform me when you are finished."

From the corner of my eye I could see him watching me.

There was only one way out from the complex, up.

I hadn't been awake when I'd been brought here, so I was more than taken aback by the climb. Eight flights of stairs stood between us and the exit.

At long last we stood behind a heavy steel door. Archer set a hand upon it, holding me back.

"We already have your prints on record. They'll get you in. As long as you can find us again." He grinned, showing his teeth. "Just stay close to the door when you step out."

There was the screech of metal on metal as he pulled the massive door slowly open. I could smell a change as the air-tight seals broke.

I stepped out into the darkness and was nearly pulled forward off my feet. Only Archer's arm across my chest held me in place.

I had to scramble to snatch a breath into my lungs. "What... was... that?"

I couldn't see the flash of his teeth in the darkness, but I could hear the grin in his voice. "An Underground car. We're in the tunnels. Come on, Piccadilly Station is just up ahead."

The Dog held my hand firmly in his as we picked our way down a narrow service gantry along the edge of the tunnel. The pads of his hand were warm and smooth. He held me tighter than I thought was strictly necessary.

Before long a pinprick of light began to grow in the distance. I heard the murmur of a thousand voices as we pushed towards it.

Before we ventured too close Archer dropped my hand. I could just make him out adjusting his uniform, tugging it here and there, fighting to make it lay properly and appear presentable. I had no need to. Mine sat straight and perfect.

We stepped off the maintenance walkway as nothing but two Police Dogs on normal patrol. Not a single commuter so much as glanced our way as we walked by.

Up another set of stairs and we at long last had daylight above us. I had to pause for just a moment to enjoy it. I hadn't the slightest how long I'd been down there, but it felt too long for a Dog of the country like me.

Archer didn't waste any time.

"Where was it you saw this so called *Dog*?"

I glared at him. If he was making any effort to sound like a proper Police Dog, he wasn't doing an appreciable job.

"I was escaping from The Kennel. We'll have to retrace my steps. Can you lead me to the pub where you found me?"

He flicked his ear. At least he was able to contain his laughter while in public. "Of course. They make my favourite Cornish pies there."

Half an hour later we were back in the same alleyway we'd fought in not so long ago. I glanced at Archer, then at the pavement where we'd fought.

Nose to the ground, I struggled to pick up my own scent. It would have been a simple thing out in the country, but here in the city there were a thousand other trails jockeying for my attention.

At long last I had it.

I didn't bother glancing back to Archer. He been leaning against the pub wall, playing with a lighter he'd found somewhere, watching me track back and forth on all fours with my rear in the air.

"Let's go."

Walking the streets, I quickly noticed that Police Dogs were back on the beat, but there were fewer of them. And they looked *nervous*.

It wasn't something a human would ever be able to see, but the set of their ears, the way they held their tails, every motion of their bodies made it crystal clear they were frightened.

Archer and I made our way slowly up the street. Even with the other Dogs we were still stopped every other block to render aid. Thankfully, it appeared Archer knew an override code to gain access to the supply boxes.

I slipped into the alleyways every now and then to take a scent reading. There was no chance I'd be able to pick up anything out on the main roads.

We were getting closer.

"You were really trained to do that?" Archer asked as I set my nose to the pavement yet again.

I glanced up at him, ready for another of his acidic comments. "Yes. It is part of standard training for the force. Were you not trained in proper tracking technique?"

His expression didn't change. "I wasn't *trained*. I chose what I wanted to learn. I do what I do because I choose to, not because some human ordered me."

I mulled over his words for a moment, but decided not to bring up the fact he was doing as the Queen directed him.

"We're almost there," I said. I pointed to the next alleyway over.

The dead-end alley looked much as it had last night. The scents of battle were still strong enough in the air that even Archer could pick them out.

I noticed the Dog still held a silver lighter in his hand. He was nervously flicking it open and closed.

"I don't know him," he said matter of factly. "Who was he?"

I glanced at Archer, raising an eyebrow. "I was hoping you could answer that. We most

certainly wasn't of the Kennel. I assumed he was of your group.”

“*Our* group,” he corrected me. “And he isn't.” Archer took another breath. “He smells...”

I nodded my head. There was something about the Dog's scent that was simply not right. It didn't even remind me of Xomp. The Russian horse had been strange, but the Dog smelt... damaged.

Corrupted.

I narrowed my eyes and tracked to where I'd left him lying. He'd gotten back up not long after. I placed my nose to the pavement and followed him.

Twenty paces later it was obvious that would be no good. He'd darted out into the street in the wee hours of the morning, not caring who saw him.

“Perhaps, Archer, there are yet more Dogs that neither of us are aware of.”

Turning, I walked past him and back out into the street. If there were more Dogs, there was only one place to begin our search.

The Kennel.

I'll admit I took a perverse pleasure walking back into the building. We didn't sneak, we didn't skulk. We simply walked inside plain as day, just like all the other Dogs. After all, we Dogs all look the same to humans. Even I, larger than average, looked like the hundreds of others.

In a side door, we got about ten feet before becoming trapped in a queue. Up ahead a human officer was looking over all the Dogs that entered. My heart quickened. Archer clandestinely set a hand on my shoulder.

When it came my turn I stepped up to the man. “Name?” He didn't even look up at me.

“Sixty-Six.” Never before had I lied so smoothly.

He glanced down at his paper. A scowl crossed his face for just a moment before he found my entry.

“Fine. Welcome home. Did you see the rogue Dog while out?”

I shook my head.

He didn't even wait for me to answer before moving on. Next in line was Archer. I hung back just within range to hear him. My companion's voice was almost unrecognisable. He sounded... he sounded like a proper Dog.

“Twenty-Four, reporting in, Sir.” When the officer asked him if he'd seen me Archer paused for a long moment. The man glanced up at him. “No, Sir. I haven't.”

When Archer joined me a moment later he was grinning from ear to ear.

“So what are we looking for?” he asked a half-hour later. We'd wandered up and down the halls, but I couldn't find a trace of the misshapen brute I'd fought last night.

“I... I don't know.”

He scowled. “I thought you grew up here. You should know this place inside out.”

I reached out, grabbing hold of the front of the Dog's uniform, yanking him bodily into the privacy of a small side hallway.

"Archer," I hissed, "You were never a *real* Dog. You don't know how things operate here. I lived here. This was my home. I took orders. I went where I was ordered. I did what I was ordered. If I wasn't told about something – and I *certainly* wasn't told of this – then I never knew."

For just a moment I saw a wave of panic cross his face as I held him close. Only then did I realize my lips were pulled up in a snarl.

They slammed down.

What was happening to me? This was not the way a Dog could ever act.

He smiled. "Fine, purebred. You don't know, I don't know. That means we've got one choice."

I set him down and lowered my ears. "What's that?"

His grin widened. He flicked his ears towards a nearby janitorial closet. "We snoop."

Armed with mops and buckets, the two of us slowly worked our way down the corridor. Not one of the offices was locked. Who in their right mind would ever lock their office in a building staffed by perfect, incorruptible Police Dogs?

The wing we currently stood in held records regarding Dog assignments. It quite literally *hurt* to riffle through the confidential papers, but I did it anyway. Archer just smiled at me.

There was nothing.

Next was the medical wing. We weaved between the very people who had created us. I saw dozens of faces I recognised. I didn't, however, see Dr. Brophy.

When we reached the Doctor's office the lights were dark and the door locked tight.

The Kennel complex was huge. There was no way the two of us could ever hope to walk it in a single day let alone search it.

I called a halt after six hours with nothing to show for it.

"What's wrong, purebred? You getting dish pan hands?" He continued to push his mop down the hallway, peering into each window we passed.

It was seven in the evening. There were fewer human staff about, but the Kennel never closed. I had to think about where we were now. We'd just left the genetic therapy floor... I believe we were in the wing where the senior Handlers had their offices.

"We need to rethink our plan. This isn't working." I was cut short when we heard the clomp of a set of boots on the tile floor, coming this way.

Bowing our heads, we stared down at our work, returning to it with the proper diligence of good Dogs.

The footsteps grew louder behind me. I didn't look up.

The man drew level with us, preparing to turn into an office, when I picked up his scent.

Cigarette smoke and sweat. He could have been any of a thousand humans.

He wasn't. Ever so slightly I raised my eyes.

Handler Llyal.

I heard the jingle of keys. His office was one of the few that had been locked.

The door clicked open and he stepped in. Then he turned around and glanced at us. "Why don't you two get things cleaned up in here before I go home?"

I didn't say a word, letting Archer answer. "Yes, Sir."

In perfect time the two of us stood and carried our mops through into the Handler's office. I kept my face down and hunched my back.

This was Handler Llyal. Along with Proust, he had practically raised me. If there was anyone in the Kennel who could identify me on sight it was him. If there was anyone who could capture me, predict me, it was him.

And... and I wanted to turn and give him a hug.

We set immediately about cleaning. Handler Llyal, for all the world, didn't so much as spare us a second thought. He threw his heavy greatcoat across the small room and took a seat at his cluttered desk.

A moment later I heard him begin to mutter.

"Where in all the bloody... Proust you fool, what have you gotten yourself into this time? And what the hell did you do with Forty-Two?"

The man's office – I'd never seen it in all my years here – was less impressive than I'd expected. It was tight, windowless, cramped, and unkempt. But at the same time it smelt of *him*.

It made me feel at home.

We continued to clean and he continued to mumble. With every passing second his voice grew louder, actions harsher. He struck the table and we jumped.

"Out!" he ordered. "I'm going home. Now."

Archer and I scrambled for our buckets, happy to have an excuse to escape. I wasn't sure if Archer realized my history with Handler Llyal, but it was clear he picked up on my panic.

Out in the hallway, Llyal locked the door behind him. Turning, he began stomping up the hall. I let out a sigh of relief.

No more than a heartbeat later he stopped. Turning, he walked back to us.

"Sorry there, boys. You're just doing your jobs."

He reached out to ruffle the fur between Archer's ears. It was obvious it took everything the Dog had not to react.

Then he reached out to pat my own head – and stopped dead.

I did everything I could not to react, but even then my tail slowly slipped to the floor.

"Forty-Two?" His voice wasn't even a whisper.

I didn't say a word. I kept my eyes perfectly forward, staring into the middle distance.

"Forty-Two. Answer me."

I didn't dare even breathe.

He pulled back and began circling me, keeping his distance as best he could in the narrow hallway, as if I were a dangerous beast. He knew me, likely better than any human alive. He knew every hair on my body when I'd left the Kennel. It was by his efforts I'd graduated at all.

"You are aware, Forty-Two, that it is an offence to pass yourself off as another officer." He paused, watching for any reaction. I gave him nothing. "That alone would be enough to have you disposed of."

Archer shifted his weight, making his mop clank, trying to draw the Handler's attention. It wasn't enough.

"You are dismissed," Llyal said to Archer, never moving his eyes from me. "Take your equipment and go."

I could hear Archer draw a breath to protest, but only just in time did he realize that alone would be enough to expose us both. Without a word he took our mops and buckets and retreated up the hall – but not too far. I could still hear his breathing.

The lines of Handler Llyal's face softened, if only by a tiny measure. "Forty-Two, just please tell me it's you. Please... I just want to know you're alive."

My heart beat loud enough I couldn't believe he didn't hear it.

I looked him straight in the eye, summoned all the frayed and long used courage I had, took a deep breath...

And did nothing.

He reared back and slapped me hard across the muzzle.

I saw stars, but I never took a step back. The pain wasn't just that of his strike, but also the fact Handler Llyal had hit me.

He'd *never*, *never once* hit me.

"I knew it!" A moment later he'd stepped forward and wrapped his arms around me. "You're too perfect, Forty-Two. No other Dog in the world would have survived that without a flinch." He met my eyes again. This time there was a sparkle where only moments ago he had looked worn and half-dead. He didn't even glance up the hallway before calling, "Get back here, Dog. I know you're skulking just around the corner."

Archer let out a surprised yip.

"How..."

Llyal scowled. "I've spent my life around Dogs. You expect me to not notice when your claws stopped clicking?" He glanced up and down the hallway. "Come on, get back in. We need to talk. Now."

"Sir..."

He levelled me with what I could only call a Handler's glare. It was impossible to contest him.

I felt like a child standing up to his father.

Moments later we were back in the tight little office. The door was shut behind us this time.

“Forty-Two...” Llyal had stripped me of my uniform and was running his hands up and down my body, searching with the speed only a Handler could for my wounds. “Are you alright? What happened to you? Your file's been locked. Rumours claim you went rogue.”

“No Dog in the history of the Service has ever gone rogue,” I said, choosing my words carefully.

He paused for just a moment as hands stilling, but went right back to it. A moment later he lifted my lips without fear, checking my razor sharp teeth.

“But if any were to be the first, Forty-Two, it would be you.” He heaved a sigh and walked slowly to sit behind his desk. “Tell me what's happened.”

I shook my head. “I can't, Sir.”

The slightest grin touched his lips. “Do you realize, Forty-Two, that's the first time you've ever refused an order? And you didn't even pause to think about it.”

I blinked.

Archer rolled his eyes. “Alright folks. Would the two of you get this over with? It's late. I want to go home. Just kiss and make up. I'm missing my favourite telly programme.”

I think Handler Llyal just about fell face-first to the floor. His eyes went wide and his mouth agape when Archer spoke. He'd never heard a Dog speak like that before.

“Handler Llyal,” I said, “May I introduce you to Archer, partner in my current endeavour.” I couldn't bring myself to call it a *mission*.

“He... no Dog...”

Archer snickered. “I think I broke your friend's brain.”

A moment later Handler Llyal seemed to come out of it.

“You're no Dog. That has to be a mask. It has to be.”

Archer grinned, showing his teeth. “Think of it however you want, Pops.”