

# POLICE DOG



# THE KENNEL

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Posted on FurAffinity

Date: March 2, 2013

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## Chapter 3: The Kennel

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*August 18, 1982*

*05:54 Hours*

*South London, England*

I opened my eyes, as always, a few minutes before the harsh fluorescent lights above us flared to life. I was never sure what woke me. It wasn't as though there was even the slightest disturbance in the near silent room. The darkness was so complete that I couldn't even make out the steel bars of my cage that stood not two feet before my nose. The windowless room was black as sin, and the only sounds that reached my twitching ears were those of my brothers and sisters slumbering nearby in cages of their own.

Sitting up, I could feel the tips of my ears brush the bars above me. There was only just enough room in the cage to be able to curl up for sleep, and stand on all fours in order to get in and out. Heavy, unpainted steel bars, thick as my wrist, made up everything around me but the floor. That was made of cold, hard, long scarred concrete. They didn't give us anything to put on the ground beneath us. That made it easier to clean up the blood and urine.

I was never quite sure if I was the only one awake, as I was too afraid to speak. Such was against regulation while the lights were off. I never heard a sound from anyone else.

I'd been waking up like this for as long as I could remember. The floor may be cool beneath me, but I had my pelt, and, more importantly, I was home. I was where I should be, at the Kennel. The slight warmth of my brother beside me kept me at ease.

The overhead lights flicked on a moment later without a sound. Beside me, I could see my brothers and sisters jerk as they were suddenly awakened from their slumber.

As one, they all sat up in a single spastic motion, eyes opening but unfocused, sitting at attention. The position I was already in.

Their bodies moved, but their minds had not yet woken up. They were little more than automatons, following their program for the beginning of the day, as they did every day. Every single day that any of us could remember.

We were Police Dogs in training. That's what we did, that's what we were. That's what we had been bred to be.

A heavy key turned in the steel door of the room, the only entrance. It took a few moments to unlatch. I never could understand why they had such a reinforced lock and door. We were already in

cages, and it wasn't as if the Handlers had even the slightest to fear from ones such as us.

Any Dog who showed even the merest hint of aggression towards a Handler, even a touch of insubordination, was immediately disposed of. I, like all of us, had seen many a Dog escorted away for disposal, but not one of them had been for assaulting a Handler. We would sooner slit our own throats than ever lay so much as a claw on any of them.

They were second only to the Government in our chain of respect.

At long last the door swung open, booming back on its hinges and banishing any remaining sleep from the Dogs around me.

The Handler who walked in was the same man we had every Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Handler Llyal. He was a short, heavy set fellow who regarded us from behind thick, droopy black eyebrows.

He was quite possibly my favourite Handler. While hardly a light touch, he was far from the most violent of our trainers. That position was reserved for Handler Proust. Proust enjoyed sending Dogs to disposal more than any man I had ever met. Not that I had yet met all that many.

"All right, you lot. Time to get moving, it's a 'nother wonderful day in London." He walked down the cages, peering into each of our eyes to make sure we had made it through the night intact and sane. Unlike some Handlers, he didn't drag his baton across the cage bars with a 'clink-clink-clink' sound. That always set my nerves on edge and left me shivering.

Standing at the far end of the row, he pulled a large set of keys from his belt and unlocked the first cage. The Dog's name was Sixty-Eight. My brother averted his eyes from the Handler as the man reached down to pull the door open.

Upon leaving the cage Sixty-Eight bowed his head to Handler Llyal and let his tail drop to lie on the floor, accepting the Handler's dominance. It was an old ritual that we went through every day, it hardly meant anything to us anymore. Hardly.

Handler Llyal looked him up and down, checking for any wounds that may have festered overnight, peering in his eyes to make sure he was fully aware and cognizant.

"Very good, Sixty-Eight. Go wait for us in the mess hall." The Dog turned and scampered off out the door without pause or a glance back.

Handler Llyal worked his way down the line of cages, opening each in turn to inspect the Dog that sat motionless within before sending them on. He, however, skipped mine, leaving it until last.

There were only the two of us alone in the room now. Llyal had waited for the last dog to scamper away through the door and out of sight before coming to stand before me. I could hear his hushed footsteps on the concrete floor of the hall.

Handler Llyal stood for a long moment in front of my cage, inspecting me through the bars before opening the door.

"And how are we doing today, Forty-Two?" His voice was gruff and gravelly, having been ravaged by untold packs of cigarettes through the decades. It wasn't uncommon to see him smoking when off-duty, but never in here with us.

It always made me uncomfortable when he asked me questions in private. I was never able to grasp which were rhetorical and which I should answer.

I played it safe. There was less of a punishment for speaking out of turn than for ignoring a Handler. And in any event Llyal, unlike the other Handlers, rarely reprimanded me for showing initiative.

"Quite well, Sir." I spoke softly as I crawled out of the cage to stand upright before him. His head only made it halfway up my chest.

He inspected me much the same way he had all the other Dogs, but far more exacting, more in-depth.

And he touched me.

It was neither rough and forceful as some of the Handlers are want to do, nor fearful and fleeting, but simple and matter of fact. Efficient and familiar.

He took each of my hands in turn, inspecting both sides, paying special attention to the thick joints of my fingers and wrists, and my polished black claws. He ran a callused thumb over the pads of my fingers and palms, checking for any scratches or infections.

The inspection continued as he lifted my arms, legs, pulled my mussel down to his height so he could peer into my eyes and ears, even going so far as lifting my lips so he could see my teeth.

He even walked behind me to lift my tail. An action that not only sent me teetering off balance, but also left me feeling slightly embarrassed. That was despite the fact that I didn't have any clothes, and nothing to hide in any event.

At long last he was done. A smile broke his lips as he returned to stand casually in front of me, showing at least a half dozen gold teeth.

"Excellent, my good boy, Forty-Two. You look fit and trim for the day, you always do." His grin widened, "Your last set of tests came back, a ninety-nine point seven score. That's the highest we've ever seen. And it pulls your average up, too. You keep doing that, my boy, and you'll graduate with just shy of a perfect final score!"

I wanted to smile, but I knew it was improper. I simply nodded my head. A single quick, sharp bob.

"You're the best we've ever had come out of the Kennel, boy. Keep it up. There's a bright future for you, I know it." He gave me a smack on the rear and sent me off to join my brothers and sisters in the mess hall for breakfast.

The meal proceeded as it always did, quick, silent, and consisting of nothing save the all but inedible kibble. It was the same kibble that we were always fed. It did little for the taste buds, but it filled the empty space in our bellies just the same. And that was good, it was the only thing we'd ever eaten since being weened. Well, other than some grass and dirt out on the sports field.

The bowls had already been set out before us, long before the first of us had ever arrived, but they sat untouched.

I sat down in my normal spot, between Forty-One and Forty-Three. Without turning my head I glanced over at each of them in turn. They glanced back, the slightest of nods ruffling their fur.

It wasn't until Handler Llyal entered the room behind me and barked out the order to 'Eat' that we dug in.

We each had a large bowl of dry kibble and a jug of water to wash it down. They were both quickly emptied, licked clean in barely over five minutes as though we were afraid they would be stolen by our neighbours if we didn't eat fast enough.

One by one, in numerical order, we took our now empty bowls and pitchers to the front counter of the spartan mess hall to wash, then refilled them with kibble and water to place back on the simple metal tables where we had sat – ready for the next group of Dogs to come through.

No one was quite sure what our next class would be as we lined up next to the mess hall door. Our daily routine of classes seemed to be near random, dictated by what amenities were available and whatever it was deemed we were the weakest in. *I* was never the weakest in anything.

Today it was chosen that we were to be sent off for hand-to-hand combat training.

This was one of my favourite classes. It was one of the few places where we were able to work off our aggression through combat. The only other class we could do anything similar in was the physical training gym. But it always felt better to have someone to fight, not just an iron weight to push around over and over. You never *learned* anything from pumping iron.

Not that we tried to actually hurt each other of course. We had all long ago attained the top rank in karate, jujitsu, and ken-do. We knew just how deadly a slip up could be. To either damage another Dog, or to allow ourselves to be damaged would be dealt with harshly. The government had invested far too much money in our bodies to allow us to break them unnecessarily.

I sat patiently on the edge of the mat with my brothers and sisters, waiting my turn as we observed each other fight, working our way, one-by-one, through a tournament ladder to decide who was the best. Our rankings would, of course, become part of our daily averages.

It wasn't long before I was called upon the mat to fight my first round. I was pitted against Forty-Seven. We had fought many times before. The other Dog was talented, one of the best, but not good enough.

She was female, my sister, but in the same class as I. As far as the police were concerned the only difference between a male and female Police Dog was that you needed one of each for breeding. That was it. In all other ways we were treated identically. Including in combat.

We were both naked, as per normal. We were only provided with clothing when situations warranted, and combat practise didn't. Not unless we were training in how to fight in uniform.

Handler Llyal didn't even bother to tell us when to begin, that was left up to us. All he did was watch. Watch and score us.

We started at opposing ends of the mat, walking forward towards the center. I matched her every stride, as she did mine. Anyone stumbling into the room would have assumed that we were to do nothing but pass as two strangers. They would be mistaken.

I let her make the first move. I always let my opponent strike first. It gives them a chance, no matter how slim it may be.

She didn't disappoint me. In the blink of an eye her stance had fallen from a casual walk to almost laying flat on the ground. One leg shot out towards me as she balanced on the other, arms and tail spread wide to steady her weight.

A classic first strike straight out of any of the text books they had taught us from. The stance

she found herself in would have been difficult if not impossible for a human, low and balancing on a lone leg. The inhuman shapes of our limbs, however, made it easy for our kind. Not to mention the counterbalance of our tails allowing us to stay upright.

Her foot moved almost too fast to track, slicing through the air, claws leading. Unfortunately for her, it never connected.

The classic textbook response to this attack was simply to step back, out of range. It had been drilled into us for years, that's what any one of us would do. Pull back out of range, then counter attack.

I leapt.

I'd been expecting the move, there were only a couple dozen opening attacks that filled the pages of our books, and this was one of the more common. Sweep your opponent's legs, then fall upon them as they lay prone and defenceless on the ground.

I always was one for poetic justice.

The toned muscles in my legs threw me more than two meters in the air, a clean arc through the high ceilinged room that was not intended to merely protect me from the attack. I landed atop her before she'd even had the chance to finish her kick.

Her one legged balance had been precarious to begin with. We were all trained in how to cope with the shock of our blow landing, and even with contact of the more common of blocks, but never on how to respond to an assault from above.

My weight came down squarely on the tip of her upturned nose as she stared dumbly up at me, not even trying to escape from my devouring shadow as I fell upon her. She'd never been trained in what to do now, so she did nothing.

I weighed only a stone more than she did, but she would have been crushed under me if I had allowed myself to make full contact. Her backbone, no matter how strong and trained, would have folded as I came down upon her.

I made contact, of that there was no doubt, but I shot out an arm to the mat as I fell, diverting my weight from her and rolling to the side before any serious harm could be done.

In no more than a single attack and counter, Forty-Seven lay in a heap on the mat beside me as I pulled myself quickly back to my feet in a single fluid motion. Watching, I let out an unhurried breath as I waited for any sign that she might return to the fight.

I glanced down to my elbow, where I had made contact with her face, it was smeared with blood from the slight nose bleed I had just given her. I wiped it away offhandedly. It was a minor wound, she would heal. It was nothing to be concerned with.

After a count to five it was obvious that Forty-Seven would not be continuing the fight. I lowered my guard and walked forward, offering my hand to her limp body.

She looked up at me weakly from the mat, her brown eyes slowly coming back to focus. She nodded slightly to me, formally ceding, then took my hand.

I helped her back to her seat on the edge of the ring, then returned to my own. During the entire battle not a single word had been said. There was no reason to, we'd been through it a hundred times before. Every time we repeated them the battles became a touch more experienced, ever so slightly more efficient, but little else changed.

Passively, I watched the spars until my second round came. There was little to note. No new tactics, no surprise moves. Nothing changed from the last time we had been in this room.

The only minor entertainment came from Sixty. He was the next best combatant. After myself, of course. He would always be second best. He used the same move I had, the one I had invented for myself just moments ago.

My second spar was little different from the first, other than the fact I allowed my opponent a few more attacks before I concluded it. Forty-One, my brother who slept in the cage to the left of me, was one of the weakest hand-to-hand combatants in the group. I let him have some additional practise.

His blows were loose and sloppy, hardly better than what a human could manage, but still better than they had been when I had first decided to allow him more time practice with me, months ago. He was improving, slowly, but he was improving. That was good. He was too close to the bottom of the ladder for my comfort. I could feel the warmth of his body through the cage wall when we slept at night. I didn't want to see him go to disposal.

I ended the match with a light blow to his shoulder, sending him off balance and spinning to the mat where I placed a single claw gently to his throat. I finished as softly as I could, he was weak and prone to bruising. I always felt bad when I hurt him.

Forty-One didn't bother nodding to me to cede the bout. We all knew who had won without question when I touched his unprotected throat. He walked back to his place, less steady than Forty-Seven despite the softer bout.

In due course I came to spar against Sixty. That was as it always was. If we didn't meet each other earlier on the ladder, then we met at the top. The spars weren't random, they were called out by Handler Llyal, and we rarely met at anything other than the final round.

Sixty could have very well been a mirror image of me, like all the other male Dogs. We were the same weight, same build, and same brown and black German Shepherd fur. The only thing that set us apart were the colour of our eyes. Mine were blue and his were ocean green. They marked us as competing strains.

My strain was line 'C', his was 'A'. That simply meant that his line was the most conservative for the year of our berth and mine was the most aggressive and experimental use its use of breeding and genetic manipulation. Most of the members of our group were 'B'.

He was the only one who had a realistic chance of beating me, and we both knew it.

Standing at the edges of the mat, the silent signal passed between us and the bout was on. I estimated him as having a thirty five percent chance of success.

I could feel my lips pull up ever so slightly at the edges, exposing my teeth. A challenge.

He began walking towards me, but I refused to follow the timeworn routine. I simply fell into an easy, relaxed stance, never taking a single step forward. His odds had just dropped to ten percent.

He nearly fell flat, tripping over his own toes as he gawked at me, unable to understand why I had refused to meet him in the center of the mat. It wasn't normal procedure to stop dead before meeting your opponent. Even Handler Llyal looked up now. I had piqued the human's interest.

Sixty didn't know how to respond, this was unprecedented. We always met at the center of the mat. Always. He couldn't understand what to do now that I would not meet him there.

And that was why he would lose.



Sixty was a talented combative, perhaps even more so than I, but he could only repeat and emulate. He, like so many Dogs, could not think for himself.

He looked over to me, wide eyed, almost seeming ready to cry, silently begging me to walk forward, to act as I always did. To fulfil the contract he expected of me. I steadied my gaze and motioned for him to come to me instead.

I never struck first, and now I would not meet him in the center of the mat either.

Sixty looked over at Handler Llyal, imploring the human to instruct him what to do. The Handler didn't respond, refused to intercede at all. All he did was watch and write quick notes on the paper before him.

In the end, after a long pause, Sixty took a single, tentative step forward. Then another. His nervousness increased with every motion, every stride further he moved from his well practised and memorized routines.

He didn't even notice when he came within range of my strike.

I shot a single fist out, connecting cleanly with his wet black nose. His head snapped back with a satisfying wet crunch as blood flowed free to splatter across the mat between us. He fell flat on his tail, staring up at me.

I had yet to so much as take a single step.

He sat there for a moment, eyes narrowing as a hand rose to his face to staunch the flow of blood. I could just make out the glimmer of one of his canines as his lips rose.

Slowly, he returned to his feet, making sure to keep out of range. The hesitation was gone from his motions. He may have not noticed that I struck first, but he was capable enough to know now that the fight was now truly on.

Circling me, he was careful to keep his feet on the mat, any step off would disqualify him. I never so much as moved my head when he walked behind me.

It wasn't in his nature to attack my undefended back. He'd never been taught to do so.

Instead, the assault came as soon as he returned to sight. A simple and inelegant leap through the air at my middle.

All I did was to smoothly step aside.

I didn't move more than a single stride, but he went flying past me, very nearly landing outside the mat before scrambling to remain in play.

A snarl tore from his lips now, deep and foreboding. Its companion rose from my own throat. Our eyes danced, but not in anger. He loved losing to me, even more so than winning. I could expect to see each and every one of my new moves reflected next time he was on the mat. He would be unbeatable. Against everyone but me.

He came at me again, arms held high and sweeping down. For a moment I almost thought I saw a glimpse of creativity as he charged. Before, that is, he fell into the feint attack that I had debuted two weeks ago on this very mat. His hands were nothing more than a distraction. It was his shoulder that came crashing into my gut, threatening to drive the wind from me.

And that was the reason I never demonstrated a new attack without first concocting its defence.

I fell. Simple as that. I pulled my legs up and dodged beneath the brunt of his assault. He still connected with me, leaving me gasping for breath, but his momentum carried him over and above me as I followed in a slower arc below.

I never even gave him the time to land from his leap before I pushed my now compressed legs beneath me and sprang up to follow him through the air.

I landed upon his exposed and undefended back. Having twisted in my flight, I was now upon him. Hands, and more importantly claws, gripped loosely around his throat.

I couldn't see his face, but I could feel his head jerk as he ceded to my dominance.

From the corner of my eye I could just see Handler Llyal hastily scribble something in his black leather bound notebook.

It took me long moments to remove my hands from Sixty's throat. I could feel the beat of his racing heart under my fingers, only millimetres from my sharp claws.

I let him go as I stood up. Turning a moment later, I reached down and offered him my hand. He took it without comment, never making eye contact.

If I could keep this up I would be selected as breeder for sure.

I could feel yet another grin split my lips. It was less aggressive this time, but no less feral.

The remaining balance of the morning was spent in small arms training. No one, not even the Handlers, knew why we were being trained in pistol use. It was illegal as an act of Parliament for any Police Dog to possess, use, or even handle a firearm. A special exception had to be made of the Kennel grounds.

The only armament a Police Dog was ever graced with, save those of his own body, was a simple baton. It was all the classic British bobby had been given, and all that we were given in this modern age of the Eighties.

In fact, we were the only group being provided this training at all, the only ones even permitted into the tightly locked firing range, and under heavy guard at that. As far as anyone knew we were some type of pilot group, though to what end we were never told.

Sixty was as an accomplished marksman as he was a sparring partner.

Guns. They were more or less point and shoot, simple machines. They didn't require any imagination, any soul. Even acquiring a moving target required no more than basic mathematics and depth perception to determine how far to lead one's aim.

The bull's eye was a small target, but it was a simple enough matter to hit if one put their mind to it.

In the end, as it inevitably did, it came down to a contest between Sixty and myself. All the others had missed their marks long ago. My heart went out to Forty-One, he hadn't even gotten past his third round. Sixty and I were on our fifteenth.

The targets were hung and pulled back, as far away as the small shooting gallery would permit. Sixty and I stood shoulder to shoulder, facing forward, target pistols held at rest, aimed safely at the ground between us.

It was a sight that one would not often see – our gun hands were nearly touching. He held his in his right hand, I in my left.

In that way I was an abnormality. Where perhaps ten percent of the human population at large is left-handed, it was less than one in a hundred for Police Dogs. The only other I was aware of was Forty-One. He also possessed the same blue eyes as I.

I had to glance over to Sixty to synchronize our motions. We couldn't hear each other move on account of the large custom shaped hearing protectors perched atop our upright canine ears. The silly things hardly did any good, but they put us both off balance none the less.

The plastic safety glasses that wrapped around my face set the whole world in a slight amber cast, making it harder to focus on the dimly lit paper targets. In the end I had to speak directly to him to ensure we both fired properly.

"On the count of three?"

He nodded. I could see his lip raise just enough to expose the tip of a single tooth. He winked at me.

Do not feel so confident, my brother. You will not win this time.

Sixty had a history of beating me in marksmanship that matched his name. I was not interested in allowing him to continue excelling past me anymore.

The countdown was slow and monotonous, even to my own ears.

Our two guns barked together in perfect time.

Behind us, Handler Llyal flicked a switch set into the red brick wall that pulled our paper targets forward.

My heartbeat was slow and calm behind my measured breathing. I was confident in my abilities.

Despite the bravado, my eyes fought to focus on the small holes in our papers as they crawled towards us. I didn't bother to look to my side, I knew that Sixty was doing the same.

I could make his shot out first, it was high and to the right of the bull's eye. Not a miss, but neither was it a perfect shot. Suitable for my needs.

Then... I couldn't see the shot in my own paper.

Despite the rigid control I held over it, I could feel my heart quicken.

My tongue came out to nervously lick my nose. I couldn't have missed. The puncture must just be hidden, difficult to see in the black of the bull's eye.

I reached out, snatching the target from its caddy as soon as it came within reach, before it even had time to slow to a stop. I almost ripped the thin paper as I wrenched it forward.

Now that I had the target in my hands, it was obvious. I had missed.

Not by much mind you, not by much. But I hadn't hit the bull's eye.

My shot had landed perfectly to the left of its goal, the almost invisible mark betraying it on the paper. Not more than an inch to the left.

In the back of my mind I realized that my mark was off by the same distance that Sixty's had

been.

It did little to raise my ears as we stepped up to Handler Llyal, presenting our results.

Sixty seemed unconcerned with his failure. How could he look so calm? How could anyone who hadn't gotten a perfect score?

Handler Llyal took our targets with a gap toothed smile as he scribbled in his book, dismissing us with a laugh in his voice, "Very good, both of you. A near perfect round."

His words rang in my ears as we lined up and shuffled out to lunch.

*Near Perfect.*

Lunch was exactly the same as breakfast had been, a bowl of dry kibble and a flagon of bitter municipal London water.

Our next period was different from the last two. We were no longer in a given room, but rather were handed running routes as we stood by the mess hall door.

Endurance. I rolled my eyes. This was a nothing period. I hadn't even the concern of being anything but the best at this.

A full forty two kilometre marathon. The paths meandered their ways up and down the hallways of the Kennel and across the enclosed grounds outside. We were each given a different route to follow so as not to interfere with each other or cause congestion in the hallways.

The paths had been decided by some administrator. All Llyal did was hand them out to us. Each paper already had our name on it.

I took a quick glance at the paper as it was handed to me before folding it up in my hand. A new route, I'd never taken this one before. It ran directly to the other side of the building, skirting the restricted areas on the lower floors before looping around a set of maintenance corridors until its distance was up.

Handler Llyal blew a small tin whistle that he kept hung around his neck. We were off.

I stood for a moment, as I always did, watching my brothers and sisters scramble for the narrow doors and end up as little more than a brown furred traffic jam. They yipped like pups as they pushed and struggled to escape.

It wasn't worth it. I took deep breaths and stretched my muscles until the way was clear.

I could make out the glint of Handler Llyal's gold teeth before I left the room at a quick jog a moment later.

Moving at a fair pace, I made my way down the hallway without rushing. The Kennel was a huge complex of buildings occupying several square blocks; one could live their entire life here, as I did, without ever exploring all of it.

The buildings themselves extended many floors, both above ground and below, and I was in one of the lowest levels now. The normally spotless halls were edged with grime and rust, giving them the air of a place that was rarely travelled.

It didn't take long for me to locate the circuit that I was to follow for the duration of my run. I perked up my ears for a moment as I settled into the rounds. Normally I could always hear the sounds of one of my mates running no great distance off... but there was nothing save the rumble of machinery now.

"Forty-Two."

I rounded a corner in the hallway and almost ran snout first into the hunched form of Handler Proust. He stood in the center of the corridor, arms spread so I couldn't pass him.

"Sir." I came to a stop and lowered my eyes obediently. Handler Proust was not a pleasant man to encounter at the best of times, I made sure to make no move that could cause offence. I'd seen him send Dogs to disposal for little more than looking him in the eye.

"Come." He drew a finger towards himself before turning to disappear through a heavy steel door that was set into the wall beside him like a bomb shelter.

"But, Sir, my run..." My voice trailed off. I hadn't any idea how to reconcile conflicting commands from two different Handlers of the same rank.

"Is inconsequential. Come." His voice brooked no further argument as it slid from the shadows beyond the door.

I stepped from the hallway into the gloom of the room beyond. The door sealed behind me with the screech of unlubricated metal on metal.

"Is this him, Proust?" The voice that spoke from the darkness was unfamiliar. A moment later a naked light bulb snapped on above my head. It made me flinch and cover my eyes.

I heard the voice chuckle, "Doesn't look like much, does he? He isn't even as big as some of the ninth generation from a few years back."

"Why should he be?" another voice cut in tersely. I recognized this one. It was Dr. Brophy, second in command of the Kennel's medical staff. He was the head genetic specialist overseeing all of our therapies. "We've packed more into a smaller package. People don't run from these ones like they did the older models. He's already at least ten percent stronger than any of the ninth generation, and he still has yet to reach full maturity. And, might I include, we were able to eradicate that disgusting drooling habit."

"If you say so, Doctor," the unfamiliar voice continued, before laughing outright. I was developing a distinct distaste for being spoken about like I was nothing more than a slab of meat held forth for their caustic inspection.

With my eyes adjusting to the light I could just make out forms in the shadows surrounding me. There was Handler Proust, he was behind me, leaning against the door. To my left stood Dr. Brophy, immaculate in his white lab-coat, he stood next to a stainless steel trolley that was piled high with things I couldn't identify.

Last, dead center in front of me, stood the unknown man. He spoke with an accent that was almost Walsh, definitely from the west coast. He was dressed in a dirt brown uniform that at first I couldn't identify. I'd only ever seen it in photos... the dress of the Queen's army. What didn't take me long to identify were the sword, pip, and crown that graced his insignia.

I didn't utter a word as I stood there, slowly straightening to attention, towering over them in the gloom. I didn't know what to say. What was one supposed to do in the presence of a General? My

training had never covered such things.

The man's eyes travelled up and down me for a long moment before, looking away, he pursed his lips as though being fed a lemon.

"He's naked."

"They don't give them uniforms until they graduate," Brophy explained.

"He's naked," the man repeated, as though he couldn't get his head around my brown furred body standing before him.

Brophy pulled a small white towel from the cart beside him and tossed it to me. I caught it in midair without ever shifting from full attention.

"Cover yourself, Forty-Two." The Doctor's voice was swift and clinical, almost sounding like this was just another check-up.

I wrapped the towel around my narrow hips and knotted it in the back, just above my tail, creating a crude loincloth of sorts.

"Happy now, Jack?" Proust asked, his cackling laugh coming from behind me. "I thought they didn't mind things like that in the army."

General Jack shot him a withering glare before approaching me, inspecting my body more closely than even Handler Llyal had. Unlike Llyal, however, he never so much as laid a finger on me as he circled around and around. It was as though he had never seen a Police Dog up close before.

"And you can speak, can't you... Forty-Two? A dumb beast would be of little use to me."

"Yes, Sir. I can speak English, in addition to three continental languages." I was slightly taken aback by his low opinion of my abilities. I did my best to enunciate in an effort to demonstrate my prowess.

"A multilingual mongrel?" General Jack laughed to himself as though he had made a joke.

"Hardly a mongrel," Dr. Brophy said as he turned his back to me, digging about in his cart with the soft clink of metal on metal. "This creature is the razor's edge of more than forty years of breeding and genetic alteration."

General Jack's lip twitched up, I could see one of his dull human teeth shine white in the wan light. "And how many pounds has that cost us? For what, a furry bobby? If it wasn't for the Goddard's animals convention we would have put you to better use by now."

Goddard... that took me no more than an instant to place. We had covered the laws endlessly, but almost never spoke of who had given them their name. No one quite seemed to know exactly who Dr. Goddard had been. The British thought he had been a German scientist, the German's had thought he had been British. The French had assumed him Swiss, and the Swiss followed with the British in thinking him a krout.

All we really knew for certain was that he had lent his name to the earliest military breeding and genetic manipulation programs running during the most vicious years of the Second World War. Goddard's dogs had been used for assassination missions on both sides. Smart animals that could be trained to hunt down a particular officer hundreds of miles away. They had been a terror in the closing acts of the war, because they were the only weapons that *thought*. A V-2 rocket falling out of the sky had nothing on the horror of being *stalked* through the dark streets by something that existed only to

kill you, and you alone.

Whatever danger they had posed during the war had doubled after it came to a close. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Goddard's dogs had been left over after the fighting. Sent on their missions but never completing them, they skulked the countryside of Europe for years, indistinguishable from benign domestic animals. Their missions never ending, they brutally murdered anyone who smelled like their long lost targets.

The dangers had only grown as the time passed, for the animals had mated. They had bred, reproduced. Sometimes with others of their kind, more often with unsuspecting domestic stock. This had resulted in uncontrolled crossbreeds with no training and unstable, unpredictable genetic deformities.

It had taken over twenty years, and the near extermination of many domesticated species, before the last of the feral beasts had been destroyed.

The result of the mass hunt had been the 'Convention on Goddard's Animals'. One of the first, and so far only truly worldwide, resolutions of the then still nascent United Nations.

The convention placed very strict restraints on the creation and use of any animals undergoing genetic therapy. Not the least of which was that any form of genetic modification in humans was absolutely forbidden.

All Police Dogs were forced to read and understand every nuance of the entire four hundred-page resolution, but it was fairly simple to boil down.

No humans.

No uncontrolled breeding.

No use in the military.

No killing of any sort by the engineered animal.

The one thing they didn't remember to include in the tome was to forbid the injection of human DNA into the animal being modified. Any amount of humanity could be forced into the creature as long as one started with a non-human base.

And that was why I stood on two feet. No one would ever confuse *me* with a true *canis familiaris*.

The General stopped pacing and stood in front of me, one hand out but not quite brushing the fur of my chest.

"Go on, Jack. He won't bite," Handler Proust said from behind me, "Will you, Forty-Two?" There was a soft chuckle from the man.

I nearly shuddered at the thought. The mere idea of biting a human was so abhorrent, so black an image that I felt dirty at but the mention of it. The very first thing that had drilled into us, before even language, was to never, under any circumstances, harm a human.

"No, Sir," was all I could get out between clenched teeth, "I will not bite."

That was all the General needed. His hand shot up to grasp my mussel, pulling my head down,

level to him. His watery grey eyes searched my face, seeming to seek something. I simply stared back into the middle distance, not blinking, not averting my gaze.

Whatever he was looking for, he seemed to find it. He released my face. I pulled myself back to attention, wiggling my whiskers ever so slightly to undo an itch his touch had left behind.

"Jump." His voice was a sharp bark in the quiet room. I unthinkingly obliged.

There wasn't much room to leap with the low concrete roof, but I jumped high enough to let the tips of my ears brush the rusted pipes above me.

A smile split the General's face as I silently landed. He seemed pleased.

"A model soldier. And he has yet to even attend boot camp." General Jack's voice was light.

"Boot camp? Bleah." Proust spoke up again from behind me. "Your so called *training* is nothing. He covered more by the time he was a year old." The General raised an eyebrow, but Dr. Brophy nodded in agreement as Proust continued. "When was the last time you had a soldier that was born and bred for you? He's never so much as seen the inside of a church. I'm his Handler. I'm his god."

"Imagine it, Jack," Proust continued, waving a hand in my direction, "A whole army of Dog Soldiers in less than fifteen years. They would jump off a cliff if you told them to. No more cowardice, no desertion or questioning of orders."

"And he's the best you've got?" General Jack asked.

"Are you kidding me?" Proust sounded angry now. "He's perfect. You're looking at the highest score that has ever come through the Kennel in the history of the Police Dog program. He's goddamn perfect."

"Tell me, Forty-Two," The General stepped back close to me again, face almost touching my own, "Would you kill if I gave the order?"

That was a trick question, but not much of one. There were few occasions in which I could deviate from an order given by a human, much less a superior. I couldn't break the law, and, above all else, I could not kill.

"No, Sir. I would not." The practised answer came easily to my lips.

The General wasn't smiling now as he turned on the other two. "Then what good is he to me? An army that won't fight? We might as well surrender to the first tinpot warlord that washes up on shore."

"That, Jack, is where I come in." Dr. Brophy pointed to the wheeled examination table that stood behind him. "Forty-Two," He looked at me, cocking a finger, "Get on."

Examinations were a normal part of our lives here at the Kennel. We had them every two months to check for physical defects resulting from our gene treatments, but I'd never had one anywhere but up on the medical floor. And, now that I thought about it, Dr. Brophy himself had been the one to administer my last three examinations. I wasn't aware of anyone of the doctor's status examining other Dogs in my group.

Nor had any of the previous examination tables been furnished with heavy leather straps to hold my hands and feet fast to the cold, hard metal surface.

The examination started out as they all did, checking my fingers, teeth, and eyes, but this one



quickly delved into something quite different. Behind him, Dr. Brophy had a thick folder of papers, it had my full name written across it in bold type. Every so often he would cross check my results with those that had been previously recorded. He never added anything to the papers.

The taking of blood is normal procedure, but not four separate times, and not with hair, saliva, and flesh samples. The flesh was by far the worst, and not merely because it was both new and unexpected. He didn't warn me before using a scalpel to dig a pea sized chunk of muscle out of my bicep. The bloody lump was quickly sealed in an air tight plastic bag and hidden amongst ice packs.

The doctor began pointing out different muscle groups under my fur for the benefit of the man I knew as General Jack Train. Within seconds he far surpassed the basic medical training I'd been given. About all I was able to tell was that he wanted to make changes. Lots of them.

I shivered in the cool of the basement room, the still, moist air somehow penetrating my thick coat.

In the end, the process, while not enjoyable, was at least vaguely close to routine. Just... more invasive than I could ever remember it having been in the past.

My breath didn't even catch when Dr. Brophy pulled the first of the loaded hypodermics from a covered tray on his cart. Unlike the earlier ones, this was not to take a blood sample. It was weighed down with a grimy brackish brown substance that mixed and ebbed in the tube as he readied it in his gloved hands.

I closed my eyes and steadied my breathing. I never really enjoyed injections, I doubted any Dog did, especially the varied and unpredictable aftereffects they inevitably caused, but I was long used to them by now.

"Wait." It was the General's voice.

I opened my eyes to see the needle's point no more than an inch from the flesh of my tightly restrained arm. The General's pale, hairless hand was holding Dr. Brophy's equally fur-less, gloved one.

"Don't we at least need his consent first? We can't just do this to his body without even asking."

Dr. Brophy just smiled. A tight lipped smirk, as though he was looking down to an ignorant child. A moment later Handler Proust was behind the General, gently pulling him away.

"Jack, he's not human. You don't have to worry about things like consent or willingness anymore. That's the whole point. He's ours, body, mind, and soul. Well..." The Handler stopped for a moment and barked out a sharp laugh, "If they even have souls, anyway."

"No." The army man shook his head with a sharp snap, looking uncomfortable as he stared down at my limp and unresisting body. "This is my project, I won't have anyone involved if they're not a willing participant. Not even... him."

"Fine." Proust turned towards me, voice falling into the hard clipped edge that all the Handlers seemed to possess. "Forty-Two, tell General Train that you willingly accept this assignment and will speak of it to no one."

I shrugged as well as I could, restrained as I was. "General Train, I willingly accept this assignment and will speak of it to no one." I echoed the Handler's words near perfectly, just as I had been taught. I didn't even need to think about it, I did as I had been commanded. I hadn't the slightest what was going on, but I couldn't refuse such as simple and direct order. That was my training, to do as

I was told.

"No." General Train shook his head again and stepped towards me, roughly pulling the restraints free from my arms and legs so I could sit up on the table. "I don't care *what* you are, I'm not going to let you be forced into this against your will."

Handler Proust looked uneasy as the General spoke and Dr. Brophy backed slowly towards the door.

"I'm not used to dealing with... your kind, Dog. So I'm going to treat you like I would one of my own men. Understand?"

I wasn't sure if I should be elated or humbled. I was going to be treated like a full citizen of the empire? And by a General, no less? In the end it was all I could do to nod.

"You've been chosen because you're the best, Forty-Two, and we want to do something to you..." He paused for a moment before correcting himself, suddenly unable to meet my eyes, "With you. You'll be the first of your kind, more than any mere Police Dog. We're going to change you, make you better."

"Like my monthly gene therapies?" I interrupted, I couldn't help myself. I'd become nervous enough that the claws of my one hand were clicking unconsciously on the metal of the table. The sound came out hollow in the cramped room.

"Something like that, but more. Much more. We're going to do things that have never been done before. You were created with controls, limits, safeguards. We want to remove them."

"Why?" My voice was small, "Aren't I good enough already?"

Proust barked out a laugh from somewhere I couldn't see.

The General smiled, his voice warming, "You're good, Forty-Two, but we're going to make you more than 'good'. You'll change the face of Goddard's animals forever."

My claws stopped ticking for a moment as I looked over at Dr. Brophy. I'd just realized that he was the second in charge of deciding who the breeding pairs were.

"Would this help me become a breeder?"

Dr. Brophy was suddenly at my side, pushing me back onto the table, tugging the straps tight around me again as soon as I was in place. "Sure, Forty-Two. We'll make you a breeder if this works. I guarantee it. We'll want you to make as many puppies as you can."

I could feel Dr. Brophy's deft fingers searching for a vein under the fur of my arm as I spoke again, "Will I be breaking any laws by agreeing?" His hand stopped dead.

"I won't lie to you, Forty-Two..." General Train began before being roughly cut off by Handler Proust. The other man shoved him back, pushing himself forward into my vision.

He grabbed my muzzle roughly with one hand, forcing me to meet his eyes. "No. You will not be breaking any laws. And you won't tell a soul about this." Proust's voice was loud and firm, as though he were giving me orders to attack one of the foam targets back in class. "Now tell the General that you accept."

I held my breath for a moment, feeling my tongue brush nervously up against the inside of my mouth. This was the first real choice I'd ever had in my life... everything else had been nothing but following orders from the earliest I could remember.

Handler Proust's answer to my question tickled something in the back of my mind, but I couldn't resist the simple fact that he told me I would be breaking no laws. He was a Handler, and Handler's never lie. That was just how they were. Just like we, Dogs, always obeyed them.

"I accept, General."

I wanted to be a breeder.

A moment later Dr. Brophy's needle found its mark. The injection was stiff and viscous, like tar. I almost screamed when he shoved down the plunger. This was not my normal gene therapy.

I was able to bite my tongue and remain silent on the first injection. I wasn't so fortunate over the next eight.

I could taste the copper bite of blood in my mouth, spewing from my cut tongue.

It made me sick.