

POLICE DOG



FINAL EXAM

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Chapter 8: Final Exam

October 1, 1986

09:42 Hours

South London, England

The Final Exams are conducted in a room expressly designed for the purpose. As pups were born all year long, so the finals were ever running. It was a busy location, every Dog in the whole of the Kennel passed through here. Assuming they made it this far.

Normal procedure was to arrive hours early, waiting patiently on the wooden benches that lined the hallway leading to the unassuming door. I only arrived seconds before my call.

I didn't even break stride as the receptionist called me to the front of the line.

I didn't know her. I didn't know anyone here. Not even the armed human guards that kept a close eye over all of us, waiting for the off chance that we might go rogue.

Even from this distance I could tell they didn't have their safeties on.

"K-9-78081842?" She recited my full name, reading it from the paper in front of her. It was one of the few times I had ever heard it spoken aloud.

"Yes, Ma'am." I bowed my head to her as I stepped smoothly up to the desk.

She watched me closely, obviously noting my near tardiness.

"You just made it. The examiners to not look favourably upon infractions, no matter how minor. You must know this."

"Yes, Ma'am."

She simply sighed and rolled her eyes. "Someday I'd like to meet a Dog with more personality than what we've programed you lot with." She thrust a clipboard towards me. "Sign here."

I did, dutifully. My full name. The pen slipped ungracefully in my thick fingers, the beginning of hound's scrawl apparent. And my nerves.

She looked down at the piece of paper, then up at me. "I'd tell you not to be nervous, but you're not making a good impression so far." She sighed again and shrugged. "Just another brick in the wall I suppose. Proceed through the door and follow the instructions of the examiners on the other side."

She didn't even bother to wish me good luck.

There was a little more to the humble wooden door behind her than first appeared. It led into a short, unfurnished concrete hallway. The only light coming from a single florescent lamp secured to the ceiling above me, it threw a razor edged shadow in my wake. It would have been well above any other Dog who had passed this way, but my ears grazed it as it floated overhead.

The door on the other end of the hallway was far more substantial. A huge metal installation that looked only a step from the combat doors that had been found on Exercise Room Five. I hadn't any instruction on what to do now, but the single red button next to the door was a good hint.

A few moments later a loudspeaker crackled to life right next to my ear. It almost made me jump.

"K-9-78081842?"

"Yes, Sir. That would be me." I cautiously peered about the hallway as I spoke. I could see a video camera now, trained on me. It was hidden in the shadows, almost undetectable.

"Very good. Proceed through the door and present yourself for testing."

There were no sirens or lights this time, but the door crept open just as slowly.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I finally got a clear view of the room within. We had all been dreading, dreaming of the Final Exam for years, but no one had ever told us what to expect. The only people we ever interacted with were the Handlers and Technicians of the Kennel, and they would never tell us of what would happen. Not even Dr. Brophy, Handler Proust, or General Train. We'd been told once that the uncertainty was part of the test itself. To see how we reacted to the unknown.

The unknown was not something I enjoyed.

The space I stepped into was almost vexingly like the exercise room I'd so recently left. Slightly smaller, it was constructed of the same grey concrete and had the same array of lights in the ceiling. There was no true way for me to know, but I had no doubt that there was a control center suspended above me, just as there had been in the last room.

This space, however, was not so empty as Exercise Room Five had been. In the center lay a long wooden desk, three humans sitting behind it in stern attendance. Their faces were not obscured in any way, but yet were still in shadow while the rest of the room was lit at an almost obsessively even level.

There were no obvious marks to direct me where to stand, but the tread of a thousand Dogs before me had worn footsteps into the otherwise impervious concrete. Plus, I could smell those who had trod this way before me, I could smell the scent of their fear as they had stood for judgement before their masters.

With no other Dogs around me I couldn't slouch to hide my height as much as I normally would. All I could do was suck in my gut, pull my shoulders together, and hope they didn't notice my body's deviation from the Police Dog standard. Even under my new dress uniform I felt naked and vulnerable before them.

"So, you're Forty-Two?" the man in the center of the three asked. Now that I was closer to them I could pick up their scents on the still air. They were all human, of course, two male and one female. I'd never met any of them before in my life.

"Yes, Sir." My voice was so clipped and perfect as I responded that I was afraid I might bite off the tip of my tongue if I spoke too fast.

"You've been quite the rising star." He flipped through some of the papers that were spread out before him. "Even we, as segregated as we are over here, have heard your name batted about with much enthusiasm. And now I see why."

The other man spoke up, "Are these correct, Forty-Two? You have an almost perfect score – over ninety-eight, almost ninety-nine percent. I've never seen a Dog score so high."

"They are correct, Sir. And it is unsurprising that you have not seen a score like mine before. There has never been a Dog to score to the level I have."

I might have been boastful if I were a human, I might have been fighting back a stupid grin as I spoke, but I felt nothing. Hollow inside.

"Gentlemen," it was the woman now, "Shall we get this over with? With marks like these, I have a feeling that the whole exam is little more than a formality for our new recruit here."

They never asked me to remove my uniform. In fact, I was required to keep it on at all times.

I had been expecting something near biblical for my Final Exam, something that would shake me to my core and prove to the world that I was capable of the great expectations and responsibilities that would be placed upon me as part of the police service.

I was somewhat let down.

It wasn't to say that the exercises I was put through were simple or effortless, but they were little more than the same procedures that I had been doing over and over again nearly every day of my life. The only difference now was that I was doing them alone, or with a human partner that was called in on an as needed basis.

I was under greater scrutiny, of course, but it was nothing that I was not accustomed to. I had always been under greater scrutiny, ever since the first day I had scored a perfect one-hundred on a test. And that had been before I was able to even so much as walk.

If anything the examinations were simpler than what I was accustomed to. I was used to competing with sixty, and he was himself far above the Police Dog standard. Now, with him not here, the tests seemed almost trivially simple.

There were five portions to the test, each self contained and rated separately. I would complete one section of the examination and then be scored for it. An average score of under eighty over all would result in my failure and immediate disposal.

I noticed that, unlike the waiting area, there were no obvious security measures in place in the examination room. No jumpy guards with automatic rifles. I wasn't sure if that made me feel better or worse.

The first section of the exam was physical, lifting weights and running laps. This was hardly so much as to even rate a mention. The test passed quickly and effortlessly. I scored a perfect one hundred much to the examiners' surprise.

The second section was breed standards compliance. I did not do nearly so well in this round. There were well defined lower limits for what was accepted in weight, muscle mass, and intelligence, but no one had ever written upper limits on what was proper. There were 'suggested' and 'preferred' but no hard limits.

I was too tall, too heavy, and, even with Handler Proust's careful treatment, my coat was too long.

This must have been a first for the tribunal. They asked me to return to the hallway, shutting the heavy metal door between us so that not even I with my keen hearing could make out what they said.

When I returned, I discovered that I had only received a ninety eight percent in standards compliance. My ears fell at that, but I knew it was still better than I had any right to expect. I was imperfect. I could only be thankful that they had not tested my blood.

The third battery of tests covered my mental abilities. Everything from the basic multiplication tables to identification of currency and social interactions like purchasing from a store. There was nothing police oriented in this, merely the day to day requirements of being able to live and work in the greater human society. I didn't so much as twitch a whisker. Another easy pass at one hundred percent.

The fourth section was police work. They placed me in a range of simulations with human actors. Watching and grading me on my interactions with them as we enacted examples of everything from domestic abuse to a murder investigation.

This was the longest and most in-depth of any section yet. The tests required thought to be sure, but hardly deviated from the classes and lectures that we had all been put through. They even crossed over into the physical arena as I was required to chase down subjects and properly restrain them.

Yet another one hundred. Only one round to go.

I wasn't sure what to expect as I stood in front of the tribunal. They had already tested by body, my breed, my mind, and my work. They had tested what I was and what I was to do. What else was there?

"Very good, Forty-Two." It was the center man speaking again. I'd never seen the three of them leave their seats during the whole examination process. "I must tell you that I'm more than impressed with your scores so far. You've more than lived up to our expectations after what we've heard about you. The final battery of tests will be to cover your stability and adherence to the axioms of Goddard's animals. It's little more than a formality, but international law requires that all genetically engineered animals the world over complete it. Are you ready to begin?"

I didn't even clear my throat before answering him. "Yes, Sir. I am ready."

When he had spoken of the axioms the lifeless eyes of Forty-One had flashed before me.

"These questions are free form spoken answer, Forty-Two," It was the woman speaking now. She had said little during the tests up to this point. And... did I detect a slight Swedish accent in her voice? "We understand that this format is unusual for you. Please, take your time before answering. But be aware, however, that every action you perform, from your breathing to your body temperature, is being monitored and factored in as part of your answer."

Oh dear.

I fought the sudden spike in my heart rate. Brophy, Proust, and Train must have known of this before they let me walk in here. They had to. They couldn't have placed me here to fail after breaking the single most important axiom.

I had to be able to pass, I must. I would not allow my commission to escape me now.

"We'll get started with something simple, Forty-Two," The woman continued, "Recite for me the axioms of the Goddard's animals and how they relate to you."

I nodded.

"The first of the laws is that no human may be used for any form of genetic experimentation. This does not apply to me directly, as my own lineage does not come from the homosapien line. There has, however, been some controversy as human DNA has been used in the past as part of the early Police Dog program. This is, however, no longer considered current or valid to bring up in argument."

She nodded silently, scratching a few meagre notes on the paper before her.

"The only situation where this law may apply to me is in the event that I should encounter any evidence of human genetic engineering. As it has been deemed that the Police Dogs would not be suitable for such a case, I would immediately contact the central police authority here in London and hand the investigation over to specialized human investigators."

"Very good. Move on to the next law." Her voice was soft and flat.

I sighed as I repeated this one.

"Any and all reproduction of the genetically altered species is to be strictly controlled and logged. The final decision of breeding is held in the hands of the Police Canine Authority, and, above them, the international Goddard's board. They select the most appropriate candidates for reproduction and bring them back to the Kennel. There are at any given time approximately one hundred females and two males involved in the program. The number can drop as low as a single male if a particular line has been deemed superior to all others."

"And how does this affect you, Forty-Two?"

I let the smallest of smiles touch my lips.

"It provides me with a goal."

She paused for a moment, silently regarding my answer. Apparently she had yet to encounter that particular response before.

"And do you know what breeding is, Forty-Two?"

I was taken aback by her question, rocking on my toes.

"I... I don't know." It was true. We had never been trained in breeding. Everyone knew about the breeding program, it was a normal part of our education, but they never really told us what a breeder *did*. Only that it was the top position a Dog could hope to achieve, even above the highest service rank.

A breeding position was the pinnacle of what a Dog could do, to pass on their own genes as the chosen template. It was a form of immortality, the ultimate accolade that we were the best that existed.

But they had never told us what breeding really *was*.

I knew it had to do with the female Dogs, my gut could tell me as much, but we were never provided with even an instant alone with them to discover it for ourselves. Every moment of our day was in classes and training, always under the constant eye of a Handler, and nights were spent locked away in our separate cages. Males and females on opposite sides of the aisle.

"Should I know?" I asked her, my voice rough and high. Worry began eating at my gut. Had I somehow missed a class, could I have forgotten something so core?

"No, Forty-Two. You have answered perfectly. And likely more truthfully than most other

Dogs. You know exactly what you're supposed to, nothing more. Please continue."

"The third law is that no genetically modified animal may be used in any form of military service, or any offensive role. No matter how peripheral."

I wanted to speak of General Train, I yearned to tell them all about him and what he planned for me. For my offspring. But I didn't.

I had made a promise to them that I would not reveal their presence, their plans. And they had been intelligent enough not to suggest that *I* would ever be conscripted into the service. The law only spoke of what I may or may not do. It did not speak of what others may wish to do to my offspring. In some ways it didn't matter anyhow. I had never seen or even known the Dogs who had whelped me, nor would I know those who followed in my line.

"And how does that affect you, Forty-Two?"

"It restricts my occupation. I am not, and will not, be part of the military service." I spoke the line straight, not flinching in the slightest. It was the truth, of course. Why should I have anything to worry about as long as I spoke the truth?

"Very good, Forty-Two. We have one last point to cover before wrapping up your Final Exam."

"Yes, Ma'am. The fourth and final law is that no engineered animal is permitted to kill."

"And how does this affect you, Forty-Two?"

I didn't say anything for a long time. Dozens of responses filtered through my mind, there must have been hundreds of things I could say. Then why was I seeing nothing but the eyes of Forty-One, feeling his cold body next to me as he lay still as stone?

"Forty-Two? Did you hear me?" She was leaning forward now, watching me more intently. The other two were staring down, watching something behind the desk that I couldn't see.

"Yes, Ma'am, I heard you. One moment, please."

"Take all the time you need, Forty-Two. But remember that we are factoring this delay into your results."

"Yes, Ma'am."

I closed my eyes, letting my breathing slow to a gentle pant. How did the forth law affect me?

It was a part of my life, a core structure of my mind, of my moral compass from the day I had been born. We were Dogs, we followed the law. We enforced the law that was set out by humans. Murder was not only a capital offence, it was a sin. But... we were Dogs. To harm a human in any way was a nightmare that could hardly be considered... and killing anything larger than an insect was against everything we stood for...

But how did the law affect *me*... how did it affect me now that I had broken it, been freed however unwillingly, from its constraints?

A shudder ran through my body. I didn't bother to try and suppress it from those who watched.

It didn't affect me at all.

The thought scared me more than anything else I had ever considered. It was like being dropped, tied and bound, into a cold and bottomless ocean. It was like being set adrift, away from everything I had ever known.

My entire life I had been drawn down a straight and narrow line by those around me. Even when the three men had come to me, there had really been only a single choice. My whole life had been nothing but a series of laws layered one on top of another until they formed the great and grand facades that I hid behind, that directed my each and every action.

"The fourth axiom does not affect me." The words came out before I could even form them in my mind. There was nothing else I could say. I couldn't lie.

The three humans sat there. Not moving. Long seconds ticked by before the woman spoke. I could hear each syllable stressed on her voice, see her eyes as they nervously flicked from me to the screens behind the desk.

"Could you... could you repeat that, Forty-Two?"

"The fourth law of Goddard's animals does not apply to me. The law states that no engineered animal is permitted to kill another creature. It came about as a result of the military creations during the Second World War. Its purpose is to be a fail-safe against another situation where the previous laws have been violated, to ensure the safety of all naturally occurring creatures. The most extreme violation of this law would be murder, either premeditated or accidental, of a human. As I have stated, this law does not apply to me."

"And why would that be, Forty-Two?" She spoke barely above a whisper.

I stared straight into her eyes, not blinking. This was the question I had been fearing from the moment I walked into the room. I couldn't lie to her, but at the same time I couldn't reveal the existence of the changes that had been enacted upon me.

"That is because I choose it to be so, Ma'am." Her face fluctuated between amazement and fear as I continued. "I am not affected by the law as I will not allow myself to be placed into a situation where it might take effect. I will abstain from killing not because I am unable to perform the act, but rather because I, as an individual, will not allow myself to." I held my hand out towards them, moving slowly. My claws were apparent, glinting slightly in the flat light. Even my fingers alone were enough to snap their imperfect human bones. "It is obvious that I am physically capable of the act, but that is not what is in question. I will not be bound by the law as I will never encounter it. As long as I have my mind, I will act upon my own will, and I will never harm another living thing." I chose my words carefully as I spoke.

"You reject the law?" It was the man in the center who spoke now.

"No, Sir. I embrace it, likely to a far greater extent than any other Dog who has passed through these halls. I accept my place in the world not because I must, but because I choose to."

The three of them shared a long glance before the man in the middle spoke again. "Would you be so kind as to wait in the hallway again, Forty-Two?"

"Of course."

By the time I'd stepped into the hall a half dozen armed police officers, human, of course, were standing at the far end. Each and every one stood with a rifle held to their shoulder, my heart firmly in its sights.

The door slid closed behind me.

My dress uniform didn't include a watch, an oversight that I was starting to sorely note. I hadn't the slightest how long I stood there. I did notice, however, that there was a turnover in my guard as

they tired.

It was a silent stand-off. They stood still and unspeaking on one end of the hallway, I stiff at attention at the other. They jumped every time I so much as breathed.

I was almost falling asleep when the door opened behind me again. I turned slowly towards it.

"Forty-Two," the man in the center said. "Come here." His voice was still and careful, expression unreadable.

I returned to the position I had last taken in before them. I had previously stood proud and at attention. I didn't now. My ears were flat to my skull, my tail brushing the floor. I would have grovelled before them if it had been acceptable. Or likely to make any difference.

"We have come to a decision regarding your score on conformity to the Goddard's laws." I held my breath ever so slightly. "We will be throwing out your results. You will receive a zero for the section."

My breath came out in a huff.

Oh dear.

He continued, expression still a practised mask of disinterest. He had likely read sentences to more Dogs than I could count. Though, I would bet, never such an odd case as mine.

"Your final score is as follows: Physical, one hundred. Breed standards compliance, ninety eight. Intelligence, one hundred. Policing, one hundred. Godard's laws, zero." He paused a moment to look up at me. "Your final average is seventy nine point six. A passing score is eighty."

I bowed my head before them.

"Sirs, Ma'am," It was hard to speak, my voice felt dry, about ready to crack. "Thank-you for reviewing my application to the force. I'm sorry to have disappointed you."

There were many ways they could do away with a Dog sent to disposal, but I was unsure of exactly what would be done to me. I suppose I was about to find out. I could only hope it would be painless. And quick.

"There is something more, Forty-Two," The woman spoke up again, "We are bound by international law to set your Godard score to zero... but the service has seen fit to provide you with special dispensation in light of your exemplary record while at the Kennel."

My ears perked up as I dared to glance back towards them.

"Pardon?" The word hardly escaped my lips.

"We will be factoring in your near perfect history to award you a one percent bonus. This brings your final score up to a total of eighty point six. You will be receiving your commission."

I just about leapt in joy. It was only by the barest of my strength that I could contain myself.

I was, however, able to retain some greater degree of restraint and decorum in my response, "Thank-you. I appreciate your leniency."

"You're welcome, Forty-Two. You are not what we expected of you. You are a credit to your species, but in ways that I doubt you would ever understand. You've left us with much to consider." She was speaking slowly, carefully. It was apparent that these were words she'd never had to say to a Dog before.

The man in the center spoke up again, "Proceed through the open door, Forty-Two. Our examination has concluded. You are the last of your group to be judged, your graduation ceremony will begin as soon as you arrive." He scowled for a moment. "And you've taken far longer than you should have. We're behind."

He pressed a button on the desk, speaking into a microphone, "Send in the next Dog."

There were two doors built into the back of the exam room, only one of which now sat open. I didn't want to think of where the other lead. I stepped through and it immediately closed behind me. I could hear the door on the far side of the room slowly slide open to admit the next Dog.

The hallway I found myself in was little different from the one I had waited in earlier. Minus the heavily armed guards.

A half dozen paces later I was then vomited unceremoniously out into a small room.

The only other Dogs present were Sixty and one of the females. The other one was nowhere to be seen.

There was only one Handler here, a human that I didn't recognize. He stood impatiently beside a massive machine that looked like a steam-era locomotive.

"So, you're Forty-Two?" He didn't bother for an answer as he began adjusting dials on the contraption, didn't even look up at me when he spoke.

"Yes, Sir."

"Fine." He pressed one last button and the metal beast lurched to life with a howl of grinding gears.

"Your badge," he explained, though I could barely hear him over the screeching metal.

Moments later a small metallic slug fell from the bottom of the sea of pistons and gears. Reaching out, the Handler inspected the object for a moment before giving it a quick buffing with a stained rag. Its metal glinted faintly under the overhead lights.

It was my badge. They had created it in thirty seconds flat.

Taking it from his hands, I carefully pinned the symbol upon my chest. It was still warm and smelt of oil. I was a Police Dog now.

And I had to keep my legs from giving out beneath me as they turned to water.

"Alright, Dogs," the Handler said, turning to address us, "Welcome to the force. I'm not going to tell you what that entails, you're all well aware of it by now. You're no longer pups, and I expect you to stop acting like them. You're Dogs, and you've been accepted into her majesty's police service, so you'd best act like it." He waved a hand towards the door at the far end of the room. "You go out that door, walk past the bright eyed pups, give 'em a show of what real Dogs look like, then enter the assignment room at the far end of the courtyard to find out where you've been placed. After that..." He shrugged. "Get your tails to the outfitter's room and collect your kit for the long walk."

That was the last thing he said to us. He made sure to force us from the room before the next group of Dogs began to arrive.

The three of us stepped from the shadows of the room into the bright daylight of the courtyard.

This was the same place I'd seen Police Dogs parading across in dress uniform. That had been years ago, and I was no longer sitting on the sidelines.

The daylight burnt my eyes as we stepped out. It was Sixty first, then the female, then me. Last.

Our uniforms were sweat stained and rumpled from our exam, but they still shined in the light. I kept my eyes ahead, but I could still see all the pups pressing in at the corners of my vision. They were everywhere... far more than I remembered from when I had been here.

We made it little less than halfway across the yard when I saw something streak from the crowd on my left. My instincts made my head turn to track it as it shot towards us. Neither Sixty nor the female gave the slightest notice.

It was a pup. I'm sure he was aiming for Sixty, but he misjudged and ran face first into me instead. His small brown and tan body would have become tangled in my legs if I hadn't seen him coming. I reached down at the last moment to scoop him from the ground before he was trod underfoot.

The two Dogs ahead of me continued on, parade marching without a glance back. As though nothing had happened.

Around me everyone fell silent, pups and Handlers alike. A Dog didn't do this, not even a pup. It was well understood that a mere pup did not interfere with the business of a full Police Dog, even freshly minted ones such as I.

I looked down at the small bundle in my arms. He was playing with the thick fabric of my uniform, making soft cooing sounds as he gently drew it back and forth between the pads of his fingers.

"Hello there, little one." I gently pulled him away from my uniform before his claws could become entangled in the thread. He was young, not likely more than a few months old. I was surprised that he could move as fast as he was able.

His bright eyes were blue, like mine. He looked up at me, unguarded and curious.

Reaching out, he grabbed a hold of the fur on the side of my face and pulled himself closer.

"Daddy?" His voice was small and high, the syllables already taking on the distinct clip of the service.

"No, little one. I'm not your sire."

"Brother?" His small face screwed up as he tried to place me in his world. Up until now it was unlikely that he had ever met anyone but the brothers and sisters of his own group. Them and his Handlers.

"Perhaps. Perhaps, little one. I could be your brother." And it was true. While unlikely we had come from the same breeders, neither of us knew who they were, so it was always possible.

"Brother!" His other hand shot out to entangle itself in my fur as he pulled closer. I could feel the warmth of his little body as he held tight to me. He reminded me of Forty-One.

I felt cold as my arms came up to hold him tight.

We were only there for a few moments before I heard the heavy booted footfalls of a Handler coming towards us. It was an old woman, her hair curled tightly into a grey bun atop her head.

"Sorry to interrupt your parade, Constable." Her lips twitched up in an ironic smile. She knew as well as I how freshly minted that rank was.

I bowed my head to her. Even as a full Police Dog she still outranked me. "Not an inconvenience at all, Ma'am."

She looked at me oddly. "And have your big day ruined?"

"Hardly. I am more than grateful for the distraction. You must be aware, Ma'am, that I have memories of this day from so long ago." I gently disentangled the quietly cooing pup from my pelt, he didn't fight me as long as I held him to my chest.

I paused a moment before speaking again, softly this time, "Ma'am, if I may impose to request something from you?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What would that be, Dog?" Her Handler's instincts had been piqued. It was inappropriate at the best of times for a Dog of any rank to request of a Handler.

"I can only assume that the pup will be disposed of for such an indiscretion as this." I spoke quietly, keeping my voice level. It was unlikely the little one in my arms knew what I was saying. He was too young to yet have learned of disposal. "I would like to plead upon his behalf for such a punishment to be stayed. Just this once."

She hadn't broken eye contact with me, her brown eyes narrowing. "Why?"

I let my ears fall as I assumed a submissive posture. "Because, Ma'am, I dreamed of doing the same, so many years ago."

Her long weathered face softened for just a moment as I handed the still and calm pup back to her.

"We'll see, Constable. We'll see." She turned to walk off before remarking, "I wasn't aware that compassion training had extended to cover those of your own kind."

Turning, I raced to catch up with the other two Dogs before they made it from the courtyard. I only just fell into formation behind them when they stepped into the shadows. I wasn't even sure if either of them had noticed I'd been gone.

The assignment room was more than slightly grander than the badge factory we had just left. It was one of the locations that were used whenever a photo op of the Kennel was required. A large space, two stories tall, this was the primary nerve center where they tracked the assignments of Dogs all across England. A large map with blinking lights was projected on one wall. A dozen computers were set up here and there, a mixture of humans and Dogs operating them.

This was the first time I'd ever seen a Police Dog at work.

The area was a strange oxymoron. It was quiet, the loudest sound being the fans in the background or the skitter of feet and claws on the floor, but the atmosphere was that of a powder keg about to explode.

The room had been constructed years ago, before the expansion of the Canine force, and had never been renovated to support the additional personnel it had to administer. There were too many people in too small a space.

A Dog stood at the front desk, awaiting us. He was of an older line, a less refined curve to his

mussel, a rougher lay to his pelt, and grey hair framing his face. His badge named him as Eleven.

"Sixty, Forty-Seven, and Forty-Two?" He nodded politely to us as we stepped towards him. The simple action almost made me trip on the smooth floor. It was the first time I'd ever so much as seen an offhand politeness from a superior. The Handlers hardly ever treated us in such a way.

We nodded back.

He then proceeded to read off our Final Exam marks for confirmation.

"Constable Sixty, final grade of ninety six point two percent." He nodded. "Constable Forty-Seven, final grade of eighty nine point eight." She nodded. "Constable Forty-Two, final grade of eighty point six."

I closed my eyes and nodded.

No one said a word, but I could hear them silently laughing. When I opened my eyes I could see Sixty staring at me. Just staring.

Eleven handed out our assignments, our lives from this point forward.

The normal procedure is for the best Dogs to be assigned to London, the next best to go to such places as Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds. It went downhill from there, those who performed poorly getting small, less respectable postings. Only the lowest ranking Dogs were assigned to rural duties.

Sixty was assigned to Greenwich. A proud home for any Dog.

Forty-Seven was placed in York. Again, not a bad assignment, still one of the larger towns in England. It had over a hundred and twenty thousand people.

"Forty-Two, your assignment is in..." He had to double check the paper in front of him, "West Woodburn."

"And... and what is its population?" I had to ask, I couldn't help myself. Perhaps I'd a break of luck and was posted to some obscure suburb of London.

My hopes fell as Eleven was forced to consult his computer. It was not a sign in my favour when the assignment Dog didn't even know anything about my new home.

"Five hundred. Up near the border with Scotland."

"F-five-hundred!?" I was a single twitch away from leaping the desk and shoving him out of the way to read the screen myself. I wasn't sure if this was a disgrace, or exactly what I deserved.

I'd all but with the grace of God failed the exam, and worse yet killed Forty-One with my own bare hands... but this...

I did as any proper Police Dog should. I simply bowed my head and took the folder of papers from his desk.

"Thank-you. West Woodburn."

I turned to walk away without another glance, leaving the other dogs standing at the counter. The directions to my new post would be in the paperwork.

The path to the outfitting room was plain, it all but had a sign pointing 'New Dogs, this way'. Once leaving the assignment room, into the Kennel administration buildings proper, there were people

rushing in all directions around me, almost like a battlefield. I didn't even look up at them.

Five-hundred people...

There were hamlets larger than that. I'd been assigned to a nowhere bump on the road. I'd likely be the only Dog there. I really wanted to feel the warmth of Forty-One beside me.

I needed to hear him tell me I'd been a good boy.

I'd only made it a few dozen steps when I heard a commotion behind me. I tried to ignore it at first, determined to remain wrapped up in my own misery, but that became impossible as it moved closer.

"Forty-Two!" That was a voice I'd never expected to hear again. It was the gruff and pained voice of Handler Llyal.

I'd only just had the time to turn around before he reached up and grabbed my ear savagely in his hand, hauling me off and down the hallway as I'd seen him do to particularly ill-mannered pups. We didn't stop, didn't say another word until he threw me into the nearest Men's toilet, locking the door behind us.

There was hardly room for the two of us in here. I was pressed up against the counter on the far side of the small room, my tail brushing the spotless mirror.

He hadn't let go of my ear. And now he was beginning to twist.

"What the hell went on back there!" I'd never heard Handler Llyal swear before.

"I'm sorry, Sir..."

"Don't give me that, Forty-Two. You're a full Police Dog, I'm not your Handler anymore." He pulled now, wrenching my ear so hard I feared it might rip clean off. I could feel the blood vessels popping in my flesh. He gritted his teeth. "Just tell me what happened."

"I..." I was at a loss for words. The only thought coherent in my mind was to roll over, show him my belly and whimper, cry out for mercy and tenderness. I would have if there'd been the space. "I failed, Sir. There is no excuse, nothing more I can say about it." I let my eyes fall to the floor. "I'm sorry."

"Don't you think I know that, Forty-Two? We were watching you over closed circuit, half the Handlers in the building were. We all saw you throw the Exam. We even had a pool going on you netting a perfect score of five-hundred." Almost as an afterthought he added, "I lost a week's pay on you."

"You were set for it, Forty-Two," he continued, finally releasing my ear. I raised a hand to it to reduce the throbbing as I straightened as much as the low ceiling would allow. "You were poised to still get the highest score in the history of the Kennel. You were high enough that we were going to have to rework the exam and make it harder because of you... and you went and threw the very last question. Do you know what we had to do to keep your tail from disposal? We actually had to change the very rating system just to let you pass! That's never been done before! Never! God, we're going to catch flack from the international Goddard's board in Bern. This was the only time in the last twenty years that I was actually agreeing with Proust as we took it to the very top just to keep you alive. We had to pull Dr. Coldstone-Smith from a meeting in Whitehall to sign off on the exception. Do you realize that we had to pull the director of Canine Services in for this?"

"I didn't throw it, Sir. I had to answer truthfully. I can do nothing else."

"We'd talked about the fourth law hundreds of times, Forty-Two. You never felt the need to invent your own answer then."

"Things change, Sir. I'm not the same Dog as I was when we covered them before."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He stepped closer to me. I had to avert my eyes from his piercing gaze.

"Nothing, Sir."

"Do you know what they're calling you, Forty-Two? You're the 'Canine Philosopher' now. You're the laughingstock of the whole service. The Dog who can't even answer the single simplest question on the test. The only purpose of that question is to weed out the dogs who are too unstable to interact with society, and too stupid to hide it."

"Then I guess it failed, Sir."

"Bloody right it failed! You're the smartest Dog I've ever seen. You deserve that posting in London. Not to... God, wherever it was they stuck you."

"West Woodburn, Sir." I felt a little defensive at how quickly he brushed off my new assignment. I'd never even seen the place, but I still didn't like him speaking poorly of it. "I'm sure I'll do fine, Sir."

"You're not supposed to do 'fine', Forty-Two, you're supposed to change the world."

"Perhaps it's for the best, Sir." I tried to smile, but it wouldn't happen. "Perhaps I'm just an experiment that shouldn't be reproduced for the world to see."

He didn't bother to respond to me. He simply stepped forward and wrapped his arms around my chest. For a moment I thought he was about to take me to the ground in a Judo move, but instead he hugged me.

"It's not going to be the same around here without you," he whispered, voice muffled as he pressed himself into the plush of my coat.

"I'll never forget you, Sir." Slowly, I returned his embrace. "You've been the closest thing I've ever had to a father."

"Call me Dave, Forty-Two. My name is Dave."

A few minutes later we were apart and gone our separate ways. I was hoping to make it through the outfitting room and away before I ran across anyone else. I wasn't so fortunate.

Proust was more discreet than Llyal had been. He had reason to be.

The outfitting room was quiet, only new Dogs on their first assignment ever had need to come here. Somehow though, I wasn't surprised when Handler Proust stood there waiting for me. He slammed the door behind us the moment I walked in.

I didn't bother to turn and face him.

"Forty-Two..." His voice was smooth and low, sounding like the hiss of a cobra.

"Sir." I was tired now, too tired and empty to cringe.

He didn't say anything for a long time as he slowly circled into view. "What have you done?"

"You mongrel bitch!" He exploded forward, calm facade fracturing into a thousand pieces as he screamed. His face was bright red, looking like nothing so much as a demon minus the horns.

And he struck me.

I don't believe I'd ever been struck by a Handler before. It wasn't that it hurt, the fur of my face absorbed most of the impact, it was the fact he had hit me. He'd hit me.

I didn't bother to move, didn't bother to say a word as he paced in front of me, ranting. His voice grew louder with each exclamation, faster and more violent. It was only seconds before he was screaming at the top of his lungs.

"... can't even pass a simple test... after all the money we've put into you... we'll never be able to make another one, half the people are dead... why did you do this to me..." There was enough cursing to turn the air blue, and it was all directed at me.

I never did have the opportunity to say another word in the end. All he did was leave a glass tube on the counter behind him when he left, slamming the door in his wake.

I inspected the tube closely. It came with a piece of paper that read 'destroy after reading'. It directed me in how to use the drugs, how to get more, and to ensure I was never without them. Lest Forty-One's death begin a pattern.