

The Gift

by

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“So I searched many books for an image of ‘gift’ and my eyes were deluged with boxes and bows.” The Wolf paused and gave a disgusted look. “Boxes and bows; can you imagine? I suppose that might be the popular idea of a gift but it’s all so superficial.”

We were sitting in a bar buried in the shadows of the downtown district. I’d stopped in because I’d had a bad day at the office and wanted something to cry into other than the palm of my paw. My situation, though painfully heart wrenching for me, was not really so unique. Raised in the clear air of the country and tired of having nothing but hunger I’d moved to the city to make my life. Too late I realized having nothing is sometimes better than being surrounded by the many play things you have to pay for... because you truly pay for them with your soul.

“Where are you from?” I asked him as I couldn’t think of anything else to say. I’m just a common dog, you see. A Wolf talking to the likes of me was highly unusual. They were usually military types and held themselves to a much higher standard than the common mutt.

“Does it matter?” he muttered.

I swallowed the last of my beer and tapped the bar for another and nodded to the fellow next to me indicating the barkeep should take care of him too. “It does to me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m a Royal snitch and inquisitor,” I told him with a smile, indicating it was a joke. He didn’t take it that way and I suppose I came very close to dying as a large paw closed around my throat. Suddenly I couldn’t breathe.

“I am not in the mood for jokes or inquisitions... snitch.”

My paw smacked against the bar several times as my vision began to gray out. To his credit, the bartender came back, placed my order on the bar and whispered in the Wolf's ear that I was a regular; which was odd because he'd never seen me before.

The Wolf released his paw and with a gasp I took in a good full lung of air. He didn't apologize and I didn't ask him to since the mistake had been mine... never ever joke with a Wolf. When I could speak again I croaked, "You were talking of gifts. Maybe I can help with that."

"It was rhetoric."

"Of course it was," I replied picking up my beer. "You were preparing a speech for your brethren. Be sure you slap the podium much and yell a lot. Wolves like that sort of speech."

He looked at me, his eyes warning against further jokes. "I'm a Dog," I told him, "I might not be too bright but we're close enough that I can pick up on a few things."

He scowled and tossed down his drink, which was a double whiskey neat.

"You said the images of a gift were superficial," I continued, "Why were they superficial?"

"Because they do not truly show what a gift is," he told me after giving it some thought. "You're not a Wolf, you wouldn't understand the depths to which I speak."

Perhaps it was the beer or perhaps it was the canine in both of us that seemed to have connected, but I suddenly felt put out by his attitude. "You're so full of shit," I told him.

The bartender took a step backwards his eyes telling me I was on my own after that one. The Wolf slowly turned to look at me and his eyes were like looking into a deep pool of very still water. "I almost killed you," he near whispered, "And your words ask me to finish what was begun."

Legally he could kill me for whatever reason he thought appropriate and I knew that, but suddenly I didn't care. I'd become a slave to what I chose as a living and to those whom employed me. Every day was the same... every day, every day, every day. I wanted to go back to the fresh air of my youth with nothing but hunger as my companion.

"If you want to kill me," I told him seriously, "Go ahead. You think you're life is so fucking hard, try mine."

This time he ordered the drinks and we went to sit at a table in the back where it was even quieter. I remember thinking it would be the perfect place to meet my end. I have no idea why I thought that but the room had a certain feel to it... like it had always been there just for this chance meeting.

"I was almost killed in the last war," he told me after we had passed some time in less serious conversation.

“I was too,” I admitted and it wasn’t a lie. I was young and the company commander did his best to keep me out of the front lines. I ended up on ammunition detail and fell while holding on to a mine I’d been carrying. My chin hit squarely on the detonator plate but it didn’t go off. When it was inspected we found the safety pin dented to the point that the charge should have sparked. When I explained this to him he nodded, his eyes now just a little glassy. “It was a gift from God,” he told me softly.

“And there you have it,” I replied, “A gift. No possible way to wrap that up in a box and bow.”

“I too was given a gift,” he told me seriously, “But it was given to me by a British Tommy.”

“No shit?”

He nodded. “No shit.”

After fetching another round of drinks, this time a double whiskey for both of us, this strange Wolf told me he’d been a message runner sprinting front and back incessantly through artillery barrages, mine fields, barbed wire; all of it. He was exhausted and probably not as vigilant as he should have been. Stepping out of a shell hole he’d come eye to eye with the soldier who had his rifle trained right on his heart. There was a moment’s pause and then the Brit lowered his weapon and motioned he should run off... which he did.

“I felt sure he would shoot me as soon as my back was turned but he did not. I think we were all tired of the killing by then. He gave me a true gift.”

This time it was my turn to nod. “Also a gift from God,” I told him, “There must have been a reason. Perhaps God has a special mission for you to accomplish, ja?”

Clinking out glasses together we drank down and finished.

Telling me he had to leave, he rose and departed without another word. I thought this odd, though by now my mind was sodden and what thinking I could actually do amounted to very little; though I did determine to go back to my home and starve to death rather than live one more day working for strudel stuffing Dachshunds in the city.

As I thought this the bartender brought me back one more double whiskey and a beer. “This is from the one you spoke with. He said to give you his thanks.”

“For what?”

“Your advice. He said he knows now what he must do.”

“Really?”

“Ja.”

Picking up the whisky I asked him the name of this Wolf. The fellow told me it was Adolf... but it wasn't until years and years after the second war that I remembered this strange meeting.

It was a gift that I had forgotten. It would have been a better gift if I had never remembered this meeting at all.