

POLICE DOG



A GRAND DAY OUT

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Posted on FurAffinity

Date: March 4, 2013

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Chapter 5: A Grand Day Out

July 1, 1984

08:00 Hours

New Forest, Hampshire, England

The back of the transport van was musty and crowded, there was at least twenty five of us Dogs stuffed shoulder to shoulder, sitting on the floor. The heat alone was near stifling, and that didn't even factor in the smell.

The lot of us, myself included, had only ever been in a vehicle a couple of times. It was one thing to be told about road sickness, but a whole different thing to experience it first hand. Sixty, sitting pressed to my right, had vomited over his knees not twenty minutes after we'd left the Kennel. The evidence of it was still on the floor, just inches from my toes.

I had no idea where we were. The only windows in the back of the van were high and near the roof, so small that you could only see just the slimmest glimmer of the overcast grey sky.

What I did know for sure was that I didn't like being driven around. We couldn't see what was happening on the road that was no more than a yard from us, but the lurching, squealing of tires, and occasional blaring of horns was enough to leave even me cringing.

No one knew what was going on. They hadn't told us where we were being taken when we'd been roused this morning. We'd simply woken up as per normal, been given breakfast, then instead of heading off for classes we'd been marched down to the vehicle bay and loaded unceremoniously into the vans. My entire room was in here, along with one or two others.

There were Dogs in here that I'd never seen before, not that I got to meet many that weren't in my immediate room.

I could smell their scents, but not a word passed between us, neither in greeting or curiosity.

There were no handlers in the back of the van, but we knew they were driving up front. We could hear them through the metal body of the truck, chatting idly about whatever it was that caught their fancy.

The only thing I knew for certain was that we'd passed by Heathrow at some point. And that was simply due to the number of aeroplanes that roared overhead. The other Dogs cowered at the sound, but not I.

The drone of traffic fell away the further we drove. For all I knew we could be going in circles,

I had no way to tell. We didn't even have anyway to judge time back here. We'd been given nothing as we'd loaded up, not a single timepiece or tool amongst us.

Forty-One was asleep on my shoulder when I felt the texture of the ground change beneath us. We were still hurdling forward at a headlong pace, but it was rougher now, and the sound of the world around us was muffled.

It wasn't long after that we came to a sudden, almost skidding halt. There was no question to it now, we were off the beaten path. I could hear the scrape of gravel beneath our tires.

"Fifty! Seventy-Eight! Forty! Out, out, out! Move it, you lot!" The stern voice of a handler came from outside the van's back door just a moment before it slammed open, drowning us in bright yellow morning sun. I didn't even get a chance to see what was outside before the requested Dogs had dove forward and escaped outside. The door slammed shut again so quickly after them that it almost caught the last one's tail.

It was only then that I noticed that they'd never quieted the truck's engine. We were off and rushing down the road again before I could even get my wits about me after being dazzled by the quick flash of sun.

And that was the way it continued. Two more stops and two more calls for teams of three Dogs apiece. It was on the forth stop that my own name was tallied off.

"Forty-Two, Forty-One, Sixty! Get a move on!" It was the same Handler as before.

I dove through the open door with my two brothers so close behind me that they could have yanked my tail.

My years of training were the only thing that saved me as I leapt to the ground. The light was dazzling after the dark of the van. I stood straight, rigid at attention in a world I still couldn't see. I didn't even know where the Handler was, I had no choice but to take a guess from where his voice had last come from.

The sound of the van door slamming shut again behind me was loud enough to almost make me jump.

"Which of you lot is Forty-Two?" The Handler's voice was curt and brisk. He wanted to keep moving.

"I, Sir." I adjusted slightly to face his voice. I still couldn't see him, but vague expanses of blue sky and brown earth were forming slowly before me.

"Fine." I could hear the sound of his feet in the dirt as he took a step towards me. "Here." An envelope was thrust into my hands. "Don't open it until told to do so."

And before I could even see him he'd climbed back into the van and was gone.

That left us standing stiffly at attention, half blind, facing nothing but an empty field.

The first thing I did after my vision cleared, even before regarding the envelope clutched in my hands, was to check to my left and right.

Forty-One and Sixty. The world was still right and proper.

I may not know where I was or what I was doing, but I still had my brothers.

I let out a quick huff of breath and fell from the strict attention that we all maintained. Forty-One and Sixty still held it, but I saw no reason to act like I was on parade when there were no humans around to grade me upon the performance.

Turning my attention to the brown paper envelope in my hands, I flipped it over, being sure not to open it.

I could smell the faint scent of Handler Llyal upon it. That alone did a small measure to calm me in these unfamiliar surroundings. The Handlers would never abandon us.

The handwriting scrawled across the front of the envelope was in thick black marker, its loops and curves familiar.

All it said was: Team 4. Forty-Two, Forty-One, Sixty. Drop point Brommy Lodge. Group type '3'.

Other than our names, the words meant nothing to me. I hadn't the slightest what or where 'Brommy Lodge' was, nor what group three might entail. It didn't matter. I'd either be told in good time, or I didn't need to know.

My eyes had cleared enough now that I could finally see the land around us. We were standing at a split in a narrow, pothole ensnared gravel country road. This was not the verdant rolling green hills that one would see on the traditional postcards of England.

Rather we stood on the rough and craggy heathland. There were trees and thick forests a ways off, but where we stood was nothing more than scraggy brown shrubs and bird picked bushes that came up to our shins, sprouting from the dry, sandy dirt.

The scents that wafted through the air were alone enough to send me spinning. This fresh air, the lack of soot and stench of London streets... the flowers. I don't think I'd ever smelt *so many* flowers.

And above all, the lack of man.

Dear Lord. Other than from the envelope in my hands I couldn't smell a single human anywhere.

I wasn't sure if I should be exhilarated or terrified.

I turned to glance to my companions, to see how they were taking this sudden change of scenery.

Sixty was still standing at strictest attention, eyes staring firmly off into the middle distance. He hadn't said a single word, hadn't moved since the truck had driven away.

He hadn't even bothered to wipe the vomit from his chest where it matted his fur. It was beginning to truly stink.

Stepping up to him, I gave him a slight poke to the meat of his shoulder with my sharp black claws.

"You can relax, brother, stand down. There is no reason to keep in parade when no one is here to watch us."

"I don't like it out here, brother." He never turned to me as he spoke, never responded to my poke. His voice was a whisper, like he was hiding the fact he was talking while under review. "Where are we, brother, why are we here? I..." His tightly held ears began to fold back to his skull, "I want to

go home, I want to go back to the Kennel."

"I'm sure you do, Sixty." I rolled my eyes slightly, "We all do. I haven't the slightest where we are or what we're doing, but we were commanded out here, so here we'll be." I held the sealed envelope closer to me, hearing its paper crinkle slightly in my hands. "At least until we know what we're here to do."

Turning from him, I shifted my gaze to Forty-One. He had, to my surprise, left his tight attention stance and was reclined out on the sandy soil beneath us, laying on his back with his head pillowed in his arms.

"It's a clear day out, brother." His voice was calm and moderated, like this was simply another day of training to him.

"What do you mean, little one?" I sat down roughly in the dirt beside him, throwing up a small cloud of dust in the process. It made me want to sneeze.

"The sky, brother." He gestured with his nose. "It is unusually clear, isn't it? You don't often get to see the true colour of the heavens back home."

I glanced upwards and was near immediately blinded by the glare of the sun. It took me a few moments, and the shading of a hand to my brow, before I could see the sky.

I'd seen blue sky before, of course, but... but not like this. There were the rare clear days in London, but the sky out here was a bleached light blue that looked more like it should be fast flowing in some clear stream than hanging suspended above us.

I joined him a moment later, flat out in the dirt, staring upwards. Not even a single cloud sailed past over our heads.

For a good half hour not one of us moved. Forty-One and I lay easily next to each other in the dirt and Sixty still stood at stiff attention not a yard away.

At long last I could stand his theatrics no longer.

"Sixty!" I barked, never sitting up. He stiffened but didn't say a word. "At ease."

"Brother..." at long last he spoke, but he never moved to look at us, "You don't have the authority to give that order."

I smiled, careful to keep my teeth covered. "Yes I do, Sixty. I was the one given the instructions for this exercise. That makes me the de facto head. Do as I say." My voice was nothing but casual.

He mulled it over for a moment, playing my, admittedly rather thin, logic back and forth in his mind. At long last he fell from attention to stand as our bodies were wont to. A heartbeat later he turned to regard Forty-One and I.

"What is going on, brother?" His voice was timid.

I shrugged as well as I could in the dirt. "The Lord knows. I have my orders to wait here for the command to unseal my envelope. That's what I'll do. Come, brother, join us." I patted the warm, soft dirt next to me.

Sixty looked at it dubiously for a moment before stepping over and stiffly lowering himself to the ground. He sat straight backed and rigid, like he was attending a lecture. He didn't lay down like Forty-One and I.

Some time later I heard the crackle of static on the air. It sounded like a radio.

Neither Forty-One or Sixty had heard it. They both perked up when I dusted myself off and went to investigate.

The sound came again, from just behind a tangle of bushes up the road. Stepping around them, I could see the tire tracks from where a truck had come to a halt not that long ago, perhaps a day or two.

Beside the tracks lay three backpacks. Beside one sat a hand-held wireless.

I reached out for it where it lay in the dirt. A gust of wind had likely pushed it off the packs to lay in the dirt and press its buttons.

A quick review of the equipment confirmed my suspicions, it was ours. Everything here from the radio to the packs and everything in them was monogrammed with the logo of the Police Canine Authority. The simple line drawing of a Dog kneeling within the outline of England made me smile and feel somewhat more at home in this alien place.

I called Forty-One and Sixty over to take their packs, one for each of us.

Digging quickly through mine, this didn't meet any regulations I could recall. There was little here. The packs themselves were heavy canvas covered steel frames like what a camper might use, but within there were only a few basic supplies. I was however happy to see each pack contained a large bag of kibble, enough for a couple of servings.

Well, it was an improvement. At least the radio let me know how they would be contacting us to inform me that I should unseal my orders.

And... well, that was it.

We'd been dropped off sometime in the late morning, now it had to be close to five in the afternoon and my belly was grumbling.

It was hard to finally tell myself that I should open my bag of kibble. I'd never had to make a decision like this before. Not for myself, and certainly not for others. There had always been a Handler nearby in the past to tell us when to eat. It was obviously time by now, but there was no one to give us the order.

I heard a crunch from beside me, Forty-One was playing with his sealed bag of kibble, pushing and pulling it, making it grind together.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

He glanced over to me and shrugged. "I guess." He paused for a moment, "How do you know if you're hungry?"

I was about to laugh when I pulled back. "I... uh, don't know. I guess it's when your belly hurts."

He shrugged again. "Okay. I'm hungry."

He turned from me and went back to playing with the sealed bag, never opening it.

I looked over to Sixty. "What about you?"

He narrowed his eyes for a moment, thinking. "Yes. My belly does hurt." His words came out in a clear monotone.

With a sigh, I opened my pack and pulled out my own bag of kibble. I didn't even bother staring at it for a moment before ripping it open with my claws. It wasn't like the metal bowls that we normally ate from, but we'd had to eat in the field before.

A look of horror crossed Sixty's face. "You can't eat! We haven't been given the order!"

I snorted. "Right. And where is the Handler who would order us? It's just us out here. I'm the leader of this team and I've decided it's time to eat. So eat."

I let my lips rise ever so slightly as I gave the command. Sixty didn't contest me.

I wouldn't exactly say the scent of kibble sent my mouth watering, but it was food and I was hungry. I ate.

Sixty ripped his own packet open with clinical precision a moment later, crunching down quickly and methodically on each pellet of kibble just as he should. I doubt he even tasted them.

Forty-One, however, just kept playing with his sealed bag.

"Aren't you hungry, little one?" I asked him.

He shrugged, never looking up at me. "Only a little bit. I'm not as big as you are. I don't eat as much."

I furrowed my brow. "I'm no bigger than you are, brother. We're all Police Dogs. We're all the same."

Now he did look up. "No we're not, brother. I'm smaller than Sixty, and he's smaller than you. Not by much, but it's enough. I'm not really hungry. My belly only hurts a little bit."

I sighed and let a slight smile slip to my lips. "As you say, *little one*. But it's still time to eat and you'll need your strength for whatever it is we've been sent out here to do."

He smiled back. "Alright, brother. Always looking out for me?"

I chuckled. "Yes, little one. That's what a family does."

Eating normally only took a matter of seconds back at the Kennel. Sixty was the only one to finish that fast out here.

He didn't even look like he wanted to eat the entire portion that had been packaged, but he finished it off none the less, just as a proper Dog should.

I, on the other hand, was admittedly hungry. I finished my food not because I *should* but because I wanted to.

Forty-One, not so much. He never even got half way through his ration before petering off, playing with it, something that would never be permitted back in London.

Tossing it about, he attracted a couple of squirrels and birds. They were happy to share in his generosity. Eventually, when even the wildlife had eaten its fill, he dug a small hole in the dry ground and carefully deposited the remainder here.

Sixty cocked an eye, but I was the only one to say anything.

"You're burring your food now, little one?"

A slight chuckle came from him. "If you like to think of it that way, brother. I don't expect to

collect it. We'll never be back this way again. I have no need for it, might as well return it to the earth."

I laughed at him, but he ignored me as he went about his self directed task.

It was another six long hours before the radio crackled to life.

The voice that came over it was so clear and sudden that it made us jump.

"Command to all Dogs." It was one of the handlers who had driven us out here. "The exercise has now begun. Unseal your envelopes and follow the instructions within. That is all." The radio fell silent again.

Well, that was that.

Reaching into my pack, I pulled the envelope from where I had stashed it. A single swipe of my claws and its seal came free.

Within were three copies of our instructions. I passed them around and we began reading in silence.

The papers were, like the envelope, monogrammed with the logo of the service. There was no doubt where the commands had come from.

At the top of the page were our names and the bold stamp of 'Group 3'.

The instructions were quick and to the point. This was a live exercise to demonstrate our abilities to operate independently while in the real world.

There were over four dozen teams spread out across New Forest, split up into three different types of groups. The hunters, the prey, and group 3.

The prey's task was simple enough. They were dropped off in one part of the forest and expected to make it to their preassigned destination.

The hunter's task was equally simple. They were given the names, scent, and destination of another team and expected to capture them before they made it to their goal.

Group 3, they didn't have a real name, just '3'. They sat in the middle between the two other groups. Not only were they given a target group to prey upon like the hunters, but they were also targeted by hunters themselves and had to escape to a given point while evading capture.

Yep. We were a group 3.

I enjoyed challenges, and there were no two other people I'd rather take this one with.

Glancing to either side, Sixty and Forty-One were also going over their orders.

Sixty was slow and methodical. I could just tell by the movement of his eyes that he was reading word for word, progressing at the exact words-per-minute that had been clinically defined as best for our comprehension.

Forty-One on the other hand... he'd turned the paper over and was folding it into shapes.

"What does it say, brother?" He didn't bother to look over to me when he spoke. He was too busy forcing his inhuman fingers to make the exacting movements to fold the paper into some form or another.

"Didn't you read it, little one?"

He shrugged. "Yes. But you always understand these things better than I do. I'll just do what you say, it's easier that way."

My eyes nearly bugged out when he said that... to take the command of a fellow Dog over that of an official letter from the Canine Authority...

He turned and smiled at me. "You always know best, brother. I always do better when I follow you."

The last line on the instructions said this: The exercise has begun.

Taking a deep breath, I waited until Sixty had finished his own reading. He was the slowest of us.

There had been a single additional item in the envelope, a map.

We were in New Forest, in the south of England. We'd been dropped off in the west of the reserve, near a place called Brommy Lodge. That explained the name on the envelope.

Our targets had been dropped off to our east, closer to Stony Cross. Their destination, and ours, was far to the south, next to the Solent. Our intel did not include where our hunters had been deployed, but I doubted it was far away.

Very well. It was time to set off.

A few barked orders and the three of us had our packs and were setting off cross-country.

The land here was nothing like what we were used to. We'd grown up on the level and polished floors and lawns of the Kennel. It wasn't so here. The low lying bushes and shrubs that covered the uncultivated ground hid all manner of holes and stumbling blocks. I'd first estimated our arrival at Stony Cross at being no more than a few minutes. I'd have to reassess that.

The sun was quickly descending now, plunging us into a natural darkness that seemed anything but natural to creatures such as us who were accustomed to the never dimming lights of the city.

At long last, with a few bruises and scrapes, we made it to the hamlet of Stony Cross. To call it even *that* was a bit of an overstatement. There were no more than a dozen buildings forming the entire community.

Without a word, the three of us spread out, pressing our noses to the ground, searching for the scents we'd been given of our prey.

It was Forty-One who found it, just off of the south of the A31 carriageway that cut through here.

Their scent was faint, suggesting that they may have set off before we'd gotten our instructions to move out.

No matter. We had both their scent and destination now, and could track them wherever they went.

Their path went south, heading almost straight towards the only large town in New Forest, Lyndhurst. That's where we went as well.

The sun was good and truly down now as we sprinted again cross-country.

I should have stopped, should have slowed down. It was obvious that we weren't prepared for this kind of exercise. We were far too unfamiliar with the land, it was only a matter of time before something went wrong.

I'd thought of a dozen things that could impede our progress, planned a hundred ways to avoid them or mitigate the issues.

What I hadn't planned for was something as simple as a twisted ankle.

Especially not my own.

The only light was that of the moon high in the sky, and that was only at waxing crescent.

I should have seen it, I should have avoided it.

A single bloody mole hole was enough to send me sprawling onto the ground with an undignified yip.

I was leading our group, Forty-One and Sixty behind me a half step. They both fell to the ground as I did, but their motions were merely a copy of mine, unneeded and unthinking.

"Brother?" It was Sixty, whispering in my ear. "What is it?"

I gritted my teeth and rolled onto my back, pulling my throbbing foot from the small, near invisible hole in the earth.

"I..." I huffed out a breath, fighting not to whine. "My foot."

A moment later I felt soft hands on the hot, already swelling flesh.

"Steady, brother. Lower your chest and keep your leg up. We must keep it above your heart."

Forty-One? He was the last person I expected to take charge in a moment like this.

"What is it, Forty-Two? We should keep moving, shouldn't we?" Sixty was still kneeling next to my ear, as if he didn't even realize what was going on.

"Sush, brother. Can't you see what's happened? Forty-Two has been hurt." The little one's tones were quiet and smooth in the night.

"Hurt? No. Forty-Two has never been hurt before." Sixty's tone was final.

I grunted out a laugh as Forty-One's soothing fingers worked up and down my ankle in the darkness. "There's a first time for everything."

"No." His tone was final. "You've never been hurt, brother. That's simply not what happens. You are well. Get up and lead us on. That's what you're here for. That's what you do. We should be going. We should be winning. Get up."

He reached down roughly and tried to loop an arm under my shoulders before I forced him back with a snarl.

"*I can't walk*, Sixty! My ankle is twisted. That's all there is."

"No." His voice was weaker now, smaller. "You can't be hurt. You're never hurt. Who will lead us? Who will win?"

I snorted. Letting out a long breath. "Not I, not tonight."

My words were brave, but my gut was rolling. How could I be so stupid? I'd been running for

less than an hour and I *did this*? The worst part was that I didn't even have anyone else to blame it upon.

I'd failed.

Forty-One must have felt something in my motions as he tugged and pulled at my wounded leg.

"Hush, brother. Be calm for just a moment."

I hadn't the slightest what he was doing down there, but there was little he *could* do. The human ankle was complex enough, having to support the whole weight of a man, and the true canine's was so different, being digitigrade, that it left the Dog's lower leg a nightmare of complex bones and joints to allow us to walk upright.

There was little Forty-One could do. There was little anyone could do until we got back to the Kennel and its proper medical facilities.

Blast it all, Forty-One and Sixty would have to continue on without me.

My first true test and I had failed almost before I started.

"Be still, brother." Forty-One's voice came again, calm and smooth. Then my leg lit up with fresh fire racing down me.

I nearly screamed, nearly bit my tongue in two. The pain would have been horrifying if I hadn't long ago steeled myself against the agony brought on by Dr. Brophy's shots.

As it was I was almost accustomed to such sensations. All that escaped my lips was a slight gasp.

"Very good, brother. I'm proud of you." Forty-One sounded surprised.

"What..." I had to pause for a moment, gasping for breath as my heartbeat spiked from the pain, "What did you do?"

"Set your foot, brother. I can do little more, but at least I can put the bones back where they should be. There doesn't feel to be anything broken, but the swelling is continuing none the less."

A moment later I could hear the tearing of fabric, heavy canvas.

"Stop with this silliness, Forty-One," Sixty cut in, on the edge of panic now, "Forty-Two is fine. He's always fine. Get up, lead us out of here."

Next came the clink of metal from Forty-One's direction. I could just make him out as he pulled apart his backpack, spilling its contents uncaringly across the ground.

"What..."

"Be still, brother. I'm fashioning you a frame, a splint. It will keep your foot still enough for tonight. You'll be unable to run, but it should allow you to walk... after a fashion."

"Where... how did you learn this, Forty-One?" Caring for other Dogs was well beyond the basic medical training we'd received.

He cocked an eye at me in the darkness. I could almost see a... something there.

"Extra training, brother. I've been pulled off some of my endurance runs now and again to receive it." He didn't say anything more.

A few seconds later he'd pulled his makeshift creation of canvas and aluminium poles tight

around my leg. The limb still ached, and I could feel it swelling under my fur, but it was a dull ache now, something I could suppress.

Sixty hauled me to my feet, almost before I could catch my breath.

"You are fine, aren't you, Forty-Two?" His voice was soft but splintered. "This is all just part of our test, right? To see how we react under stress?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes, Sixty. I'm sure it is. Let's move out."

Sixty under one arm, Forty-One under the other, we ran once again over the scrubby ground. Almost as fast as before.

I tightened my arm slightly around Forty-One.

We'd only been on the move again for a few minutes, ducking and weaving ungracefully through the trees when the wind brought a sound the left my ears twitching.

To a human it would have been nothing. Not even the crunch of last year's dried leaves... neither Forty-One or Sixty noticed it.

But to me... to me it was a warning.

"Faster." My voice was nothing more than a whisper as I tried to put more weight on my wounded leg. It did little good. A lance of fiery pain ran up my hip, leaving me gritting my teeth and panting.

"What is it, brother?" Forty-One's voice was equally soft as he turned his ears towards me, never slowing his pace.

"The hunters." It was taking everything I had to speak as we ran, stumbling over every rock and crag in christendom. "They've found us. I can hear them."

"No." Sixty's voice was flat. "They can't catch us. We can't lose the exercise. It's not who we are." He paused for a moment and glanced towards me, "It's not who *you* are."

A couple of seconds later we stumbled into a shallow river that meandered through the trees. Its soft and smooth surface was like a white mirror held against the moon light.

"They will not catch you." Sixty's voice was soft in my ear before his arm came away. I nearly fell face first into the stream when I lost his support.

"Come back!" I didn't dare do anything more than whisper, "That's an order!"

He didn't hear me.

I could just see the brown furred tail of Sixty as he disappeared through the trees, back the way we'd come. He didn't make even the slightest sound as he sprinted on two legs.

"Come, brother. We need to get you someplace safe," Forty-One said, soft voice coming from beside me. He was nearly buckling under my weight, yet I couldn't hear the stress in his voice.

We continued down the stream for a few hundred yards, the cool current was soothing against my hot and swollen ankle.

The water served another purpose. Its never ending flow would carry away our scent, make tracking us by smell impossible. But, on the other hand, we couldn't stay in the water forever. Not

only did it slow our progress but it was harder to hide the sound of our footsteps as we trudged.

At long last we came ashore, according to my map next to a place called Minstead. We both had to hold back the instinct to shake our coats free of water. Not only would it take time that we did not have, but it would also be far too loud.

Alright. I hadn't the slightest what Sixty was doing now, but we still had our orders. We had to find our prey.

"We need..." I panted out a breath as my leg fired up again, "We must stop. I need to study the map."

A few moments later we were bedded down in a small secluded gully. Its only redeeming characteristic was its open access to the sky. There was just enough light from the moon that I could clearly read the map I spread out across my legs.

Scraping my claws gently across the paper, careful not to rip it, I traced out the likely path of our prey.

They would keep to the woods, shying away from any roads or human habitation. That still gave us a chance to catch up to them. We could cut through the town of Lyndhurst, shaving miles off our trek and possibly getting ahead of them.

With a huff, I pushed back to my feet. Forty-One's arms looped around me before I could even so much as take a step. He wasn't strong, but he was warm.

It wasn't far to Lyndhurst, yet the journey seemed to take forever. With both Sixty and Forty-One supporting me we'd been able to move fairly quickly, that wasn't the case anymore.

But, at long last, the lights of town did slowly come into sight. Lyndhurst was not a large settlement by any measure, it was somewhat of a tourist town for those who came to get away from the press of the city.

It wasn't much, but the scent of humans around me again, even if they were fast asleep in their beds, was enough to calm my heart.

We weren't here for a sightseeing tour. Pushing as straight a line as possible, we pressed through the center of town, racing to get out the other side as soon as we could.

Even with my limp it only took moments to make it most of the way. Lyndhurst truly was a speck on the map. I noticed the blue box of the local Police Dog from the corner of my eye. He sat awake, even at this time of night, his overhead light on, doing paperwork.

He never glanced up at us as we passed by. He must have been informed of the exercise.

For a moment I wasn't sure if I felt pity or contempt for him. This was a nowhere assignment, a nothing placement. The entire town had a population of no more than three thousand. He must have been a wash out.

So be it. He was none of my concern at the moment.

We were passing through the heart of town now, a small maze of winding streets and alleyways that seemed to loop endlessly back on each other.

We hadn't seen a single human out on the streets all night.

The sound of claws clicking on the cobblestones behind me sent a chill up my spine.

We'd been found.

The hollow sound came at an all out run, drawing closer.

Pulling Forty-One's arm from my shoulder, I pushed him forward.

"Run." Was all I was able to get out. There was no way I could escape the hunters with my damaged leg. Forty-One was the only one left, he'd have to complete our mission alone.

"No." He stopped dead, turning towards me. "I won't leave you, brother."

We were in a narrow, twisting alleyway that wove between the buildings, there was nowhere to hide, nowhere to take refuge.

Forty-One wouldn't run and I couldn't. We waited, chins up and eyes narrowed for the hunters to descent upon us.

Only a single Dog stumbled out of the darkness, he fell at my feet, panting and dripping water. Sixty.

The Dog raised his head to me, I could see the whites of his eyes as he tried to focus upon my face.

"Brother." His voice was ragged as he tried to collect his breath.

"Sixty?" I awkwardly reached down to him, trying not to overbalance on my hurt foot. "What are you doing here? Where are the other Dogs?"

He looked away from me, suddenly refusing to meet my eyes.

"Behind me, brother. I lead them from your trail, but I couldn't shake them from mine."

"What!?" I gripped him by the scruff of his neck, pulling him savagely to his feet. "You led them right to us?"

"Yes, brother."

Never giving him a chance to finish catching his breath, I threw one arm over him and my other over Forty-One.

Turning my nose to the night wind, I took a deep breath.

There had to be one around here. There was one to be found in *every* town in England.

Yes. There it was.

"Go." I pointed with my nose and we were off down the cobblestones again.

A pub. It wasn't a big one, but it was enough. And, more of interest to me, it had a rubbish bin out back.

I could just hear the skitter of claws on the pavement behind us again. The hunters were there.

They were tracking us by scent, they had to be.

There was one easy way to throw off a Dog's sense of smell.

Reaching into the rubbish bin, I threw aside the lid, careful to aim it to the grass where it wouldn't make a sound.

The stench that came forth from the bin was enough to make me smile.

"What are you doing, brother?" Forty-One whispered.

"Escaping."

Sixty's eyes nearly bugged out as I began pulling rotted meat and other foul remains of the human's food from the bin. Their scents were enough to fill our noses instantly.

"Go." I let go of my brothers and leaned against the bin, "Run off and back, we'll need some false trails in addition to this stench to throw them off."

A few moments later it was done. Not only did we have a dozen false trails to throw off the other Dogs, but they would have a time of even finding them in the stench that surrounded us.

We left Lyndhurst a few moments later, my arms over both my brothers' shoulders as they pulled me on.

We were twenty minutes out of Lyndhurst when I called a halt to our run after we found the lee of a small, fast running brook. We still had the clinging wisps of the human's garbage about us. It shouldn't be too much longer before we caught up with our own prey, and we'd have to be sure not to tip them off with our stench.

The brook was clear and cold. We quickly rinsed what we could from our hands and feet.

Forty-One was still washing when Sixty returned to me, ready to go.

He didn't get the response he was expecting when I reached up to grab him by the throat.

"What were you thinking, you mongrel?" I had to fight to keep the growl from my voice. "You led them straight to us! You could have gotten us all captured!"

"I... Sir... please!" His voice was a croak.

I slowly forced my fingers to relax enough for him to get air.

"I... I'm sorry." He was on the verge of breaking down, voice faltering. "I... I didn't know what else to do, brother. I led them away, I truly did. But then I didn't know what else to do. You're the leader, brother. Not I. I... I needed you, I needed you to tell me what to do next." His eyes were wide.

I let go, giving him just a moment to compose himself before I lashed out at him with my claws.

I connected with his face, the right side of his muzzle. An involuntary yip escaped his lips before he pulled back from me.

"Never do that again, Sixty." My voice was cold as ice. "Never jeopardize a mission for your own comfort. We are Dogs. The mission, any mission, is always more important than we are."

"Yes, Sir." His voice was perfect and controlled.

I turned from him, now needing to wash his blood from my hands. The cuts I'd given him were superficial, but they'd bleed none the less.

In the reflection of the water before me I could see Forty-One silently tending to Sixty's wounds, as diligently as he had my own.

I wanted to turn to Sixty, to Forty-One, to wrap my arms around them and say I was sorry. Sorry for tripping in a mole hill, sorry for being the leader, sorry for pushing Sixty become the best Dog he could be.

But I didn't say a word.

Again we set out. My arms were wrapped tighter this time around my brothers, tighter than they strictly needed to be.

There was a natural north-south clearing up ahead, the perfect and logical place for a team of Dogs trying to avoid detection to use.

And, if my estimations were correct, our prey should be passing by here in no more than minutes.

A quick whispered command and we each found a depression on the side of the field to fall into unseen. The shadows were so deep that one could all but stand atop us and never know we were here.

I'd chosen this location was due to the wind. More vital than sight at this time of night, the wind was in our faces. It carried the scents of those coming our way to us while keeping us hidden.

We didn't have long to wait.

About ten minutes later three forms materialized from the night. They weren't coming from the direction of Lyndhurst.

They jogged slowly, checking each step as they took it, watching every shadow. They even moved like prey.

I'd done my best to place our trap directly in front of them, within easy reach. It seemed, however, that the Dog who led them was smarter than I'd expected.

There was a tradeoff to be made when one was skulking through the woods like this. You could stick to the trees where you had better protection but moved more slowly, or you could push out into the open field where you moved faster.

I'd expected the Dogs to strike out into the center of the field and make a run for it as fast as their feet would carry them. Rather, they hung near the edge of the trees, still hiding themselves in the deep shadows while gaining the advantage of open ground.

Drat.

That would take their course too far to the west for us to be able to simply reach out and tag them. And, with my bum leg we wouldn't be able to chase them down.

Curse my own stupidity. This hunt would have been in the bag long ago if I hadn't been such a fool.

My mind raced. I couldn't let them get past us. We'd never be able to catch up to them with my wound.

I did the only thing that came to mind. I screamed.

Not a Dog's scream, mind you. No, I forced my inhuman vocal cords into a shape I'd never tried before.

I screamed like a human.

And that was enough. The Dogs up ahead froze. It was bred deep into us, far overriding any mere exercise. We had to help.

The three Dogs who neared us were not the only ones who startled at the sound. Both Forty-One and Sixty jerked like I'd struck them with electric prods.

I ignored them.

Another inarticulate cry of pain from my lips and the three Dogs broke from their carefully planned exercise and ran headlong towards us.

Perfect.

Ten seconds later they were within reach.

The three of us sprang as one, a silent signal, an instinctual sign bringing us together as a pack for the hunt.

There was no concern for Sixty. I could just see him from the corner of my eye as he leapt, sailing through the air at his target. The other Dog, poor sod, was limp on the ground under Sixty's weight before he even knew what was going on.

My own hunt went almost as smoothly. Despite my injured leg I was still able to move fast enough to snake a hand over my prey's wrist. His eyes went wide when he realized that the cry he had heard was from no human.

A quick jerk and I brought him to the ground next to me. I was careful to ensure I didn't dislocate his shoulder in the process, but he would be sore by sunrise none the less.

My target was down and under control on the ground in a matter of heartbeats.

My lips were just beginning to pull into a smile when I heard a scuffle from my other side.

The smack of fist to flesh and Forty-One crumpled to the ground. His quarry had escaped, running off full flag under the moonlight.

"Sixty." My voice was sharp. "Go." I reached out a hand to restrain his target in addition to my own.

The other Dog was fast, there was no doubt about it, but he was only normally fast.

Sixty was the second best Dog of our generation. He caught the last of our prey well before he could escape.

And that was that.

Ninety-Five, Ninety-Six, and Ninety-Eight. We'd never met before, but they looked like carbon copies of us none the less. The only way to tell us apart was scent.

"You have been captured." My voice was low, but I had to hold back a chuckle. "Game over."

One of them lowered his head to me submissively.

"Acknowledged, Forty-Two." He looked up. "There was no human in distress?"

Now a laugh did escape my lips. "No. Only us. You need to be less gullible, Ninety-Five."

He didn't say anything.

We sent them packing off to their pickup point soon afterwards. We still had the second part of our mission to accomplish.

Turning Forty-One's face back and forth in the moonlight, I could see a couple of cuts and a nasty bruise from where the other Dog had struck him. Now I wished I'd ordered Sixty to take that bugger down more harshly.

So be it.

"Alright, Forty-One, what do I do now?" I was tending to his wounds under his direction.

"I will be alright, brother. You needn't worry about me. It's my own fault I was hurt."

"Nonsense." I drew a thumb tenderly down one of his cuts, trying to tease the dirt out. "He was a larger Dog than you. You couldn't have restrained him."

"All Dogs are larger than me, brother."

"What?"

"Was that fair, brother?" Forty-One's voice was a soft whisper next to me as he changed the topic, watching the other Dog's backs melt into the darkness. "That hardly seemed sporting to play upon their instincts like that."

I brushed him off as I prepared to get going.

"This is the real world, brother... or at least as close to it as we've ever come. Anything is fair as long as we win."

I frowned as I said those words. They were almost an exact echo of what Handler Proust had once told me back when I was being given my injections.

Sixty didn't say a word. He simply watched me. Watched and learned.

"We need to be setting off, brother." I struggled to my feet, looping an arm over him. "We'll discuss it after we win. Together."

We set off south again, hobbling along as quick as we could.

My map had a destination marked on the far side of New Forest, out next on the coast of the Solent.

The moon was near directly above us now. We had until sunrise to meet our goal before the exercise ended. We'd have to hurry, we weren't making good time.

It was no more than twenty minutes before a sound came from behind us.

Once again three canine forms were pushing towards us from the darkness.

Oh dear.

"Faster." I tightened my grip around my brother's shoulders and pushed them onward.

Behind us, the other Dogs closed the distance.

I would have pulled the map from my pack if I had the arm to spare. I knew there had to be a train track up here somewhere...

Yes. There it was. Looking like a scar across the otherwise virgin land, a track split the world in two, cleaving it cleanly like an old wound puckered up and half healed over.

And, if my ear's didn't deceive me, I could hear something moving in the distance.

A slight shift of my weight and we angled to the east, towards the sound. This was a long shot, but there were few options to waylay the hunters that were once again on our trail.

Off in the distance, like a star fallen to earth, I could just make out the single headlamp of a locomotive.

"Faster, brothers." I pushed them on again. I felt so useless to be unable to run on my own, instead relying upon them for everything. "We must make the tracks before the train reaches us."

"But, brother," Sixty was breathing heavily now, "Procedure states that we are to stay away from active tracks."

I didn't bother to say anything as I gave him another tug.

The problem in the end was not that we didn't make it to the tracks before the train, but rather that we made it too soon.

I had to keep changing the angle of our approach to a shallower and shallower line. The space between the hunters and us was narrow enough now that I couldn't risk crossing the tracks right away and giving them enough time to follow.

I could just make out the locomotive behind its glaring light as it almost blinded me in the darkness. It was an electric-diesel, that was all I could tell. We'd learned about trains once, long ago. All I knew was that I didn't want to get caught under it.

We were on the rough and bumpy right of way now. Both Forty-One and Sixty were fighting to make sure their feet didn't go the way of mine in the treacherous rocky soil.

"Not yet, my friends," I glanced over my shoulder to the other Dogs. They were closing the gap with each second, no more than a couple dozen yards behind us now.

It was obvious that they knew my plan, but they weren't brave enough to jump the tracks. A smart Dog would have split his team, sent one of them over the tracks already, but they were frightened. They didn't want to split up in this unfamiliar place.

The sound of the approaching train had grown with each second. When I'd first heard it there was little more than a gentle rumble to the night. Now the air itself seemed to vibrate with the racing heartbeat of the man made machine that shot towards us.

A single whistle broke the night, screaming from the locomotive. It would have been enough to make me jump if my feet had been on the ground.

Sixty hardly seemed to notice it, but Forty-One cowered beside me, pressing his face into my shoulder. But neither of them stopped running.

"Wait for it, my brothers..." My eyes were focused on the locomotive as it ate the distance between us at a frightening pace. It was no more than a couple hundred yards from us now...

A hundred...

Fifty...

"Now!"

With a kick, I turned our little pack and we scrambled over the railway tracks, claws scraping in the gravel as the train bore down on us.

The sound of its whistle broke the night again, growing lower and deeper as it approached.

The vacuum of its passing pulled at our backs as we cowered not a yard from the tracks.

The hunters were on the other side.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Never stopping, I glanced back over my shoulder. There was no end to the train in sight.

That would buy us precious minutes.

Our tongues were hanging from our mouths and foam flecking at the edges of our lips as we finally neared our destination.

I'd lost track long ago of how long we'd been running. All I knew for sure was that the moon had moved no small distance in its orbit over our heads.

We could just see the shimmer of the ocean in the distance.

And, ever so slightly closer, a small glimmer of light, a torch to help us find our destination.

"Brother," Forty-One's voice was rough and ragged beside me, he sounded ready to topple over. "We have been found."

Glancing back once more, my heart dropped.

They had come for us again.

Their steps were as stiff and laden as ours, but they gained on us none the less. They didn't have the handicap of carrying an extra body.

I took a deep breath and lowered my head.

"Brothers," I could barely speak, "Let me fall. You can make to the goal without me."

They didn't stop running.

"Brothers!" My voice was stronger now.

"No." It was Forty-One. "You will not fail." His voice was soft, but he spoke without fear. "Sixty," He glanced over to the other Dog, "You are to take Forty-Two. Win. It's what the two of you do."

"What?"

I hardly got the word out before stumbling, almost falling into the soft turf as his support disappeared from under me.

I had just the narrowest glimpse of him turning, disappearing back towards the shadows that hounded us.

I was about to turn myself, find someway, anyway, to bring him back to me.

That was when Sixty grabbed me about the chest. He never even broke stride as he crouched down, pulling me up and over his shoulders in a fireman's carry.

No longer needing to follow anyone's pace but his own, the Dog sped up beneath me. I watched the silty soil disappear beneath us, slowly giving away to sand.

Shifting, I kicked while held aloft by Sixty, almost causing him to trip. I could just see Forty-

One as he intercepted the hunters.

The other Dogs had no idea what to do with him. They'd been told that the prey would run, try to escape. Forty-One charged straight into their midst.

A heartbeat later they contacted. The other Dogs reached out for him with their clawed hands.

Forty-One stepped calmly into the embrace.

The last I saw before we rounded a bluff was Forty-One struggling valiantly to remain upright while three Dogs, all larger than he, fought to drag him down.

He didn't fight back.

Seconds later Sixty skidded to a stop in front of an electric lantern that dangled from an old stone wall on the seaside. There was a paper hung under it that read 'Team 4 destination'.

Sixty reached out to lay a shaking hand upon the paper.

"Quickly, brother." He turned to me, eyes wide. "Before they come."

I slid from his shoulders, wincing as fire shot up my leg. I could see the hunters still coming towards us, slower now, with Forty-One held tightly in their arms.

I could just see the flash of Forty-One's blue eyes in the darkness. He nodded to me.

It didn't matter what you sacrificed as long as you won, as long as you were the best.

I reached out and set a single claw tip upon the paper sign. My hand was as steady as the stone.

I left a long ragged tear in the paper as I drew my finger down.