

POLICE DOG



A NIGHT AMONGST THE RUINS

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Chapter 9: A Night Amongst the Ruins

June 4, 1988

06:00 Hours

West Woodburn, Northumberland, North East England

Master Constable Proust had departed yesterday afternoon, just shortly after the church fire had been finally doused. He'd left that for me to deal with. No sooner had I put the case of Jonathan Hyatt to bed than I now had a possible arson to investigate.

And that still left the murder of Zack Crow in my docket.

Now that I was on my own again it was time to start acting like a proper Police Dog and get to work. I'd been so busy looking presentable for the Master Constable that I'd let my duty slip. The one thing that should matter above all else.

I may be ready to act like a Police Dog, but I hardly looked like one. My dress clothes were stained and tattered to the wilds and back, leaving me with only my ill-fitting backup uniform. I put it on anyway and ventured once again out into the predawn gloom of north England.

It was six in the morning, and not a soul was yet awake in West Woodburn. There had been a ruckus wake for Jonathan last night and I doubted that many in the community would be rousing anytime soon.

What to do first? The evidence in the arson was fresher, but the case was less important. Little was of greater concern than a murder. That, and to investigate the arson would require me to seek the company of Reverend Benson.

I next found myself in front of the 'Crown, where Zack had met his death. There was little to see now. What the other Dogs had not cleaned up time and the passage of traffic had quickly worn away.

I'd considered contacting the nearest detachments, north in Hawick and south in Hexham, to check of any unusual vehicles passing through but that would have been little more than useless. There were dozens if not hundreds of side streets that the motorist could have taken to evade detection.

Instead, I did what I was designed to. I put my nose to the ground and fought to turn my unnatural sensitivity to blood to my advantage. Even the vague lingering scent of blood on the asphalt was enough to set my nerves on edge and singing. It was like the trail of the motorcar was light up by an invisible fire.

I followed it down the street and out of town. It made a hard right a few hundred yards on, veering onto a dusty farm road. Tracking it was harder here. Not only were the scents of the countryside closer, but the grit of the road had stuck to the blood on the tiers, wicking it away to fall by the wayside.

It was a few hundred yards more when I came to the first cross roads. There were neither obvious tracks to follow, nor a useable scent of blood.

Well... that did say something. With the driver heading down these country roads, and taking effort to remove the scent of blood from their vehicle, it was likely that it hadn't been some random passerby who had struck down Zack. That meant it had to be a citizen of town or the farms nearby.

There was no way a panicked tourist would have seen this all but invisible turnoff in the dark of night, nor had the presence of mind to take it the moment they left town. Anyone trying to escape the scene of the crime would have simply continued to drive south to Hexham, or at least taken one of the more apparent intersections.

That changed the game completely... I'd already concluded that it had to be someone from town, but seeing the evidence firsthand made me shiver yet again.

West of the town as I was, I'd already ventured close to the old Roman fort of Habitancum, where I had tracked my unknown sprinter some nights ago. I all but smacked myself in the head as I set off across the fields. I should have returned to investigate the unknown suspect that same night.

Someone with information about the crime had been here, and I'd been too thick headed to continue tracking him down. Some Police Dog I was, I couldn't even follow standard procedure when lives depended on it.

I had been too wrapped up in the monster I'd become to even keep my mind on the job I was here to perform. I deserved to be here. I deserved what I'd got.

The sun still wasn't above the horizon as I neared the standing stones. The predawn light cast everything in a vague, hazy grey gloom. Fog had risen from the ground and left my uniform damp, cloying and sticking to my fur.

The shadows were little different now than they had been last I'd stood here. The ground was carpeted with lush green overgrown grass and weeds that came up to my ankles and the air smelt of due and late summer flowers. There was no one here now. Not even the ghosts of the Roman soldiers that had once manned this small island of civility in the wild land that had been the Isles.

I leaned upon one of the stones for a moment, the pads of my fingers brushing the chips and flecks that might have onetime been intricate carvings.

It was an odd thought... centuries ago, before the birth of the modern God, men had stood here and protected themselves, their families and society, against the great untamed wilds that surrounded them.

They protected themselves against the creatures that had once stalked the hills and furrows of this land. Including wolves.

I didn't bother to deceive myself. I had as much in common, genetically, with undomesticated wolves as humans did with the great apes. My bloodline had been cleaved from the wolves of Europe millenia ago, then bred for centuries to create the German Shepherd line. And that was before the geneticists had begun their work.

I don't howl. I don't bark. I doubt I even growled much more than an average human male did. But yet... but yet I wasn't human, I didn't descend from monkeys like my masters had. They had formed and shaped me in their own image, but I was not one of them.

I don't know if it was the memory of last being out here on the hunt, or perhaps an aftershock of the near deadly outburst I'd had that forced me to use my drugs, but an itch formed at the back of my mind and it wouldn't go away no matter how hard I tried to smoothen it.

I don't howl, really, I don't. I've never done it even once in my life... but for some odd reason I now wanted to.

It was a different sensation than any that had come over me before, as difficult to put words to as it was to grasp.

I'd had many times in my life when my body had wanted, and occasionally demanded, something that my analytical mind simply couldn't grasp. It could be anything as simple as a twitch of the tail when I was happy to the urge to display my belly when I was seeking forgiveness from a superior.

This was different. Every other time it had been unconscious, as uncontrollable and automatic as a sneeze. This was different. This was a thought, a yearning, a desire. Something with form and volume. It was part of my conscious mind, something that interacted with the bits of me that read and wrote, those parts of me that were a Police Dog, not just a dog.

I *wanted* to howl.

Falling down to my haunches, back resting against the cool stone, I let out a slow breath that misted in the cool air. A moment too late I felt the seat of my trousers rip. My tail wriggled freer, the hole that had already been there was wider now.

I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to howl, to sing. But, to be honest, I didn't know how. I'd never done it before, never even wanted to, neither had any of my brothers or sisters while we'd been growing up. It was something we knew of from our ancestry, from what we had been taught about in books, but nothing we had ever experienced.

I didn't even know what it sounded like. Now that I thought about it, I knew vanishingly little about the species I represented. I'd never even seen a true dog, likely so much as a fellow German Shepherd.

All the reasons not to didn't stop the tickling at the back of my mind. I threw my head back and howled to the empty predawn sky.

The sound that came forth from my throat was little more than a croak. I was trying to force my vocal cords into a shape that they had been explicitly bred away from, a form that was at odds with the civilized act of speaking. I nearly vomited when I tried again. The feeling was so alien as to almost come across as something else wriggling within me, apart and alive. My body was moving half of its own violation. I only seemed to guide it now and then, helping it to stay within the lines that were enforced by my Frankenstein's physiology.

The next attempt came out clearer, and my fourth and fifth echoed off the stones, bouncing back to my ears and making it feel as though I were with my family again. Not exiled out to this small scrap of civilization where none of my own kind set foot.

The wailing cry that escaped my lips now did not sound the least bit like a true canine. My ears

could pick out the malformations easily, even though I hadn't the slightest what it *should* sound like. It came across like a familiar, long forgotten song heard over the telly. The pitch, the highs and lows, they were all wrong, but you could recognize it for what it was all the same.

I paused for a moment, waiting for anyone, anything to return my call. Nothing but the enveloping predawn silence boomed back at me. Not even the echoes of my false pack hung in the air any longer.

I wasn't sure if the exercise left me feeling better or worse, but it did leave me drained.

I could just see the first faint touch of the sun beginning to edge over the horizon as I slowly levered myself off the ground. Brushing at the dirt stained seat of my trousers, I could feel far more fur than was either proper or presentable. The rip was growing, leaving my rear end all but hanging out for all to see.

I circled the pillars, pacing round and round, not sure where to go. This was my only true lead to discover what had happened to Zack. Someone had been here, and he had seen something, though I hadn't the slightest what.

Well, it wasn't much to go on, but it was all I had.

There was nothing left to do, the grass was too overgrown to show any tracks. That left me with yet again a single option. Scent.

Not that the outlook was good. If the runner had any sense at all he would be leagues from here by now, but I couldn't slink back to my box without trying.

I had to fight back a slight shudder of revulsion as I lowered myself to all fours again and clumsily moved forward, nose to the ground.

Walking like this was one of the basest things to a Dog like me, a symbol of the old heritage that the breeders and geneticists had fought so valiantly to lift us from. The only acceptable time to move like this was when we were tracking a scent.

Criss-crossing the center of the old fort, there was nothing to follow but my own footsteps since I had so recently arrived. As I feared, the runner had been too intelligent to return to the scene of our confrontation.

In desperation I slowly corkscrewed out, grasping for any faint scent I could that might lead me onward.

For what seemed like hours I encountered nothing but the trails of mice and birds, even a lone fox had weaved through the undergrowth. They did nothing but leave my stomach grumbling for the kibble I had left uneaten back at my box. Yes, that was it. My stomach was crying for kibble. Nothing more.

I was just about to give up when something alien flirted tantalizingly at the edge of my perception.

The wind had shifted, a strong, cold breeze from the west. It carried with it the scent of something I couldn't place. But I could recognize.

The runner had returned after all, he just hadn't dared come too close to our meeting place.

The wind blowing firmly into my face, I strode slowly forward. It wasn't until I'd reached the nearby outcropping of trees, a hundred feet away, that I realized that I was still on all fours. Quickly, I

shifted back to a proper, civilized, stance, glancing around guiltily to make sure no one had been watching.

This was where he had been, I could smell him clearly now. Something about his scent – yes, it was definitely a him – tried to bring forth more instincts like my howling. I quashed them quickly and savagely. They were not all so benign.

I still couldn't place who or what he was. He wasn't human... I think. But that would more than likely make him a Dog such as me, and his scent certainly didn't match that of any Dog I could imagine. He smelt more like a farm I had once passed on the way up to West Woodburn from London.

I had more important things to worry about now. I had his scent, no matter where he went I could find him now.

The trail was relatively fresh, no more than a day old. This was no criminal mastermind. Not only did he return to the scene where we had met last, he also didn't bother to take the time I had so foolishly given him to clear out of the area.

I had to put my nose back to the ground in order to track him, but it was a small price to finally feel like I was doing my duty. Acting like a true Police Dog for once in my life.

The trail led on for hours, across the fields and through brooks and shallow, stony streams. It very nearly seemed to skirt the Scottish mountainsides to the north, as though looking for a pass.

The sun was well into the sky by the time I caught up to him. I didn't have to worry about stumbling upon him blindly, I could see the smoke from his campfire a mile off.

I paused and rested on my haunches as I looked down into the shallow valley that held him. I couldn't see him yet, the corpse of trees between us prevented that.

I could only wish I had brought my needle and thread with me. The rip in the seat of my uniform's trousers had grown during the trek. They were never designed for the type of movement that a four legged gait required. I'd just have to make sure that I didn't turn around while I spoke to him – that would be embarrassing. Not that my fur left anything to see.

I padded silently forward, the soft crackle and pop of flame was the only sound to disturb the barren countryside.

I froze upon rounding the final tree that separated me from the traveller. He was not what I had expected.

Not that I was sure what to expect with his scent confusing me so, but not a Russian Horse.

He was asleep under the clear blue sky, open to the elements. Not even so much as a thin blanket covered him as he lay beside the slowly dying fire.

I'd heard of the Russian Goddard's animals over the course of my training, but I'd never expected to ever meet one. They were as common in the U.S.S.R. as clover in Ireland, but they almost never crossed the iron curtain.

He was massive. I was well larger than an average human, at least a good two feet taller than a fair sized man, and he was again that of me.

His body was built along the same basic design as I, bipedal with a more or less human form, but it was his feet and face that differed to the point of being alien.

That, and his scent.

I didn't want to think of his scent. Stronger now as I stood closer to him, it woke urges in me that didn't mesh well with my analytical mind. Like the emotions that had drawn me to howl – only multiplied by the hundred fold.

His head was as equine as mine was canine. A long face, covered with the same velvety dark brown fur that enrobed him was tipped in a snout that looked far more bestial than what I liked to think my own carefully refined lines reflected. There were the remains of a white streak that tried to trace its way down the creature's face. It was blotchy and indistinct, either in the early stages of being bread in or the late stages of removal.

I could only just see his hands as he held them close to his chest. The hands were always one of the hardest parts to implement properly on creatures like us, second only to the mind itself. He had only three thick stubby fingers on each hand, pressing backwards towards a descended thumb that looked like it had no business being there, as though it had been all but stitched on after the fact.

His entire body seemed to follow the same appearance now that I had a moment to take it in. His form looked like a poor mishmash of multiple designs that had been combined over time, like his breed had been passed through many hands with no one single guiding force or vision.

Was 'breed' the proper term to use for a Horse? I didn't even know. The British government hadn't any such programs for me to compare him to.

Slowly, taking painstaking care with every step, I edged further into camp. There wasn't much here to see.

The rough fire pit that lay smouldering before him was one of the few signs that the creature held even a glimmer of intelligence. That, and a truly titanic backpack that lay by his side.

I couldn't read Russian. Battling the red menace had never been part of my stated design, too close to military operations, but the symbols on the pack were unmistakable. It was made of rough canvas and tied down with coarse rope and leather straps.

Well, there was little more I could do without waking him. I'd tracked him here, but I hardly had a warrant to bring him into custody, and where would I put him anyway? And I wasn't about to go digging through another creature's personal possessions, no matter how foreign he might be.

"Hello? Hello! What's all this then?" I'm not sure why, but I could feel a bit of an Old English twang work its way into my speech. My own voice seemed to want to buttress itself from the unknown dialect the creature would likely sport.

The change was so subtle that it would have been all but invisible if I hadn't been watching for it. Even then there was little more than a slight twitch to his limbs as he woke.

"Come on there. I know you're awake." I let my voice soften. I wouldn't much care for it either if I had been so rudely roused.

He still didn't respond. I edged forward ever so slightly to nudge one of his feet with a toe. My claw made contact with his foot and we both instinctively pulled back from that unwelcome sensation.

His toes were like his hands. Not human, but not equine either. There were no hooves on him, but his leg came down like it still expected there to be. His limb ended in an odd, hardened stump that was stiff and callused black, but held neither toes nor hoof.

The sensation that had run through me when the black claw of my foot had touched him left me feeling dirty. He wasn't *right*. But, then again, I'd just as soon bet he'd had the same thought about me.

Eventually he rolled onto his back and sat up. I didn't even need to order him to move slowly and keep his hands in sight. He did it without my bidding.

His eyes kept darting around the whole time, peering into the trees around us, as if expecting something more.

He began to speak, it sounded more like the boulders of a mountain rumbling together than any human tongue. My best guess was that he was rambling on in Russian, but it was so much jibber-jabber to me.

"Wait, wait." I held my hand out before him, not willing to come in contact with him again. "Do you speak English? You're in England. You must speak English for them to have sent you here."

"Кто вы такие? Что вы от меня хотите?"

I just lay a hand on my forehead and sat back in the grass. This was getting us nowhere.

"Anglais. Qu'avez-vous dit? Pouvez-vous parler anglais?" Slowly, I tried falling back upon the other languages I had been taught, one after another. That only seemed to leave him more confused.

"Okay, big fella." I huffed out a breath and rolled by eyes heavenward, "You either have to come to a sudden breakthrough or I'm going to send for the Russian consulate."

The threat of his fellow countryman seemed to give him pause. When next he spoke it came in halting and heavily accented English. Understandable, though the words were gruffed to the point of almost being grunted out.

"I speak English. Little."

"Thank God." I rocked forward from my sitting position, focusing more intently upon him.

"God has nothing to do with it, English товарищ. Neither of us would have anything to say to God, even if we were ever so much to meet him."

Huh? How did we suddenly get to philosophy?

"Whatever you say. What's your name?"

He began spouting random syllables again, the most I was able to get out of it was 'Xopt'. Kind of like 'top', but with the first letter pronounced with a zed sound. I repeated it back to him and he nodded somewhat reluctantly.

"And yours, Wolf?" My ears twitched when he called me that.

"I am not a wolf. I am a Police Dog." I felt a bit indigent, despite the fact I knew it was silly. I'm sure it was nothing more than the translation roughing up his words.

"Nyt." He waved a massive hand in my direction. I could hear the air pass as it moved. "All of you are Wolves. We have those of you in home. All are волк. Not matter what you say." I let the point drop. "And name. What is yours?" He was becoming more animated now, holding my gaze rather than peering into the trees behind me.

"Forty-Two. My name is Forty-Two."

"Nyt." His brows lowered at me. "Forty-Two is not name. Is number. What is name?" His accent was becoming even thicker now as he huffed out breaths.

"My name is Forty-Two." He huffed at me again as I spoke, muscles flexing under his coat. I

knew I was going to regret this. "But you can call me Jonathan."

He seemed to relax a measure at that. "Da. You are Jonathan? Then we speak like the beasts we are. What does Wolf Jonathan want of me?"

"Were you the one I saw a couple of nights ago? Back in West Woodburn?" He looked confused when I mentioned the name. "Back in the town. Were you the one I saw back in town?" I truly hoped it was him. I'd hate to have more than one of his kind traipsing about out here.

"Da. Was. Wolf Jonathan chased."

"Why did you run from me?"

"Ran because Wolf chased me."

"I only chased you because you ran."

"Then we were as nature intended, Nyt? Wolf chases Xopf, Xopf run from Wolf."

I sighed and sat back down, leaning against an old and gnarled oak tree. This creature had the most confusing way of running in verbal circles and diverging on tangents that seemingly made sense to no one but him.

"What did you see, Xopf? What did you see back at the town before I arrived?"

"Nyt. See nothing." He crossed his massive tree trunk arms over his chest. "Xopf see nothing. Safer that way."

I narrowed my eyes at him slightly, but refused to lean forward. "That's not the way it works here, Xopf. I'm a police officer, and you have to tell me if you saw anything. That's the way it works."

"Nyt. Is not police, is Wolf. Much different."

"I am police, you Russian fur job." I couldn't help the growl that clawed at the back of my throat. He shied away at even the hint of that sound.

It took me a moment to realize... he was afraid of me. And his eyes were continuing to dart to the trees around us, searching for moving shapes that weren't there.

He truly thought I was a Wolf, and that I'd brought my pack with me.

"Nyt!" His eyes were spinning now. "Wolf can not do anything to Xopf. Xopf has done nothing wrong! Just want to go home!"

I held my hands out to him again, trying to calm my voice, "It's just you and me, Xopf. There's no one else here, no other Wolves. Just you and me. We're alone."

He paused, taking a deep breath. I could feel the air move, even from over a stride away. "Wolf is alone?"

"Just us, Xopf. I promise. But I still need you to tell me what happened. What did you see?"

He fell silent for a long moment, sitting so still that I almost thought he had returned to sleep. "Wolf Jonathan will protect Xopf? Help return home?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure if I can help you get home, but I will assure your protection as far as it is extended by the law." I didn't bother to tell him that the law provided few comforts for creatures like us, and likely even fewer for foreign constructions such as him.

"Saw it. Xopf saw it. Saw weak man killed. Was killed by cart." Cart? Well, I guess that was

his description of vehicular homicide. I already knew that much.

"What else did you see? Did you see who was driving?"

He paused again, thinking. I could almost see the gears grinding in his large head, deciding what he was to say. And more importantly, what he wouldn't.

"Saw man look out of cart. Was in shadow, was in black. Looked out of cart then went off. Went away. Later Wolf Jonathan came and screamed on ground."

"That's good, Xopf. That's all I need." I was eager to divert him away from recounting my episode. I hadn't realized that he'd seen that too.

"No need worry about cart. God will not punish, but we, creations, we make right."

What in the world was he talking about now?

The Horse paused for a moment as he crinkled his nose and looked at me. "Wolf Jonathan not smell as he did then. What wrong with Wolf? Was Wolf before, not so much Wolf now."

I stood up quickly and backed away from him, trying to get downwind, almost stumbling over the gnarled roots of the oak as they seemed to insinuate themselves between my feet.

"What do you mean 'was Wolf'?" I didn't want to know the answer, but I couldn't keep myself from asking as I backed away.

He shook his head, huffing in another breath. "You were Wolf. You smell like Wolf then. You move like Wolf then. You not the same now."

I was as far from him as I could be now while still in camp, making sure to stay downwind.

"Okay, Xopf, I need you to do something for me." I wasn't sure what I was doing, but I couldn't let the beast leave. And I couldn't take him back to West Woodburn where he might speak to someone. "I'm placing you under arrest." His eyes widened slightly as I spoke. I wasn't sure if he fully understood what I was saying, but he did seem to get the gist of it. "You're part of my murder investigation now. I can't let you go."

"But Wolf Jonathan promised to protect Xopf. Said he would help Xopf get home."

"I *will* help you, Xopf. You're safe out here. You're under arrest now, and you can't leave the campsite. Do you understand what I'm saying, Xopf? You need to stay here. Don't leave."

His massive head fell slightly in a nod... or perhaps a bow – I wasn't sure which.

"Xopf will stay here until Wolf Jonathan comes back for him. All Xopf wants is to go home, keep going north until Xopf gets home to family. Not like it here with Party who brought him. Only want to go home."

I looked around at the meagre campsite, there was practically nothing here other than his oversized pack. "Do you have enough to eat, Xopf? Do you need me to bring you supplies?" I was suddenly dreading the thought of having to provide for him. What would a titanic creature like him eat, anyway? And a better question was how would I pay for it?

"Nyt." He shrugged. "I eat what I find. Am designed to."

Well, that solved that problem. Maybe he was a grass muncher. I'd never heard of a herbivore Goddard's animal, but there was always time for a first.

I left Xopf in his small dell soon after. I wasn't sure if I really wanted him to be there when I came back.

The walk back to town was long and tiring, but far more leisurely than the trek out had been. Without my nose to the dirt I was able to see, and to some degree appreciate, the verdant green fields around me. We were a long way from any road – the Russian had a talent for keeping far from traffic. I couldn't even see any houses or farm animals from the vague path I walked.

A good question was what the Horse was even doing up here anyway. I'm guessing he must be from some Russian delegation sent over, there was no other way he could have ever gotten into the country, but one would expect they would have kept a close eye on him. It's not like we wanted a commie creation running unsupervised over hill and dale.

Now there was a thought... was he a commie? Was he part of the red menace? That was like saying that a shovel made in a Russian factory was evil, like a child born to Russian emigrants was a commie by virtue of blood alone. Then, on the other side of the coin, what did that make me? I was a Police Dog, property of the crown, did that make me nothing more than a shovel or gun to England? Was I part of the West, or was I simply manufactured by the West as a tool like anything else?

They certainly had enough of us. Police Dog breeding had increased so much over the last few years that, other than remote villages like this, we seemed to all but be on every street corner now. I came from the Kennel like all the others, did that make me mass produced?

A slight stitch in my gut lit up where I'd stabbed myself with the needle a few nights ago.

No. I was one of a kind. *I* was not mass produced. All of my brothers and sisters may be, but I was special, I was different.

Was I? Truly?

How did I know that despite the Master Constable's words I was the only one of my kind? Well, that was simple – they would have killed me long ago if they could make another to stand in my place.

I had to be different, unique. Every human is a being in their own right, why not Dogs? Or, at a minimum, why not me?

The clear sky that had been over my head back when I'd met Xopf around noon was quickly being defeated by the dark clouds that blew in from the east, the sea. They were not simply the normal dark storms that one would expect to encounter, they rolled and boiled from within, ugly sheens of green and purple bubbling through. I doubled my pace, all but sprinting to make it the last few miles back to town before they opened above me.

I almost made it. West Woodburn was just coming into sight when the heavens let loose their floodgates, drenching me instantly to the bone in a cold downpour that soaked through my uniform and fur coat without so much as a second's pause.

The smoke that curled up from the chimneys here reminded me of how I'd found Xopf's camp. I hoped he had some shelter in the massive pack of his. He'd need it.

My box was as I'd left it, not quite shiny and new, but hardly as run down as it had been but a few days ago.

Stepping within, I left the door open a crack as I disrobed. Dishearteningly, I discovered that the seat of my trousers had come completely off. I'd walked all the way home giving the world a show. Not that there was much to see, mind you. I'd gone the first eight years of my life nude, back at the Kennel... but it felt odd now.

The shirt was little better, walking on all fours had stretched the seams along the arms to the breaking point. All in all, the whole uniform was a loss.

There were a million things I should be doing now, everything from patrolling to paperwork. But instead I sat back on my simple wooden stool, staring out at the graveyard across the way.

I listened to the rain patter on the roof of my box. I wasn't sure when, but I nodded off at some point, memories of howling running free through my mind.