

# POLICE DOG



# UNEXPECTED AID

By: wwwolf

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## Chapter 10: Unexpected Aid

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*June 5, 1988*

*10:00 Hours*

*West Woodburn, Northumberland, North East England*

The day began late the next morning, despite the fact it was unheard of for me to ever sleep in. I'd even failed to so much as set foot out of my box to run the night rounds.

The knock came hard and sharp to the half open door of my box. Wan sunlight edged in, and I could just make out the grey dawn of a hard raining new day. What I couldn't see was who awaited me.

Another knock sent me scrambling about the small space to try and look presentable. I was still naked.

"Yes, citizen? I will be with you presently," I called quickly as my clawed fingers slipped at the buttons on the front of the same shirt I had worn yesterday. I stepped into my trousers as well, they still looked alright as long as I didn't have to stand up.

I pulled the door open a moment later from my perch on the stool, and was rather surprised to find Reverend Benson awaiting me out in the blowing rain.

I bowed my head to him as I spoke. It wasn't that he held any particular position to me in the police force, or even as a Dog, but he was a well respected man of the community.

"This is a rare honour, Reverend. What can I do for you today?"

He was an older man with a thin face and a grey beard that reached part way down his chest. It was as if the hair from his balding head was slowly migrating downward. He was dressed in his normal black robes of office with the white collar encircling his neck.

I'd never understood the collar. Collars were what you put on dogs. Not humans, and certainly not men of the faith.

He stepped forward, out of the rain, pushing me back into the already too small space as his eyes quickly took account of the rough wooden interior of my humble box.

"I am pleased that you are able to see me, Dog." He edged forward, further from the gusting winds, almost pressing against my chest as he spoke. "I must discuss with you the events that transpired at my church day before last." His voice was smooth and well practised, a dramatic change from the tones he normally used when referring to me. They almost sounded coated in a layer of quiet honey.

"Of course, Reverend. You will have to pardon me for not coming to see you yesterday, but I was otherwise occupied."

"Yes, I suppose you were, but is not a case of arson your highest priority?"

I had to keep from rolling my eyes. The man had said no more than two words to me in the fourteen months it had been since he had taken over the parish and now he was expecting me to jump at his every whim.

My head almost jerked at that thought. What was I thinking? This was a member of my community, and an obvious crime had been committed. It was my responsibility as the resident constabulary to resolve the issue, no matter the history between us. He was well within his rights to demand as much from me.

Despite what he may preach from his pulpit.

"Yes, Sir. But, as you need understand, I must balance it against a murder investigation and the closing act of an accidental drowning. This has been a very busy week, Reverend. I assure you that I have not been purposefully ignoring you or putting your case behind."

He waved a hand at me and turned to step from my box. "That be as it may, Dog, I insist that you begin investigations immediately. This is not merely a crime against me, nor the community, but against God himself. It must be dealt with swiftly and with all the force that his Holiness puts behind it."

"I understand, Reverend. I will address it with the same care and attention that I do every aspect of my duty." He huffed slightly at that statement. "But we are at an impasse."

He turned back towards me, rain dripping from his nose. "And what would that be, Dog?"

I stood up and tugged slightly at the loose threads that dangled behind me. "I am not properly attired. My last uniform was damaged during the investigations yesterday, and I haven't yet an expectation for replacements to arrive."

Did the ghost of a smile cross his lips?

"Be that as it may, Dog." He took another step back from my box, letting the rain hit him in full, "Come as you are. God did not make you, having you clothed in my church is no worse than having you naked."

He disappeared a moment later and I had to scramble to keep up.

Locking the door behind me, I followed him through the blowing rain that was quickly growing into a full storm. He walked without an umbrella or a rain coat, striding forward almost as if it were a sunny day, as if he didn't even notice the inclement weather that beat down upon us.

"Do you have any information that I may be able to add to my investigation, Reverend?" I caught up to him, but hung a respectful half-step behind.

He didn't turn to me as he spoke, "You are the investigator here, Dog. You know as much as I. The fire was started some time after the funeral of Jonathan Hyatt, while the balance of the town was either at the funeral or the 'Crown.'"

"It was likely well after the funeral, Sir. While we were at the 'Crown. I didn't notice it until I was returning to my box, and it couldn't have been burning for long. It would have only taken a scant

few minutes more for it to have grown into a conflagration that would have consumed the building whole."

"Then who would have done such a vile thing? It certainly wasn't a member of my flock." We were just passing through the large wooden doors to the church now, the smell of cold smoke hung heavy and pungent in the air.

"I didn't mean to suggest such a thing, Sir. Only that it was not an accident, and the perpetrator likely waited until after the funeral to set the spark and make off. It would make sense, Sir, as someone would have likely seen them if they had done it while we were all just across the street."

"That still doesn't answer who it was, Dog." The Reverend ran a hand through his rain slicked beard, sending fat drops to fall to the floor atop the existing water stains.

It was apparent that my assault upon the fount had released more water than I had intended. It must have taken them some time to shut off the flow, for the floor of the main chamber was extensively damaged, more so from the water than the short lived flames.

I lowered my nose to the floor, attempting to pick up the slightest scent of who may have set the spark, but got back nothing but the jumbled trails of almost everyone in the village. They had all been here for the service immediately before, and many of them had come back to help with the fire. Any trail that may have been was torn to the ends of the world and back.

Something did however tug at me, a familiar tang that I couldn't quite put my finger on. It was so faint that I couldn't even form it in my mind, but it shouldn't be here.

Rising back to my feet, I walked to the stairwell, the Reverend in close tow.

"We'll need to review the site of the arson, Sir."

"Do as you will, Dog. But I'll be watching you."

Well, *that* was a comforting thought.

My claws clicked on the hard stone steps as we worked our way down once again into the basement, his soft leather boots were silent behind me. I had to duck to make it through the narrow space. Thankfully, there was no red blaze awaiting me at the end this time.

The scents in the basement were much the same as the main chamber had been. The room may have seen less traffic, but the stench of burning materials was far more pungent down here, choking out any other scents that may have been present before.

The Reverend stood silently in the doorway as I carefully poked and tiptoed amongst the charred ruins. The space must have been fairly well packed before it had been set ablaze. Even charred, the debris still filled the majority of the chamber.

Wooden furniture, blackened and twisted, still laid across the ground where it had fallen, spilling reams of singed paper and parchment to the stone floor. I was careful to touch nothing as I moved, but bent low to inspect all I could.

There were footsteps and prints in the ash that spread across the length of the room, but most were old and showed the decay of time along their edges. One set didn't.

They were booted prints, those of a fair sized male, and they had come sometime well after all the others had been here to put out the flames. He had been alone to pick through the remains.

"Sir, has anyone been in this room since the fire was put out?" I turned carefully to look

towards the man, my tail swinging wildly to keep me from pitching forward on the unstable footing.

"No one." His voice was unequivocal. "There may be locks on the doors to the house of God, but I need not bar them. No one has been here since the atrocity."

That was peculiar. I stooped over again to re-examine the prints. No, they were definitely new. I would bet no more than twenty-four hours old. The Reverend was edging forward, but the bulk of my body kept him from observing what was before me. I didn't bother to shift the minor amount that would have allowed him to see.

Working onward, I untangled the fresh prints from the jumble of older ones that weaved around them. They led firmly and directly to the back corner of the room, never erring as they pushed past the debris that lay in the way.

I was obscured from the Reverend now, the husk of a burnt out wardrobe standing between him and I. I could hear him nervously rocking his weight back and forth as he waited.

I was now well beyond the prints of those who had come to help put out the flames, even beyond those who had returned later to ferret out the hot spots that had laid beneath the ash. The final back corner of the room was free of most damage, the flames not having made it all the way here. We were almost beneath the font that had previously stood on the floor above.

A single unassuming cupboard lay pushed up against the wall here, almost hidden behind the furniture that surrounded it. The low, heavy wooden object was sternly built, fitted with a large iron lock upon the front.

I stepped towards it, gently lifting the padlock that hung there. The make was old, looking as if it could be over a hundred years, but crafted from a simple design that had worn the time well.

Unfortunately for its owner, it hadn't been oiled recently. The locking mechanism had been pushed back into place quickly, and the user hadn't taken the time to double check that it had snapped properly into position.

I stole a quick glance over my shoulder, back towards the Reverend. I shouldn't do this, the stern voice of Handler Llyal whispered in the back of my mind. This was against regulation, I couldn't force my way into the property of the Reverend. That was illegal.

Another voice floated into my thoughts, sounding uncomfortably like that of Proust. I didn't like the Reverend anyway, and I was performing my investigation. He was a suspect, everyone was a suspect. I was the only one who was above doubt.

I tried to take a deep, calming breath, but that unidentifiable scent still lingered, a base note that always hinted through the smell of ash. It magnified the second voice, pushing me to cast off my training.

The remains of my uniform felt even tighter and more constrictive around me.

Just a look. That was all, just a single quick glance. I was a police officer, and I needed to recover all the evidence I could.

Without another thought, I knelt down and quickly wrapped my oversized hands about the top and bottom of the lock.

The padlock may not have clicked home as it was supposed to, but it had never the less begun to fall into place. I had to be careful not to let the metal squeak or the wood creek as I pulled.

The lock was old and time worn, but it still held fast. A growl crawled its way up my throat as I pulled. I had to hide it under a cough.

"What are you doing back there, Dog?" The Reverend's voice was high and nervous.

"Very little, Sir. Simply inspecting the burn patterns on the back of a shelf," I lied as I gave the lock one more final wrench. It popped open with the sound of rusted plates sliding against each other.

"What was that?" His voice was closer now. I could hear his footsteps picking ungracefully through the burnt furniture.

Quickly, I levered the top of the cupboard open, skittering my claws across the stone floor to cover the sound.

Its contents were disappointing. It was empty. Not a single scrap of paper nor stray thread.

What I was welcomed with was the strong, unmistakable scent of gun oil.

I all but slammed the lid down and thrust the lock back into place just an instant before the Reverend came into sight. The iron contraption snapped properly this time.

I had only just enough time to fall to all fours, nose to some meaningless scorching on a bookshelf before he stepped up. That left my exposed rear in the air, pointing back towards the man as he rounded the last corner.

He got a better look at the canine anatomy than he likely ever had any wish to. I had to fight to keep my tail from wagging.

"Get out of there, Dog! What do you think you're doing?"

"Investigating the crime scene, Sir." I slowly turned to him.

He scrutinized my face for a moment. Fortunately, canine features are difficult to read for humans at the best of times, and I wasn't giving any tells.

"Well, what did you find?" He edged behind me, pushing between me and the cupboard, slowly urging me away. "You've spent all this time poking around my house of God, what have you found?"

"Sir, I've been here for under fifteen minutes." I refused to be forced back a single step. "I'm sure you understand that a proper investigation requires far more than that."

"I understand nothing." He scowled at me. "You are wasting time while the man who vandalized my church runs free!"

"You are right, Sir." I raised a claw to my lips. "I *am* misappropriating time. I should not be spending effort on a simple arson case that may be nothing more than the work of a petty juvenile delinquent when the murder of Zack Crow still stands unsolved."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you implying that the damage to my church is less important than that no-good, ungodful drunkard?"

My own expression stilled now. I leaned forward until our noses almost touched, speaking lowly, "Do not presume to lecture to me on the severity of murder. An innocent man's blood has been spilt on my territory and I will not rest until his killer has been brought to justice. Zack Crow was one of the few men in this town that I was proud to call a friend. I *will* avenge his death by bringing his killer forth."

God, what was I doing? Was I truly speaking this way to a man of the cloth?

The Reverend must be made of sterner stuff than I'd supposed. He didn't give me an inch as I loomed over him, his willowy form stood firm before me.

"You will not speak to me in such a way, you godless abomination. I am your master, and you will obey me."

I wanted to spit, to curse, to do anything but obey. "You presume too much, Reverend. God may have made man, he may have even made you in his own image, but he did not make Dogs. You have no jurisdiction over me, human. I answer only to the law."

"How... dare... you!" He was sputtering now, flecks of white foam forming at the edges of his mouth. "God will strike you down for your impertinence!"

"Let him, Reverend. I have already met my creators, and they have given me a passing grade. Can you say so much for yours?"

"Out!" He very nearly pushed me towards the stairwell before thinking better of it at the last moment.

"Gladly, Sir. There is nothing more I can learn for my investigation here."

In truth, I wanted desperately to escape the small space. The undercurrent scent was driving me to do things that were all but unthinkable. And I was enjoying it.

The Reverend was on my heels all the way up the steps, but I refused to allow him to evict me from the church.

I insisted on searching the rest of the building despite, or perhaps because of, his protests. He followed me at first, nearly tripping over my tail as I worked my way slowly from room to room, sniffing and inspecting everything. It wasn't until more than an hour later that I finally rid myself of him. He had apparently tired of watching me comb over every square inch of the church with both my eyes and nose.

I was glad to be free of him, but I noticed that he sat himself between me and the basement stairs. That suited me fine. I hadn't any further reason to return there.

The cupboard had been empty, not that he realized I knew that. Any evidence, save perhaps fingerprints, was long gone... likely elsewhere in the area. There were two scents I was hunting for now, the familiar undercurrent that had been in the cellar, and that of gun oil.

I hadn't the slightest idea what he might be hiding. Guns were legal, provided he had the proper licences, and I wasn't aware of any outstanding warrants for fire arms in the area. There hadn't been an incident with guns around here since long before I'd first arrived. Northumberland was a relatively peaceful, rural area and many folks owned guns for hunting.

Sadly, neither smell came to hand as I crisscrossed about. The most I gained from my search was to refresh myself with the general layout of the church. The main doors faced north, they were flanked on either side by an office to the west and store room to the east. Next to them were the stairwells, one down to the cellar and one up to a small second floor that served as the private quarters of the Reverend. His accommodations were meagre, but well enough appointed with a kitchen, bath, and all the other normal amenities.

The main feature of the building, as one might expect, was the congregation chamber. It was a mess now, as a result of I having stormed through it, splintering no small number of pews in the



process, but was still a sight to see.

The large chamber had room for every citizen in West Woodburn with space to spare for whatever they might choose to bring with them. My mouth watered for a moment as I remembered the food and goodies that they would often take along. I had to force my mind back to the task at hand to not get led off on the wrong scents.

The far end of the chamber, to the south, was a large stained glass window that sat behind the pulpit. The image was one of those that I would suppose one found in abundance throughout the writings of the church. A God-like human figure reaching down to the earth below, suspended in mid motion. The figure was far larger than any man had right to be, he took up two stories of glass, filling the entire wall with a soft light from the southern sky.

The Reverend didn't bother to follow me when I padded up the stairs for a second time to double check his quarters. All he did was sigh and throw me a dirty look as I slipped from view.

Well, I suppose that answered my question on whether he had stashed his hidden goods up here.

There really wasn't much of anything to see upstairs, I'd just been trying to work up a reaction from him to point me in the right direction to find the guns. Oh well. I could spend a few minutes rechecking his night stand and personal effects. There were pictures of his family up here, along with those of a young man who must have been his father back during the Second World War.

I had my head stuffed under his bed, snorting up dust bunnies, when I heard a voice from below. It sounded like Richard Hyatt.

Despite how close we were, no more than a few yards vertical, the heavy old construction of wood and stone dampened their voices to the point I could hardly hear them. No clapboard and plywood for this building.

I couldn't make out a single word, save one. "Jonathan".

And by the raise in the Reverend's voice, I could safely assume the Richard hadn't referred to his late son.

I returned back to the main floor a few minutes later, refusing to rush, refusing to let them know I had overheard their argument.

It was Richard who saw me first, waving a hand and calling to me as he stood in the hallway. The Reverend stood before him, facing away from me. The older man almost, but not quite, blocked his way into the building.

"Jonathan!" His voice rose over the Reverend's, "I've been looking for you."

I couldn't see the other man's face, but I could hear his snide interjection well enough. "Do not call him that, Hyatt. He is not human. He receives a number, not a name."

Richard didn't push towards me as I walked forward, he simply stood his ground and waited for me to arrive. I towered over the two men as we stood in the antechamber of the church.

"Mr. Hyatt," I paused for a moment, remembering our last conversation, "Richard, what can I do for you?"

Reverend Benson grimaced when I used the familiar to address the man, but for once kept his silence.

Richard grinned, walking out the door and into the rain with me as we left the Reverend behind.

"I was hoping to invite you to dinner with us tonight at the farm." I almost missed a step as he spoke, nearly falling face first into the pavement. "What's wrong?" He asked, a concerned look on his face.

I waved him off quickly as I straightened. "It's nothing, Richard. Just... I'm not sure how to respond."

"What do you mean? I'm just inviting you for dinner."

"It's not that, Sir." I'd fallen back into calling him 'Sir' again as I tried to find a way to put what I needed to say into words... "It's just that this is not part of my training, I'm not sure how to react."

"React?" He looked at me oddly. "Unless you have plans, all you have to do is say 'yes' and drop by tonight. I'm not asking you to quit the force, just come over for dinner." He shrugged slightly, a sad smile creeping to his face. "Trevor has been all but throwing a fit to see you again, but we won't let him walk to town alone anymore."

"A wise decision, Sir." I paused for a moment, mentally flipping through the pages of the Police Dog's manual for proper procedure and etiquette under these circumstances. It didn't say a thing about being invited to a non-public social event. It just wasn't the type of thing that the Handlers ever expected would come up.

It didn't say I could attend. Then again, it didn't say I couldn't, either.

"Richard, yes. I'd love to come. It would be an honour." I bowed my head towards him.

He seemed slightly taken aback by my show of deference, but took it in good humour, reaching out to pat me on the shoulder. "Wonderful. We'll see you around six, then? Don't worry, nothing formal. It's just going to be the four of us after all. Truth be told, it's been feeling a little lonely around the table without Jonathan..." He paused for a moment, looking uncomfortable. "My son Jonathan, the original... you know what I mean."

"Yes, Richard, I understand. I'll be there."

A few moments later he walked off, disappearing into the ever growing rain. I could hear the sound of an old pickup truck engine starting as I returned to the church.

The Reverend was still there, waiting for me when I returned. If anything, he was watching me even more closely now.

"What was all that about, Dog?"

"Nothing relating to the investigation, Sir. Simply personal business."

"I thought you Dogs didn't have 'personal business'. That's they why they bred you."

Ever so slightly I raised one lip, showing the shadow of a tooth in the guise of a smile. "We are canine, Sir. Social animals." He refused to react.

"And what was that about disgracing the name of his first son? Hadn't he sinned enough in cavorting with you before he died?"

That was interesting. I hadn't been aware that the late Jonathan's curiosity in me had been publicly known.

"That, Sir, is a decision made by the Hyatt family. And, dare I say, is none of your business."

I returned to sniffing through the church. Making sure to spend extra time snooping through his personal quarters.

When next I returned to the main chamber the Reverend was seated upon one of the undamaged pews, sipping a cup of steaming tea from a stainless white bone china cup.

"And have you found anything, Dog? Has all this inconvenience been worth the time it has taken?"

Dutifully, I bowed my head ever so slightly to him. I hadn't picked up any more than a few whiffs of the unfamiliar scent the entire time I'd toiled here, and those had been found near the door and in the basement. I felt worn and tired now, the fire that had lit me earlier long gone.

"I do not currently have anything to report, Reverend." Lifting an eye ridge, I added, "Unless you would like me to re-examine the burn patterns in the rear of the cellar again?"

He furrowed his brow at me. "I don't believe that will be required, Dog."

I was briefly disappointed that he failed to rise to my barb. He seemed to be putting more effort into remaining civil now.

"Well, Sir, unless there is anything else I can do for you?" I prepared to depart.

"Wait, Dog." I could almost hear his molars grinding together as he spoke. He hid a grimace behind a sip of tea. "There may be something I can do for you."

Oh?

"And what would that be, Sir?"

"Are you investigating Richard Hyatt for the fire?"

I cocked my head at him, "Pardon? I haven't any persons of interest at this time. I'm not investigating anyone."

He sighed. "I suspected as much. He is the only logical choice right now, you know."

I could only just keep my eyes from rolling. Lord save me from armchair detectives who read one pound-store crime novel and think they're Lestrade of Scotland Yard.

"If you say so, Sir. But wouldn't one suspect that he would be the last person to perform such an act when he and his family were the center of attention?"

Did I see the ghost of a smile cross his lips?

"I would think a government trained Dog like you would have checked your facts before making such a bold statement. Wasn't it Richard who was first on the scene to drag your fur-baring corpse from the flames? And, if you didn't know already, he and his family left noticeably early from the wake. They left from their own son's wake."

"If you say so, Sir. However, I must remind you that until some form of substantiated evidence comes to light, all men are equal under the eyes of the law."

He didn't bother to respond to that.

"If there is anything else I should be aware of, Sir?"

I took my leave from the Reverend and his church.

I had expected to return to my box and plan my next step, but my feet turned me to the right after I passed the oaks and through the gate, leading me away and towards the center of the village.

I suppose I should be concerned, being out in the cold rain as I was, but it meant little to me with my pelt. The water may soak in, but it never made it deep enough to chill my heart.

I'd spent quite a number of hours searching the church from baseboards to steeple, it had to be well into the afternoon by now. I should be hungry, or at least tired from my toils... but all I felt was nervous.

I had been invited to dinner, that was it. That was all. Okay, it had never been covered in my training, but I should be just fine. Shouldn't I? I was the same Dog who was commended back at the Kennel for his adaptability, wasn't I? What had changed?

Well, that was a rhetorical question. *I* had changed.

I shivered now, reaching up to brush a too-long lock of fur from my eyes. I had been the one to change. I had asked for this, it was my fault. I had wanted to be a breeder. And I hadn't even known what it had meant at the time.

I knew what being a breeder meant now, in a technical sense at least. I'd looked it up. But it was far out of reach now.

I wasn't sure where I was going, but I was wandering down the center of town, not another soul had braved the rain to be out on the streets with me.

I suppose it was getting closer to six, and I'd best prepare to meet the Hyatts. In reality, I knew it was nowhere near six, hardly past two in the afternoon, but a flighty, unsettled feeling grew in my gut every time I thought about going venturing out to their home again. This was new territory to me, and despite what Richard may have promised I still felt nervous.

Now that I thought about it, I was more nervous today than I had been for my Final Exam. I'd had a vague idea of what was expected of me then.

Wasn't it traditional for a guest to bring a gift to his hosts when he was invited to such a meal? I wasn't sure where I'd heard that, but, like most human customs, it was something I'd had to pick up through observation, never having been taught or experiencing it myself.

Oh dear. What would I bring? I quickly ran a hand through the remaining pockets in my uniform trousers that were still left intact. A slight sigh of relief escaped my lips when I found the change from the ten spot I'd used to purchase my carrots several days ago. I'd just kept transferring it from uniform to uniform, never returning it to the canvas pouch I should be keeping it in.

Well, that left me with eight-odd pounds. What should I spend it on? I'd still yet to see a refresh on my miscellaneous fund, I'd never had a chance to bring it up with the Master Constable. I, however, refused to let my dire position limit what I would bring.

The Hyatts had been gracious enough to invite me into their home, I would not return the gesture by economizing on the single thing I could bring to represent myself.

Flowers? I was never quite sure why, but they often seemed to be an appropriate gift amongst the humans. No. I think not. Flowers had no utility, you couldn't eat them and you couldn't use them for anything. They simply died after a few days. There had been enough flowers at the funeral of the real Jonathan that I think they would have had their fill of them for the rest of their lives. And, in any

event, I was under the impression that the floral scents that humans found attractive were not necessarily mirrored by Dogs such as myself. We had a far greater sense of smell than our masters did, and it was attached to a different brain. No, flowers were definitely out.

What else then? I continued my slow trudge down the main street of West Woodburn, peering quickly into each window as I passed, hoping for inspiration.

Chocolates? Weren't they a popular gift? I paused in front of the town sweet shop, peering through its frosted glass. Yes, they were a popular treat, especially among children such as Trevor. But there were problems with that idea too. I'd been warned long ago that chocolates posed a most definite threat to the Dog physiology, a trait we had inherited from true canines. Partaking of that particular treat could deliver me to the local hospital in short order, and possibly the morgue if I found I liked them. No, they would not do either. I couldn't purchase a gift that I would be unable to partake in if asked.

Wine? No. That was an easy item to decide against, for much the same reason as the chocolates. While I could consume alcohol, much like a human, it was forbidden by the Canine Authority to do so – save for properly prescribed medicinal purposes. One needn't think too hard on why that was. Police Dogs, even normal ones unlike I, were larger, faster, and stronger than a human. No one wanted to contemplate the damage a drunken Dog could wreak. That would be a very bad thing.

I was starting to run out of ideas now, not to mention stores. I'd already passed by very near every shop in town, and nothing had presented itself as the perfect gift.

The rain continued to beat down on me as I walked, my box would be up beyond the next curve in the road, just beyond the Green Grocer's store.

Well, that was a thought.

What about something from him? I was familiar with purchasing from the man, if only a single product, so there would be no difficulty there. And I should be able to join in consuming almost anything from his stall.

He didn't have a front door to his store, instead the entire wall recessed into the ceiling to expose his goods to the outside world. He was regretting such a design today, dashed by the occasional gust of rain as I stepped in.

There was a slight look of surprise on his face as I came closer, or at least I thought there was – it was hard to tell under all that hair. I rarely came by his shop while on patrol, being so close to my box, and I'd never come into purchase at any time but last thing before he closed up shop for the night.

Now that I had decided on a venue from which to purchase, I had only to decide upon what. Most anything here was edible, I suppose, but I had tried little of it... Okay, other than the carrots I had sampled none. I'd only even learned of that particular vegetable by sheer chance, and hadn't the slightest of how the others would land on my palate.

I didn't in fact want to purchase carrots to bring to the Hyatts'. That seemed so... pedestrian. But in the end I could come up with nothing else that I felt comfortable with.

Being here in the middle of the afternoon was literal night and day as compared to waiting for last call. I had product to choose from for one.

The produce that lay before me now was a comparable king's bounty to what I was accustomed

to. Normally I scooped up whatever was left, happy to simply have anything at all. Now I could pick and choose, and that I did.

I didn't fancy myself as much of a horticulturalist, and I didn't really know what a carrot *should* look like, so I just chose the ones that looked the least like what I was accustomed to eating.

My carrots had been dry and stringy, thin and ready to go to ground. So in response I selected the freshest and plumpest specimens I could find.

I'm not sure if the grocer appreciated me pawing through his produce, but he was unusually quiet as he stood behind his till.

I didn't even bother to consider the weight of what I selected, I simply took the best I could find and let God hang the cost. For once I was going to purchase what I wanted rather than the absolute minimum I needed to get by.

"Sir." I politely bowed my head to the grocer as I placed my bounty on his scale. It came to five pounds.

"Dog." He nodded back without further comment.

I peered over my shoulder, the sign was back out, it still read "Carrots' 1 £ a pound".

For once he charged me four pounds sterling.

I nodded at him politely as I reached for my bag to leave.

"A moment if you will, Dog." He reached out a hand to cover my purchase. "I need to talk to you about the fire."

Today was just full of surprises. This was the first time that the man had ever spoken civilly to me.

"Of course, Sir. What can I do for you?"

He settled back behind his till for a moment before beginning to speak. I took the opportunity to nip my package away, holding it to my chest.

"It was Richard and I that dragged you from the flames that day. We saw what destruction had been wrought firsthand, better than anyone else." He coughed, looking abashed, "I just thought I should thank you for doing what you did. We would have lost the church if it wasn't for your actions."

I bowed my head to him. "There is no need to thank me, Sir. I am simply performing my duty, what I was placed here to do."

"No, Dog, it's more than that. What is it they're calling you these days anyway?"

"My name is Forty-Two," I wasn't sure why, but I diverted my eyes from him, staring at a pile of apples off past his left shoulder, "But the Hyatts have taken to calling me Jonathan, in memory of their lost son."

He grunted. "That would be Trevor's doing I suppose. I can deal with that, he's a good boy." He cleared his throat, "Anyway, Jonathan, if not for you the church would be so much more than a smouldering wreck now, and who knows what would have happened to the rest of the village. Thank-you."

"As I said, Sir, you needn't-"

"Damn well I don't! You know Reverend Benson as well as I, he would as soon throw you out of town as have you burnt like a modern day witch."

"I'm sure it's not that bad, Sir."

He simply grunted and turned from me. "Like I said, thanks anyway." He began counting the money under his counter. "Will I be seeing you again in a few days for your next purchase?"

"More than likely, Sir."

"Good. I'll make sure we have some carrots left."

I sprinted the rest of the way back to my box, doubled over and clutching the carrots to my chest, trying to keep the paper bag dry despite the driving rain.

I nearly made it too, before slipping on the slick pavement and sending myself skidding face first along the ground. I didn't go far, only across the sidewalk to land against the nearby fence, but it was enough to rip my already torn breaches asunder and put a good long tear down the arm of my shirt. I only just managed to keep my precious badge from getting dented on the hard cobblestones.

Wonderful. Now I truly hadn't a single uniform to wear. I didn't even have enough bits and pieces left to stitch them together to form something halfway presentable.

No one had yet to vandalize my box since I had fixed it up, and the rain had washed the paint clean of any dirt and grit that may have landed upon it. The structure almost looked brand new on the outside.

The inside, however, had not changed. It was warm and dry, but as cramped and worn as ever.

I found a home for my now soggy bag on the desk, followed by a carefully placed badge as I wiped it clean of water and grit before setting it down.

This now left me with a problem. I quite literally had nothing to wear, and was expected at the Hyatt household in little more than a few hours. Both my day uniforms were torn asunder, and my dress uniform had been destroyed while battling the fire. The only thing I had left was the pelt on my back.

I put the thought out of my mind for a moment as I went about my normal day to day police work.

The post had been delivered in my absence. It lay in a small pile on the floor of my box from when it had fallen through the chute.

Unlike the human populace of this town, or likely any town, I didn't receive junk mail. Not only was it prohibited, but no one marketed to a segment of the population that hadn't the right to spend on frivolous purchases. Much easier to market to the Canine Authority directly.

Let's see... normal policy and procedure updates, they came every month or so, some general correspondence from my immediate superiors in Hexham, and a coroner's report.

I set the rest aside and ripped open the report regarding the death of Jonathan Hyatt. This would definitely be for the boy as it was far too soon to expect one for Zack, murder reports always took much longer as they must be more precise.

It started off normally enough, confirming his identity, age, previous medical conditions, et

cetera. I skipped down to cause of death, the only thing I wanted to confirm.

They had not agreed with my assessment of death by accidental drowning.

Oh dear.

They had confirmed my observation that it had been what appeared to be a 'dry drowning', a situation where the muscles of the larynx and throat had closed shut to block the passage of water into the lungs before death. I had thought his body felt too light for his lungs to be filled with water.

I hadn't thought much of it, it seemed to me to be nothing more than what it appeared. It was uncommon, but certainly not unheard of for such an action to happen. Something around one in ten if I recall correctly.

The coroner it appeared had his doubts. He hadn't the evidence to hold the body, hence the funeral had continued uninterrupted, nor even the clout to open an investigation on his own, but he had left the cause of death as 'Undetermined, possibly due to head trauma'.

I skimmed down the rest of the report, it contained a laundry list of other wounds that had been inflicted to the body, none of them major. I simply would have assumed that they occurred as the child had thrashed in the water, then later as he had floated downstream. It seemed, however, that the coroner had come to a different conclusion.

Now that I reviewed what he had listed, I couldn't help but begin to agree with him. The list did seem a touch too long and a tad too complete to be accidental.

There were no broken bones or major lacerations, just a series of sub-dermal bruises that had not had time to fully form before his heart had stopped.

They covered his arms and head. It was possible that they had continued under his hair, but the coroner hadn't had the time to shave him and check.

Interestingly, the single location that would have guaranteed this case opened as a full investigation, the neck, was completely untouched – almost obsessively so.

The fur on the back of my spine was starting to itch, and I was sure it had nothing to do with the inclement weather that raged outside.

At no point in the whole report did he ever mention even the possibility of foul play. At least not in so many words. But its suggestion was as plain and prominent as the wet black nose on my face.

Reaching out, I pulled my phone off the hook and began dialling the number at the bottom of the page. Only then did I notice that it stated a copy of this report was being sent to the family.

"Hexham Coroner's office. How can I assist you?" I immediately recognized the not quite perfect clip of one of the Special Examiner Dogs that had driven up here to collect the bodies.

"Good afternoon, this is Constable Forty-Two in West Woodburn. I'd like to speak to the person in charge of the Jonathan Hyatt case."

I heard a stack of papers flip on the other end. "I'm sorry, Forty-Two, but Doctor Brown is unavailable at the moment, he's attending a symposium in London for the next three days. Is there anything I might be able to assist you with in the meantime? This is Nineteen speaking. I believe we met when my partner and I arrived to collect the bodies. I do have access to the Doctor's notes and records, and the authorization to provide them to a police officer." I wasn't quite sure if he stressed my position or not.



"That would be much appreciated, Nineteen. I have some questions about the report I received today regarding Jonathan's cause of death."

"Not a problem, Sir. Just give me a few moments to collect the paperwork. Would you like to wait or shall I ring you back?"

"I'll wait. This could be important."

"Understood. I will return shortly." His clip got noticeably more pronounced and exact the moment I suggested this could be a case of note. It was likely that the life of an average Special Examiner was even less exciting than that of a Police Dog, and I'd just made his month by providing him with the possibility of some action.

I twitched and fidgeted as I waited. Waiting always made me aware of my tail, and how ill-suited it was to such a posture as this, sitting ramrod straight atop a hard, human made stool. I'm sure the Dog on the other end was working as fast as he could, the sounds of him, and possibly his partner, scurrying to and fro in the background filtered through the speaker of my phone, but I was restless none the less.

What could all this mean? Is it possible that I had in fact two murders on my hands in as many days? This could be bad. This could be very, very bad.

This could result in me having to call in the Serious Emergency Response Team. I shuddered at the thought. The good Dogs went to London, the bad Dogs went to the country, and the ones diagnosed as being born free of empathy went to SERT. They were only called in when the situation was gravely out of hand.

They could have the entire town overrun in a matter of hours if deemed necessary. They would arrive with both Dogs and human officers and put an end to any sense of normality.

Having SERT called down upon our heads would be a truly worst case scenario, but one that was all too terrifyingly real if I had a serial killer on my hands. A SERT investigation would not only involve a full in-depth background check of each and every citizen in the town, but myself as well. They would uncover my genetic tampering in a heartbeat.

Master Constable Proust and General Train, if he's even still alive, would never permit such a thing. They would have me transferred, or more likely killed, before that could ever happen.

My fingers were beginning to twitch, claws clicking out an ever more frantic beat on the desk as my tail curled tightly around my legs.

It couldn't be a serial killer. It couldn't. Not here, not in the tiny rural town of West Woodburn. Killers like that were what they had in London and Liverpool, and they were rare even in those massive metropolises. There couldn't be a serial killer here... it had to be nothing more than an oversight by the coroner.

We all longed for some excitement in our lives, the coroner must just be jumping at ghosts, that was all.

Then why was I so nervous?

With an effort, I pushed the thought out of my mind as I waited. It took more than half an hour for Nineteen to return to the line.

"Are you still there, Forty-Two?" I grunted a reply to him, not quite trusting my voice. "Good. I have the Doctor's notes here, but I doubt I know any more than you do. It says that there was no

water found in the boy's lungs. None, not a drop. It is possible that he was able to close up before he passed out, but it's extremely unlikely that he wouldn't have taken at least a single gulp as he went under. There wasn't even any excess water in his stomach either."

"Is that what made the Doctor suspicious?" I had a sinking feeling.

"Exactly. It's not as if a dry drowning like this is unheard of, but he notes how perfect it was. Even the best case scenario would undoubtedly involve at least a small amount of water passing into the body. Your boy had none."

"What did he find when he searched the rest of the body?"

"He listed everything on the official report. The starting of bruising across his upper body, the arms and head."

"Could it be the result of him having been restrained?"

"Possibly, but the bruising was too indistinct to truly suggest anything specific. Hence that everything we are discussing is no more than conjecture and theory." His voice turned up slightly towards a whine at the end.

"Of course, Nineteen." I put on my most soothing tone as I cradled the receiver gently in my hand. "You are far more familiar with damage to the human body than I. I'm sure you can come up with much better theories than I ever could. Do you have anything you might suggest?" I felt a little dirty to be stroking a fellow Dog's ego to try and force him to provide me with information. But we Dogs, like the humans who created us, were more than vulnerable to such base tactics.

"I really shouldn't be putting forth such unsubstantiated..." His voice was uncertain as he tried to find an excuse to segway away back into familiar procedures.

"Nineteen, please, this case means a lot to me." It was my turn to work a whine into my words.

"It does?" He couldn't keep the curiosity from his voice.

"That boy treated me almost like a brother..." Okay, I was stretching the truth here a little bit, "And I just want to make sure that his memory is well served. Please, Nineteen, he was like family to me."

"I guess I could try and help..."

"Nothing you say will ever leave this line," I assured him.

He sighed, a long and drawn out breath. I couldn't tell if I was releasing a heavy weight from his shoulders or adding one. "It wasn't a rope or chain," he began abruptly, speaking quickly before he lost his nerve. "And it wasn't straps. The marks are all wrong for it. The Doctor thinks it was trauma from being hit." His voice raised in pitch now, almost a whine, "But I think he was held, restrained by hand. The Doctor thinks I'm just being foolish."

"Why is that?" I was holding the phone tighter now, feeling the plastic of the receiver creek in my hand as I pressed it hard to my ear.

"Because the bruises are deep but narrow. That's what you normally see in a trauma when someone is hit with a blunt object like a rock or club. But... but the angles just aren't right. They wrapped around his arms too much. It had to be a person, a grasp."

"So why couldn't it be?"

"The force involved to make a bruise like that would have to be great, more than most humans could ever manage. Either that or they would have to have been done just seconds before he died."

Nineteen's voice was starting to break up now, the stress of going against his training was tearing his mind apart, speech beginning to devolve into grunts and barks as he lost control over the finely manicured parts of his brain that had been cultivated to the purpose. It was a common affliction amongst us Dogs, it even affected me, but the results were still enough to all but rip my heart out as I heard them play out over the line. He could barely bring himself to contradict the report of his human superior.

"Thank-you, Nineteen. You have no idea how much your diagnoses has helped me." I pitched my voice in such a way as to place myself subservient to him.

The change on his end of the line was both palpable and instant. "Really? It was really useful to you?"

"Truly, Nineteen. I never would have been aware of the alternatives if not for you."

I could all but see his tail wagging as he spoke again, the stress having dropped completely from his voice. "You're welcome, Forty-Two. Just let me know if you ever need my help again. I'd be happy to take the journey back up to West Woodburn for you any time of day or night."

"And I would be happy to receive you."

"Is there anything more I can do for you, Forty-Two?"

"Not today, Nineteen. Thank-you again."

"Not a problem, Forty-Two. Keep dry and warm up there, eh?"

"Pardon?"

"Haven't you been listening to the wireless? They have a storm warning for the entire area up to the Scottish border. They're predicting the worst storm in fifty years will be sweeping in through from the Channel."

"I wasn't aware of that, Nineteen. I'll be sure to take it under advisement. West Woodburn out."

I hung up the phone, then reached towards the door of my box to slide it open a crack. The rain stared back at me dull and thick, the occasional wayward drop falling on my nose. It didn't feel like the storm of a lifetime yet, just a strong squall like what came through every summer. No matter. Rain or not, my job didn't change.

What would be a problem, however, was what I was going to do about the Hyatts. They could very well have already received a carbon copy of the same letter I had, and I'm sure there would be questions. Ones that I was not in much of a position to answer.

And that brought me back to a more immediately pressing issue, that of what to wear. I'd already gone over the problem before, but it didn't help to find an answer. Turning, I snapped the door back shut and reached under my desk to pull out the small water stained cardboard box that I'd been using as a laundry hamper.

Things were no brighter now than they had been before. Two sets of shredded duty uniforms and one dress uniform that was ripped and stained with soot. It was so badly gone that it hardly had a speck of its original immaculate white upon it.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to break down in tears or just wish it good riddance.

There was nothing for it then, I would be going in my pelt alone. It wasn't *technically* illegal or even immoral, I am, after all, not human. The clothing decency laws don't apply to me. I am a Dog, or perhaps a dog, and our natural state is nothing but fur out...

Reaching a hand, I gently pulled my still shiny badge from the desk, making sure this time to take the small braided metal chain that sat behind it. It was provided for just such a situation as this.

I clipped the clasp on the back of my badge securely onto the chain, then looped the whole thing around my thick neck. Looking into the small, cracked mirror I had pinned to the wall, I didn't think I cut *that* poor of a figure.

Dogs aren't much of a judge of human beauty, nor are humans capable of understanding a Dog's taste, but I figured that I looked not too poorly at all. There may not be much padding to a Dog's duty uniform, but what little of it there was strategically placed to hide or reduce our more alien, inhuman features that were now on blunt display.

Standing open to the world, I could see that my body had lost none of its definition or mass that I had worked so hard to build while at the Kennel. I, dare I say, was still a near perfect specimen of the Canine Superior species. I would have been perfect, should have been perfect, if the Janus project hadn't come into my life with empty promises. I was too big, too shaggy now to be what I could have. I was just another flawed Dog, assigned a commission and left to die, never having the chance to breed and continue my line.

It was no good to reminisce and spit vitriol at my fate now. I'd made my decision long ago and there were no options left but to see it to its conclusion.

Rummaging around in my box, I was able to dig up a standard issue clear plastic rain smock to try and keep my fur somewhat dry as I took the long trek to the Hyatts' farm. I'd never had need to use it before, but I doubted the Hyatt's would appreciate my damp pelt dripping onto all the nice things I was sure they had in their home.

That was that. I had my chain and badge, my paper bag full of offerings, and my rain smock.

Oh dear. What about my emergency vial?

I never went anywhere without it safely hidden next to my body. The pockets of my trousers had always been more than enough to conceal it in the past – only I didn't have them now.

There was nowhere I could hide it. I couldn't hang it from my chain plain as day, couldn't stash it in the bag I would be offering to the Hyatts, and the thin plastic smock was both transparent and free of any pockets or folds that might hold it.

It wasn't until the realization that I would have to leave it behind that I discovered just how comforting and reassuring having its small weight upon me was. It was my emergency plan, my full stop backup that could protect me, and more importantly everyone else, if the worst should come to pass. If the being that was not me should rise to the surface once more.

A whine was growing in the back of my throat. I didn't want to leave it behind. The thought of not having that small glass tube scared me until my tail curled around my legs with a shiver.

But there was nothing else I could do... it was either stay here with my secret or venture into the unknown with the Hyatts and leave it, however temporarily, behind.

I'd given my word to Proust, Brophy, and Train that I would keep their secret. But I'd also given

my word to the Hyatts, to Trevor, that I would attend their dinner.

I pushed the tube to the bottom of my laundry basket with a quick, sharp shove. Hiding it beneath the rags before I could look at it again.

The only other thing I took were the keys to my box. I clipped them onto the chain around my neck after locking the door firmly behind me, stepping out once again into the driving rain.

I was quickly glad I'd chosen to scrounge up my rain coat, the downpour seemed to get worse with every step I took. I was on the hard concrete pavement, but the runoff from the yards and fields coated my feet with a dousing of sticky black mud. And that was before I even took the turn off by the River Road to work my way towards the farm.

Joining the road next to the river, I stole a glance down to its waters. I didn't have to look far, the normally calm and sedate waves were whipped into a muddy and turgid brown froth now, promising a quick and terrifying death for anyone foolish enough to brave their surface.

I'd have to remember to come back here after dinner and post a 'no swimming' sign for the duration of the storm. It seemed silly and redundant, but I didn't want the possibility of another death, premeditated or accidental, on my hands.

I was quickly glad that I'd left myself hours to make the relatively short journey to the farm. Every step was into the wind, and for each stride I made forward I seemed to be pushed, sliding and skittering, two back.

All I could do was dig the claws of my feet into the road and in the end scramble forward on three legs, holding the paper bag under my coat with my free hand.

The lights of town had long faded into the swirling black clouds behind me, and the farm was still somewhere in the distance when the wind picked up, forcing me to find temporary shelter in the trees along the road.

The branches whipped back and forth above me as I huddled in their meagre protection. I nearly feared that they would come crashing down upon me if the gale were to keep up. It did pass in time, but not before I thought of Xopf.

Oh God. He was out and unprotected in this storm. If he was following my orders he would still be in the valley where I had left him, far from any civilization or aid. He was a strong creature, but no one deserved to be out in this if it could be helped.

I resolved to find him after dinner. I'd made a promise to the Hyatts, but after that I would make sure to look after the Russian Horse.

The weather was hardly better, but the winds died down enough that I set out again, pushing onward through the blowing leaves and mud towards the faint and dim lights that I could no more than imagine to see in the distance.

The farm did in good time hove from the chaos around me, the stout stone structure looking no worse for wear with the near biblical winds and rains that swirled angrily around it.

There was a warm yellow light lit above the front door. I homed in on it like a beacon in the darkness.

I paused for a moment before the door, stopping to pull the ripped and tattered plastic coat from me and attempting to smooth down my fur that was in near total disarray.

The only thing that still looked as shiny and perfect as the day I'd gotten it was my badge. It glimmered against my brown chest like a newly minted soul.

I adjusted it slightly to lay flat and perfect before knocking loudly on the door with my claws. I put enough weight into it to be sure I would be heard over the discordant howling behind me.

It was Mary who answered a moment later. Her long brown hair was left to freely cascade down her back, across the simple home and work clothing she wore.

"Jonathan." Her voice caught slightly when she said the name. "You made it. We weren't sure if you were going to arrive when the storm picked up."

"I made Richard a promise I would be here, Ma'am. I don't break my word easily."

"I can see." She stepped aside, ushering me into the cozy front room of the home before looking back up again, puzzled. "You're naked."

I blushed slightly beneath my pelt, holding the soggy paper back loosely before my nether regions.

"There were few other options. All my uniforms have been destroyed in the last few days. It has been a busy week. And, besides," I let my lips rise in a small, abashed smile, "I still have my pelt."

"Jonathan!" I had only an instant to turn before being hit by the flying projectile that was Trevor. He had dashed towards me, leaping at the last moment to wrap his arms around my chest, driving me backwards and almost off my feet.

A second later he had my fur gripped tightly in his small hands and was climbing around to my back. He then struggled upwards until he'd looped his arms about my neck to hang happily from my shoulders. His weight quickly became so natural that I hardly noticed it as I leaned forward to counterbalance. I couldn't help but feel my tail wag ever so slightly at the warm reception.

"Trevor!" Mary's said, mortified. "Get down this instant! That is no way to treat a guest. Especially not a police officer!"

"It's alright, Ma'am." I gently raised a hand towards her to ward off the protests. "I'm more than honoured to be received in such a way."

She turned from us with a bemused expression on her face. "If you say so."

"What do you want to do now, Jonathan?" Trevor was still hanging from my back, his mouth right below and behind my left ear. He spoke in that excited, breathless voice of so many children when the adrenalin had them in its hold. He'd likely been lying in wait for me, counting down the seconds to my arrival.

"Will it be sometime before dinner is served, Mrs. Hyatt?" I forced my attention back to her and away from the hyperactive Trevor.

"You don't have to call me that, Jonathan. Just call me Mary. And yes, you can let Trevor lead you off for a while if you want. Dinner won't be for a half hour or so. I wasn't expecting you to arrive so early with the rain."

I wasn't sure if I should feel embarrassed for arriving early, or proud that I'd surpassed her expectations. It took me a moment to quash that thought. I had to keep telling myself that she was simply making conversation, not critiquing or grading me like so many other humans I had met throughout my life.

Now that I thought about it, the Hyatts were among the only humans I had ever come into close contact with who were neither Handlers nor members of the police service. It was a slightly unsettling thought, we were technically equal in rank. I'd always looked at every human as my superior, either 'Sir' or 'Ma'am'. These weren't. They were simply Richard, Mary, and Trevor.

Craning my neck around, more than any human could due to my unnatural spine, I could just make out Trevor's face as he hung from me.

"And what would you like to do, Little-One?" I let the edges of my lips rise, doing my best to emulate a human smile while at the same time hiding my sharp teeth from sight.

He looked at me, puzzled for a moment. He'd likely spent so much time looking forward to my arrival that he had never put any thought into what it was we would do now that I was here.

"I can show you my room!" he picked up, young voice only a shy from being a happy shrill. "I saw your room, now you can see mine!"

"I'm sure your room is much nicer than my box," I said softly as he directed me on. Never letting go of my back, he pointed deeper into the home and up a set of tight stairs.

"I like it, but it's not as cool as your place." He paused for a moment to conspiratorially whisper in my ear, "Sometimes I wish it was a box like yours. Sometimes I wish I could have a home by myself, like you."

"You do?"

A guilty expression crossed his face now. "Sometimes. Not a lot, but sometimes I wish I could get away from my parents. Do you ever feel like that?"

I didn't answer for a moment as I slowly climbed the stairs, careful not to knock him against the walls or ceiling.

"I never had the opportunity to, Trevor. I never met my parents, remember?" It was an odd concept. I'd never really thought of them as my 'parents' per se. They were breeders, my sire and dam, and had given birth to hundreds of Dogs. I and my brothers and sisters had simply been another number among those they had produced. I wouldn't recognize my parents if I met them, nor they I.

Trevor's grip tightened around my neck, his small fingers digging into my coat almost enough to be painful. "Does that mean you were raised in an orphanage like you talked about? That's sad."

I had to laugh at that. His young mind was trying to apply human family values and stereotypes to me, a Dog.

"It's all right, Little-One, don't feel sad. That's the way it is for all Dogs. I lived with my brothers and sisters in a big building called the Kennel. That's where we all grew up." I decided not to mention the many of us that never made it to step beyond those walls.

"You did? Was it nice there?"

"It was..." A flash of memories swam before me. I put out an arm for a moment to steady myself against the wall. I could remember the cold bars of my cage, the warmth of Forty-One sleeping beside me, the pride I'd felt at every exercise I had won, the bitter disappointment of the few I'd lost.

I could remember the bright days we had spent working out in the courtyards, the sun in our eyes, the darkness of night simulations in Exercise Room Five when they turned out the lights.

I remembered the cold of the examination table beneath me when Doctor Brophy had strapped

me down and injected me with God only knows what. And above all, I could remember the hot, sickening feeling of Forty-One's blood on my hands when I had killed him.

"It was home, Trevor. It was home."

I stopped at the top of the stairs, waiting for him to point the way. There were three bedroom doors that lead from here. One was obviously that of Richard and Mary, but the other two were those of the children. Or, I should correct myself, one was Trevor's and the other was empty.

They had yet to clear out the room of the real Jonathan. I didn't want to go in there.

A moment later, with a little help from my guide, we found ourselves in the proper room. It was, like the rest of the home, a touch on the small side for me. There was barely enough space for the two of us to stand within.

The room was wallpapered in sky blue with images of aeroplanes and rocket ships in repeating patterns. There was a small bed on one side and a large toy box on the other. The only other furniture was a single wardrobe that Trevor paid little attention to.

I let him gently down on the bed. He immediately scrambled off my back and over to the toy box, lifting the treasure-chest like lid up to expose its contents that were obviously more valuable to him than gold.

I was rather surprised to see what lay within. There were the obligatory toy cars and building blocks, but mixed in with the robots and ray guns were action figures. Of Dogs.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that they had been producing such things with the blessing of the Canine Authority for years, decades even, but I'd never seen one. It just seemed impossible that they could mass produce a toy that looked like me.

Well, it wasn't me per se, but rather my breed. All Dogs of the same breed looked nearly identical from a human's point of view, and identical to what Trevor now held in his hand, thrusting towards me.

"Do you like it, Jonathan?"

He handed it to me, I took it hesitantly in my paw. I'd always thought of my hands as just that... hands. But now, now they were paws as I stared at the toy they held.

Trevor held the toy's counterpart, a human figure. They were identical except for the head hands, and feet. I could even see the seams on the figures where they could be interchanged to turn a man into a Dog and vice-versa.

The Dog toy was all wrong now that I looked at it more closely, as though its designer had never seen a Dog in his life. Other than the parts that had been swapped out, the figure was human, not a single nod to canine physiology. The feet were not bent like mine, having been forcefully evolved from a completely different form as they were. The toy was little more than painted a different colour with a few extra markings to make it look inhuman. You could accomplish the same on a real man with little more than body paint and movie prostheses.

The hands were little better, they looked like fancy-dress gloves that one could buy at the two-pence store. It was, however, the face that most struck me. The Canine Superior's face was almost identical to that of a true canine, we had been bred that way, but the face of the toy was... wrong.

His expression was one that I had never seen on a Dog. It was a fierce, man-eating snarl that had been purged from us by the time we were able to so much as walk. Any Dog that ever showed



such an expression as that, even in combat, would be immediately disposed of. It was an emotion that would be at home on a wolf, but never a Dog.

"It's very nice, Trevor." I pushed the figure back towards him, hoping that he would take it away from me.

I had no such luck. He set his own figure's feet to the ground, holding him around the chest – something like what he had so recently done to me – and began to play out some scenario from his imagination.

He didn't seem to notice that I hardly moved, the Dog figure loose in my hand. He played on oblivious, seemingly happy to so much as have another soul with him. I heard the words 'robber' and 'crook', even 'Queen' seemed to work its way in every so often.

It wasn't for some time that I finally noticed that, in his imagination, I was a 'good guy' who seemed to be able to do near super-human things. Apparently I 'always got my man', and never seemed to fail at even the most titanic of tasks in his eyes.

I was a good boy.

"Are you alright, Jonathan?" His voice was suddenly soft.

I blinked, clearing my vision to look down at his concerned face. I hadn't realized that my eyes had begun to water.

"I'm fine, Little-One. I'm just happy to be here with you."

That brought an instant smile to his face. "You can come back to play again whenever you want. Maybe I could come and play at your home."

"Perhaps. Perhaps, Little-One."

My ears twitched a moment later. I could hear Mary's voice calling from downstairs. She must have stepped up to the stairwell, for we could both hear her now as she called us to dinner.

Trevor was up and out of the room like a shot. I followed a moment later, after carefully placing both the human and Dog figures back in his toy box. It was only then, after I had placed them side by side, that I noticed they were the same rank.

I arrived in the dining room shortly thereafter, it wasn't difficult to find in the small home. Somehow in the still and stuffy air of the house I had failed to notice the scent of cooking food. Now it was unmistakable, leaving my mouth watering.

The dining room was a warm brown wood panelled chamber, dominated by a single large table that sat in its center. The walls were backed with china cabinets on two sides, the door on the third, and a picture window that looked out to the fields on the final. The only empty chair faced Richard, who sat with his back to the stormy sky.

It wasn't until I finally sat down, carefully cradling my tail behind me on the seat, that it truly clicked in that I would be eating *human food*. It may sound like an odd statement, but it came as a shock to me not to see a bowl of kibble sitting in my place.

I'd eaten very nearly nothing else in my entire life, and the thought of a meal without it was almost not a meal at all.

And, for that matter, I still had my soggy paper bag clutched in one hand. I'd completely forgotten to give it to Mary when I'd first arrived, and, surprisingly, no one had asked me about it.

Richard nodded politely to me as I sat down. "It's nice to see you again, Jonathan." A moment later he noticed me looking forlornly down at the damp bag clutched in my hands. "What do you have there?"

I lifted it up, thrusting my arms out stiffly before me, forcing a smile to my face to try and cover the nerves that jangled in my gut and pulled my ears flat.

"I, uh... I brought a gift. I hope it's appropriate." My voice was rough.

"I'm sure it's wonderful," Mary said from my left. She reached a delicate hand out to my still dripping bag, only to be beaten by Trevor who lunged forward from his seat to grab it from my limp fingers.

No one even had a moment to speak before he turned it upside down over the table, spilling its contents out with a look of unbridled expectation on his face.

The smile didn't last long once the plump orange vegetables fell out to roll across the table.

"Carrots? Yuk!"

I wasn't sure whether to cringe or laugh out loud. The expression on his face was just short of priceless, but Richard and Mary simply looked at me confused.

A moment later Mary reached out her thin fingers to pick up one of my prizes, holding it out to me. "Carrots, Jonathan?" Her brow furrowed for a moment, before, with some obvious effort, she forced it to lie flat and peaceful again. "That's wonderful." A small smile crept to her lips, "If I knew you liked vegetables I would have made more. In any event," She reached out to collect the spilt carrots that still lay haphazard across the table, "Give me just a moment and I'll bring dinner out."

Trevor was still playing with two carrots he'd stolen away, swinging them around like aeroplanes.

It was Richard who spoke next, leaning towards me from across the table.

"Is this a Dog thing, Jonathan?" He laughed gently. "Do all Dogs have a taste for carrots?"

"Uh, no, Si... Richard. Just me. They don't feed us *human* food. We're all fed kibble. I'm the only Dog I've aware of who's ever eaten anything other than kibble."

"Really?" He raised an eyebrow. "You've never eaten real food?" I nodded, eliciting another laugh from him before he continued. "Mary may not be one of those celebrity chefs you see on the telly, but she can make a truly wonderful rare roast beef."

"Uh, rare... roast beef?" I couldn't help but stutter. The words had meaning to me, but it took a few moments for them to truly etch themselves into my mind.

What had I just gotten myself into?

Pausing for a moment, I huffed in a deep breath through my nose. How I'd ever missed it before I would never know, almost as if my own brain had been in traitorous revolt to hide the scent from me until it was too late.

The scent of the roast enveloped the home now that I could smell it. It wasn't blood, for that I would thank any number of gods, but the scent of the near raw meat was enough to cause the saliva to

foam up in the back of my mouth.

That was a bad sign. The only time I'd ever felt that was when I was nearing a full episode. And my crash kit was sitting back in my box, hidden from the world under a pile of stained and shredded uniforms.

I closed my eyes, letting my head fall to my chest as I forced myself to breathe calmly through my nose, scrambling vainly to chase after my now racing heart that was threatening to run out of control.

The scent of the cooking flesh wreathed around me, pushing into my mind like the memory of Zack's blood. I could feel it pressing past, through my defences, to the part of my mind that had been created by my special training. Tempting it, awaking it. My hands were starting to shake.

"Jonathan, are you alright?" I could hear, at a distance, the scrape of Richard's chair as he pushed it back, the heavy stomp of his feet as he walked towards me.

"I'm... fine. Richard." The words barely escaped my lips, whispered through clenched teeth. Only as an afterthought did I realize how talented I had become at lying.

Forcing my mind to heel, the image of what would happen if I lost control crashed down around me like a bucket of ice water. For just an instant I could see an image of the Hyatts' home after I had rampaged through it in a feral blood-soaked rage. I could almost reach out to touch their dismembered bodies.

The thought made me want to retch.

A heartbeat later the blood-lust was gone, blown away like the smoke of a campfire in the winds of a hurricane.

I raised my head, opening my eyes to see Richard close at my elbow. Trevor hadn't even realized that anything had been wrong, he was still playing with his carrots turned action figures.

"I'm fine, Richard." A sudden stroke of bravery surged through me as I reached out to lay a hand on his shoulder as a friend would. "I'm sorry for alarming you. I... I simply had a bad memory come to me. That's all."

He looked at me oddly, but returned to his seat.

"You are a strange one, Jonathan. Are all Dogs like you?"

I wasn't sure if it was a smile or scowl that touched my lips. "No, Richard. I am truly unique. From the Kennel that produces a million Dogs, I am the only one-of-a-kind."

He leaned back and grinned at me. "And you got assigned here? West Woodburn? I never could understand that. I've seen other Dogs, they didn't seem nearly as good as you." He paused for a moment, laying a finger aside his nose. "Why are you here anyway, Jonathan?"

I leaned forward, levelling him with a steady gaze. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course." He leaned forward in turn, voice falling to a conspiratorial whisper.

"So can I." I sat back. A grin now in full bloom across my face. A moment later Mary came back into the room, both of her hands heavy with plates that were next to spilling over with food like I had never seen.

From an intellectual standpoint I could recognize the spread as simple, wholesome country fare,

very salt of the earth and all that. But the emotional side, the side that had memories of growing up with nothing but kibble and water, I nearly wanted to weep.

Even the salt and pepper shakers that graced the center of the table, for God's sake, they were a luxury that I had only ever seen others partake of.

A loaf of brown bread straight from the oven sat next to Richard, accompanied by a block of soft yellow butter that, by its scent, had more than likely come from the family's own livestock.

The next plate down was a bowl of steaming mixed vegetables, with my own offerings diced and spread on top. It was an odd feeling to see my own work displayed so prominently, like I had finally managed to do something right for the first in a long time.

The final plate was the center piece. It was what had sent me trembling earlier. The mere sight of it still left me drooling. This time, however, my dripping fangs were truly from my own nature, not that which had been forcibly injected into me.

I quickly drew the back of an arm across my mouth to keep from slobbering all over their nice linen.

"Would you like to say grace, Jonathan?" Richard peered over the roast at me.

I felt my blood run cold for a moment. Grace? Had I missed something? Was there something I didn't know about?

"I... uh..."

"It's alright," he said quickly moving on. "I can say it tonight." He cleared his throat for a moment. All three of the humans bowed their heads down over their still empty plates. I didn't know what was happening, I kept mine up, eyes darting around the room, looking for any danger to the family as Richard's voice came slow and steady.

"Bless, O Father, thy gifts to our use and us to thy service." His eyes rose for a moment to glance at me before he continued, "And bless our good friend Jonathan who has been thrust so quickly into our lives in such a moment of sorrow. Amen."

"Amen." The three of them recited the word again. I sat quiet. I'd learned long ago from Reverend Benson that God did not look kindly upon prayers from ones such as I. None of the humans commented on my silence. I wondered for a moment what he, God, would think of his creations praying for me. Would that raise me in his eyes, or lower the humans?

I had little time to reflect, they quickly began passing the plates of mouth watering food around the table with a well-practised coordination that I had to quickly learn. Trevor laughed for a moment as I needed to get help from Mary to even so much as scoop the vegetables from the bowl to my plate.

"I thought you said you liked vegetables, Jonathan."

"I, uh, do. It's just that I've never had them cooked."

"Never?" Mary asked as she took the bowl gently from my thick fingers.

"Never. I'm not even supposed to have them at all." For a moment my mind flicked back through the pages of rules and regulations that a Dog was expected to follow. Nowhere did it say I couldn't attend a dinner if invited. Nor did it say that I could not partake in it.

A silly grin spread across my mussel as I nodded to the family around me. "I would like to thank you again for inviting me. You have no idea what this means to me."

A feeling of simple happiness and tranquillity spread through me for a moment, until Mary took the liberty of setting a large slice of roast beef on the plate before me.

It both entranced and horrified me as I took a moment to stare at it. Everyone else was already eating and didn't pay me any mind.

The slab was thick and juicy, far bigger than that anyone else had received. It was obvious that Mary thought she was doing me a great service.

When Richard had mentioned they ate their meat rare he had been making no overstatement. The chop of flesh that lay before me was barely so much as kissed by flame, and so fresh it had possibly been striding the Hyatts' pastures that very morning. It was more than likely that it had been Richard himself who had slaughtered the animal.

Clumsily, I reached down to grasp the silverware that lay before me with my thick, ungainly fingers. Thankfully, it didn't feel quite as alien as it otherwise might. We had long ago been given a single class on its function.

Cutting off a single sliver from the chop, I lifted it gingerly before me, holding it in front of my mussel to sniff.

A single whiff was all it took for the scent of blood that still permeated it to send my rational mind reeling and cringing back. The vicious beast that lay chained in the back of my brain howled and surged forward against his weakening bonds. It took everything I had to keep him from bursting to the surface.

"Is everything alright, Jonathan?" Mary's calm voice broke through my inner visions. "You've barely touched your meal."

"It's wonderful," I took a deep breath, looking into her eyes, over at Richard, then Trevor who sat beside me. I delicately nipped the meat from the fork with the small teeth between my canines, swallowing it whole.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to gag or howl in joy.

To explain it would be like trying to describe the majesty of the perfect sunset to a blind man. The taste and texture very nearly poleaxed me from my chair. It connected to parts of my mind that were more primordial than anything I'd ever felt before, deeper even than the gore soaked memories that my special training had left in its wake.

I let out a breath that I hadn't realized I'd been holding after I swallowed. All the images and dreams that had run through me before were gone. Huh. I guess that a full belly is more important than any 'training' they may have ever injected me with.

That, or it could be the people who crowded so close and warm around me.

The savage winds howled not feet away from me, but their cries were impotent. I was safe and warm in here.