

POLICE DOG



TRANQUILITY

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Chapter 11: Tranquillity

June 5, 1988

20:15 Hours

West Woodburn, Northumberland, North East England

The rest of the meal passed in relative silence. There was conversation, but I had the feeling that I'd let everyone know where my focus lay when I took a fifth serving. The rest of them had hardly worked halfway through their own first course.

"To your tastes I take it, Jonathan?" A slight smile touched Richard's lips as he spoke. Behind him only the faintest glimmer of the sun could be seen as it set through the thick black rainclouds.

I did little more than nod as I continued to eat. It was impolite in the extreme, I knew, but I did it none the less. I felt a pang of guilt every time I reached for yet another serving, especially the meat that I had single-handedly more than three quarters consumed. The only thing that kept me from stopping in shame was the easy smile that crossed Mary's face each time she passed one dish or another.

Dinner didn't end until I had polished off the last of the serving plates. Even the bread that constantly got stuck between my teeth didn't escape me. Perhaps there was some truth to the old rumour that they kept us on a strict diet of kibble to control our weight.

But there was more to it. Sitting back, with my full belly pushing out before me, I felt a sense of calm, of serenity, that I had rarely if ever experienced before. The closest I could recall was the clear headedness that followed a snack of carrots. But this was a hundred fold that, like a candle held before the brilliance of the midday sun.

"I'm sorry to tell you, Jonathan, but I didn't make any pudding. I would have prepared a dessert if I'd known you would have enjoyed it so." Mary smiled at me. "I don't believe I've ever had such an appreciative audience for my cooking before."

I had to keep from belching, I could barely speak I was so stuffed. "Please, don't feel sorry on my account." I leaned forward in an ungraceful and off balance bow. "You have already done more for me than I could ever have hoped. I am most indebted to you," I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the warmth of the room soak into me, "To all of you for your generosity."

"Don't mention it, Dog." Richard playfully flicked a breadcrumb across the table at me as he spoke, "It's been a long time since I've called you 'Dog'. Or at least it feels that way. What's your real name again? Forty-Two?"

"Yes." I felt a slight shiver pass through me as he spoke my name. If I'd had the space I would have shaken like I was throwing off water. "Forty-Two is the last part of the registration code I was assigned at birth. It's all I had up until a few days ago."

"All the money they put into you and they can't even give you names?" Mary leaned forward from beside me, looking into my eyes. I had to fight not to look away. "How can they do that? It doesn't seem humane. We even give our cows and chickens names, how could they not name you?"

"Humane doesn't have anything to do with it," I replied. "We're Dogs, and we're treated as such. It's not a bad life." I felt uncomfortable trying to defend my upbringing to people who had never experienced it. "We're born with a goal, a job. How many people can say that? I've always known what I was going to strive for as I grew up. There was no question, no deviation. The government created me, and I, like all my kind, own my life to it. It is truly the least I can do to serve."

"But didn't anyone ever want to do something different? Be their own person?" The playfulness that had held Richard a moment ago was gone now as he addressed me.

"No." My answer was unequivocal. "That's just not the way we are. Such thoughts were bred out of us long generations ago. Only the very best Dogs are permitted to breed. As such, even the worst of the next generation are comparable to the best and brightest of the previous one. Any urge we may of ever had to explore other vocations were purged from us long ago. Other lines exist to do other jobs, but I'm a Police Dog. It's more than what I want, it's what I *am*."

A shudder ran down Mary's spine now. She reached towards me, covering my large brown furred hand with her smaller ivory one.

"I thought that was why we fought against the Nazis in the war. Eugenics. That's what they were trying to accomplish, to breed the perfect human, kill off all the rest. Aryans and such."

I shook my head. I wanted to tell her this was completely different, how the Canine Authority's breeding program was nothing like what Hitler had done with his own eugenics back in the war. But the words wouldn't come to my lips.

What was I but a German Shepherd?

"It's... I'm not human." Was all I could get out in the end. My words were high and pinched.

"Damn it! Is this what we've become?" Richard banged his fist against the table as he spoke, rattling the dishes and setting my teeth on edge. "We kill the mad man, at what cost, only to invite his teachings amongst us? Mary's right, experiments like this were what people were dying by the thousands to stop."

"Richard, language!" Mary's voice was shrill in the small room.

He looked back up sheepishly, the sudden anger having drained as quickly as it had come. "Sorry, Dear." Then he turned to look at me. "And I guess I should apologize to you too, Jonathan. I'm not trying to say or compare... I'm not trying to blame..."

I raised a hand, routing his stammers before he could finish. "I understand. No apology required. I am as I was born," I had to bite my tongue to say that bit. "And that is all there is to it. I can't change what I am, what I've become. No more than you can. All I can do is to strive to make the best of the life I have been given."

"Anyway, Richard," Mary smoothly slid herself back into the conversation, "Shouldn't you be getting Trevor up to his bath? It is a school night."

The boy froze from playing with the remains of his food, as though caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. "But, Mother!"

"No buts, little man." Richard was already out of his chair and carrying the small boy away on his shoulder. "Wave goodbye to Jonathan. Perhaps, if you're good, he might want to come back before too long."

The last I saw of Trevor was as he disappeared around the corner, waving morosely at me. I waved back, even long after he had slid from sight.

"Well, Jonathan," Mary said, dusting her hands on her dress and began reaching for the now empty plates, "I'd best get this cleaned up. You can wait for Richard in the study if you want."

My hands moved faster than hers. I brushed her gently aside, quickly collecting the plates from the table before us.

"You don't have to do that," she protested. "You're a guest here."

"Please," I said, loading more flatware into my arms, "Let me help. It's the least I can do after you've provided such a wonderful meal."

She fell silent a moment later as I collected the entire contents of the table into my arms. It was hardly even a strain.

"This is what I was designed for, to help." I smiled.

I followed her into the kitchen.

I was of little additional use to her after I placed my load onto the counter. I simply stood back and watched as she cleaned the dishes that we had so recently eaten from. Being the first time I'd ever eaten from anything other than a cardboard box or simple bowl, it was a strange sight to see all the ornaments that humans used to feed themselves.

I was lost in thought, staring into the middle distance, when she spoke again. "You know, Jonathan, you remind me of a dog I knew long ago. From back when I was young."

I cocked my head slightly, "That would seem unlikely. Police Dogs are a relatively recent development. I doubt we were yet in wide use when you were young." Only after the words escaped my lips did I realize that I had made the social gaff of suggesting she was old. Such a statement was meaningless to those such as I, but humans didn't seem to care for then.

"Not a Dog, Jonathan, a *dog*." She stressed the words in such a way as to make the difference as plain as the nose on my face.

"He was one of the few dogs who survived the Goddard sweeps back in the fifties. He lived with my Grandfather. He was a German Shepard like..." She paused for a moment, never turning from the sink to look at me. "You remind me of him. Especially without your uniform."

"I'm sure he was a wonderful... um, dog. What was he like? I've never met a true canine."

She shook her head slightly, a low laugh escaping her lips. "I'm not surprised. He was the only one I'd ever met, myself. I never did understand how Grandfather was able to keep him when all the others were destroyed. Dover was his pride and joy, he would have died if they'd been separated. In the the later years I wasn't even sure who was taking care of who anymore, Dover looked after him as much as the other way around." She paused for a moment, the only sound in the room was that of water sloshing in the sink. From somewhere above I could just make out the footfalls of Trevor being

led to bed. "Promise me something, Jonathan?" She still hadn't turned towards me.

Thoughts began to swirl in my head. What could she be asking of me? And how could I turn her, or anyone of the family, down after the kindness they had shown me?

"Anything I can," I whispered.

"Promise me you'll be there for him, for Trevor. Like Dover was for my Grandfather. He doesn't have many friends. There are few children in the village, and fewer out here. He needs someone now that his brother is gone, and I couldn't hope for a better big brother than you."

"Big brother?" I could barely say the words.

Her hands came from the soapy water as she turned towards me, grasping my wrists, suds falling to the floor in fat drops.

"Promise me you'll at least think about it, Jonathan. Please."

I lowered my head to her, ears pulling back as I slowly fell to one knee. "I would be honoured more than anything I could ever express, Mary. I know I'll never be even a shadow of who your son, the real Jonathan, was, but I will love him with every kindness as if he were my own."

Looking up, an expression of surprise was frozen on her face. Had I done something wrong?

A moment later her hands had let go of my wrists and wrapped themselves around the too-long bushy mane of fur surrounding my neck. I could feel the still warm wash water beginning to soak in. That didn't account for the warmth that I could feel on my chest, where she had buried her face.

A few moments later I was gently shooed from the kitchen to wait in the study for Richard. The study was a small, wood panelled room that had been stuffed to overflowing with every manner of nick-knack and children's toy imaginable. There was hardly enough space left over to leave a couch uncovered in the far corner.

I gently let my weight down on it, feeling the springs protest and strain under me. There was little to keep my attention as I waited, so I let my eyes rove over the photographs that lay framed on the wall. They were all of the happy and truly normal British family, the Hyatts. They were like something you might just as well see in an issue of Parade magazine, or posted up on an advertisement for traditional family values.

One mother, one father, and two children, all smiling proudly for the camera. In one shot they were standing before the house, in the next they posed by the sea side. One frame stood on the end table beside me, looking closer I could see it was Jonathan and Trevor playing in the River Read. Jonathan was helping his younger brother into the water, teaching him how to swim in the gentle and forgiving current.

It wasn't for a long moment that I noticed a distant, out of focus brown and blue blotch in the background. Me. My fingers reached out to scrape gently on the glass of the frame.

I'd only just put the picture back in place, exactly where I had found it, when Richard walked through the door.

He looked dishevelled. Apparently Trevor had decided that he didn't want to go to sleep on this particular night. He sat down next to me with an exhausted huff. For a moment I almost thought the chesterfield would collapse under our combined weight.

"Thanks again for coming, Jonathan. You really made his day by showing up." A grin worked its way to his weather-beaten face as he stretched the kinks out of his spine. "And I think you gave him an evening to remember by playing with him. He wouldn't keep his blasted yap shut all the way through his bath. Figures. I'll probably have to buy him a whole new set of action figures now. He wants to find one that looks just like you."

I wasn't sure what to say. Then I remembered that this, sadly, was more than just a social call.

Clearing my throat, I had to fight for words. This should be the easiest part of the evening, just falling back to my training to deliver a report... then why was it so hard to slip back into what I had been for so long?

"Sir... Richard, I received news regarding your son today."

He looked at me lazily for a moment, "Trevor? Oh?"

"No, Jonathan. Have you received a follow-up letter from the Hexham coroner?" He shook his head. "It's likely in the mail. He believes that there may be something more to your son's death."

Richard had been reclining back on the cushions before, near totally at ease. Now leaning forward before me, he closed up, face becoming hard.

"What is it?"

"There is no hard evidence as of yet, but he is attempting to put forth the suggestion that there may have been foul play involved."

"Murder?" He barely whispered it, quickly glancing over his shoulder to where Mary was working around the corner, still out of earshot in the kitchen.

I reached out a hand to gently lie upon his, the warmth of his flushed skin was almost shocking.

"Not so much as of yet... there is no hard evidence to the fact. But, unlike we first thought, we cannot rule out the possibility of foul play. Whatever it may be."

"But why? Why now? We'd just begun to put his death behind us!" Richard's voice hadn't risen above a whisper, but it was harsher now, ragged. "We just got through burying him, why do we have to dig this up now?"

"I was not suggesting we should exhume his body..." My gut flipped at the mere thought.

"That wasn't what I meant, you stupid Dog! Why can't you just do your job and put this to bed?" His voice had hardly even reached my ears, but the words stung me like a slap to the face. I pulled my hand from his as violently as if I'd been shocked with an electric prod.

"Perhaps I should go..." My voice trailed off as I quickly raised myself from the sofa, leaving a sizable dent behind in the cushions.

"No, wait, Forty-Two... Jonathan, whoever you are. It's just..."

I turned around to see him, small and shrunk on the sofa behind me.

"It's alright, Sir. I'm just a Dog, no harm done. I'll leave you in peace now." I quickly fled from the room without another look back.

Passing by Mary on the way to the door, I bowed deeply to her, but never stopped walking. "Thank you, Ma'am, for the wonderful meal."

Then I was out the door and into the storm before another word could be said.

I hadn't even remembered to collect my rain coat.

The wind and rain had not let up in the slightest while I'd been safe and warm within the Hyatts' home. If anything it seemed to have worsened.

Thinking back to my promise to Xopf, I struck out north, across the fields to where, somewhere in the far distance, his camp lay. It was a fool's journey and I knew it, the walk had taken me hours in the daylight under good conditions. Admittedly, I wasn't trying to track him with my nose to the ground now, but it would still take me much longer than I would have liked to reach him.

Though it wasn't as if I had anywhere better to go. I might as well seek the company of those that were at least somewhat like my own kind.

I did, however, in good time find the small dell where I had left him. It was after midnight now, and the rain still poured down in buckets, making me shiver even under my thick fur coat. I wasn't sure how to react when I found the campsite cold and empty.

There weren't even any dying embers in the flooded ashes of the campfire, all but the most general traces of him were long gone. Had he fled? Could he be headed north, back to 'Russia'? Or could he be returning to West Woodburn to find me?

Either option filled me with dread. An unregistered Russian Goddard's animal wandering the countryside was not something I could avoid reporting, and that might let my secret escape when they found and interrogated him. But the thought of him returning to town, where everyone could see him, was no better. What could I do to disguise the presence of a massive Horse striding through the quiet streets?

I raced back towards town, feet slipping in the churned black mud as I forged up yet one more hill after another, leaping the age worn stone fences that separated the fields. Every step was a marathon by the time I could see West Woodburn slowly creeping up in the distance.

Something was wrong.

It could be no later than three in the morning, all the townsfolk should be asleep, yet it seemed like half the village was up and out of doors. I could see cars parked on the road and lights on in the houses. People were gathered with electric torches and raincoats on the north end of town, next to the church.

In front of my box.

I wanted to run faster, to sprint the final distance to my home that so many people now clustered about, but my body simply didn't have the resources left. I'd thrown away everything I had in either my flight from the Hyatts' home or the marathon run back to town.

No one even noticed my brown, rain drenched form as I stole amongst the buildings. The rain held all the scents close to the ground, I couldn't smell the stomach turning stench of burnt wood and petrol until I was no more than a few strides from the crowd.

But that was it. I very nearly fell to my knees when I saw the charred husk of my home, burnt from the inside out, laying in a puddle of ashes and charred lumber on the rain soaked ground.

No one dared come near me as I walked forward. Everyone backed away, parting to give me

room, a glint of fear shared amongst their faces as they cleared the way for me.

Reaching down, I shifted a tentative claw through the already cooling debris. I could just see the sparkle of a half melted glass tube hidden amongst the ashes. Its contents were long since burned away, lost forever.