

POLICE DOG



WHEREVER HOME IS

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Chapter 14: Wherever Home Is

October 15, 1986

09:42 Hours

Outside of West Woodburn, Northumberland, North East England

Leaving Darlington and the man who I had assaulted in his vehicle, I very nearly sprinted all the way up to West Woodburn. I only stopped in Hexham just long enough to report in to my immediate superior, a fellow Dog.

I still had the knife that the man had cut me with, stained with my dried blood. Evidence against me, against what I was and what I'd done. It had been quickly sealed in an airtight bag and stuffed in to the bottom of my pack. I didn't want to think about it.

I hadn't slept since that night, just kept walking until my feet ached and I'd run out of carrots. I still liked the carrots, they made me feel clear headed, drove the ghost scent of blood from my nose.

The Dogs at the Hexham station likely thought me a washout. I was so tired and haggard by the time I'd made it there that I must have looked dead on my feet. I nearly was.

I had finally stopped for a few hours rest just as the buildings of West Woodburn came into sight. I wouldn't be here long, I still remembered my pact to quietly disappear, let my body and all its secrets return to the earth.

The River Read flowed just beyond the village. I stole to it, stalking along its banks unseen until I found a sheltered dell to wash myself. I may not be planning to remain long, but it was still no reason to present a poor face representing the Police Dog Service.

My travelling uniform was stained and torn as I peeled it from my sweat slicked fur. I tossed it offhandedly back towards my pack as I slipped into the cool, calm waters of the river.

The water hardly made it up to the middle of my chest in the deepest part of the dell. It flowed so slowly as to almost make the world come to a standstill.

"Hello."

I turned around sharply at the sound of the young voice, it had come from behind me. Its owner was a boy, no more than ten, with sandy brown hair. He wore a pair of dark blue swim trunks, both he and the clothing were wet from a recent swim.

"I'm Jonathan, who are you?" He pointed to his chest as he spoke, as if there might be two Jonathans to confuse.

For a moment I couldn't find myself. I had to press forward words, voice sounding gruffer than it should, "I'm Forty-Two."

His lips turned up at my answer. "That's a silly name."

I shrugged, the wet fur of my shoulders sending a spray of crystal clear water about me in droplets. "It's the only one I have." I had to search my mind for anything else to say. "Have you come here to swim?"

He nodded his head once, a huge smile splitting his lips before he cannonballed into the dell next to me, showering me in water.

"I swim here all the time," he said, voice breathless as he came up for air. His hands came out to cling to my fur as he held me without the slightest fear. Then he laughed, "You look like an action figure I have at home." He paused a long moment before continuing, "Are you a Dog?"

I spent a wonderful, peaceful few hours with Jonathan in the sheltered pool, the world seeming to pass beyond us without so much as a ripple. It wasn't until noon that he left, still wearing his trunks as his bare feet scrambled across the earth towards home for lunch.

Never once had he shown the slightest fear of me.

Towelling my long fur with the discarded travelling uniform, I lay for a time in the sun before finally pulling my blue duty shirt and trousers from the pack.

In some ways this was even more iconic than my dress uniform, the clothing that I would wear every day of my life from now on as I performed my duties. I shivered as I pulled it over my still damp fur.

The last thing I did before leaving the dell was to dig the bloodstained knife from the bottom of my pack. The dried blood left a rusty stain on the blade as I regarded it for a moment. The faint scent still threatened to weave around me, but I forced it out of my mind.

In a single motion, I pulled back and cast the evil thing away from me. It arced further than I expected, splashing loudly out in the center of the river where it disappeared from sight.

Walking into town fresh and groomed, I got the requisite stares and gawks from the townsfolk. I was the new Dog, a rare sight.

According to my map the police box was on the north side of town, buttressed up against the local church. It was in sad shape as I approached it.

The whole structure looked just about ready to fall apart, the light in the ceiling wouldn't even click on. What little data I had on its previous owner stated that he had died here, at his post as a proper Dog should. He had been one of the early sheepdog lines, long discontinued.

As I looked about and got my bearings I noticed a large truck backed up to the church next door. I tossed my pack into the ailing box and went to investigate.

It was a moving truck. Looks like the local vicar was off to a new home.

The man who slowly pushed about the boxes was twig thin and as aged as the earth beneath us. His bald head shone in the sun as I walked towards him.

He stopped to wave a hand and smile at me. "My son, you are the new replacement for old number Three, are you?" His voice was dry and cracked, but still warm and inviting.

"Yes, Sir. And you are?" I bowed to him, stopping a respectful distance away. He quickly closed the space to take my hand.

"It doesn't much matter, my son. I'm off on the next stage of my journey, retirement." He barked out a dry laugh, "Can you see it, my son? A retirement home for old priests like me!" He just smiled now. "I'm off to London," He paused for a moment, looking me up and down. "Which is, incidentally, exactly where I figure you're from."

I let the slightest grin touch my lips. "You would be correct, Sir."

He just rolled his eyes and replied, "Please, just call me Father."

"I'd be honoured, Father."

A moment later he had tugged me into the church, weaving between stacks of boxes waiting to be packed away in the truck. We next found ourselves in a small kitchen tucked upstairs where he offered me cold lemon tea. I took it with some trepidation until I'd gotten the chance to take a small sip. It was a true improvement from that I had been offered back at the diner.

"You'll be taking over from number Three? He was a good Dog and a loyal friend." The priest paused for a moment, a shadow crossing his face. "I was sad to see him go, but he lived a good long life until the last. I was only sorry that the Service wouldn't allow me to give him a proper burial, they insisted he be returned to London. He spent his final years here in the church with me, you know? I expect you'll have a time reconditioning his box, he hadn't set foot in it for seasons."

I didn't know how to ask, but I had to. I might not have another chance like this ever again.

"Father," I reached out to gently take one of his liverspot stained hands, "Do you believe that Dogs have souls? Do you believe we will see a world after this to repent for our sins?"

He narrowed his eyes slightly, assessing me, never flinching under my gaze. "I believe we all have our roles to play in this world, my son. The church doesn't yet know the measure of Dogs, but I ask you this: Does it truly matter so much?"

I was taken aback, almost dropping his hand. "Father! What?"

He wrapped his other hand around mine, a tired smile creeping to his lips. "Let me say this, my son. Number Three was one of my best friends in this world, or any other. I could not have ever hoped for more. If he did not go to heaven, then I do not wish to reside there either. But, in any event, even if Dogs have not been given the gift of our saviour, why should that change what it is you strive for in life? You are virtuous, my son, you all are. Born without sin, you have a myriad of possible futures ahead of you. Let the good works you do in this life determine who you are, not meekly allow yourself to be chained to what you were born."

I spent the rest of the day drinking lemon tea with the priest and helping him load his boxes into the truck. I toiled under the soft light of the stained glass window. The image of a benign human God floating above me gave me much to think about.

I was sad to see him leave, but the new priest would be arriving soon.

I was almost unable to spend the night in my new box, so dilapidated was it. That was when I made it my goal to bring it back to working order as a gift for the Dog who followed me.

That would be it. I would fade quietly into the night after I had brought the box back into a respectable condition. Only then would I have atoned for at least some of the sins that stained me.

After all, how long could it take?

Author's Note

Well, after much delay and more than a little challenge, I present you with *Police Dog*.

This was in fact the third full length story I wrote, after only *The Hunters* and *The Explorers*. It was quite a change to drop Tommy and company and travel halfway across the world to the verdant green fields of Northumberland.

The story came to me, almost fully formed, like a bolt of lightning from the blue. The only time I've ever had such luck as that. In no more than ten minutes I had the entire arc of the story worked out in point-form. The first scene to come to me was the climax. That explains why it's more of a set piece than is normal for me.

The fact I had a story ready to write was rather annoying as I was still finishing *The Explorers* at the time and didn't want to abandon it.

It all came from a conversation I had with a coworker about the future of human/animal interaction. He mentioned his opinions on animal cruelty and I remarked that it was amazing dogs had gone so long accepting some of the treatment we give them.

And this is the result of that line of thought.

Going back to the setting. I have U.K. roots in me somewhere, but I've never been within a million miles of Great Britain, so you'll have to pardon the (likely numerous) errors. Not to mention how I completely butchered the accent.

This story was written shortly after Google introduced its now ubiquitous Street View feature to the world. The town of West Woodburn was selected, I kid you not, by pulling up Google Maps and randomly zooming in on north England. Other than always clicking on the least populated area, the town was found completely by chance.

I'd say it worked out rather well.

Now onto a more somber note. You'll notice this story is a bit darker than my normal fare. There's one good reason for this, and one silly one. The first, I had a death close to me while writing the story. It didn't have too much of an impact on the plot, but it's there if you know where to look.

The second makes me feel far more silly but is a rite of passage for all would be authors. I was writing this story, having just come back from a funeral, when I got my first rejection letter from a literary agent. As silly as it sounds, I spent a good ten minutes staring at a blank wall after reading it. What I didn't know at the time was that it was to be the softest, most personalized rejection letter I'd ever receive. I still have it sitting in my desk drawer.

An interesting side note regarding *Police Dog*. The story was originally written to the exact specifications of Robert J Sawyer Press. I'd always been a fan of the author, so when I heard he was lending his name to a science fiction press I ran, sprinted madly, to submit a book. Sadly, it wasn't to be.

They were among the first casualties of the recent recession. In the four months it took me to prepare *Police Dog* they shut down. Ah well, at least I got to talk to Robert briefly over email to confirm the fact.

But I suppose that's enough rambling from me. Here's hoping you enjoy the trials of Forty-Two. He's a good dog, a good boy, but the world is not always kind to those of us who are born innocent.

So, a little bit more background on where the idea came from. Up above I said it hit me as a bolt from the blue, and that is true. For the final, fully formed idea.

But, as always, there's a bit more to it.

The first, earliest inklings of the idea came before even *The Hunters*. Back in 2004 I was reading the Moreau series by S. Andrew Swann. If you haven't read his book *Forests of the Night* yet put this down and buy it **now**. Done? Good, we'll continue.

Anyway, there's a throwaway line in the book reporting that people in Europe are having fewer problems with their human-hybrid creatures as they'd tasked them to nonmilitary projects. That got me thinking about what kind of jobs you'd give a half-human, half-dog.

Didn't take me long to answer that question.

I played with the idea for a couple of weeks, tossing it about in my head in those hazy minutes before falling asleep, but nothing came of it. I wasn't writing back in those days so there was no way for it to get out.

I suppose that's how it managed to spring fully formed from my mind, it had been brewing away for years in my subconscious.

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