

Diary of a Mountie - Part the Thirty-Fourth On Dogs, Revisited

By
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Day Forty-Three / First Night in Oz
The Winkie Country, Oz
Late Night

Prince had been hanging about the edges of our tactical council, but hadn't said anything. He hadn't gone far- just far enough to find a spot open to the sky. I found him sitting on his haunches, gazing up at the moon. "Hello, Sergeant," he said without turning his head.

I was standing downwind of him, but I haven't met a White man yet who could move silently through a forest, and that includes myself. "Didn't mean to disturb you, old fellow," I said.

"That's all right." He turned his head a little, one eye looking at me. "We are going back?"

"Tomorrow, yes."

He dropped his muzzle briefly. When he spoke I realized it was a nod. "I see."

I hesitated; there was something odd in his tone of voice. At least, if he were a man, I would have said that. "We should have included you," I said. "I'm sorry."

Prince's tail swished from side to side in the yellow grass. "It is all right," he said, looking back up to the moon. "I would like to go home. It is very warm here."

This wasn't going to be easy. "Prince," I asked, "do, ah... d'you mind if I sit down?"

He shook his head, edging sideways to offer me a better spot on the ground. I settled down next to him. "Thank you."

He nodded again. "Of course," he said.

I didn't know what to say next. It's not every day a man tries to have a heart-to-heart talk with his dog- at least, not once he's past the age of twelve. And even a boy doesn't really expect his dog to answer. For a while, all I did was look up at the sky myself.

"There is something you want to say," came Prince's quiet voice.

"How can you tell?"

The grass swished under his tail. "You smell uncomfortable," he said simply. "And you sit like you do when someone has killed a man and his mate does not know it yet."

That made me smile. "I didn't know I was that predictable," I murmured.

"It is a habit, isn't it? Little Paws bites herself when she itches. White Ears tries to claw up the ground when he is nervous. You sit like that when you want to speak. It's the same thing."

"Little Paws- oh, on our dog team back home?"

"Yes."

"You would know, wouldn't you," I said slowly. "You've been with me long enough, after all."

He nodded. I glanced over at him. His eyes were still on the moon, but eyes don't mean as much to a dog as they do to a man, and his ears were tilted just a bit in my direction. I took a deep breath, and couldn't help but notice them tilt a little bit more. All right, he was listening, whether he showed it or not.

"Prince," I began, "I... "

And I stopped. How do you begin a conversation like that? Prince canted his head a little, curious.

Sighing, I shook my head. "Sorry, old boy," I said ruefully. "Too many words."

"Ah," said Prince. "It is like eating from many bowls."

"Excuse me?"

He glanced over at me. Since both of us were sitting on the ground, he hardly had to look up at all. "You have the words," he said, "but you cannot use them all. They are all good words, so you do not know which one to start with. It is like eating from many bowls, because you cannot choose."

"Well, yes- but if I don't speak, another man isn't going to come along and take the words away, is he?"

Prince's tongue lolled out in something like a smile. "That would be something to see," he said.

"I suppose it would, wouldn't it?"

"It would have to be the big man. The one you call Danner. I don't think the others could beat you in a fight."

I laughed, and Prince wagged his tail. "I suppose you're right, fella. I might just as well pick a place to start."

He closed his mouth then, but there was still something of a smile about him. "Then start. I am listening."

"All right." Another deep breath. "It's like this, Prince... back home, dogs are- well, they're dogs. They're smart, or they're dumb, or they're like you, but no matter what, they're dogs."

Prince rolled his head from side to side. "We are still dogs here," he pointed out. "Although Toto is small enough that I could eat him in two bites."

"You're not going to, are you?"

His tongue lolled out again, and I got a very definite feeling that he was having a joke at my expense. "It would not be right. Dogs should not eat each other. And the girl would miss him."

It seemed like an opening. "Yes, she would," I said. "Just like I would miss you, if anything had happened when you went looking for the Lion."

Prince nodded. "I know," he said calmly.

"Is that important to you?" I asked.

His head jerked up at that, eyes wide as he stared at me. "Yes!" he all but barked.

"You're sure about that?"

"Yes!" He came to his feet. "This is a stupid question. I do not want to hear it any more."

"I'm... sorry, Prince. I didn't think it would bother you."

He snorted, refusing to look at me. "You are my human," he said, gazing fixedly off into the woods. "You have always been my human. You should know this."

"I'm not a dog, Prince, I don't know how it is for you-"

"You should know," he repeated. The fur along his back was almost standing on end. "Of all humans, you should know. I do not believe that you do not know."

What was I supposed to say to that? I sat back in silence, watching him. Every line of him was taut, tense. He looked like he wanted to bolt, or pounce. As if there were something chasing him and he didn't know whether to fight or flee. In the end the effect was the same: he stayed nailed to the spot, bristling.

Eventually, he spoke. His voice was low, on the edge of growling. "When I was a

puppy," he said, "a man came and looked at all of us. My mother was afraid of him. She said he would take us away. Then my father came up to the fence and spoke. It was my father who told us what would happen, that he would give us to men when we were old enough. He said some men were cruel and bad. He said some men were kind, and would take care of us, but make us pull heavy loads and sleep in the cold. And he said that his man was the best any dog could ever ask for."

I stared at him. "That was... Your father was Duke. My lead dog."

"Yes. Duke." Prince looked sharply at me. "You fed him, he said. You kept him with you, always close to you, and talked to him like you did to men. When he was hurt you bandaged him. When men said bad things about dogs you barked them down, because of him. You took care of him before you took care of yourself. You were his human. He said he was glad, because you treated him like a human, and that was good."

"He was my lead dog, though," I pointed out. "He had to work as hard as the other dogs-"

"You work hard for your pack, too," Prince said.

"Excuse me?"

"The people you guard? You work hard for them, to keep them safe. Men have tried to kill you but you still work for them. Your people are your pack, yes?"

"It's not quite like that."

"It is enough." Prince started to pace in a slow circle. "Everything you do is for the pack. My father said this. He was right. I have seen that."

I shook my head slowly. Prince went on. "He said that you would come, and you would take one of us. You would teach us things and make us work hard, but you would be good to us. He said we should be glad to be your dog, because you would always take care of us, and so we should always take care of you."

"I've always tried to do that. For all my dogs."

"Yes." Prince stopped pacing, looking to me again. "But especially to my father, and to me."

"Well ... yes."

"That is why," he said softly. "That is why it is important. I do not want anyone to hurt you, ever. In the place of the burned people you were in danger. They would have torn you apart. I would have torn out their throats for you."

He said it so matter-of-factly.

"The people who have come to this land have done things that make you angry. If they can, they will kill you. I do not want that to happen."

"Because I'm your human?"

"Because you are you, and because you are my human. You would not let them hurt me, would you?"

"Of course not!" The words came without my even thinking them.

"There. You see? It is like that. I was not afraid when you asked me to go with Toto to find the Lion, even though the smells were strange. Even when the wolves surrounded us, and the things with wings and hands tried to attack me."

"The winged monkeys attacked you?"

Prince licked his chops. "They tried," he said. "They were not good at it. I bit most of them. All they got was that talking thing you made me wear."

"The wireless headpiece."

"If that is what you call it." He snorted. "They tried to fight me, because they thought I came with the men who make you angry. There were many of them, and many wolves, and the Lion and the Tiger. If they had all fought me and won-"

I found that my hand had crept up over my shoulder, and was resting on the handle of the axe I'd brought to Oz with me. Prince saw the motion and nodded. "There. You would have fought them for me, yes?"

"Of course."

"That is why I was not afraid," he said. "You were near."

"But I sent you and Toto out alone..."

"And when the- monkeys?- when they took the speaking thing, you came looking for me, yes?"

I thought, for a moment, that I should say "for both of you" - but in my heart I knew it wasn't true. When I made that lantern and set off into the Yellow Woods I was looking for Prince, and Prince alone. Toto would have been a bonus, but... "Yes," I said. "For you."

"I knew you would," he said simply.

I let out my breath and leaned forward, my arms across my knees. It was ... somehow, it was not what I'd expected. I don't know what I'd been thinking. It

wasn't the words of the dog in Bambi; there wasn't anything of worship in it. It seemed too simple, somehow. "Back home," I said slowly, "you hunt for me. Does that ever bother you?"

"Should it?"

"Your mother was a wild wolf before she lost her paw," I said. "But you track wild things down for me."

"No," said Prince, "I track them down with you. I hunt with you."

"What's the difference? Half the time all I do is say 'Prince, find them'."

Prince snorted; it sounded like amusement. "It is the pack," he said. "A pack hunts together. My mother said so. The first of the pack leads the hunt, but the others hunt too. When the first of the pack does not find the trail, the others do it. When they make the kill, they share it."

"But I'm a man," I said. "Not a wolf. Or a dog."

"You treat me like a human," Prince answered. "I have heard you say that I am as good as any man."

"Well- you are."

"Then you are as good as any dog," he said. "Or any wolf."

I've been called a lot of things in my time, good and bad alike, and I have to say... that was probably the second-best compliment I've ever had.

Prince padded over to me. "You do not smell uncomfortable any more," he noted. "Are you done?"

The answer took a few moments, but I finally nodded. "I think so."

"Good," he said, and nosed at my right arm. "I do not like it when you smell like that. Try not to let that happen again."

I smiled, and reached over to scratch him behind the ears. "All right, old boy," I murmured, "if that's what you want."

"Good," he said again. The grass swished; he was wagging his tail.

"You're not going to be able to speak when we get back to Canada, you know," I said.

His tail didn't pause one bit. "I will manage. So will you."

"You're sure?"

"Yes." He paused. "There is one thing..."

"What is it?"

"Will we be going to the other place, too?"

"England, you mean?"

"If that is what you call it."

"I think so. Why?"

"There was this poodle..."

It took me a moment to realize what he was talking about. "You don't mean the one in Picadilly? The brown one?"

"Yes. Her." His tail was still waving, although a little more slowly.

"I... don't think that's such a good idea, Prince. Her human wouldn't like it. Anyway, she's a quarter your weight."

"I do not care. I liked her."

"Yes, but- a poodle? That's not the breed I'd have thought-"

"There are no other huskies in England," Prince pointed out. "And there are no other dogs here at all. There are wolves."

"Wolves are all right. Your mother was a wolf. Why not one of them?"

"Maybe." He turned to nibble at an itch on his flank. "What about you?"

"I don't need another dog, Prince. Especially not a poodle."

"I do not mean another dog, Sergeant."

"Excuse me?"

Prince looked at me. "I was with you the night Turtle Mountain fell," he said. "Your mate has been dead more than three years. You should find another. Have puppies."

I choked. There wasn't any other word for it. "Prince!" I finally managed, but he just cocked his head.

"What? It's true. You should have a mate. It would not be hard back home- there are always women looking at you-"

"That's enough, Prince."

I swear, that dog was laughing at me. "Even here. You would not have to go far."

"Absolutely not, Prince! Miss Poppins- well, it just wouldn't do, and that's flat."

"Not her. The one with yellow hair."

The only reason I didn't choke again is because I couldn't believe my ears.

"The girl is young," Prince said, "and she likes you. She has many puppy-bearing years ahead of her-"

"Prince, she's a child! A- a cub!"

"She is not a cub." Prince stared at me. "I can tell, I have smelled it- she is not a cub. Not any more."

I opened my mouth, but there weren't any words willing to come out.

"You didn't know?" asked my dog. I shook my head mutely. What was I supposed to say? I couldn't even believe the conversation was happening.

With a sigh, Prince nosed at my hand. "I am sorry," he said sympathetically. "It must be very confusing, to be a man."

More out of habit than anything, I rested my hand on the back of his neck. "You have no idea," I muttered.

There was no more talking after that. There wasn't anything left to say. That, or Prince realized he'd overstepped his bounds- I couldn't tell which, and I didn't much want to find out. Still, it was a decent silence, not an uncomfortable one. I think we both were glad to finally be out of the city noise and stink, no matter how warm and strange the Yellow Woods were.

Miss Poppins came by eventually. "The Hungry Tiger has agreed to carry word to Glinda that Dorothy is still alive, while we are gone," she said. "For now, it's getting late. We'll be leaving in the morning. It would be a good idea to get some rest."

She was right, of course, but I didn't want to go in just yet. "We'll be along soon," I said.

"Waiting for something in particular, Sergeant?"

What she meant by that I don't know, but I chose to take it at face value. "No, ma'am. But I've been in London for more than a month now."

She lifted an eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

I nodded at the gap in the trees. The moon was gone, but there were still stars,

thick and close together as frog spawn. "You can't see that in London. Not with the smoke, and the city lights the way they are. This is as close as I've been yet to home."

If there'd been a little more light I think I could've made out the look on her face as she turned to see. In a way, I'm glad I couldn't. There was something about the set of Miss Poppins' shoulders that made her look- well, private somehow. "Yes," she murmured, "I suppose I can see that. . ."

I didn't say anything, and neither did Prince. Eventually Miss Poppins nodded, turning away from the sight of the stars. "We leave in the morning," she reminded me, and then she was gone.

Here ends the text of Sgt. Frank William Preston's diary as presented in Fort Munn. Should further material become available, it, too, will be transcribed.
