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Anno Canis

Something woke me. My face was wet, because it was being washed vigorously with a flannel. I opened my eyes and got the flannel in one of them. I shut them again and tried to rub the soap out of them with my hand. My hand wouldn't move.

I'm having a dream. That's all. Don't panic.

The washing was getting tedious. I'm a grown up. I take a shower every day. I don't need to have my face washed. I tried to turn my head away from the flannel. My head turned.

That's better.

I tried to sit up.

I couldn't move my body.

I knew my eyes worked, because I'd opened them before with mixed success, so I tried that again.

I was a few inches away from some sort of wall, dull silver in colour and with a slight curve. Whatever it was filled my field of vision. I turned my head as far as it would go the other way – getting another washing in the process. Same view.

I tried to look towards my feet, but the washing started again.

Something wasn't right here. I was lying in a narrow, metal something which absolutely wasn't the hospital bed I should have been occupying.

There was an obvious and logical explanation for me lying in a long, narrow space.

I was lying in a coffin – my coffin.

Just a nightmare. I'll wake up in a minute.

Although I was hazy about procedures for preparing corpses, I didn't think that vigorous and repeated washing with a tepid flannel was a feature in any sect that was likely to have responsibility for disposing of my remains.

I was still getting the flannel-in-the-eye treatment, so I said,

'Oi! Cut that out!'

The washing stopped. I blinked a couple of times, then opened my eyes again. A very large dog was looking down at me. Its head was so close to mine that I could feel its breath on my face. Its breath was as rank as the old epithet intimated, and it had a full set of sharp, white teeth.

Only a nightmare. Don't panic.

I tried to concentrate on something other than the teeth.

My canine flannel appeared to be mostly German Shepherd. I couldn't see all of it, but there seemed to be something not quite right about the bits I could see. The dog was neatly straddling the sides of whatever I was lying in, fore and aft, with its front paws holding onto the sides. There was something odd about those paws.

Bear in mind I said that the paws were *holding on* to the sides.

It took me a minute to work it through, then I had it – the odd thing about the paws was that they had large dew claws that looked for all the world like ... thumbs.

I thought quickly. We'd got leash laws and dog pounds last time I checked. A German Shepherd – even one with opposable thumbs – shouldn't be wandering about on its own.

I shouted for its owner.

When I shouted the dog's head went away and the coffin-thing rocked slightly. I could hear grunting and scuffling, like a family of really big racoons was rooting through a nearby garbage sack.

The dog's head re-appeared over the edge of the – hell, I'll just call it a coffin. Then – oh, shit shit shit – the dog jumped into the coffin with me. It was one big dog, must've weighed pretty near sixty pounds. The whole caboodle rocked.

It wedged itself into the space, working its hind legs around until it was sitting on me. This was not comfortable. Then it lowered its head towards my middle somewhere and I screamed,

'Leave!'

It came out as a squeak.

The dog sat back on my legs and looked at me. I began to lose feeling in the parts of me it was sitting on.

This is one really big dog.

It leaned forward again, pawed at something on my chest and whined softly. Then it put its head on one side just like every dog I've ever known does when it wants something. I squinted down my body to try and see what was down there. There was a round, metal thing sticking up from the general area I reckoned my waist must be. From what I could see it looked a bit like the fastener off a parachute harness.

I gave this information a good mental worrying.

Perhaps I couldn't move because I was strapped in?

'Good dog.' *Thank you for bringing this to my attention.* The dog's head was still on one side. I took a deep breath and said to the dog, 'Okay,' hoping I was okaying what I thought I was okaying, and not giving the dog carte blanche to chow down on my large intestine.

The dog's head disappeared towards my midriff area again and I tensed, half expecting to feel teeth ripping into my belly. There was certainly gnawing going on down there but, from the lack of pain, I was pretty sure it wasn't on me.

After a bit the dog sat back on my legs again and started to use those so-not-right paws. Then it had another go with its teeth. I heard something tear. Finally it stood hard on my chest with one front paw and something went 'clunk'. The dog sat back on its haunches on my shins and did something which *really* freaked me out. It said, 'Sit.'

I'd been expecting a moderately bad day. When you go into hospital it's never a party. I'd been creaking about like an old man for months while they grew a new heart for me. Today was the day I was scheduled to have my old, faulty heart replaced with a shiny new, fully functioning one. Routine procedure. Nothing to worry about.

Except that currently I appeared to be lying in my own coffin with a talking dog sitting on top of me.

It had to be the drugs. Any minute now the monitors would pick up my increased heart rate and the dispenser would pump something into me which would make all this go away.

I closed my eyes and counted my heartbeats.

They were rapid.

No surprise there.

I counted two thousand and opened my eyes again. As I had suspected from the numbness now spreading through my lower limbs, there was still a large dog sitting on me.

It began to look as if this was no dream.

The dog stretched out one of those handy paws and used it to pull some chewed up webbing away from my upper body. Although I was still tangled up in something, I could now move a bit.

I got an arm free. I wanted to get the rest of me untangled and out of the ... er, coffin, but that's not easy with sixty pounds of dog sitting on you.

'Shoo,' I said, with minimal but hopefully appropriate gestures.

The dog didn't move.

I tried, 'Get down!'

The dog got to its feet and hopped neatly out of the coffin.

I started to work vigorously at the tangled-up problem. As soon as I started in earnest I felt a tearing pain in my chest. Gingerly I felt around on my chest over the white thing I was wearing. I could feel brand new sutures there in a big Y shape. Looked like I had my new heart.

That was the first bit of good news I'd got since I woke up.

Trying not to rip my stitches, I began to wriggle my arms and legs. There's very little to get any kind of purchase on in a coffin, I can tell you. I guess the occupants of coffins don't usually have any need to haul themselves about once they're *in situ*. But I finally got myself into a sitting position. Now I could see a lot more – and I wasn't happy about any of it.

Yep – this was a coffin all right. It was more space-age than I'd have expected Jood to choose, being made entirely of metal as far as I could see.

What the hell could have gone wrong? A new heart was a routine operation these days – just a couple of days in hospital. Still, it did require a general anaesthetic and those things aren't completely fool proof. Perhaps I'd flat-lined, and they'd decided the damage to my brain was too great to try and jumpstart me again.

Well, they'd been way wrong there, hadn't they?

Just look what happened when you weren't able to keep an eye on things for yourself. If ever there was an argument in favour of letting your inner paranoid control freak have its head, my situation was certainly it. Where the hell were the fail-safes when you really needed them? I was a long way from dead. I'd felt better, sure – but ...

I thought of something.

I felt around underneath me. The white shift I was wearing was just held together with Velcro tags at the back. Surely Jood hadn't let them dump me in here still wearing a hospital gown? She'd have appreciated that even a dead husband needs his dignity. My good blue suit would have been a better choice.

I wondered how Post-Op I was: mere hours probably from the state of those sutures – but in that case why wasn't Jood still here? Perhaps it'd been days or ...

Suddenly the most important thing in the world – even more important than where a talking dog with thumbs could've come from – was to know *when* something had gone wrong with my surgery.

I got my knees working, and my elbows over the sides of the coffin for some leverage. I looked over the side that the dog had jumped out of. The coffin was about four feet off the ground, not on the sort of trestle you might expect, but cradled in a hefty metal unit. I could see a tell-tale glowing red down towards the far end of it.

I noticed that the dog was not alone.

The German Shepherd and something that looked a lot like a Collie were sitting about ten feet away. When they saw me their tails started to sweep backwards and forwards across the floor.

I looked out the other side. Three more dogs sat there. Their tails started to wag too. A big one, that had a lot of Mastiff in it, was holding a short length of iron bar in one paw. Those dew claws had really come on.

I wondered what it was intending to use the iron bar for.

The wagging set up a tinkling noise – there seemed to be a lot of broken glass on the floor. Now that I was moving about myself it occurred to me that there was a lot of something scrunching and tinkling in the coffin with me: a quick check revealed more broken glass.

I needed to try and extricate myself without getting slashed to ribbons. I put some pressure on my elbows to try and lever myself out, but stopped quickly when I felt glass bite into my lower arm. Shit. When I looked at my left arm there was a big sliver embedded in it. I pulled the sliver out cautiously and blood started to flow. I looked over at the dogs. Were they still man's best friend, or would the smell of my blood bring on some kind of shark-like feeding frenzy?

German Shepherd and Collie got up and came over to the coffin. Collie jumped up lightly into the space with me. I noticed that where it had jumped in there wasn't any jagged glass. Collie looked over towards Mastiff and gave a single bark that sounded exactly like,

'Mutt!'

Then it put out its left paw, took hold of my injured arm, lowered its head and began to lick the blood away.

When it had finished it said,

'Better,' released my arm and jumped back onto the floor.

I looked at my arm: the blood had stopped oozing.

While I sat there, probably with my jaw hanging open, German Shepherd took the iron bar away from Mastiff in the same way that any dog might take a bone off any other dog – there was a brief growl and show of teeth on GSD's part, and an immediate cringing and release of the bar by Mastiff. Then the Shepherd got up on its hind legs, took the bar out of its mouth with one of those hands that it really shouldn't have and used the bar to smash the rest of the jagged glass remaining in the sides of the coffin.

It was pretty nifty with that iron bar. Like it had had plenty of practice.

Shaky with shock and exertion, and the nasty cut I'd acquired, I eased myself out and over the side. My legs buckled when I hit the ground, and I found myself leaning on GSD. Big brown eyes looked up at me with what looked remarkably like anxiety.

There was nowhere to sit – the floor was covered in glass and I had bare feet - so I leaned against the coffin and the dog for a bit to get my breath.

When I felt better I started to feel curious again. I set off for that tell-tale down at the end of the coffin unit. It felt like a very long way. GSD came with me.

When I got to the end of the coffin-thing, I could see that the little red light there was faltering. It was set above a panel with a lot of LEDs on it, none of them lit.

Under the panel a small label was set into a holder. It read:

Percy Conrad /P9800132/Stasis beg: 06-21-2102

My name is Conrad Percy, and my operation was slated for the twenty-first of June, 2102. In my brain a couple of feeble tell-tales of my own began to flicker on and off.

This wasn't a coffin – it was a cryo-chamber.

Percy Conrad must have been parked somewhere near Post-Op. When they'd finished giving Conrad Percy his new heart his gurney must've ended up near Percy Conrad's for some reason. One had been destined for the Recovery Ward, one for the Cryostasis storage facility.

And, faced with an unfortunate coincidence, someone had made a major blunder.

I wondered briefly what had been wrong with P Conrad, then dismissed that train of thought, reflecting that C Percy was number one priority – and there was plenty wrong with him at present.

I looked round the rest of the room. It held eleven more stasis chambers. Slowly I shuffled from one to the next, avoiding the broken glass, and checked them all. Some of the stasis dates were years after Percy Conrad's. The latest I found was 2198.

That rocked me.

Jood would be at least 132 years old, and almost certainly dead. Our children would be great great grandparents. In fact you could probably shoe-horn another 'great' or two in there without exaggerating the number of generations by which I was now adrift of my own. Our family home was most likely under the foundations of some later building development.

What else had happened to the world in my absence? It had had at least ninety six years to go to hell in a hand basket. Why had these stasis chambers been left like this? Why were dogs roaming around in packs, and how had a pack got into the sort of facility where stasis chambers were stored? It suggested that the place we were in had been abandoned. Were there still people around somewhere, or had I been brought back from the dead by the good offices of the dominant species? That was a lot of questions. I felt singularly ill-equipped to answer any of them, shuffling about in bare feet and with my arse hanging out of a hospital gown.

And, oh yes, sometime in the last hundred years or so someone had decided that dogs with opposing thumbs and basic English were a good idea.

None of the other stasis chambers showed tell-tales. The glass on the top of each was covered in mould of various colours and, now that I thought about it, there was a faint but unpleasant smell in here.

I wondered if that was what had attracted the dogs.

Ah ... the dogs. They were still with me, sitting patiently in a row beside the stasis chamber they'd released me from, while I poked about.

I wanted to ask them what year it was. But I felt that was too hard a question, even for a talking dog.

It was also likely to be one with a depressing answer.

Nevertheless they were company, and that was not to be sniffed at in the present circumstances.

Having finished my inspection of the room and drawn what few conclusions I could, I returned to my canine chums. All five tails began to wag. Collie seemed to be their leader. It barked a question at me. It said,

'Walkies now?'

And arched its eyebrows in the way that dogs do when they want a treat that is out of reach – and for the life of me I couldn't find anything more useful to do than laugh. I laughed until I had to sit down. The dogs sat down beside me. I laughed until

my ribs hurt. I laughed until I felt my stitches rip. I laughed and tickled their ears and rubbed their briskets. I laughed until the tears ran down my cheeks. And then I just wept.

They licked away my tears.

Dogs had moved way up the species pecking order since I'd been put to sleep, but some things, apparently, never change.

Finally I was able to stop laughing and weeping and wiped my face with the sleeves of that damned hospital gown. It was time to try and find out where and when I was. I stood up. Instantly the pack sat up and looked at me intently.

'Heel,' I said and set off slowly for the door.

They arranged themselves in a semi-circle so close to my heels that I could feel their breath on the backs of my legs.

We went up a ramp and through two sets of swing doors and, finally, I could smell the outdoors. So could they. Their ears pricked and they picked up speed, quickly getting ahead of me.

The air was cold, but it smelt good. I felt goose bumps start up on my arms and legs: I needed clothes. My belly rumbled: I needed food. I hadn't eaten, after all, for nigh on a hundred years.

Lots to do. And I had a brand new heart to do it with.

The pack was already trotting out into the day.

'Wait,' I said.

They waited for me.

The end