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THE BEST DOG IN THE WORLD

DIRK FLINTHART

My dog is the best dog in the whole world. I got him when I turned seven; the best day of my life. He was just a wriggly little black pup then, soft and fat and lop-eared, but he grunted and licked my face when my dad put him in my hands. “Scout,” I said. “I’m going to call him Scout.”

“That’s a good name,” said Dad. “You have to look after him, you know. Not many kids your age can have a dog. They eat a lot of meat.”

“That’s okay,” I said, and I held Scout next to my chest. He was warm, and he lifted his head to lick my chin. “He can have mine.”

Dad laughed, and ran his hand through my hair. “No need,” he said. “The lab will buy his food. But he’ll have to help with my work when he’s older.”

I rubbed Scout’s ears. He looked at me, and tilted his head to one side. “Good dog,” I said, and patted him. “It won’t hurt him, will it?”

Dad got a funny, far-away look in his eyes, and he rubbed his chin. “Most likely nothing will happen,” he said. “It’s just a crazy idea I’ve got. Mostly I’ll just scan him, like we scanned you in the hospital when you fell off your bike. Later, maybe he’ll wear a special harness.

There might be some tests, but nothing that will hurt him. That's the last thing I want."

"Good," I said. "Can he sleep on my bed?"

Dad grinned. "Absolutely," he said. "That's perfect."

Scout and I thought it was perfect too. Of course, I had to house train him, but he was a Kelpie. They were working dogs, once. They used to help look after sheep back when there were still big flocks of them, outside the zoos and the preserves. Scout learned really fast, and he almost never made the same mistake twice. He knew how to *sit* and *come* in only a day. *Stay* and *fetch* and *speak* and *shake hands* took a little longer, but Scout was smart even for a Kelpie. Dad said he'd been bred specially.

I didn't care. At least with Scout, I had a friend.

The other scientists' families lived off the base, in real houses like Dad and I used to have before Mum died in the big riots. But the work that Dad and the other scientists did was so secret that they couldn't bring their children onto the base at all, and I wasn't allowed off. I went to school with the kids of the soldiers who lived on the base, but since I wasn't an army kid, they didn't think much of me.

I spent a lot of time alone.

Scout changed all that. Every day after school I took him outside into the dry scrub behind our house, and we ran and played and chased each other for hours. At first, Scout was clumsy. His feet ran faster than his body. They tangled up under him so he spilled across the dusty ground like a splash of black ink, rolling and struggling. It never stopped him. He only ran faster, and jumped higher. Pretty soon he was so fast I couldn't catch him. I'd go out walking and he would run ahead, this way and that, with his nose to the ground. Back and forth he'd go, round and round, digging things up, chasing lizards. I had to run to keep up. After a while, we'd explored the whole base, except for the really secret bits and the dangerous places.

Then Dad put the harness on him. The weekly scans never bothered Scout. He didn't mind wearing a lead in the hospital, and he liked the special treat he got after every scan.

The harness was different, though. It was made of some kind of wire mesh, and it went over him like those doggy sweaters in the old pictures on the Web. There was a hood, too, with holes for his ears,

and a little box on his collar that recorded stuff. Scout didn't like it, but he let me put it on him. He always did anything I asked.

Scout was wearing his harness when Ben Grubb came up to me in the rec zone. The other kids had seen Scout before. They'd tried whistling him over, or throwing balls and sticks to get his attention. A couple times they even brought bits of meat they must have got from their own plates, but when Scout ignored them, I think they just got angry. Except for the guard dogs and the laboratory, nobody was supposed to have animals on the base.

But the harness was something new. I guess they just couldn't stand the curiosity any more. I saw them watching Scout while we played with a ball. After a while, Ben sidled up to me. "Why's he got that thing on him?" he said.

"Science stuff," I answered. "My dad uses Scout in his work."

"That's his name?" Ben's blue eyes widened. "Scout? Will he come if I call him?"

"I don't know," I said. "Nobody's tried it before."

"Can I?" Ben didn't wait for my answer. He bent a little, and slapped his thighs. "Here, Scout!" he called. "Come here, boy!"

Maybe because I was there, Scout came right up to him and sniffed his hand. Ben looked at me. "Can I — pat him?"

"Sure," I said. "He likes it if you scratch behind his ears."

Ben rubbed Scout's neck under the harness. I'd never seen Ben look so happy, not even when he won the school art competition and they read his name out in front of everyone on the whole base. "He's great," he said, grinning so widely I could count all his teeth. "He can fetch, right? I saw a movie with a dog who did that."

"He likes to fetch," I said, and threw the ball for Scout. He bolted after it, caught it on the bounce, and raced back to drop it at my feet. "You want to try?" I said to Ben.

His eyes got so big I thought they might pop out. He scooped up the soggy tennis ball, stretched his arm way back, and threw it as far as he could. Scout looked at me. I nodded, and he was gone in a flash, tearing after the ball like a bullet. "Wow!" said Ben. "Look at him go!"

Pretty soon, Ben and I were throwing the ball back and forth, playing keep-away with Scout jumping and yelping and running back

and forth. Some of the big kids joined in, and the ball went all over the rec zone. It was the first time I'd ever been part of the games. I was a little scared, but Scout kept coming back to me, lolling his tongue and grinning and wagging his tail. He played with everyone, but he watched over me the whole time, just the way those old-time Kelpies looked after their sheep.

The army kids thought he was fantastic. When they believed he was just my pet, they were jealous. Once they found out that Scout worked in the lab, I guess it was all okay.

Scout and I never had to be alone after that. There was always someone who wanted to explore, or play ball, or throw a frisbee, and it was really cool. But Scout always came when I called him, and he always, always came home with me, and slept across the bottom of my bed.

Best dog in the world.

On my tenth birthday, Dad sat down with Scout and me in the kitchen. He didn't say anything, just sighed, and rubbed at his nose like he does when he's worried, until I finally asked, "What's wrong, Dad?"

"Things aren't going so well with the work, Kevin," he said. "We're almost out of options. Commander Kinnear wants me to start testing Scout. You remember I told you that might happen?"

Scout put his chin on my knee. "I remember," I said. "You promised it wouldn't hurt him."

"It won't. Scout's too important for that. Why, all those scans — if you knew how much they cost! Nobody wants to see Scout hurt, Kevin. But ... the time has come for him to earn his keep."

The thick fur on Scout's neck was soft and rough. I knotted my fingers in it. "What kind of tests?"

"It's hard to explain," Dad said. "Some dogs have been known to find their way home over long distances. Like an extra sense. I need to find out if Scout can do that."

"He can find his way back from anywhere on the base," I said. "Even the south fence, down near the old riverbed."

"Farther," Dad said. "A lot farther..."

The first test frightened me so much I couldn't eat or sleep. They put Scout into the back of a Travvan and drove two hundred kilometres

into the desert. They circled the Travvan around and around to confuse him, then they put him out and drove away. Dad said they had a drone watching him from high up, but Scout wouldn't have known. He'd have been alone and lonely for the first time in his life, out there in the big, empty desert.

I cried most of the first night. I didn't care if Dad saw me.

It took Scout four days to get home. I was down at the gate waiting when he arrived, and they opened the gates especially for him. He was walking slowly when I first saw him, his head down and his tail drooping. Then the wind changed, and he smelled me. His ears came up and he ran like a black arrow, puffs of dust flying behind him in the sunset. He crashed into my chest and barrelled me over, licking my face and wriggling madly. I hugged him and I cried. We stayed there on the ground until the soldiers shut the gate. Then we went home, and Scout flung himself across the bottom of my bed with a sigh. Just like that, he fell asleep.

That was only the first test. After that, they took him farther away. At school, the teacher put up a map, and we put pins in it every day, showing where Scout was. He made a straight line almost five hundred kilometres long.

Dad and Commander Kinnear told me he was safe. The drone was armed, they said, and there was a support team not far away. But I imagined Scout falling off cliffs, or being bitten by snakes, or running into a really big fire ant nest, or just being killed and eaten by hungry people. A healthy dog has plenty of meat on his bones. Lots of people would be happy to eat him.

Scout made it home just fine. He was happy as ever to see me, and he slept on my bed like nothing had ever happened. They let him rest a whole week before they took him away again. This time they put him in a Lifter, and flew him to the other side of the country, two thousand kilometres away. Worse, only an hour after they took Scout away, Dad and I got in another Lifter, and they flew us to a base in the Blue Mountains.

“Magnetism,” Dad told me. “We have to be sure it's not magnetism. If it's only the Earth's magnetic field, or the sun and the stars, Scout will find his way back to the base. But if he comes here to you instead — well, it's happened before. There are lots of stories about it. But we have to prove it.”

“Why?” I shouted. I didn’t care if the Lifter pilot heard me. “Hasn’t he done enough? What will you do next? Will you make him swim home from New Zealand? Shoot him off to the moon in one of your transports? How far does he have to go?”

“Farther,” said Dad. “A lot farther...”

Then I understood, and my belly went cold and hollow. “You want him for the starship! You think he can bring it home!” Dad put his hand over my mouth, but I shook it off. “You’re crazy! I won’t let you do it!”

“We have to try,” he said, and his voice was intense, and scary. “There’s not enough food and not enough room left on Earth. Too many people. Everything’s dying, Kevin.”

“Mars,” I said. “What about the Mars colony? What about Europa?”

“No good,” he said. “You know that. We can’t change them fast enough. We need a new world, with oxygen and water and the right gravity. There’s at least a dozen within sixty light-years, according to the orbital telescopes. We can reach them with the Overspace Drive. But we can’t figure out how to get the ships back.”

“Why not?” I wanted to pound on his chest and scream.

“Nobody really understands,” he said. “You know that, Kevin. The trip through Overspace isn’t like a walk to the commissary. You don’t just turn around to get home. *The way out isn’t the same as the way back.* It took us decades and hundreds of probes to map the Overspace around Earth well enough to send things out properly. It took us another decade to map paths back from Mars and Europa to Earth. It’s all in the computers now, and we can travel back and forth just fine — but to another star system?” He shook his head. “We can go there. But we don’t have the computer maps to get back. We’ve tried everything else. Scout is our last hope.”

“But he’s my dog,” I said. “He’s my *dog*. He’s not some kind of starship pilot.”

Dad was quiet, while the Lifter banked and slowly settled over the Blue Mountains base. “Scout’s a dog to you,” he said finally. “But to a dying world full of desperate people, he’s the only hope there is.”

I didn’t talk to him at all for the rest of the trip.

It wasn't magnetism. Scout never even tried to get to our house in Woomera. The map on my e-slate showed a straight line from where they dropped him in the Kimberleys, aimed dead at the Blue Mountains. On the tenth day, with Scout somewhere in the desert, they put Dad and I in a Lifter again, and set us down north of Brisbane, in the D'Aguilar Range. Right away, that line on the map changed direction. They let Scout walk three more days, just to be sure. Then they picked him up, and brought him back home.

He didn't even go into the house. He just took off. Found a hole under the perimeter fence, and ran north-east, into the desert, towards Brisbane. They couldn't explain it. They couldn't understand it. But they couldn't deny it, so they brought me home again.

They gave us ten days.

On the second worst day of my life, they sent Scout to the moon. I got to hug him just once before they took him. I buried my nose in the fur on his neck. He whined, and put his paw on my leg. "Goodbye," I whispered. "Come home, boy. Please. Come home."

They loaded him into his special container, then they stacked my dog into the cargo space of a big orbiter. Ten minutes later, it rose off the ground on a cloud of steam and vapour, rising higher and higher with a rushing, roaring sound until finally it disappeared from sight against the grey-blue of the sky.

"He'll be all right, Kevin," my dad said. "He has to be all right."

I slid out from under his arm and walked away.

The ship was all ready for Scout. They'd been preparing it for six months, with everything he'd need, Dad told me. When he wasn't bringing the ship home, Scout would be kept asleep. He wouldn't even know the time had passed. Dad told me everything about that ship; all about the nuclear fusion power system, the safety systems and shields, and all the sensors and computers and drones so it could explore a whole star system without any human help at all. He told me everything except what I wanted to know; how Scout was supposed to pilot it home, all by himself.

That was the big secret.

I watched the starship vanish. Not like everyone else did, on the teevee, but through a proper telescope set up behind the school. The air over Woomera was still clear enough that we could see the ship

hanging there, next to the space station. Through the telescope, it looked so close I could touch it. Could Scout see the Earth? Was there even a window for him? Or was he already asleep up there? The other kids watched on the output screen, but the teacher let me stay over the eyepiece all the way through the countdown, so I could see the ship right up until the last second.

The countdown finished. I had time to draw a breath, and then the ship just — disappeared. The Drive had worked. Scout was gone, and since Overspace travel took no real time, he should already be somewhere near a star called Beta Hydri, a star with a planet that had oxygen and water. The ship would dispatch its drones, gathering as much information as it could. How long would it all take?

How long before Scout had to find his way home across twenty-four light-years of space?

A month of days and hours crawled by, and then another month. The ship was programmed to try randomly jumping after six months. If Scout couldn't guide it, at least it could try to get home, jumping and observing and jumping again until its power finally ran out. But the chances of it ever coming back close enough to Earth on its own were tiny. There was just too much distance, too much space. Everyone agreed; if Scout couldn't bring the ship home, we would never see it again.

Another month passed. Every night, I went outside and looked for Scout's star, a yellow-white dot far to the south. Was Scout out there, trying to find me? Did he know I was looking at him? Nobody knew how his special homing sense worked. Did he know I was thinking about him? Would it help him? Was there anything I could do?

I didn't care about the rest of the world. I just wanted my dog to come home again.

One hundred and twelve days after Scout's ship vanished, it reappeared. I was in the main lab when it happened, arguing with Dad. Just as he was about to say something, there was a giant cracking sound, like a huge clap of thunder, and all the windows smashed. Glass went everywhere. Sirens and alarms blared. "It's an attack," Dad shouted. "Get down on the floor!"

We were huddled together under a counter when one of Dad's assistants pushed an e-pad at us. "Look at the telemetry, sir," he said.

“It’s the ship! It’s broadcasting again!”

Dad grabbed the pad and sat up so quickly he banged his head. “That signal strength! It’s — where is it? What orbit?”

“It’s not in orbit, sir,” said the technician. He pointed to the smashed-in window opposite. “It’s sitting on the cricket oval outside!”

I was already up and running.

Scout’s Ship was a long strand of shiny beads, linked units the size of houses. Built in orbit, it was never meant to land. On the ground, it looked like a gigantic, broken metal caterpillar, steam pouring off it like fog. I ran over to it, but one of the technicians grabbed me. “Don’t touch it,” she said. “It’s been in space for months. It’s so cold your hand would freeze solid in an instant.”

“My dog,” I shouted. “Scout! Scout’s in there! He came home! He found me! Let me go! I’ve got to get him out of there!” People came from everywhere. Commander Kinnear shouted orders through a loudhailer, and his soldiers formed a cordon, keeping everybody back — but Scout was in there, home at last. I just *had* to get through.

Dad came up from behind and took me by the shoulders. “I’ve got this,” he said. The technician hurried off. Dad looked at the ship, and shook his head. “Amazing,” he said. “We never guessed he could do that. The best our Mars ships can do is get somewhere close to the planet. Scout jumped twenty-four light-years and landed in the backyard. Unbelievable.”

“He found me, Dad! He came home! He’s in there, waiting for me! You’ve got to make them let me in!” I struggled in his grip, even though I knew the ship was too dangerous to touch.

He tightened his hands. “No, Kevin,” he said. “You can’t.” Then he sighed. “Not now. And ... not ever.”

Then he told me how Scout brought the spaceship home.

Everyone knows the rest. They fixed the starship; they got their information. The new planet even had some plants and animals of its own. We’re still learning about it, but already there are more than a million people living there. Scout’s ship took them all, every one, even though he’s never even set foot on New Earth. He hasn’t even sniffed the air.

He never will. An ordinary dog *can't* bring a starship home across all of space, even if you teach him to press buttons and turn wheels and stuff.

Scout finds his way back to me with a special sense that we still don't understand, a way of knowing that's deeper and cleverer than anything we've ever built. The only way he could come home to me from Beta Hydri was to *become part of the ship*.

That's what they did to him. They took out his brain and his spine and they built him into the ship. They made the ship into a new body for him. When he walks, the fusion jets fire. When he sniffs, sensors and probes tell him all about the space around. And when he wants to come home, then the fusion system pours power into the Overspace Drive, and across the long, dark light-years, no matter how far they've sent him, he comes back to me.

My dog Scout is a hero. They're training dozens more, but my dog is the *best* dog in the whole world. He brought us the stars, and he gave our planet a second chance. There aren't enough medals and awards and statues in the whole world to say how great he is. Sometimes they even let me put on a spacesuit so I can touch his gleaming metal skin.

But the place at the bottom of my bed is empty.