

THE DOG KING



THE HUMAN DIVISION // EPISODE 7

JOHN SCALZI

The Dog King

John Scalzi



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The Human Division as a whole is dedicated to:
Yanni Kuznia and Brian Decker, two of my favorite people;
and
John Harris, for his wonderful cover art for this and other Old Man's War books.

Additionally, this particular Episode is dedicated to:

The SFWA Board of Directors

(Jim Ficus, Matthew Johnson, Ann Leckie, Lee Martindale, Bud Sparhawk, Rachel Swirsky, Cat Valente, and Sean Williams)

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Notice](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Begin Reading](#)

[Also by John Scalzi](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

Episode Seven: The Dog King

“Don’t step on that,” Harry Wilson said to Deputy Ambassador Hart Schmidt, as the latter walked up to the shuttle that the former was working on. An array of parts and tools was splayed out on a work blanket; Schmidt was on the edge of it. Wilson himself had his arm shoved deep into an outside compartment of the shuttle. From the inside of the compartment, Schmidt could hear bumping and scraping.

“What are you doing?” Schmidt asked.

“You see tools and parts and my arm shoved inside a small spacecraft, and you really have to ask me what I’m doing?” Wilson said.

“I see what you’re doing,” Schmidt said. “I just question your ability to do it. I know you’re the mission’s field tech guy, but I didn’t know your expertise went to shuttles.”

Wilson shrugged as best he could with his arm jammed inside a shuttle. “Captain Coloma needs some help,” he said. “This ‘new’ ship of hers is now the oldest active ship in the fleet, and she’s got the rest of the crew going through all its systems with a microscope. She didn’t have anyone to go over the shuttle. I didn’t have anything else to do, so I volunteered.”

Schmidt backed up a step and looked over the shuttle. “I don’t recognize this design,” he said, after a minute.

“That’s probably because you weren’t born when this thing was first put into service,” Wilson said. “This shuttle is even older than the *Clarke*. I guess they wanted to make sure we kept the vintage theme going.”

“And you know how to fix these things how, exactly?” Schmidt asked.

Wilson tapped his head with his free hand. “It’s called a BrainPal, Hart,” he said. “When you have a computer in your head, you can become an instant expert on anything.”

“Remind me not to step inside that shuttle until someone actually qualified has worked on it,” Schmidt said.

“Chicken,” Wilson said, and then smiled triumphantly. “Got it,” he said, extracting his arm from the shuttle compartment. In his hand was a small blackened object.

Schmidt leaned forward to look. “What is that?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say it’s a bird nest,” Wilson said. “But considering that Phoenix doesn’t actually have native birds per se on it, it’s probably a nest for something else.”

“It’s a bad sign when a shuttle has animal nests in it,” Schmidt said.

“That’s not the bad sign,” Wilson said. “The bad sign is that this is the third nest I found. I think they may have literally hauled this shuttle out of a junkyard to give it to us.”

“Lovely,” Schmidt said.

“It’s never a dull day in the lower reaches of the Colonial Union diplomatic corps,” Wilson said. He set down the nest and reached for a towel to wipe the soot and grime from his hand.

“And this brings us to the reason I came down to see you,” Schmidt said. “We just got our next mission assigned to us.”

“Really,” Wilson said. “Does this one involve me being held hostage? Or possibly being blown up in order to find a mole in the Department of State? Because I’ve already done those.”

“I’m the first to acknowledge that the last couple of missions we’ve had have not ended on what are traditionally considered high notes,” Schmidt said. Wilson smirked. “But I think this one may get us back on the winning track. You know of the Icheloe?”

“Never heard of them,” Wilson said.

“Nice people,” Schmidt said. “Look a little like a bear mated with a tick, but we can’t all be like that.”

beautiful. Their planet has had a civil war that's been flaring up off and on for a couple hundred years since the king disappeared from his palace and one faction of his people blamed the other faction."

"Was it their fault?" Wilson said.

"They say no," Schmidt said. "But then they *would*, wouldn't they. In any event, the king left no heir, his sacred crown went missing and apparently between those two things no one faction could legitimately claim the throne, thus the two centuries of civil war."

"See, this is why I can't support monarchy as a system of government," Wilson said. He reached down to start reassembling the portion of the shuttle he had taken apart.

"The good news is that everyone's tired of it all and they're all looking for a face-saving way to end the conflict," Schmidt said. "The bad news is that one of the reasons they are trying to end the conflict is that they are thinking of joining the Conclave, and the Conclave won't accept them as members unless there is a single government for the entire planet. And this is where we come in."

"We're going to help them end their civil war in order to join the Conclave?" Wilson asked. "That seems counterintuitive to our own agenda."

"We've volunteered to mediate between the factions, yes," Schmidt said. "We're hoping that by doing so, we'll generate enough goodwill that the Icheloe will choose an alliance with us, not the Conclave. That in turn will help us build alliances with other races, with an eye toward establishing counterweight to the Conclave."

"We tried that before," Wilson said, reaching for a spanner. "When that General Gau fellow was putting the Conclave together, the Colonial Union tried to form an alternative. The Counter-Conclave."

Schmidt handed him the spanner. "That wasn't about building actual alliances, though," he said. "That was about disrupting the Conclave so it couldn't form at all."

Wilson smirked at this. "And we wonder why no other intelligent race out there trusts the Colonial Union any further than they can throw us," he said. He went to work with the spanner.

"It's why this negotiation is important," Schmidt said. "The Colonial Union got a lot of credibility with the Danavar negotiations. The fact we put one of our ships in the path of a missile showed a lot to other alien races that we were serious about building diplomatic solutions. If we can be seen as good-faith negotiators and mediators with the Icheloe, we're in a much better position going forward."

"Okay," Wilson said. He replaced the outside panel on the shuttle and began sealing it. "You don't have to sell me on the mission, Hart. I'm going regardless. You just need to tell me what I'm supposed to do."

"Well, so you know, Ambassador Abumwe isn't going to be the lead on this mediation," Schmidt said. "The ambassador and the rest of us will be acting in support of Ambassador Philippa Waverly, who has experience with the Icheloe and who is friendly with a Praetor Gunztar, who is acting as a go-between between the factions on the negotiating council."

"Makes sense," Wilson said.

"Ambassador Waverly doesn't travel alone," Schmidt said. "She's a little quirky."

"Okay," Wilson said, slowly. The shuttle compartment was now completely sealed.

"And the important thing to remember here is that there are no small jobs on a diplomatic mission and that every task is important in its own unique way," Schmidt said.

"Hold on," Wilson said, and then turned around to face Schmidt directly. "Okay, hit me with it," he said. "Because with an introduction like that, whatever idiot thing you're going to have me do has got to be *good*."

"And of course, Praetor Gunztar, you remember Tuffy," Ambassador Philippa Waverly said, motioning to her Lhasa apso, which stuck out its tongue and lolled it, winningly, at the Icheloe.

diplomat. Wilson held the leash attached to the dog's collar. He smiled at Praetor Gunztar as well, not that it was noticed.

"Of course I do," Praetor Gunztar exclaimed in a chattering burst duly translated by a device on his lanyard, and leaned toward the dog, which scampered with excitement. "How could I possibly forget your constant companion. I was worried that you were not going to be able to get him past quarantine."

"He had to go through the same decontamination process as the rest of us," Waverly said, nodding toward the rest of the human diplomatic mission, which included Abumwe and her staff. They had all been formally introduced to their Icheloe counterparts, with the exception of Wilson, who was clearly an adjunct to the dog. "He was very unhappy about that, but I knew he wouldn't want to miss seeing you."

Tuffy the Lhasa apso barked at this, as if to confirm that his excitement at being close to Praetor Gunztar had elevated him to near bladder-voiding levels of joy.

From behind the leash, Wilson glanced over to Schmidt, who was assiduously not looking in his direction. The entire group of them, human and Icheloe alike, were taking part in a formal presentation ceremony at the royal palace, in the same private garden where the long-missing king was last seen before the mysterious disappearance that plunged his planet into a civil war. The two groups had met in a central square surrounded by low planters arrayed in a circular design, which featured flora from all over the planet. In every planter was a spray of fleur du roi, a gorgeous sweet-smelling native flower that by law could be cultivated only by the king himself; everywhere else on the planet it was allowed only to grow wild.

Wilson remembered vaguely that the fleur du roi, like the aspen on earth, was actually a colonial plant, and the sprays of flowers were all clones of one another, connected by a vast root system that could extend for kilometers. He knew this because as part of his dog-minding job, he needed to figure out which plants in the private garden could tolerate being peed on by Tuffy. He was pretty sure that the fleur du roi would be hardy enough if it came to that, and it almost certainly would. Tuffy was the only dog on the planet. That was a lot of territory to mark.

"Now that we have all been introduced, I believe it is time to move forward with our initial meeting," Praetor Gunztar said, turning his attention away from the Lhasa apso and back again to Ambassador Waverly. "Today I thought we'd take care of merely procedural items, such as confirming the agenda and opening formal statements."

"That would of course be fine," Waverly said.

"Excellent," Gunztar said. "One reason for a short schedule today is that I would like to offer you and your people a special consideration. You may not know that the royal palace sits above one of the most extensive cave systems on the planet, one that ultimately travels almost two kilometers into the planet and meets up with a vast subterranean river. The caves have been used by the palace as a keep as a place of refuge and even as a catacomb for the royal family. I would like to offer you a tour of these caves, which no one but Icheloe have been in before. It's a token of our appreciation for the Colonial Union's willingness to mediate these possibly contentious negotiations."

"What an honor," Waverly said. "And of course we accept. The caves really descend that far into the planet?"

"Yes, although we will not follow them down that deep," Gunztar said. "They are blocked off for reasons of security. But what you will see is extensive enough. The cave system is so vast that even now it has never been fully explored."

"How fascinating," Waverly said. "If nothing else, it will give us an impetus to get through today's business as quickly as possible."

"There's that, too," Gunztar said, and everyone had a laugh, in their own species' fashion, at this

Then the entire mass, human and Icheloe, was herded toward the palace, to the suite of rooms reserved for the negotiations themselves.

As they moved, Waverly glanced toward Abumwe, who in turn glanced toward Schmidt, who held back with Wilson. Wilson stood, hand on leash, restraining the little dog, who was becoming anxious at seeing his mistress wander off without him.

“So, today will just be a couple of hours,” Schmidt said. “The agenda’s already been agreed to by both sides, so all we’re doing is going through the motions. All you have to do is keep Tuffy here busy until we break. After today you and Tuffy will be at our embassy for the duration.”

“I’ve got it, Hart,” Wilson said. “This isn’t exactly rocket science.”

“You’ve got all your stuff?” Schmidt asked.

Wilson pointed to a jacket pocket. “Kibble and treats here,” he said. He pointed to a trouser pocket. “Poop bags here. The pee I’m not picking up.”

“Fair enough,” Schmidt said.

“They know he’s going to do his business, right?” Wilson asked. “It’s not going to cause a major diplomatic incident if one of the grounds staff here sees li’l Tuffy in a poop squat, right? Because I am not ready to deal with that sort of thing.”

“It’s one of the reasons you’re staying behind here,” Schmidt said. “It’s a private garden. He’s been given approval for taking care of business. We’ve been asked not to let him do any digging.”

“If he does that, I can just pick him up,” Wilson said.

“I know I said it before, but sorry about this, Harry,” Schmidt said. “Dog sitting isn’t in your job description.”

“*De nada*,” Wilson said, and then rephrased at the sight of Schmidt’s puzzled expression. “It’s not a big deal, Hart,” he said. “It’s like working on the shuttle. Someone’s got to do it, and everyone else has something more useful to do. Yes, I’m overqualified to watch the dog. That just means you don’t have to worry about anything. And that you owe me drinks after this.”

“All right,” Schmidt said, smiling. “But if something *does* happen, I have my PDA set to accept your call.”

“Will you please get out of here now and go be useful to someone,” Wilson said. “Before I have Tuffy here mate with your boot.”

Tuffy looked up at Schmidt, apparently hopefully. Schmidt left hastily. Tuffy looked over to Wilson.

“You leave *my* boots alone, pal,” Wilson said.

I have a problem, Wilson sent to Schmidt, roughly an hour later.

What is it? Schmidt sent back, using the texting function of his PDA so as not to interrupt the talks.

It would be best explained in person, Wilson sent.

Is this about the dog? Schmidt sent.

Sort of, Wilson sent.

Sort of? Schmidt sent. *Is the dog okay?*

Well, it’s alive, Wilson sent.

Schmidt got up as quickly and quietly as possible and headed to the garden.

“We give you one thing to do,” Schmidt said, as he walked up to Wilson. “One thing. Walk the damn dog. You said I didn’t have to worry about *anything*.”

Wilson held up his hands. “This is not my fault,” he said. “I swear to God.”

Schmidt looked around. “Where’s the dog?”

“He’s here,” Wilson said. “Kind of.”

“What does that even mean?” Schmidt said.

From somewhere came a muffled bark.

Schmidt looked around. "I hear the dog," he said. "But I can't see it."

The bark repeated, followed by several more. Schmidt followed the noise and eventually found himself at the edge of a planter filled with fleur du roi flowers.

Schmidt looked over to Wilson. "All right, I give up. Where is it?"

Another bark. From inside the planter.

From *below the planter*.

Schmidt looked over to Wilson, confused.

"The flowers ate the dog," Wilson said.

"What?" Schmidt said.

"I swear to God," Wilson said. "One second Tuffy was standing in the planter, peeing on the flowers. The next, the soil below him *opened up* and something pulled him under."

"What pulled him under?" Schmidt asked.

"How should I know, Hart?" Wilson said, exasperated. "I'm not a botanist. When I went over and looked, there was a *thing* underneath the dirt. The flowers were sprouting up from it. They're part of it."

Schmidt leaned over the planter for a look. The dirt in the planter had been flung about and below he could see a large, fibrous bulge with a meter-long seam running across its top surface.

Another bark. From *inside* the bulge.

"Holy shit," Schmidt said.

"I know," Wilson said.

"It's like a Venus flytrap or something," Schmidt said.

"Which is not a good thing for the dog," Wilson pointed out.

"What do we do?" Schmidt asked, looking at Wilson.

"I don't know," Wilson said. "That's why I called you in the first place, Hart."

The dog barked again.

"We can't just leave him down there," Schmidt said.

"I agree," Wilson said. "I am open to suggestion."

Schmidt thought about it for a moment and then abruptly took off in the direction of the entrance to the garden. Wilson watched him go, confused.

Schmidt reemerged a couple of minutes later with an Icheloe, dusty and garbed in items that were caked with dirt.

"This is the garden groundskeeper," Schmidt said. "Talk to him."

"You're going to have to translate for me," Wilson said. "My BrainPal can translate what he says for me, but I can't speak in his language."

"Hold on," Schmidt said. He pulled out his PDA and accessed the translation program, then handed it to Wilson. "Just talk. It'll take care of the rest."

"Hi," Wilson said, to the groundskeeper. The PDA chattered out something in the Icheloe language.

"Hello," said the groundskeeper, and then looked over to the planter that had swallowed the dog. "What have you done to my planter?"

"Well, see, that's the thing," Wilson said. "I didn't do anything to the planter. The planter, on the other hand, ate my dog."

"You're talking about that small noisy creature the human ambassador brought with it?" the groundskeeper asked.

"Yes, that's it," Wilson said. "It went into the planter to relieve itself and the next thing I know it had been swallowed whole."

"Well, of course it was," the groundskeeper said. "What did you expect?"

"I didn't expect anything," Wilson said. "No one told me there was a dog-eating plant here in the garden."

The groundskeeper looked at Wilson and then Schmidt. "No one told you about the kingsflower?"

"The only thing I know about it is that it's a colony plant," Wilson said. "That most if it exists under the dirt and that the flowers are the visible part. The thing about it being carnivorous is new to me."

"The flowers are a lure," the groundskeeper said. "In the wild, a woodland creature will be drawn by the flowers and while it's grazing it will get pulled under."

"Right," Wilson said. "That's what happened to the dog."

"There's a digestion chamber underneath the flowers," the groundskeeper said. "It's big enough that a large-size animal can't climb out. Eventually one of two things happens. Either the creature starves and dies or asphyxiates and dies. Then the plant digests it and the nutrients go to feed the entire colony."

"How long does that take?" Schmidt asked.

"Three or four of our days," the groundskeeper said, and then pointed at the planter. "This particular kingsflower has been in this garden since before the disappeared king. We usually feed it a kharak once every ten days or so. Tomorrow is a feeding day, so it was getting a little hungry. That's why it ate your creature."

"I wish someone had told me about this earlier," Wilson said.

The groundskeeper gave the Icheloe equivalent of a shrug. "We thought you knew. I was wondering why you were letting your, what do you call it, a dog?" Wilson nodded. "Why you let your *dog* wander through the kingsflowers, but we were informed ahead of time to allow the creature free rein of the garden. So I decided that it was not my problem."

"Even though you knew the dog could get eaten," Wilson said.

"Maybe you *wanted* the dog to get eaten," the groundskeeper said. "It's entirely possible you brought the dog as a treat for the kingsflower as a diplomatic gesture. *I* don't know. All I do is tend to the plants."

"Well, assuming we didn't want the dog to get eaten, how do we get it back?" Wilson asked.

"I have no idea," the groundskeeper said. "No one has ever asked that question before."

Wilson glanced over to Schmidt, who offered up a helpless gesture with his hands.

"Let me put it this way," Wilson said. "Do you have any objection to me *trying* to retrieve the dog?"

"How are you going to do that?" the groundskeeper wanted to know.

"Go in the same way the dog did," Wilson said. "And hopefully come back out the same way."

"Interesting," the groundskeeper said. "I'll go get some rope."

"You should probably rub against the flowers a bit," the groundskeeper said, motioning to the fleur du roi. "Your dog was not especially large. The kingsflower is probably still hungry."

Wilson looked doubtfully at the groundskeeper but nudged the flowers with his feet. "It doesn't seem to be doing anything," he said, kicking at the plant.

"Wait for it," said the groundskeeper.

"How long should I—," Wilson began, and then dirt flew and fibrous tentacles wrapped around his legs, constricting.

"Oh, that's not good," Schmidt said.

"Not helping," Wilson said, to Schmidt.

"Sorry," Schmidt said.

"Don't be alarmed when the plant starts cutting off the circulation to your extremities," the groundskeeper said. "It's a perfectly normal part of the process."

“That’s easy for you to say,” Wilson said. “You’re not losing feeling in your legs.”

“Remember that the plant wants to eat you,” the groundskeeper said. “It’s not going to let you go away. Don’t fight it. Let yourself be eaten.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m finding your advice to be less than one hundred percent helpful,” Wilson said to the groundskeeper. The plant was now beginning to drag him under.

“I’m sorry,” the groundskeeper said. “Usually the kharhn we feed to the kingsflower are already dead. I never get to see anything live fed to it. This is exciting for me.”

Wilson fought hard not to roll his eyes. “Glad you’re enjoying the show,” he said. “Will you hand me that rope now, please?”

“What?” the groundskeeper said, then remembered what he had in his hands. “Right. Sorry.” He handed one end of the rope to Wilson, who quickly tied it to himself in a mountain climber hold. Schmidt took the other end from the groundskeeper.

“Don’t lose your grip,” Wilson said. He was now up to his groin in plant. “I don’t want to be fully digested.”

“You’ll be fine,” Schmidt said, encouragingly.

“Next time it’s your turn,” Wilson said.

“I’ll pass,” Schmidt said.

More tentacles shot up, roping around Wilson’s shoulder and head. “Okay, I am officially not liking this anymore,” he said.

“Is it painful?” the groundskeeper asked. “I am asking for science.”

“Do you mind if we hold the questions until afterward?” Wilson asked. “I’m kind of busy at the moment.”

“Yes, sorry,” the groundskeeper said. “I’m just excited. Damn it!” The Icheloe started patting his garments. “I should be recording this.”

Wilson glanced over to Schmidt, looking as exasperated as he could under the circumstances. Schmidt shrugged. It had been a strange day.

“This is it,” Wilson said. Only his head was above the surface now. Between the tentacles constricting and dragging him down and the pulsing, peristaltic motion of the fleur du roi plant sucking him down into the ground, he was reasonably sure he was going to have post-traumatic flashbacks for months.

“Hold your breath!” the groundskeeper said.

“Why?” Wilson wanted to know.

“It couldn’t hurt!” the groundskeeper said. Wilson was going to make a sarcastic reply to this but then realized that, in fact, it couldn’t hurt. He took a deep breath.

The plant sucked him fully under.

“This is the best day ever,” said the groundskeeper to Schmidt.

Wilson had a minute or two of suffocating closeness from the plant as the thing pushed him into its digestive sac. Then there was a drop as he fell from the thing’s throat into its belly. The fall was broken by a spongy, wet mass at the bottom: the plant’s digestive floor.

“Are you in?” Schmidt said, to Wilson, via his BrainPal.

“Where else do you think I would be?” Wilson said, out loud. His BrainPal would forward the voice to Schmidt.

“Can you see Tuffy?” Schmidt asked.

“Give me a second,” Wilson said. “It’s dark down here. I need to give my eyes a moment to adjust.”

“Take your time,” Schmidt said.

“Thanks,” Wilson said, sarcastically.

Thirty seconds later, Wilson's genetically-engineered eyes had adjusted to the very dim light from above to see his environment, a dank, teardrop-shaped organic capsule barely large enough to stand and stretch his arms.

Wilson looked around and then said, "Uh."

"'Uh'?" Schmidt said. "'Uh' is not usually good."

"Ask the groundskeeper how long it takes this thing to digest something," Wilson said.

"The groundskeeper says it usually takes several days," Schmidt said. "Why?"

"We have a problem," Wilson said.

"Is Tuffy dead already?" Schmidt asked, alarm in his voice.

"I don't know," Wilson said. "The damn thing isn't here."

"Where did he go?" Schmidt asked.

"If I knew that, Hart, I wouldn't be saying 'uh,' now, would I?" Wilson said, irritated. "Give me a minute." He peered hard into the dim. After a minute, he got down on his hands and knees and moved toward a small shadow near the base of the capsule. "There's a tear here," Wilson said, after examining the shadow. "Behind the tear it looks like there's a small tunnel or something."

"The groundskeeper says the rock bed below the palace is riddled with fissures and tunnels," Schmidt said, after a brief pause. "It's part of the cave system that's underneath the palace."

"Do the tunnels and fissures go anywhere?" Wilson asked.

"He says 'maybe,'" Schmidt said. "They've never mapped the entire system."

From deep inside the black tunnel, Wilson heard a very small, echoing bark.

"Okay, good news," Wilson said. "The dog's still alive. Bad news: The dog is still alive somewhere down a very small, dark tunnel."

"Can you go down the tunnel?" Schmidt asked.

Wilson looked and then felt around the wall of the capsule. "How does our groundskeeper friend feel about me tearing into the plant wall a little bit?" he asked.

"He says that in the wild these plants have to deal with wild animals kicking and tearing at their insides all the time, so you're not going to hurt it too much," Schmidt said. "Just don't tear it any more than you have to."

"Got it," Wilson said. "Also, Hart, do me a favor and throw me down a light, please."

"The only light I have is on my PDA," Schmidt said.

"Ask the groundskeeper," Wilson said.

Down the tunnel, there was a sudden, surprised yelp.

"Ask him to hurry, please," Wilson said.

A couple minutes later, the mouth of the plant opened and a small object tumbled down into the capsule. Wilson retrieved the light, switched it on, lifted the tear and shone the light down the tunnel, sweeping it around to get an idea of its dimensions. He figured if he crawled, he might barely be able to make his way down the tunnel. The tunnel itself was long enough that the light shone down in darkness.

"I'm going to have to undo the rope," Wilson said. "It's not long enough to go all the way down the tunnel."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Schmidt said.

"Being swallowed by a carnivorous plant isn't a good idea," Wilson said, undoing the rope. "Compared to that, letting go of the rope is nothing."

"What if you get lost down there?" Schmidt asked.

"My BrainPal will let you know where I am, and I'll let you know if I get stuck," Wilson said. "You'll be able to tell by the screaming panic in my voice."

"Okay," Schmidt said. "Also, I don't know if this is information that you need to know right now."

but I just got a ping from Ambassador Waverly's assistant. She says the negotiations should wrap up in an hour and then the ambassador will want Tuffy for, and I swear to God this is a quote, 'a little snuggle time.'"

"Wonderful," Wilson said. "Well, at least now we know how much time we have."

"One hour," Schmidt said. "Happy spelunking. Try not to die."

"Right," Wilson said. He knelt at the tear, tore it just enough to shove his body through, put the light between his teeth, got on his hands and knees and started crawling.

The first hundred meters were the easy part; the tunnel was narrow and low, but dry and relatively straight as it descended through the rock. Wilson figured that if he had to guess, he'd venture it was once a lava tube at some point, but at the moment all he really wanted was for the thing not to collapse on him. He wasn't ordinarily claustrophobic, but he'd also never been dozens of meters down a tube in a rock, either. He thought he was allowed a spot of unease.

After a hundred meters or so, the tube became slightly wider and higher but also more jagged and twisting, and the angle of descent became substantially steeper. Wilson hoped that somewhere along the way the tunnel might become wide enough for him to turn around in; he didn't like the idea of having to back out ass first, dragging the dog along with him.

"How is it going?" Schmidt asked him.

"Come down here and find out," Wilson said, around his light. Schmidt demurred.

Every twenty meters or so Wilson would call out to Tuffy, who would bark some times but not others. After close to an hour of crawling, the barks finally began to sound like they were getting closer. After almost exactly an hour, Wilson could hear two things: Schmidt beginning to sweat up on the surface and the scrabbling sounds of a creature moving some distance ahead.

The tunnel suddenly widened and then disappeared into blackness. Wilson carefully approached what was now the lip of the tunnel, took the light out of his mouth and panned it around.

The cave was about ten meters long, four or five meters wide and roughly five meters deep. To the left side of the tunnel lip was a pile of scree that formed a steep slope to the floor of the cave; directly in front of the lip, however, was a straight drop. Wilson's light played across the scree and caught glimpses of dusty paw marks; Tuffy had avoided the drop.

Wilson directed the light to the floor cave, calling out to the dog as he did so. The dog didn't bark but Wilson heard the clitter of nails on the floor. Suddenly Tuffy was in the light cone, eyes reflecting green up at Wilson.

"There you are, you little pain in the ass," Wilson said. The dog was dusty but otherwise seemed unharmed by his little adventure. He had something in his jaws; Wilson peered closely. It looked like a bone of some sort. Apparently, Tuffy wasn't the first live animal to get sucked down into the fleur-de-roi after all; something else fell in and escaped down the tunnel behind the tear, just to die in this dead-end cave.

Tuffy got bored of looking into the light and turned to wander off. As he did, Wilson caught a glimpse of something sparkly attached to the dog; he trained his light on the animal as it moved and focused on the sparkly bit. Whatever it was was stuck to Tuffy in some way, encircling one of the dog's shoulders and riding around to his undercarriage.

"What the hell is that?" Wilson said to himself. He was still following Tuffy with the light, which was why he finally saw the skeleton of the creature the dog had taken his chew toy from. The skeleton was roughly a meter and a half long and mostly intact; it was missing what looked like a rib—which was what Tuffy was now chewing on quite contentedly—and its head. Wilson flicked the light slightly and caught the white flash of something round. *Ah*, thought Wilson. *There's the head, then.*

It took him a few seconds to realize that what he was looking at was the skeleton of an Ichel adult.

It took another few seconds, and Tuffy wandering through the light cone, sparkling as he did so before Wilson realized which Icheloe's skeleton it was likely to be.

"Oh, shit," Wilson said, out loud.

"Harry?" Schmidt said, suddenly cutting in. "Uh, just so you know, I'm not alone on this end anymore. And we have a bit of a problem here."

"We have a bit of a problem on this end, too, Hart," Wilson said.

"I'm guessing your problem isn't Ambassador Waverly looking for her dog," Schmidt said.

"No," Wilson said. "It's oh so very much larger."

There was an indignant squawk on the other end of the line; Wilson imagined Schmidt putting his hand over the PDA's microphone to keep Wilson from hearing ambassadorial venting. "Is it Tuffy? Is Tuffy all right?" More squawking. "Is Tuffy, uh, *alive*?"

"Tuffy is fine, Tuffy is alive, Tuffy is perfectly good," Wilson said. "But I've found something down here that's none of those things."

"What do you mean?" Schmidt said.

"Hart," Wilson said, "I'm pretty sure I just found the lost king."

"Do you hear that?" Ambassador Waverly said, pointing out the window of one of the many sitting rooms of the royal palace. The window was open, and in the distance was a rhythmic chittering that reminded Wilson of the cicadas that would fill the midwestern nights with their white noise. They were not cicadas.

"Those are protesters," Waverly said. "Thousands of Icheloe reactionaries who are here to demand a return to royalty." She pointed at Wilson. "*You* did that. More than a year of background work and persuasion and angling to get us a seat at the table—more than a year to line up the dominoes just right for us to position this negotiation as the first step to make a legitimate counter to the Conclave—and you blow it all in *two hours*. Congratulations, Lieutenant Wilson."

"Wilson didn't intend to find the lost king, Philippa," Ambassador Abumwe said, to her counterpart. She was in the room with Wilson and Waverly. Schmidt was there, too, pulled in because he was, as Waverly put it, an "accomplice" to Wilson's shenanigans. Tuffy was also present, gnawing on a toy ball volunteered by the palace staff. Wilson had discreetly separated Tuffy from the royal bones long before they both had exited the cave. The crown remained with the dog; it had somehow attached itself and refused to be removed. All five were awaiting the return of Praetor Gunztar, who had been pulled into emergency consultations.

"It doesn't matter what he *intended* to do," Waverly shot back. "What matters is what he *did* do. And what he did was single-handedly disrupt a long-running diplomatic process. Now the Icheloe are back on the verge of civil war and we are to blame."

"It doesn't have to be as bad as that," Abumwe said. "If nothing else, we've solved the disappearance of the king, which was the cause of the civil war. The war started because one faction blamed the other for kidnapping and killing him. Now we know that never happened."

"And that simply doesn't *matter*," Waverly said. "You know as well as I that the disappearance of the king was just the polite fiction the factions needed to go after each other with guns and knives. If it hadn't been the king going missing, they would have found some other reason to go at each other's throats. What's important now is that they wanted to end that fight." Waverly pointed again at Wilson. "But now *he's* dragged up that damn king, giving the hard-liners on both sides a new pointless excuse to go after each other."

"We don't know that will be the outcome," Abumwe said. "You had confidence in the process before. At the end of the day, the Icheloe still want their peace."

"But will they still want it with *us*?" Waverly said, looking over. "Now that we've unnecessarily

disrupted their peace process and added complications to it? That's the question. I hope you're right Ode. I really do. But I have my doubts." She turned her gaze back to Wilson. "And do you have any thoughts on this subject, Lieutenant Wilson?"

Wilson glanced over to Abumwe, whose face was neutral, and at Schmidt, who had preemptively gone pale. "I'm sorry I unnecessarily disrupted your process, Ambassador," he said. "I apologize." In his peripheral vision, Wilson could see Schmidt's eyes widen. Hart clearly wasn't expecting deference from his friend.

"You apologize," Waverly said, walking over to him. "You're sorry. That's all you have to say."

"Yes, I think so, ma'am," Wilson said. "Unless you think there's something else I should add."

"I think your resignation would be in order," Waverly said.

Wilson smiled at this. "The Colonial Defense Forces isn't generally keen on resignation, Ambassador Waverly."

"And that's your final comment on the matter," Waverly said, persisting.

Wilson glanced very briefly at Abumwe and caught her almost imperceptible shrug. "Well, except to say that I know what to do the next time something like this happens," he said.

"And what is that?" Waverly said.

"Let the plant keep the dog," Wilson said.

Praetor Gunztar opened the door to the room before Waverly had a chance to explode at Wilson. She whirled toward Gunztar instead with such sudden ferocity that even the praetor, who was no great reader of human emotion, could not miss it. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Of course, Praetor Gunztar," Waverly said, tightly.

"Very good," Gunztar said, barreling through before Waverly could launch into anything further. "I have news. Some of it is good. Some of it is less so."

"All right," Waverly said.

"The good news—the *great* news—is that leaders of both factions agree that no one was responsible for the killing of the king, except for the king himself," Gunztar said. "It was well-known the king was a heavy drinker and that he would often stroll in his private garden at night. The most obvious explanation is that the king was drunk, collapsed into the kingsflower planter, and the plant pulled him under. When he awoke, he tried to escape and followed the tunnel to his death. The garden was part of his private residence and he was a bachelor; no one looked for him until his staff went to wake him the morning."

"Didn't anyone at the time think to look inside the plant?" Abumwe asked.

"They did, of course," Gunztar said. "But it was not until much later, when more obvious places were searched. And by that time, there was no trace of the king. It seems that he may have wandered down the tunnel by that time and was either dead or too injured by the fall into the cave to call for help. The bones show his spine was shattered in several places, consistent with a fall."

Wilson, who remembered Tuffy chewing on at least a couple of other bones aside from the rib, kept quiet.

"This is good news because one continual sticking point between the factions has been finding some way to finesse the disappearance of the king," Gunztar said. "The question of blame and responsibility are still sore subjects. Or were. Now they no longer are. During our discussions, the head of the praetor faction provisionally apologized for blaming the agitators for killing the king. The head for the agitator faction provisionally expressed sorrow at the death of the king. As long as it sticks, the job here has become substantially easier."

"Wow," Wilson said. "And here I thought that the disappearance of the king was just a convenient excuse already warring factions were using to go after each other."

"Of course not," Gunztar said, turning toward Wilson and thereby missing the flush that drove itself

up Waverly's neck and face. "To be certain, the factions were ready to fight. But our civil war would not have lasted so long, nor have been so bloody, had one side not accused the other of regicide. And so the Icheloe owe you a particular debt of thanks, Lieutenant Wilson, for what you have done for us today."

"If you thank anyone, you should thank Ambassador Waverly, Praetor Gunztar," Wilson said. "Without her, I would never have found your lost king. After all, she is the one who brought Tuffy."

"Yes, of course," Gunztar said, bowing in the Icheloe way to Ambassador Waverly. She, still furious at Wilson and yet also aware of how he had just transferred credit for the praise to her, nodded mutely. "And that, I'm afraid, brings us to our bad news."

"What's the bad news?" Waverly said.

"It's about Tuffy," Gunztar said. "The crown is attached to him."

"Yes," Waverly said. "It's tangled in his hair. We'll get it out. We'll trim his hair down if we have to."

"It's not that simple," Gunztar said. "You can't get it off him because it's tangled in his hair. You can't get it off him because microscopic fibers have come off the crown and physically attached themselves to him, binding the crown to his physical body."

"What?" Waverly said.

"The crown is permanently attached to Tuffy," Gunztar said. "The scans our medical scientists did when he was brought back to the surface show it."

"How could that possibly happen?" Abumwe asked.

"The crown is a very important symbol of the king," Gunztar said. "Once taken up, it was supposed to never be taken off." He pointed to a set of ridges on his own head. "The crown is designed to sit on the head of the king in such a way that it need never be removed. To assure that it never is, it is made with nanobiotic strands on the inside surface, tuned to graft to the genetic signature of the king. The crown is also sensitive to the electrical signals produced by life. It only comes off at death, when a brain and body activity are quiet."

"How did it get attached to Tuffy?" Waverly said. "He obviously has no genetic relation to your king."

"It's a mystery to us as much as you," Gunztar said.

"Hmmm," Wilson said.

"What is it, Wilson?" Abumwe said.

"How much of this genetic material would need to be present for the crown to register it?" Wilson said.

"You'd have to ask our scientists," Gunztar said. "Why?"

Wilson motioned to Tuffy, who had dozed off. "When I found him, he was chewing on one of the king's bones," he said. "He'd been in and around that skeleton for at least an hour. More than enough time to get some of the king's genetic material all over him. If the crown wasn't programmed well, it might have registered the genetic material, registered electrical signals from Tuffy being alive and decided, 'Well, close enough.'"

"So we give Tuffy a bath, wash off all the king's, uh, dust, and the crown lets go," Schmidt said. "Right?"

Wilson looked over at Gunztar, who offered up a negative gesture. "No. Only death will cause the crown to let go," he said. He turned to Ambassador Waverly. "And the council, I'm afraid, is adamant that the crown must be removed."

Waverly looked blankly at Gunztar for the ten seconds or so it took for what the praetor said to sink in. Wilson glanced over to Schmidt and Abumwe as if to say, *Here it comes.*

"You want to kill my dog?!" Waverly exclaimed to Gunztar.

Gunztar immediately threw up his hands. “We don’t *want* to kill Tuffy,” he said, quickly. “But you must understand, my friend. The crown is an object of truly immense historical, political and social value. It is no exaggeration to say that it is one of the most iconic and significant objects we Icheloes have. It’s been missing for generations. Its importance to us is incalculable. And your *dog* is wearing it.”

“It’s not *his* fault,” Waverly said.

“I agree, of course,” Gunztar said. “But ultimately that is neither here nor there. The council is unanimous that the crown must not stay on your dog.” He pointed out the window, toward the chattering masses gathered in front of the palace. “The reactionaries we have at the gate do represent our people at large, but there are enough of them to cause trouble. If they were to find out your *pet* wore the crown of the disappeared king, the riots would last for days. And I would be lying to you if I said there weren’t those on the council who didn’t find the fact Tuffy wears the crown deeply insulting. One of them even began calling him ‘the Dog King.’ And not in an affectionate way.”

“You’re saying Tuffy wearing the crown is jeopardizing our diplomatic mission,” Abumwe said.

“Not yet,” Gunztar said. “The fact that you found the disappeared king far outweighs the issue of the crown, for now. But the longer it takes for it to be returned to us, the more questions the negotiating council will begin to have about it. Make no mistake that eventually it will jeopardize your mission, and your standing. And the standing of the Colonial Union.”

“Philippa,” Abumwe said, to Waverly.

Waverly said nothing, looked at them all and then went over to Tuffy, who was by this time on his back, paws adorably in the air, snoring lightly. Waverly sat next to her dog, picked him up, wakened him in the process, and began sobbing into his little back. The dog craned his head back and heroically tried to lick the head of his owner, hitting only air instead.

“Oh, come *on*,” Wilson said, after roughly thirty seconds of awkward silence from everyone in the room except Ambassador Waverly, who continued sobbing. “I feel like I’m twelve and being made to reread the last couple chapters of *Old Yeller*.”

“Lieutenant Wilson, it might be advisable to let Ambassador Waverly have her moment with Tuffy,” Praetor Gunztar said. “It is hard to say good-bye to a friend.”

“So we’re all agreed that we’re going to have to kill the dog,” Wilson said.

“*Wilson*,” Abumwe said, sharply.

Wilson held up his hand. “I’m not asking just to be an asshole,” he assured Abumwe. “I’m asking because if we’re all agreed that’s what has to happen, then no one will look at me like I’m nuts for offering a completely insane potential solution.”

“What solution?” Abumwe asked.

Wilson walked over and stood by Waverly and Tuffy. Tuffy lolled his tongue out at Wilson. Waverly looked up at him with deeply suspicious eyes.

“Badly-designed technology got us into this problem,” Wilson said, looking down at Tuffy and Waverly. “Maybe better-designed technology can get us out of it.”

“Here you go,” Schmidt said, handing Wilson the small wand with a plunger button on top and then motioning with his head to two nervous-looking Icheloe technicians. “Press the button, everything goes down. Press the button again, hopefully everything comes back up again.”

“Got it,” Wilson said. He watched as another Icheloe technician brought in Tuffy and placed him on a stainless steel table, a small work towel placed in the middle to keep the dog’s feet from getting too cold.

“The technicians also wanted me to tell you thank you for being willing to be the one to press the button,” Schmidt said.

“Of course,” Wilson said. “Ambassador Waverly already hates my guts. And if this doesn’t work then better it’s someone on our side than one of the Icheloe.”

“Their thinking exactly,” Schmidt said.

“How is Ambassador Waverly, anyway?” Wilson asked. He hadn’t seen her for several hours.

“Abumwe is with her now,” Schmidt said. “I think the plan is to keep feeding her alcohol.”

“It’s not a bad plan,” Wilson said.

Schmidt looked at his friend. “How do you feel?”

“I feel fine, Hart,” Wilson said. “I’d like to get this over with, however.”

“Can I get you some juice or anything?” Schmidt asked.

“What you can do is help that technician with Tuffy,” Wilson said, nodding to the Icheloe tech holding the squirming dog. “He looks like he’s about to lose it.” Schmidt hurried over and took the dog from the tech, then settled it down on the table. The tech backed away quickly, obviously relieved to be rid of her burden. The other two techs also quietly excused themselves.

“You want me to go?” Schmidt asked, petting Tuffy to keep the dog still.

“No, I need you to help me,” Wilson said. “You might want to move your hands, though.”

“Oh, right,” Schmidt said, and moved a step away from the dog.

Tuffy moved to go after Schmidt, but Wilson said, “Tuffy!” and snapped his fingers at the same time, drawing the little dog’s attention to himself.

“Good dog,” Wilson said, to Tuffy, who gave him a happy doggie smile and wagged his fluffy little tail.

Wilson accessed his BrainPal and got the feed on the two small monitors the dog had on his body, one at the top of his head and the other on his chest, close to his heart. The two monitors showed Tuffy’s brain and heart electrical activity. There was something else on his body as well, at the back of his neck, close to where his spinal cord met his brain. Wilson didn’t have a monitor for it.

“Tuffy! Sit!” Wilson said.

The dog sat, winningly obliging.

“Good boy!” Wilson said. “Play dead!” He pressed the plunger button in his hand.

Tuffy’s brain and heart monitors flatlined instantly. The Lhasa apso gave a tiny squeak and collapsed stiffly, like a stuffed animal blown over by a wind gust.

““Play dead?”” Schmidt said, ten seconds later, after examining the dog. “That’s just *cruel*.”

“If this doesn’t work, I’ll have bigger problems than a tasteless joke,” Wilson said. “Now, shut up for a couple of minutes, Hart. You’re making me nervous.”

“Sorry,” Schmidt said. Wilson nodded and walked over to the dog on the table.

Tuffy was dead.

Wilson poked the body with a finger. No response at all.

“Any time,” Wilson said. The Icheloe had assured him that their biological systems were similar enough to those of Earth vertebrates that Wilson was willing to risk his little experiment. Nevertheless, he wanted the crown to realize its wearer was dead sooner than later.

A minute passed. Two.

“Harry?” Schmidt asked.

“Quiet,” Wilson said, staring at the crown, still nestled on the dog’s body.

Another two minutes passed. Three.

“What do we do if this doesn’t work?” Schmidt asked.

“Are you asking if there’s a plan B?” Wilson asked.

“Yeah,” Schmidt said.

“Sorry, no,” Wilson said.

“Why are you telling me this now?” Schmidt asked.

“Why didn’t you ask earlier?” Wilson asked.

Another minute.

“There,” Wilson said, pointing.

“What?” Schmidt said.

“The crown moved,” Wilson said.

“I didn’t see anything,” Schmidt said.

“You remember that part where my genetically-engineered eyes are about ten times better than yours, right, Hart?” Wilson said.

“Oh, that,” Schmidt said.

“Remove the crown, please,” Wilson said.

Schmidt reached over to the dog and gently removed the crown from the body. It came off easily.

“Got it,” Schmidt said.

“Thank you,” Wilson said. “Stand back now.” Schmidt backed away from the table.

“Okay, Tuffy,” Wilson said, looked at the dog and raised his wand. “Time to learn a new trick.”

He plunged the button down a second time.

The dog twitched, peed himself and scrambled up from the table, barking furiously.

“Wow, he’s pissed,” Schmidt said, smiling.

“True in more than one way, and a totally appropriate response,” Wilson said, smiling himself.

The Icheloe flooded back into the room, one of them carrying a bag full of red fluid: Tuffy’s actual blood.

“Wait,” Wilson said, and realized the Icheloe had no idea what he was saying. He made himself clear through gestures and then turned to Schmidt. “Tell one of them to go get Ambassador Waverly please,” he said. “I want her to see that her dog is fine before we transfuse the poor thing again.”

Schmidt nodded and spoke to the Icheloe through his PDA. One of them departed in a hurry.

One of the other Icheloe pointed to the dog and looked at Wilson. “How is it that you could give the animal your blood?” Wilson’s BrainPal translated the Icheloe’s chitter as saying. “You’re not even the same species.”

Wilson reached over and borrowed Schmidt’s PDA. “It’s called SmartBlood,” he said, setting the PDA in front of him. “It’s completely non-organic, so the dog’s body wouldn’t reject it. It also has several times the oxygen-carrying capacity, so we could stop the body’s processes for a longer period of time and still have the tissues survive.” Wilson reached over and picked up the still-damp dog, who had stopped barking by this time. “And that’s what we did. Replaced this little guy’s blood with my blood, then stopped this little guy’s heart and brain long enough for the crown to think he’s dead. The crown started him up again.”

“It seems risky,” the Icheloe said.

“It was risky,” Wilson said. “But the alternative was worse.”

“You mean us breaking off our diplomatic relationship with you,” said the other Icheloe.

“Well, I was actually thinking of a dead dog,” Wilson said. “But yes, that, too.”

Ambassador Waverly appeared in the doorway, Abumwe and Praetor Gunztar behind her. Tuffy saw his mistress and barked happily. Wilson set the dog on the floor; Tuffy’s nails skittered adorably across the floor surface as he raced over to Waverly.

Everyone dissolved into a puddle of *awwwwww*.

“This is just about the perfect ending, isn’t it?” Schmidt said to Wilson, quietly.

“Just about,” Wilson agreed.

“And I suppose we are to make a pact never to speak of this again,” Schmidt said.

“I think that’s the wisest course, yes,” Wilson said.

“I concur,” Schmidt said. “Furthermore, I suggest that we now commence to get drunk.”

“Agreed,” Wilson said. “I seem to recall you promising me a drink at the end of all this.”

~~“Do you want us to pour back in that pint of SmartBlood you gave to Tuffy before we do?” Schmi~~
said.

“You know, I think I’ll be fine without it,” Wilson said.

They watched as Waverly and Tuffy wandered off together, followed by some very concerned Icheloe, carrying Tuffy’s bag of blood.

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

HUMAN DIVISION #7: THE DOG KING

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