

A man in a grey t-shirt and blue jeans is playing an acoustic guitar. In the foreground, a fluffy, light-brown dog with a black collar and a tag is looking towards the camera with its mouth open. The background is a textured, grey wall.

RHYS FORD

HAIR OF THE DOG

A SERIALIZED SHORT
FROM THE SINNERS SERIES

Hair of the Dog

Rhys Ford

A serialized short story from the Sinners Series

This serialized series is dedicated to anyone
who has grabbed one of my books and fallen in love with Dude.
Okay, it's for everyone who has ever gotten one of my books.

Because *you* are the reason for all of this.

I treasure that.

Beyond measure.

So thank you.

This is a collection of free stories. Do not pay any money for this book. It should be free of charge like the love of a good dog, swimming in the ocean and the sound of laughter in the air. Also the smell of coffee because really, that does it for me.

Hair of the Dog • Part One

“Hello, Defender of the Concrete Squirrel.”

It was a silly name but the bulldog took it on with a great seriousness. Apparently the people he called his considered the squirrel an important part of their lives so he in turn honoured them by defending it. It was better than the human-name give to him. Roscoe. A noise at best and a harsh one. It probably meant something in human language but I didn't know what. They rarely discussed their language with us and mostly it centered around food or toys.

And beatings. Some humans liked to chase away the Pack's members as if they had dominion over the ground they squatted on.

It is one thing to be territorial but quite another to be cruel.

Much like the name Roscoe.

“Hello, Chinatown Gypsy Walker.” Defender snuffled a greeting through the chain link fence surrounding his property. Another silly human thing, running a line of tall metal around an area as if they can keep it safe from anything outside coming in. It would be an easy enough fence to scale. Or if I were something other than Pack, fly or crawl under but that would be disrespectful to the bulldog so I stayed on my side of the silly webbing. “Where are you going today?”

“I am heading down to the end path there. I have found a human I like. I'll be staying there for my life.” His shock flavoured the air and I sniffed at it, wondering what was such a surprise. I cocked my head at him, pulling my ears forward. “Why the strangeness? Did you think I will give up my roaming? The one I've found needs a roamer. He stays inside too much. He'll need me to bring the outside in.”

“Does he like you?” The bulldog furrowed its brow and I wondered if he'd spent too much time with his humans as he looks more like one of them when he speaks. But then, thinking back on all the bulldogs I have know, most of the breed were like that. A mass of wrinkles, worry and defending odd things.

“He feeds me. And when he does walk outside, he goes to the food place on the corner and buys me a sandwich. Just for me.” I catch the scent of a cat on the wind. It is nearby but not one I know. If I hadn't been on my way to home, I would seek it out but there are things to do. I had to find my newly claimed human and mark him as mine—an easy task since I'd avoided at least three rains since I'd last seen him so I reeked of my scent. “So, you will see me with him. I thought I should tell you I would be in the area and hope to be good Pack to you.”

“Wait, I know that one. He looks like he owns a cat.”

"He *is* a cat." I assert. "But I can work with that. Wish me luck. It will be a hard thing with him but I am determined."

"Then why are you doing it?" Defender asks as I turn away.

"Because he is sad inside." I reply, elated the bulldog did not draw a line of aggression between us. It would be difficult to live near him if he had. "And because, Defender, he deserves to live better than the death he's chosen for himself."

Hair of the Dog • Part Two

The dead squirrel was the final straw.

Okay, stepping in it had been the final straw but that counted as finding it, especially when the thing squeaked and spurting when Miki's foot came down on its slightly depressed corpse.

"Fuck! Shit." His howl echoed through the empty half of the garage and Miki hopped off the squirrel, shaking his foot. Turning, he banged his elbow on the garage door, rattling its slats and sending a shockwave of pain up his arm. Unbalanced, his bad knee gave and he went down, slapping the concrete floor in an inelegant sprawl. The ache in his elbow was nothing compared to the twisting anguish coming up his leg to grab at the base of his neck, a devastating ripple through his nerves.

To add insult to injury, the squirrel's remains still clung to his bare foot, its gummy flesh poking out between his toes.

More importantly, the bringer of the dead rodent sat there laughing at him, his pink tongue curled up like a one-finger salute poking out of his panting mouth.

A panting mouth reeking of dead squirrel stench.

"Dude, really?" Miki shook his foot, adding another layer of pain to his already aching knee. The squirrel remained lodged between his toes and he spread them as wide as he could, shaking harder.

The damned dead thing was as stubborn as the dog who now seemed to live with him.

"You see this thing on my foot? What the fuck is this? Shit, now I've got to touch it." Miki debated how long he could lie there with a dead squirrel stuck to his foot before someone found him. "Yeah, the answer to that is fucking forever 'cause no one gives a shit about you, Sinjun."

He regretted using that old nickname instantly and the pain began again, rushing into his blood with a poisonous sting. No one called him that any more. Hell, even Edie said Miki or even St. John when she was annoyed with him. Sinjun was dead. As dead as the men who'd once called him that.

God fucking damn it, he missed Damie so much. There wasn't anyone to tell him it was okay that he woke up in the middle of the night shivering from fear. He missed being held. He missed being able to go down a hallway or across a room to find someone to anchor him to the now. Without the others, he was lost and...drowning.

He was drowning so much and nothing Miki did seemed to get him closer to shore.

There were some days...most days...when he felt like going under, just so it would all stop.

"You do that, and that bitch family of his is going to get Damie's shit. Next thing you know, they'll be selling tampons and mineral water with our crap." Miki sniffed, his nose clogging up too tightly for him to breathe. "Fuck it, Damie. Why'd you have to leave me here? Why couldn't you have been the one to stay? You could have done this fucking shit without me because I sure as shit can't do it without *you*."

Something tugged at his foot and he blinked, wiping away the tears in his eyes to look. Oddly, the terrier had the squirrel's rather flat tail in his mouth and was tugging its dead prize off of Miki's foot. Dropping his stench-laden gift onto the floor, the dog trotted over to Miki's side and swiped at Miki's tears with his slobbering tongue.

Miki laughed despite himself then gagged, pushing the dog away gently. "Oh no, Dude. You just had a mouth of squirrel ass. No fucking way that's coming near me. Never ass to face. Never."

Hair of the Dog • Part Three

My human was useless.

There was no other way to say it but—useless. He couldn't hunt. Well, hardly any human did these days. Most of them gathered from food places or had other humans come over with food but even these simple things, my human failed at.

The noise he used for me was nice. Dude. I'd heard other humans use it to call one another. Much like saying Pack. It was an acknowledgement of equality and I bore it with honour. I added it to my other names, gleefully in fact. It was much better than the bulldog's and so much greater a name than the poor Chihuahua-mix I'd met whose owner called it Boobie-Hamster. But Snuffler of Warm, Soft Flesh liked the name and wore it as a badge.

Of course he also called himself Terror of Cats and we both pretended as if it were true.

Sometimes, it's best to let a dog's pride remain intact, even as he shivered when passing by one of the Pack's traditional rivals for affection—the canny feline.

No, my human was useless in so many things. He did not gather food that smelled of anything but salt, grains and chemicals even though he made sure the sustenance he gave me was primarily protein—even the dried kibble he left in an open bag for me on the floor. He did not walk. He did not stretch his legs. And he hurt. All the time. Inside and out. There were parts of him I could not reach because humans and their frail communication skills meant they had to chatter and chatter nonsensically at each other just to say hello or goodbye.

I would have liked if he chattered to someone—anyone—but he rarely saw another person. If he left to the food place on the corner of the crossway, he spent less than a few seconds talking to the human there.

Useless.

And he also brought home much too much liquid fermented grain. If he intended to drink his food, I'd have to find a new person to live with before long because the one I'd found was too broken to survive.

No, I was going to need help. The problem with my human was too big for just one dog to take care of. I'd need a bigger voice than the one I had, one my human—my Miki— would listen to.

I was tired of my human tasting like tears. Tired of hoping he would find something he'd like to play with in the things I brought to him every day. I was going to have to bring him something—someone—grumpier than he was. I knew I felt better after a good fight. There was something about getting my blood stirred up that lifted the spirit even in the darkest of days.

That is what Miki needed. His blood stirred.

And I knew just the human to do it.

Hair of the Dog • Part Four

Humans are stupid stupid things.

Someone brought *death* to my house and the swarms of metal-smelling, grumbling men who'd invaded my home spent more time trying to shove me into a box than taking care of my Miki. He was scared and sick. I could smell the sick on him and the Other One—Kane—was doing as best he could trying to calm my human down.

It wasn't going to work. Miki'd already was covered with the stench of the kill and it made him sick. He was pulling up his stomach and the salty mess of grains he'd eaten were all over the ground. But that didn't matter either. The loud people were digging into that too, as if they would find anything but grains and bile.

There was *death* in the house! How could they not smell it? It was not a good death. Not like a hunt or even meat brought back from a food place. This was death with no intent on eating the flesh—the worst kind of horror any Pack could think of.

It was something a cat would do—bring a kill to another cat's yard to say he was better than the other.

I needed to get to Miki. To tell him it would be alright and Kane would take care of him but one of the humans picked me up—as if he had the right to do so.

So I bit him.

And he did *not* taste good.

There are very few times when I've shown my teeth in anger. Usually mostly to warn another of the Pack away if I'm eating and they are perfectly capable of getting their own food. One does not show teeth to a puppy or kitten. My dam taught me manners before I even pulled away from her teat. I knew that from the beginning. Aggression is stupidity because there were other ways for me to deal with the situation. But in that moment of panic, stress and anger, I could only think of one thing—getting to Miki.

So I bit one of Kane's people until he bled and dropped me.

Sorry, I am *not* sorry.

I took two steps to the garage when someone threw something over me and the next moment, I was in the cold, hard room with the water dish I could only reach if I stood on my hind legs. A few pants later, a dish with dry food and more water in a bowl joined me and someone thought

to throw in one of the thick bones Miki had another human bring me when they brought his salty bread things.

There was no familiar voices after that. There was chatter. Most of it confused. Some of it worried. A few times I thought I heard Kane but the sound of the voice was different. Not as old. Not as wise but very much of the same litter.

There was nothing more I could do. Just sit there. And wait.

Well, and chew the meat off of my bone. I only hoped someone would take care of my human. And keep death as far away from him as possible.

Hair of the Dog • Part Five

“Do you know what you need?” Brigid tilted her head, studying Miki as he nibbled on the mountain of food she’d put on a plate and plopped into his lap.

The woman purred. Literally purred. As Irish as any pint of Guinness he’d downed in Dublin while on tour, Kane’s mother spoke with a lilting purr meant to comfort and soothe.

But it scared the fuck out of him.

Crawling scary fucks even.

He knew why. Explaining it wouldn’t help. He’d met women like Brigid before. Well, not exactly like Brigid since she seemed to be the type of person someone would name an unsinkable ship after.

No, Miki frowned, they’d name the iceberg after her. Any poor ship minding its own business in the middle of the ocean was fucked if it ran across her.

And if anything made him feel smaller than a dinghy on a collision course with doom, it was apparently a sweet-faced, Irish mother bent on stuffing him like a turkey waiting for Judgment Day. That and she was staring.

It was damned hard to eat when someone was staring at him. Hell, even the dog didn’t do it. But then, Dude’d abandoned him what seemed like hours ago, settling into gnaw on yet another bone he’d dragged over to a corner of the living room. Staring—like she wanted something.

He held out a grilled Brussels sprouts, putting up a wall of green between them.

Apparently that wasn’t it because her eyebrows gathered up together like a coiled spring waiting to snap back and bite him.

“Um, no?” It took him a bit to realize she was still waiting for him to answer her question. Odd since she’d not paused for more than a second as she chirruped and sang her way through the living room and across the couch where he’d shoved himself to hide from her assault.

First thing he was going to do was get very thick doors for the room he’d plopped his bed in. Really thick doors. That locked. Maybe even bolted from the inside with a heavy wooden bar like he was expecting an orc raid or perhaps Smaug. Eyeing her frightful mop of red curls as it bobbed and wove about her heart-shaped face, Miki wasn’t so sure even those types of doors would hold her back.

“You need to come home with us,” Brigid declared, pronouncing a death sentence on him in her cheery, Lucky-Charms accent. “Quinn can come get us. I’ll go pack up some of your clothes—”

“Shit, no!” Miki was up off the couch before he realized he still had a plate of food in his lap. The cabbage thing he’d been picking at hit the carpet by Dude’s nose. Gleefully, the terrier snapped it up in a single gulp, quickly rising up to Hoover his way through the remains of Miki’s dinner.

No carried absolutely no weight. Hell, even the dog didn’t look up from his food slurping when Miki shouted. Although, he frowned down at the terrier, the grilled sprouts were probably going to revisit them all later. Miki was still reeling from the gaseous cloud of death the dog emitted after he’d gotten a mouthful of kim chee.

“Shit, kim chee’s cabbage. Everything on that damned plate’s cabbage. Is she trying to make sure I fart off the bed? Kane’s going to love—shit, where did she go?” Miki looked around, shocked to find himself alone in the living room with what was obviously going to be a furry, ticking time bomb of mustard gas in a few hours. A fluff of red hair near his unmade bed stuttered his heart to a dead stop and Miki knew he’d die of cardiac arrest long before the dog’s sulfurous ass got him.

Especially when Brigid held up the half-empty bottle of lube he’d hastily shoved under his pillow and asked, “Should I pack only this one? Or do you think you boys are going to need more?”

A Hair of the Dog • Part Five and a Half

There is someone new in the house.

I, as the Dude, am responsible for checking out the intrusion. The duties of the name Dude are loosely defined. Unlike my other names—like the most recently obtained Cat Squat Sand Scrounger—Dude is not so much a description of my status among the others in the global Pack but rather my Miki-given status as I share his life and den.

Dude—such a short noise—but it comes with tremendous responsibilities.

I taken these responsibilities very seriously. My first and foremost responsibility is to Miki, my human.

When I first moved into our home, he was hurt someplace too deep inside of himself for me to lick clean.

That is the problem with humans.

They get hurt too deep inside of themselves and sometimes, their souls bleed out of wounds they can't see.

When I first found my human, I knew he'd been bleeding out for a while. I just didn't know he was hemorrhaging—the wounds went that deep.

Kane helped. More than helped. Kane was a staunch on his wounds—those ones I couldn't reach. Together we scraped and pushed our human until he moved about. Miki ate the food Kane brought him. I could ask for no better hunter than Kane. Miki no longer smelled of salt and chemicals and his eyes weren't dead any more.

That is what worried me the most. One's body—human or dog—could be flopping about fine in the grass but once the eyes go dead, the time for their soul to leave is near and not even the body can keep it contained.

I was very concerned about that. I didn't want Miki to leave me. Humans should not burn as brightly and as quickly as Pack. They live longer because they see so little, live so little. They need more time to fully become themselves and often times, they don't make it—even when they are given ten-Pack lives to live.

It is a sad thing to be human. The world must be a drenched, watery place with no smells and their eyesight—it would have been better for them if they were born blind so their other senses could develop better. Instead, they are milky shadows in the world, sliding around hoping to suck up anything they can and call it living.

Of course, I also get the feeling they believe they are in domination of the world. Which is silly because how can a living thing own a rock? A rock will be here long after the living thing becomes dust again.

Miki is not like that. Kane is a little bit like that with the collars and baths and noise names but I humour him. He did after all help me fix Miki.

But this new one—in the house. Smelling of things that are familiar yet are not. He is bigger than Kane. They smell alike but this one is more seasoned. Gruffer in some ways but when I ask him for food, he gives me finely minced steak and once, even cow bones covered in fat and gristle.

It's a good human who knows gristle is the way to a dog's heart.

This one knows.

"Con, I'm fine. I don't need you to check up on me just because Kane's at work." Miki speaks to the one who's come. They have already spoken at the door and for a moment, I thought I would have to bite the One-That-Is-Not-Kane because he was insisting on coming into the house and Miki wasn't happy about it.

Never bite a human that gives you food was my dam's second lesson to me. It is a good lesson. One I follow strictly because people like smiling, happy dogs. I like a full belly so it works out. I didn't want to bite...Con, his name is Con—but I would if I had to. Anything for Miki.

Sometimes rules are meant to be broken. And I knew Miki would protect me from harm if I had to defend him.

For a cat-like human, Miki is quite loyal.

"He loves you, y'git," Con rumbles, his voice as deep as the Dane's down the street. "K asked me to come by because he's worried about you. Wanted to make sure you ate and got some sleep."

"A phone call wouldn't have done that?" Miki growls back. He pushes back, shoving his personality at the other man. He was good at that. Shoving and skipping away. "Besides, I've got Dude."

I wagged my tail. They like it when a dog wags their tail upon hearing the noise they've given him. I'm not sure why. There's rarely any play attached to the sound but often times it means food so tail-wagging I go.

In this case, Miki pets my head as I jump up onto the couch so I could put my paws on the back cushions and look up at Con without hurting my neck. He is llama-tall and I nearly choke off my breath looking up at him all the time. Kane too. Both of them are much too tall for the average dog to look up at. And unlike Q, they don't squat to talk to me.

He's left the door open, probably to shove Con out of it when he's done. Outside, the giant black car Con drives is chugging away, one of its doors left open and its lights splashing up against the outside of the house. I like Kane's machine better. We go riding in it and I get my own window to lean out of. It is nice.

"Dude isn't going to get you fed," Con points out.

I beg to differ. I get hungry and Miki eats too, sometimes. In a way, I feed him the best I can. It's not my fault he eats things crows wouldn't touch.

"So you're here to what? Cook me dinner?" Miki replies. He does sarcasm well. I can smell its strong odor on his words.

"No, I am here to take you for Mexican food." Con jerks his head back to the open door. "Come on, jump in and I can tell K I've done my brotherly duty. Or would you rather he send our mum the next time?"

Miki eyes him, disgusted at something. Petting my head, he replies slowly, "Only if Dude can come with. And he gets a taco."

He has said a magic word. I am off the couch and up into the huge car before I can hear Con's response. It doesn't matter because Miki is following me and my stomach is twisting up in anticipation.

"You know most dogs know sit and stay," Con says when he gets up into the elephant he calls a car. "Your dog knows taco."

"He also knows mac-and-cheese," Miki says with a grin, pulling himself up. "But if you want me to eat, you've got to feed my dog too. That's the deal. Even Kane knows that one."

My dog. I puff up at the description. Miki's Dog. Dude's human. Those are lovely names. And Miki knows them both.

I shall have to add Eater of Tacos to my names but honestly, Dude is all I really need. Because it holds so damned much—and all in a single noise.

Hair of the Dog • Part Six

The house was—as the young woman who'd just finished scratching my belly put it—awesome sauce.

I wasn't sure what kind of sauce would be awesome sauce but I imagined it would probably be like the yummy goodness of steak gravy over bacon.

Mostly because there'd just been bacon and despite Miki's disgust at my perfectly natural body expulsions, there'd been belly rubs galore.

Also...cats. Because the Pack knew I love cats. They are like small grumpy cousins who really need to be teased out of their unhappiness. Sun beams are all well and good but really, the world would be a better place for all of us if they'd just realize sometimes it's the tail wag and baring teeth in that odd way humans do that get the treat at the end of the day.

Cats think differently. They're still harping about how they were once Gods. No good reminding them about the whole witch's familiar thing or how they could steal a baby's breath myth. It was all about the time when humans got together, lit some candles and chanted over their fat furry asses.

My human was definitely rubbing off on me.

The house had a definite Pack leader. He was bigger than the others, older and barked deeper when he spoke. Not that he spoke through most of the high-pitched jumping squees the young belly-rubber did near my Miki but he certainly provided a good wall for Miki when my human took a few steps back. Donal—the dam called him. More noises and they probably meant something too but really, what does it all mean? Names are so fluid and humans seemed very attached to only a few sounds when they spoke to each other. Even their Pack names were short grunts. Dad. Mom. Who communicated that way?

What chaos it has to be when a human stands in a crowd and shouts Mom or Dad? How many humans turn around because that's the noise someone makes for them.

Silliness. Silliness everywhere.

"So, ye're Duke, eh? Ye don't look much like a Duke to me. But that's what Brae says yer name is."

I wanted to tell him, no—that's not the noise for me but well—I wasn't made for talking.

Ah, the pater's shadow crossed over me as he sat down on the squat soft couch thing next to me. If I were superstitious like a fool cat, I'd have to wait a turn of time then race around the

house to get the shadow's dirt off of me—preferably as quickly and as erratically as possible so it couldn't find me again but... I am not a cat.

Besides, he'd brought more bacon with him.

"The family's going to be making ye as fat as a cow if they keep feeding ye the way they are." He helped a bit with the cow transformation by snipping a piece of bacon off and holding it up for me to nibble. I licked his hand in thanks. Also, to encourage him to cough up the rest of it. He obliged, a little bit at a time.

"Yer Miki's looked a little shell-shocked but no worries, we'll be taking care of him too." Another bacon nibble and he scratched at the spot between my back and neck I could only reach when I rubbed up against the stiff chair in Miki's den.

The bacon was too much. I'd already had the meat from a bone—a lot of meat too—as well as those cabbage things Miki dropped, more smaller cabbage things, a fluffy biscuit or maybe three from the plate Kane made for himself but forgot on the table long enough for me to get something off of it and a few ham slices from the first belly scratcher I'd come met. The bacon definitely was way too much for my stomach to handle and I belched, tasting the fried yumminess on my breath.

The thump Donal gave me on the side of my ribs didn't help either and as hard as I tried, I couldn't hold it back. One of the snootier cats pawed at me from her perch on a table and I turned my head its way, not wanting to foul my relationship with a man who clearly knew well enough to bring me bacon when he had some.

The cat said something—probably about my mother because cats aren't inventive in their insults—and slashed at me again. This time, however, she connected and scraped my nose with her claw. Her smug look lasted nearly as long as the bacon did because I cocked my head up—and threw up all over her.

Hair of the Dog • Part Seven

“What time is it?” Kane fumbled to reach his phone. It was going off—an alarm of some kind. Musical but soft. “Fucking Connor probably changed my ringer again. What the hell is that?”

The bed smelled—familiar. Good familiar but the sheets were cold. So were his toes. And his shoulders. His ass wasn’t much warmer and there was a significant breeze hitting said ass and other bared parts of his body. One appendage he was quite fond of complained mightily of the chilly San Francisco air hitting it and it curled up in on itself, refusing to bare the cold evening outside of the warm hollow between his thighs.

“Yer a coward, ye are,” Kane informed his dick as he grabbed a pair of sweat pants from a nearby chair. Thankfully, they were his and not Miki’s, snuggling up against his relieved cock. “Happy now? Shit, why the hell is it so cold in here? And—fuck, wind?”

He swallowed the panic choking his throat. Blinking, Kane snapped his mind around to where they’d spent the night. Miki’d been driven out of the warehouse like a sheep being led to the slaughter and Kane’s own mother was the border collie nipping at his heels until he went through the gate.

“God, he’s going to kill me if she doesn’t let him go,” Kane threw his eyes up to the heavens to beseech any listening guardian angel without anything to do. “If yer listening, God, please let me mother understand he’s not one to be cuddled. I don’t want to pulling him off the ceiling whenever she comes near him because that’s surely what I’ll be doing if she doesn’t stop.”

“You talk like your dad when you’re sleepy.” The music stopped as Miki’s voice rasped out of a shadowy corner of the room. “More...Irish. Like you’re selling me soap or cereal.”

“Hey, there ye are.” He rubbed at his eyes, waiting for them to adjust to the soft ambient light coming from the street. The loft-style apartment his father’d built behind the garage was a good enough size to hold the odd piece of furniture and definitely large enough for shadows to cluster in its corners. Miki’d found one of those darker spots and peered out from its safety, cradling a now silent acoustic guitar. “Door open for a reason? Yer cold?”

“Nah, dog had to piss. Then he came in but I lost track of time. Fuck, it’s freezing in here.” Miki set the guitar down gently against the wall. Its strings hummed when his fingers slide over them one final time, a faint goodbye until they were reunited. He limped as he made his way back to the bed, his knee stiff and unresponsive. Kane caught him before he stumbled over his own feet and Miki blistered the air with a hot curse. “Damn it.”

“Why don’t you get back into bed?” Kane kissed the top of Miki’s head. “I’ll close the door.”

“And hell, now you’re really awake.” Miki practically launched himself at the mattress, burrowing down into the cooled off sheets. “Hell, these are cold too. What’s the use of a boyfriend if he doesn’t keep the sheets warm?”

“Is that what I am then? A boyfriend?” He said it teasingly but as Kane closed the door, he found himself waiting for Miki’s answer. The anticipation was sharp, a razor poised over his heart, waiting to plunge into him.

“Yeah? Shit, I don’t know. What do guys call each other?” With the door closed, Kane turned to watch Miki tugging and fighting with the bed linens. There was no momentous moment dangling in front of them for the singer. No, he was more concerned with staving off the cold than breaking Kane’s heart. “Didn’t we talk about this already?”

“Not really, no. Some. A bit,” Kane admitted softly as he approached the bed. “But not in so many words.”

“So that’s a no-yes-maybe?” Miki yawned and yelped when Dude jumped up onto the bed. “Dog, watch the nose. That fucking thing is colder than... hell, whatever cold thing I can’t think of right now. And yeah, pretty sure we’d said something or—hell. Look, K, you and I both know I suck at this. Can’t we just cut through all the bullshit emo-feelings thing and just call it so I can go back to sleep? Do I use boyfriend or not?”

“Yeah,” Kane replied, getting onto his hands and knees to crawl over Miki’s slender body. “Boyfriend it is then, Mick. But let’s not go back to sleep just yet. From the way you shiver under me, feels like you could use some more warming up. Here, let your boyfriend be helping you with that.”

Hair of the Dog • Part Eight

I’d been on the fence—a good phrase borrowed from the cats—about Kane’s dam. She was excitable, much like a Jack Russell I knew and like that particular terrier, her bite was far worse than her bark. And by all that is smelly and ripe, they both could bark.

Any fence sitting I was on was over. She’d somehow taken offense to my morning frolic and trapped me into yet another cold, bright room that stunk of flowers, cleansers and fresh linens. These weren’t the linens on a soft fluffy bed. No, these were thirsty raspy things that while fragrant, signaled only one thing to a dog.

A human was going to scrub off every damned calling card, scent and trace of a dog’s existence from his fur and skin.

So no, I wasn’t too thrilled about Kane’s dam.

Especially since she’d lured me in with bacon then shut the door behind me.

A dog is used to betrayal. It happens every day. People leave—sometimes forever. People die before we're ready for them to go. And sometimes they do mean things like pretend to throw a toy to be fetched only to hold onto it and laugh while we go looking for it.

Kane's younger brother—one of them—did that when I'd first gone out to the yard and Miki tore into him like one of the snooty cats roosting in the living room like some regal chicken. My Miki does not like to be fooled and he suffers none of them gladly. Ergo—good word that as well, sea lion origin—Miki will not let anyone fool me.

So he'd probably be on my side if he knew Kane's mother tempted me with fried pig and then after feeding me the slice, plopped me into a tub to hose my wanderings off of me.

To borrow a curse from the humans—*bitch*.

Still, I suffered it gladly. Well grumpily but I said nothing. Bit no one and she'd just gotten enough lather on me for people to wonder if I was some damned poodle when the door opened quickly and yet another Donal-Monster-Son came in.

I was losing track of who was whom. They all looked alike and for the most part, sounded the same but they smelled differently. I gave Brigid a dirty look from under my veil of suds—that is *if* I could smell him through the damned soap she'd covered me in.

"Con, close the door. The dog'll get out and there'll be hell to pay for it then." She practically sang a ditty as she lathered me up.

"Ma, why are ye bathing Miki's dog? That's a bit of liberty don't ye think?" Con—that was Con. I recognized him when he came closer and I could peer at him through the lather. I tried giving him a tried-and-true sad puppy mourning face but either the soap was dimming its power or he was immune. I was going to blame the soap. "Christ, he about tore Ian a new arse for fucking with the dog's mind yesterday. Now yer going to piss him off by washing the Dude?"

"It's just Dude. Not The Dude," Brigid corrected him. She was right but she didn't have the inflection down right. Miki seemed to be the only one fluent enough in Miki-ese to put the right purr on it but I suffered the slaughtering of my noise about as well as the bath—silently and plotting a peeing in a shoe or two when I could. "And I had to wash him. He'd gone through the flower beds and rolled in the fish guts yer da put out there for something or other. I can't have him smelling like a plate of *hákarl* when one of them gets up. They'll think we can't be trusted to watch the dog and then where will we be?"

"Not watching a dog?" Con sounded as confused as I felt and I tried to roll my eyes in sympathy but sadly, my guts rolled instead and I felt a slither of gas escape me.

Revenge is a sweet sweet thing—or rather a rotten thing best served after stewing in my guts and when Brigid, Mother of Rolling Tongued Horde and Betraying Cajoler, was bent over my ass to scrub my back legs.

Needless to say, she fled. Fled like the bacon-tricker she was, choking on my rank fur and even ranker, cabbage-laden belly. I cast a longing look at the now open door and then back up to Connor who was standing over me with a bemused smirk on his face.

“Aye, I know you did that on purpose, you mad bastard,” he laughed, sounding more like his father than before as he bent over me. “And no, you’ll not be getting out a scrubbing. Come on, let’s finish you up. And none of your tricks. I grew up with a pack of brothers. There’s no stench you can come up with that even comes close to the boys after a weekend of mum gone and frozen bean burritos.”

Hair of the Dog • Part Nine

Miki was full. Mostly of food but also of other things. Splayed out on a very comfortable sofa in the Morgans’ family room, he stared out of a bank of tall windows onto the back yard where Dude chased bird shadows across rain-damp grass.

“Here, ye look like ye could use one of these.” Donal placed a brown bottle of crème soda into Miki’s hand then sat down on a wide chair set close to the sofa Miki’d snuggled into. “I’m taking ye like crème soda.”

“Yeah, I do.” He sipped then wrinkled his nose at the bubbles. “Wow, strong. Fuzzy.”

“Kind of like yer dog there,” The head of the Morgan family chuckled. “Hope ye don’t mind, m’bride gave him a bath this morning. Seems he found a bit of fertilizer and decided it was his kingdom.”

“He hates baths,” Miki replied softly, taking another sip. “I always have to chase him around the house and then once I get him in the tub, he stands there like I’m about to shove him in a microwave or something.”

“Well, ye’ll be happy to know, he also is quite fond of bacon so Brigid coaxed him in with that.” Donal laughed at Miki’s horrified expression. “Let me guess, ye’ve never bribed him like that?”

“Seems kind of... fucked, you know?” He frowned, unsure if he liked what he was hearing. Knowing Dude—and the dog’s fondness of foul odors, he’d probably been at a nuclear-level of stench but still, it bothered him. “It’s like lying, right? I mean, Carl...fuck, Kane probably—”

“He told me about the man.” The words were gentle, much more soothing than any piece of pie the Morgans’ forced at him after he’d eaten his third dinner. “Ye don’t have to talk unless ye want to but know if ye do, it only goes as far as ye and me, a’ight?”

“Yeah, okay.” Miki nodded, sighing as Dude nearly skidded into a rose bush. “It’s just... Carl used to—in the beginning of all his shit—he’d buy me things or give me candy. So I’d like him. Then he’d do... shit to me. I don’t want to do that to Dude. He’s... it’s not right. You either give stuff because you want to or you don’t, you know? Things shouldn’t be.. fucked with. I know it’s stupid because he’s a dog and everything but... hell, apparently he’s *my* dog. And I don’t want him to be lied to.”

“Fair enough,” Donal murmured softly. “I can see yer point and I agree. Yer relationship with him is based on a lot of trust. He’s come to ye and depends on ye for that. I understand.”

“Yeah, then you’re the only one.” Miki scoffed. “Most people think I’m insane or something.”

“No, not insane. Just—yer world’s very stripped down, Miki boy. Yer honest. People sometimes have a hard time with honesty. Ye don’t cover things up with pretty words if ye don’t like someone but yer polite enough to be civil to someone ye have to.”

“Shit, you must be talking about Brigid.” He grinned at Donal. “Sorry, I know she’s your wife, dude, but she’s... man, she’s like swallowing *Sriracha* to cool down your throat after you munched on a *habañero*.”

“It’s why I fell in love with her.” Donal put his feet up on a low coffee table then grinned at Miki. “M’life was very...ordinary before I met Brigid Finnegan. Then, I couldn’t imagine me life without her. Crazy and stubborn to a fault but fierce and loyal. I knew she’d be a good mother to m’children and a good soul to have in m’heart for the rest of m’days. She’s pretty too. That had a long way of it, Miki boy.”

“Yeah, I’m going to take your word on that one.” He shrugged. “Women—not a single...anything.”

“No, I’d gathered not,” Donal teased. “But I promise ye something, Miki boy. I will do my very best to ensure none of mine push ye too hard or do harm to ye and yer dog. That I promise ye.”

“Yeah.” Miki eyed him carefully. “What do I have to do for that?”

“Ye just keep lovin’ my Kane. Because I tell ye, *boyo*, I’ve never seen m’son as happy as he is with ye,” Donal winked at Miki. “And for that, I’ll battle any dragon that needs it. Even if it’s my boy’s mother.”

Hair of the Dog • Part Ten

I'd forgiven Kane.

It took me a bit longer than I liked but when he brought Miki home—my human was *not* in the condition he'd been when he left the house. He was better now but not at first. It'd been days but still, he hurt. Badly.

No, Kane was on my shit list. And I could shit a lot.

Luckily for Kane, there was steak being grilled on an outside stove-thing and I'd been promised one of my very own.

Promised by Donal—Father of the Foot-Stompers and Grumbling Mountains, Mate of the Betrayer.

Still, a man sometimes has to make do with what he has in front of him and that's the only reason I could think of Donal having the Betrayer as a mate. Well—looking around the yard—she also seemed to have very large litters, a plus if a male wants to establish a bloodline to leave behind.

I'd already done my part. Preferring only human-bonded mates ensures not only a healthy litter but also puppies nearly always guaranteed to find their own humans without much effort. So far, all sixteen of my offspring have been scattered about the neighbourhoods and each of them are content.

That is all a dog could ask for in life.

That and freely-given bacon but apparently that is too much to ask of some people.

People.

Miki was people. Good people. He'd come back to the house broken a bit but better inside. He'd gone out to fight something inside of him but instead found someone waiting for him—an evil he didn't create but reaped anyway.

Sometimes humans betrayed each other with much bigger things than bacon.

I found my Miki and climbed up into his lap. He didn't mind that I'd found the dead fish guts again although this time, I merely nosed them around a bit. They smelled of Donal and oranges. The first I'm fine with. The second sting my nostrils so I left it be.

Although by the cat-smug look on Donal's face when he saw me come out of the roses, I'd say he was the one who'd gotten orange in there somehow.

"Your dog smells a hell of a lot better. It's a wonder what regular baths can do." Kane nibbled on Miki's neck. They do a lot of nipping between them. More than I'd ever get away with but they seemed to like it. It's probably a lot nicer without having so much fur getting caught between their teeth but I'm only guessing on that. Kane's hairy enough to be Shibu Inu in some places. "And I'm gathering he's wanting a piece of steak."

"He always wants a piece of steak. Your dad got him one too." Miki nodded to where Donal was slivering up my dinner and putting the pieces into my bowl. "He's going to have enough. Shit, your dad even grilled him carrots."

"He'd grill you carrots if you wanted them."

"Do I look like I'd eat grilled carrots?" He sneered. My human really does sneer well but I do like carrots. "Hell, aren't carrots supposed to be raw?"

"You just like long raw things to chew on," Kane teased then grumbled when Quinn sat down on the lounging chair next to them. "Hey, go find your own love nest. We're talking carrots, here."

"I heard." I liked Quinn. I liked him even better once I realized he was probably as sideways as Miki. He snuck me a piece of broccoli, making sure it was dipped in white slathering stuff before he gave it to me. "Your dog is more bunny than canine. Or do you think he is like this because he was a street dog before he moved in with you."

"Don't give him that, Q-bert. He'll be..."

"He can sleep with you tonight, Q. I'm done with him hotboxing me out of the bedroom." Miki wrinkled his nose. "Bad enough Kane snores."

"Do not."

"You do, actually." Quinn remarked softly and I slid over to his lap, begging shamelessly for anything he wanted to give me. Mournful puppy eyes worked on him and I got a piece of crispy chicken skin from his plate. Nearly as good as bacon. "You've snored ever since Rafe punched you in the nose that first time."

"He shouldn't have grabbed my ass." Kane protested then yelped again when Connor flicked a finger against the back of his head.

“Rafe grabs everyone’s ass.” Connor stole the last piece of chicken from Quinn’s plate and split it with me. If I wasn’t careful, I’d be too fat to get up the stairs to sleep on Quinn’s bed. “Sides, if it wasn’t for Rafe, you and Quinn would still be blundering around thinking you liked women.”

“I knew I never liked women,” Quinn snorted, slapping Miki’s hand when my human raised it up in salute. “I’d rather sleep with Dude here.”

“Good,” Kane growled playfully, baring his teeth in that funny way he did. “Because tonight, the only warm thing I want in my bed chewing on my toes, is this one here.”

I snorted as best I could.

As if I’d ever chew on *his* toes.

Hair of the Dog • Part Eleven

Miki'd healed up enough to be grumpy. Kane bore it well but after the corner store complained about Dude's ravaging of their outside produce cart, Miki and the dog were going on a road trip to the pier. They went in the GTO, Kane driving through Chinatown as if his life depended on it.

Considering how shitty Miki felt, Kane probably felt like it was.

He knew he should have been happy. Hell, he was alive. Kane—fuck, so much of his life was *good* because of Kane but there was a small part of him lying in darkness.

And nothing would ever scrub that bit of black out of his heart.

"Do you think Damie knew I loved him?" Miki glanced at Kane as he drove into a parking structure. His lover's hands were firm on the wheel and his knuckles weren't white so Miki figured the question wasn't too off base. "I mean before... you know?"

"Mick, I think Damie probably only got into Heaven because you loved him," Kane muttered, pulling into an empty space. "From what I've heard about the two of you, I'm surprised they didn't lock the doors and throw away the keys to Hell because they're scared you'd show up."

"We weren't *that* bad," he paused, thinking about their first road trip and how many bars they'd been thrown out of. "Okay, maybe a little bit but not like we Jake-and-Elwooded San Francisco."

"Huh," Kane grunted.

Damn, he hated that sound. He hated it even more since he was pretty sure Kane'd picked it up from him.

Dude was eager to leap out of the car but a stern *no* kept him inside until Kane clipped a leash to the dog's harness. Miki swung his legs out and winced when he struck the car door with his foot. A cane sprouted up from the back seat as Kane jostled it over the console.

"Take this, it's dangerous out there."

"Funny. I'm sure they laugh their heads off down there at the end of the rainbow." He took the cane, leaning most of his weight onto it as he got out of the car. "You win a prize. Temporary custody of my dog."

"Well, at least you're admitting he's your dog now."

"Only when you're walking him and people come over to coo at you." He batted his lashes, widening his eyes in mockery at some of the women they'd met during their infrequent strolls. "Oh, what a lovely puppy. What breed is he? You must be really good at training him because he's so well behaved."

"Yeah, so well behaved he just took a piss on my sneaker." Kane shook off a few droplets off of his foot and glared down at the blond dog laughing at him. "You, *boyo*, are damned lucky he loves you because I just don't let anyone piss on my foot."

"You better not let *anyone* piss on your foot," Miki warned him, hobbling alongside of Kane. "Or anything else of yours for that matter. Why would you do that? It's disgusting."

"Some people believe urine is a panacea."

"A what?"

"Something that can cure all their ills."

"Shit, why didn't you say that to begin with? And if it did, why do people get kidney problems? That's where piss is stored, right? Wait, no...that's the bladder. What do the kidneys do? Filter stuff out?"

"About that," Kane chuckled. "Not up on biology much are we?"

"I know where your dick is." Miki shot back. "And your mouth. Pretty much all the body parts I need to worry about. If any of those move, then I'll have a problem."

They walked, slowly and not very far. To ward off the cold, Miki'd layered his clothes as much as he could and still bend a bit but the chill worked its way into his bones and he faltered, nearly toppling over a pylon. Kane grabbed his elbow, jerking him back upright. He'd pulled too hard, throwing Miki off balance in another direction and the lovers bumped one another, nearly stepping on Dude sitting on the sidewalk between them.

Dude grunted his displeasure then got up to sniff at a nearby wrought iron fence post while Kane untangled Miki from his arms.

"Hey, that's Old Lady Finnegan's place." Miki jerked his chin towards an Irish pub set nearly up against the edge of the pier. "Man, wonder if she's still around. Wait, Finnegan. You said your aunt or something used to own a pub before she died. Your aunt's Old Lady Finnegan!"

"Well, she was. Passed now, remember? My cousin, Sionn, owns the place now." Kane tugged on Dude's leash to get his attention but the dog ignore him, preferring to continue his sniffing

investigation of the pub's outdoor tables. "He's been scarce, our Sionn. Da says he's back in town but I've not seen him."

"That's 'cause he's hiding from your mother," Miki muttered. "We'll have to come back. She used to kick me out of here all the time. Me and Damie. She hated musicians playing in front of her place. Used to beat us away with a broom."

"Yeah, she'd do that to her own kin too if you didn't move fast enough." Kane smiled, hooking his arm around Miki's waist. "Come on, let's go home. I've got a mind to warm you up some and put a smile on that face of yours."

"Today's the day, you know?" Miki moved slowly, the cane tapping along the sidewalk.

"The day you lost your boys?"

"Yeah." He used to refuse to cry but in the warmth of Kane's embrace—even a half-embrace—Miki let his tears go, hot and bittersweet on his face. "I'm glad I have you. I mean, fuck—I love you, Kane but I miss them. I just fucking hate not having them with me."

"They're always with you, Mick," Kane whispered then kissed at a tear welling up along Miki's lashes. "And some day, you'll see them again. I know it. I can feel it in my bones."