

Anne McCaffrey - Great Canine Chorus

PETE ROBERTS OF THE WILMINGTON, Delaware, K-9 Corps has as his partner a German shep-herd named Wizard. One night, just after they took the beat, Wizard started acting itchy, nervous, whiny. He was snappish, not like himself at all. He kept try-ing to pull Pete toward Seventh Street.

That wasn't the beat, as Wiz well knew. But Pete decided there might be a good reason. Wizard was a canny dog; he could pick a culprit out of a crowd by the smell of fear the man exuded. And he'd saved Pete from two muggings already this year. So, pro-testing, Pete let Wizard lead him to a block of build-ings being torn down as part of an urban renewal program.

Wizard became more and more impatient with Pete's apprehensive, measured pace, and tried to tug him into a jog. Pete began to feel worried, kind of sickly scared. Suddenly the dog mounted the worn stairs of one of the buildings about to be demolished. He pawed at the door, whining.

Who's that? a voice asked, high and quavering like an old lady's. Pa? It couldn't be too old a female, then.

Wizard barked sharply three times in the negative signal he'd been taught.

Hi, dog. Do you see my pa?

Wiz got down from the steps, looked up and down the street, then barked again three times.

Pa's so late, and I'm so hungry, the voice said.

Pete, who had eaten well an hour earlier, was suddenly overwhelmed with hunger-a sullen kind of stomach cramp that he'd experienced in Korea when his unit was cut off for four days. The kind of grip-ping pangs you get when you're hungry all the time.

"Lady, I'm going down to the deli on the corner. I'll be right back with something to tide you over till your pa gets back." Pete made the announcement before he realized it. He left Wizard to guard the door.

He ordered a sub with no onions (somehow he knew she wouldn't want them), two cokes and a banana.

I'm in the back room, said the voice when he and Wizard entered the hall.

Pete had had the distinct impression the voice had come from the front of the building. It was too thin to have carried far. The stench in the filthy hall sickened Pete. No matter how many years he might spend on the force, he'd never get used to the odor of poverty. Maybe it was the stink that brought a growl from Wizard.

Pete pushed open the back door and entered the pitifully furnished room. On an old armchair by the window was a wasted little figure, like a broken doll thrown down by a careless child, limbs askew. By now he expected a girl, a child, but this was such a little girl!

Wizard got down on his belly, licking his lips nerv-ously. He crawled carefully across the dirty floor. He sniffed at the tiny hand on the shabby arm of the chair, whined softly. The little band did not move away, nor toward him, either.

What kind of a father, Pete fumed to himself, would leave a kid, a mere baby, alone in a place like this?

I'm no baby, mister. I'm nine years old, she informed him indignantly.

Pete apologized contritely, blaming his error on the glare from the single window. He wouldn't have thought her more than five, six at the outside. She was so pitifully underdeveloped. She was clean, as were her shred of a dress and the old blanket on which she lay, but the rest of the room was filthy. Her pinched face had a curious, calm beauty to it.

When Pete knelt beside her, he saw her eyes were filmed and sightless. And when she spoke, her mouth did not move.

He found himself breaking off small pieces of the sub and feeding them to her. She sipped the Coke through a straw and a look of intense pleasure crossed her face.

I knew I remembered how wonderful it tasted, she said. But not with her lips.

The truth dawned on Pete; this child was a tele-path. Impossible? He hadn't actually believed any of that crap. But there was no other explanation.

"You aren't talking," he said. "You don't make a sound."

I am too talking, answered the child soundlessly.

And you're answering.

Pete gulped, hastily trying to mend matters. "You just don't speak the usual way."

I do everything kind of different. At least my pa's always complaining I do. Her head turned slowly to-ward him. You don't suppose something's happened to Pa, do you? I can't hear very far away when I'm hungry.

Guiltily, Pete fed her another bite. "When did you eat last?"

Pa was home this morning. But all we had was bread.

Pete vowed passionately to himself that he was going to see Welfare immediately.

Oh, you mustn't! pleaded the soundless voice.

Wizard, ears flattened, growled menacingly at Pete. She was clearly frightened of Welfare. They'd take me away, like they took my sister, and put me in a barred place and I'd never hear any birds or see Pa. They might cut me up 'cause my body doesn't work right. She still spoke without sound.

"Aw, honey..."

My name's Maria, not honey.

"Maria, you got it all wrong. Wizard, you tell her.

Welfare helps people. You'd have a clean bed and birds right outside the window."

It'd be a hospital. My ma died in a hospital be-cause no one cared. Pa said so. They just let her die.

Wizard whimpered. Pete felt frightened himself.

He soothed Maria as best he could with promises of no hospitals, no cutting, plenty of birds. What she didn't finish of the sandwich, he wrapped up and put beside her. He started to peel the banana for her but she refused it.

It's a treat for Wiz for bringing you here. She laughed. He listens to people.

Pete grinned.

"How on earth did you know that fool dog loves bananas?"

Nothing could have been funnier to Maria, and her laughter was so contagious Pete grinned foolishly. Even Wizard laughed in his canine way, his tongue lolling out of one side of his mouth. Suddenly the at-mosphere changed.

I hear Pa coming. You'd better leave. He wouldn't like having the fuzz in here.

"Then why did you let me in?"

Wizard. Dogs always know. I talk to dogs all the time. But I've never talked to one as smart as Wizard before. You get out now. Quick.

Pete felt a violent compulsion to take to his heels. Once they were around the corner the impulse van-ished, so he waited a few moments and then peered out at the building. He saw a shambling figure go into the house where they had found Maria.

Pete was shaken by his encounter with the girl: shaken, confused, and frightened. She had taken him over, used him to suit her needs, and then cut him off in fear when all he wanted to do was help her. He worried about her all the way to the hospital: her pitiful life in those awful surroundings... and that strange talent.

He had a friend, a drinking buddy, who was in-terning at Delaware Hospital. Finding Joe Lavclle on duty in the emergency ward that night, Pete told him a little about the girl. "And what's going to be-come of her, living like that?"

"I'd say she was dead already and didn't know it," Joe snorted.

The thought of Maria dead choked Pete up. Her fragile laugh, her curious calm beauty gone? No!

"Hey, Pete!" The intern watched the cop's gut reaction with amazement. "I was only kidding. Why, I couldn't even guess what was wrong with her with-out an examination. She could have had polio, men-ingitis, m.s., any variety of paralysis. But I'd say she needed treatment, fast. And I'd certainly like to see this kid who can make a stalwart defender of this one-horse town quake in his boots like this."

Pete growled and Wizard seconded it.

Laughing, Joe warded off an imaginary attack with his arm, just as his phone rang. Pete resumed his

patrol.

The next morning, resolved to help Maria in spite of herself, he bought a frilly dress, bundled it and food and Wizard into his car, and went back to the house. He "talked" to let her know he was coming.

There was no answer. The back room was de-serted. Except for the de-stuffed armchair by the window and two Coke bottles on the floor under it, Pete could have sworn no one had been in the house for months.

"Find Maria, Wiz," Pete ordered.

Wizard sniffed around and, with a yelp, raced out the door. He sniffed around outside and seemed to find a trace. Pete followed him in the car. Wizard acted just as if he knew exactly where he was going. He got halfway down the next block, then stopped as if he had run into an invisible wall. He lay down on the sidewalk, put his head on his paws, and whined. Then he slunk back to Pete at the curb.

"Find her. Wizard!" The dog crouched down and laid his ears back. It was the first time he had ever disobeyed that tone of voice.

"Maria! We're your friends! We want to help!" Pete called, oblivious to the stares. He was sure she could hear him. He waited, apprehensive, unsure.

No/ came the one disembodied word, filling his skull till his head rang. There was no arguing with it. "At least tell Wiz if you're hungry, Maria. He can bring you food. I promise I won't follow."

Twice in the next three weeks, Wizard darted into a deli, whining pathetically. The first time, it took Pete a minute or so to grasp what the big dog wanted.

Then he'd get a sandwich and a Coke to go, put it in a bag, roll the top into a handle for Wizard to carry. Then he'd wait till the dog returned. He was deter-mined to prove to Maria that he'd keep his promise. He didn't want to lose contact with her.

In the meantime, he did a little library research on telepathy, but the textbooks were too much for him. When he asked the librarian for something a guy could understand, he was shown the science fiction shelves.

Maria didn't act like fictional telepaths. According to the stories, she should be able to get food when she wanted it, commit robberies undetected, start fires, transport herself and anyone else anywhere, aid society, and perform minor miracles. Like heal her-self, even. The prospects were magnificently endless. Yet she was stuck in some hideous, hot horrible back room, half-starved and slowly dying of neglect.

The one thing Pete had to accept was the fact that Maria kept in touch with Wizard but excluded him. Since Pete considered Wizard every bit as smart as most men, he wasn't offended; but he felt powerless to help her as only another human could.

The next set of inexplicable incidents began about four weeks after Pete and Wizard first encountered Maria. They were pacing the beat on the hotel side of Rodney Square when the dog got restless. He strained against the leash until Pete let him go to see where he'd head. At a dead run, Wizard streaked down Eleventh Street, right over into Harry West's beat.

Harry walked with Pirate, the biggest dog on the force. Pete couldn't figure Harry in trouble. But he was

wrong. He heard the sullen rumble of an angry crowd by the time he reached French Street. Wiz was already around that corner and in the middle of a fight. Pete whistled for squad cars as he broke into the edge of the crowd, swinging his nightstick. He could hear Wizard growling angrily. He heard a yelp and then the growling of a second dog. He stumbled over Harry, bleeding from a head wound. Pete got Harry clear of the stampede just as the squad cars arrived.

Both dogs were at work, snapping, snarling, dart-ing around, and the crowd thinned rapidly. In a matter of minutes, all but the bitten, bruised, and brained had evaporated into the hot night.

"How'd you get here so fast?" Harry demanded as he came to. "I heard Wiz just as some kook pelted me with a bottle."

"Well, Wizard just took off," was Pete's unen-lightened reply.

"Glad he did. We came down on a Code One, but when Pirate and I got to the edge of the mob to get them moving, they closed in like we was Christmas in July. Somebody got Pirate in the head and I couldn't turn anywhere without getting clobbered." Harry dabbed at the cuts on his hands. "I'd sure like to know what set them off."

Wizard and the bigger dog were wandering around the street, nervously sniffing. The paddy wagon arrived, and Wiz and Pirate assisted in rounding up the incidentals, just begging for one legal bite. Then they started whiffing around again.

"What's with the dogs?" Harry asked Pete as he helped him into a car. "Look at old Wiz pumping."

Wizard's tail was wagging like he was on his way to a steak fry.

"Maria!" Pete gasped and called Wizard to heel.

The dog came bounding over, wriggling with delight. "Find Maria!" But Wizard barked three times, sneezed, and shook his head. Pirate came up, nuz-zled Harry, sniffed Wizard, and then he barked three times.

"I got a girl that only talks to dogs yet," Pete said in bitter disgust.

Back on their own beat, Pete tried to figure out why Maria would have called Wizard. Harry and Pirate weren't in trouble at the time Wiz took off. Maria must have been worried... yeah, that was it! Worried about her old man! She'd called Wizard because her old man had been in that crowd.

And that explained why Wizard was so happy-acting. He'd found Maria's father's trail leading away from the rumble. '

Pete left a note for Harry to keep an ear and an eye open for any crippled kids on his beat and to let him know if Pirate ever acted... strange. She might keep in touch with Pirate, too, since the big dog had been involved in getting her father out of a tough scrape.

Two of the men picked up that day were known numbers runners. They stuck to their story that the cop had come busting in where he wasn't wanted and his damn dog had spooked the crowd into the rumble. They just "happened" to be there.

For the next few weeks Pete got no signs from Wizard that Maria was in any distress. This bothered

him almost as much as hearing from her when she was hungry. At headquarters they were hearing nasty rumors about a new numbers racket. Certain hoods were being seen in new cars, in new quarters, acting up. Two runners were picked up on suspicion, in the hope of cracking them. They had to be released twenty-four hours later, clean, but one of them had bragged a little. Pete heard one of the detective lieu-tenants complaining bitterly about it.

"Yeah, the punk says, 'You gotta have evidence, Lootenant, and this time there ain't any, Lootenant. Not unless ya can read minds.' That's what he says, s'help me."

Mariaf Pete thought with a sense of shock.

What was it Maria had said? When she was hun-gry, she didn't have the strength to hear far away. If she were well fed, how far could she hear? All the way to Chicago? To grab the numbers?

The conclusion just couldn't be dodged. Maria and her pa were involved. But how would she know she was doing something wrong? Whoever had latched onto her would be jubilant over the fact they were able to put something over on the cops. To Maria, cops were just the fuzz. Cops spelt trouble for her father. Cops meant Welfare, and hospitals, and she didn't know which one scared her the most.

"At least," Pete said to Wizard, "she's not in that crummy room. She's cared for. That was all I wanted, wasn't it? And she is a minor, so even when the gangs gets pulled in, she wouldn't be booked. Why, those hoods might even get a doctor to try and fix her up." He groaned. "And I sure as hell can't go to the Chief and say, 'Look, there's a kid telepath running the numbers.' Not even if I knew where to find her." Wizard nuzzled his hand.

"Now what would Al Finch be wanting with a high-priced specialist from Minneapolis?" the desk sergeant asked Pete when he came on duty the next night. "He's got medics and nurses hopping in and out of his pad like he had the Asian crud."

"Better him than you," said Pete, automatically laughing. But he was thinking Maria!

Pete found out where Al Finch was living. Outside the building, Pete saw a truck from a pet shop deliver a triple cage of singing birds, and he knew his hunch was right. Finch was making book with Maria's mind-reading ability.

"Maria," Pete called in his head, "Maria, answer me. I know you're there. What you're doing, reading numbers, is wrong. It's causing a lot of trouble. It'll get you in trouble, too."

Pete, came Maria's voice in his head, sweetly, happily, Pete, I'm not hungry anymore and I have so many pretty birds. And you should see how nice Pa looks now he's got a good job. I'm clean, and my whole room is clean. I've got pretty dresses.

Her giggle was light and tinkling. Smelly men come and poke me around. They say they want to fix me. They can't, of course. Some of them say it out loud and some tell Al they can. Then they say inside they can't, that I'm a hopeless case. She giggled again, as if this were the funniest thing she'd ever said.

"Maria, I won't say Al isn't trying to help you and make you happy. But he gets more out of you than you get out of him. He's just using you. You miss get-ting the numbers through once and he'll hurt you."

Maria's laugh bubbled up. / don't let myself get hurt. And Al's all right. He thinks the damndest things sometimes. She giggled naughtily. He says he's my sugar daddy.

"Maria, you shouldn't use such words."

Maria's incredible laugh chimed through his head.

Al says it's cute the way I talk. And he really does like me.

"I'll bet," Pete said in a harsh tone. "Look, Maria, you can have the birds, and the good food, and a good job for your father, but get them from the right sort of people. Al Finch is dangerous! He's got a rec-ord for assault, attempted homicide, you name it. I'm afraid he'll hurt you."

He wouldn't dare, Maria replied with complete self-assurance. I'm very important to him, and I know he means it. Do you know I have my own Coke machine?

"Maria, Maria," Pete said with a groan. Oh God, how do I explain? How, please, do I have the nerve to try? "Maria," he called as loud as he could in his mind, "Maria, promise me one thing. You get scared of Al, or worried, just call Wizard or Pirate. Any of the dogs. They'll protect you. Just call the dogs!"

Wizard barked twice, paused, barked twice again. So did three stray dogs across the street. And a cat walking on a nearby fence meowed in the same se-quence.

Pete tried not to worry. But she was so frail; well-fed or not, she couldn't have great reserves of energy. Finch might kill her without meaning to. He'd have to find a way to stop Finch using her.

On his day off, following a strong hunch, Pete hung around the betting windows at the Brandywine Raceway. Sure enough, Maria's father shuffled up to the ten-dollar window, just before the second race. Pete sidled up to him.

"You tell Al to be careful with Maria," he said. "He can use her too much, you know. He could kill her. And the cops'll tumble to Finch soon enough. They got a lead."

"Who're you?" the little man asked nervously, his face twitching as his red-rimmed eyes slid over Pete's face. "Fuzz?" He scurried away.

Pete had had a good look at his face, though, and was able to identify him in the rogue's gallery as Hec-tor Barres. He had a record; vagrancy, drunk and disorderly, petty larceny.

No appeal based on Maria's frailty would reach Barres. Right now he had all he wanted from life. Barres' thoughts were only for the money rolling in today. Tomorrow, and Maria's welfare, were far from his mind.

Now that he had Maria's last name, Pete checked hospital records and found her date of birth. Her mother had been picked up unconscious, already in active labor, and brought into the emergency ward. The intern who had delivered Maria had expressed doubts that the infant would survive, due to prenatal malnutrition.

Maria's mother had died in the same hospital two years later. The cause was neglect. Not on the part of the hospital. She had had tuberculosis, diabetes, and a coronary condition. She had been severely beaten about the abdomen and died of internal hemmor-rhaging before they could operate.

Pete took to talking to Wizard on the beat at night, hoping that Maria would overhear him. He told

Wizard all about Maria's mother, about her father's record, about how Maria could use her great gift to help people. He told her all he knew about paranormal powers, his feeling that she must conserve her energies; and he repeatedly cautioned her to call Wizard or Pirate if she felt endangered. Sometimes he had the feeling she listened to him. He knew she often talked to Wizard.

Then Al Finch stepped up his operations to include narcotics, apparently having approached and reached an agreement with the local drug pushers in an unprecedented crossover in vice. Pete and the police went quietly berserk. No known pushers were suddenly in evidence. There was no direct contact with or indirect approach to Finch. All known pushers were clean when they were picked up on routine searches. Not a sniff on them. But the stuff was circulating in greater quantities than had ever reached Wilmington before.

"Maria," Pete called resolutely to her from the corner opposite Al's apartment. "Do you know what drugs do to people?"

Sure. They have the coolest dreams to read.

"Do you take it?" He gasped, frightened.

/ don't need to, Maria laughed with a mirth that no longer chimed. Her voice—the essence of the voice she sent—was hard and brassy. I dig it from others. It's boss, man.

"Then dig what happens when they can't pay to get it, Maria. When they have withdrawal. Dig that and see how boss it is!"

But, Pete honey: you gave me the idea yourself. It's much easier to grab the stuff from... well, never mind where. Her voice was sickeningly smug. Easier than reading numbers out of Chicago. You said I was to take care of myself. I am.

"I don't know why I bother with you. You know you're doing wrong, Maria. And when you get hurt, it'll be your own fault." Then...

He didn't know what hit him. When he came to, he was in the emergency ward with Joe bending over him anxiously.

"Brother, you've been out three hours and there isn't a mark on you."

Pete carefully touched his sore head with exploratory fingers. He hurt all over, every nerve felt twisted, his head half unscrewed.

"I got clobbered." The phrase had never seemed so apt.

"Yeah, I know," Joe replied drily. "But with what?"

"Would you believe a girl telepath?" Pete asked in a plaintive voice.

"Right now," Joe said wearily, "I'd believe an invasion of little green men."

Pete looked up at him, startled by the credulous bitterness in the young doctor's voice.

"What'd you mean, Joe?"

Annoyed with himself, Joe grimaced, then swore under his breath. He stepped to the door, looked up and down the hall. Closing the door tightly, with one final cautious look through the small glass insert, he asked, "Do you know where Al Finch is getting nar-cotics, Pete?"

The policeman groaned. "From the locked pharmacy cabinets of the hospitals."

Joe's eyes widened in stunned amazement. "How in hell did you know? Hahlgren didn't report it until noon and you've been in dreamland since then."

It was a relief to Pete to be able to tell someone his secret. When he finished, Joe shook his head slowly from side to side.

"Believe you, I must. The drug cupboard was bare at eight this morning. The question is, what do we do now?"

A few days later, Hector Barres was admitted to the hospital, stricken with a paralysis of the spine. Some of the drugs Maria had lifted from the hospital shelves were not pure opium. One was a thebaine compound which acted like strychnine and com-monly caused spinal paralysis. Her father died of a heart attack shortly after his admission.

Suddenly all the dogs began to howl. Every dog in Wilmington added his note to the clamor. The dogs howled for a full ear-splitting hour despite every attempt to silence them. The SPCA and the Humane Association, police and firemen were called in-un-successfully-to disband a huge pack of hysterical dogs, cats, and tree beasts congregated in Maria's neighborhood.

Only when Maria released them, did the animals disband, melting away in a matter of moments. Pete and Joe took up a position across from her windows.

"Maria," Pete said. "I brought Joe with me. He did everything he could to save your father. But you've been stealing the wrong kind of drugs. It was one of those that killed your father."

I know, Maria said in a flat, hard tone. There was an odd blur to her projected voice that had always rung so clear and true in Pete's mind. I've been...experimenting a little.

There was a long pause. Pete suddenly experienced wild grief, a sense of terrified guilt which was quickly overlaid by a sullen resentment; and, finally, an irrational feeling of satisfaction.

He was a nasty old man. He was mean to me. He killed my mother.

Joe caught Pete's arm, his eyes wide with repug-nance and dread.

You go away, Pete, Maria said. Or I'll set my friends on you.

"Maria, I don't care how much you threaten me," Pete said stolidly. "I have to tell you you're doing wrong."

Bug off, fuzz, Maria snapped. I'm having fun. I never had fun before in my life. I'm living it up good now. You go away.

"Pete," Joe cautioned urgently.

"Damn it, Maria..."

This time when Pete woke up in the emergency ward, Joe was in the next bed. They managed to talk the intern on duty into entering "heat prostration" on their charts as the cause of collapse. They promised faithfully to go to their respective homes and rest for the next twenty-four hours. Out on the hot street, Pete suggested that a couple of beers would start their unexpected holiday the right way, so they adjourned to the nearest air-conditioned bar.

The dogs began to howl again as they crossed the street.

"If we'd told anyone why the dogs howled," Pete said, moodily doodling in the moisture on the beer glass, "they would send us to the funny farm."

"Would you believe a hopped up preadolescent telepath?" Joe asked wistfully, and raised his glass in a mock toast.

"I only told her the truth." !

"For truth she puts holes in our heads."

"All right, wise guy, what should I have done?"

"How do I know?" Joe asked with a helpless gesture of his hands. "My specialty's going to be internal medicine, not head-shrinking or pediatrics. I'm as lousy at this sort of work as you are." He thought for a while, holding his head. "The trouble, Pete, lies in neither you nor me... nor Maria. The trouble is the situation and the circumstances. If she'd had the sense to get born a Dupont instead of a Barres..." And he made a slicing motion with one hand.

They got drunker and drunker, somehow agreeing

on only one thing: they were both so sensitive in the head bone that they couldn't give a j.d. brat the spanking she so richly deserved.

Or rescue her from hell.

Success on a small scene went to Al Finch's head. He decided that Wilmington offered too little scope for his operation's potential. Pete got the word from the desk sergeant that Finch had hired a private plane and a private ambulance.

Pete called Joe Lavelle, told him to meet him across from Maria's at once. Joe arrived in time to watch Maria being carried from the apartment on a stretcher.

"God Almighty, look," Pete cried. "Al Finch, framed by canaries."

Executing an intricate shuffle step, the gang leader was maneuvering the elaborate five-foot cylindrical triple birdcage through the door, all the while bellowing conflicting orders at his subordinates. That kept them bobbing so solicitously between Al and Maria that they all got royally in each other's way.

Then the rear stretcher-bearer tripped on the un-even sidewalk. He went down on one knee, losing his grip on the handles. Maria, her tiny body strapped to the stretcher, was jolted. The forward bearer,

unaware for a moment of the accident, continued on and pulled the handles out of his companion's grip so that Maria, head downward, was dragged jouncingly along the sidewalk. With a yelp, Al leaped forward, unceremoniously depositing the canary cage on the lawn, where it rested at a dangerous tilt. He collided with one of his cohorts who had also jumped to the rescue. The two of them succeeded in startling the forward bearer and the front end of Maria's stretcher dropped with a second jar-ring jolt.

Like the incredible noise that issues from a cyphering organ played full through faulty stops, a chorus of strident howls arose. Starting with the piercing yelps of nearby dogs, it grew in intensity and volume as Maria, battered and pain-racked, summoned aid. It came bounding in answer to her call.

With uncharacteristic ferocity, three poodles and a terrier launched themselves at the stretcher men. Before Finch could touch Maria, a collie and two boxers cut him off, snapping and snarling. The indignant doorman was tripped by a frantic cocker, who plunged at him from the lobby.

"Christ Almighty, she's called all the dogs," Joe cried.

A yelping, yapping, yipping vortex of sound with a rumbling, roaring ground-bass enveloped the area. The street soon became a seething mass of dogs, from ragged Scotties to leaping Dalmatians. More kept arriving on the scene, many dragging snapped ropes and chains, towing stakes, one even hauling a dog-house.

"She's called too many! She'll get hurt," Pete groaned.

As one, Pete and Joe started across the street, stepping on and over dog bodies. Pete caught a glimpse of a protective ring forming around Maria's man-abandoned stretcher.

"Maria! Maria!" he shouted over the tumult. "Call off the dogs. Call them off!"

The sheer press of numbers would overrun her. Kicking, flailing, Pete waded on. A cat, leaping from a stopped car roof, raked him with her claws. Joe reached the curb and fell, momentarily lost under the bounding bodies.

Suddenly, as if cut off by an invisible conductor, all sound ceased. The silence was as terrifying as the noise, but now the momentum of the charging animals faltered. Pete made it to the sidewalk in that hiatus. Neither Maria nor stretcher nor sidewalk was visible under the smooth and brindled, spotted, mottled, rough and smooth blanket of dogs and occasional cats.

Cursing wildly, Pete and Joe labored, throwing the stunned animals out of the way until a space was cleared around the overturned stretcher. The upset bird cage rolled down to the sidewalk, coming to rest with the bent door uppermost. A flurry of orange and yellow feathers, frightened canaries flew hysterically aloft, their frantic chirps ominous and shrill.

Unable to move, Pete watched as Joe carefully turned the stretcher over. The two men stood looking down at Maria's crushed and bloodied body, trampled by the zeal of her would-be protectors. Then, moved by some obscure impulse, Pete joined her hands.

At this point, the dogs, released from the weird control that had summoned and then immobilized them, remembered ancient enmities. The abortive rescue mission turned into a thousand private battles.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Pete saw Wizard coming hell-for-leather down the street. Finch staggered to his feet, clawing his way up, using the bird cage as a support. With a howl, Wizard knocked him down

again. Pete grabbed the man and arrested him for disturbing the peace. Wizard stood guard, in much better shape than any of Maria's other pro-tectors, thanks to his late arrival.

The news story never mentioned that a human had been killed in the great dog riot. But it was noted that the unearthly canine choruses that had been plaguing Wilmington ended with that unscheduled concert.

But sometimes now when Pete Roberts is walking the beat with his K-9 partner. Wizard will suddenly start acting itchy and nervous. He whines and pulls, straining against the lead.

"Heel," Pete says stolidly, pretending nothing's happened.

One of these days I'll really put on the pressure.

THE END

About this Title

This eBook was created using ReaderWorks®Publisher 2.0, produced by OverDrive, Inc.

For more information about ReaderWorks, please visit us on the Web at www.overdrive.com/readerworks