

Kanaan & Tilney: The Case of the Arms Dealers

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Chapter One

It pained John to have to go to the Bureau for Supernatural Protection and Defense for help. Still, it wasn't like he needed them for actual police work, so he could stick to his principles. A man had to do what he had to do, when it came to research.

Bearing all this in mind, he went up the stairs. The building was easy to overlook. Part of that was deliberate—all praeternatural government buildings had Psychogenics keeping them safe from prying human eyes. Part of that wasn't—it was just one more brick row house in a neighborhood of brick row houses. He pushed the front doors open and strolled into the bustling reception area of the Boston BSPD like he had every right to be there.

The tiny waiting area was packed. A few drifter types with far-off looks in their eyes, like Psychogenics on the edge of losing themselves. A man knitting some sort of long, thin hat (or possibly underwear, though the very idea of a knitted banana hammock made John itch) and talking to himself quietly. Two agitated women fighting over a small cardboard box containing a calico cat—or, who knew, maybe the cat was a Beast, one of their lovers or children or something to that effect shifted into animal form. (Yes, John liked that story better.) And of course, there was also the push of uniforms coming in and out about their business, which gave John the most remarkable urge to mutter the word *pig* while coughing into his hand.

Seeing as that would not be the best start to his endeavor, he wrestled the impulse down. He approached the desk sergeant, a petite black woman, young and bright-eyed, and she smiled. "How can I help you, sir?"

John grinned at being called *sir*. First time for everything. "Officer DeLancie." Weren't name tags a fantastic invention? "Hello, hello. Name's John Tilney. You might've heard of me—I write a lot of mysteries and that."

She waited for a moment, like she expected more, then shook her head. "Ah, no, sorry, not a big reader."

John frowned, but there was no accounting for taste. Especially among those who served the Establishment. "Well, anyhow, I'm working on a new direction for my writing right now, and I need to do some research. Wondered if there was some sort of outreach or shadow program where I could talk to a detective, maybe follow them around a bit, possibly even be of some help."

"Like *Castle*?" She arched an eyebrow.

"What's *Castle*?" John asked.

"A TV show."

"Oh, sorry, I don't own a TV. Though if my new direction works, I could finally afford one." John gestured expansively with one hand. "You see my difficulty, yeah?"

Still smiling, she shook her head. He'd gotten worse reactions. Lots of them. She said, "I never heard of that, and honestly, most of the cops here would say you were a damn nuisance. But you're funny, and I needed a laugh today, so I'm gonna ask the chief about it."

He beamed. He liked being called *funny*. Mostly, he just got *weird*. Which was also fine but not nearly as complimentary. "I'll wait." He slid a card across the desk.

John Tilney
Author, *Man of Mystery*
www.johntilneywrites.com

She took it, snorted out a laugh, and picked up the phone. As she spoke into it, she gestured for him to settle down near the arguing cat ladies. To whom he listened with interest, of course.

"You can't have him!" said the taller one. "I bought him fair and square!"

“You can’t buy an animal!” said the shorter one.

“You only say that because you’re a Beast!” The taller woman made it sound like an insult.

John watched with open curiosity, not bothering to hide the sudden disgust that twisted his lips. As an Elementalist himself, he’d heard a lot of anti-Beast racism; there was no surer way to immediately lower his interest in a fellow praeternatural than to start that shit.

“Oh, and it’s so far-fetched to expect a Terran to respect an animal? Aren’t you supposed to be the guardians of all living things? Not just yourselves and a bunch of trees?”

“The cat is mine!”

John already had his phone out to take notes. Terrans were generally far more tolerant toward Beasts than any other praeternatural faction, so the whole argument had shifted from disgusting to a point of interest. He could use this!

Alas, the desk sergeant returned and said, “Mr. Tilney?”

Reluctantly, he tucked away his phone and returned to the desk. Another cop, a tall, browned man with eyes like a hawk, emerged. He ran his gaze all over John quickly, critically.

John held out his hand. “John Tilney.”

The Chief—or whoever—shook, but gave him a look that was more amused than anything else. “Mr. Tilney, we don’t need hangers-on getting in the way of our work. I’m sure you can understand.”

John took his hand back and made a face. It seemed a bit off that a “busy” police chief would come out here to tell him that for no reason. “I wouldn’t get in the way,” he said. “And I’m useful; I’m a crack researcher.”

The chief snickered. “Yeah? Well, sorry, buddy, but people around here are trained detectives, so your brand of crack research doesn’t do us much good.”

John frowned. “How do you even know? I have a résumé, if you like. I’ve worked on several exposés and articles—”

The chief waved him off, still smiling as if at some private joke John wasn’t in on and never would be. “You’re funny, kid.”

John sputtered a little. This was not the kind of funny he liked being called, thank you very much.

Meanwhile, the desk sergeant was obviously trying not to laugh too. “I’m sorry, sir. If you’ll—”

“No, I will not!” John was about to launch into a tirade about how this was why law enforcement was entirely irrelevant in the modern age, how they treated young people—not to mention people of color, women, and don’t even get him started on Beasts and Necros—like criminals without a single real question, and it was a travesty, and damn The Man!

But the chief suddenly turned back to him and said, “Wait. I know just the mutt for the job.” His grin became positively wicked. “Send him to Kanaan.”

John narrowed his eyes. “The mutt?” Sounded like a slur against a Beast to him—some kind of dog-shifter? Racist police, as usual! “I should’ve known better than to think the BSPD could manage a single, solitary, nonracist discussion of—”

Officer DeLancie slid a card across the desk at John—and she wasn’t just giving him his own back. It said:

Lowell Kanaan
Private Investigator
Kanaan Investigations

John swiped it up, stuck out his chin, and marched directly out of the station. And just before he left, he finally let himself say, “Pigs!”

Chapter Two

Same shit, different day.

A meaty fist connected hard with Lowell's face. He took the blow with a grunt and staggered back into his desk. It rattled on uneven legs, and Lowell winced at the familiar sound of folders sliding off, hitting the floor, and spilling their contents everywhere.

All right, so maybe some days were better than others, but this was not one of them.

"This is all your fucking fault!" Bobby Carmichael, the owner of the fist, said. Carmichael was a large man, bald, and wearing the kind of suit that said three things: puffed-up self-importance, new money, and showing off. Unsurprisingly, that was one of Lowell's least favorite combinations.

Lowell stepped forward again, gingerly touching his cheekbone. Carmichael really knew how to throw a punch. Former hockey player, probably. "Funny accusation, coming from the guy who was having an affair," Lowell said drily.

"And you told my wife!" More shouting, more pointing, this time accompanied by a throbbing temple vein.

Lowell sighed before he could stop it. He'd had this conversation more times than he could count, and always with the same kind of asshole. "No, Mr. Carmichael, your wife hired me. But if you didn't want to get caught, you probably shouldn't have cheated."

For a moment, Carmichael seemed at a loss for words. Then his jaw set, his eyes narrowed, and true to puffed-up, self-important asshole form, he said, "I don't need some fleabag telling me what to do."

Fleabag. Original. "It was a suggestion." Lowell didn't bat an eye. "I'll leave the 'telling you what to do' to your wife. I'm sure you'll be getting those divorce papers any day now."

Carmichael shouted and swung again, but this time Lowell was ready. The fist hit the cradle of his palm with a solid *thwack*. Lowell's fingers tightened around Carmichael's. "It's time for you to leave," he said with a rumble of a growl.

Carmichael had to tug hard to get his hand back and step away. "Animal." He swore, then stormed out of the office and slammed the door hard enough to shake the wall.

"Yeah, yeah," Lowell muttered. He rounded his desk to take an ice pack out of the mini- fridge, then dropped heavily into his chair. Ice pack pressed to his cheekbone, he eyed the mess of folders and papers spilled across the scuffed wood floor.

Fuck it. He'd deal with it later.

He nearly growled when the door creaked open again. Thankfully, it wasn't Carmichael coming back for more; instead, a head of close-cropped ginger hair poked through, turning this way and that to take in the shabby office. "Lowell Kanaan? Or are you his assistant?"

Lowell sat straighter, but the ice pack stayed against his face, and he still eyed the stranger warily. "I'm Lowell Kanaan. You coming in or going out?"

"In" came the response. The voice managed to be both low pitched and chirpy at the same time. The ginger head was followed by a gangly body dressed in a loud pink paisley button-down, a tan jacket...and skinny jeans, of all idiotic things. Ginger left the door slightly open as he came to the desk to hand over a business card. "The fascist regime at the BSPD sent me your way."

The corner of Lowell's mouth tugged upward at *fascist regime*, and he took the card. An author, huh? That was a first. "All right, Mr. Tilney, what brings you here?" If he'd gone to the BSPD, this was about a case, and if the BSPD had sent him here, then it was, in all likelihood, a shitty one.

Tilney focused on Lowell for a moment, all curiosity, then swept his gaze around the dark, cluttered room. "I'm writing a book about a cop—or I thought it was going to be about a cop, but I may be changing my mind just now. I need to do some research, like shadowing or assisting a detective. And you're a detective." His bright blue eyes fixed on Lowell once more. "This is all very noir; it's fantastic."

So it wasn't a case. Lowell couldn't decide if that was better or worse. "Noir is a literary or film aesthetic. This is my office." He looked down at the card, at the emblazoned *Man of Mystery*, and then up again at the pale face staring intently at him. "So the BSPD turned you down?"

"Like a bedspread." Tilney nodded, expression serious. "To tell the truth, I'm not so sad about it. Bunch of racist pricks. But when I research, I like to be thorough and start at the beginning. This is much better." He glanced around again, this time looking satisfied.

Now *that* wasn't the reaction Lowell was used to when it came to his office. Nearly everything was secondhand and falling apart. The paint was the newest thing about it, and even that was cracked and peeling. "Better?"

Lowell lowered the ice pack and leaned forward. "Look. I'm not quite sure what you think you're going to find here, Mr. Tilney."

"John. And—going to find?" John blinked. "I've already found it. Here you are, behind your shabby desk, looking all gruff and hard used. Speaking of, is that a bruise forming? Did you get in a fight with that man who just left? He was pissed."

"He took issue with my work." Lowell touched his cheek and then put the ice pack on it again.

John laughed—more like a giggle, really. Weird coming from a six-foot-two rumbler like him. "Yeah, see, this is what I'm talking about. You're exactly what I was looking for. Tell me how I can convince you to take me on. I mean, I could be an assistant, maybe? Carry your bags? Fix your filing system? I'm a great researcher too. Been doing it my whole life."

Lowell stared at John a long moment, then sat back in his chair. "I can't pay you."

John shrugged. "The book will pay me, when it's done."

Another long stare as Lowell weighed the pros and cons, and then he sighed quietly. "You got a résumé?"

"I'm glad you asked." John's face lit up with a smile. He settled his battered messenger bag on a nearby chair and dug through it for a bright purple folder. This, he settled on top of one of the less precarious piles remaining on Lowell's desk. "I've worked as a research assistant for pretty much my entire life."

The résumé inside the folder was...impressive, actually. It was neatly typed and organized, listing a number of nonfiction books John had worked on and mystery novels he'd done for several publishers. At least, Lowell assumed they were mystery novels, with titles like *More Dead Secrets*.

There were quite a few references too: a former teacher, the woman (a relative, if the last name was anything to go by) he'd worked as a research assistant for, and—*Wait*. "Dead Fred?"

"Yeah, I wanted to write a convincing Necromorph character, but there are some very closed-off bits in their subculture. Had to go in deep. Dead Fred was a great help." John held up one hand, snapped his fingers, and called up a tiny flame to dance on the end of his index finger in illustration of his next point. "In spite of, you know, this. Which is also a great asset, by the way."

Lowell tried to keep his surprise off his face. "You're an Elementalist?" Of course he was; that explained the smell. It was like smoke and burnt matches. It was just rare you met an Elementalist who associated with Necromorphs and asked Beasts for help. Well, outside of Mina.

John nodded, then snapped his fingers again and killed the flame.

By then, Lowell would have turned anyone else away, but for some reason he found himself hesitating. He decided not to look too closely at it and just chalk it up to a

combination of admiring John's tenacity, odd as it was, and the office really needing some straightening up. "I'll give you a trial run," he finally said.

"You won't regret it." John clapped his hands together, then swept another critical gaze over the office. "Where do we start? Got some kind of juicy case we need to pound the pavement for? Or should we play 'get to know you' first?"

"No, I'll, uh"—Lowell couldn't believe he was about to say this—"pound the pavement on my own for now." He stood and gestured at the stacks of folders on his desk. "You can start by organizing these files. They're all old cases." He went to the coat rack, took down his worn leather jacket, and pulled it on. "I'll be back in a few hours." He paused awkwardly. "I'll bring coffee."

John frowned but turned his attention quickly enough to the mess at hand. "I think I'm gonna need it."

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Want to know what happens next?

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