

“So how’s that, then? Everything good?”

The Australian shepherd sighed, paws on his hips, and looked over the apartment once more. Far, *far* smaller than what he was used to, with quite a higher price tag to boot – and then the utility bills stacked up too; and the air quality wasn’t great; and there was nothing really *nearby*, yet at the same time, the roads were too bad to drive save for when it was absolutely needed; and then, worst of all, this just wasn’t quite *home*. It wouldn’t be for a long time.

Nothing to be done about that, though. He squeezed his paws at his sides and turned to look to the window, out across the slender alley and over the top of the slightly shorter building beside their complex here. Not quite within view of the bay, but if he opened the window, drew up a chair, and closed his eyes, he could imagine that the constant rumbling hiss of street traffic was instead the gentle lapping of waves upon the shore...

He was here now. *Here*, in Oakland. Nothing remained for him back in Perth across the ocean, so far distant physically, mentally, emotionally. Everything that survived that fire had come with him packed into a few medium-sized, reinforced moving boxes sent on a plane with him following soon after. It was still hard to believe, and every morning he awoke here in this little studio apartment, he kept his eyes closed for a few minutes extra just in hopes that, when he did open them, he would see the familiar arrangement of his room at his family’s house back then.

It had not happened yet, though, and he knew in his heart that it never would. The shepherd turned back to look over the apartment, with its short ceiling and tight corners, with used and thrift furniture backed up against the stained and discolored walls, African wild dog standing by the kitchen with paws in his pockets. This last part hadn’t come with the apartment. Thinking of this, the shepherd couldn’t help but smirk, even as he had to reach up to dab at the tears that gathered at the edges of his eyes. Those had become a near constant thing as well, whenever his mind was allowed to wander.

It wasn’t home yet, but it was the closest thing he had to one. His best friend from Perth had turned into his only remaining family here in Oakland. He gave his best smile, sniffed, and nodded.

“It’s nice,” he answered, and looked around once more. “Gaz, I’m sorry I couldn’t really help with setting everything up. I’m, just...”

“I know, I know.” The wild dog strode forward the few steps it took to cross the space and draw his friend into a hug. “You went through a lot. But that’s – understatement of the year, aye? We’re here now, and we can move on. Since that’s all we can do. Aye? Prince?”

Prince nodded and lifted a paw to rest it along Gaz’s arm, then had to turn and bury his muzzle in the dog’s shoulder again. Eyes squeezed shut, jaw tight, he let everything flow through him again just as it had so many times since it had happened. The worst part was the regret: if he had been there that night instead of out at another friend’s, if he had paid attention to the sirens as they passed by, if he had...

If he had done *this*, if he had done *that*. Slowly he steadied his breathing, wiped at his eyes, and then straightened up again. Warm turquoise eyes flicked back and forth across his muzzle, and Gaz gave another small smile.

“You ‘kay, mate?”

"Yeah." Prince swallowed and rubbed his eyes again. "Yeah, I'm... thank you."

"Of course. I've gotta take care of you when you can't do it yourself, y'know?"

"I know. I don't know where I'd be without you." But he didn't want to think about that anymore. That had been the rule of his life in the few months since the fire had first happened; thinking about this the shepherd paused again, and frowned. Had it really been months already? It felt at once like it had happened just the other day, yet at the same time as though it were years ago when his mom had last called him. His phone slept mostly still and silent in his pocket these days. "But I, um, do have to go and..."

Gaz patted his shoulder, his characteristic grin returning. "Right," he said, "job fair. Over at the campus."

"Yeah."

"You know the way?"

"I think so, yeah."

"Cheers. Go kick ass. I've got some things to wrap up here, and then once you get back we can just take it easy, and..." The wild dog went over to the window as well and peered out. "Then get back to it tomorrow."

Prince really *was* grateful for Gaz. How couldn't he be? He had been his only island of solace and comfort since everything had happened, and the originally laid-back, nonchalant wild dog had shown quite the resilient backbone and support when pressure demanded it of him. It was he who had arranged the movers to come, he who had searched for and found the apartment, he who had ordered the plane tickets, and taken care of handling the lease... "*we can peace out of here whenever,*" he had told him, "*so once we're both in a better place mentally and financially, we can go ahead and step out to somewhere else.*" It was just a matter of getting there.

On his way out the door Prince reached for his jacket hanging there from the hook, though faltered at the last moment and slipped out without it instead. It had a tendency to get a bit chilly in the evenings and mornings out here, humidity constantly rolling in off the San Francisco bay, but even after multiple washings Prince could still pick up the lingering sting of soot and foul smoke on the material of the fabric.

Gaz would close that window before too long. The angle and positioning of their apartment along this rise meant that the afternoon sun blazed straight through the glass there, casting a harsh glare across the wall and TV both – but they didn't really have the space to move anything around, and the apartment itself hadn't come with space for a curtain rod. Between all of the legal nonsense and some unnecessary hassle with the movers, it had taken a little over a month for everything here to settle, and whereas Gaz had nailed something down within the first week of the move, Prince was still up in the air on that front. Applications sent online, two weekends spent poring through three local library branches for resources, loitering at college campuses for news about things just like this... it was something to do, something to keep his mind distracted and his body busy. Under normal circumstances the shepherd

would have had nowhere near the patience to do all of this, but now there was simply nothing else he *could* do.

He bunched his paws up into his pockets as he made his way down the cement stairs outside the door to their apartment, the heavy door thumping shut behind and echoing through the stairwell. Already the pleasant warmth of the California afternoon had seeped in through the walls of the building, though again he knew it would swiftly start to drop again within the next few hours.

The noise of the street redoubled again when he pushed through the big, metal doors spilling out into the side alley, and this time there was no way the shepherd could pretend it was the ocean. Not quite as chaotic as he had expected from what little research he had done leading up to the move, but still enough to dig at his senses and get under his skin from the ringing of bells and door chimes, the hissing of huge buses, the constant distant honking of some unhappy driver, all wrapped up and entwined with everything else that would come from a city. He poked his head out from the alleyway, looked both ways down the sidewalk, and then started off along the route he had planned earlier in the morning.

That would take him down this main street towards the next intersection, at which he waited for about seven minutes before the light changed in his favor – and even then he had to jerk to a stop and glare when a car tried to roll forward across him. Then along that way for a bit until he made it to the little bookstore on the corner, and then...

Prince slowed to a stop there and paused. Was it straight ahead from here for another block, or turn right? He reached into his pocket to double-check, but found his pocket empty instead – and after patting at each and every other possible spot along his body found that he must have left his phone back at the apartment with Gaz. He rolled his head back and sighed to the partly cloudy sky, for a moment weighing the options in his head. Twenty minutes here, so it would be twenty minutes back and then twenty *again* for a full hour, then still another fifteen left on the walk to the campus. The job fair, for some reason, was only scheduled to go for two and a half hours this afternoon, and he had left right as it started since yet another issue had kept him back at the apartment while Gaz finished getting things set up, and – it was just this whole fiasco, another problem to add to the stack.

*Right.* That was it. It would be good to take a shortcut anyway, though, so after weighing his options and digging through his memories a little more thoroughly, Prince swung to the right off the sidewalk and stepped into the alleyway between the bookstore and the building beside it. Immediately the odor of sour trash stung his nose, and the shepherd grimaced, thought about turning back, then committed to it instead and continued forward. He really didn't have any time to waste, and besides, what better way to learn the city than exploring it himself?

Before long the alley widened out into a space between this throng of buildings, much of the concrete ground occupied by stairs leading up to backdoors, or lines of dumpsters, or cardboard pallets and shopping carts for the homeless that took refuge back here, beneath the overhanging awnings of the buildings overhead and away from the eyes of the street.

Prince still avoided making eye contact, though, and continued on his way, step picking up a bit. Some rustling down another alley, the screech of a feral cat – which made him smirk, as it felt like he was in some kind of movie. For a moment he took the pleasure of pretending there was music behind his steps, and when he turned the corner onto the next street with the bright sunlight slanting in at an angle, that his imagined camera would swing out and sweep around and-

"Hey there. 'Scuse me."

-in a split second the conflict hit his mind: *do I slow down and talk, or keep on going as though I never heard?* But, naturally, the firm paw that clapped down on his shoulder from behind settled the decision for him, and in another moment Prince felt himself tossed around to face, to his surprise, none of the three unfortunate souls back there in the alley, but instead a sleek, polished panther, fur deep blue-black in the shadows of the city, looking him up and down with a face seemingly permanently twisted in a half-snarl. Beneath that slightly lifted lip glimmered the unmistakable shine of a smooth golden fang, standing smooth amid yellow-white.

"Oh. Um." The shepherd met his eyes, rich yellow as bright as that tooth, then immediately glanced away. The panther leaned in and turned his head to follow, in an attempt to force that eye contact. "I was just..."

"On your way somewhere. Yeah?"

"Yeah." Why was his heart pounding like this already? For all he knew this panther might just want directions, or to ask for a handout, or... that was a *knife* at his side, clasped in a plastic sheath attached to the sleek leather belt strung through the panther's denim jeans. Certainly not the only one on him, at that.

"In a bit of a... *rush*, it looks like." He was chewing gum. The panther popped the wad into the other side of his mouth, briefly giving Prince a clear flash of the full array of those fangs. "Why's that? Somewhere you need to be? Tryna get away from something? Or, I dunno... someone?"

*Oh, no.* There it was again. The slight dizziness, the growing dread... the pressure in the back of his throat, the squeeze at his eyes. *I do not need this right now.* Prince tried to squirm free, felt that paw on his shoulder tighten, noticed his fear turn to frustration, and tried to will it all back down again. "I just – moved here, and I'm... looking for... I need to go to – a – job fair..."

The panther raised his eyebrows. Little flecks of sandy brown sparkled amid the sleek amber of his eyes. "Just moved? You don't say. That sure as *hell* is not an accent from around here. What brings you to our lovely shores of-" Here the larger feline spun Prince around again, caught him right as he was about to stumble into the wall, and threw an arm over his shoulder to squeeze him uncomfortably close against him. He smelled first of cigarette smoke, with the distinct pungent kick of weed underneath that, then with these two mixing and muddling into an ugly concoction atop whatever sharp cologne that was. "*Oakland, California?*"

Prince swallowed, then did so again, and then did so a *third* time, trying to push down the panic as it bore down upon him. It was always there, constantly lurking in the background of his thoughts, and any new source of stress or strain would be enough to bring it right back to the surface as he had discovered over these past few weeks. "I – need to – there was an, um... an accident, and..." He swallowed again. His vision misted over; again and again he tried to blink the tears away. "And..."

And his little pretend movie was about to become a comedic tragedy with him right here at the center. Already he knew he wouldn't make it to his job fair today: the way things were going, it was more likely for the shepherd to wake up here in this alley some hours later, welts and bruises rising on his face and

shoulders and stomach, stripped of his wallet, shirt, and likely pants too. *"You're in our territory now,"* the panther would hiss into his ear. Did street gangs still have names? He saw West Side Story once, years ago.

Those fingers tightened on his shoulder again, thick claws shooting out and pinching through his shirt and fur. *"Well? I asked you a question. Answer it, pup."*

So Prince tried. He really did. A handful different explanations bubbled in his head, all of the same rote responses he had given to all of the friends and strangers who had asked about the incident. *"I-"* he managed, *"my... family..."* and that was all. He buckled forward and crumbled to the ground, head between his knees, arms wrapped tight around his legs as he shook and jerked with powerful sobs, the wounds still so fresh.

*"It never gets easier,"* Gaz had told him once, soon after they had arrived. *"I know. It's right tough. Like I always say, all we can do is keep on movin', aye? You've got your best mate here. I can pull you along if you need me to."* Yet here he was in some alley, lost in the city, likely about to receive a knife between the ribs, and – and the panther's strong boots scuffed against the ground as he prepared to swing forward, to kick Prince the rest of the way down and take everything he had.

Except he didn't. Another soft scuff, barely audible beneath Prince's choking and sobbing, and then to his surprise that arm draped down around his shoulders again, with the other paw coming in to squeeze at his arm.

*"Whoa,"* the panther rumbled, his sleek tenor suddenly dropping the sharp edge it had before, *"whoa, okay... okay... this is-"*

Feeling a pulse of frustration and rage, at himself and this damn cat and the world around him, Prince shook those paws off his shoulders and scrambled away.

*"Leave me – alone, I have to-"*

The panther raised his paws with fingers spread in defense. *"Whoa! I wasn't doin' anything. Believe me. Are you okay? Do you need help?"*

The shepherd sniffled and wiped at his nose. *"As if I'd – let you help me."*

*"Okay. Ouch. But, understandable. Here."* The panther rose to his feet and reached down for Prince, then seeing that he wasn't going to accept the help, crouched down a little further and softened his gaze. *"Come on. I'm Malcolm. What's your name?"*

He looked the cat up and down again. Slim-fitting jeans, thick work boots that came up just beneath the cuffed legs of those pants... knife at his belt, chain hanging from the other side and disappearing into his pocket, leather jacket halfway zipped to show the smudged and stained t-shirt underneath. One paw held out and the other in his pocket, Prince could see that he wore a gold watch along one wrist with a cloth wristband on the other. The chain of a necklace settled draped among the thick, soft fur visible beneath the collar of his shirt, but just what that chain bore, Prince couldn't tell.

Still sniffing, still hating himself for it, the shepherd finally reached up towards that paw, and then felt himself hoisted up to his feet. This time Malcom caught him when he stumbled forward, and braced another paw on the back of his shoulder for balance – and when Prince swallowed, wiped at his eyes, and looked at him again to murmur a half-sincere thanks. The panther's muzzle split in a grin again; Prince couldn't look away from that single golden fang, deadly sharp against the rest.

"Well? Name?"

"Oh – um, I'm..." He wiped at his nose once more. "Prince. Name's Prince."

"Oh, my. I didn't know I was in the presence of royalty. *Your Highness.*"

Despite himself and the situation, hearing this come out on Malcolm's voice, and seeing the little twist he put into his muzzle and expression, still managed to make the shepherd laugh softly. That strengthened the panther's grin, and then before he knew it he was guided back towards the other end of the alley with the feline beside him.

"Hey," Prince said, "I'm not – I just came from Australia, and..."

"Ah. That explains it. New here... I can show you around, if you'd like?"

His heart jumped again. "Well, actually, I was – needing to go--"

"*That* way, yeah yeah, I know. What's over there that needs your attention so much?"

"There's... a..." Prince took a moment to clear his throat and rub at his eyes again. At least the pressure and sensation had stopped. "Job fair over at the campus, since..."

Malcolm tossed his head and scoffed before he could finish his explanation. "*Job fair*. No, no, no." A wagging finger came up. Prince saw in that flash that the claw there, too, was gold – not painted, but rather set in at the root. "I don't know how things are where *you* come from, pup, but over here? *Absolutely* not. Folks up *there*—" He pointed to one of the buildings climbing far up towards the sky. "—don't care about you, or me, or our friends. All they care about is lining their fat fuckin' pockets with money that should've gone into *ours*. Get it?"

"Well it's – just--"

"Y'know what?" Malcolm paused where they were, now standing at the mouth of the central area with the dumpsters. For a moment he unhooked his arm from around Prince's shoulder, slipped his wallet out of his pocket, and leafed through it for a bit. "Here. 'S yours. Little... welcome to the city gift."

His fingers were warm and deft when he sought Prince's paw and stuffed whatever he had retrieved into his palm. The shepherd moved to open his paw and peer inside, though the panther made sure to keep it tilted towards him and hidden from anyone else. There between his fingers, limp and crumpled, off-colored... Malcolm closed Prince's paw around it again.

The panther winked. "Gift from me to you. Keep it 'til ya need it."

Prince gaped at him. “A *hundred?*”

Guiding him towards the street again, Malcolm glanced down his shoulder at the dog beside him. “What, not enough?”

“No, no, it’s – but, why? You just met me, and I just...” *Made a fool of myself.* “Why?”

Again Malcolm shifted his gum to the other side of his mouth, giving a sharp *pop* as it went. “I’ve been here since I was – a little kitten. I know my way around; you don’t. Gotta watch out for the little guys. And you?” He poked at the shepherd’s chest, then swung him out of the alley and onto the sidewalk by his side. Even for a weekday afternoon there was still quite a few people out and walking around, but Prince noticed now that they parted around the two of them to let them pass. “You’re one of the little guys.”

Was that supposed to be a threat? For a moment that fear returned – but seeing Malcolm’s flashed grin and sideways glance led Prince to push out a quick laugh. “Yeah. I guess... I guess I am. Where are you, um, taking me, by the way?”

“Up by the garage. It’s just over this way. I saw you wanderin’ around, lookin’ like a lost puppy, and thought you might be able to use a bit of a... guiding hand.”

“What’s at the garage?”

Malcolm dug his finger into Prince’s palm where he still clutched the bill. “More of *that.*”

It was a bit of a walk to get there, but nothing more than the shepherd had already expected from making it to the job fair. Along the way Malcolm’s arm slipped from around his shoulder and he stuffed his paws into the pockets of his jacket. Around a corner, then around another one, and in through another alley – and then Prince looked out over the yard of what looked like a small-scale mechanic shop, tires of all sizes stacked up underneath protective roofing, a shed that looked like it was in need of a fresh coat of paint, a rather huge feral Great Dane chained to a haft of twisted rebar in the small patch of yellowed grass, and then of course the garage itself, doors lifted and all kinds of sounds issuing out.

Again he felt like he was in a movie. Malcolm guided him forward, swiftly scaled the chainlink fence and tossed himself over the barbed wire at the top – *that* was impressive – then padded around to open the gate for his visitor. That golden fang flashed again, and again his arm went around his shoulders, this time gripping a little more firmly.

“Ey!” Malcolm shouted, the sudden volume startling the poor dog at his side. Following this he gave a sharp whistle and waved an arm. “Y’all busy? Don’t tell me you’re *actually* getting’ shit done...”

Prince was about to ask who he was talking to, when this question was answered for him. The noises in the garage ceased, and a second later a tall, broad older wolf and another slim wild dog, each wearing the same leather jacket as this panther, stepped out. Prince frowned and squinted closer – but, no, that wasn’t Gaz.

The two groups met at the center of the yard, the wolf wiping his paws off on his shirt and reaching back to adjust the fit of his pants. The wild dog, meanwhile, kept his mismatched eyes, one blue and one brown, on Prince and kept silent.

"What's goin' on, Malc?" the wolf said. It looked as though he *should* have had pure white fur, though now it was stained and smeared with black grease, orange rust, brown grime, and who knows what else. "This the one interested in Moose?"

"No, no. This is..." He trailed off. It took Prince a moment to notice that the joking bow and the flourish of the paw towards his chest was a cue for him to introduce himself.

He cleared his throat. "Um. I'm – Prince. We just met... back..."

"New in town," Malcolm interrupted him. He pressed his weight down against the shepherd's shoulder and upper back, his free paw draping down across his chest; with a flex of his fingers his claws caught into Prince's shirt and tugged. Something about the sensation sent a chill rippling down his back. "No job, no way around, no friends..."

"Well, actually, I've got-"

"So I was thinking, let's show him the ropes, get him all set up. You don't have to be anywhere 'til later tonight, right, pup?"

Prince blinked. Three sets of eyes appraised him. The tall wolf wiped a rag off between his paws.

"Actually, I need to... ah..."

Malcolm tilted his head. "Come on, pal. You wouldn't leave your new friends high n' dry, would you? We lost someone recently, and could use the help. Remember..." He reached down and patted at the pocket with his wallet. "Most jobs make ya wait 'til the end of the week or, hell, the fuckin' *month* for your cut. You'll get yours daily. Cash, too. You'll get to hang out here, you'll get to spend time with *us* – you already know me; this is Scott," said with a motion to the wolf, who half-lifted a paw in greeting, "and Kia," to the wild dog, who just nodded. "Hey, is Sam around?"

Scott shook his head. "Out for the day. He'll be back in the morning."

"Oh, right, he had his... thing. Anyway. I've got something I need to take care of right quick." Malcolm patted Prince's back and then slid away from him, off towards the garage. "These two'll take care of ya 'til I get back. Yeah?"

Prince looked after him. "What? I don't-"

"Hey." Scott looked over his shoulder at the panther. "Where d'you want him?"

"I dunno. Oh! Up front. He's got a nice enough face. He'll be good for routing the customers."

"Customers? What do you do here?"

This time it was Scott's turn to grin. He displayed a set of full, sharp white teeth, not a single one out of place or damaged. "Oh, all *kinds* of things. Kia here does a lot of the mechanic work with Sam. You'll meet him when he gets back tomorrow."

The wolf spoke in a slow, steady baritone, a more jovial note under his voice than Malcolm's attempt at one. Prince immediately felt a liking for him. "What do you do?"

"I run the books. You might've picked up that everything we do here, we do through cash – all off the record, officially, but it's still good to keep track of things. Here, walk with me. You're trustworthy, right?"

Loose gravel crunched beneath their steps as they went not towards the garage, but the metal door into the building just beside it. The Great Dane lifted his head from where he lay; Prince heard a low, throaty growl issue from the feral, and quickened his step to put Scott between him and the dog.

"I mean..." There was that tug at the back of his throat again. "My mom always said I was."

Scott's deep, resounding chuckle easily overtook the feral's growl. "I'm sure she does. Well, we-"

"Did."

"What?"

Prince looked off towards the garage. "She... always *did*."

The wolf stayed silent for a moment. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"God. I'm sorry."

"Yeah. I am too."

Scott heaved a sigh as he started up the steps towards that door. He fiddled at his belt for a keyring, fished through it, then with a bit of a bump and press managed to knock the door open. "Well, I don't want to get too ahead of myself, but – we're like a little family here. Malcolm seems to have taken a quick liking to you, and that can be either a good thing, or a *very* bad thing."

That didn't bode well. Prince nearly tripped over the stairs on his way up.

"There won't be any issues, though. We all get along. You might've noticed that I've got some three decades on Malcolm and Kia both."

"I *did* notice." Prince reached to shut the door behind himself. Inside it was much darker and cooler, and could also use a bit of a touch-up. "I wasn't going to mention it, though..."

"Oh, *and* he's polite! Yeah, you'll be great for running our front desk. There's those two and Sam, and then also Maritza, Leo, Tony, Vincent... Vince and Tony run our deliveries. They're all young and hotheaded, so we need *someone* to keep the ship afloat. That's where I come in. Been to college?"

"No, sir."

"Oh, my. *Sir*. Finished high school?"

"I – secondary? Yes?"

"Yeah. We'll have to put you through our trial run first to make sure you're not a rat, but we'll be all good past there."

"Rat?" Prince looked down over himself. "I'm an Australian shepherd."

Scott looked down at him, eyes narrowed – but then a moment later, recognition and understanding flashed there, and he nodded.

"Don't you worry," he said. "I'll show you the ropes. Oh, look – we've got a customer coming in now. This one's a repeat; we know him..."

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It was late by the time Prince made it back to his apartment. The events of the day had left him in a fantastic mood, so that the shepherd jaunted up the stairs and hummed a tune to himself as he went – but all of this faded as soon as he turned his key in the lock and stepped in, slowing down so as not to wake Gaz.

The wild dog hadn't gone to sleep yet, though. As soon as Prince stepped in he found himself wrapped up in a tight hug, Gaz's tail wagging behind him and his muzzle buried in his shoulder. He was speaking, or trying to, at least, but his words kept on getting tangled up with one another and tumbling out in an unintelligible mess, until Prince took him by the shoulders and pushed him back a step.

"Whoa! Whoa. What's this about?"

Gaz looked across his face, wiped a paw under his eyes, and then with his other pushed his large satellite-dish ears back. "I was just – so *worried* about ya, mate! Your job fair was only s'posed to take, what, an hour? And then two go by, and a third, and a fourth, and you're not back, and I call you, but then your phone right there," said with an emphatic motion towards the coffee table, "goes off, so I'm wonderin' what's happened, and if you're lost, or if somethin' happened, and – aah, I just did *not* need this, and..."

"Sorry! Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm fine." It *had* gotten a little cold, and he had been made to walk all the way back on his own with nothing to go off other than rough directions from Scott after closing. He had expected and hoped to see Malcolm again, but the panther never showed back up – but that was alright, all things considered. He was to return tomorrow morning before noon and go from there... and now, his pocket felt considerably fuller than it had when he had left earlier. "I'm sorry I worried you, Gaz. I didn't mean to do that."

"Aye, it's just... ah. I'm glad you're alright. Did you go somewhere after your job fair? Did everything go okay?"

"Yeah. I..." Prince slid past Gaz to head into the main room of the apartment. He thought about slipping his wallet and the wad of cash out of his pocket right then and there, but after digging his fingers into his pocket, thought differently and decided against it. "Got something set up, I think. Gonna go back tomorrow and see what's going on about that. See what I can do."

"That's a relief." The wild dog padded after him. "I'm gonna be headed in tomorrow, too. Was wanting to stay up 'til you got back or I'd've been in bed already, but... now that you're here..." He gave him a little smile.

Prince returned it. "Yeah, go ahead. I'll be in after a bit."

He waited for the bedroom door, right there next to the couch against the wall, to close before he fully relaxed. Scott had stayed there by his side for the first half of the day, showing him how to judge the different "customers" and make the exchange – and it really helped that the wolf kept such clear, tabulated books on everything, even though he had recorded everything in a kind of code that Prince couldn't even start to read. All the shepherd had to do was take a name and a codeword, then pass those to Scott who would run the books and then guide him over to the shelves, for him to return and make the exchange... and as he had said, each and every one of them paid in cash, and Prince was allowed to keep a few bills from each one.

Right now, right here in his pocket, was more money than he had had in his checking account for the past four months. He spread it out over the coffee table, the bills ranging from tight and crisp to ancient, weathered, and taped, and looked over all of them. A visit to the bank before work tomorrow morning would be in order, and-

And he sat back and rested his head along the back of the couch. *Work*. What a turn today had taken. What he had originally thought was just life taking another sucker punch at him while he was already down, was instead a hell of a boon between Malcolm's generosity, Scott's gentle care and treatment... and at one point Kia even came over, two cups of coffee in hand, and passed one to the shepherd so they could sip in silence. Prince thought he caught a wink from the wild dog when he went to get back to his work, but he couldn't be sure.

After sitting there and looking over his haul for the day, he cast around for a place to hide the cash for now, and then stepped over to the bedroom door to join Gaz. The small studio apartment, lack of funds, and short schedule for both of them meant that they could only get a place with one bedroom, but neither of the dogs took up that much space – and Prince saw when he opened the door that Gaz had pulled himself close to the edge of the queen-size bed, right there facing the wall. That worked out just fine: the two *had* had a small history together, mostly friendly, curious stuff, little explorations and tests of boundaries – Prince still sometimes thought of the wild dog when enjoying his private time – but recent events had caused this front to stagnate a bit. That was fine, too.

Trying to keep quiet, he tugged his shirt off, stepped out of his pants, and then slid into bed alongside the sleeping wild dog – who squirmed, sighed softly, and rolled over onto his back at the gentle interruption. Prince settled into place, kept an ear perked to make sure he hadn't woken his friend, and

stared up at the ceiling overhead darkened by night, the only movement that of the ceiling fan spinning in place.

It was memories of the day and thoughts of that panther that eventually lulled him off to sleep. Seeing Scott's smiling face after each successful transfer, the wolf sitting over in the next room bent over his laptop – Prince couldn't see the screen since he had installed some kind of filter to prevent it being visible save for the user – and giving a thumbs up, or a nod, or some other small gesture to show his approval. He felt like the father of the group so far, an idea which just strengthened once Vince and Tony returned from their "deliveries". These two were a fruit bat and a lion pair who seemed *very* close, and also quite boisterous and troublesome; as soon as they saw Prince sitting there they yelled and jeered at him, and it startled the poor dog at first but before long he was laughing alongside them, and had to force it only a little bit.

Tony had leaned in close as Prince got ready to leave for the day, and seized the shepherd's hips in his strong paws and nipped at his ear – somewhat unusual for a lion, he kept his mane trimmed down to the base, so he looked more like a lioness or some kind of honey-colored panther. *"You're a real cutie,"* the lion had rumbled, *"and I wouldn't mind getting a taste of you myself... but we'll have to see what Mal's plans for you are."* And with that he had slipped away – with a pinch to the rump and a brush of the tail along Prince's ankle.

So that had startled him too, and made him a little bit uncomfortable, but now that he was away from the situation and thinking about it... but, no. He turned his head to the side and worked to clear his mind to sleep.

It worked... partially. Upon waking up the next morning, he realized that that sleek panther Malcolm had slid into his dreams somewhere along the way, though just what had happened, he couldn't tell. Gaz had already left for his own job when the sun came in and roused Prince awake, and then the shepherd was out the door soon after, a quick snack in his belly with his phone actually on him this time.

Some fifty minutes later after a quick run by the bank, it was Scott who greeted him at the garage – with nobody else present: they had been the first two to show up. So the wolf had him set up the front desk again and sat him there to get right back to it. The first customer visible through the fogged glass of the front, Prince straightened up, tapped his fingers against the desk, leaned over to try to catch the wolf's attention through the window in the wall – and then, to his own surprise, felt his tail wag and thumb against the chair when a sleek, tall panther, the leather of his jacket as black as his fur, strode through that front door.

Late morning sunlight glittered across his golden eyes, tooth, and claw, and his face lit up when he saw the shepherd sitting there. "Hey-o! There's my pup. Heard you had a good day yesterday. Fast n' easy, got the job done, didn't ask any questions... that's what we like to see."

Honestly Prince *had* been curious about what kind of business they were running here, as every 'transaction' was made either in a little cardboard box, or in a bag wrapped in a second opaque bag wrapped in some kind of plastic wrap, but he had kept his mouth shut after a quick look and gesture from Scott beside him.

The shepherd shifted in his seat, ears perked and smile bright. "I'm trying my best."

“Love it. Keep that up and you’ll be golden. Sam will be back today, too – usually he’s in that spot, so we can get things sorted out if he wants. ‘Til then, though...” The panther slipped a little mint canister out of his pocket, flipped it open, and slipped a little paper-wrapped nub between his lips. A quick flick of his lighter and a few seconds spent at the wrapped end of it, and then... Prince’s nose flared with that so-familiar grungy, slightly-acrid scent. *That* much he had expected – Gaz had brought some with him, somehow sneaking it onto the plane – so it didn’t bother him too much. “I’ll check in with ya. Might have something else for you to do before long.”

“Yes, sir.”

Malcolm raised his eyebrows. “Scott get you doin’ that? He loves getting *sir’d*.” He reached up and scratched behind an ear. “Don’t you *dare* fuckin’ let him make you ‘daddy’ him.”

Prince stared. Malcolm drifted off into his thoughts for a moment longer, noticed the dog looking at him, and winked, blunt clutched between his lips.

“You can ‘daddy’ me, though.”

The dog’s mouth fell open. Malcolm tossed his head back in a cackle and then turned to slip past him into the garage. As he passed by he clapped a paw onto the dog’s shoulder, and reached up and patted between his ears.

“Keep it up. I’ll come for ya if I need you.”

As it turned out, he would: Prince ended up spending most of the day running deliveries around town now that he had his phone, checking the directions and addresses back and forth, keeping in mind the odd little notes: *back in the alley between the two dumpsters; under the bridge and in the clogged pipe in the O of the tag there; in the shelf underneath the mailbox; leave it in the exhaust pipe of the car. Don’t worry, it’s electric. The pipe is fake.* He met nobody in person, and each time he returned to the garage it seemed like there was nothing really going on, but still he had work to do. Vince, Tony, and Malcolm had all gathered in the back room, sitting back in lawn chairs and passing another blunt, this one home-rolled instead of premade, between them. There was no way it could be the same one each time.

Come the end of the day Prince had a bit less in his pocket than the previous, but still a fair amount. When he arrived back at the apartment he found he was alone, and thus took the opportunity to slip back into the bedroom and take care of some business that had been left to simmer. The bed creaked underneath his body; he tugged his shirt halfway up his chest, slid his pants and underwear down his legs, sat back... fondled, rubbed, squeezed, sighed. His ear still tingled where Tony had nipped at it, and as he slid deeper into his thoughts the shepherd imagined those fangs to make their way down his neck and shoulder instead, strong feline paws gripping his waist, pulling his hips back... but when he turned his head in his fantasy and opened his eyes, it was sleek black-furred arms that held him instead of warm honey-yellow.

The single golden claw traced along his hipbone, making him squirm and shiver – and he imagined he could feel the difference in Malcolm’s teeth, between the natural fangs and the false one. He imagined he could hear the panther’s distinct rumble, that little edge that he put beneath his surprisingly warm

tenor voice; his cologne, the smell of marijuana, the sharper touch of what Prince imagined to be feline musk...

And the sound of the apartment's front door startled him out of his fantasy. On instinct the shepherd scrambled to cover himself back up, even though it certainly wouldn't be the first time Gaz had caught him like this. It just felt... odd, and a little bit shameful, perhaps. After all, he had *just* met the guy yesterday, and even then there was nothing that would show that kind of interest. Other than perhaps his little comment this morning, and the way he had looked and winked at Prince on his way out, and a certain little snatch of a whispered thought that the dog's ears had picked up on the way out the garage.

The door closed again. Prince took a moment to catch his breath, still his heart, and then stood up to go greet his friend.

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The rest of the week progressed without much issue, and for a time it seemed as though things were finally looking up for the poor Australian shepherd. He gradually came to know each member of the "gang" in turn, as Malcolm cycled him around the stations: mechanic work with Kia, who actually gave him a smile at the end of the day; more deliveries with Vince and Tony, which was quite a tense and breathless endeavor, as the dog's heart caught in his throat every time one of them glanced, smirked, winked, or otherwise growled at him; then "inventory" with Maritza, a sleek otter with countless piercings adorning her muzzle "and just as many you can't see, during which he learned that they dealt with far, *far* more than just weed. That made him a bit uncomfortable, but this was his third day with the group; already he was in too deep to take a step back and slip away. So he just swallowed his nervousness and went on with it.

He had met Sam briefly earlier in the week, though the rottweiler had disappeared again, this time with Leo at his side, for some task or another. Come the end of the week he was sitting up front again with Malcolm watching from the other wall – and every time a customer came in they jumped upon seeing the panther there, looked between him and the shepherd, and spoke to Malcolm instead.

Prince thought he had done something wrong, his nervousness steadily growing throughout the day. As he prepared to leave he even approached the panther, an apology practiced over the past hour ready on his tongue – but as soon as he came close, Malcolm's arm came out to tug him towards him in a quick, surprising embrace, complete with a tousle between the ears.

"Good work today, pup," he rumbled. Even just that was enough to get Prince's tail wagging. "See you tomorrow."

He slowed. "Tomorrow? Saturday?"

"Yeah. We don't run an *official* business here, y'see – and weekends are our most popular."

And he was right, of course. Already Prince could feel that Malcolm wasn't about to lie to him, but to his surprise he was kept in the garage alongside Kia and Scott for most of that Saturday. Those two maintained an admirable relationship, he noticed, laughing and chatting over their work, teasing and bumping at each other – perhaps a little more than the shepherd would expect from a gang like this. As he watched, tightening bolts or buffing at some dents, he caught a lot of things that he would expect

from a friendship like what he maintained with Gaz back at home: a bump of the hips, a little tug on the tail, a toss of the head and a wink.

At one point when the two disappeared to fetch a part from the next room, Prince wandered over to get a drink of water – and caught sight of Kia up against the wall, big white-furred wolf paws pinning his wrists while Scott’s muzzle teased and worked at his chest and belly underneath his shirt. Prince watched for a second, startled, and then hustled back to the garage. So *that’s* how it was, then.

As far as Prince could figure in the not-quite-week he had been here, the group used the garage as a cover for their *actual* business, dealing and exchanging drugs and, he assumed, counterfeit money as well as stolen merchandise: the one time he had seen Leo, a big brown grizzly bear, he had backed up towards the garage with a truck full of brand new *stuff*, sharp and clean – video games and consoles, TVs, a variety of other electronics, clothing. Each member of the team was allowed to pick one thing to take home, and Prince went with a game that Gaz had had his eye on. It seemed that his first day was still his strongest in terms of income, but this at least made up for it.

Sunday was much the same, complete with another similar interaction as between Scott and Kia in the hallway. This time it was, unsurprisingly, Vince and Tony later in the morning after Prince had gotten everything at the desk handled – but then to his surprise, it was Tony who he saw bent over the table in the other room, long brushlike tail yanked up in Vince’s other paw, sharp teeth gritted in a look of sheer pleasure as his body lurched with each forceful thrust from the bat behind him.

With the door *open*, even. Prince watched this for a moment too and turned to leave, but right as he went, the bat’s voice cut away from low, rhythmic moans to a sharp call – “Hey! Pup! C’mere.” That *had* to mean him. So, startled and unsure, he padded back, swallowed, poked his head in through the threshold, and forced himself to keep his gaze up from the lion’s sleek, toned rump, caught in place against the bat’s hips.

Panting, mouth hanging open, Vince raked his fingers down Tony’s back and then winked towards Prince. “Want a piece of this?”

Were they *really*-? Caught even further off guard, the shepherd blinked, stammered, and stared.

“I – well, I mean, I was... there’s – um-”

Tony folded his arms over the table and rested his head atop it. Sultry eyes watched Prince’s face, and he worked his hips forward and back in a slow, steady rhythm, grinding back onto Vince still buried inside of him.

“He does,” the maneless lion purred. “I got a taste of him earlier in the week. Smelled him get hard quicker ‘n Kia when Scott hefts his balls over his nose. Come on, little dog; there’s enough room under me.”

His ears and cheeks suddenly seared with a hot blush. The image and idea flashed into his head for a fraction of a second before he quashed it down, and with a mumbled, incoherent apology he ran back down the hall towards the other room. He thought he heard them laughing behind him – and then the gentle, rhythmic squeaks of the table’s feet as it was bumped across the floor again and again.

Malcolm found him a little bit later, after his heart and head had calmed down – yet seeing the panther had immediately instilled that image in his thoughts again, especially what with how he kept his jacket open and the front of his shirt tucked in behind his belt, drawing the smaller dog’s attention downwards towards the bulging fly of his jeans.

Prince tried to prepare himself to answer any number of questions about that encounter, but found he couldn’t come up with much: was that *expected* here? This wasn’t exactly a formal work environment, between the drugs and theft and who knows what else; earlier in the day there had been rumors of Maritza bringing someone in to breed their dog with that huge Dane out back, and then offering a hands-on demonstration of the feral’s behavior and *endowment*.

Because of this, when Malcolm *did* ask him something Prince didn’t even hear it. The shepherd blinked, shifted, and looked up to his golden eyes, trying to wipe the image of feral dog cock out of his head.

“I’m – sorry, what did you say? I was...”

The panther half-lifted a paw and shook his head. *Don’t worry about it*, that gesture said. Still though, he remained here by the shepherd, and after another moment and another tug on his cigarette he nodded his way.

“Help me out with something tomorrow?”

“Of course. You’re all being quite nice to me.”

Malcolm nodded. “Something *personal*?”

Prince’s heart jumped again. *That means he trusts me*. He swallowed, and then in another moment nodded again. “Yeah.”

Malcolm nodded too. “Cool. I’ll find you tomorrow. Get here early.”

Those words stuck with him throughout the rest of the day. “*Help me with something personal. Get here early.*” Anxious and interested, it was only natural that the shepherd encountered a bit of trouble getting to sleep that night, especially with all the images of what he had seen over the weekend flitting through his mind; lying there, Gaz’s warm back against his own, it was hard not to reach over and guide the wild dog’s paw around and to his front for a quick, breathless release, their first time messing around since the accident.

But, no. He was already asleep, and besides, on the off chance that what Malcolm wanted *was* – no. He put that out of his mind, too, and tried to drag himself off to sleep.

It was downright chilly when he got up the next morning, having set his alarm back an extra hour and a half just in case. The banks would be closed this early, but that was alright: his take-home over the weekend was in total less than his first day at the desk, and while that seemed a little odd, he couldn’t complain. Prince bunched his jacket around himself as he approached the garage, wanting to nuzzle down into it but still keeping his head high and nose out, so as not to pick up that dreadful sting of soot and ash again.

At first he thought he was *too* early, the sky overhead still grey-blue from dawn, his breath misting out in the still air before him and, for the first time since he had started coming here, the garage door firmly closed. Not even the Great Dane was chained there to the post in the small yard. Prince slowed as he approached, looked around a bit, and then trudged around to the front. A quick few knocks at the door followed by another set at the window, and he waited. A minute passed, and then another; he dug his paws into his pockets, looked out over the street visible between the buildings, kicked at the gravel along the doorstep – and then perked when the latch of the door unhooked.

Malcolm's smooth, charcoal-black muzzle poked out from the space in the threshold. "Was wondering if you'd show up," he said, the usual growl to his voice gone. He jerked his head in. "Come on. Got something I want you to see."

Prince still felt a little bit... *odd* about this whole thing. He hadn't spent enough time around the panther to really read him, but his instincts told him the tone of his voice, the angle of his ears, the position of his whiskers, all read as trepidation, nervousness. As if he were *unsure*. As he followed the panther down the hall he noticed that Malcolm's other paw hovered near his pocket, where he kept his knife sheathed.

"Did you – sleep here?"

Amber eyes glanced back over his shoulder at him. "Yeah."

"Isn't squatting illegal?"

Malcolm shrugged. "So's basing a business out of unowned property. Nobody's told us otherwise. At least, nobody's *tried* to since last time."

"What is it you need me to..."

The panther shouldered open the same room in which Prince had stumbled upon Vince and Tony the previous day. He could still see them bent over the table like that, bouncing and thrusting and lurching, panting, sighing with pleasure... but now the room stood dark and empty, the heater running yet at a low degree, the table barren of the usual stacks of books and clothes and whatever else as well as a lion, the tattered couch near it also empty save for the pillow up against one arm and the blanket draped over the front. That must be where Malcolm slept.

The panther stepped into the room, noticed Prince had stopped at the door, and turned to look at him. "Over there," he said, nodding towards the other side of the table. "Down on your knees. By the window."

That seemed odd, too. Prince's heartbeat picked up. "Um... okay..." And he obeyed, ears flicking over towards whatever it was that Malcolm went off to do. At the other side of the table sat a single folding chair, skewed and a bit rusted. It screeched as he swiped it up off the ground and carried it over.

"Turn to face this way."

Prince braced one paw on the table and the other on the windowsill to lower himself down, mind running in a hundred directions at once. *He can't be...*

But he could. Malcolm tossed the chair down in front of him, slouched back onto it, and then swiftly, efficiently worked at his belt and pants fly – and in another few seconds had brought his plump, black sheath out into the air, pert balls hanging down over his fingers and the opened zipper. Prince caught his scent; his ears flicked back, and he swallowed.

Golden eyes appraised him. That single claw came up under his chin and forced him to meet them. “Well?” Malcolm rumbled. “Show me what you can do, pup. Was havin’ a nice little dream about you, and then whaddya know – you go and knock on the door and wake me up. So you’d better finish what you started.”

*I... did this?* Sure enough, in the darkness of the room and especially this close, Prince could still make out the slick, sleek pink of the panther’s length, a good couple of inches out from his sheath and twitching against his belly. Tapered to a smooth tip with thin, soft barbs down the length – and that *scent*... Prince swallowed again, licked his lips, and looked up.

“I...”

“What?” Malcolm rolled his head on his shoulders. “Got a girlfriend? Forget about her. Not into dick?” His paw drifted down and brushed the hem of his jacket to the side, bringing into view again the handle of his sheathed knife. “Too fuckin’ bad.”

“No, no, that’s not it, I-”

“So you *are* into it.”

He blushed. “I mean, *yeah*, but...”

“So what’s the holdup?” That paw came down on his head right between his ears and coaxed him in – and, God, was he *strong*. Not that Prince was putting much effort into resisting, but still Malcolm had an easy time in tugging him down and pressing his nose at the base of his sheath and lips against his balls, and then from there guided him up, traced those barbs along the sensitive skin of his nose, angled himself forward... and with his other paw, tapped himself against the shepherd’s lips.

It seemed like he didn’t have much of a choice. Prince swallowed again, closed his eyes, and then let his lips part – and let Malcolm take over and guide him. He hadn’t been with a feline like this before, and took a moment to just feel and experience those little barbs over his tongue and lips, like little soft, light hooks of something, far more gentle than he had expected, more... tickly than rough. The scent and taste weren’t exactly pleasant at first, but when Malcolm squeezed both paws behind his head and lifted up into his throat, a tense sigh in his chest, Prince couldn’t deny that his own pants had a much tighter fit than when he had first arrived in the morning.

It was clear that this was purely for the panther’s benefit. He moved and slid the dog’s muzzle along his length, lips against his sheath and pushing it back, in rhythm with his own upward thrusts; he shivered and squirmed in his seat and thrust forward, occasionally cutting off Prince’s breathing or making him choke and gag; and each time the other male tried to pull off to catch his breath or clear his throat, those strong fingers just tightened behind his ears again and yanked him back down. The musk in his throat had strengthened and concentrated, and every time Malcolm drew back Prince felt another

strand of loose, slippery pre coating his tongue; he swallowed and worked around it, teasing his tongue across those barbs when he could, trying his best to keep pace and do his best.

For a while he wasn't sure it was enough – but then the panther grunted, shivered, and arched forward over him, body shaking and legs bouncing. Prince knew what that meant: he squeezed his eyes shut, sucked in a breath through his nose as soon as he could, felt that thick pubic fur press up around his muzzle – and then nearly jerked and bucked in heaving gags as Malcolm shoved himself deep and painted the back of his throat, his load hot and sharp, sour and bitter. As soon as he finished he fell back and draped limp over the chair, chest heaving with tired breaths. Prince, spluttering, drew back and wiped at his mouth.

His heart pounded, both from excitement and nervousness. But not – not *fright*, he assured himself. This was *Malcolm*, whose heart had broken for him back on the street after hearing his story, and who had taken him in and under his wing to integrate him with his little family here. Malcolm, who would never hurt nor lie to Prince.

The shepherd swallowed again, the taste of the panther's pleasure searing across his tongue and throat, and smiled up at him. Malcolm leaned forward again, hard shaft still twitching and dripping milky white into his otherwise violet-black fur. Prince wondered what to do next, whether he should stand up and drop his own pants, or if the panther expected him to climb up and sink down into his lap, or if he wanted them to trade positions, or...

"That's a good pup," Malcolm purred. He reached down and rubbed a thumb behind the shepherd's ear. "Wanted to do that since the first time I saw you. You will be hanging around, won't you?"

Prince thought briefly about sitting back, reaching down, and undoing his own pants, but right at the last moment, stage fright seized up over him. "I mean – yeah, I don't really have... anywhere to go now after... what happened, so..."

The chair creaked again when Malcolm leaned further forward. This time he took the dog's muzzle in both paws, long fingers stretching up along the sides of his jaw. "Good," he rumbled, his grin showing that single sparkling fang. He tilted his head, winked, then patted Prince's cheek and stood up. "I'll need you around from now on. You're mine, pup."

At first Prince wondered what that meant – but the answer came to him before too long, and settled firmly into place as the week continued. Anything Malcolm needed to do, he passed along through the dog first. *Go here. Fetch this from Sam. Bring this back to me. Track down Tony. If he wants you to suck his dick, don't. You'll be getting that from me later.*

The panther kept him busy on all fronts, almost literally. Running jobs for the crew, performing his usual tasks around the garage, chatting with the others when he had the time. Kia and Scott both figured out quite quickly that their leader had made his mark on the young dog, and later in the week when Vince and Tony found out, they just doubled down on their teasing of him – even to the point where Prince once ended up on his knees with the fruit bat just about to unzip over him, when Malcolm himself came through and scared him off.

It was almost a daily thing, he soon found out. Malcolm always had this energy and need that he had to dispense, and now that he had Prince around there was nothing stopping him from doing so. The

shepherd would find himself dragged away from the front desk to take care of the panther's needs, or sometimes Malcolm would just push him down underneath the desk and take his seat, so he could at least get some more work done while having his balls drained like that. Each time it happened, even though it still made him nervous and unsure, the shepherd still couldn't help but tightening up in his own pants, and squirming and shivering with the lingering scent and taste – to the point where, come Friday, he had to sneak off to the bathroom and take care of himself in a quick six minutes. He could still smell Malcolm on his upper lip and breath, and knew that he would for the rest of the day; for this reason he had started carrying around a little tin of mints in his back pocket, so that Gaz wouldn't suspect anything upon his return home.

Saturday he showed up early as usual, expecting the same routine and even getting himself worked up for it, so that he had to keep a paw in his pocket when he pushed through the front door to keep his pants and underwear from rubbing against himself too much. The bleary-eyed panther, fresh from sleep, half-stumbled down the hallway when he walked in; Prince murmured a soft *good morning*, but just as quickly felt those strong arms wrap around him in something halfway between a hug and a scramble for balance. Malcolm smelled of alcohol.

It felt nice that the bigger feline let him guide him back down the hall and towards the couch, pleasant that he already put this much trust in him. It helped for Prince to think of their little trysts and rendezvous as just part of the job, as no matter what, the work still got done – and it was work that *needed* doing. Besides, he couldn't help but think about the panther now whenever he relaxed for his private time, back at home before Gaz returned from work, or leaning back in the shower with his lip clamped between his teeth and one paw squeezing in along the bar of the door. This morning Malcolm had stumbled awake in nothing but his boxers, and as Prince lowered him back down to the couch he glanced down, watched the way the thin fabric moved and shifted, curled his nose at the sharp, inviting scent wafting up... but he knew he shouldn't. There was still the matter of respect to consider.

So after settling Malcolm back into place along his makeshift bed the shepherd turned to leave – and then just as quickly heard a quick little hiss. When he looked over his shoulder again he saw those bright golden eyes watching him, half-lidded and half-lucid, from where Malcolm lay with one arm draped over the arm of the couch, one leg lifted up, and his other arm stretching down across his body – with his paw hidden inside his boxers, the blanket promptly kicked off again. As Prince watched, the fabric in front parted and gave way to smooth, soft black, and then a moment later, warm glistening pink.

So he looked to Malcolm again, smirked, then turned around and came forward, and as usual he dropped to his knees and got to work. This time the shepherd slipped a paw into his own pants and worked at himself as he went, other paw coming up to rub and squeeze and tug at those balls like he had learned the panther liked – until, abruptly, Malcolm shifted where he lay and reached down to pull Prince to his feet.

At first the shepherd thought he didn't like him pawing off while doing this for him, but within another second he realized he was wrong – and his heart leapt into his throat again. Still partially drunk, still dazed and half-asleep, Malcolm fiddled with Prince's pants and then lay back in defeat; the shepherd stood there awkwardly for a second before finishing up for him, his jeans and boxers dropping to the floor in a heap a moment later before he pulled his shirt off over his head. Amber eyes flicked open and looked appreciatively over him again, and then those paws came in on his hips, pulled him aside and down so that he straddled the panther's lap, and then...

Just like every time Malcolm dragged him into the next room, or down the hall, or pushed him underneath the desk, it was rough. Prince gritted his teeth and bit his lip and dug his fingers into the strong chest underneath him as he sank down and worked his hips and rocked back and forth, and as those soft barbs dug and pulled and stung. Even as he tried to regulate his pace the panther still had his own needs to satisfy, and his superior strength meant that he won out, sharp claws digging into Prince's thighs and pulling him down again, holding him in place so that he could buck and thrust and grind deep into him. Hot and fast and hard and *rough*, but still it kept that flame burning deep in the shepherd's abdomen – so that after Malcolm bucked and gasped and unloaded into him, hot sticky slickness pumping deep, he remained hilted and pawed himself off until he, too, twitched and jerked and squeezed on the feline's still-buried shaft, though did so while leaning back so none of his mess would mar that pristine ebony fur.

A satisfied smile lingered on Prince's muzzle once they had both finished up. Truthfully this was something he had thought and daydreamed and fantasized about since he had first been allowed to taste the panther's musk, and now that it had actually happened... panting softly, chest heaving, tailhole stinging, he leaned forward to rest himself over Malcolm and nuzzle into his neck, expecting those big arms to wrap up around his back and hold him close.

They didn't, though. Prince swallowed and nuzzled in, breathing that now-familiar mix of cigarettes, weed, booze, cologne, musk, and auto grease. Malcolm rumbled and turned his head to the side, then heaved a sigh, shifted, and adjusted – and Prince realized he had fallen back asleep again, still inside of him.

He stayed there for a time, enjoying the closeness, trying to get as much out of it as he could, before he tugged himself up off the panther with a grimace at the pull of his barbs, and went to get the shop ready for the day.

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Malcolm left later in the day. It was a quick notice, with him coming in while Kia showed Prince how to double-check some of the levels in an engine. The shepherd lifted his head, saw him standing there, and couldn't help but wag his tail. He expected some kind of praise or sign of affection, even as small as a nod of the head or a wink, but all the panther gave him was a look, a sniff from across the room, and then a "I'll be out with Vince, Tony, and Sam tonight. Watch Moose for me," before he was gone.

Prince looked after him once he left, expecting something, anything more. Seeing that nothing was coming he turned to Kia again, confusion on his face. The wild dog shrugged and leaned back over the machine.

"Moose is his dog," he said, his voice also a surprisingly high, warm tenor. "The Great Dane out in the yard and shed. He's a mean fucker. Maritza's the only one who can get close enough to pet him, which is why he put her in charge of his breeding."

He *had* seen that before. Prince nodded. "Seems easy enough. Should I talk to her about it?"

Kia shrugged. "Not worth it. What he means by 'watch him' is pretty much just make sure he doesn't wreck shit in the shed and get out. Literally – just keep an eye on him. That's all."

So he did. After finishing up that task alongside the other dog Prince made his way out back towards where he knew Malcolm kept the dog, again chained out to the rebar stake today. And Kia was right – he was *vicious*, growling whenever Prince even so much as entered his field of view, snapping at him if he reached a paw out, snarling and barking if he moved too quickly. Once evening began to close in later in the day, with some encouragement in the form of bones dug out of the trash and leftovers from lunches brought by the other members of the crew, Prince managed to get close enough to the huge feral to unhook his chain and guide him back to the shed.

Or, rather, to let Moose do the guiding for him – and he was *strong*. As soon as that chain came free Prince felt his arm nearly yanked out of his socket, and for a moment thought that his life was about to end right then and there after seeing those huge fangs bared. Moose knew his routine, though, and in just a few more minutes of wrestling and wrangling, was locked safe and sound back in his shed.

So that wasn't so bad. He went home that night feeling warm and satisfied with this day, and even considered rolling over and grinding up against Gaz once bedtime came... but then remember the panther's words, rumbling in his head: *"You're mine, pup."* What did that mean? Best not to tread too far on unclear boundaries; Prince kept those thoughts and wants close to himself, and again turned back over, his back pressed to the wild dog's.

Malcolm returned the next day, yet had little for Prince in terms of encouragement or appreciation. Come Monday, though, things were back to the usual with the shepherd getting a good mouthful at least twice a day, and then on the following morning found himself assigned to the same task again. This would soon become a pattern as Malcolm's responsibilities with the group kept pulling him away, and leaving his faithful dog all alone at the garage – and, Prince seeing himself as his most trusted friend, he always chose him to watch over Moose.

*Boyfriend?* he thought. *That doesn't sound quite right, for someone like him. Partner? I suppose he'll never say it in person. That's not like him. But... he does things with me he doesn't with anyone else. He trusts me with tasks normally kept only for himself. Maritza doesn't even watch Moose.* Today he sat in the shed with the Dane, Moose chained back against the wall – just a safety measure – while Prince sat back in one of the little lawn chairs. If Moose tugged his chain to its limit, and if Prince leaned forward and stretched an arm out, he could even touch the massive feral. Instead, though, he reached into the bucket beside his chair and tossed another twisted beef bone from the bin behind the local butcher. Moose loved those; Prince thought he even caught a brief wag of his tail when he did so.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. Tail wagging already, Prince leaned over to slip it out and then look over the message. It had come from one of the couple of numbers he had assigned to Malcolm, as the panther kept a number of burner phones for a few different reasons. *"Everything ok?"* it said, and nothing more.

Still, though, that gave him a smile: it showed that Malcolm really cared more than his gruff, gang-leader exterior could allow him to show. Moose currently satisfied with gnawing and mouthing at the bone, Prince sat back to respond.

*"Of course,"* he sent back. *"When will you be back this time?"*

*"Not til day after tmrw. Missing me so much already?"*

There it was again. *"You know it. It's weird here without you!"*

*"Ya. Missing my little cockwarmer pup too. Keep that tail raised for when i get back."*

That was all he had learned to expect from the panther in whatever their relationship might have been, but it was enough. As the week went on Prince pushed further and further along with Moose, trying out measured sessions with him unchained from the wall, and then bringing his chair closer to him, and then, once the weekend began, even reaching out to pet him between the ears and feed him from his open palm. Yellow-brown eyes remained fixed on his muzzle as he did so, the feral watching him just as he did the same.

Every time Malcolm returned from one of his trips, there was nothing that Prince could think about other than *him*. It made him smile and wag to see the panther's familiar, sleek figure outside the front door, or in the garage, or out in the hall chatting with the other members of the group – and every time those golden eyes flashed across him his heart leapt into his throat and he froze in place, stuck in that spot between shock, fear, and excitement. Arousal constantly warred with hesitation, especially when he saw that familiar look in the feline's eyes or the smirk on his muzzle, or felt that strong paw creep down his back towards his rump.

He and Gaz used to be each other's... not quite *partner*, but certainly more than friends. After what had happened to his family Prince could hardly fall asleep without being wrapped around the wild dog, fur of his shoulder soaked through with tears, clock ticking away late into the night. They had messed around before, and did so again every now and then, until his libido had suddenly dropped off with the accident – and now that it was back, he was spending it all on Malcolm, this new, interesting, *frightening* individual whose last name he didn't even know.

Even so, though, Prince thought he had learned more about Malcolm in the few weeks he had known him than he had about Gaz in those several years. He knew his habits and tastes, his behavioral quirks, how to tell when he was frustrated or upset or, most of the time, just needing to empty his balls. At times it felt like a chore, like when he wouldn't let Prince cum so he could keep on going for a second or even a third time immediately after; at times it felt like he was just a toy for him, just something to keep around, especially after hearing Vince talking with Tony about something that had happened when the three had left town for that night; and sometimes Prince felt that it might be better to just stop coming in one day, to stay at home with Gaz and show his best friend all the appreciation that he wanted to receive himself from Malcolm.

But, inevitably, he always came back, and always wagged his tail when Malcolm looked at him, and always left the room with a tent in his pants while Malcolm caught his breath. Doubt and nervousness and reluctance tinted all of his interactions with the panther, but all of these were easy enough to push down and ignore either from Prince's own thoughts or from the few little signs that Malcolm showed to him: a squeeze of the paw while pushing deep under his tail, a fierce chomp on the shoulder a little too high up for his shirt to hide, little claw-mark scars raking along his thighs.

It was worth it, he told himself. The seasons had started to change, and now Prince wore his jacket throughout most of the day – and Moose was to be kept inside the shed at all times, with the shepherd watching at least three days out of the week. Business had slowed to the point where his weekly intake was now less than that fantastic first day, but Prince chalked that partially up to his different position here, taking care of and watching the dog. Already he was closer to Moose than even Maritza was, with

the Great Dane allowing him to run his paws up and down his back, to scratch behind his ears, to pat at his haunch while he devoured a not-quite-fresh steak from the butcher's bin.

Tonight, late on a Sunday with Malcolm gone yet again, he crouched there alongside Moose after multiple hours spent just lazing about in here with the giant feral. Part of why Malcolm kept assigning Prince to watch the dog was simply because Moose wouldn't let anyone else near him – even Maritza, who was used to handling his undercarriage and yanking at his chain, literally, for folks who came by for his potent seed, didn't want to stand anywhere within twenty feet of him once that chain came off.

Prince didn't see the big deal. Moose had been frightening at first, certainly, and on a couple occasions the shepherd had had to go and get help from Scott up front to properly wrangle the feral back into place. After some time spent together, some gentle encouragement, and some know-how with proper application of treats and pets – he had raised some rather better-behaved dogs before – Moose behaved around him just like any other. Or at least, *almost*: there was something in the feral's eyes, a certain glimmer that caught and held Prince's attention when he looked at him. Even now with Moose's head angled down while he slurped and chewed at what remained of the steak, he looked over at Prince beside him as though expecting something more.

With Moose standing like this and Prince sitting back on his haunches, he had to straighten up and lean over a bit to be able to drape an arm around the huge feral. Warm and strong, tight muscles bunching up underneath short fur and tough skin, with thick, dense bones underneath... the shepherd sighed and bumped his head sideways against the feral's body, without budging him in the slightest. Moose lifted his head, yellowed bone still caught between his teeth, and looked over his broad shoulder at Prince beside him.

The shepherd looked up, then back down again at his phone in his other paw. Malcolm's last text to him, from yet another burner phone, had contained just a single kissing emoji. The panther had never kissed him in person – not like Prince wanted and dreamed about, that was. The multiple kisses underneath his balls and to the end of his sheath, "*with tongue, pup,*" were fine and everything, but...

"I don't know, Moose," he rumbled. "Sometimes I just want some, like... clear confirmation, you know?"

The feral dropped the bone back into the bowl, lapped at his chops, and then gave a languid full-body stretch. Prince straightened up and let him do so, eyes briefly flicking down towards the bounce and jiggle of full, heavy masculinity underneath him. Embarrassment sparked through him, and again he remembered Maritza as she tugged behind the feral's double knot to show him off to an interested breeder, and-

And Prince stopped thinking about that. Moose shifted again, walked around to the shepherd's other side, and flopped down onto his side, taking a moment to spread out.

"Like..." Prince half-turned to face him again. Those yellow-brown eyes looked lazily up at him. "I know he likes me. I know I mean more to him than... well, I don't know. Everyone else here feels like *family* to him, y'know? Like me n' Gaz. It's hard to imagine one without the other. I know Vince and Tony are a thing, and Maritza's into gals, and I think Scott and Kia? And Sam is just kind of Sam, but then Malcolm..." He reached down to run his paw along the feral's revealed side. Moose's thin tail thwapped heavily against the ground as he did so, back and forth along that belly.

"I guess that's just how he shows-" Prince stumbled over the word. "-love, though. Yeah? I don't think I've ever seen him come in here to spend time with you. And you're *his* dog." As he said this Moose lifted his head, as though asking for pets – so Prince of course obliged. Those yellow eyes closed in enjoyment, and again his tail thumped. "He keeps his distance, and he gives... little compliments, and signs, and hints, but nothing really... obvious. Right? But I would love it if he would, just..."

Again he trailed off, phone screen dimming where he held it, thoughts drifting off. Images and scenarios, all visited so many times before, wafted through his mind: Malcolm reaching down and giving his paw a squeeze, when he wasn't trying to just pull him up off of his lap to twist him around and bend him over. Malcolm leaning in to nuzzle at his cheek, or nip at his ear without trying to tear it off, or to give a little sandpaper-tongue lick along his jaw. A kiss to the forehead, or the cheek, or the lips, or even just the back of the paw. A hug, when he wasn't stumbling and unable to keep himself up for how much he had drunk the previous night. Just – anything. Anything that would-

Moose scrabbling to his feet startled Prince out of his thoughts, and for a moment instinct and reflex sent him scooting backwards and away from the huge feral. This just resulted in Moose standing over him, though, Prince easily fitting underneath his body with legs spread while the feral, tail still wagging, leaned down to lick and lap at his new friend's face, over and over again.

"Hey – what're you-" He reached up and tried to push him off, but the Dane's strength won out. "Okay! Okay, I get it! Gosh, would you – Moose, I... I was..."

Something flipped and settled into place inside the shepherd – or, maybe, something broke and fell out. He paused, Moose's broad, warm tongue still dragging across his muzzle, frowned... and then leaned in to squeeze around the dog, arms coming up and across that thick, barrel-like chest and wide shoulders. He could feel the lurching rhythm in Moose's body from the wagging, and though all of these different thoughts and feeling tumbled and warred inside himself, just being here with this fierce, frightening beast, this feral that none of the other members of the group wanted to approach, brought him some measure of solace and warmth.

"I guess we're the same, aren't we?" he murmured, again sitting back and resting down onto his shoulders. Moose remained above him, forepaws patting at the ground near his waist; Prince had to keep his head tilted up, or else he would find himself perfectly level with that hanging, dangling mass of supple skin and flesh, hot and humid, down between the dog's hind legs... "He loves both of us, but he forgets us. That's okay, though, isn't it? He's busy. He's important. Look at this business, this *family*, he's built. We have to give him some leeway..."

Images flashed in his head again – Malcolm pulling him into the back room early one morning, paw hovering over his sheathed knife as he told the shepherd to go down on him. Malcolm yanking him to the side and forcing Prince's muzzle between his legs, just to get his scent on him. Malcolm, drunk and dazed, pulling the dog up into his lap and tugging him down, forcing himself up into him even when Prince gasped and squirmed and tried to lift up, just for some relief.

Malcolm and Vince off in the garage late at night after everyone had left, the fruit bat with his legs pressed up near his shoulders, the car underneath them lurching, bouncing, squeaking with the rhythm set by the panther's hips. Malcolm standing there in the back room, table pushed to one side, Kia kneeling down with his muzzle fitted up under his tail and Scott in front of him, the older wolf's muzzle moving in the same rhythm and pattern so familiar to Prince after doing it so many times himself.

Moose licked at his face again, this time his broad tongue catching beneath his chin and flicking up over his lips. Prince spluttered and wiped at his mouth, all of those thoughts instantly wiped away into mist. At the start, his assigned time with the Great Dane felt almost like a punishment for some misdeed. Nobody else wanted to do it, and Prince knew he was the new guy, the easy, impressionable one. Everyone used him for their own purposes, and as such, he was made to do the thing nobody else wanted to. But then he and Moose had grown closer together, and now he found himself like this lying underneath the feral, the Dane's tail still wagging behind him, eyes bright, tongue hanging out of his mouth...

Warm, glistening pink protruding out from that sheath, smooth supple skin shifting and bouncing with his breathing and heartbeat. The Great Dane took a step and a half forward, partially pushing Prince further back down and forcing him to look forward at that hanging heat. Prince swallowed, licked his lips, and looked up again, thoughts suddenly skewing towards something else, a different idea, a different *interest*.

He tilted his head. Moose's tongue flopped out of his mouth and he tilted his head in the same direction.

"Moose, buddy..."

The feral's tail wagged when he heard his name, and he took another step forward – and another – and another, keeping his head angled to watch the shepherd underneath him, tail swaying, body poised and stance widened. He couldn't believe it at first, but by now he was caught fully underneath the feral, that broad chest keeping his head down and bent at that angle while he propped himself up on his elbows, and... he swallowed again, took in a breath, and let it out again. He knew it was cold outside, yet in here, trapped where he was, it felt so much warmer, so humid, so... *inviting*.

It felt a bit similar to that morning where Malcolm had pushed him down to his knees, but now, here... he swallowed yet again and squirmed out from underneath the dog, Moose giving him a quizzical little look as he did so. There was no expectation, no paw hovering a knife, no veiled threat that something would happen to him if he rejected the advance. There was just himself, this huge feral with the warm yellow eyes and the slowly wagging tail, and then that heavy meat hanging down between his hind legs.

Moose's scent remained strong in Prince's nose, bright and sharp, a bit coppery. The shepherd worked himself into a more comfortable position and draped one arm over the dog's body, the other reaching down and underneath to, at first, blindly touch and feel. That at least helped to alleviate some of the guilt and creeping doubt, that distinct feeling of *I shouldn't be doing this* – but Moose had been the one to start it. Prince couldn't deny that. Head tilted, watching the Dane's muzzle and eyes, he reached up and felt along that broad chest, that soft belly, further down... until damp, sticky warmth brushed against the side of his fingers, and then soft and supple skin came into place there.

Immediately Moose gave a little thrust, his sheath remaining in place in his friend's palm while his length slid forward and out, then retracted back in again. Then again and again, each time with Prince adjusting his grip and angle a little bit to find what felt right for him, and for what he assumed felt good for the dog. Once he got there, fingers cupped, thumb reaching up and hooked over the hanging portion of Moose's sheath, he lowered himself back down again – and just as quickly sucked in a breath of surprise.

Hot, reddish-pink flesh, thick and veined, glistening with natural moisture and arousal, already protruded a good few inches out of the dog's plump sheath. It bounced and jiggled with the quick rhythm of his hips, each time sending out a little spurt and spray of clear liquid across the cement floor and, partially, Prince's legs still out underneath him.

He looked up to Moose's muzzle again. "Is that good?" the shepherd murmured, now bringing his other paw in to tease and touch. So similar to his own and Gaz's, this feral canine, yet still so different... already he could see the telltale bulge of his double knot hidden there in the base of his sheath, his full, heavy balls swinging forward and back and bouncing against one another as he went. "Does that feel alright, boy?"

Moose half-lifted his leg. He wanted more. Prince smirked, thought about it, and then sprawled out alongside the dog's hind end, squeezing and stroking just so he could *watch* everything that was going on. All of this weight and mass, this powerful feral need; Moose's scent, strong and right and metallic, swirled into and filled his nostrils in a way much more welcoming, much more pleasant than Malcolm's acrid, feline touch.

Not to say that Malcolm's was bad. Prince shifted and tugged at Moose's length as he continued to grow from his sheath, eyes grazing back and forth over the slick, smooth contours, the fresh wetness of the dog's shaft, and the way he still bucked forward and down and kept his tail hiked. He *definitely* enjoyed digging his nose down into the source when he was in the mood, and often thought and fantasized he could still smell him on his lip once he had returned home – which, often, he could – but there was something about Moose's that just... he swallowed yet again and leaned in, gently lifting his nose beneath and between those heavy balls and drawing in from there. The canine lifted his leg further, his thrusting slowed under the lack of leverage but eagerness and arousal still there.

he couldn't believe he was doing this, yet at the same time, he could, and he wanted *more* of it. Prince closed his eyes and drew in that scent from the source, muzzle settled into place between Moose's balls from behind with the soft skin of the dog's sheath pressing in against his lips; he angled that thick shaft down, down further, until it pointed nearly vertically down, each rhythmic spray of pre jetting down into a growing puddle between his legs, stray sprays catching along his pants and arms.

Malcolm could easily fit into one of his paws. Moose, lip of his sheath just now pulling back past the slight bulge of his unswollen knot, could take both on top of the other and still have his tapered tip sticking out. This was exactly what Prince did, shifting again to slide himself more fully underneath the feral's body, eyes now flicking back and forth across that thick length as it pulsed and dripped in his paws, and the puckered tailhole also clenching and squeezing in turn. The Great Dane looked over his shoulder at his friend, eyes half-lidded and tongue hanging out; he rested his weight briefly back down onto his leg and then lifted it up again. He wanted more.

This time, Prince was glad to oblige. He knew that he could stand up and leave if he wanted, and Moose would still welcome him as bright and energetic the next day as he always had. He knew that there was nothing binding him to doing this for the dog, and really – he did this for *himself* just as much. One paw slipped away from the dog's shaft, the other tugging it further back until Moose could lower his leg down again and stand there on all fours again, and then in so that Prince could slowly, carefully undo the fly of his own pants. He leaned in, swallowed yet again, sniffed at the slick, wet flesh of the feral's hard cock on his paw, wrapped his fingers around himself... then touched his nose to that wet heat, inhaled again, and finally slipped his tongue out to drag it from tip to base.

Scent strengthened into taste and washed in and through his mouth. He swallowed it down, then had to do so a second and a third time, strong and persistent. It clung and held in place, but unlike Malcolm's, Prince still wanted to dive in again for a second and a third, and then a fourth, this time turning his muzzle to lift the feral's sack again and to drag his sheath back an extra half-inch or so against his tongue. Moose gave a little twitch and thrust each time he did this, which in turn made him smile and do so again, and again.

Soon all he could taste and smell were both *this* dog, and the weight between his legs. Like the heavy, dull wet-dog smell overlaid with a sharp metallic touch, an undeniable stinging musk... Prince shifted where he lay to tug his pants and underwear down his legs, then hissed when he settled in against the cold cement floor. He angled himself a little bit further, lifted up, gave himself a few strokes, and then leaned in to press his length alongside Moose's.

The shepherd smirked: Moose was bigger than him, too. For a moment he just lay there, one paw keeping himself propped up while the other slid back and forth along the both of them, Moose's shaft squeezed against his own, each spurt of that rich, feral arousal emptying out and soaking deeper into his own fur, tainting his musk with the Dane's own. Before long he started to thrust and push and rumble again, and at that point Prince lifted up as well, drew his cock back and forth around Moose's until he couldn't tell what was his own arousal and what was the dog's.

The feral had leaned down and forward a bit, hind legs now pitched at an angle with his heavy sack hanging down alongside his sheath. As he worked and stroked the two of them in tandem Prince reached forward to caress and roll those balls back and forth over his fingers, touching and feeling in a careful, attentive manner, watching for any response or encouragement from the dog before him. Each spurt of that hot pre jetted out against the base of his shaft and lip of his sheath, and it didn't take much more manipulation and adjustment until... until he managed to slip Moose's tapered tip down into his sheath, and then a little bit further, and further still, until his own shaft stuck up alongside the dog's balls, and Moose's squeezed and twitched and spurted down near the root of his own cock.

"That's a..." *...good boy*, he almost said, and then remembered that Malcolm had said something quite similar to *him*. So instead he trailed off there, swallowed, and sighed again, dropping both paws down – one to keep his bulging, overfull sheath squeezed around both of them, and the other sliding and stroking and working at the buried portions of both of their lengths, wrapped close together, hot, wet. With nowhere else to go Moose's pre bubbled up and trickled down out of his sheath, and as Prince continued to grind and thrust and stroke he felt himself approaching his peak so much faster, so much *easier* than the times he was allowed to paw off with Malcolm in his throat or under his tail, and –

And the swift, tight swelling of his own knot once he reached that peak squeezed his sheath so tight around himself and the upper third of Moose's length, buried down near his base. The shepherd gasped and bucked and tossed his head back, and somewhere along the way lost his grip so that Moose slipped out and twitched forward, forceful throbs forcing the Dane to slap against his own belly and then shake and shudder, so close himself – and right in the dying afterglow of his own peak Prince bent over him again, dripping and twitching, still-hard cock settled along the base of the dog's tail, and there while kneeling forward over him wrapped one arm around his chest and the other down along his hind legs.

He knew that Moose could support his weight like this, and thus he focused all of his effort and attention on pawing the dog off, following his thrusts and rhythm, running his fingerpads back and forth

over that double-knot as it twitched and pulsed and grew. Finally the feral tossed his head back, let out a deep, rumbling growl of pleasure – and again Prince wrapped both paws around him, one pushing his wrinkled sheath back past his root and the other milking along his length, as the shivering throes of the dog's orgasm reverberated through his body and emptied out across the cement floor.

Panting, tired, still harboring some of that same guilt and stress that he had felt before, Prince remained draped over Moose's back for a moment before he sat up and looked across the mess the two of them had made. Still the feral's shaft bounced and twitched between his legs, but now that he was done he half-turned to face his friend again, wagged his tail, and lapped alongside his chin and cheek again. Prince chuckled and reached up to rub at his scruff; that was more than he had ever gotten from Malcolm after one of their sessions.

The stain would have to remain where it lay along the cement floor. His time here was about done anyway: Prince took a few more minutes to get cleaned up, thought briefly about applying his tongue and lips to help the Dane do the same, and then after another few minutes of goodbyes consisting of petting, head-scratching, and nuzzling, was on his way home.

He just needed a shower before Gaz noticed anything.

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It became a routine thing, as Prince had certainly expected. Every time Malcolm assigned him to watch the dog, the two strengthened their bond further; he was worried that Moose might start associating him with the sex, as Prince knew he wouldn't *actually* be able to deny the dog if he ever got in the mood, but to his relief the Dane kept it mostly under wraps until the two were alone, and for enough time that they could get into it, enjoy one another, and then clean up. As the days went on they explored and pushed further, just as Prince had with Malcolm: fingers and paws turned to mouth and tongue, where he learned that when Moose came, he spurted out about two mouthfuls' worth of hot, rich feral seed, slick and loose, easy to swallow.

On another Saturday night, shaky and unsure, Prince had dropped down to all fours with his pants around his ankles – and went home that night with his tailhole sore and belly full, all in much more satisfying, energizing way than he had expected. Moose was *large*, yet it was less uncomfortable to take him than it was Malcolm, and not just for the smooth canine contours against those soft tugging feline barbs. There was just something about the way the feral pounded at him, how he wrapped his legs around his waist and tugged Prince back against him, not too hard, not too urgent. A few days later Prince even got Moose on his back and rode him that way, trying his best to squeeze at his knot yet of course unable to – but still he ended up gasping, scrabbling at the Dane's hindlegs up near his hips, and jerking in place as he painted the feral's wide chest and the cement floor around him, pushed to that point nearly hands-free from the pressure and sensation of him buried inside of him. Malcolm had never been able to do *that*: it took ample fantasizing and pretending for Prince to remain hard when it was the panther inside of him.

Still he obeyed Malcolm's whims, though – at this point there was nothing else to do. It became a task like any other, but still Prince put on the good face he always had, even when he closed his eyes and pretended it was Moose thrusting into him, Moose pulling out and shooting across his belly and chest, Moose dumping deep into the back of his throat – even though Moose tasted quite a bit better, and didn't smell of cigarettes and sharp cologne. He just felt like he *connected* with the dog more, with many

nights spent sitting across from him, or with the huge Dane leaning back in his lap, Prince patting and petting the dog while going over another complaint about Malcolm, or an issue with the group, or a worry about his home life. Gaz had started to ask questions about the job he had found, and Prince had been struggling to come up with a believable alibi.

The money had slowed down considerably so that now he had little choice but to stay here, as taking a break to find an actual job would be enough to put him under, and weeks of living like this had depleted his savings. Every day he came in he wished and hoped that Malcolm would assign him to Moose again, just so he could have that solace and companionship: he would listen, tall ears perked as though he actually understood, and then lean in and lick across his face, or his shoulder, or just bump against him for a hug. It was hard to believe this was the same fierce beast that he had seen chained outside to the rebar, all those weeks ago.

One night, though, after quite a full day – Malcolm had finally started “formally” introducing the others to his “lovely little pup”; Prince had learned that Vince tasted even worse than the panther – with the autumn wind cutting back through the alleys and all the cracks in the garage, Prince made his way into the shed, locked the door behind him, sighed, and knelt down to meet Moose in his energetic greeting. The wagging and bouncing, the licks and laps to the face, the little whimpers and barks... he felt as though he couldn’t properly show his own appreciation for the dog limited to just patting and scratching, and little murmured affirmations that each brought their own response.

He had felt it inside of him all day, this want and need – so before long Prince had already coaxed Moose onto his side, the feral lying back with one of his front and hind legs both raised, plump heft draping down in full view. Prince got right to work there, nosing down along those balls and then pressing his lips to the dog’s sheath to kiss there, sucking softly, slipping his tongue in and around and remaining there as the thick, hot flesh filled his mouth and pressed into his throat, until he had reached his limit. Even while there he remained down on him, fingers squeezing and rubbing at the feral’s favorite spot behind his buried knot: as more time passed Prince had figured out all of Moose’s good spots, and how to get him to pant and whine and jerk within seconds, if desired.

Not tonight, though. The shepherd bobbed along the dog’s revealed shaft until his taste coated his throat and breath, and then slipped out of his own clothes, fully naked this time. The cold air ran its sharp fingers in through his fur and along tender skin, but it was a worthy sacrifice: Moose would keep him plenty warm. He came up off of the dog’s cock, swallowed and wiped at his mouth, then leaned forward to receive a few more licks across his face and even a few *inside* his lips and over his own tongue, then slid down and into the familiar position with his knees on the ground, tail raised, and arms and upper body resting across the chair.

Moose took his own position, too. Prince squirmed and gasped under the dog’s immense weight on top of him, spread his posture, reached a paw back to guide him up... and within another few minutes had his head resting limply across the chair, mouth open and eyes closed, drool trickling out in breathy, panting moans after each of the feral’s firm yet careful thrusts into him. His hard cock bounced and twitched underneath him, the shepherd clenching in rhythm with those bucks; there was just something about Moose that felt so *good*, that meant that he hardly had to touch himself to get off when he was the one on top. Tonight he had already been pushed through his paces a few times, so once he felt the dog’s knot start to pulse and swell, he arched his back, relaxed his body, lifted his head...

...and then jerked, surprised and startled and suddenly full of a hot, tight pressure, when that knot pressed its way in through his already-stretched tailhole, seized tight, and swelled up, bigger, *bigger*, as Moose shuddered through his peak. Prince gasped and squirmed, that pressure bringing with it a bit of discomfort – and bucked as he, too, was forced past his limit, one paw down between his legs working swift and easy along his length, his entire body clenching and squeezing as the pleasure rocketed through him. The sheer size of the feral tied tight inside of him kept him backed up, though: he felt himself cum, yet felt nothing past a weak dribble leak out of him, everything bunched and squeezed together around that huge double-knot.

He hadn't been particularly *quiet*, either. Prince had made sure that everyone else had left before he had come here tonight, pretending that he had already gone home and then circling back around later, just to spend this special time with the dog. He would have time for this tie to go down, though it might become almost unbearable by then; he turned his head over his other shoulder, and gave a tired grin as Moose leaned in to lap at his face, the two kept together from that union.

Then, though, the lock on the shed door clicked. Prince jerked upright, heart suddenly pounding for a different reason. The latch slid open, the door squeaked on its hinges and scraped over the floor... and for a moment he saw nothing. Then, though, a sleek black-furred figure slid into view, wrapped within a shimmering leather jacket.

The panther held one of his other phones up, the light of the camera bright in recording. Even in the darkness of night Prince could see those sharp amber eyes, and this time, the gold of his fang glittered in a grin that showed no enjoyment.

"Hey there," Malcolm rumbled, "pup. Or should I call you *bitch*, now?"