

Prince paused at the door where he stood, one paw half-raised in preparation to knock, the other resting down near his side with what felt like thick, heavy chains wrapped around it. He sniffed again, nose cold and numb from the chill of walking all the way back here in the middle of the night, felt a shiver zap through his body, then raised his other arm as well – and saw that it was, indeed, chains that trailed over and around his palm, down his forearm a bit, and then hung off down by his side. This didn't seem right. Was this even *his* apartment?

Tonight almost didn't seem real.

His footpaws were numb, too. His throat felt dry and rough as though he had been shouting though he hadn't said a word since he had left the garage. He had come here in a haze, certainly not running, but not quite walking either. Had he forgotten anything? His phone, his wallet, the pack of gum that Askia had given him, the wrapped remains of half of the candy bar that Scott had brought him for doing a good job. What else? Was there anything else? He couldn't remember. Did he have his keys? Why was he knocking? He thought he might be able to – or, had he even knocked yet? The Australian shepherd stood there with his paw still raised and bunched into a fist, yet wasn't sure if he ever had. He sniffed again, forced his ears to stand upright though they tried so hard to drop back against his head, and moved to rap his knuckles against the paper-thin material of the door again, just in case.

Just before the first knock landed, though, there came the sound of the latch coming free, and the deadbolt, and then the lock on the knob itself. Suddenly everything flashed through him again, all of the shock and concern and worry and who knows what all else, and for a moment the world spun and swam around him... and then slowed down and refocused in along Gaz's face, familiar dark muzzle, turquoise eyes, and speckled pattern poking through in the space in the threshold. First there was annoyance – it was fairly late – which quickly turned to confusion when he saw Prince standing there, and then relief as the realization set in, and then, naturally, gentle concern.

"Whoa." The wild dog pulled the door open a little bit further. "Hey there, mate. Wasn't expectin' you to be back. I thought tonight was gonna be one of your later nights, and..."

The door opened further, and Gaz's expression turned from concern to a sharper worry and fear, and he visibly took a half-step back. Prince, still only halfway here, thought that was odd and looked down as well, only to see the huge feral Great Dane sitting there at the end of the chain leash, sharp spikes protruding out from around his collar, tense musculature visible beneath his smooth skin and fur. Immediately the dog's lips curled back in a quiet snarl, showing vicious yellowed teeth already dribbling with thick saliva underneath.

"Moose." Prince sort of half-waved his paw holding the other end of the leash. *Wait*, he realized a moment later, *that's right, I'm the one who...* "Calm down. That's Gaz. He's nice." His own voice sounded a bit strange to him, distant and rough, and for a while he wasn't actually certain if he had been the one to speak.

Still back in the apartment, Gaz looked back and forth between the two of them, muzzle showing every thought that passed through his head. "Aight, mate," he said after a while, "what's going on here? What happened? You look... well, to be frank, like hell. Here, just – come on in, I was about to head to bed, but now that you're here... is that dog, uh, yours?"

Prince hefted the chain again. Still sitting in place, Moose angled his head, looked at him, then flicked his broad tongue out over his lips. Nothing came to him for a bit, but there in the back of his mind, all of the time they had already spent together over these last two weeks or so, sitting together out in the shed, listening to the sounds of the city through the windows, sharing their warmth as the night dropped further down.

There was a bright, hidden intelligence in these yellow eyes, tilted up towards Prince above him, waiting for his response and command. Moose had *listened* to him through all of those nights, more than just hearing him. He had shifted and moved to bump his muzzle on the shepherd when stress and worry had started to dig their claws into his chest, and had wagged his tail and bounced around whenever he first entered the shed to greet him. Laughing and chatting, paws rubbing up and down his body, scratching above his tail, at his belly...

Often pushing lower, pressure softening and becoming gentler, fingers teasing, touching, coaxing, then wrapping, squeezing, stroking. Though that particular soreness still twinged under his tail, though he could still *smell* Moose in his fur and worried that Gaz might be able to as well, thinking about that just added another layer of guilt to what already thrummed in his chest, and as such Prince pushed those particular thoughts away.

"I don't think he's anybody's," he answered, voice a lot more stable than he had expected. "But I'll be watching him, um... for the... foreseeable future."

*"Get out of here," Malcolm had said to him, once Moose's knot had receded and popped free from the shepherd's stretched tailhole. Had the panther not been there, it might have been quite the pleasurable sensation, all of that weight and pressure suddenly jerking free, finally allowing the evidence of his orgasm now some twenty minutes past to dribble weakly out of him. The panther squatted down before them, head tilted, lips pulled back in a mirthless smile with the gold of that tooth glimmering in his phone flashlight.*

*Panting, exhausted, every muscle in his body tense, Prince had frowned and struggled to his feet, trying to get his pants back up as though he had just humiliated himself – which, really, he had. Worse than ever before. "What?"*

*Malcolm nodded over his shoulder at the door to the shed. "Go. Out." He looked down and tapped at his phone screen, and the light flicked out. The darkness of deepening night swept in. "Take the dog with you. You're done for tonight." Even in the shadow, sharp and oppressive against the glaring light that had been there a moment earlier, Prince could see Malcolm's sharp gaze flick down towards the floor, and the pooled stickiness that had dribbled out and down from between him and Moose.*

*So the shepherd swallowed, fully believing he might never actually be allowed to leave this shed, and scrabbled around in the darkness for Moose's collar and leash. His paws nearly failed to respond to him, too, shaky and unsteady, weak and limp. "That's... all?"*

*"That's all." Then Malcolm grinned again, golden tooth sparkling in some dim light cast in through the window. "Have I ever lied to you? Go on. Go home."*

So he had, and as tended to happen with Prince, the time it took to get from there to here had resulted in his own mind stirring everything up to a hundred. As soon as he stepped into the comfortable warmth

of their apartment, as soon as Moose trundled up behind him and made a little noise of concern, as soon as he went over to the couch and sank down onto it, Prince realized just how close to the edge he had been, and still *was*. Panic swirled, swelled, and flooded in, and for another moment he wondered again if any of this was actually happening.

The wild dog strode around towards the other seat within range of him and slid down into it, sitting close to the edge. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again.

Prince swallowed. His throat still felt dry. "Can I... be real with you?"

This was rhetorical, and both of them knew it. Moose came over as well, chain leash jingling heavily along the floor as he went; Prince had forgotten he was holding the other end let it go, the cold metal dropping down into his lap. Across from him Gaz leaned forward and tilted his head a bit, all patience and understanding.

And so he began. He started right when everything else had, all that time ago when he had supposedly gone to a job fair further down in the city. The shortcut through the alleyway, his original meeting with Malcolm – he skipped over the part where he broke down crying in front of a stranger who could have very likely robbed him and left him there – and then from there to the garage, where he met everybody else and started to slip into a daily routine.

This was the part where he just came out and told Gaz that the entire thing was some sort of criminal ring. Prince himself hadn't fully put it together until quite some time in, but of everything he had done these past several weeks, that was arguably the least embarrassing and incriminating. "I don't know exactly *what*," he explained, "since of course they keep that info away from folks like me, but... I was helping with the books a bit, meeting folks for deals, mostly making deliveries..."

Gaz sat back in his seat a bit. "Hooh. Didn't think you had it in ya. My poor li'l puppy Prince, a total fuckin' hardass!"

Despite himself, that still squeezed a little smile out of the shepherd. Idly he reached down to rub between Moose's ears, which still brought a surprise raise of the eyebrows and twitch from Gaz as he watched.

And so he continued. The words spilled out of him, bottled up in stark silence as soon as he left the garage. *Gaz can't know*, he remembered repeating to himself on the walk home almost every day. *He can't possibly know. What I'm doing isn't right. I don't want him involved*. The days passed, he got into naming the others on the team: Askia, with whom he felt he had developed an appreciative acquaintanceship; Maritza, who still made his skin crawl a bit, but he liked her well enough in small doses; Tony and Vincent, who he tried to stay away from; Scott, the one out of the group he definitely trusted the most; Leo, there in the background somewhere; Sam, the quiet rottweiler, tall with a slight gut. He didn't know much about him.

This led to him finally diving into the *specifics* of what had been happening. Prince paused, thought about it for a moment, felt his train of thought start to derail, and then instead of allow it to completely leave him, just opened the floodgates again.

"I was in a relationship, kind of."

“Kind of?”

“Kind of.” As much as a relationship consisted of a daily duty to suck his partner off, regardless of whether he wanted to or was up for it. All of the times Malcolm dragged him back from some other task, to yank his pants down around his knees and sink in from behind, sometimes with no more lube than just what had gathered in his sheath. He went over this in a lower, shaky voice, watching Gaz’s face change again from amusement to concern, then distaste when he told about how Malcolm had started to basically rent him out to the others in the group.

Vincent had finally got the turn on his mouth that he had wanted so much, then again when he made Prince prepare Tony’s rump for him with a thorough coating of saliva. He moved on quickly from this part, feeling embarrassment more than anything about the acts, which brought him in to what had led him to this current predicament: Malcolm assigning him to start watching over Moose, in Maritza’s place. At this point Gaz’s eyes drifted over to the dog again, with Moose lifting his head from where he had rested them atop his paws. The two watched each other for a moment; Gaz was the first to turn away.

Prince started to stumble over his words again. The longer he thought about it, the less he could believe that these were things he had *actually done*, but in the moment, in the shadows of the shed and the closeness of the time spent alongside Moose it had felt so reasonable, so proper, so... *expected*. He felt his tail pin close to his body and his ears flicked down, and his eyes would not remain on any one thing, instead flicking back and forth around the room to find literally anything else to fixate upon.

“And...” He swallowed, throat still dry. “Me and... well, with Moose, some of those nights, I was...” The dog’s ears perked up at hearing his name, and he lifted his head to look at the shepherd. Prince met his eyes, lost his train of thought, and soon after felt another blush warming his cheeks as his thoughts strayed. “Well, I was... just wondering, or like... with everything that had been going on and... um...”

*God. Is this really happening? What am I saying? I can’t believe...* He dropped his muzzle into his paws, trying to piece together all the images, memories, scenarios, and fantasies into something he could bring himself to say. Nothing came, though, and then it was Gaz’s paw reaching out to touch his knee that startled him out of his thoughts.

The wild dog’s little smirk had returned. His tongue flicked out over his lips, and then simply, matter-of-fact, he said: “You fucked the dog, didn’tcha?”

Immediately Prince’s ears flicked back and his jaw fell open – and, admittedly, the same arousal twinged between his legs and in the back of his mind. Moose’s ears perked up as well, and his tail gave a few slow wags as though in self-satisfaction. “Wh... how did you-”

The wild dog tossed his head back in a laugh, then reached up to wipe at his nose. In that moment Prince noticed his amusement turn to slight embarrassment, which seemed strange on him – Gaz, *sheepish*? He stayed there for a moment, let the conversation drift into awkward silence, and then seemed to finally notice that Prince was still waiting for his explanation. So he shifted again, looked down, twiddled his claws and squirmed, and then finally heaved a sigh.

"I, um..." Turquoise eyes flashed up for a second. "Dogs have a certain... *smell* to them, as I'm – sure you know. Remember how I said I'd been picking up all kinds of weird scents on ya, mate? Well, ah, dog... dog dick – *feral* dog dick, it... smells different from, say, *mine*." He reached up and scratched behind one of his radar-dish ears, now avoiding eye contact with his friend. His voice fell another notch. "I know that one from experience, too."

For a moment he wondered if he had heard that right. Prince straightened up, wiped at his forehead, leaned in along the arm of the couch, adjusted his posture, frowned, looked at Gaz again... "Wait. *What?*"

Gaz chuckled again, embarrassment clear in his ears, his muzzle, the angle of his tail alongside his body, and in so many other things as well. "Ahah. So, uh. God. Was never thinking I'd ever have to explain this, um... remember that dogsitting job I took, way back when we were in school together?"

"Uh huh..."

"And how I'd always take Mr. Lori's jobs over the others, even though they paid a bit less?" Prince could see where this was going. A little bit of Gaz's sly smugness returned, and he laughed again. "Well. His shepherd mix more than made up for that."

He had sure as hell just heard Gaz say all of this, but still it felt like the realization hadn't quite set in. Prince tilted his head as he rolled this new knowledge back and forth. "I, uh, remember you made a point to bring your camera every time, too..."

"Yeah. I wasn't lying when I said I wanted pics I'd wanna look at later!" Another laugh, seemingly to cover his own embarrassment, before Gaz nodded towards Moose on the floor there again. "So, wait, is that just what happened? You fucked the dog, then felt bad and brought him here? You looked like you were half a step away from fuckin' dyin' when you got here, mate."

"No. That's not it." All of those prior feelings and sensations came flooding back in. Yet again Prince dropped his muzzle into his paws. "Malcolm *caught* me and Moose together. *Tied*."

For a while Gaz had nothing to say. Prince even looked up between his fingers to see if the wild dog had even actually *heard* him. The only sounds in the room for those few seconds were their breathing, the occasional rustle of fur or clothing, and the constant rumbling woosh and drone of Oakland traffic outside.

"*Oh.*"

When he finally did respond Prince almost didn't hear it beneath the swirl of thoughts in his head again. He squeezed in on himself and wiped at his eyes, trying to banish the panicked tears before they came.

"God, just – what am I gonna do? At least he doesn't know where I live, or at least I don't *think* so, and... he kicked me and Moose out, but like, I *need* the money. I *need* to go back."

"Whoa, whoa." Gaz stood up from his seat and came over to sit beside the shepherd, warding off another protective growl from the feral on the floor. "Hey, hey, hey. None of this now, mate. Abso-fuckin'-*lutely* are you not goin' back there. You stay here, and when I head out to work tomorrow I'll

take you with me to the other side of the bay to look around, and we'll find you a job. Yeah? It'll be good. Hey." He wrapped an arm around Prince, now shaking with slow sobs. "Hey, now. It'll be fine. Does, ah – does Moose needa be walked? Or sprinted, more like?..."

Prince at least appreciated Gaz's efforts to calm him down and help him out, but still the longer the night went on the worse he felt about the entire situation. Moose watched him through heavy eyes as though he knew how he felt, muzzle resting on his paws and heavy chain collar jingling around his neck every time he moved... the first time he had seen the Great Dane Prince had been terrified of him, snarling and tugging at his leash, muscles tensing, slavering from near rabid jaws, yet now he behaved as though he were another person here in this pit, offering his presence and solace for the shepherd in the midst of his panic.

It took some more talking and coaxing for Gaz to coax him over to bed, and tonight he slept with his arm wrapped lightly around Prince's lower body, something they hadn't done in a while. Still, though, he felt restless and shaky, as though he should be doing literally anything other than relax and try to sleep: every time he closed his eyes all he saw was the look on Malcolm's face, the glitter in his golden eyes and the reflection of the moonlight off that sharp fang visible in his grin, completely devoid of any joy or pleasure. All of the memories with the panther felt tainted, enough so that Prince felt his heart rate palpably pick up when he went back over them – and not in the way they used to, when he would sneak off into the bathroom at the garage and work himself to a quick, panting finish. Now those same thoughts that used to bring a guilty pleasure and arousal instead instilled in him a deep, resounding dread, a tingling disgust, and worst of all, a heavy, cloying *shame*.

At some point he *must* have fallen asleep, though, since when he opened his eyes again Gaz had rolled over onto his other side in the small bed, his brushy tail tickling at Prince's inner thighs. Exhausted and feeling not the slightest bit better, he sighed, stirred, and pulled himself to his feet, already reaching for his phone to see if he had missed anything. It came slowly to him, but as he shuffled into the bathroom to brush his teeth it all slotted into place again: he would stay here today until Gaz left for work, and then he'd go with him, maybe stop at the library, look at some openings, and...

And a few photo messages were the first notification waiting for him on his phone, from an unknown number. Prince frowned and moved his toothbrush to his other paw so he could open it – and then again felt his heart drop into the pit of his stomach.

It was a photo of himself and Moose at his side, leaving the front of the garage along the main street. Then after that another of them, walking down the side of the street between here and that shortcut he had taken, within view of a streetlight. Then one taken from much closer when he had started up the stairs to the door of his apartment, and finally another with him standing there, face in his paws, back hunched, and Gaz looking through the crack of the door at him.

As if on cue, as if he were still watching, another message dinged into his inbox right then, from that same unknown number.

*"Need u in today. Get here. Ditch the dog. M"*

What was he supposed to do? His only defense last night, *he doesn't know where I live* – that had turned out to be false before he had even said it. The faucet continued running, his toothbrush – an electric –

buzzed on in his paw, spraying little droplets of minty water across his shoulder and the window. Another message coming in brought his attention back down to his phone.

*"Understand? Yes or no."*

Prince looked over his shoulder, through the door of the bathroom, and eyed the shape of the wild dog as he still snoozed beneath the blankets. Moose had come into the bedroom with them but slept on the floor – there was simply no room for him on the bed anyway – though now he watched him again with those bright, sharp eyes, waiting for his answer and action.

There was no choice in the matter. Prince knew that. He turned his toothbrush off, set it back in its stand, and then with shaky paws opened up the reply interface.

*"Yes"*

That was that, then. He swallowed past the lump in his throat, tried to brush his fur down to something at least somewhat acceptable, then got dressed and left the apartment, before Gaz could notice and stop him, and before he could put another thought into it. He just had no choice.

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It felt at once as though it took no time at all to make his way over to the garage, and at the same time that it had taken him much longer than it should have. Prince swallowed his nervousness as best he could on his way up to the door, unassuming and grungy, as this *was* legally an uninhabited property. The windows remained cracked and dusty, the blinds stayed half-drawn and bent, no vehicles waited out in front.

He didn't know what to expect, really, when he pushed his way through the front door. Part of him expected everything to have changed into unrecognizability, though another part knew that this would be silly. There at the front desk, as ever since his first day as a naïve, idiot little pup, sat the same white-furred wolf, shoulders hunched and muzzle pointed towards the computer monitor, a decade and a half out of date, at the side of the desk.

Prince waited for Scott to greet him. He did not.

*"Um..."*

Some small part of him held out hope that the fatherly wolf would offer the same island of solace and comfort that he had before, but again, Prince just had no idea what to expect – whether Malcolm had told everyone to shoot him on sight, figuratively or otherwise, or if he had kept quiet about the whole thing. Which, knowing Malcolm, seemed unlikely.

*"Mm."* Scott nodded but did not look his way.

Prince padded in a little further. "I'm – um, I think... I think Malcolm wanted me, today?"

"Yeah." The wolf nodded again, this time over his shoulder towards the hallway. "Back there, last on the right."

“Oh. Okay. Um, thank you.”

“Mm.”

Even if he hadn't seen those horrifying pictures this morning, already Prince would be able to tell that something was *very* wrong. The only noise that rang out to his ears was the sound of his own footpaws scuffing along the dirty floor, in past the desk and around to the hall. When he turned the corner he waited there for a moment, willing and silently begging Scott to turn around and look at him, to say *anything*, but all he got was a flick of the ear and a quiet huff of frustration from looking over the spreadsheets. So he continued down the hall, his own ear flicking back at a gentle squeak.

When he looked back over his shoulder he caught just a flash of the wolf's muzzle, leaning back in towards his computer from where he had angled himself to watch. His chair swiveled forward again and leaned out of his view. The further down the hall he went, the more his attention and nervous curiosity drew forwards to it: shuffling and rustling, a soft thumping... gasping, panting, and beneath all of this a wet, rhythmic slapping, *shlp-shlp-shlp*.

His heart dropped. He paused at the threshold, straightened up, swallowed, took in a breath, then turned... and felt everything shudder to a halt when he saw what waited for him there in the room. Not only Malcolm was here, but Vincent, too, both of them naked, fruit bat bouncing in the panther's lap, Malcolm with one black-furred paw along Vince's inner thigh while the other stroked and pumped at his hard length. Two others sat in the chairs near the other wall as well, a dog and a weasel, neither of whom Prince recognized. They, too, sat back to enjoy the show, pants flies opened and similarly pawing themselves off.

The weasel noticed the new audience member, turned to face him, and worked at himself a little faster. Prince blinked, startled, and averted his gaze.

“Aah! Here he is!” Malcolm called out for him, hips still thrusting up and into Vince's rump. The bat had reached one arm back and behind his head to caress the panther's, eyes shut and mouth open in pure ecstasy. “Man of the hour. Or, should I say, *bitch* – since that's all you are here, aren't you? Let me just... finish up here, and... *ah...*”

It seemed as though his timing couldn't have been better – or, rather, worse. The panther's muzzle scrunched up in that way it always did when he was about to finish, showing first yellowish-white teeth before the sharp, chiseled golden tooth, and then his nostrils flared. He sucked in a gasp, growled deep in his throat, bucked, bucked again – and then Vincent on top of him shuddered and jerked as well as he painted the dark fur of his lower belly with his own seed. Malcolm thrust into him twice more, slower and weaker, then shifted both paws to the bat's lower thighs to heft him up. His thick, twitching length slid slowly out of the other male's tailhole, slick and smeared with discolored milky white. Vince twitched and clenched over him, dropping out another slimy glob along his tip.

“*There* we are... and this is where *you* come in.” Vincent still in his lap, Malcolm pointed down. “Clean him up.”

Again, what was he supposed to do? Prince swallowed back his doubts and stepped forward into the room, the heavy stench of sex, unwashed bodies, marijuana smoke, and something deeper and richer

digging into his nose. His tail tried to pin between his legs and his ears flattened back against his head when he knelt down there, Malcolm's so-familiar musk sharp and unpleasant. Already once he had been made to service Vincent, but now...

He didn't want to. He *really* didn't, but at his first hesitation the panther's paw shot down, seized him between the ears, and yanked him up and forward into the depths of the bat's pubic fur, then up along the side of his length. Prince did the best he could, trying to float off in his mind and pretend this was someone else he was tasting, someone else he was serving – even with the claws digging into the back of his head and the pressure growing in his throat.

"Good bitch," Malcolm purred. "Now lower. It seems I've made a mess of him. That too – and me."

That part almost made him gag, sticky and slimy, like a thick, half-molten glue struck through with oversalty, savory ooze. He could *feel* Vincent push out against his tongue when he moved there, nose already curled with the scent, and then down over Malcolm's length as well. At one point he had to pause to catch his breath, though Malcolm shoved his nose even deeper in – and Prince nearly lost everything he had worked so hard to clean up.

Coughing and spluttering, wiping at his muzzle and trying to clear his eyes as well, he looked up to the panther. "Is that all? Can I go now?"

For a moment Malcolm looked back at him, incredulous. Then he and Vincent shared a look, scoffed, and both broke out into laughter.

Vincent actually had to reach up and wipe at the edge of his eye. "Like fuck you can!" He squirmed and pushed himself back down against Malcolm's sheath; the panther rumbled softly and gripped at his thighs again, starting to sink back in. Vince nodded over towards the dog and weasel, who had since slowed in their progress. "Ya gotta attend to *them*, too."

Prince looked at them, avoiding the obvious, and then back up to Malcolm. "Who are..."

This time the panther's grin was *all* pleasure and enjoyment. For a moment his eyes unfocused, lost in the pleasure of digging deep into Vincent's rump.

"They're – *ah* – your new clients." He blinked, licked his lips, and refocused his gaze on the shepherd in front of him. "Unless you want word to get out about what you've done, yeah? I made sure to get..." Here he shifted a bit to rummage around in his pocket, then took out the phone that Prince recognized as his, the main one. He spent a moment fiddling with it. "...ample picture and video evidence... it's a shame you don't have any parents I can show this off to, but I've got trustworthy contacts – more trustworthy than *some*, y'see – who, presented with the proper *evidence*..."

He tapped the screen with his thumb. At first nothing happened, but then as Prince leaned closer and listened, he picked up... noises, sounds. The same steady rustling and shifting, then panting... and then a moan, and another, and another, each one making his heart drop a little bit further. That was *him* moaning, and the thick, heavy panting undeniably belonging to a feral dog, Moose mounted on top and behind him, thrusting deep. So startled, so *humiliated* was he that he barely heard the rest of Malcolm's threat.

“...police involved like flies to fuckin’ cow shit. So, then,” and he nodded at the dog and weasel, “best get to work. Might as well get you a pillow for your knees, though, since...” He shivered, sighed, and buried himself deep inside Vince atop him. “...you fuckin’ *bet* these aren’t your *only* ‘clients’ for the day.”

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After so long spent wondering how many hours it had been and how many he had left, the Australian shepherd had simply lost track of the time. He remained where he knelt, now bound to one of the metal bars of the window by a similar chain collar and leash as Malcolm had put on Prince. The irony was not lost on him: he tugged and pulled at it whenever he was alone in the room, as little as that was, and yet all he succeeded in doing was chafe and scrape at himself, as the panther had ensured he wouldn’t be able to escape through a thick, heavy padlock weighing down the front, pulling his head and neck down unless he resisted.

And after all this time, anything resembling resistance had long since trickled out of him. He had been stripped of his shirt and pants and now knelt in his underwear and nothing else, the fabric there stained and discolored from “contributions” from his other clients throughout the day; every time he swallowed all he could taste was a thick, heavy pungency in the back of his throat, a buildup of so many different scents and tastes, sharp and spiced, unpleasant and hideous. He sighed again, looked up to the fading light through the window over his head, and continued to try to push away the thought that nobody was coming for him.

He would have to stay here tonight, on his own, in the cold. Everyone else had already left, and he wasn’t allowed enough room on this humiliating chain to even get as far as the couch. Across the floor in front of and around him, evidence from his work throughout the day streaked and dribbled out, now dried into a thin crust just like what he could feel in his fur along his muzzle, his face, his cheeks, his neck, his chest, his groin. Prince swallowed, wiped at his mouth, then felt some of that crust flake off, and stifled yet another gag.

Maybe now that he was finally, *finally* alone, he had time to himself. Pressure, frustration, humiliation, and sharp anger all bubbled up inside of him and pressed at the roof of his mouth and backs of his eyes, and as he adjusted his position to sit down he dropped his muzzle into his paws, wrenched his eyes shut, felt his lips curl back – and then a noise down the hall struck a hammer-blow against his heart, and nearly without thinking about it he pushed all of that back down and returned to his original posture of kneeling here on this ratty old pillow one of the other members had gotten for him, positioned conveniently in front of one of the chairs here.

Definitely footsteps. At once his ears flicked forward and then flattened back again, then struggled with straightening upright so as not to show *too* much defiance. Whatever would come, would come, and at this point there was nothing he could do to resist or deny. As those footsteps came closer Prince tilted his head back, sighed again, and already started welling up the saliva in his mouth. He had learned they didn’t like it too dry. He half-turned himself to keep an eye on the door, tried not to look too dejected and disappointed, and waited, and...

And someone new turned the corner. That shouldn’t have been a surprise, as it was *usually* someone he had literally never seen before, but this time... the rottweiler braced a paw on the threshold, made direct eye contact with Prince here, with the new “public cocksleeve” that he was certainly about to take for a spin, and then glanced back and forth down the hall. Sharp, intact ears flicked forward and

back, and when he looked into the room again the pale light of the streetlamp outside caught his eyes and flashed them warm gold.

Prince had seen Sam around the garage quite a few times over his weeks here now, but he couldn't remember if the two had ever exchanged more than a few words. He was tall and a bit round, especially around the middle – his shirt pulled up partially over his belly as he pushed his way into the room and approached – and, as far as Prince knew, he did a lot of the in-person things. A little bit strange, given how quiet and reserved he seemed to be around the rest of the team, but... everyone here had a certain streak to them, he supposed. Even himself. Scott was good with numbers; Askia was good with vehicles; Maritza was good with dogs; Sam was good with people...

Prince was good for nothing. He blinked back the tears as they continued to push at the edges of his vision, growing in strength and sharpness as the rottweiler approached. *Not another*, he thought. *Not one more. Please. Let me go home. I just want to...*

To his surprise, though, Sam made no move to undo his belt and pants fly, as so many of the others had done first thing upon entering the room. Instead he dropped down to his knees in front of Prince, tilted his head, gave what was probably his best attempt at a comforting smile, and then reached forward. Immediately Prince lifted his head and closed his eyes, mind racing a hundred steps into the future: for a moment he almost expected those strong thumbs to wrap around his throat, to hold and squeeze and tighten in. He had been here barely a day and already he knew that that would be a mercy. Sam's breath wafted down, warm and slow, over his face: he must have just eaten something, and whatever it was, it made the shepherd's stomach, empty other than everything his 'clients' had so thoroughly shot down his throat, growl with hunger.

As swiftly and gently as those paws had settled around his shoulders, though, did they then fall away... as did the chain collar around his neck, padlock having popped open and pulled away between the links. Prince blinked and looked down, the cold metal running a shiver through his body where it grazed before it swung off and lightly impacted the wall beside him. He frowned, swallowed, looked down over himself, felt at the spot along the back of his neck where it had started to chafe, and then looked up at Sam before him. The tears had started to return, and this time, there was nothing he could do to banish them.

The rottweiler smiled again and tilted his head the other way, then reached his arms out and, wordlessly, brought Prince into a gentle hug. He smelled of engine grease, sweat, cigarette smoke, and then something else warmer and softer beneath, maybe a soap or shampoo. None of that mattered, though: surprised, Prince let him hold him for a moment, and then the tears forced themselves out.

Shaking and shuddering, the day's humiliation and panic reverberating out of him, he had thoroughly soaked Sam's shoulder by the time he finally calmed down enough to wipe at his eyes. The rottweiler stood up again, offered a paw down for Prince to do the same, and then slowly led him out of the room and back down the hall, into the silent interior of the garage building.

"I..." Sam cleared his throat. "I, uh, saved some of my lunch when I found out you were in there. Here..."

He led him into what functioned as the building's kitchen, complete with a run-down refrigerator, and in another moment had sat Prince down with a half-eaten sandwich, a banana, and a bag of chips that had the distinct look of being bought from a vending machine spread out in front of him. The shepherd

looked up at Sam, tears still at the edges of his eyes. The other dog smiled again, blinked, then gave a little nervous laugh and edged out of the room.

A few minutes later he returned again, Prince halfway into the sandwich, and rested the shepherd's folded clothes along the table. He waited for the younger male to look up at him.

"They're, um, a little smelly," he said, apologetically. "But they're not wet. Not anymore, at least."

Prince's heart dropped a bit again, but at least he *knew* what the others had done to those clothes. It would be a bit of an unpleasant walk home. He felt a little weird sitting here in his underwear eating like this, especially after such a nightmarish, unbelievable day, but at least he would be able to sleep in his own bed.

He paused as he reached for the chips. Maybe that wasn't what this was about at all. Maybe this was Sam setting him free, only to take him back to his *own* place and...

"If there's... a bus stop near your place, I can drop you off there tonight," Sam went on. Prince looked up at him again, eyes no doubt belying the fear and shock he still felt. The rottweiler shrugged. "I know you're probably not in a good spot right now, so, like... I don't want to make you nervous. I already made sure everyone left. Malcolm thought I wanted you to myself for the night, so I, um..." He shrugged again. "Played along with it. That was how I got the key, if you're wondering about that."

It still seemed like a bad idea, but at this point Prince recognized how little of a choice he had. He finished the meal, stomach empty despite his complete lack of appetite, and shakily got to his feet again. Still there was a flash of embarrassment at getting dressed in front of someone who was effectively a stranger like this, especially when his clothing smelled so strong, so *richly* of so many of the guys who had used him throughout the day, but... again, no choice. So he got dressed in crusty, discolored clothing, wiped at his nose and mouth again, and looked to Sam. The rottweiler smiled again, this one tinged with regretful sadness, and led him out through the back of the building, through the cavernous garage itself, then past the now empty shed that used to house Moose, and down the block a bit towards his own car.

They made the drive in silence, with the first and only thing said between the two of them Sam asking for a street and Prince struggling to recall the names of any of the roads nearby. In another few minutes the rottweiler had done as he had said and pulled up to drop Prince off at one of the bus stops there, the light still on even though the routes had long since closed.

Prince stepped out, suddenly self-conscious, and looked back at his impromptu savior. Sam gave another little smile. He raised a paw. "Here's hoping I don't see you tomorrow," the older male offered. "But if I do, well... I'll find you." And with that he was off.

The rest of the night, just like the day before it, came and went in a haze. After some time Prince realized he had made his way back to the apartment building, then up the stairs and towards the door. He had left his phone at home on purpose, and now knew that he should feel at least a little bit guilty for doing so, yet knowing this did little to provide the feeling itself. He reached out, fumbled with the lock, slid it open... and then in another few moments Gaz and Moose both were all over him, making noise and barking and worrying over him, noses scrunched against the foul mix of scents soaked through his clothing, panicking about the way he looked, the way he felt, the way he moved. A shower was

drawn and soon he stood beneath the water, so hot it pierced right through his matted, messy fur and stung at his skin, but still he didn't really notice. Gaz waited right outside for him, shifting nervously, calling in for him every now and then.

Prince still didn't feel as though he were wholly *there* once he got out, Gaz swiftly standing up to offer him the towel. He felt weak on his legs and dazed, and soon had hobbled over to sit down on the edge of the bed and then... nothing. The wild dog sank in beside him, an arm resting around his body, and soon Moose had come up to rest his wide muzzle along Prince's leg as well.

Gaz wanted to ask what had happened. That much was clear. Prince would, too, were he in the wild dog's position. Instead, though, his friend's wellbeing in mind, he just cleared his throat, sighed, and shook his head, radar-dish ears flapping gently.

"You *cannot* go back tomorrow."

"I have to." Said without even thinking about it. "He knows we live here. I don't know *what* he could do."

"Is there *anything* we could-"

"I don't think so. I just..." Again he dropped his muzzle into his paws. "I need to do this."

"No you don't. *Nobody* does."

"I'll, just..." Prince heaved a sigh and then, without thinking about it, rested his head on Gaz's shoulder. "I'll figure something out. I can't go to the police, since-"

"Oh, abso-fuckin'-*lutely* not, mate. What'll they do? Come over, take pictures of you, do nothing about the issue at hand, and then arrest you for aiding a criminal organization? I'll do some askin' around, too. Maybe we can find a friend or a hotel or something to stay in. You gonna be okay tonight?"

Prince didn't know. The small bed felt much smaller tonight between the two of them, with Moose's thick, rhythmic breathing echoing up from the rug on the floor nearby, but this time that tight space wasn't a problem.

~ ~ ~

He awoke to an empty bed. Slow, sluggish, barely present, Prince tugged himself up, cleaned up as much as his scattered thoughts would allow him, and was already on his way to the door again when he saw where Gaz had gone. The wild dog must have gotten up at some point earlier in the night to watch the door, as he had pulled up one of the chairs just next to the threshold and now snoozed there, arms crossed and head drooping down over his chest. One of the steak knives from the kitchen rested at an angle across the floor in front of him, where it had likely fallen out of his grasp when he had fallen asleep. A small, tired smirk on his muzzle, Prince reached down, picked it up, and set it onto the kitchen counter, then kept as quiet as possible on his way out the door.

He didn't *want* to go back, but as he had already known, he *had* to. He spent the walk there though dark alleyways and foggy sidewalks still cold with the chill of night trying to separate himself from his body,

focusing on anything and everything else in order to put this divide between what was happening and what he would be able to consciously feel, or remember. That was what he had to do yesterday, once he realized the only lunch he would get was another set of 'clients'.

On the way there, in fact, the shepherd almost stopped, picked some random direction, and just headed off that way. If *he* didn't know where he was, then certainly Malcolm wouldn't, either, but no matter how much he thought about it, his legs kept on carrying him forward until the now familiar shape of the garage and surrounding buildings came into view between the others. As usual only two cars sat outside, the broken-down, permanently in-progress one that the group used to further the illusion that this place was still abandoned, and then...

Prince sighed – but felt the disappointment and shame only distantly, his legs still bringing him forward. This time he barely felt the cold touch of the metal beneath his paw when he pushed the front door open, and only vaguely heard the jingling of the bell overhead. This time Scott looked up at him from the front desk, seeming as though he had something to say this time, but Prince walked on past. He went by, turned the corner, started down the hall, and didn't even slow when he saw Malcolm there.

The panther had his arms crossed in front of his chest and head up and back, looking down at the shorter male over his muzzle. His tail lashed behind him, and as Prince approached his upper lip curled back in what was certainly a practiced move, to show his glistening golden tooth.

"Well, well," he growled, barely parting his lips to speak. "Look what the dog dragged in today. It's good you know your place, y'know." The feline nodded towards the room. Just like yesterday Prince heard some rustling and other noises, and while his curious body strained to hear more, his mind, separate and distant, couldn't care less. "And it's even better that I *caught* you playing as a dog toy, since you'll have an encore performance today."

Swiftly, forcefully, and without any sign for him to prepare for it, Malcolm swung his arm around and tossed Prince into the room. The sudden movement caused the inhabitants to jump and panic a bit, and then it was loud, raucous barking in his ears, accompanied by the jangling of a thick, heavy chain – and when he caught his balance he looked forward to see Maritza sitting there along one of the chairs, jaw set as she yanked on the leash for a huge feral dog, thick in the shoulders, round, squat, a wide head, two hundred percent muscle. Part pit bull, Prince mused. His heart pounded with fear at being placed face to face in such close proximity with this beast, still snarling and barking, thick strands of frothy saliva dripping down from its – from *his* – lips... and then, of course, Malcolm's paws settled on his shoulders and pushed him down to his knees, none too kindly. That put him face to face, for lack of a better term, with what this dog carried for him between those hind legs.

"Maritza, here..." Malcolm went on. The otter averted her gaze from Prince on the floor before her. "Well, she's got a contact with a dog, as you can see, who's *desperately* in need of breeding. And – oh, my, would you look at that?"

Maritza struggled to keep the dog back on his leash. Malcolm squatted down behind Prince and rested one paw on his shoulder and the other along his chin, forcibly tugging his head up and over to look at the window. A small black box rested there, screwed into place and angled with a blinking light in the corner.

“Your efforts today will be recorded! Isn’t that nice?” He patted the shepherd’s shoulder and stood back up. Prince’s nose wrinkled at the repeated bursts of foul dog breath puffing out across his muzzle. “I have to have some more properly captured evidence to show my friends, right? Who knows – maybe this’ll be your new niche. I’ve got several more lined up today. Mary? I’ll leave him to you.”

And with that he was gone, though still the door to the room remained open. Prince looked up past the dog’s wide shoulders at the otter sitting there, decked out in her usual tattered garb, glistening with piercings, but for once looking as though this were the last place she wanted to be. She swallowed and again tugged back on the leash.

“I’m sorry about this, man,” she said, voice quiet. “I wish I didn’t have to. But I do.”

Prince breathed a hollow laugh. “How do you think I feel?”

She smiled, though just as expected, there was no enjoyment in it. Maritza swallowed again and continued, though her voice broke at first and she had to try again.

“I’m gonna need you to strip down.”

~ ~ ~

*“What happened-?”*

*“Oh, don’t...” Sam shook his head as he knelt down in front of Prince, now bound at the neck as well as at the wrists with those same heavy chains. His entire body ached, and he was certain he was bleeding from somewhere, but at the same time he didn’t really care enough to look. “Don’t worry about me. I just, ah...” Here in front of him knelt the rottweiler, a bottle of clean, clear water and a second lunch with him. He rummaged around in the paper bag and held another banana up for Prince to take a bite.*

*As he did so the shepherd got another look at his face. Even through his already dark fur, around one of his eyes the makings of a bruise had started to set in, tinting the skin beneath purple and yellow in splotches. He folded the peel back over the banana and this time slid out another bag of chips, trying his best to open it noiselessly.*

*Sam smiled again, a small, tired twitch of his lips. “Made the dumb mistake of, y’know. Trying to change our dear leader’s mind about all of this. About you.” One by one he offered them forward, then moved on to the next item.*

*“Hang in there.”*

~ ~ ~

Had that been a dream? Prince really couldn’t recall. This time he had been bound so that the chains kept his body up, which was a small relief beneath the ache and chafe, as all the energy and will had gone out of his muscles. He didn’t even try to resist when Malcolm came into the room at the end of the day, unzipped, and then started working at himself right there above him. His appearance, his scent, his warmth... Prince kept his eyes fixed up and along the plump balls and barbed length, since he *knew* that was what Malcolm expected of him, but for once none of this ignited a reaction in him, even when he

tried to force it too. He had long since been stripped of his clothing and set down here, fur of his muzzle shoulders, chest, and groin matted down and soaked through with all different kinds of scents again, but no response came from him here – even when Malcolm seized his head and tugged him down into the puff of his pubic fur, even when he bucked against his muzzle and gasped, even when he thrust again and again alongside his face and painted his fur yet again with another mark.

“I don’t know...” Panting softly, Malcolm drew back and wiped himself off, right along the patch of fur between Prince’s nose and his lips. His nose curled with the acrid stench. “...*how* you got out last time, but I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again. I’m leaving for the weekend,” *tap tap tap*, “and I expect you to still be here when I return. And-” He took a step to the side, fished beneath the couch for the dog bowl that had been pushed there – *that* had been a popular object today, held beneath Prince’s hindlegs when some feral kept him on all fours, then shoved up against his muzzle afterwards – and scooted it in front of the shepherd with a footpaw. “Remember. Every time you disobey... *ah...*” Prince blinked and tilted his head away at the stream of hot, rich stench first trickling, then arcing out of the panther’s still-revealed length and into the bowl in front of him. Malcolm made no effort to keep piss on target, and freely doused the shepherd’s muzzle and shoulders as he went. “...is another video sent to my *friends*. Haah... so then, it’s... in your best interest.”

Again he shook himself, wiped and tapped his dripping length off directly on Prince’s lips, and then zipped his pants back up. Then Malcolm grinned, mirthless as usual.

“I’ll see you Monday,” he rumbled. “I gave my friends free reign to come in here and use you as they like. Keep you warm for when I get back. Since you already know that’s all your good for. Catch you later.” This time before he left he gripped Prince’s jaw in his paw, smirked down at him... then welled up and dumped a fat glob of saliva against his face, precisely aimed so that it splattered across his eye and dripped off his cheek.

Then he left him like that, a low cackle echoing down the hall as he went. And Prince waited. He knew not to get his hopes up about Sam coming back, as at this point in time there was very little left he *could* look forward to, so instead he hung his head down as far as the chains would allow him, sighed, and tried at least to get some rest, and to make these next few days pass quickly. He should have told Gaz after all where this place was.

*Why didn’t I? It literally never occurred to me. I’m gonna be here, and he’s not gonna be able to find me, and he’s gonna worry, and...*

*Click.* Something down the hall, then gentle, scuffling footsteps. At this point Prince couldn’t even work up the proper response, of fear and nervousness and reluctance. He just lifted his head, swallowed down the sticky, metallic slickness in his throat, tried to open his eye against the now-dried layer of smoker’s spit, and waited for his next task.

Instead, though, it was the very same rottweiler he had kept himself from thinking about, trudging in through the doorway. As he turned his body there was a flash of dim moonlight off something metal at his side, and once more a certain set of ideas and fantasies flashed through Prince’s mind before he saw just what he had with him. A finger went to Sam’s lips and he glanced over his shoulder, then hustled forward. Bright eyes met Prince’s when he leaned in and focused the mouth of the bolt cutter around one of the links, then took in a breath, centered himself, worked his shoulders, squeezed... and then, sharp and sudden, *snap*. Then he readjusted for the chains bound around his wrists, repeated again...

*snap*, then the one along his ankles. That done, he reached over to set the cutters along the nearby table, halfway bent over to help Prince up-

-and then jerked upright at the sound of a door slamming down the hall. Sam glanced over his shoulder again, body tense and posture tight, then looked down at the shepherd before him.

"Okay, okay," he said, and reached down for the front of his pants. Prince's heart dropped, though he was surprised he could feel something like that at all. "Just – play along. Okay? I need you, to..." And he reached forward, took the shepherd's head in his paw, and tugged him down into his lap, then held him there as he made slow, careful thrusting motions against his muzzle, without *actually* doing it. Still, though, his scent floated and washed over the younger male, eyes half-shut and nostrils wide. Different from everything he had been forced through today, lacking the distinct coppery tang and wet dog odor that now clung so deep in his lungs and fur.

It was almost... pleasant. Perhaps this was only by comparison, and relatively speaking, but at one point Prince actually found himself nuzzling forward, eyes fluttering shut so he could lose himself here... but then a familiar voice from just outside jerked him back to horrible awareness. It sounded like – like Vincent.

Sam tossed his head over his shoulder, though kept Prince down between his legs. Then, to the fruit bat out of sight behind his body: "What? The fuck you *want*? I'm busy."

That startled, and for a moment frightened, Prince. In the little he had known the rottweiler he had learned him to be soft and gentle, calm and a bit shy, and yet here he was with a growl in his throat and fangs bared. Behind him Vincent said something else, voice rising, but Sam waved him off and pretended to focus down on the dog "servicing" him. "Piss off," he called over his shoulder. "Yeah, I'll lock the place up. I heard what he said. Get out of here, you're – distracting me..."

He waited a bit longer, one floppy ear cocked towards the door with his feigned moans and huffs quiet under his breath, and then after a while finally stopped and looked over his shoulder again. That done, the rottweiler smoothly dropped to his knees, drew Prince into another hug, and then lifted him to his feet, brushing the rest of the chains off of him as he went.

"I'm really sorry about that," he said. "Are you okay? I'm so fucking sorry this had to happen to you, this... was another thing you did *not* deserve. Do you know where your clothes are?"

Prince nodded, then reached up to wipe at his nose and eyes. There was nothing there. "Over..." His voice felt and sounded strange in his throat, so again he nodded over at the couch. Sam looked over there, patted the shepherd's shoulder, and reached underneath, then jerked his paw back soon after. They had used Prince's shirt to clean and wipe him off after every new visitor today, every new feral dog.

"Oh... um." The rottweiler glanced up at Prince again, standing shakily in the middle of the room. "We'll... find something for you. Look. I know you might not trust me yet, but – you know as well as I do that this just *can't* go on." He stood up again and returned to Prince, reaching out to rest his paws on his shoulders but then thinking better of it when the shepherd flinched away. He lowered his voice again. "Malcolm knows where you live. He's been keeping track of where you're going, and recording

everything that happens to you while you're here, and – it *has* to stop. Can we talk? Like, *away* from here? I've got something planned that I want to share with you, and... oh, man, yeah, I know, I know..."

He reached forward and drew Prince into another gentle hug, the shepherd shaking and convulsing with sobs built up throughout the day. This time it really was just the two of them left here, though, and after some time Sam managed to bring him over to the couch and sit him down while he went and found a spare change of clothes for him, a bit large – and smelling warmly of Askia – but still good enough. Then from there he led him back into his car, leaving the chains and bolt cutter where they lay, and again Prince felt as though he were passing through a dream, watching the foggy shapes of the high-rise buildings speed past, the dim colored sections of streetlights, the faint awareness of an entire world outside so far distant and removed from what he currently knew and felt.

He directed Sam around the streets, having to dig around in his thoughts to find the actual street directions. This at least brought him back out of his thoughts a bit, but still he lingered behind when the rottweiler pulled up in front of the apartment complex, and it took a while once they had made it to the door for Prince to realize that he was the one with the key. So he unlocked it, and opened it, and pushed his way in, and within a few seconds there was Gaz storming around the corner, ears back and tail up, rightfully *pissed* at Prince... and then suddenly startled and a bit frightened when he saw Sam behind him.

Prince saw him immediately reach for the knife he carried at his side, and hustled to calm him down. "Wait, wait. Gaz."

The wild dog looked between him and Sam. "Prince..."

"This is Sam. He's..." He stumbled over the words. "A friend. He – got me out, today and yesterday. He, um..."

Sam had no time for pleasantries. "Do you know what's going on? What's been fucking *happening* over there?"

Gaz frowned, paw still hovering over his knife. "I don't know if I should tell you..."

"Gaz." Prince took a step forward, then faltered and caught himself on the back of the couch. "Please. You don't know what – you're..."

Soft steps came in from the other room, and then all three heads turned to look at the huge feral Great Dane that trundled out from the bedroom. Moose looked from Gaz to Prince, wagged his tail, then noticed the newcomer, stopped wagging... then noticed it was Sam, and started wagging all over again. A smile split the rottweiler's face, and though he reached down to pat the feral's head when he approached, he still visibly kept his careful distance.

This at least broke the tension a bit. When rottweiler and wild dog met eyes again, this time Prince didn't feel as though he were about to witness another crime. Sam stayed by the door, paws half-raised and visible, and again he put on the guise of a soft-spoken and reserved dog, as Prince had seen before. This time Gaz was the one to ask, and Sam answered.

And Prince felt each word hit him like another needle sinking into his flesh, pinning him down and filling him with a dreary, lurching ache, dread, and humiliation. Slowly he sank down to the couch, body numb, as Sam mentioned – in light detail, thankfully – just what Malcolm had used the shepherd for, yesterday and then today as well. Gaz's ears came up, went down, came up again, then flattened back, and then he sank down onto the couch beside Prince and held him, and he could *feel* the fury boiling through the wild dog's veins.

"So," Sam went on. The rottweiler had made his way over to the kitchen and now leaned nonchalantly over the counter there, as though they were discussing dinner plans for the night. "Malcolm's gone this weekend, but I know where he's gonna be."

Gaz looked over the back of the couch at him. "How?"

"How do I know? Oh, that's easy. Just as Prince there." His muzzle split in a wide, sharp grin. "I run correspondence for the fucker. Remember? I'm good with people. But, yeah – he never leaves town; he just pretends he does. I know precisely where he'll be and how long he'll be there, and also, I know him. He's gonna be out of his mind on who knows what, so we'll have a great chance."

To this Gaz frowned, and looked between Prince and Sam. "Chance to... what?"

Sam shrugged. "Get revenge. If you're not interested, well, I've still got things I need to do, so it's gonna happen one way or another."

For a moment the wild dog looked at him again, thoughts mulling around behind warm turquoise eyes. Prince swallowed and held that gaze, trying to keep all of his humiliation and rage bottled down, trying not to show just how much all of this had impacted him – and Gaz gently wet his lips, pulled in a breath, then let it out as a sigh. Then, slowly, he turned back to face Sam again.

"I was hoping you were gonna say that. How can we help?"

The rottweiler sank down a bit to rest his muzzle atop his paws, again as though this were just standard conversation, just regular weekend plans. His ears flicked back: Prince had noticed while he had those intact, his tail had been docked down to a nub barely visible through the back of his pants. It was... cute, in a way.

"Well," he went on, "I don't want to rope y'all into anything that's too far above your heads, but – if Prince there can handle it, then I don't doubt you could too. Never got your name, by the way."

"Gaz."

"Sam. Good to meet ya. Wish it were under other circumstances." He nodded. "I've got some stuff back at the garage to pick up, but we'll have to be careful running by there. And just so we're clear – we're not gonna see a fuckin' *murder* happen here, alright? Malcolm's gotten where he is now by stepping on and pushing down others, often literally as our poor Prince here has learned, and I'm not the only one over at the garage who's fed up with it." Sam straightened up, rolled his head on his shoulders, and cracked his knuckles, left paw and then right. When he continued speaking his lips had curled back into a faint, slight snarl, just enough to be visible in the dim light of the room. Suddenly this was an entirely

different dog standing before them. “You two don’t have to participate if you don’t want, but it’ll be good to have you there.”

Prince frowned. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Of course it is.” Sam looked over at him. “But if I’m right, he’ll be the only one there. I’ll go in first just to make certain. Hey, speaking of – y’all got a pair of pliers anywhere?”

~ ~ ~

Prince really had no idea what to expect. Just like for the past few days he felt as though he were floating along in a dream, or watching someone else’s body in some gang crime movie. Before they had left he had slid into the shower to finally get cleaned up, and then as he approached the door it almost felt as though Moose understood what was happening, too, as the huge feral barked at the three of them just before they filed out of the apartment, then fixed Prince and Sam with a sharp, intelligent stare before the shepherd came forward, dropped to his knees, and offered some needed affection. Moose wagged his tail and licked at his muzzle, and only then did he “let” the three go.

From there it was back to the garage, with Prince aware that his nervousness and reluctance were both climbing steadily back up the closer they came. Gaz sat up in the front seat of Sam’s car, taking in the route and surroundings as they went. This was something he wouldn’t forget, Prince knew. As usual Sam parked down a few blocks, told the younger dogs to wait here, and then in a few minutes returned, slightly out of breath, with a few choice *implements* under his shoulder.

Gaz had found for him the pliers he had requested, needle-nose. Those rested atop the dashboard. With him now the rottweiler brought back a long, thick-bladed knife, which he handed by the handle to the wild dog in the passenger seat – “y’know, being a panther, he’s *awful* proud of his fur,” Sam explained, “and it’d be a fuckin’ shame if someone were to, oh I dunno, shave some of that off” – then, of course, the classic aluminum baseball bat, which he slid alongside the driver’s seat for himself. Then, once he sat back down behind the wheel, he turned around and caught Prince’s eye over the back of the seat.

“How about you?” the rottweiler said, voice low. “How are you feeling? If you want, I’ve got, um...”

He wiggled his paw. Between his fingers there he clutched a pair of handheld pruning shears. Immediately Prince thought of everything he could do with that – and felt nearly sick to his stomach. He shook his head.

Sam nodded. “No problem. This’ll be over and done with before you know it. But,” and he turned the key in the ignition and threw the parking brake, “Prince, you *know* this isn’t gonna just make everything better, all of a sudden.”

The shepherd swallowed, head turned to the window to watch the buildings and road as they went by. “I know.”

“It’s just the first step in getting there.”

The rottweiler drove them away from the garage and deeper into the twisting labyrinth of inner streets, still surprisingly crowded against what Prince had become accustomed back home. Or – his ears flicked

and lips tightened. *This* was home now, here with Gaz and Moose. There was simply nowhere else anymore, and there hadn't been in months.

The further they went, the more he felt his anticipation build up. Gaz was nervous, too: whenever Prince glanced over at him he saw the wild dog eyeing the knife Sam had given him, running his fingers along the flat or back of the blade, or turning it over in the passing streetlights to examine the metal. They were crossing over into portions of the city that Prince had never heard of, the streets unfamiliar in the depth of night and the signage and roads strange and obscure.

And then, suddenly, they arrived. Sam pulled up alongside one of the curbs, leaned over behind the seat again to execute an admirable job of parallel parking, and looked to each of the younger dogs in turn. Sam waited a moment, blinked, then nodded up at the building along the street, still easy and nonchalant.

"He'll be in there," he said, idly reaching for the pliers with one paw. "Another apartment complex. Third floor. Technically rented out, but nobody's living there – so he and some of his other cohorts use it for a spot to slam every now and then."

Gaz tilted his head. "Slam?"

"Yeah." Sam bumped the driver's side door open with his shoulder. "You'll wanna watch your step when we get in there. Last time he had me over to pick him up – fucker was so blasted out of his mind he couldn't take a step without falling over – there was, uh... broken bottles and, y'know. Used needles everywhere. Both his and others'. So, yeah, be careful."

The cold chill of city wind again wrapped its fingers around Prince when they stepped out of the car, fur still damp from his shower earlier. He wrapped his arms around himself and shivered, wishing he had taken a jacket. Gaz noticed, slid around the backside of the car, and rested an arm over the other dog's shoulder; Prince bumped his muzzle against the wild dog's shoulder and stepped up with him.

Each step felt like it came at a distance, up the curb, around the sidewalk to the side of the building, up the metal stairs of the fire escape. Half of a floor, then around again, then up the rest of the way to the first – and Prince felt his chest tighten with exhaustion and exertion pounded into him throughout these past few days. Another half, and another, and he had to pause and rest over the edge of the landing. Then another, and the last – and the door hung conveniently slightly ajar, a clinging, insistent acrid stink wafting out beneath a higher, almost fruity touch. Something synthetic and artificial, something foul and putrid.

It made Prince's nose curl. There was one odor that pierced through all of the others, something so close to the smell of burnt plastic yet distinctly different. From inside he could hear nothing beneath a low drone of music played through, naturally, low-quality speakers, airy and fuzzy. Sam slid his paw in between the door and threshold, careful not to brush it with his fingers, and pulled it slowly open.

Prince and Gaz peered inside – and both had the same instant reaction, shock mixed with revulsion and, for a moment, the same fear that had been so prevalent throughout the rest of the evening. The two shared a look, then each looked up to Sam, who put a finger to his lips and nodded inside again. *In here*, he mouthed. Gaz set his jaw, took in another breath – which made his nose wrinkle – then nodded, and moved to follow.

Prince did the same as well, only for the rottweiler's big paws to settle against his shoulders and hold him back. He looked down at him in that moment, muzzle tilted, eyes open and brows raised, looking into his eyes. The shepherd swallowed and shifted, uncertain; even though he had showered, and scrubbed at his fur and dug into his skin and soaked himself through this soap and scalding water, even though he had thumped his forehead against the wall and let the tears run down his cheeks hidden between the coursing water, he could still feel, and smell, and *taste* what all Malcolm had done to him these past two days. There was rage and fury, and fear and hatred, and frustration and humiliation and indignance and...

He thought of the pruning shears again, the two curved blades that snapped together into a snug union, black metal along the flat sharpened to a bright steel-grey at the edges. His heart froze in his chest.

Sam waited another moment, then released the younger dog's shoulders and turned to lead Gaz into the apartment. Prince waited where he was, let out his breath, and resisted the desire to peer in around the door and look inside, instead turning to rest himself over the fire escape landing. Below him stretched out more of the city, the sparkle of the bay just barely visible in the distance between ironically low-lying high-rises, warehouses, scummy run-down buildings and little residential sections far too small and tight to be comfortable. All the twinkling of the city lights, many of them still bright and full even in the dead of night; the constant rumbling hum of living bustle, car horns and engines, the hiss of the waves out in the distance, the occasional distant roar of a plane from the airport just across the way. He swallowed again, closed his eyes, tilted his head back, took in another breath-

-and then felt it jam in his throat like edged glass at the first sharp, sudden *ping* of Sam's aluminum bat. Then a second, and a third – and a strangled shout which, had he not already known, would not have sounded a thing like Malcolm's voice. Prince lowered his head and tried to squeeze his ears down against the noises: there was rustling, and scuffling, and the clatter of an empty bottle rolling across the floor. Gaz yelped, then muttered a curse under his breath – *thump, ping*. Heavy breathing, another shout, a grunt.

"Mother... *fucker*-" That was Gaz again. This time the *ping* was shortly followed by a crack and a thump. "I'll *kill* you. I'll – *fucking*-"

"Gaz!" Sam's voice, sharp yet low. "Hold – come on, hold it. Let me."

At once Prince so deeply wanted to peek in and see what was happening, but at the same time... he wrenched his eyes shut and pressed his forehead against the cold metal of the railing, trying to focus on that sensation instead. The stench stung at his nose, the sounds dug into his ears, images and scenarios flashed through his head.

"Move it, mate-" Gaz again. His accent sharpened when he was mad. "I jus' wanna talk with 'im. I *jus'* wanna-"

"I said *no*." There was another crash, this one sounding like plastic kicked across the floor, and the music stuttered to a stop. The silence afterwards floated heavily out from inside the apartment. Deep down beneath that, Prince could just barely hear wet, ragged breathing, interspersed with little coughs and chokes – though he tried so hard *not* to hear it. "Get his phone."

"Where the flyin' hell-"

"His pocket."

"Mate, I ain't aboutta-"

"Gaz. Now. He's unconscious." A pause, a grunt of exertion, another *ping* and a scuffle. "...Now he is. Take that to Prince. And, *don't*-" Sam lowered his voice again, just barely audible. "*Don't look at what's in there*. Please. For his sake. Pass is one-two-two-five, then two-one-eight-two. Got that?"

Prince lifted his head again, trying to clear his mind of everything that he had just indirectly witnessed. A moment later Gaz trudged back out of the apartment, clearly winded, frazzled, and still quite pissed. A thin trickle of blood oozed from his nose; he reached up and wiped at it, and as he did, Prince saw that there was more than just shimmering black fur stuck to the blade of his knife.

"Here." He held the phone, already unlocked, out to Prince. "Sam told me to give this to you. It's the guy's phone. What'll that..."

With a shaky thumb Prince opened up the *saved files* and – felt his heart drop and the world lurch around him again. It was all here. Everything throughout today and yesterday, from all the times Malcolm had come in to take pictures and record, along with other events that he had already blocked out of his mind... and instances from times he hadn't *known* he was being recorded. Stretching back days, weeks... the entirety of the month. The first time he had snuck off into the bathroom, taken from a crack in the door; when he had had a few moments to himself in the backroom, from through the window; Moose, and Moose again, and Moose on top of Prince, and... he reached up, tapped at the folder icon, then without a second thought, *delete all*. Both dogs watched as the progress bar filled up, as the numbers climbed... and then the screen cleared, with a little animated thumbs-up signaling the completion of the process.

Prince swallowed, thumb still resting on the screen. He turned it in his paw a bit, looked up across the city before him, pressed harder against the screen – then gasped gently when the claw of his thumb popped into the surface, a spiderweb of cracks spreading out from that spot. He looked down, shifted the claw around, pressed harder; now a trail of inky black spread out from that point as the pixels fired and died, little shards of material dancing out, spreading across the screen... and then the whole thing flashed and darkened.

Gaz rested a paw on his shoulder. "Y'alright there?"

It took Prince a moment to respond. He glanced at his friend beside him, tried to say something, stopped, and nodded instead. Then he rested over the railing again, the dying phone facedown against the metal – and then, all of this restless energy and frustration boiling inside of him, threw his arm back over his shoulder, clutched the phone tight, and heaved it as hard as he could. It flew through the air, spinning as it went, then cracked against the building across the street – bounced off a windowsill – pinged against the pole of a streetlamp – and shattered in the middle of the road.

And the two stood there side by side, Gaz with his arm still around him, the shepherd shaking gently. Now his mind was just blank, empty of thought, devoid of anything. He liked it that way. A little while later another rustling from the apartment caught their attention, with Prince's heart leaping into his

throat and Gaz swinging around, knife held up – but it was just Sam, chest also heaving and sweat slicking his dark fur. In one paw he loosely held the baseball bat. Prince avoided looking at it.

Sam swallowed. “So, ah...” He glanced over his shoulder, grimaced a bit, and reached a footpaw around to pull the door shut. “So y’all know, that’s Malcolm’s *main* phone. Always got that on him, though most of his business is done through burners. Where’s...?”

Prince looked away. Gaz patted his back.

“Down there,” the wild dog answered, “in probably like... two hundred pieces now.”

“Oh.” Sam raised his eyebrows. “Perfect. I was gonna suggest that. Literally everything important to him is – *was* on that.” He reached up and scratched at his chin. “I might go down there and snap the card just to make certain... ah, well. Oh – one thing.”

Prince scooted a little closer to Gaz. Between the two of them, the wild dog reached over, found Prince’s paw, and squeezed it tight in his own, fingers entwining for a second. Both of them reared back in surprise, however, at what Sam pulled out of his pocket there, clutched between the teeth of the pliers – a bent, twisted, stained flash of glittering gold. It took a bit of elbow grease to unstick the metal from the mouth, though, and when he lifted it up he made sure to wipe it off on his shirt first.

Sam turned his head, pulled his lips back on a finger, and held the golden tooth in place over one of his fangs. Thick, bright blood rolled down the side of his thumb. “What do y’all think? Yes or no?” After neither of them responded, he huffed again and wrapped it back up in his palm. “Maybe not. It’s real gold, though. I can probably have Scott run it for me... y’all wanna head back? I can drop you off at your place, or we can clean up the garage a bit more.”

Prince had to clear his throat. He felt... *something*. As he had figured, he felt no better about the situation than he had before, but there was definitely something there. “What’s – gonna happen now?”

“Now? Well, *now*...” Sam brushed past them – he smelled of sweat and the same burnt-plastic stink from inside the building – and started down the stairs. “I need to track down Vince and Leo. I kept Scott in the loop the whole time, and Kia took care of Tony. Maritza’s just in it for the cash and the dick, which,” and he glanced over his shoulder, “if you’re willing to bring Moose back...”

Gaz coughed. “What about – Malcolm? Certainly he’s not gonna...?”

“Gonna what? He’s got nobody to step on. Hopefully can’t stand up at all, if I aimed my swings right.” The rottweiler chuckled. “I saw you swipe his wallet, too. Good boy. We won’t be seeing him back at the garage for, ah... at least a month, I’d wager, if at all. And if he does come back, well...”

As they descended the stairs Prince looked back out across the city. The stench from the apartment had again, thankfully, been replaced by the general clinging odor of the city, gasoline and exhaust and tar and who knows what else. Like a dream, these past few days trickled away, specific flashes and fragments remaining stuck in his head but still blissfully distant, at least for now. The metal felt cold beneath his paw; he looked out and down along the street, trying to find the glitter of the phone and its shattered screen, but couldn’t.

Sam hefted the bat over his shoulder as he took the last step down. "Like I said," he went on, "I'm good with people. And I know just how to treat a repeat customer. Speaking of – will you be joining us, Gaz?"

The wild dog's ears flicked, and he paused where he stood. His mouth dropped open; he looked from Sam, to Prince, then back to Sam. "I..."

"And you, Prince? Of course, there's nothing *keeping* you here. I understand if this is something you want to put behind you. Scott can probably get you in with his cousin's company – it pays a bit less, but it's legitimate, and it's also just a few blocks down, so you could come by to visit. Think on it. Y'all wanna head back?"

Cold cement pressed up against his footpaws once he stepped down the last bit of the ladder. Prince wiped his paws off on his pants legs, took another breath of cold, faintly acrid city air, and straightened up to his full height. "Sam."

The rottweiler looked over his shoulder at him, face calm and serene right beside the crimson-slicked length of the bat.

"Y'wanna stay for a late dinner?"