

Finn hummed to himself as he walked up the path to his brother's house, boots crunching in the snow, his breath puffing out with every exhalation as he approached the front door. A series of knocks caused an eruption of commotion from within, shouts and barks mingling together as footsteps rapidly got louder until the door was pulled open. Finn gave a little wave and a crooked grin before saying, "Did I come at a bad time?"

The man standing before Finn was older, but not by much, his body more solidly built (if not softer in the middle) than his lankier, taller brother. He grinned right back and wrapped an arm around Finn, pulling him into a bear hug, laughing. "Aaaaaaah, its never a bad time when you're here Finn! Now get inside, I'm not paying to heat the world."

"So you've just fully morphed into Dad then, Dale?" Finn slyly asked. "That joke sounded just like him."

"The Dad jokes come for us all, even if we're not dads." Dale said solemnly, hand over his heart. "You'll understand one day, little brother."

"Oh goody, literally I can't wait." Finn said, rolling his eyes. "With all the noise in here I was expecting a crowd."

"Linda's out at the moment, picking up some last minute things for today, and I told Marie to take Duke into the other room but I'm not sure how long that-"

He was interrupted as a door BANGED open, a volley of barks ripping through the air along with a chaotic jangling sound. "Duke no! Daddy said we had to wait!"

A large St Bernard suddenly turned the corner, barreling towards Finn and Ray, a little girl following in his wake, her little steps inadequate to keep pace with the loping strides of the massive dog. Ray moved fast, intercepting the dog as he leaped, the heavy front paws nearly knocking him over as Duke energetically licked Dale's face. Finn watched in amusement for a bit before turning to the little girl, crouching down and opening his arms. "Hey squirt! How about a hug from your favorite uncle?"

Marie giggled and rushed forward, flinging herself into Finn's arms, nuzzling into his chest. "I missed you Uncle Finn! You hafta visit more! Duke gets sad when you're not around too!"

The big dog whined, as if on cue, staring up at Finn with the kind of eyes that only dogs can give. Finn grinned and said, "Careful what you wish for! I might be around so much you'll get sick of me!"

Marie shook her head, hugging Finn harder and said, "Nuh uh! Never!"

She released her uncle and climbed onto Duke's back, easily able to ride him due to his great size. She waved at Finn and said, "Come on, follow me! I wanna show you the new swing set daddy set up!"

"In a minute, squirt, just need to talk to your dad for a bit first." Finn said, waving as his niece rode off like a cowboy into the sunset.

"Whats on your mind Finn?" Dale asked, once Marie had sped out of the room.

"I'm getting a job." Finn said, hanging his coat up in the closet before folding his scarf. "Starting

Monday.”

“Really? That's great to hear! You're not giving up...”

“No way! I've got dreams, I've got plans, this isn't forever!” Finn said quickly. “My art is still my passion but, you know...”

“Junkyard sculptures don't sell?”

“Scrap Art.” Finn said, glaring at his grinning brother. “You're going to eat your words when this whole town has my art all over it.”

“I'll put your biggest piece right out front on my lawn when you make it big. So what's the job?”

“The garage. They needed someone who can use a torch and said I could just learn the rest. I'll get some steady cash flow, still get to use my torch, and they said I could take unusable parts to help with my art. Pretty much wins all around.”

“Sounds great! We have to celebrate. Once Marie is down for the night we'll go and get a drink, on me.”

“Don't try and take that back later.” Finn said with a wolfish grin.

“Never. Tonight is your night. Things are going to start looking up for you.”

Dale's hand clapped Finn on his shoulder, Finn's eyes snapping open as he gasped. It was murky and gloomy, barely any light filtering in from a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling in a different room. Finn groaned as he sat up, touching his face, grimacing at the wetness on his cheeks. Those memories, those faces... again they came to him. Who were they? It didn't matter. They were part of a life that wasn't his anymore... if they had ever been. His master was very clear about Finn's position in life: dog, pet, subservient to a fault. Anything else was lies and distractions. Finn rose to his feet, kicking aside enormous curls of shaved wood as he shuffled over to the bars of his cage, wrapping his fingers around the cool steel. He peered into the darkness, trying to see if he was alone or not. The room was still but his master was quiet. Too often Finn had thought he was alone only for his master to appear, catching him in some defiant act. His thoughts were beginning to stray. He could feel the scar across his face burning as he remembered the last time his thoughts had strayed. His master had said he could see the light in Finn's eyes and that was no good. Finn trembled as he realized people were out there, people who knew him, who had been expecting him, people who could find him, people who could save--

An inarticulate snarl, somewhere between a roar of anger and a yelp of pain ripped from Finn's mouth as he reared back, slamming his head into the metal bars, over and over again. "GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT! LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!"

He screamed and he raged as he slammed his head against the bars of his cage until blood dripped from his head, staining the bars and raining down onto the floor around him. The thoughts slowly dispersed... the faces faded... and Finn lowered himself to the ground, sobbing. "Leave me alone... leave me alone..."

"Poor little Finn." A cold voice said in the darkness, twin pinpricks of silver light appearing within the

gloom. "Those dreams are such a torment. Maybe I could help you. A pin prick in just the right place could be just the thing..."

"No!" Finn said, jumping to his feet and moving backward, away from the dark, from that voice. "No, please master, I'll be good. They're gone, whoever they were, I'm... I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine."

His voice slowly grew quieter as he repeated the mantra to himself, Darren slowly coming into view as he crouched down in front of the cage. "Very good Finn. Very good indeed. One day soon I'm sure those dreams will stop for good. I think you just need a little incentive."

Finn's voice turned to a desperate whimper, his mantra turning into a plea for mercy as Darren slowly opened the cage, his hand reaching for Finn.

The End