

Team Player

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I had to smile as I watched Christian interact with Tasha, seeing him loosen up and treat her with genuine adoration. He'd seemed so out of place here in Alaska, having made his way through the desolate backcountry to check up on his childhood friend. He'd clearly been expecting my living quarters to be far more austere than he found, though I knew Christian still felt out of place without city conveniences at his disposal.

The moment he'd arrived, the dogs had of course been overjoyed at seeing a new visitor. He'd been a little overwhelmed at their jumping and pawing at him in their enthusiastic greetings, so I'd led him into the sitting room to escape the ruckus. We'd found Tasha there, and Christian had seemed a little taken aback at seeing her quite at home, curled up in one of the chairs. He'd made little mention of it however, and had taken his spot on the couch, doing his best to ignore the tufts of husky fur attaching themselves to his clothing. Tasha worked her usual magic on him in short order, and soon he was sharing his tea biscuits with her, patting her head gently as she smiled up at him with those ice-blue eyes.

Eventually, Tasha had gotten her fill of attention, and had nuzzled his hand affectionately before excusing herself from the room quietly.

"Wonderful dogs, aren't they Christian?" I remarked as Tasha was leaving.

"Yes John, they are quite unique, but a little rambunctious" he replied.

I just smiled at that. I'd spent more time than I cared to remember around huskies in general, and these ones in particular. I could certainly appreciate his statement.

"Well yes, they can be a bit of a handful at times, but that's what also makes them so perfect for this climate; they're very intelligent and independent. Out in the wilderness you need a team of dogs that can not only look out for themselves, but for you as well."

Seeing Christian's acquiescent nod, I continued. "Not only are they smart to begin with, but I got them from a breeder who promised me these dogs were smarter than average, and quite loyal as well... I have to say I agree with him on both counts. They took a bit of getting used to, but they took a shine to me and we've made a good team. It's funny, but once you've been around them for a while, you can really tell how smart they are... We almost communicate on a certain level."

I read Christian's dubious expression and smiled. "Oh, nothing earth-shattering, but their moods are easy to read, and sometimes they even get a bit more than that across..." I paused briefly, then continued. "Anyway, they were with me when I found that lucky strike, and if it hadn't been for them, I would've never gotten it all out of the backcountry. I'd never seen so much gold hauled out of one place before!"

"That's what I don't understand, John," Christian interrupted. "If you struck it rich, why are you still up here? Why haven't you come back to civilization and lived it up? It's what you

always dreamed about."

I smiled and gestured around the well stocked cabin. "Oh, things here aren't that bad. It may not be as nice as a house down in the lower forty- eight, but this place still has some things to offer, especially if you have the money for it... Besides, the dogs like it here."

"You mean you're staying here for the dogs? You've become that attached to them?"

"Well, not exactly, it's more like it's the other way around," I let out a small chuckle, glad to share my unusual story with him. "You see, the dogs had become very fond of me. I was planning on selling them to another prospector, even though I liked having them around. However, it seems they had other ideas. That night, after hauling the gold back to the cabin, I'd unloaded the sled, taken care of the dogs, then gone off to bed, ready to make the trip to the assayer's office in the morning. Heh, imagine my surprise when I woke up to find the gold missing."

"The dogs... they took it?" The incredulous look on Christian's face was enough to make me laugh once again.

"Yup, I told you they were smart, didn't I?"

"But why, what use would they have for the money?"

"None whatsoever, my friend, except that they knew that's why I'd be leaving, and they didn't want that. It seems they would much rather stay with me than have a new master."

"So the gold is gone? It can't be!"

"No, of course not, they weren't that mean to me, they just played a little trick to keep me around... You see, they hid the gold out in the woods somewhere. They've hid it quite well as I haven't been able to find it. I tried following them a couple of times, but they'd split up and run in different directions to confuse me. Oh, they had fun with that game."

"So, they're keeping you hostage here then?" Christian asked, his voice ringing with disbelief.

"Oh no, not hostage, I could leave anytime I wanted to, but then I wouldn't have the money now would I? They bring me some of it from time to time, enough to live quite comfortably here, but if I ever want to see it all, I understand they want me to look after them for the rest of their lives. It's a pretty good life, and the summers here can be quite nice. I enjoy having the dogs around too, they're a fun team, and I know I'll miss them when they do finally leave me my inheritance..."

I was interrupted as the door was pushed open and Tasha made her return to the room, her ears perked up at attention and her tail wagging merrily behind her. With a cursory glance in my direction, she trotted over to Christian and dropped something in his lap. Picking it up, his eyes went wide as he examined the small lump of gold.

He turned to stare at me, while I chuckled, having figured that was what she'd been up to. "See? Tasha is quite taken with you! It's not every day we get visitors here. She likes you and wanted to repay your kindness." I urged him to keep the thing. "Go on, take it. There's plenty

more where that came from, even if I can't get at it just now..."

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