



"I don't think this one is going to have cover quotes... wait, what?"

— No name

Too Late

amenon

About the author

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We are further compelled to note that, at the time this latest manuscript mysteriously materialized in our offices, Miss Silverlock is known to have been attending an awards ceremony, with a great many witnesses, including some of our very own editorial staff, and can thus be said to have an absolutely airtight alibi.

As she can use magic, we are not sure what, exactly, that is supposed to prove.

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Foreword

This book contains not one, but *two* sequels to *Entertaining Possibilities*. In writing EP, I unwittingly asked myself a question, and found I owed myself an answer. Payment materialized as *Two of a Kind*, then known by its working title *Too Late*. That story wasn't originally intended for release; I just didn't think it was the kind of story I could leave off with, not after EP. But I felt I had to write the story, so I did, and having done, chucked it at avwolf—as one does. While writing it, I had raised another question, another possibility to entertain, but it wasn't a question I *had* to answer. I was free and clear, with some new ideas that I could break out at need; perhaps, say, to celebrate the completion of *Desire for Orders*, or some other suitably worthy occasion.

So *of course* avwolf, that blessed, damnable *genius*, had to go and find the *exact* right thing to say to draw the story out of me. And so, I wrote *Full House*, completing this tome. Writing it also gave me the opportunity to release *Two of a Kind* without it needing to stand alone, and here we are.

That is how there came to be not one, but *two* sequels to *Entertaining Possibilities*. The stories are complementary alternatives, showing two different branches of canon, though at different times. Don't get distracted by the fact that one is five times longer than the other; different stories are different lengths. I'm presenting them as equal, and will staunchly claim to have no preference myself.

I might not even be lying.

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Two of a Kind

Dedication

To avwolf; For courage over wisdom.

And to everyone who liked *Entertaining Possibilities*.

Brace for whiplash.

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Two of a Kind

Keith sat on the steps of the porch, looking out at the autumn evening. The sky was perfectly clear, the sun about to set behind the mountains. There was a crisp chill in the air, but he didn't let it bother him. The cold almost felt good to him. Appropriate.

He was out of tears. For now.

The near wards chimed. Someone *was* coming. He didn't know who. Natani wasn't there to tell him.

Maybe he wasn't completely out of tears.

The tears had run their course again by the time his ears caught the sound of a horse's hoofs. Before long, his eyes found the rider. Coming up where the road had been. Basitin, by the ears, and not in uniform. Clearly not Maddie, either. He watched a while, becoming increasingly certain as the figure drew closer. Of course. And on a white horse, no less. He almost smiled, but resumed his study of the skies, only watching the approach from the corner of his eye. The rider dismounted a ways away, and after a moment the horse started plodding back the way they had come. The rider came the rest of the way on foot, coming to a stop a few feet away.

The figure cleared its throat. "Hello, Keith."

Keith looked, and to his surprise found two healthy eyes looking back. He was older now, yet somehow looked more like the Nick he remembered from his childhood than Master General Alaric had. Keith briefly considered the possibility of it being some obscure relation he'd never heard of... but no. Here, now, it had to be him. Wearing light travelling clothes such as any Eastern basitin might. Unarmed, just a simple satchel hanging at his side, and with no rank insignia. But it had to be him.

Keith's voice was a little rusty. "Hullo, Alaric." He nodded at the spot beside him on the steps. "Have a seat."

Keith half-expected Alaric to brush up against him or to give his foot a nudge, but he maintained a polite distance. Keith took a moment to contemplate Alaric's feet, properly wrapped, next to his dishabille ones. Well. Maybe

not how he would have chosen to appear on this occasion, but couldn't exactly stake any great claim to propriety these days. Or most others. And Alaric had certainly always had a unique approach on the subject.

Maybe it would have been his choice, after all.

After seeing that Alaric had settled down, Keith gave him a nod and went back to watching the skies. Alaric sighed. "Seriously? You're not even going to ask?"

Keith shrugged. "I had my suspicions that you were alive." He turned to look at Alaric. "You *are* alive, right?"

Alaric grinned. "Ah! That's actually an interesting legal question. But," and he reached out to touch Keith on the arm. Solid. Warm. Lingering just a bit longer than propriety would allow. Alaric. "I *am* flesh and blood and actually sitting here, yes." He reached down to rub at his leg with a wince. "Very flesh and blood. I guess I should be glad you didn't kick me in the shins. Suspicions?"

"Well, for one I never saw the body. And nobody ever owned up to putting that rose on your coffin..."

"Nice touch, don't you think?"

"... and of course, those shipments just kept on coming. I never could track down the source."

"Too much?"

Keith cleared his throat. "Well, there isn't anything left over."

Alaric whistled appreciatively.

Keith was silent for a moment. "But, mostly it's just... you *planned* for the possibility of losing that fight. You *used* it. So I thought.... maybe."

It was Alaric's turn to pause a moment. He looked away. "Nothing about that day went as planned. Not the Templar, not the other generals dying, not falling off that damn bridge. But the situation presented... unique... opportunities." He sighed. "I was scrambling for days to stay ahead of matters, improvising for all I was worth. At least the King survived. I would have had to scrap it all to put myself on the throne, otherwise."

Keith's eyebrows shot up at that. True enough, the Master General would have been the natural successor. "No desire to rule?"

Alaric shook his head. "No. And I never..." He looked Keith in the eyes. There was pain there. "Keith, I never want to have power over you again. Not

after...”

“Not going to blame the tower?”

“No.” Alaric sighed. “And even if I did, the tower is my fault too. It was Alabaster’s mistake, but he made it on my watch. And it nearly cost us everything. And... Alabaster may have pushed for your orders, but I’m the one who gave them to you. And I thought I was being so goddamn *clever*, too. Ordering you to betray your friends.” He swallowed. “Ordering you to kill Natani.”

Ah. “I guess I should be angry at you for that...” Keith couldn’t help but smile a little at Alaric’s expression. “Look... I don’t want to get into that right now. But if I’m angry at you for anything,” and yes, there was a spark of anger there, “it’s letting me live with having killed you.” Alaric opened his mouth to reply, but Keith forestalled him. “And I don’t want to get into *that* right now, either. Okay?”

Alaric nodded. “... okay.”

“Tell me, how was Maddie doing?”

*

That question had implications. “Furious with me. I tried to gauge if she was worried about you, but if she was she hid it well. She’s grown so much, it’s hard to... it wasn’t just about me, was it? Or you?”

Keith shook his head. “She was here at the end. They were close.”

“Ah.” So she *had* been crying. Rethink, rethink, rethink. “Well, she was certainly hard at work. Had the entire embassy spinning like a top. Took me half a day just to get to her. I think she was angling to start something with the West embassy. If that’s good or bad... I don’t know. Sorry.”

A flicker of a smile. “More good than bad, as long as she remembers where the lines are. And she will. She went back because she wanted to do *something*, and I just ‘wanted to sit here feeling miserable.” The smile returned, and deepened as Keith glanced at Alaric’s shins. Then disappeared. “She was sure you were dead. I had my suspicions, but... she was sure. It won’t be easy to make that right.”

Alaric winced again. “She made her opinion known. I thought I wasn’t taking much of a risk going to her, but I nearly had to beg just to be put on your mercy. She had a few ideas of what to do to me. Said I only got by on a technicality. What was that about?”

“Oh, I told her years ago that you were to be admitted if you showed up. She thought I was joking. Or crazy.”

Keith once again turned to watching the darkening skies. Alaric hesitated, and the silence had time to grow. The warmth of travelling was fading, and he was feeling the chill in the air. He adjusted his cloak tighter around himself and wondered at Keith, apparently fine in his shirtsleeves. This wasn't what he'd been expecting. Anger, gloom, even tears, but Keith just seemed... tired. Muted, apart from the odd flash of grim humor. So was this better, or worse?

How was it that Keith was always at the center of his designs, and yet the piece he could least understand? Well, he was here. Nothing to do but to keep poking at the hornet's nest. He thought back to his encounter with Madelyn Adelaide, and took one of the available openings. “She also had some choice things to say about my showing up now.”

Keith glanced at him, and Alaric saw another brief flash of amusement. “I can imagine. I think I understand it, though.” Keith looked at him, and Alaric could feel he was being closely scrutinized. “You didn't want to come, did you?”

Could he get away with lying? He thought he didn't need to. “No. Not yet.” He let some of his sympathy show, hoping it wouldn't insult. “Never for this.”

Keith nodded at him slowly, but the scrutiny continued. “How did you know to come?”

Ah. He'd been worried about this one. Dissemble, dissemble... “I read your—well, Maddie's—weekly reports.” Keith's raised eyebrow spoke volumes. “Oh, she isn't spying on you for anyone.” He paused to consider. “Not that I know of, anyway. Seems unlikely. But she has certain... habits. The report that brought me here was a masterpiece. I had to read it three times before I realized she made no mention of you whatsoever. That's... only happened once before.”

“And when was this report dated?”

Dammit. “The fourth.”

Time enough for the report to reach him, or him to get here, but never both. But Keith just nodded again. “You're well-positioned, to be reading my mail.”

Alaric shrugged. “I report directly to the King.”

A small smile from Keith. “And does the King know that?”

When had he gotten so *suspicious*? Alaric pulled out his best indignation. “Yes, of course!” This seemed to satisfy Keith, who turned away again. He could have left it there, but couldn’t resist the temptation. “I had to tell her eventually.”

Keith’s reaction made it worth it. Maybe that was how he needed to do this. Fall into his old persona, be who Keith expected him to be. And damn the consequences.

“Keith...” his hesitation caught Keith’s interest. “I *am* happy to see you.” *And happy that you don’t hate me.*

Keith gave him a rueful smile. “Me too. I think. It’s a little hard to tell these days. Sorry about the reception. I wasn’t expecting anyone for a while.” He sighed. “But welcome, for what it’s worth, to where my home used to be. Let’s get you in out of the cold, Post-Master General.”

“... Not that it’s much warmer inside. I was airing it out for most of the day.”

Indeed, Alaric barely felt a change as he closed the door behind him. Keith showed him the house, and he saw that everything was squared away and freshly cleaned. The place barely felt lived in. With a twinge of sadness, he realized that was the point. *Maybe it was easier for him to be outside.*

One of the rooms was almost cramped with a large desk, but curiously no chairs. It had something of the feel of his old study. Keith seemed to notice his interest. “That’s the den.” Alaric opened his mouth, but Keith continued, glancing at him. “Never saw much use. Too many puns.” He closed his mouth, sheepish, and thought he saw a little smile play on Keith’s lips. “We used the sitting room instead.”

Indeed, in the sitting room the furniture looked comfortable, the bookshelves enticing, but even here everything was cold and clean. Maybe especially here. Even the fireplace was spotless. Keith started moving on, and Alaric followed. “Maybe a fire...?”

Keith’s voice was neutral. “I’m out of firewood.”

“Ah.” He hesitated for half a heartbeat. “You never did do things by halves.”

Keith came to a dead stop, and Alaric almost walked into him.

“Did you seriously just...” Keith laughed. Of course he had. He shook his head and turned to face Alaric. Who was all cheerful poker face. Of course. “That was... Zen would have loved that one.” Keith grinned. “You two would have gotten along. Natani would have...” his voice faltered. ‘Natani would have.’ There had been no need for words, those first few days with Maddie. She understood. But now he needed words again, and with words came new ways to hurt. He didn’t look away or fight the tears, even as he saw Alaric’s face fill with concern. It was something he had promised to himself. “That was the... first time I’ve spoken those words.” He managed to get the words out through his sobs. “I’ll be saying them for the rest of my life.”

Through his tears, he saw Alaric hesitate—and then reach out to place a hand on his shoulder, giving him a small squeeze. Keith was grateful for the touch, for the impropriety, for the cause of it. He was crying, and Alaric wasn’t looking away.

Words. Keith went on, haltingly. “The mornings are the worst. I wake up and... Natani... I’ll...” he found it easier to speak about the both of them. Perhaps they were together again. There would at least be something right about that. “They’re both gone now. I’ll never... never speak to them again. Never see them, or hear their voices. Smell their scents. Feel their touch. Never again. *Never.*”

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If Keith had more to say, he could no longer form the words. Alaric squeezed his shoulder harder, aching for a way to help. He had nothing. But something had been entrusted to him. “Keith...” his voice sounded rough in his ears. He cleared his throat. It didn’t help. “Keith, I have something I’m supposed to give you now.” He fished the small package out of his pocket. “Maddie gave this to me. Said I was to give it to you when... anyway, she said to tell you it’s from a ‘Mr. Wuffypants.’”

Keith’s eyes shot wide and the sobs subsided. He wiped the tears from his eyes, then hesitantly reached for the package. Alaric handed it over, withdrawing his other hand from Keith’s shoulder. What *was* this, to have such an effect? He watched as Keith carefully opened the package, not risking any damage to the contents. What emerged was a piece of paper and... it took Alaric a moment to make sense of it, but he realized it was two tufts of fur; each bound

at one end, then both bound together. He thought he recognized Natani's color. The other would be Zen, then. Keith looked at the paper and laughed, then brought the tufts to his nose. A look of wonder came over him. "Zen..." his voice was wistful. "When could they have..."

The instructions had been specifically 'When he's crying about *them*.' "It's from them both?"

Keith handed him the piece of paper. The only text on it said 'We love you', but there was a rather rude drawing in the corner.

Keith laughed again. It was a good sound. "That's Natani's handwriting, but the drawing is *definitely* Zen. How long ago could they have... the scent is preserved perfectly. But then again, magic." He shook his head. "Nothing is supposed to remain. To have done this..." He looked at Alaric with such an expression of joy it made his heart ache. "Nick, I love them so much."

He'd known, of course, but for the first time he felt like he understood a little what it had really been like. What had been lost. "Keith..." Alaric reached for something that would let Keith see that he understood. He found his vision blurring with tears. "Keith, you'll see them again."

Keith smiled at him. "What's this? Are you the Philosopher General, now?"

Alaric wiped his tears. "You will. If there's any justice, you will."

Keith just looked at him for a long moment, then smiled. There were tears in both their eyes. "Perhaps I will. Thank you, Nick." He let out a long breath. "Now, I think I could do with some exercise. How prepared would you say you feel right now?"

Keith led him to the disused guest room, then decided the light was fading too fast and went to get a lamp. Alaric surveyed the room. All the furniture had been pushed up against the walls, leaving a large open space. There was certainly room enough for a friendly fight, if you left throws out of it. Not the first time it was put to this use, then. Like the rest of the house he'd seen, it was spotless. He removed his cloak, and his more fragile—or volatile—belongings, and made a pile in one corner, then stretched his limbs and tested his freedom of movement. No problems. He rather thought he could use the exercise. It would serve to get his body warm again. As long as it didn't get too warm. He sighed, thinking back to long ago times.

Keith returned with the lamp and went to set it down near Alaric's belongings. Maybe not the best idea. "Oh, I've got rum there."

Keith quirked a smile at him and took the lantern to another corner instead. "Maybe a drink after?"

Rum or no rum, knocking that lamp over would probably still lead to the whole place going up in flames. Something to keep in mind.

Alaric nodded. "I thought you could use one. Though..." he looked at Keith, trying to get a handle on him again. He'd been crying, yes, but... "I don't think that's quite right. But maybe you would like one?"

Another smile. "Sounds like a plan." Keith took his stance, opposite Alaric. "Face and groin off limits?"

Alaric nodded his agreement, and they began. Slowly at first, taking each other's measure. Alaric wasn't in his best martial condition, but he would have still counted himself among the best ten or fifteen on the island, armed or unarmed. He found himself getting pushed harder and harder as they picked up the pace, and wondered if that might have been too naive of him. Keith fought with a style seemingly all his own, though occasionally some flash of basitin orthodoxy could be seen; usually delivered with devastating efficiency. In truth, the fight was friendlier than just the rules would have suggested; the touches were mostly light, advantages attained weren't pushed far, and by unspoken agreement they kept the light fairly positioned. The balance between them shifted multiple times as they adapted to each other. Alaric eventually stopped keeping score and let himself get lost in the exhilaration; it had been a while since he had sparred at this level. He found himself trying out some of Keith's moves, and thought he could glimpse the method in the madness. There were definitely some things here that he could use, especially against someone too set in their ways... he found Keith doing something much the same, his style quickly shifting, almost familiar in one exchange, almost alien in the next. The intensity kept increasing, the exchanges becoming extended, more and more often leading to grappling and even outright wrestling. Alaric didn't *think* that was his doing, but soon had no time to think at all.

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Keith heaved himself off Alaric and lay on the floor, staring at the ceiling, gasping for breath. He felt happy. It was... it reminded him of the times they

had wrestled together as kids. Until it had started to feel less than innocent. He gave a sigh for his younger self. “Do you remember when—”

“Yes.”

Keith smiled to himself. “You didn’t listen to the question.”

He could hear the grin in Alaric’s voice. “Won’t change the answer.”

That rang true. “Rum?”

“Rum.” He could hear Alaric getting up, and soon his friend was standing over him, looking down quizzically. Keith extended his arm with a grin, and Alaric clasped it to pull him up. Neither of them let go quite as quickly as propriety would have dictated.

Keith led the way to the kitchen, holding the lamp. It was truly night now, and while the skies were clear and the moon almost full, its light didn’t reach everywhere. He set the lamp on the table and rummaged around for glasses. After a moment of consideration, he also hauled up a large jug of water.

“Have a seat. Do you want anything to eat?”

Alaric set his bottle—Keith saw it was the good stuff, and plenty of it—on the table and sat down on one of the long benches. “I’m good, thanks.”

Keith settled down opposite him. Between them were four glasses, a good deal of rum, and enough water to live to tell the tale. “Give me half a glass to start.”

Alaric did, and poured himself the same amount. When the bottle was back on the table, Keith took his glass and threw it back in one swallow.

The coughing fit and the tears in his eyes weren’t quite as planned. Alaric grinned at him, but followed his lead. He handled it rather better.

Keith got his coughing under control. The stuff kicked like a mule. “Just felt like doing that. Give me a full one next, and I’ll be more careful with it.”

He looked at Alaric, pouring, and wondered. Couldn’t he just put this off for tonight? It could easily go badly, and he was enjoying himself for the first time since... but no. He sighed, and Alaric looked at him curiously.

Keith looked him in the eye. “Okay, I’ve got a few minutes before that hits me. Now, let me see that necklace of yours.”

Alaric covered well, but he could see that he’d startled him. Keith shook his head and gave him a rueful smile. “I’ve got some experience being poked with the things. Out with it.”

Alaric sighed and reached into the neck of his shirt, pulling out the mana

necklace. He set it down in the middle of the table. Seven crystals. Fairly high quality, Keith thought, not that he was an expert. All of them charged.

“Huh. I was sure...” he looked at Alaric again. He looked a little wary. “... are these all of your crystals?”

Alaric snorted, then laughed. “Yes. Yes, they are. I started out with seven—” Keith was about to object “—*those* seven, and I’m planning to go back with those same seven, and with all of them charged. With their *original* charge. And I’m not planning on using any other form of magic, either. Satisfied?”

Keith considered this for a moment, forcing sobriety, then nodded.

Alaric shook his head. “When did you get so... *precise*?”

Keith grinned at him. “Hey, you’re the one who made me a diplomat.”

Alaric smiled back. “I’ve created a monster. You were never supposed to leave, you know.”

Keith’s head was beginning to swim a little, but he gathered his focus. “So it’s just a precaution?”

Alaric nodded. “Yeah. I have it on pretty good authority that I can handle it, but...” he grimaced. “I don’t exactly like to trust it, after my first experiences. So I avoid using it as much as I can. But...”

Keith nodded. “It’s too useful to throw away.”

He didn’t think Alaric still having magic would have explained the eye, anyway. From what he knew, that wasn’t something you did for yourself. So for him to not have used any magic, and yet be here in impossible time... Maddie couldn’t even have been back in Wreathwood for all that long; not even that leg of the journey added up. He thought back to Alaric’s horse, and smiled. Maybe it hadn’t been symbolic, after all.

Alaric looked surprised. “So I’m in the clear?”

Keith nodded. “Yeah. Though I’ll be checking those before you leave.” Alaric rolled his eyes, so he grinned and added “And all of Natani’s, too.”

“I shall humbly acquiesce to your search.”

Keith snorted. “I do get it. There are times I would have risked insanity. But...” he narrowed his eyes at Alaric. “I would have kicked your ass if you’d used that to get to me.”

“Kicked *my* ass? Did you hit your head just now? Was I too rough on you?”

Keith grinned. “I’d say we both kicked some ass.”

Alaric returned the grin. When he moved to pick the necklace back up,

Keith put a hand on his arm. “Please be as careful as you can be.”

Alaric looked at his hand, then at him, then cleared his throat. He put his other hand on top of Keith’s. “I will.”

Keith held his gaze for a while, then nodded. He gently extracted his hand to raise a toast, and Alaric mirrored the motion. “To kicking some ass!”

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“I would’a, you know.”

“Wha?”

“Used magic. To get here. If ‘twas any faster.”

“... thanks.”

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. .
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“Still kick your ass, though.”

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Keith looked up at the moon and the stars and pissed away with the wild abandon of a happy drunk. He laughed softly to himself. Not the evening he’d been expecting. *Natani, are you laughing at me somewhere? I know Zen has to be. I can practically hear it.* He whispered the words. “I miss you so much.” Tears in his eyes, again. That final gift... “I love you. So, so much.”

Finished, he made his way back inside. The lamp brought some warmth to the kitchen—that, and the booze—but there really was a nip to the air. Winter was right around the corner. They’d been up half the night, talking about the times before everything got complicated, slowly making their way through that bottle. And they still had more than half to go, offering the possibility of more in the future. And, well, Keith might have had a thing or two in the pantry as well. He wondered for the first time how long Alaric was planning to stay. He didn’t want to ask. He was here now; let that be that.

Keith took care getting back to his seat—he wasn’t that drunk, really, maybe the least he’d been since they started—and poured himself some more water on the way. “I think that’s enough for tonight. Right?”

Alaric nodded, and yawned loudly. He’d been matching Keith drink for

drink. “Enough for tonight. Now if you’ll excuse me... nature calls.”

“Just go out a way thataways. Err, you may want to veer to the right.”

“Right it is.”

Alaric left, and after a moment Keith pulled out the package. He examined it carefully, but no new secrets revealed themselves. Just that piece of paper and... he closed his eyes and raised the charm to his nose. It was as if they were right there. He sighed and opened his eyes. It was wonderful, but... he looked at the lamp flame. It was the right thing to do, but he really didn’t want to do it. But what other answer was there? He sighed again. It was another thing he shouldn’t do drunk. And if it turned out to be something that he *couldn’t* do sober, well, that was hardly a problem at all.

He had just set the package down again when Alaric reappeared. He was shivering, Keith realized, but got it under control quickly. He leaned close to the warmth of the lamp when he sat back down, though.

Alaric nodded at the package. “Getting to the sentimental part, eh?”

Keith rolled his eyes at him. “Actually, I was thinking about whether to burn it while I still have the courage.”

Alaric was clearly shocked. “... do you want to?”

Keith sighed. “No, I don’t. But it’s the right thing to do. The final goodbye.”

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Alaric looked at him blankly for a moment, then buried his face in his hands. “No, you idiot, it’s... Exactly what about this would you call *traditional*?” He looked at Keith. It wrenched at his heart to say it, but he knew it was the right answer. “You keep it. You keep it on you. And when it’s your time... you don’t look for a burial spot.”

Keith’s eyes went wide, and with a sinking feeling Alaric saw he’d got it right. One less reason for Keith to ever return for good.

“Nick, you...” he took Alaric’s hand in his own and squeezed it. “Thank you.”

Alaric sighed and forced a smile. “I guess that’s why they needed someone with half a brain to bring it to you.”

Keith gave his hand another squeeze. He appreciated the gesture, as inappropriate as it was. Well, probably *because* it was as inappropriate as it was. All in all, this had been a much better day than he could have hoped. Even if he

should have dressed more heavily.

“Nick?”

“Yeah?”

Keith had a dangerously deadpan look on his face. “Are you still feeling cold?”

Alaric quickly decided that the risk of being sent to get firewood was worth literally every other possibility he could think of. “Yeah.”

“That’s good, because I really can’t be bothered to set up the guest room. Want to share?”

Any thoughts of necessarily sleeping in close quarters disappeared on seeing the master bedroom. The bed could have housed a squad of the empire’s finest.

That was in turn forgotten when Keith started stripping.

The thought of looking away for modesty’s sake *did* enter Alaric’s mind, but never got very far.

Keith, shirtless now, glanced at him and grinned. “Oh, sorry. Force of habit. I guess I should at least keep my pants on.”

Alaric, frozen somewhere between joy and horror, found the ability to raise his hand in protest. “Oh, no, I wouldn’t want to *impose*.”

Keith rolled his eyes at him. “How *considerate* of you. I think the pants stay on.”

Alaric gave an exaggerated sigh to hide his real one. Keith looked... best not to think about that right now.

“And you? *I* wouldn’t want to put *you* out, either.”

Well, certainly. Alaric stripped down to his pants, Keith grinning at him all the while.

The grin only widened. “And the wrappings?”

That was a much bigger ask. But... Alaric looked away and started unwrapping his feet.

*

Seeing his discomfort, Keith clambered into bed instead of watching him openly. Had Alaric always been this—he smiled to himself at the idea—prud-

ish? He must've been off his balance. "Turn down the lamp and come on in."

The curtains were drawn against the inevitability of morning, so with the lamp extinguished the room plunged into near darkness. He could feel the shifting of the bed as Alaric got in. Keith had gone a bit past the midpoint, himself, and Alaric seemed to have gotten the right idea, to match him on the other side. Alas, he didn't take the opportunity to stumble into him, but they were close enough to feel each other's warmth.

"It might be a bit cold, but it should warm right up like this." After a moment of silence, he continued. "Alaric?"

The answer was very pointed. "Yes, *Keiser*?"

He smiled to himself. "... Nick?"

"Keith."

"Thank you for coming."

*

The mornings were the worst, Keith had said. Alaric didn't think the sleeping arrangements really had all that much to do with *him*, no matter how much he might have wished otherwise. But was there more he could do? Well, the covers *were* pretty light...

"Keith?"

"Hm?"

Alaric kept his voice neutral. "I'm still a little chilly."

He felt Keith draw closer. "Better?"

"A little."

Keith drew closer still, until Alaric could feel him along his side. "Now?"

To be touched by him was like fire. "That's... better."

Keith settled his head on Alaric's shoulder and placed his hand on his chest, giving the tuft of fur there a little tug. "And now?"

Alaric managed to croak out a "That's good!"

"That's a shame." And Keith snuck one leg over and between his, brushing up against his tail and unwrapped ankles. Keith kept shifting against him, settling into a comfortable position, and Alaric tried not to whimper.

"Sweet dreams, Nick."

The morning—or what passed for morning after a certain type of night—found them still much the same way; Keith asleep, and Alaric thinking he must be dreaming. He'd had time to think it through, and there really wasn't anything that could get him to risk waking Keith up, short of a direct attack; and, well, he still had one hand free. That should be enough to deal with most opponents. There *was* the small matter of his bladder, of course, but he was sure it only *felt* like it was about to rupture.

Eventually, Keith's breathing changed and Alaric felt him stirring slightly. To his relief he didn't withdraw, just adjusted his position a little. Alaric shifted slightly as well, to get his arm better around Keith.

He realized that Keith was crying. It wasn't the wracking sobs of yesterday; these were quiet tears, but unmistakable in the dampness on his shoulder and the small movements of Keith's body. Afraid he would bolt, Alaric slowly, slowly turned to his side, to bring both of his arms around Keith and pull him to his chest. He didn't say anything. There were no words worth speaking. So he just held on to Keith, stroking his back, while the tears ran their course. It was the best he could do.

Or... maybe not quite. After the tears had finally subsided—and what interval he felt appropriate had passed—Alaric reached down and very, very deliberately gave Keith's ass a squeeze.

Keith burst out laughing, and Alaric grinned into his hair. "Good morning."

Keith pulled back slowly to sit up beside him, and Alaric let him go. Keith wiped his tears and smiled at him. "Good morning. Sleep well?"

Alaric pulled himself up to a seated position, with a groan. Some bruises from yesterday were starting to make themselves felt. He smiled brightly at Keith. "Not a wink."

Keith grinned. "Sorry about that. You can consider it payback for everything you've ever done to me."

Alaric wanted to say, 'Is that *all* that it was?', but instead he laughed. "Then I'm getting off easy."

Keith looked at him thoughtfully. "Alaric—" he caught himself with a grin before Alaric could correct him. "*Nick*. When we were kids... I'm sorry I never heard you out."

Alaric shied from the topic. "I was just... I kept pushing, even though I knew you hated it. It isn't something that..."

Keith gave him a faint smile. “That’s the thing. I never *quite* hated it. That’s why it scared me so much.” He raised a hand to softly touch Alaric on the cheek. “So I *am* sorry. You deserved better from me.” And he leaned in, using his hand to guide Alaric, and gently kissed him on the lips.

“You can blush!” Keith grinned at him. “I never knew that.” Before Alaric found himself again, Keith had clambered over him and out of bed. “Come on, I’ll make you some breakfast.”

**

Alaric sat on the edge of the back porch, basking in the sunlight. There was still a bit of warmth in it, even this late in the year. This side of the building caught the morning—he squinted at the sun—or at least pre-noon light. It opened onto a clearing, with the forest in the near distance. Only two things here drew the eye; a big blackened spot, some distance from the house, and a young sapling, not far from it. Alaric sighed. Keith really wasn’t in the habit of making things easy for himself. But that, too, had to be a part of that weird strength of his. He thought back to the Keith he’d last seen, on those few fateful days, and tried to plot the course he must have taken to get here. He failed. But when he thought back farther, to that playful and happy kid he had first come to know and love, the picture started to form. He smiled to himself.

His work had been unnecessary. But unnecessary did not mean useless. Unless he wanted it to.

Keith arrived, bearing the promised coffee. He was still bare-chested, and Alaric saw he had fashioned the wolves’ memento into a pendant. He handed one mug to Alaric before sitting down right next to him, almost touching.

Alaric resolved not to look at Keith’s feet. “You’re warm like that?”

“I’ve been getting used to the cold.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Though, it’s actually pretty warm today.”

Alaric tried his. It was hot, and wonderful. “This is really good.”

Keith grinned at him. “I was taught by the best.” He ducked his head to catch the scent of the pendant and closed his eyes, smiling. When he found Alaric looking, he turned the smile on him. “Zen and coffee. It’s a thing.”

Alaric gestured at the pendant. “Do you mind if I...?”

“Go ahead.” Keith moved to unfasten it from his neck, but Alaric had other plans. He leaned in and took hold of the pendant—and Keith’s chest tuft, for

good measure. Two unfamiliar scents and Keith, making a whole.

He leaned back with a sigh, and looked at Keith with a sad smile. "...I should have come earlier, shouldn't I?"

Keith's expression mirrored his, and he reached out to touch Alaric's cheek. "Yeah."

He almost had, once, years ago. He'd needed to come to the mainland, and there had been an opportunity... he'd balked, just barely. It had seemed like the right thing to do; he'd stuck to his plans.

Right now, he wasn't so sure.

But... he didn't need to decide anything immediately. More information couldn't hurt. "Do you think you'll ever return to the island? To live."

Keith was about to say something, then closed his mouth and took a long time answering. *Does he need to think about it, because I'm alive? Was there a possibility? But eventually, Keith shook his head.* "No. I don't think so. I don't hate it, but after all that's happened... I don't think it will ever be home again." He smiled. "Plus, I'm actually a pretty decent ambassador. I'd be useless on the island."

He had no idea. But it wasn't time for that, yet. "You could be Arms General, if you wanted." He didn't think it would make any difference, but it was true, so he might as well say it.

Keith raised his eyebrows. "Really? I'm that good?"

"No, but you clearly could be. I could see you challenging in a year or two."

Keith nodded slowly. "Thanks. But I don't want to be Arms General."

Alaric nodded as well. Maybe it would have been a fitting dream for Keith the Exile. But not this one.

"Nick..."

"Hm?"

Keith kissed him on the cheek, then lightly scratched him under the chin. Alaric nearly purred with it.

Keith's smile wasn't quite sad. "Where's the place for this, in our glorious society?"

Alaric sighed. "Abroad. Mostly."

And that might take longer to change than Keith had the patience for, no matter what Alaric did.

Keith tousled Alaric's hair, and he had to admit that abroad was starting to

sound pretty good. Mostly.

They finished their coffees in silence.

Keith put his mug down. “Well, that took the last of the firewood in the kitchen. Care to help rebuild the woodpile?”

Alaric stretched. That coffee had really done wonders. Well, that and Keith’s little stunts. “Sure thing.” He hesitated. “Did you really burn *all* of it?”

Keith smiled his sad little smile. “There’s still some seasoned logs in the woodshed. Should be enough to last until the next bunch dries.” He sighed. “It’s not like this was unexpected. It’s one thing to show devotion, another thing to burn green wood for a season or two. Or condemn guests to cold food.”

Alaric looked at the dry-ish landscape. “Or start a forest fire.”

Keith shook his head. “It’d been raining. We had to wait for it to stop before building the pyre.” He looked up. “Been clear ever since.”

Alaric had nothing to say, so he reached out to touch Keith on the arm. To his wonder, the gesture didn’t feel awkward anymore. Keith gave him a smile. It wasn’t big, but there was more than sadness in it. “Right! How about we make a bit of a competition of it? Let’s start with one tree each...”

**

They spent a good chunk of the day felling a few likely trees to rebuild the stores, and splitting the seasoned logs to restock the woodpile, interrupted only by a topically cold lunch. Keith only called it done when they had a pile that Alaric thought had to be enough for months. He was bone weary by the end of it, but doing his hardest not to let it show too clearly. He’d had sleepless nights before, and the exercise had clearly been good for Keith.

In fact, he grinned at Alaric. “I think we could both use a bath after that.”

Alaric stifled a yawn. “Agreed. Let me guess; that means more work.”

“How do you feel about pumping water?”

And pump he did, while Keith ‘got some fires started’, in his own words. The bath wasn’t small, for a private residence. Thankfully the pump fed right into it, and was easy to work. The water was very, very cold.

When he had it full enough, he wandered off to find Keith. He turned out to

be heating water on the kitchen stove.

Alaric smiled. "We're not relying on *that*, are we?"

Keith grinned back. "No, this is for washing up. There's a fire going under the floor of the bath. Takes a while to warm up, but it'll be good."

Alaric sat down on the bench he'd been sitting on the previous night. "I would have expected this place to be more... magical."

"It used to be, but all the enchantments were gone by the time we got here." Keith sat down next to him. "We didn't really need the conveniences, so we left it as it was." He smiled. "Hours enough in a day, and we all liked doing things for each other, y'know? It's all the everyday stuff..."

Keith's smile wavered and Alaric could see his ears drooping. He put his arm around his friend's shoulders and gave him a little squeeze. "I get it."

Keith just sighed in response. They sat in silence for a while, waiting for the water to boil. Alaric kept his eyes on the kettle.

They mixed hot and cold water in pails until they had something suitable for washing with. The bath was nearing lukewarm.

Keith started stripping again, and this time he didn't stop at topless. Alaric's only concession to propriety was to clear his throat, as one does, and that was mostly in hopes Keith would turn around.

It worked, too.

"Alaric?" Keith sounded amused. "Eyes up."

"Hm?"

"I *said*, eyes up." He cleared his throat again and looked Keith in the face. He *looked* amused, too. "It's not anything you haven't seen before, you know."

Alaric grinned. "I was just thinking what a shame it is that I didn't think to bring any granite."

Keith rolled his eyes at him. "No clothes in the bath; house rules. *We could* go in separately if you want..."

"Oh, I wouldn't even dream of being difficult."

"Well, get naked then. And yes, that goes for your feet too. I'll wash your back if you'll wash mine."

Keith was as shameless about watching as Alaric had been. He found he didn't really mind. House rules were house rules, after all.

The bath was just right by the time they got themselves washed and rinsed. Alaric settled in up to his neck, with a satisfied sigh. It felt... “This is wonderful.”

There would have been some room to maneuver, but Keith came in fairly close. And gave his foot a little nudge with his own. It made Alaric shiver.

Keith grinned at him. “Payback.”

Alaric smiled back. “I thought you already got even.”

“Ah, right. I guess that puts me ahead, then.”

Completely on impulse, Alaric put his arms around Keith’s neck, and, being careful to see it wasn’t unwelcome, returned the kiss from that morning. Gently.

Keith just smiled at him. “I think I’m still ahead.”

Alaric sighed. The way Keith made him feel... He returned the nudge with his foot. Keith trembled, and Alaric worried he was going to cry again, but it subsided. Alaric relished the warmth of Keith’s body more than the bath, but he let go and stretched his limbs in the warm water, settling to float on his back. His mind was a jumble. *Must be the fatigue.*

He didn’t really believe himself, either.

*

Keith sat in the bath, considering his friend, sorely tempted to tease him in some further way. Some possibilities flashed through his mind, but he settled for just watching for a moment. Pushing him more would border on ingratitude.

Alaric looked wonderful. It wasn’t just the eye; as far as Keith could tell, he didn’t have a single scar left on his body. And he hadn’t been shy about looking. It’s not that he would have minded—some of those scars would have been quite nostalgic—but there was something good about seeing him completely hale. *He’d make a fine statue.*

“How did you ever get into it in the first place? The stone-working?”

“Hm? Oh, it just... happened.” Alaric seemed to be gathering his thoughts. “You could say I needed something to do with my hands while I was plotting and scheming.”

“Are you still at it?”

“No. It was a bit too conspicuous a hobby to keep.” He grinned at the ceiling. “You’ll be happy to hear I found a place for that statue, though. One of the inner courtyards.”

Keith groaned. “Did you at least give me a fig leaf or something?”

“And ruin the educational value? Never.”

Keith considered some of the uses the inner courtyards were put to, and sighed deeply. Ah well. Better to hear about it now than to just walk into it one day...

What was the topic again? Ah. He grinned. “And what do you do with your hands *now*?”

Silence. Alaric had fallen asleep. Again Keith was tempted to do something to him, and again he resisted. So he really hadn’t slept... Keith settled deeper into the bath, careful not to cause a disturbance. It really did feel wonderful.

*

Alaric came to groggily. It took him a moment to realize he was still in the bath. Keith had him by the shoulder. Alaric blinked at him. “Mh?”

“Hey. I may have overdone the fire a bit, but I didn’t want to wake you up by dumping cold water on you. Do you still want to soak for a while?”

He felt thoroughly suffused with warmth. He couldn’t even tell what temperature the water was. “I... think I should probably just get out. How long was I...?” Falling asleep *bathing with Keith*? Ridiculous!

“A while. I may have dozed off myself.” Keith slowly stood up and stretched his limbs, causing Alaric to feel even warmer. “Come on, let’s get you rinsed and dry.”

Alaric nearly stumbled getting up. He felt dizzy. Keith took him by the shoulder and led him to a bench. “Sorry, I guess I should have woken you earlier. Just stay there, I’ll take care of the rest.”

He sat down gratefully. The air was cooler than the water, of course, but Alaric felt like he was heating up the room rather than the other way around. He watched as Keith mixed some more water in the pails, occasionally testing the temperature with his hand. Watched Keith’s fully naked form, dripping wet, every step deliberate to avoid slipping on the wet tile... and when Keith caught him looking, he just grinned. If the abashed Keith of his youth had been

dangerously cute, this one was devastatingly beautiful.

Keith returned with a large bucket full of water that he presented for Alaric's examination. He tested the temperature; it felt almost cold, but he just nodded. It felt more than *almost* cold when Keith unceremoniously dumped it over his head, and he shuddered and shook himself. "Invigorating."

He could hear the grin. "You looked like you needed it. Hang on."

Keith produced a towel and began drying his hair for him, and the temperature of the water was suddenly the farthest thought from his mind. When Keith moved to gently rubbing his ears dry, all thought fled.

Keith was already halfway down his back—getting dangerously close to his tail—when he recovered. "Thanks! I can take it from here."

Keith dropped the towel on his head, and Alaric pulled it off before turning around. "Would you like me to... oh." Keith was already drying himself, so Alaric got busy getting the rest of the water out of his own fur instead. Next time.

Keith sounded thoughtful. "I think I'm going to do some laundry. I can clean yours as well."

"Oh, thanks." Wait. "Err..."

"Hm?"

"... could you at least give me my foot wrappings?"

Keith grinned. "Hang on." He retrieved some from an adjacent room. "You can borrow these, they're mine."

"Thanks." He wrapped his feet, and it was weird how much more he felt himself. Though the thought of them being Keith's was a little distracting...

"Could you check on the fireplace for me? It might be down to embers by now."

"Sure."

"You can just relax there for a while. I shouldn't be long."

It was only when he was out in the corridor, buck naked save for his feet, that he realized Keith could just as well have given him some spare clothing.

Ah well, the cool air felt welcome.

He saw to the fire—not quite down to embers, but getting there—then carefully closed the fireguard back up. Arson wasn't called for.

With nothing to do, he got a better look at the sitting room. Furniture to seat seven; a couch, a love-seat, and two comfortable-looking chairs. From the den, perhaps? All were well-worn with use, and with scuff marks on the floor to show they'd often been moved around. A small table, likewise pulled this way and that, doubtless to where it was needed at the time. Cupboards and cabinets and such, but he didn't go rummaging around. Curiously, there was a banjo hung on a set of pegs. He wondered who had played it last.

Bookshelves lined one wall, filled with a great quantity of books of all shapes, sizes, and colors. History, politics, the famous works of all the different races collected, peppered with ones he'd never even heard of. One corner of interest held banned books of basitin origin—Western and Eastern, both. Some of them *he* hadn't even read!

And there was magic. Treatises on the arcane, some of which he recognized by name. He kept returning there, even reached out to pull one, before finally stepping away.

He wasn't here for himself.

Alaric wandered back to the fireplace. There, on top of the mantelpiece, was the only object in the whole house that looked askew. A small metal plaque of some sort, placed seemingly haphazardly. On it, something like a sigil had been engraved. It didn't seem magical... a maker's mark, perhaps? He'd decided not to touch it.

'Relax there', Keith had said, but the idea of sitting around naked felt... weird. Besides, the warmth of the fire was starting to feel welcome again.

There *was* the rug...

He laid down by the fire, feeling a little silly. It was quite comfortable, really. He listened for signs of Keith, but only heard the crackling of the fire.

**

Alaric woke up again, this time to the tantalizing smell of food. Again, it took him a moment to figure out where he was.

"Hold still for a bit longer."

Keith was seated on the couch, not far off. He was naked too. He was... "... you're drawing me."

"I assure you, it's quite tasteful."

"... of course it is." Alaric laughed quietly and settled back down.

“That’s good.”

“What about the food?”

“It’ll still be a while.”

“Laundry?”

“Probably not dry yet. Are you cold?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Okay. I can get you something if you want. And... I think I’m done.”

Alaric stretched before getting up.

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to hold that pose?”

He sprang to his feet. The couch was covered in papers. He could see that they were other sketches, and not of him. Keith gathered them up and placed the lot on the table, then patted at the couch beside him.

Well, if Keith didn’t mind sitting around naked, neither would he. As best he could. He settled down, and Keith presented him with his sketch. It was... he was lying on his side, slightly curled up, with one hand under his head. The angle was from nearer his feet than straight from the side. It was, of course, anatomically correct. At least his feet were covered... He appeared to be sleeping peacefully.

It was a good likeness, and yet...

“I was thinking of hanging it up at the embassy.”

Alaric choked.

“Just kidding. Probably.”

“Please be.” He gestured at the other drawings. “Do you mind if I...?”

Keith handed him a part of the stack, and he leafed through them carefully. They were mostly of Natani—usually looking amused or dignified—or Zen—making faces, sleeping, or both—and again there was that feeling... he’d seen Natani, of course, and more recently likenesses of both wolves from sources that he knew to be trustworthy, at least as far as artistic ability was concerned. They were definitely the same subjects. And yet...

There were a few with Maddie as well; some of her alone, striking this or that dramatic pose; one with her and Natani, the basitin sleeping against the wolf’s shoulder, apparently drooling; another of her sitting triumphantly on top of Zen, who was lying down in a pose of abject defeat. He looked at his own picture again, then compared it to the ones with Maddie, then the ones with Zen or Natani.

But how could that possibly be the answer?

He looked at Keith. "Keith... I don't know what to do with you."

A smile. "Oh? I'd say you're doing pretty well. Though you've been behaving more than I'd have expected. Or... do you have someone? I just assumed..."

Alaric shook his head. "No. No one else. But you do."

"I do. But those two... they'd be happy that you're here." He laughed softly. "You know, they actually tried to see if there could be something between me and Maddie, at one point. She still hasn't stopped laughing about that." His smile faded. "Well, she hadn't, anyway." He shook his head. "No, Natani probably *would have* locked us in a room by now, left us to sort ourselves out."

Alaric didn't know what to say. "And Zen?"

Keith grinned. "Yelling suggestions through the door."

But how? Because of the lifespan difference, he realized. Maybe, just maybe, because of what he meant to Keith. It was...

It was what he would have done.

"They love me better than I deserve. Though," Keith smiled sadly, "I suppose I'm not allowed to say that anymore, since they're not here to correct me." He stuck his tongue out at Alaric. An odd gesture. "But no, you don't need to hold back on their account." He smiled a small smile. "Possibly the opposite."

Alaric reached out to touch Keith, to... his heart constricted in his chest. "... you'd cry, wouldn't you."

*

Depends on how good you are. But no, this was no time to be flippant. Keith nodded. "Probably."

"... would it help?"

Keith couldn't help it; he teared up. He really was far luckier than he had any right to be. He'd been thinking about what it had been like, after Zen had passed, and he and Natani... but looking at Alaric's stricken expression, he found it in himself to lie.

This was no time to be selfish, either.

"No." He pulled Alaric into an awkward seated hug. "There isn't anything more I'd ask from you."

Alaric hugged him back, tenderly. So tenderly. "Just... let me know if there

is.”

“Thanks. I will.”

They broke the hug, and Alaric looked again at the drawings of the wolves. Keith liked his expression, liked it even better when he spoke, hesitantly.

“Keith... would you tell me about them?”

He teared up again. “I will. I’ll tell you all about them.” He wiped his tears with a smile. “But first, time for dinner.”

“... and maybe some clothes?”

Keith smiled, and tousled his hair. “Sure.”

They dressed, and they ate, and they retired back to the fire armed with coffee and rum. Keith regaled Alaric with tales of Natani and Zen; not their exploits—of who had they been to the world—but rather, who they had been to him. What home had been. He didn’t hold back the tears, but neither did he hold back the laughter, until the two were nearly one and the same. Alaric did not speak much, but when he did, Keith listened. The evening wore on, and the rum lower, until finally Alaric’s tiredness caught up to him again. Keith watched his old friend nodding off, his heart filling with a love and tenderness that had only something to do with the alcohol.

He reached out to lightly stroke one of Alaric’s ears. Soft and supple. Alaric stirred, smiling fuzzily at Keith. It was a good look.

“Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

“Your bed?”

Keith laughed. “Thaaaat’s my Nick.”

“... I am, aren’t I?”

“That’s up to you.”

“... it is, isn’t it?”

Keith gave him a little tweak on the ear. “Yup. And so’s if you want to share the bed.”

*

It really wasn’t much of a question. Neither of them was. Nick sighed. “Yes.”

Keith smiled in response, and Nick would have followed him anywhere. ‘To bed’ was just a bonus. They made their way to the bedroom, with only a little

stumbling, and stripped, with even less ceremony. Again the pants stayed on. It felt a little silly, after the earlier, but it also felt like it meant something. The wrappings still went, but Nick was less bothered by the loss this time. Though, they *were* Keith's... but what were Keith's wrappings, when he had Keith himself, waiting for him in bed, with his arms wide open? Nick extinguished the lamp and stumbled into Keith's embrace.

Keith pulled him to his chest.

Ah.

Nick let Keith hold him close, for both their sakes. After a while, Keith relaxed his hold a little—only to bring one hand up to his ears. It felt... incredible. Better than he'd ever dreamt. Nick pressed his face into Keith's chest, and he understood, really understood, what Keith had meant. That the wolves had been his home.

A home that had been lost.

"Keith?"

"Yeah?"

"... wake me up in the morning, okay?"

"... I will."

**

He did.

**

As they made their way to the back porch, with their coffee mugs in hand, Alaric realized that this was something of a morning routine. His eyes went to the sapling in the yard, and he wondered about the specifics. Would there be two trees, next year? Would there eventually be a third? It didn't seem to fit that one should be so much younger.

Hopefully.

But then, maybe the heights would work out.

Who would see to it? He realized he would do it, if it came down to it, and fervently hoped that it wouldn't.

But... it was exactly what Keith had had to do.

More than once.

He cleared his throat. “Keith, if you need...”

Keith gave him a tweak on the ear. The unexpectedness made him yelp, and almost spill his coffee.

“Let’s not.”

Alaric saw a strange vulnerability in Keith’s expression. Almost to his surprise, he found himself leaning in to kiss him. Somehow, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. He took his time with it, and was rewarded with a small smile.

They sat down on the edge of the porch, shoulder to shoulder, knee to knee, foot to foot, and sipped their coffees in silence. After a while, it occurred to Alaric to seek out Keith’s tail with his own. The gesture seemed well-received, and there was a certain potential there... but eventually he just tucked his tail around Keith. Keith reciprocated, and Alaric sighed happily at the easy intimacy of it.

He still hadn’t quite reached a decision. “What will you do now?”

“I take it you don’t mean with this?” Keith fiddled with the tip of Alaric’s tail. It sent a shiver up his spine.

“Yeah.” He grinned. “But, by all means...”

Keith rolled his eyes at him, but continued toying with his tail for a while as he spoke. “I’m not going to come out of my semi-retirement immediately. There are some things I’ll need to take care of, but...” His eyes wandered to the notable features of the yard. “I figure I’ll mostly stay here at least until the spring. I want to make my peace with this place.”

Alaric had suspected that last part—so what would entice him to leave? “Those ‘things’ wouldn’t have anything to do with your little side-projects with the wolves, would they?”

Keith gave him a sidelong glance that said exactly ‘So you know about that, do you.’ Alaric raised his free hand in response. “I don’t disagree with any of it. Neither does the King. Unofficially.”

Keith nodded. “No, the wolves can take care of themselves. I have some other ideas. Who knows, maybe I’ll give Maddie her first gray hairs yet.”

Alaric thought about his meeting with Madelyn Adelaide and smiled. “She’ll just pass them on.”

Keith grinned. “That’s what I’m counting on.”

“And after spring?”

“I don’t know yet.” He gave Alaric another sidelong glance, but this one said something else entirely. “I wonder if I’ll be having company?”

Alaric had been thinking of little else. He *could* just walk away from it all. Be with Keith. The King knew his appointed successor; had specifically reminded Alaric of that fact when he’d left on this little jaunt. He could just walk away, and nobody would ever find out about *his* little project to give people gray hairs. But... it was still the right thing to do. There was no getting around that. When had he grown a conscience? He looked at Keith, and sighed. *Probably when I met him.* He spent a quiet moment saying goodbye—for now—to possibilities he’d hardly even dreamt of two days ago. He would find a way to circle back to here.

To Keith, wherever he was.

“Alaric?”

He finished his coffee. “Well, you have me for a few weeks. And I expect we’ll be seeing some of each other after.” He set down his cup. “There’s something I’ve been working towards for a long time now. Eventually I’ll need your help, but there are other parts that would go faster if I could make use of your office.”

Keith raised his eyebrows. “What, can’t forge my signature?”

Alaric grinned. “Would you care for a demonstration? No, the tricky part is explaining how it got on papers that have never been within a thousand miles of you.”

Keith looked genuinely curious. “What could you be up to that you need the *ambassador* for? I somehow doubt you have less authority than me back on the island.”

Nothing for it. “I want to end the war.”

“What? The war’s been over for—”

“*The* war.”

Keith’s eyes shot wide. He carefully, deliberately, put his mug down, then turned fully to Alaric. “What did you have in mind?”

-----BEGIN PGP SIGNED MESSAGE-----
Hash: SHA1

Full House

Dedication

To avwolf; For being the most consummate of provocateurs.

To a mystery person; For reasons of mystery. You don't know who you are. It's all very mysterious.

And finally, to Dadrobot. It should be a little easier this time.

-----BEGIN PGP SIGNATURE-----
Version: GnuPG v1.4.12 (GNU/Linux)

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Full House

Lightning flashed, drawing Keith's eyes to the windows. Almost immediately, thunder rumbled over the house. That had been near. Pulled from his book, he was surprised how dark it was. The storm had gotten heavier, and it felt more like an autumn evening than an early summer afternoon. He looked across at Natani, but the wolf had not looked up. His eyes were fixed on the manuscript before him—this or that magical treatise from the shelves—and occasionally he would stop breathing for a moment, only to resume with a loud exhalation. Keith smiled to himself. They'd never been able to convince Natani that he did that.

Keith closed the book in his lap, using one finger to keep his place, and adjusted his position on the couch. When he opened the book again, he found the light poor and his thoughts elsewhere. Ah well. The book was yet another wolveren history; an old one, but gaining favor recently. Still, it was mostly rehashing sources he was already familiar with. He left the book open, but let his gaze linger on Natani. Curling up with a book was fine and all, but curling up with a wolf... alas, Natani was clearly intent on reading. Keith wondered if Zen was taking a nap. He might join him, and that would be... nice. Even if the wolf *was* actually sleeping. Idly, he let himself get lost in the daydream.

The only sounds in the house were the steady drumming of the rain, the occasional rustle of Natani leafing through his pages, and the wolf's breathing. And the creak of floorboards. The creak of floorboards?

*

Zen had been about to do something to Keith's tail—the couch had an open back—but when the basitin tilted his head, his ear giving a little twitch, he got a better target. He caught the tip in his mouth and nibbled. Tricky when you're grinning. Keith laughed and reached up to find Zen's face, rubbing his cheek before running a hand through his hair to scratch him behind one ear. The basitin knew exactly what he was doing. Zen growled his appreciation, but didn't release Keith's ear.

The basitin sounded amused. "Did you want something?"

Zen let go, giving the tip of Keith's ear a little lick, then nuzzled its base for

a moment before leaning closer, to rub his cheek against the basitin's. Keith kept a loose hold on Zen's head and leaned into him, rubbing back. *Exactly* what he was doing. "What gave you that idea? But now that you mention it..." Zen slid his arms around Keith, then across his stomach, then lower. The basitin was tenting his pants before he even got there. "... there might be one or two things."

Zen felt Keith's tail wrap around him, trying to pull him closer. The basitin's voice sounded a little husky. "Well, I *was* just thinking I could use a break..."

*

Natani rolled his eyes, watching the two of them. Not that a break... no, his brother could probably use a bit of time alone with Keith. Summer was still young, and Zen still hadn't come completely off of the seasonal high.

Keith caught Natani's eye and smiled. "How about you?"

When Keith looked at him like that... the basitin had a way of making you decide twice. For a moment, he teetered... before smiling and rolling his eyes again. At himself, as much as at them. "You two have fun. Just try not to—"

The boom of the door knocker echoed through the house.

Keith looked at him, and Natani closed his eyes briefly, using his magic to check, before opening them again, surprised. "It's Maddie."

All of them glanced at the windows. The storm had been raging for hours.

**

Maddie was drenched, no, *beyond* drenched. Being wet had become a part of her. Somehow, she felt *more* soaked in the cover of the porch than she had in the rain. She stared down the door, fighting thoughts of forcing her way in. There would be *towels*. But this was not a house you entered uninvited, even if you were welcome. She was about to knock again when the door opened. Keith, with Zen at his shoulder. Keith looked past her, out into the murk, but the wolf's eyes lingered on her, concerned. It didn't help her temper. It was a warm day. It was just *water*.

She still found a proper salute. "Sir." Sometimes you follow protocol just to keep from screaming.

“At ease. No horse?”

“No.”

“Come on in. I’ll get you a—”

Natani arrived, carrying a towel. The most welcome sight in living memory. Maddie let her sodden cloak fall on the porch, then stepped inside and reached for the towel. Zen passed her, and she thought she smelled fresh arousal. Did these people *never*... no, no they didn’t. She took the towel with a sigh.

“Thanks.” And Natani would probably offer...

“Bath?”

Maddie shook her head. “Need to report.” Still, she stopped to dry her face, hair, ears... it was something, at least. A puddle still started forming at her feet. Zen picked up her cloak and wrung it out, producing a satisfying stream of water. He came back inside, closing the door behind him, and went to hang the cloak up to dry.

He didn’t need to do that.

She didn’t stop him.

Maddie hung the towel around her neck and presented her messenger bag to Keith. Even *that* was damp, but at least the contents would be dry. She’d been shielding it enough to make sure. “Mail run, sir.”

Keith took the bag and raised an eyebrow. “On foot, in that?”

“Shaking a persistent tail, sir.”

Zen returned with a robe and a second towel, and handed them to her. Keith nodded at an adjacent room. “Just speak through the door.”

“Yes, sir.”

She secluded herself and quickly stripped naked, all the while explaining the route and countermeasures she had taken, and how none of it had seemed to be enough to shake whoever was following. It had been a new record. They were prepared for this sort of thing, and most attempts never made it out of Wreathwood. She dried herself as she made her report, toweling herself from the top down, staying with each part until it felt something like dry, finally finishing with her feet. The robe she had been given was clearly Keith’s, but it still smelled of the wolves. She sighed quietly to herself. *Just focus on how nice it feels to be dry*... Still talking, she donned the garment and pulled her tail through the tail hole. The robe fit well enough; they were almost of a size. And it *was* wonderful to be dry.

There were no spare wrappings. Well. She didn't really care, and Keith didn't exactly insist on modesty. She gathered her wet clothes and opened the door, accentuating a pause in her account by pushing the bundle of clothes at Zen.

The wolf gathered them in his arms and made a mock bow. "Why thank you, princess."

Maddie growled. "I am *not* a bloody *princess*."

Zen grinned, a twinkle in his eye. "Yes, princess."

It did cheer her up a little, despite herself. Zen went off again, and she continued her account. "... and they were *still* on me this morning. When the weather started to turn I stopped at an inn and made a show of settling in to wait it out. When the storm got bad enough, I struck out cross-country on foot. Took forever, but at least nobody could have—"

There was a knock at the door.

Oh, for fuck's sake!

Keith looked at Natani. The wolf rolled his eyes, then closed them. He spoke in a low tone. "Basitin. Alone. Unarmed." Maddie saw Natani's brow furrow in time with her own. Keith looked at her next, but she just shook her head. None of her people knew how to get here. None should be good enough to follow her.

Keith shrugged, and opened the door.

It was Alaric.

*

Zen felt Natani go on full alert, and dropped what he was doing. He returned to his brother's side, moving faster than he had in a long time. It was a curious tableau that he found. Everyone's attention was focused on the basitin standing in the doorway—Nickolai Alaric, the unexpected knowledge filtered into his mind. Keith still had his hand on the door, his face working towards astonishment. Maddie was staring at the new arrival, her face inscrutable and her ears down. Natani's mind was in a place his could not follow, and the link hummed with magic potentials. His brother was pure alertness, poised to strike, and Zen didn't know why. Alaric wasn't *doing* anything, just standing there, looking at Keith. He studied the basitin, letting his eyes fill in Natani's hazy recollections of the man. Wasn't he supposed to have a bad eye? And he

looked serious; that didn't seem to fit with what he'd heard. But maybe coming back from the dead did that to you. Or being stared at by the lot of them. Alaric was wrapped in an oilskin cloak, and had weathered the storm rather better than Maddie had; his hood was back, and he looked to be dry.

Finally, Alaric cleared his throat. "Hello, Keith."

Keith smiled wide. "Alaric! You *were* alive! And your eye..."

Maddie cut in, tense. "Sir, you don't have the time to deal with him right now."

Everyone except Natani turned to look at her. She glanced at the wolves, then turned to Keith. "Natani... Zen. Your honor guard has arrived in Wreathwood. And the word is—"

"You're going to get ambushed."

"—by a bunch of ex-brotherhood goons." Maddie glared at Alaric. "You are supposed to be *dead*."

Zen was startled by the strength of Natani's fury. He thought his brother maintained his outward calm, but it was clear that Keith picked up on it as well. The basitin didn't need a link to read them. Maddie and Alaric seemed mostly preoccupied with each other for the moment. The anger called to him, but since Natani *was* angry, he would stay calm. "Let's get out of the doorway. We need to hear this in detail."

Alaric turned to him. "Could I have something to dry my feet? And my cloak is rather—"

*

Maddie hurled the towel at Alaric and stalked off, lashing her tail. Not only was he alive—against her expectations—he'd somehow tailed her all the way from Wreathwood—despite her best precautions—and then made it through that murk, and still had the gall *to not even be wet*.

And for a moment, she'd been happy to see him.

**

They settled into the sitting room. Maddie had already planted herself in the middle of the love-seat. Keith took the place he'd had earlier, at one end of the couch, and Zen took the other end, facing Maddie. Natani, too, returned to his

chair, near Keith. Alaric took the remaining chair, opposite Natani, waiting for a nod before he seated himself. Zen noted that the basitin sat very straight. Even Maddie slouched by comparison—though curiously, she had her feet up and in the hem of her robe. Had she gotten cold? Maybe she should take that bath—

Maddie glared at him and started her report. She was precise and succinct. In the few days the honor guard's stay had overlapped with hers, word had reached her no less than four times, all different incidents.

Alaric, equally precise, added a fifth. He had—ostensibly—just overheard some talk in a bar.

Natani's conclusions were feeling more and more correct. Zen sighed. "They can't be leaking that bad. It's intentional."

Natani's fury spiked, but he just nodded.

Zen sighed again. He didn't want to believe this, not of his own people. "Well, we did wonder why we rated a honor guard. Now we know."

After a moment of quiet, Keith scratched at the back of his head. "Let me see if I've got this straight. They don't know where you are, so they give you a guard just to put you on the map?"

Zen nodded.

"And then they spread rumors that you'll be ambushed, so everybody knows who to blame before anything even happens..."

Alaric cleared his throat, and looked from Zen to Natani. "And to justify the honor guard in the first place, I think. To position themselves as having been on your side." Natani nodded at the basitin, and he continued. "But... sir, wouldn't that be a huge blow to their honor? Even to be attacked, and much more so if you're actually killed?"

When Alaric called Natani 'sir', Zen saw Keith and Maddie glance at each other. They seemed surprised, then confused. Natani chose not to pay it any mind. "Their honor? How convenient for them that they *have none*. But you're right, this *will* cost them. In the end, though..."

Alaric picked up the thread. "... they'll make a big deal out of avenging you to restore their honor. The guilty will be found and punished. Some of them might even have something to do with it."

Natani nodded and sighed. "And some... *jackass* is going to bemoan how it was too much too soon. To call for *moderation*. If they're *really* clever they'll

find a woman for that bit. And nothing will change.” Natani had given voice to some of Zen’s despondency there, and they shared a moment of amusement and understanding. “It’s a neat bit of work, really.”

Silence reigned for a moment. Keith looked to Zen, possibly because Natani was still focused on Alaric. “So what do we do? Just ignore the honor guard?”

“That would be a pretty big insult. No matter what excuse we gave.”

“Bring our own people?”

“Also an insult, *and* we’d look scared. Plus, they’d have time to bring more force. I think they’d feel comfortable matching whatever we could scrounge up. Though...” He knew what Natani was about to say, and that it was the wrong thing. So he nudged his brother’s attention towards Keith and said it himself. “... they’d be wrong. *We could* just take the ambush.”

Natani looked at Keith, and anger became tempered with love. He sighed. “No. There’ll be bodies on the ground before this is done, but let’s not make it more than it has to be. Hells, it would just give them the credit of having protected us, anyway.”

Maddie spoke. “Could you sneak the honor guard in?”

Natani almost laughed at the idea, and Zen silently blessed the basitin for being who she was. “If they’re colluding?” Zen could feel Natani’s mind whirl. But in the end, he shook his head. “Maybe we could. But where does that get us? Even if we pulled it off, the story would become that nobody dared challenge their honor. No, we’re making our own way there.”

Keith nodded slowly. “And so they’ve put us in a position where everyone will think we’re starting with a deliberate insult.”

Natani’s mind whirled again, too fast for Zen to keep track of, as his brother came to some decision. And before he could make sense of it, Natani slammed the link shut, and he was on his own. The last thing he’d felt from his brother was both anger and love, burning bright. Natani stood up. “Oh, they won’t *think* I’m insulting them. They’ll *know*.” He looked at Alaric. “You’re with me.” The basitin stood up promptly, and Natani gestured for him to precede him out. “The rest of you... play some cards or something.”

*

Keith watched them leave the room, then turned to Zen. “Do you have any idea...?”

The wolf shook his head. “No. He slammed the link.”

Keith didn’t have any idea either. He glanced at Maddie, who just shook her head.

Well. Neither of them needed looking after.

An angry Natani, and *Alaric*.

... he needed a distraction. “Anything urgent in the mail?”

Maddie snapped into a professional demeanour. “The new Wreathwood charter, sir.”

Keith raised his eyebrows. “Already?”

“Yes, sir. The West stepped up their schedule; it’s possible they’ve already arrived. We got it through just in time. It went into effect four days ago.” She paused for a few moments. “Of course, you have ten days left to object.” The tone said she didn’t quite expect him to bother to.

Keith reached for the bag and started sifting through the contents, instantly suspicious.

**

Natani ushered Alaric into the bedroom and closed the door behind them. His eyes immediately went to the closet door. It seemed to loom over him. He turned to Alaric. It’s... not like he was running away from it. Natani extended his hand, palm up. “First things first. Give me your mana stones.”

Clearly, this wasn’t entirely unexpected. Alaric reached into his shirt and pulled out the necklace, but didn’t hand it over. “I... will need these back, sir.”

Natani still wasn’t able to see anything sarcastic in Alaric’s behavior, so he was willing to put it down to basitin being basitin. “You can have them when you leave.”

Alaric nodded, and handed them over.

Natani kept his arm out. “And the ones in your pocket.”

“Ah. Must have slipped my mind, sir.”

“And the one tied to your tail.”

Alaric raised an eyebrow, but produced what was requested. “Purely for ornamental use, I assure you.”

Natani thought he could like him. That would help. “I take it that’s where I should hide something if I’m about to be frisked by basitins?”

“Depends on how polite you expect them to be, sir.”

Natani considered the five crystals in his palm. “I think you forgot the empties.”

Alaric dug them up from a different pocket. He was starting to look a little worried. “Permission to be impressed, sir?”

Natani grinned. “You should save that for when I mention the one you buried in the woods.”

“That’s... not a fishing expedition, is it? You actually *know*. Sir.”

“Would you like me to describe the location?”

“...it’s all you, isn’t it? Zen can’t do magic.”

Natani smiled, and reminded himself not to underestimate the basitin just because he had the upper hand. “That’s *almost* a secret.”

Alaric nodded. “I’ll keep it almost safe, sir.”

Natani rolled his eyes, then examined the crystals. The stones themselves weren’t anything special, but the mana was unusually pure. “Did you charge these yourself?”

“Yes, sir.”

Natani nodded. That was a good sign. What had the basitin been up to... he found a waypoint for Wreathwood, and another, farther out— “Is that waypoint *moving*?”

“That would be my cabin in my ship, sir. I am not to be disturbed.”

“Can you hit that?”

“I expect I’ll find out, sir.”

Interesting... but not relevant right now. There was nothing else in range, and as far as he could tell, Alaric hadn’t been up to anything flashy. He was tempted to discharge one of the crystals to see how stressed it was—he suspected not very at all—but that would hardly have been polite. He deposited the crystals into a storage chest he used for holding his own surplus and other arcane bibs and bobs, then closed the lid. He didn’t bother throwing the latch; that really had very little to do with people not getting in there.

That was one worry removed. Natani ratcheted his battle-readiness down a notch and considered the basitin again. Nickolai Alaric. Alive and *respectful*. What was going on here? “Do you mind if I examine you?”

“Mind reading, sir?”

“No, but I might see surface thoughts by accident.”

“... and if I do mind, sir?”

“I won’t force you. Keith might, though.”

Alaric seemed to consider for a moment. “You won’t trawl out my deepest, darkest secrets?”

Natani grinned. “I don’t think I have that kind of time. I just want to see that you’re okay.”

He beckoned, and, reluctantly, Alaric stepped closer. Natani placed his hands on either side of the basitin’s face and looked him in the eyes. The rest helped, but the eyes were the important bit. There were no surface thoughts to pick up; Alaric’s attention was entirely on him, and followed him as he conducted his examination. He quite literally had a curious mind. Everything seemed to be in its place, the basitin hearty and hale, both body and mind. Alaric had a mind like a meticulously clean desk, with a hint of overstuffed drawers. He didn’t pry.

Natani leaned back and let his hands fall to his sides. There had been a certain... spareness, a pervasive sense of almost sadness, that nothing in Alaric’s demeanour belied... but Natani thought he could still see, now that he knew to look. But... he *was* fine. “You may be the sanest basitin I’ve ever met.”

Alaric actually seemed a little relieved. “I do try, sir.”

Natani nodded. “Now that that’s dealt with, there’s something I need a hand with.”

With grim determination, he turned to the closet.

**

A note fell out of the sheaf of papers, into Keith’s lap. ‘Honor guard a trap. Ambush by supposed ex-brotherhood. Unknown whose plot.’ No signature. Written in Basitin. He didn’t think it was Alaric’s handwriting, but then, what were the odds Alaric would use his *own* hand? Keith shook his head and smiled to himself. What *was* he up to?

... and what was Natani?

He looked at Maddie, playing cards with Zen. The game was for no stakes, and looked to be even. Those facts were probably connected. He looked at the note again. It would grate, but... if she’d been had, she needed to know about it. “Lieutenant?”

Maddie snapped into something like attention. “Sir?”

Keith handed her the note. “This fell out.”

She took the note and read it, her face darkening, her ears drooping, then going flat as her eyes flashed in anger. She gritted her teeth, and professionalism reasserted itself. "I suspect this is Alaric's, sir. How he managed... I have no explanation."

Maddie handed the note back, and Keith stuck it back in the papers. "Was there anything else in the bag?"

"Just the charter, sir. At least, there wasn't supposed to be. It's the only thing anyone's had any time for."

Keith hefted the papers. "You should read this through later."

"Yes, sir."

"As you were."

Keith watched as Maddie turned back to the game... and saw Zen, obviously concerned for her. She glared at the wolf, then sighed, then glared again before pointedly studying her cards. Zen... couldn't help being who he was, any more than Keith could help loving him for it. He wanted to touch the wolf, but, well, that wouldn't exactly help Maddie's mood. Still... the couch *did* have an open back. He threw his tail out, discreetly, and just managed to brush Zen's. It was a shame they weren't sitting a bit closer to each other, but shifting now would have been too obvious. The wolf looked at him, and Keith smiled. After a moment, Zen smiled back, and Keith could feel the wolf's tail curling against his. Maddie was probably rolling her eyes. Ah well. He could see the same thought cross Zen's mind, and with a grin the wolf went back to his game, Keith back to his reading.

Their tails stayed together, though. Keith tried not to let it distract him too much.

After a while, he got to the partitioning.

"Lieutenant?"

"Sir?"

"Remind me how our embassy building is situated on our grounds? Our *old* grounds?"

"Exactly in the middle, sir. Very symmetrical, sir."

"And on our new grounds?"

"You said to give them half, sir."

Keith looked at her completely innocent expression, and had to grin. It was very good that she was on his side. On average. "So I did."

Keith resumed his reading, and the game continued with Zen steadfastly refusing to play for money.

“Lieutenant?”

“Sir?”

“This new provision about fighting being allowed...”

“Only if mutually agreed on beforehand, sir. Good for morale, sir. We might be able to keep more than one in ten past the year, sir.”

It was true that it wasn’t an easy posting. And it *would* be good to get some continuity. But was that really what it took? “... wait. *Casualties* are forbidden?”

“Yes, sir. On pain of fines, deportation, and loss of standing, sir. The full rules are in appendix f, sir.”

Keith read through the entire text, chasing every clause and sub-clause, stopped to think hard, did it again, and finally put the papers down. He looked at Maddie. It *was* very good that she was on his side.

“Well done, Lieutenant.”

Maddie smiled, her ears perking up as she did. “Thank you, sir.”

**

Buried in the deepest recesses of the closet was a package, once opened and carefully re-wrapped. Natani fished it out and threw it on the bed. “You may want to turn around.” He—no. *She* caught himself—*herself*. If *she* was going to do this, she was going to do this. *She* pulled her robe over her head and let it fall, standing naked except for her bindings.

Natani noted with some amusement that Alaric *hadn’t* turned around. Well, it was all the same to her if the basitin wasn’t feeling prudish.

She still felt a twinge of uneasiness as she undid the bindings.

Natani unwrapped the package and looked at the card—‘For fighting the good fight’—before carefully setting it aside and looking at the contents. It was... even worse than she remembered. She couldn’t decide which looked more ridiculous: the pants or the top. And who even *wore* leather? But she’d decided. She started by wriggling herself into the pants. That, at least, she knew to be possible, as improbable as it seemed. She did her best to remain dignified—Alaric was still watching—and if she didn’t quite manage that, well, at least she didn’t get flustered.

She had to marvel at the fit. As tight as they were, the pants afforded movement, and despite leaving her tail free they sat on her hips like they were glued there. They felt... good to wear. But pants were just pants. Natani grabbed the top. She thought she understood precisely how the damn thing was supposed to be put on. She just didn't see any way to do it by herself, short of *maybe* magic. She sighed. "Alaric?"

"Yes—" he paused just long enough for Natani to see it coming "—ma'am?" She grinned at him. *Clever bastard*. "Hook this up for me."

Natani turned away, then pulled her hair over one shoulder and moved her tail to the side. She cupped her breasts with the top and stood still, feeling absolutely ridiculous. She maintained awareness of Alaric, ready to bind him if necessary—you don't *quite* turn your back on someone like that. The basitin took a moment before stepping closer. He almost seemed hesitant. But after a moment, he took hold of the trailing ends of the garment, figured out the latches and catches, and tried to make the ends meet.

This was going to be tight. Natani adjusted her shoulders, breathed out, and still no go, no matter how much Alaric tugged at it. Though... was he avoiding touching her? "Try closer to my back."

Progress. Natani could feel his fingers as he worked. She supposed it *was* a pretty intimate place to touch someone, at that, but as far as she remembered it didn't hold any special significance to basitins.

Of course, they could make *general* significance go quite a long way. "Done."

Natani stopped smooshing her boobs, only for them to stay smooshed. It felt more like Keith than a garment. But it didn't really feel all that constrictive, despite holding her close. Again, like Keith. She rolled her eyes at herself and turned to face Alaric.

The basitin still appeared nonchalant. She hadn't exactly expected him to be easily flappable, but there was still something reassuring about it. Of course, he didn't know her. And wasn't a wolf. So his usefulness as a test audience was perhaps a bit questionable.

'How do I look?' seemed... off. "What's the impression?"

"Like you're ready to go to war, ma'am."

She'd take that.

Would have preferred it to going to the sitting room, quite possibly.

She just... needed a moment to get used to the clothes. Yeah. And there was the way Alaric had felt when she examined him. *And* he'd just helped her. She sat down on the edge of the bed, and looked at him. What was the right question? "Why did you come now?"

*

There was something about Natani's tone that made all of Alaric's glib answers flee. "I... wanted to see him, ma'am." She clearly didn't consider the question answered. "I was in Wreathwood on business. I saw Maddie as she was leaving, and I just... followed her. I shouldn't have. But I did."

The wolf looked curious. "And why shouldn't you have?"

How did she not see? "I don't deserve to. Not after last time. And he's *happy*. That's... I shouldn't..."

Natani sighed. "Look, I don't know what your hangup is, but... I'll tell you what you *shouldn't* do. You *shouldn't* slip away again before he's had time to deal with you—and by the way, I'll *know* if you go near that crystal you hid. And you *shouldn't* have some harebrained scheme for him that he'll only learn about when it's already too late." She glared at him for emphasis. "He thought you were alive. He really did. But he couldn't bring himself to *believe* it, because that would have made him *less guilty*. So you *shouldn't* keep pretending that you don't matter." He had no answer. The wolf sighed again. "Look. You... care for him, yes?"

He found his conviction. "I'd die for him, ma'am."

Natani covered her face with one hand. "That's *literally the last thing anyone wants you to do*."

"... really?"

"Really."

"I..." he snapped a salute. "Yes, ma'am!"

She stood up. "*Right*. And enough with the sir and ma'am routine. I'm not going to take charge of you. The name is Natani."

It appeared to not be an ironic statement. Alaric dropped the salute and tried to relax, but it didn't come easily. It didn't help that she reminded him of the King. The wolf smiled at him. Reassuringly? "Thank you... Natani."

She nodded at him. "Now, let's get out there."

Natani preceded him out, and Alaric didn't avert his eyes fast enough. He'd

heard the rumors, but...

Tailless chaps. Far lewder than nudity.

**

Natani let Alaric enter first, and waited in the corridor. She'd pressed the bassitin into playing her herald. Stopping even for a moment, she started feeling uneasy again. She hated that. It wasn't like she was stepping out in front of the council...

She found a grin for herself. Maybe that was exactly it. It *wasn't* the council. It actually *mattered* what these people thought.

Didn't make it easier, though.

She heard Alaric clear his throat. "The wolfess, Natani."

Nice intonation.

She stepped into the room, holding herself tall. Too tall. By her side, Alaric faced the room.

The room faced them.

The only sound was of playing cards spilling to the floor.

It was Keith she looked to first. He went from surprised to... thoughtful. He could have had *some* reaction, surely— *priorities*. Thoughtful was good. Maddie went wide-eyed, then for some reason glared at Alaric. Zen...

Natani sighed. "Shut up, Zen."

She still had the link closed, but, looking at *her brother* holding his muzzle with both hands, there were times when the link wasn't necessary.

Just when it looked like Zen was about to explode, Keith spoke up. "So are you going with Kat's play?"

She hadn't thought of it that way. "No. Yes. Maybe." Natani ran her hands through her hair, then stopped when she realized what that was doing to her breasts. "Look, it can't be me. I will *always* be a special case. Holding me up as some kind of example wouldn't be... honest. Maybe it would work, but I'm not going to start lying about who I am. We need others. We need... who I might have been." Stop feeling so damn unsure of yourself. Find that anger again. "And there have to be others, because if there aren't, then we're wrong. And we're not." Some of the heat was returning. "So no, I'm not going to do that. But these assholes... they're not even taking *assassinating* me seriously." Anger flared. *That* was an insult. "And it's not my mind they hate, it's my body.

So for them...” Her temper was back at full force. Even Zen was growing serious. She let some of it leak into the link, and her brother grew somber. “I will gladly be a ‘her’ while I *kick their asses*, just to make it that much worse for them.” She wasn’t sure she could quite point out the distinction, but she had enough conviction not to care. Keith just nodded. “So I need to see that I can actually fight in this...” She gestured at her outfit. “*This*. And since *brother dearest* doesn’t look like he could stay standing...” Maddie was making not-me motions. Alaric was an unknown. Keith was already standing up. “Let’s go.”

*

Alaric watched as Keith got up and joined Natani, and caught a flash of his naked ankles again. He really needed to get the hang of not looking at people below the knee while he was here. Keith nodded at him as he passed, and Alaric nodded back, dumb. They left the room, and he watched them go.

Maybe he should make that below the shoulders.

After a moment, Maddie got up to follow, but Zen grabbed her by the wrist. Alaric noted both that she didn’t evade the grab, and that her feet were wrapped now.

Zen’s weren’t, of course. Alaric averted his eyes *again*.

Maddie looked at Zen, and the wolf let her go. He sounded amused. “That’s a *them* moment.”

Maddie shrugged and sat back down, once more pulling her feet up into the hem of her robe. Alaric nodded to himself. Consistency was key. Maddie shot him an angry glare. There, too.

Well. This didn’t stand to get awkward at all.

He looked at the wolf, careful to keep his eyes up. Less was known—or said—about Zen. His fur color had been more different from Natani’s than Alaric had been expecting, but the resemblance was otherwise clear. He’d heard the wolf described as good-natured, and as someone who was never all that far from a smile. After his reaction to Natani just now, Alaric thought he could see it.

He stepped over to Zen, who was just straightening up from gathering up his cards from the floor. The wolf looked at him, curious, and he proffered a hand. “Nickolai Alaric.”

Zen took the hand and gave it a firm shake. He was clearly amused. “Zen.”

“Charmed.”

“I’m sure.”

Silence.

“So... what were you playing?”

**

This looked to be the kind of spar that would have been better done outdoors, but while the rain had abated slightly it still wasn’t anything you’d want to have a friendly fight in. They went to the guest room and cleared as much of the floor as they could.

Keith assumed his position, keeping a careful eye on Natani. The wolf hesitated for a moment, then took off her mana necklace and put it on the table.

Not a good sign.

She stretched a bit and tested how she could move, and Keith was very nearly distracted from matters at hand. It didn’t look like the clothes would give her much trouble... but that had never been what this was about. She settled into position, opposite him, with an intent look on her face. And waited.

Also not a good sign.

Keith went in. He preferred to be on the defensive, reacting to his opponent. He didn’t doubt he’d get the chance. And indeed, he was only able to press Natani for a short moment. When they’d originally started sparring, he’d been able to keep winning on speed and technique. He still had a slight edge in both, but it was no longer enough to overcome the wolf’s reach. These days he was the underdog, taking points where he could.

And today, he couldn’t. It was plain that Natani was angry, but it wasn’t the kind of anger that leads to mistakes. She had bottled it up, but it was a clear bottle, the contents plain to see; a quiet fury, bringing utmost focus.

Even angry, she was beautiful to him.

Keith tried everything he could think of—holding back would have been unforgivable—but could barely land a hit, and increasingly found himself up against a wall. Natani’s intensity never flagged. There was none of their usual interplay today, this was about winning. But she was still fighting cleanly—overwhelming strength, not underhanded tricks.

Not that she was inclined to go for low blows these days, ever since a sparring accident while she had been in Zen’s body. It *had been* an accident, but

Keith had still apologized profusely. To both of them.

Keith grunted as another strike made it past his block, pushing him against the wall, then another, pinning him. He thought he felt the wall give a little. He was resilient to pain, but not impervious to damage. He had two, maybe three broken ribs and a bruised everything. The fight was only becoming more one-sided. There was no winning move here, and he didn't think Natani needed a punching bag. He let the next hit he took drop him down to one knee, and stayed there.

"Yield." It was more of a croak than he would have liked.

*

For a moment, Natani was confused. Keith *never* yielded. But there the basitin was, down on one knee, grimacing. In pain. He had a bloodied lip, and she had his blood on her knuckles. The heat of the battle faded, and she felt disgusted with herself. This... wasn't strength.

She grabbed her mana crystals and crouched next to Keith. Her heart sunk more as she saw the extent of the damage she'd done. Her top felt tighter than the bindings ever had. This *wasn't* strength.

There was no reproach in the way Keith looked at her, just his usual humor, if a little subdued. That helped. A little. Keith closed his eyes and let out a sigh as Natani began. Basitin were hard to heal, but she'd had practice.

When it was done, she stood up. "Keith, I'm—"

He'd already been moving to take her hand. Still on one knee, he kissed the back of her hand—perhaps for the first time—before turning it around and kissing her palm. He looked up at her and smiled. "Natani. You are strong, and you are beautiful, and it has nothing to do with what you wear or how you call yourself. It never did."

Was it really that simple? Of course it was. *That wasn't strength!* Something fell away from her heart, and she felt lighter for it. How many times had that happened, with Keith by her side? "That simple?"

A simple nod. "That simple. You're anyone's equal."

Natani found she was smiling. "A basitin—what was that word—egalitarianist?"

Keith grinned at her. "Just don't tell the King."

He was still holding her hand, and when she pulled it back there was a mo-

ment where he caught at her fingers, prompting her to clasp his hand in turn. Natani gave his fingers a squeeze and stroked the back of his hand with her thumb. She let out a long sigh, and the last of the uncertainty went with it. “Thank you, Keith.”

*

He smiled at her. “Happy to be of service.”

Natani tugged at his hand to stand up. He did, and she took a step back, spun around, and struck a pose—one hand on her hip. She grinned at him. “Well, what do you think? Pretty good, hm?”

He sighed appreciatively and made a show of looking—more than a show. “Do the spin again?” She did, slower and with more hips. Keith sighed again. “How do those things stay *up*? Magic?”

Natani laughed. “No idea, but I don’t think they’re coming off by themselves. Everything is nice and... *snug*.”

Keith eyed her chest. “Not... *too* snug?”

Natani rolled her eyes. “No, it’s fine. And a hell of a lot better than fighting bare-chested, let me tell you.”

They looked at each other. Keith let his eyes roam, but in the end, it was still her face they settled on. She might have been beautiful when she was angry, but happy, she was beyond beautiful. He must’ve been doing something right, because she blushed.

“Keith... how do I look in this?”

He smiled, then grinned. “You’re making me question my sexuality.”

Natani laughed, then reached out to touch him on the cheek. Her hand lingered. “Care to put it to the test?”

Well, she certainly seemed more relaxed now... but maybe there was still some tension to release. He stepped forward, and Natani pulled him into an embrace. He got a faceful of... leather. Well, that was new. Interesting texture. He did some experimental nuzzling, and Natani laughed again. It was a good sound. He let his hands roam down her back, past the slowly wagging tail, and squeezed her ass firmly.

It really was an interesting texture.

*

Natani gave Keith a tweak on the ear, and the basin let her go. She stepped back with a grin. "Let me get out of these things."

Easier said than done. It took some pushing and wriggling just to get the pants off her hips, and then they started bunching up. Might go easier if she could relax her legs... She pulled up a chair and sat on the edge, and was able to make some more progress. When she got them past her knees, Keith had other ideas. He stopped her, then ducked under to pop his head up between her legs and smile up at her. Quite innocently.

Not a good sign.

Natani sighed, but she had to smile. "... Fine. Have it your way. But I don't think we should keep the others waiting for hours."

Keith grinned. "It's always *something*."

She leaned back in the heavy wooden chair. A regrettably common feature of human furniture was that the backrests often couldn't accommodate a tail, but it didn't much matter sitting on the edge like this. She gripped the armrests, then spread her legs as far as she could with the pants still around her shins. She tried to settle into a comfortable a position. This... might take a while. Something stirred in her at the thought.

Keith began slowly, kissing her on the thigh, on where the leg joins the body, on the other thigh... everywhere except where she wanted him to. She had never been very patient with her pleasure, and Keith's expert attentions soon had her aching for it. But she would not take matters into her own hands, not now. Call it penance for what she'd done. So as he slowly teased his way closer, she focused on not carving new grooves in the armrests. When he finally zeroed in on her womanhood, she gasped. Lapping, licking, circling, teasing... after the slow beginning, it was much more, much faster, than she was expecting. But as her pleasure began to build, and the room fill with her moans, Keith began to back off. As she grew closer and closer to the edge, Keith went slower and slower, until even just his breath on her was almost too much.

But never quite enough.

She closed her eyes and surrendered herself into Keith's hands, and Keith carried her. The edge stretched into an endless plain, until her whole body was tense with the need for release, her breathing ragged with moans. Forget penance. She never wanted this to stop.

She didn't know what finally pushed her over. She wasn't even sure Keith was touching her when it happened. All she knew was that after that endless moment, she crested like rarely before. Keith was still there with her, adding his little touches as she strained against the chair; pushing on the armrests, pushing against the back, her legs around the basin, her feet on the small of his back, pulling at him. Keith endured, but the wood creaked with the strength of her orgasm. Finally, *finally*, she started to come off it. Another eternity passed on the way down.

Keith pushed her back over.

**

Zen made a show of frowning at his cards. Alaric had professed to be unfamiliar with the game, but they'd soon had to resort to colluding completely shamelessly just to try and pull back his early lead.

The first handful of hands had been accentuated by the occasional shake of the walls. Alaric had seemed appreciative, Maddie unnerved. Zen couldn't blame her. The way Natani had felt... If it had been anyone but Keith, he would have been worried. But it was Keith. They'd elevated not killing each other to an art.

Still. Every thump and rattle had called for a little more not worrying. And after the fight ended, and Natani's anger faded, it had been replaced with something worse. But then... something had changed. The link had thawed. And what he'd felt from Natani... there had been no need to force his cheer anymore. And he'd needed to close the link shortly after, to stop from getting terminally distracted. He'd still caught a bit of it, enough to remind him how badly *he* wanted Keith.

But the interesting bit had come next. They'd been playing along, when Alaric had suddenly tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. He'd looked first at Zen, who'd feigned puzzlement. It was no great mystery to him what the basin must have been reacting to, but he couldn't hear anything himself. Alaric had then tried to catch Maddie's eye, and when he eventually had, Maddie had blushed. Over the following minutes, Alaric's eyebrows had continued to climb until they seemed in danger of leaving his face altogether, and Maddie's blush had deepened to the point where Zen thought he could find her in the dark.

He'd known basin hearing was good, but...

The thing of it was, there wasn't really anything he could do about it. The weather was still dreadful, and if they could hear them *here*, there was no reason to expect they couldn't hear them everywhere else in the house. And he wouldn't have interrupted Keith and Natani for *anything*, not just then.

He didn't really see any harm in it, either. Alaric seemed more impressed than anything else, and Maddie... Well, Maddie would have been in this position before. And she'd never said anything.

And, okay, he thought it was pretty funny.

And then, even *he* could pick something out. He cocked his head. Was Natani *actually*... he grinned. "Oh, right! It's the full moon tonight."

**

Finally, finally it was over. She slumped into the chair, drew a ragged breath, and opened her eyes.

Keith was smiling at her, just as she'd known he would be. His voice was like music to her. "Better?"

She returned the smile, knowing she looked goofy, knowing Keith loved it. "Yes."

Keith rested his head against her thigh, and Natani stroked his hair. His ears. The basitin closed his eyes for a moment, a smile playing on his lips. He sighed and opened them again, and Natani knew he was about to say something foolish. "Come on. We need to get back to the others."

Unacceptable. Absolutely unacceptable. But... could she make him change his mind *without* taking charge? "Just a bit longer?"

Keith nodded, surprised. Then grinned. "Need a moment?"

Natani laughed quietly. She probably did, at that.

The pants had inched their way down to her ankles in the tumult. She carefully kicked them off, conscious of Keith's head between her legs. She still rubbed against him a bit, not that he seemed to mind. Quite the opposite. Her legs free, she sat up a bit straighter in the chair—one of the armrests was a little loose. Had she done that?—and snuck her feet into Keith's lap. The basitin's expression took on a breathless quality. She got the lay of the land with her paws. Hilly. Remembering the approach he'd taken, she didn't go for the obvious moves, but rather roamed around, with only the occasional nudge, as if carelessly, with a toe, a heel, an ankle... These were accompanied by cute little

sounds from Keith. As she slowly kneaded against him, she also resumed stroking his ears, occasionally scratching him *just so*. Books had been written on the subtleties of touching a basitin's ears.

The really good ones were all banned.

As if in a trance, Keith slowly drew closer to her wolfessness. She didn't nudge him toward or away, and before long he was once again lapping at her, almost hungrily, intently. It wasn't *just* about her, anymore. She pinned his ears against her thighs, massaging them, and the basitin's fervor doubled. Natani could see his tail curling. Her pleasure rose swiftly and she almost lost herself in it, arching her back, moaning as Keith lavished her with his tongue. But if it wasn't all about her, it was still Keith playing to her expectations. In his lap, she abandoned all pretense, grabbing at him with her toes, massaging him. She knew it would drive him crazy.

Then she stopped.

She rested her feet on Keith's thighs, her hands on the armrests. For a moment she thought he might just keep going, but he slowed, then stopped, and looked up at her with a mix of reproach and humor.

Natani tried for an innocent expression of her own. It probably wasn't very good. "You said something about getting back?" She curled her toes slightly against his thighs. It could have been a signal for him to get off.

It could have been.

*

Keith was painfully erect after what Natani had been doing to him, what he'd been doing to Natani. He whimpered inwardly. If he stuck to his script, he would have to say yes. It hadn't been a bluff, but Natani was calling it *anyway*. And if he doubled down, there would be nothing to do but walk away. That was the point, of course. A lesson in wolfish wisdom. Take what you want. But it didn't come easily to him, and *now* of all times... he looked up at her. *Her*.

Maybe it was exactly the right time.

He grabbed Natani's feet and shifted them off him. The touch was fresh tinder for the bonfire she had lit. He stood up and looked down at her. Natani returned the look with a raised eyebrow. "What's your next move?"

"They can wait a bit longer."

Natani grinned at him as he struggled out of his pants. That wasn't the

tightness he wanted to be feeling. He sent the confining garments flying, then leaned over Natani to kiss her. He *was* going to do this thing. Natani's returning kiss was almost placid, as if it was all the same to her. That made it harder for him. And that was the point. Keith found a place for his hands, on the seat of the chair, and positioned himself, until he could feel himself rubbing against the fur of her stomach. He kissed her on the throat, hungrily, then travelled down farther. He settled his face into her cleavage and started poking at her. The angle was good, he should be able to... after a few false starts, he had it. He slid all the way in in one thrust, coming to rest his weight against Natani, stopping there. *That* was the feeling he wanted. Natani let out a satisfied sigh, and he started moving. Long strokes, pulling almost all the way out, only to sheath himself to the hilt again. He went at his own pace, neither fast nor slow, enjoying the sensations and letting his pleasure build slowly. Natani began moaning under him, but her arms were still on the armrests, and she didn't do anything to urge him to do anything different. He thought he could change that. He picked up his pace, slamming into her a little harder on each thrust, pushing against her for a moment before withdrawing again. Her moans took on a new, more urgent tone. He nuzzled at her breasts playfully, made more difficult by the leather top. Finally, he could feel her arms around him, roaming his back. Still there was no direction, but no matter; the embrace was what he'd wanted. He sped up again, and Natani's hold on him tightened. Faster. He was panting with the pleasure and the exertion, and he could tell from the way Natani was clutching at his back that she couldn't be far either. Still faster. Natani let out one, long, drawn out moan and he felt her body quake with her pleasure. *Faster*. He pushed his body as far as it would go, racing to catch up with her. And suddenly, he was there.

As his pleasure took him, he slammed into her one last time, *pushing*, leaning into her. Natani wrapped her arms tight around him. The front legs of the chair left the ground.

The back legs buckled under.

**

Zen looked up from his cards, keeping his poker face. "Did you just feel the earth move?"

**

“Thank you.” The mumbled words came from somewhere in the vicinity of her breasts. Natani was lying in the ruins of what had been the venerable old chair, Keith still on top of her, her arms still around him. That had been a pretty confusing few moments. But no harm done, except to the chair.

She found an ear to rub, in a way that spoke of love and intimacy, and smiled to herself. “Happy to be of service.”

**

The two joined them rather sheepishly, bearing armloads of firewood that Zen suspected had been the clunky old chair in the guest room. Alaric and Maddie were on their best behavior, but Zen grinned at Natani. “Just try not to break any of the furniture?”

Natani grinned back, unabashed. “It might, perhaps, *sometimes* be inevitable.”

The two of them stacked the wood next to the fireplace. Keith found something that caught his interest in the remains—looked like a piece of metal—and handed it to Natani. She looked it over, shrugged, and set it on the mantelpiece with a clink.

Natani was still wearing her earlier getup, but the air felt a lot clearer now. Zen let the link fill with his boy-in-a-candy-store excitement.

Natani turned to him with an amused smile. “Okay, okay, let’s hear it, then.”

Zen turned to Alaric and gestured at Natani with both arms. “That’s my *little sister!*”

Alaric nodded. “We’ve met.”

He tried Maddie next. “My *sister!*”

She rolled her eyes. “Obviously.”

He turned to Keith. “*Sister!*”

The basitin walked over and kissed him on the top of the head. “Yes, yes, well done.”

Sister?

Natani radiated amusement. *If you like.*

Zen let out a sigh. What a world. Well. Back to business. “So, could you?”

Fight in that.”

Natani took a curtsy, and even though there was no way to make it work in those clothes... she somehow did. “Quite well, *brother dearest*. Would you care to try me?”

He shook his head and smiled. “I’ll take your word for it. No change in plans, then?”

Zen and Alaric had the chairs, and Maddie was still occupying the love-seat. Natani and Keith sat down on the couch, right next to each other. “No. We leave the honor guard to look after themselves, and make our own way.” She smiled, and gave Keith’s ear a tweak. “Just like old times.”

Alaric looked at Keith. “You’re going as well?” His voice was neutral, but Zen thought the unspoken ‘Is that wise?’ was still very loud.

Keith nodded. “Not in any official capacity. I’m just arm candy. Which reminds me...” he gave Natani a sideways glance. “You never decided if you want me devoted or petulant.”

Natani looked at him with a smile. “You know what? I’m not going to play into their bullshit ideas about strength. Just be you. And *I’m* not going to act like this—” she gestured at her outfit—is an insult. It shouldn’t be. If it is, that’s on them.” ... “... I’m going with Kat’s play, aren’t I?”

A smile flickered on Keith’s face. “Maybe. But... you didn’t answer my question.”

The flash of love made Zen smile, unbidden. This was how things should be. Natani leaned down to kiss Keith, tenderly. She smiled at the basitin. “Devoted.”

Keith rested his head against her chest. “Always.”

Zen watched the other basitins for potential squirming at the open display of affection, but it looked like they were already all scanded out. “Sorry about that, they’re incorrigible.” Though... He tilted his head and looked at Keith, grinning. “Maybe I should go for petulant, just to see what it’s like.”

Still snuggled into Natani’s chest, Keith tilted his head down a bit and adjusted his ears, then looked at Zen from under his brows. He didn’t *quite* make it all the way to petulant before he grinned.

Zen sighed. “*I dare* you to come over here and do that again.”

Keith just stuck his tongue out at him. Of course he did. Zen pleaded in the link for Natani to give Keith’s ear a tweak. She did, and he settled down, sepa-

rating from her and giving them both a warm smile. For a time, the moment held... but they were not done yet.

Natani sighed. "Right. We'll set out... tomorrow? No, the day after tomorrow." She looked at Alaric. "I trust you can stay that long?"

Alaric nodded slowly. "That will not be a problem."

Natani nodded back, then looked over the basitins. "Anyone have anything to add?"

Maddie did. "Consider who you want as your enemies. There's no way this plan to kill you is a consensus decision. They won't all be at fault, even if they are all to blame. After all..."—she looked at Alaric—"... it only takes one."

Keith nodded, and to Maddie's apparent consternation, so did Alaric. Natani nodded as well. There would be time to think things through on the road. "Anyone else?" Nobody. "And with that, the topic of people trying to kill us is, once again, tabled. Now..." she turned to Alaric. "How is the King?"

**

As the evening progressed, the topics varied from the King to the Empire, to Wreathwood and what the West embassy would mean, to purely mainland matters and back again. It began to sink in for Keith that Alaric was really there—*Alaric!* Alive and well! When the time came to prepare dinner, Zen took the turn, even though it should have been Keith's. He silently sent the wolf his love and gratitude.

*

Alaric had come half-expecting to be left on the doorstep, but he found himself welcomed instead. Well, except for Maddie, who never seemed to miss an opportunity to needle him. He took it in stride; would have taken much worse. It became clear very quickly that what was said of Keith and the wolves—*both* of the wolves—was, at the very least, something like the truth. When he looked at their interactions, the casual affection, love was the only frame that fit. Well, and so. The only question of import was whether Keith was happy, and that he was. Happier than Alaric had ever seen him. This was the boy he had once known, grown into a man in a place where he was free to be himself.

*

After dinner, Zen brought out the coffee. The storm had passed, and the windows were open to the clear summer night. When he handed Alaric his mug, the basitin thanked him, then actually smiled. Zen took his seat, watching Alaric as he spoke with Keith. He seemed to be getting livelier by the moment. *What do you make of him?*

Natani smiled, sipping her coffee. *I think he's coming in out of the cold.*

**

That was the evening. Keith watched Alaric, Alaric watched Keith and the wolves, the wolves watched the two basitins, and Maddie watched all of them.

**

“Okay?”

Keith struggled with himself. But they were insistent, in that way that showed they meant it. “Okay! Okay.”

“So it’s...?”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Zen was clearly amused. “Sounds about right.”

They were in bed, had been about to go to sleep—possibly via some detours—when the wolves had sprung this conversation on him. He sighed, staring at the ceiling. What was he going to do with that okay? He... *did*... have some ideas. But...

Zen poked him on the nose.

“Hm?”

He turned to look at the wolf, only for Zen to pull him into his chest.

“C’mere.”

“Mmph?”

*

How cute. Natani was amused.

Shush, you. I haven’t seen him this anxious since...

Since you.

Zen nodded, then smiled. *So what do you expect me to do? Mark my territory?*

Pure pragmatism. *And why not? Don't you think he'd like that? She grinned. Especially if you told him.*

Zen considered. ... *he probably would, huh. But...* He stroked Keith's back, then reached up to rub the basitin's ears. Soothing.

"Mmph." Keith put his arms around him, and Zen knew he'd done the right thing. He managed to not get hard, too. Keith probably would have taken issue at being poked in the stomach. He *still* managed to not get hard, and had to be amused at himself. *The burden of age and experience.*

You're too quick to sacrifice yourself, brother.

It was an old complaint; there was no weight to it, only love. Zen sent his love back. *There's no sacrifice here, sister.* "This is what I want to do right now."

"Mmh."

Natani nodded. It wasn't as if she didn't understand. She shifted closer to them, but didn't quite snuggle up to Keith. Two wolves was a lot of warmth in the summer months. But... Keith wrapped his tail around Natani's leg, nudging her closer.

A lot isn't always too much.

Natani shifted closer still, giving one of Keith's ears a lick as she did, then nuzzled his neck. She put one hand to Keith's side, then followed the basitin's arm around Zen, putting hers on top of it.

"Sweet dreams."

Keith awoke with the dawn, still in Zen's arms. He stayed there for a moment, taking in the wolf's scent and listening to his breathing. Zen always seemed to know when Keith wanted, more than anything else, to just be held. He placed a kiss over the wolf's heart, then eased away from him. Even sleeping, Zen looked carefree. He smiled at the wolf and stroked his cheek gently, then kissed him. That wouldn't wake him. He was an accomplished sleeper.

Keith sat up carefully. Natani still had an arm around him as well, and it slid down to his lap. He—*she*—was sleeping on her side, nibbling on the corner of a pillow. Keith grinned, then leaned down to kiss her on the cheek, then stroked the side of her muzzle. Could he ever explain to them how much he loved them?

Natani's arm tightened around him, and as he shifted to get out of it he bumped into Zen, who grabbed at him as well. He ended up more entangled than he'd been to begin with.

He laughed quietly to himself. Normally he would have been very happy to stay there and sleep in, and Maddie knew the ways of the house—but he had a feeling that Alaric would already be up, and even if there hadn't been anything to do... that was one guest a smart host did not leave unattended for too long. And so he carefully extracted himself from the pile of sleeping wolves, clamored out of bed, and got dressed, stifling a yawn.

But... could he go, just like that? He sat down on the edge of the bed, stroking Natani's cheek again. No reaction. He rubbed a little harder, and she flicked an ear.

Ah. He spoke softly, smiling. "Pretending to be asleep?"

Natani stuck out her tongue. Keith snuck back into bed, to give her a very solid good morning kiss.

Eventually, Natani nudged him away. He'd gotten her to open her eyes, at least. "Get going, unless you're planning on spending a *lot* more time here."

Keith snuck in one more quick kiss and retreated, grinning. "No change to my orders, then?"

The wolf yawned. "Nope. Just remember..."

Keith nodded. "No regrets." He looked at Natani, then at the sleeping Zen, and his chest constricted. "I don't deserve you two."

Natani beckoned him closer, then grabbed him and pulled him back into bed, rolling him over and expressing at length how silly he was being. When

she broke the kiss, she smiled down at him. “Yes, you do. Over and over.” She rolled off, then smacked him on the side of the butt. “Last chance. Zen’s going to wake up, and then *neither* of us is going to let you go for a while.”

That *was* a thought, but... it would also be running away. He got up, turning back to look at Natani with a smile. “I love you.”

“You too. Good luck.” She stretched before settling down on her back, and Keith had to struggle a bit to get himself out the door.

*

The door clicked shut behind Keith. Zen opened one eye. “I wasn’t sure you’d let him go.”

Natani grinned. “I almost didn’t. He *always* has to tease.”

They shared a silent moment, contemplating Keith. It was a risk, but it was well worth taking. Near as they could tell.

Zen yawned. It really was too early. He grinned at Natani. “There’s an empty spot here, sis. How about it?”

Natani looked at him, bemused, then snorted. She curled up against her big brother, and as they drifted back toward sleep the link filled with an obscure sense of nostalgia.

It had been a long, long time.

**

Keith had expected to find Maddie skulking about, keeping an eye on Alaric, but the door to the guest room was closed—usually meaning it was occupied—and she was nowhere to be seen. Not that that necessarily meant she *wasn’t* skulking about, but after yesterday Keith would have expected her to be overt rather than covert. Had the wolves said something to her? Or did she have her own reasons? ... or was she just tired?

Moving along, he found Alaric in the sitting room, very much awake. He had tidied away his bedding and was seated in one of the solo chairs, reading. One of the many magical treatises from the shelves, none of which meant *anything* to Keith. “Morning!” He pointed at the book. “Not still at it, are you?”

Alaric actually looked startled. “Morning. And I... am, actually. Natani didn’t say anything? She confiscated my crystals yesterday.”

Huh. “I... guess she wanted to see what you’d do.”

Alaric pretended to consider. “I wouldn’t have mentioned it.”

Keith raised an eyebrow. “And I’m supposed to believe you couldn’t have hidden that book in time?”

Alaric grinned. “Ah, well.”

Keith considered him. “So, should I be worried? Or angry?”

“Neither, I hope. Believe me, I’m *very* careful. And she gave me a clean bill of health.”

Keith made a note to double-check that. And ask Natani how sure she was. But, if it wasn’t a pressing concern... He shrugged. “Okay, then.” Alaric looked surprised, and Keith grinned. “Provisionally.”

Alaric nodded slowly. “Should I just expect *everything* to go better than I expect?”

Keith just smiled, and watched Alaric’s mind spin. “I was thinking we might spar, since we didn’t get an opportunity yesterday. For old times’ sakes. Or would you like breakfast?”

“Sparring sounds good. I don’t get enough exercise these days.” He stood up and replaced the book. “... outside?”

“Outside.”

**

Alaric lay on the grass, still damp with dew, and looked up at Keith, standing over him with a grin. That throw had been pretty ridiculous; he wondered if he’d left furrows. “You’ve really gotten better.”

Keith shrugged and extended his arm. Alaric grasped it, and Keith pulled him up. “I’d feel better about it if I was taking more than... one in ten? Two in ten?”

It was seven out of forty-eight, so far. “Something like that. You’ve still gotten better, though.”

“It was that fight with you on the bridge. Reminded me that strength matters.”

“You didn’t lose to me, though.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Ah.

...

Alaric assumed a ready position. “Well, in the interest of continued improvement...”

**

The final score had been nineteen to eighty-one. That there had been exactly one hundred bouts told Alaric that he hadn't been the only one counting. He was relaxing in the bath—*completely* naked, how scandalous!—thinking about Keith's words. There had been no resentment there. Keith would have saved him from himself, if he'd had the strength.

Alaric sighed. He'd already been rapidly spiraling back into love. Was that all the protection his shame and regret were good for? One evening with Keith? Unreserved. *Happy*.

It probably was.

And today! Keith had sparred with him. Made him *breakfast*. Drawn him a *bath*. The only thing missing was calling him by name.

There was a knock on the door, and Keith peeked in. “Mind if I come in?”

Yes, please! “Sure, I don't mind.”

He watched—surreptitiously, to start—as Keith entered and swiftly undressed, then started to wash himself. He had only grown more beautiful. By the time he was ready to enter the bath, Alaric was hanging on to his tail to not make waves.

Keith grinned at him and raised an eyebrow. “Like what you see?”

He grinned back. “Any granite deposits hereabouts?”

Keith rolled his eyes and got in, closer than Alaric would have expected. The almost-question somehow got away from him. “You're pretty comfortable with me.”

Keith looked at him and stuck his tongue out, and Alaric recognized it as a wolverine smile. He'd seen plenty of examples yesterday. Keith grew more serious. “Well, I'm not pretending to be a good basitin anymore, for one.” He scratched at the back of his head, somewhat sheepishly. “Sorry about that, by the way. It was always such bullshit.”

“Not... always. I remember your dad, too.”

“No, but... well, yeah, okay.” He sighed. “But I just used it as an excuse.”

That hadn't been any great mystery to Alaric, but he just smiled. It felt weirdly final, that he no longer bothered Keith. That had been the one edge

Alaric had always had, feeble as it had been. Something to set him apart, even if it wasn't exactly in a good way. But now Keith was... *secure* in himself, and it was Alaric who was on shaky ground. Of course, it was good to see him like that.

Of course it was.

But...

He looked at Keith, just sitting there, completely off his guard. Alaric wavered for a moment, then gave in. Call it the final confirmation. What was his best shot? Ah, yes.

He reached out to touch Keith's right ear, carefully examining how the cut he had inflicted years ago had healed. There was no thrill in it for him. It had been a bad trade, that injury for this excuse. "Did... it give you any trouble?" A very un-basitin question for a very un-basitin situation.

Keith smiled at him, amused. "It's fine. And I think you're just using it as an excuse to touch me, anyway."

Alaric drew back his hand and grinned. "Ah, well."

No effect. Maybe he now, finally, was exactly what he was always supposed to have been; a friend. He tried not to feel a little sad about it.

"You never needed an excuse before."

"I do now. I don't know where the lines are, anymore. And... it doesn't look like I can get to you, anyway."

Keith grinned. "You sure? You used to be a lot more audacious."

Alaric laughed. What was he doing? "Give me *some* credit, would you? You're happy. I'm not going to mess with that." *Except I came here, didn't I?* It took some of the conviction out of his voice. "That was everything I ever really wanted from you, you know? To be happy."

Keith smiled. "*Everything?*"

Alaric grinned. "Ah, well. *Most* of it. The important bits."

"And the rest?"

Why was he pushing? "I think that would count as messing with you."

*

Keith looked at Alaric. No, not Alaric. It wasn't the former Master General he wanted to talk to. It was his old friend. "Nick... This really isn't fair to you, but... today... if you want... you don't need to worry about that. I've been in-

structed—” he grinned ruefully “—at *great length* to do whatever I want to clear the air with you. So I’d like you to... be you. If you want.”

For once, he had rendered Nick speechless rather than the other way around. But Nick had always been quick on his feet. “... and this isn’t fair to me how?”

“Because I can’t make any promises about tomorrow. I just don’t know yet. *We* don’t know yet. But...”

He trailed off when Nick reached out again. To touch the scar on Keith’s cheek. Of course. He closed his eyes and smiled, encouraging. He could feel Nick carefully trace the length of the scar; from his cheek across his eyelid to his eyebrow, then back again. Nick rested his hand on Keith’s cheek, and he leaned into it a little. No lines here. The hand stayed, and Keith could feel Nick shift closer to him in the bath. He expected a kiss—but apparently not. After a few moments, he opened one eye to sneak a peek. Nick’s face was right next to his; he had his eyes closed, and he seemed to be struggling with something. Somehow, it reminded him of how Natani had looked, that first time Keith had kissed her. These things... weren’t always easy.

Sometimes, you need a hand.

Keith took hold of the tuft of fur on Nick’s chest, and gave it a small tug. Nick kissed him. He didn’t hesitate further, but he was almost... timid. Controlled. Keith was open and receptive, reassuring. Slowly, ever so slowly, he coaxed more out of Nick, encouraging at every turn, seeking to understand the full depth of what he felt.

*

Finding invitation after invitation where he expected resistance, Nick let himself get carried away. He pushed Keith against the edge of the bath, the kiss growing ever more ferocious as he tapped into years of buried desire. A timeless moment later, Nick held Keith in a tight embrace, panting. Keith had his arms loosely around him, at the small of his back; touching the base of his tail. That, too, was driving him crazy. Even Nick had been surprised by the outpouring of emotion, but he thought he could have put the lid back on if Keith had balked. He hadn’t.

Nick got his breath back and cleared his throat. “Was that what you had in mind?”

Keith tapped him on the rump and he took the hint, relaxing his hold and leaning back so they could look at each other. Keith had the most beautiful smile Nick had ever seen, but it was tinged with sadness. The voice matched. “I’m sorry for all those times I ran away from you. I was an idiot. A scared idiot. I’m sorry.”

“Keith, I... I’m sorry too, for all those times I pushed when I shouldn’t have. And when you came back to the island...” his voice cracked. His greatest failure. Only blind luck had kept him from destroying everything. *Everything*. Keith and island, both.

Keith kissed him. It was the gentlest thing. “It’s okay.” He laughed at Nick’s expression. Even that was gentle. “It really is. I’ve forgiven you long ago.”

Nick misted up. It felt like too much of a miracle. “Then for me... Keith, there was never even anything to forgive. I’ve never held any of that against you.”

Keith let out a long, relieved, sigh, and some tension Nick hadn’t even realized was there went with it. Maybe Keith hadn’t realized, either. “Thank you.”

Nick cleared his throat. “Well, the air feels clearer now.”

Keith shifted very deliberately against him. It was no mystery to either of them how their bodies had reacted to the kiss. “A little.”

That coy little smile... Nick grabbed him and they toppled—into the water.

Some sputtering later they could both breathe again. Keith grinned. “Maybe we should move to dry land.”

Nick grinned back. “Let’s.”

Neither of them stood up.

Keith’s mouth quirked into a smile. “On three? One, two...”

Keith stood on three, but Nick just sat there, enjoying the view. Keith’s full form, standing proud, the light reflecting off his glistening manhood. A living statue. Keith crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow.

Nick grinned. “If there’s no granite, maybe marble...?”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Have you seen the terrain? We’ve got *wood*.”

Nick sighed happily. “So we do.” He stood up as well, trying not to be too self-conscious of Keith looking him over. Or his raging erection. What a situation. Keith was taking his time, and Nick laughed. “So, what’s the verdict?”

Keith grinned. “A fine specimen.”

Nick sighed again. It was only a little exaggerated. “You too.”

“Come on, let’s get dry.”

They waded out and shook the worst of it out of their fur before getting the towels. Nick’s was what he felt to be a fairly typical representation of towel-hood, but Keith’s was a massively oversized fluffy monstrosity. In pink.

“Don’t ask. Long story. But it’s pretty convenient.”

It looked unwieldy. “How so?”

Keith spread it out on the floor in one practiced motion, then plopped himself down in the middle and grinned up at him. “See? Now, was there something you wanted—”

Nick toppled him over, and this time there was no water to fall into. The towel was like a rug. They rolled around on it, kissing, exhilarating in each other’s bodies—or so Nick hoped. Keith was still mostly passive, letting him take the lead. Always inviting, never rejecting... but also never initiating. Every small touch or gesture from him was like fire to Nick, and he wanted to ask for more—yearned for it—but he couldn’t. What he really wanted was a promise, and he already knew that Keith couldn’t give one. He thought—dared hope—that that was why Keith was leaving it to him—to not make promises. That would in itself be almost like a promise, of a promise...

And that was what he read into the smallest of touches, the tiniest of enticements, all the while hoping he wasn’t deceiving himself... but also accepting the possibility that he was. Let the future be unknown; this wasn’t about the future. It wasn’t really even about the present. This was about everything that had gone before. About how he had felt, at twelve, swimming naked with Keith, realizing for the first time that his heart would be broken. Realizing he would pick up the pieces and put them back together, because Keith mattered more than the pain. How he had felt, watching Keith slip away from his life, wrongfully convicted, and him too weak to help. And again, as Nick had plummeted to the gorge, having wasted the miracle of his return.

About that maybe not having been the end.

He had meant to ask one last time, a final confirmation that this was okay, even if for now, but somewhere in their rassing they had definitely crossed over into sex. He was on top of Keith, pinning him down with a kiss, the kiss growing more urgent and desperate as Nick slowly grinded against Keith—shaft by shaft, balls to balls, the sensations driving him crazy. Keith had his arms around him again, barely touching the base of his tail, slightly pulling

him down against himself, moving minutely in response. Nick was very close, and it was getting very sticky between them.

He broke the kiss. “Are you sure this is—”

Keith caught his mouth, kissed him, held the kiss as Nick peaked, held it all the way through him spending himself in small involuntary jerks of ecstasy. Keith gave Nick’s tail a little tug with each one, and he shuddered with it. When it was finally done, Nick collapsed on top of him, panting.

He could hear Keith’s smile. “Yeah. It’s okay.”

Nick’s voice sounded a little rough to himself. “Well. Good to have that clear before anything happens.”

Keith laughed, and after a moment Nick did too. He took a moment to gather his senses, then levered himself up on knees and elbows to look at Keith. He felt such love at the sight of him that he couldn’t find his words, so he just kissed him. Keith’s arms were at Nick’s sides, tugging down, and Nick realized he must’ve been close as well. Nick went to one elbow and reached between them with his free hand—sticky business indeed—to find Keith’s member. When he grazed it with the side of his hand, Keith moaned. When he grasped it lightly, the moan became a mrow.

He’d take that over flustered, any day.

Keith was hot, firm, and throbbing in his hand. Nick traced the length until he reached the head, then cupped it. The tip was a sticky mess. Definitely close. He stopped, and shifted so he could kiss Keith while he finished this. Turnabout was fair play. Before he could start again, Keith started bucking his hips, thrusting against his palm. Nick teased the head with his fingers, but focused more on the kiss. Keith’s kissing and movements grew more frantic until suddenly he stopped, and Nick felt him pulse in his hand, depositing a whole new mess in his palm. He massaged the head gently as Keith’s hips jerked under him, time after time, and all the while kept him pinned with the kiss.

Keith grew languid in the kiss and Nick relented, pulling back to look at him. Keith had his eyes closed and a smile on his face. Nick smiled at him, overjoyed that he’d gotten to do that.

But he was also afraid. Could it mean to Keith what it meant to him? Well, probably not. But... what *did* it mean? He’d said ‘clear the air’, but what had been *in* the air, for Keith? Just regret?

Was this... penance? Was Nick taking advantage?

Could he stop if he was?

He wiped the enormous mess in his hand on the towel, then returned to both elbows to give Keith another kiss. From there, he started slowly making his way down Keith's body with his mouth and his tongue. He lapped as he went, enjoying the sensation of the short fur on his muzzle. The goal wasn't to clean up the the mess they had made, but he didn't avoid it either. Some was his, some was Keith's. The taste was different, but he didn't know which was which. Neither was unpleasant to him. When he reached Keith's stomach, he took a detour to one side. He'd always been ticklish... Keith squirmed under him, and Nick smiled. He relented, getting back on track. When he reached Keith's semi-hard member he carefully licked it clean—so *that* was Keith's flavor—despite that, too leading to some squirming. When he was done with his cleanup, he kissed Keith on the groin, then sat back on his haunches to admire his handiwork.

There was a clear line of matted fur from Keith's mouth to his groin. His chest and stomach were still a total mess. Nick smiled. Ah well.

Keith sat up as well and grinned at him. "I think you might have missed a spot."

"Really? Looks good to me."

Keith leaned closer and kissed him high on the chest.

Ah. Of course.

Nick shivered as Keith mimicked what he'd done. He was painfully hard again by the time Keith reached his stomach, and when he finally felt Keith's tongue on his shaft he sighed. Almost whimpered.

Keith leaned back with a grin. "You don't look like you're done."

His wit left him. All he could manage was to look at Keith, with every bit of the longing he felt. It must've looked rather pitiful.

Keith's expression softened into a smile. For a moment, Nick felt as though Keith was about to reach out... but he stood up, instead. "Stay put."

Nick did, watching as Keith turned away and walked to a cupboard at the side of the room. Had there always been that much sway to his hips? Such an arc to his tail? And the way he flashed his feet as he stepped... Nick sighed.

Keith opened the cupboard and rummaged inside—bending over invitingly—before returning with... a bowl of favlow nuts, a grin, and an arched eyebrow. "I trust you're familiar with these."

That somehow gave Nick an in to normalcy, or something like it. He grinned. “Figured it out, huh?”

Keith stuck his tongue out again. “More or less. Natani thought it might have been the King, but I gave you the edge. Even if you *were* dead.”

The King? “... I could actually see that happening.”

Keith looked surprised. “Really? What do you guys know that I don’t?”

Nick grinned. “Many things, I’m sure.” It felt oddly gratifying to be lumped into a ‘you guys’ with Natani.

*

Keith let it slide; it had been an idle question. He sat down in front of Nick and placed the bowl beside him, then looked a question at him. Nick grew sombre again, but didn’t respond otherwise. He looked... torn, and Keith had to wonder if he wasn’t doing his old friend harm, after all. But he’d already cracked a nut without even thinking about it, and there was still a favor he hadn’t returned. He let the gooey contents pool into his palm, then discarded the empty shell. Keith moved his hand above the length of Nick’s member, letting some of the liquid drip onto it. There was a long sigh from Nick. Next, Keith ran his open palm along the underside. Nick was twitching at his touch, so he grasped him lightly and massaged his way along the entire length, coating all of Nick’s manhood with the residue. Keith liked how Nick felt under his fingers; it was somehow different from Zen, even though he would have used all the same words to describe them. He finished by massaging the base of the shaft, where skin met fur, and Nick groaned.

Satisfied with his handiwork, he leaned back and looked at Nick with a smile. He’d closed his eyes during Keith’s ministrations. He had that expression of longing on his face again, and again Keith had to wonder if this made any sense at all. But he’d seen fulfillment earlier, too, and he was hoping to again.

*

Nick opened his eyes, to see Keith sitting back, looking at him. He’d withdrawn. “I thought you were going to...”

“I could, if you like. But I thought you’d like to...”

The way he'd trailed off was doing bad things to Nick's heart. He sighed. "Look, Keith... Is it just *okay*, or do you *want* this?"

Keith smiled coyly. "Do you want me to beg?"

Where had he learned to *do* that? "... would you?"

*

Keith flashed Nick a grin, then turned around slowly, stretching out on all fours before settling down on his knees and elbows, presenting Nick with a full view of all his interesting bits—feet included. He looked back over his shoulder and gave his best inviting smile, and swished his tail—going side to side anyway—into a question mark, just for good measure. Nick looked absolutely breathless. And good, he'd judged the distance *just* right...

*

When Nick, transfixed, finally came to life again he reached out to touch Keith's ass—only for Keith to lean away slightly, putting himself *just* out of reach... and extend one leg, to softly press the pad of his foot up against Nick's balls.

2dfjgaosjifq234

His next coherent thought came when he was balls deep in Keith, crouching over him, nipping at his neck and thrusting into him with all his weight. Keith was moaning under him, pushing back with his hips, his tail coiled around Nick's, so the thought was to stay there. All uncertainty melted away, and he felt that, in this moment, their feelings were meshing cleanly. And if it wasn't the most important part of what he felt for Keith, it *was* what was on offer, and it was far from nothing. He gloried in the consummation of this new part of their bond.

Not wanting to draw away, he began to thrust by bucking his hips, easing out a few inches before reversing the motion to strain against Keith again. The hot, tight slickness of his lover felt wonderful. Nick relaxed his jaws—he'd mostly been biting on fur, thankfully—and licked where his teeth had been, then picked a new spot on Keith's neck to give a little nip, then lick. His lover's moans took on a new tone, and Nick rode him harder. He could have happily kept at it forever, but his body had its limits... and with the way Keith was

moving against him, the *sounds* he was making, the way his tail tugged against the base of his own... those limits were near. He stopped what he was doing with his teeth, not trusting his control as the moment drew nearer, resting his head against Keith's neck instead. He slammed home, just as Keith curved his back and thrust back against him, clenching around him even more tightly, and Nick was gone. It was the most intense experience of his life, the orgasm seeming to well from deep inside him as, the dam broken, he tried to pour all the frustrated lust of his youth into Keith. He supported himself with one shaky hand, the other hugging Keith closer to himself as he sought to embrace him in every way possible, his tail tangling with Keith's in the throes of his ecstasy. He almost blacked out from the pleasure. Finally, long after he thought he couldn't possibly have anything left, it slowly subsided and he was left panting against Keith's back, spent. He took his arm from around his lover to help support himself, only to have Keith collapse under him. His weight still partially on Keith, Nick followed him down.

He made to slide off Keith, to his side, but Keith turned with him, and they ended up spooning. Nick was still in him, and didn't feel any need to change that. Keith was also panting, so Nick ran his hand down the sticky fur on Keith's stomach—the *very* sticky fur.

“Did you...?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Huh.”

“Mm-*hmm*.”

“Is that...?”

“*Mm*-hmm.”

“Huh.”

Satisfied that Keith had been, Nick let his arm return to Keith's midriff. He used his other arm as a pillow and gave Keith's neck one last little nip and kiss before nuzzling against it, holding Keith close.

He'd never felt better.

After a long peaceful moment, Keith turned around, without shaking his arm off. They were nose to nose. Keith smiled at him happily. “That's a much better expression.”

Nick couldn't fathom what he looked like, but Keith was beautiful. “That... was amazing.”

Keith grinned. "Did you like that little flair? I put a lot of thought into that one."

Nick laughed. "What, you've been planning this?"

"I've had some... ideas... over the years. About what I should have done with you." He grinned again. "That was pretty high up the list."

Keith, thinking about what he should have done... "... I should have let you know I was alive, shouldn't I?"

"Yes." No hesitation. "But you're here now. Don't kick yourself about it." He gave Nick a small kiss, then a smile. "Or if you have to, do it on your own time."

Nick realized that he probably *could* go again. He kissed Keith back. "What, did you have other stuff on that list of yours you wanted to get to?"

"Maaaaybe. I didn't really mean anything by it." Keith grew a little more serious. "That... *was* good, right? I was getting a little worried earlier. You looked so... stricken."

"It was very, very, very good. All of it. Earlier, too. I was just worried this was something like... paying for your past mistakes, or some other dumb Keith thing."

"Hey! I'd like to think I'm past that."

Nick smiled. "Maybe you are. The years have clearly been good to you." He switched to a grin. "Or maybe I should say the wolves."

"Yes, and yes. But you've... changed a lot, too."

Nick laughed. "Less than I had yesterday. But yes, I have. I'm not planning on falling off of any more bridges."

Keith gave him a quizzical look, but he shook his head. "Long story. Maybe I'll write you a letter. But if I only have you for a day... I'd like to keep making up for lost time."

Keith grinned. "Oh? Still got something pent up?"

Nick pretended to consider. "Remember that last summer before your exile?"

"Yeah?"

"That right now? That was about... oh, a week of it."

"*A week?*"

He made a non-committal sound. "You know. One of the slower ones where we didn't see each other much."

Keith laughed. "I guess we've got our work cut out for us, lover."

Nick would love him forever for using that word. Not that he didn't already. "That we do. And you know, I've got a list of my own..."

He nudged Keith onto his back, then sat up and reached for the bowl of nuts. He took one of them in his hand and looked a question at the other basitin. Keith raised his eyebrows, but seemed content to let him keep doing what he wanted.

Nick cracked the nut with a practiced motion and let the goop trickle on Keith's half-mast. Keith shivered with it. The substance had certain beneficial properties apart from lubrication... Nick massaged Keith's member gently, spreading the viscous liquid evenly. It should help with the tenderness... though, Keith seemed to just be enjoying his touch, and grew fully hard again almost immediately. Maybe he was made of sterner stuff.

Nick straddled him, smoothly getting himself into position. He used one hand to position Keith's slick member against himself. All it would take is for him to shift his weight...

This was the moment. He found himself feeling oddly... vulnerable. This should mean the world to him. Would it?

Keith seemed to sense his mood. "You okay?"

He would be. Nick smiled at him... and shifted his weight. He took Keith slowly.

Relax.

Breathe.

It wasn't fast, but it *was* a single motion. He didn't stop until he could relax his weight against Keith's hips.

Nick let out a contented sigh, and the right line came to him. Military inflection. "Always prepared."

Keith stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing. Nick grinned down at him. Keith was laughing so hard, he would have been rolling if Nick didn't have him pinned. After a fashion. As it was, the way Keith was moving—while in him—made Nick's tail bristle. He could feel himself grow hard.

Finally, Keith, gasping for breath, was able to get the words out. "Nick... I... I don't think that's what they *meant*."

Nick had to laugh himself. "No? Maybe I should check with our old instructor. Ask for clarification."

That sent Keith into more bursts of mirth. It really did feel... Nick snuck his hands into the spaces between his thighs and Keith's sides, more threatening to tickle than tickling.

Keith grabbed his wrists. "Mercy!"

They held the pose, looking at each other, as Keith got his humor under control and grew calmer. Nick massaged his sides slowly, and Keith shivered under him. He relaxed his grip, but didn't let go of Nick's wrists.

Nick tucked his feet under Keith's thighs. Everything about this felt right. Just as he had hoped. But he hadn't thought it would feel this *good*. He took Keith's hands and placed them high on his thighs, then drew himself straight, gasping as Keith shifted in him. Nick extended his arms behind himself and leaned back, looking for even more depth. He found it. Keith pulled down on him and found more, and Nick's tail bristled again with the sensations. Gods. He was reaching all the right places, and then some.

Nick started moving. The position didn't leave any room for big movements, but he didn't *want* to pull off of Keith. Just tensing his thighs was enough to cause something wonderful to happen, and bucking his hips felt even better. And judging by the sounds Keith made when he did, there was no cause for complaint there either. Occasionally Keith would pull down on him, or push against his hips, and each time was a little piece of heaven.

It lasted a long time. This was a dream to him, and he was in no hurry to wake up.

*

Eventually, it got to be too much for Keith. He was getting very close, and he didn't want to finish first. He took one of his hands from Nick's hips and cupped his balls, caressing them. Nick exhaled. Keith tugged on them, gently, and was rewarded with a shuddering moan. He took his other hand to the base of Nick's shaft, then slowly traced the length all the way to the tip. Nick twitched under his touch. The way he'd been dripping onto Keith's stomach, he couldn't possibly be very far either. Keith continued to tease at his sack, and started to slowly massage the underside of the head with his thumb.

Nick's movements got more urgent, and Keith had to hang on for dear life not to peak then and there. He persevered, barely holding out just long enough. When Nick went over, clenching down hard and exploding all over

him, there was nothing Keith could have done not to follow.

*

A long moment later, Nick was laying down on top of Keith, his head on his lover's chest. Keith had his arms around him and was slowly stroking his neck. Nick gave a little purr and was rewarded with a laugh.

Keith sighed happily. "I think I like your list."

Nick smiled into his chest. "I like yours, too. Speaking of which..." He got up on his elbows to give Keith a kiss. "Your turn?"

**

What we have here, Zen noted, pointing Natani's attention towards Maddie, is a case of Basitin Hearing.

They were lounging in the sitting room after a leisurely breakfast. Keith and Alaric had been notably absent, not that it was much of a mystery to the wolves what they were up to. Or to Maddie, apparently. She had the Wreathwood papers in front of her, and was supposedly reading them, but there didn't appear to be much progress. She was... fidgety.

But, they're in the bath. Can she really...?

Uh-huh.

... Then, yesterday ...

Uh-huh.

Natani considered this for a moment, then let it pass with a shrug. *Not the most embarrassing thing about yesterday. But... this **has** to have come up before, right? She's here all the time.*

Agreed. So the real question is...

...why she doesn't have her poker face on.

Exactly. Think it could just be that Alaric gave away the game yesterday?

Natani considered, both the fact that Maddie didn't have her poker face on, and all the times that she'd apparently **had**. *Hmm. Probably not.* "Maddie?"

The basitin startled. "Yeah?"

"It's okay. You can leave off with the smoke signals."

Maddie blushed slightly. "I know, I know, you know. But how can you...?"

Was there a good way to put this?

It was Zen who answered, in a matter-of-fact voice. “They knew each other before we were even born.”

The thought completed itself in silence.

Well, for the wolves, anyway.

Maddie’s ears drooped. Zen really didn’t like seeing her like that. “Look, do you want to go for a walk or something?”

Maddie shook her head. “No. But I think I’ll go sit on the porch.”

She stood up and walked out of the room, carrying the papers. Even her tail looked despondent.

*So... should we **both** go, or...?*

Let’s.

It was a beautiful, clear morning, with still time to go till noon. The front porch faced away from the morning sun, but that was just as well; the day was warm enough in the shade, staying in the sun could have gotten uncomfortable. There was not a cloud to be seen, though that could change very fast this time of year. Maddie was sitting on the edge of the porch, her tail in her hands. The papers were beside her.

The wolves glanced at each other, then sat down on either side of the basitin. Natani went for an easy guess. “Is there something about Alaric? You seemed less than happy with him yesterday, too.”

Zen grinned. “Pissed off he managed to follow you?”

Maddie went still for a moment. “I was wondering when someone would *deign to notice* my failure to keep this place secure.”

Natani smiled. “I think you’re off the hook, in these circumstances.”

The basitin sighed. “Obviously. I still failed, though. If he can follow me... who else?”

“Well, you’ll probably want to look at how you handle basitins in general now that you lot aren’t the only ones in Wreathwood, but... how many of them can use magic?”

Maddie’s ears shot up. “He still has *magic*? That bastard! No wonder he... wait, is that safe?”

... how am I only hearing about this now?

Natani flashed a grin in the link. *Must have slipped my mind.* “I took a look at him, and he seemed fine. No more crazy than any other basitin I know.”

Zen was amused. *Is that supposed to be reassuring?*

To a basitin, maybe. “Anyway, I’ve confiscated his crystals while he’s here.”

While Maddie mulled that over, Natani took a moment to lay back on the porch. The way her tail felt under her, with her feet off the edge, wasn’t quite comfortable. She was wearing the impossible outfit again—Zen had been only too happy to help her into it—and the way it left *part* of her back exposed still felt novel to her. Though, she’d ended up spending some time on her back yesterday, too. She grinned at the memory.

Zen was picking the thread back up. “It isn’t *actually* that he followed you, is it?”

Maddie snorted. “It’s a *part* of it. As is this.” She hefted the papers. “He somehow got a note into these, so now I’m reading through the entire thing—*again*—to see if the *rest* of it is as it should be. And when I get back, I’ll check the official copies. Again.” She sighed. “It can’t be a coincidence that he’s here *now*. My job just got a whole lot more complicated.”

Natani smiled to herself. She thought she was getting the idea. “You’re giving him a lot of credit.”

Maddie was quiet for a moment. “He’s... dangerous. And I’ve only recently been realizing just *how* dangerous. I worked under him, but... I’m still piecing stuff together.”

Zen, bless his heart, was purely curious. “Like?”

Maddie rolled her eyes at him. “Like state secrets, like. But here’s one that isn’t. Remember that time you tried to see if Keith and me...?”

Zen sighed. “Kinda hard to forget.”

It had felt like it could have been a good idea. The wolves didn’t dwell on it, but they never quite forgot that they’d be leaving Keith behind, with half his life still ahead of him.

Hopefully.

And Maddie, too. They cared for her, and lately she’d been getting more... tense. More formal with Keith, more withdrawn with the wolves. Being away from home was hard on a basitin, much harder than either wolf had realized before they’d seen more of them try. Of the original embassy staff, only Maddie was still around. She’d passed multiple opportunities to go home. So they’d thought, *maybe*...

But it had just made Maddie more formal. More withdrawn.

Natani covered her face with one hand. “In my defense, I’m pretty sure you

used to have a thing for him.”

Maddie sighed. “Perhaps there *was*, at one time, a certain youthful infatuation. He is, after all, a rather impressive combatant and cuts a fine figure for a basitin.”

Natani was both genuinely curious and not at all displeased to hear Keith complimented. “So what happened?”

Maddie smiled at her. “I was totally outclassed by a certain wolf. Have you *seen* the way he looks at you? Even back then? When you were just very, very, very, *very* good friends?”

Natani could hear the implied eye rolling in the chain of *verys*, but she just grinned. She wasn’t displeased to hear that, either. Zen grinned as well, with the same fond memories. *I think she was a few verys short.*

Maddie’s smile faded. “Anyway, that was what I was getting at. Who was it that was in charge of my assignments at the time? Who might have had a wholly unpatriotic interest in getting a lieutenant in good standing, and the King’s daughter—” she glared at Zen, who snapped his mouth shut “—*not princess*, King’s daughter—entangled with his long lost friend? I... don’t think you were the first people to have that idea.”

“But... would that even have helped?”

“That’s the thing. It probably *wouldn’t* have. It’s not *supposed* to. But it *might* have. And I think that’s why he did it.” She sighed. “It’s not just my assignments—though it was grunt work, frankly, and I wasn’t a grunt. It’s *also* why I *didn’t* think it was weird I got the job. He used to talk about Keith sometimes, and the way he spoke... Well, those sort of... intense friendships... aren’t exactly unheard of, though they’re not usually... anyway, that’s why I didn’t think it was weird I got a grunt assignment; it obviously mattered to him, more than it should have, and I thought it just meant he trusted me. It was... *flattering*.” She grimaced. “What I should have wondered is why he talked to *me* about his friend in the first place.”

Natani wondered. If that was really something he’d do just for a long shot...

Zen was a step ahead. *Forget what **actually** happened.*

... *Ah. Of course.* “Maddie... If his idea was just for the two of you to maybe fall in love... you know, you’re a little alike, you and Keith. In some ways.” Maddie looked incredulous. Natani laughed. “Trust me on this. Anyway, if Alaric was just hoping that Keith might return from exile, and then maybe

meet you... is that so bad?"

Maddie looked at her for a long moment. "... maybe not."

So we've established that he's very smart, and cares a lot about Keith. And possibly Maddie.

Zen smiled. *I thought we knew that already.*

*But did **Maddie** know we knew?*

Since they were on the topic of Nickolai Alaric, there *was* something that Natani had been curious about. "He was very... polite... yesterday."

Polite? He called you sir!

And ma'am.

Zen was wistful. ... *I would have liked to see that.*

Natani stuck out her tongue. *That's **one** reason I had him stop.*

Spoilsport!

Maddie had been lost in thought. Suddenly, her ears perked. "That... might be it. I was wondering about that—did he keep calling you sir?"

"Until I told him to cut it out."

Maddie's grin flashed. "Right. I think it's the magic—did you two know you're *kind* of citizens of the Empire?"

"... we are?"

"A bit. Under Wreathwood interpretation of wolveren law, you're both *sort of* married to Keith."

"... we are?"

"And the Empire recognizes Wreathwood marriages, though not for its citizens, if they would otherwise be illegal. But!—" she held up a finger "—Keith is a *diplomat*, and Empire law recognizes the marriages of diplomats, as a common courtesy. And fails to discriminate against our *own* diplomats. We weren't originally supposed to have any. *Anyway*, if you're married to a citizen, you're by definition citizens." Her enthusiasm waned. "That's... a recent law."

Natani didn't miss the relevance. "... Keith's parents?"

"Yeah. I... think Alaric might have had something to do with it."

Good on him if he had. Natani didn't think the reasoning was all there, yet. "Okay, so we're kind of sort of citizens?"

And married! Think we should tell our husband?

Not while he's with his lover, brother.

“Right. And when you’re a citizen... in some situations, ability can substitute for rank. You said you confiscated his crystals?”

“I didn’t use force.”

“He *allowed* you to disarm him. Suppose... suppose the Empire had a mage corps. He might see you as his superior there. Something like that.”

“Huh. *Is* there a mage corps?”

“Not as far as I know.” Maddie sighed. “Did I mention my job just got a lot more complicated?”

**

They spent the rest of the morning on the porch, mostly relaxing. Maddie made it through the charter—it checked out—and the wolves did a bit of friendly sparring. Maddie turned down all challenges, preferring to just watch and make fun of Zen when appropriate. Around noon, Zen brought out a light lunch and they ate on the porch. Alaric and Keith still hadn’t emerged.

Think this means he can keep up with Keith?

Natani had been thinking about it as well. *That’s a terrifying thought. We might be here all day. We might need a new **bath**.*

Zen smiled. *Whole house, even.*

But soon after, the basitins barreled from the baths to the kitchen—*To replenish their liquids, no doubt*—and the three of them relocated to the sitting room. The wolves took the ends of the couch, and Maddie situated herself in a chair. It had the air of an experiment.

Eventually, Alaric and Keith appeared in the doorway, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. They were both in simple robes.

Zen smiled at the sight. *He’s practically floating an inch off the floor.*

Natani shared the sentiment. *They both are. Just look at Alaric.*

Zen did, and indeed, he seemed to have benefited even more than Keith. He’d been rather reserved yesterday. Now he was... joyous. He looked years younger.

The wolves looked very happy to see Keith, and not to mind him. Nick breathed a sigh of relief. Keith shot him a grin, then practically leaped on the

couch, pulling both wolves into an embrace. Nick smiled. Keith had warned him that he was going to do that.

Keith released the wolves and settled down between them, and both Natani and Zen gave him a little rub on the ears. Nick knew he had eyes on him, but he didn't suppress the twinge of sadness he felt. Touching Keith's ears was something he hadn't dared to do. That was... something beyond a lover.

... and he didn't know if Keith would have returned the gesture. And even if he had... it *had* to come from Keith, not from mirroring him.

Still, to see Keith that happy... and this time, he'd had something to do with it. The twinge passed.

The wolves clearly didn't feel threatened at all, and that spoke volumes, but all he felt at that was gratitude. This wasn't a competition.

Which was good, since he wouldn't have stood a chance.

"Natani, Zen..." Nick bowed to the wolves. An honest gesture. "Thank you."

Alaric completed his bow, and Natani smiled at him, amused. "No need to thank us. It's for Keith's sake."

"I know."

Oh, he is a clever one!

Natani laughed. *Did you doubt it?* "In that case..." She bowed her head, and Zen followed suit. "And our thanks to you."

Keith looked amused. "What am I supposed to be, exactly?" But before Natani could answer, he kissed her, cupping her face, rubbing her cheeks. Natani shivered with it. With no thought she responded, wrapping her arms around Keith, returning the kiss and more.

They broke the kiss, and looked at each other. Natani smiled. "Keith. You're supposed to be Keith."

He grinned. "Guess I am, huh." He loosened Natani's arms around himself, gently, and turned to Zen.

Watch out, he means business.

Zen was too distracted to reply. Natani grinned, and glanced at the others while Keith accounted for her brother. Alaric seemed fine with seeing this, a small smile playing on his lips. Even Maddie was smiling!

Zen sounded a little strained. "Definitely Keith."

Keith looked at Alaric, and the wolves practically threw him off the couch. Alaric caught him, and they kissed right there in the middle of the room. He looked a little uncomfortable, initially, but Keith took his time being Keith, and by the end Alaric was wagging his tail. When they disengaged, he looked a little breathless. Natani smiled, and when Alaric glanced at her she gave him a nod.

Keith took one side of the love-seat and pulled Alaric to follow. He did, looking slightly awkward in trying to figure out how close he should sit. Keith solved that problem by leaning against him with a grin.

Can I make young love jokes if they're technically older than me?

Don't think too hard. You might hurt yourself.

Hmm... but no joke followed. Zen pointed her at Maddie, who was fidgeting again. *So what now?*

Natani took in the sight. *I... expect we'll find out.*

Indeed, it wasn't long before the basitin let out a sigh. "Natani... can I talk to you about something?"

**

Maddie led the way, presumably taking them outside hearing distance. Natani made note of the range.

The basitin turned to her, but seemed lost how to begin. Natani smiled. "Yes?"

Maddie scratched at the back of her head. "Look, ever since you and Zen made that... insinuation... about me and Keith, I've been... thinking. And I decided I wasn't going to say anything, because I don't know *how* what the three of you have works, I just know that it does, and I didn't want to... look, I'm not exactly the most *stable* element of, well, *anything*, am I? So I didn't want to risk anything, because I really like all of you. But now *Alaric* is somehow back from the dead and just *waltzed* in here and *you're all still smiling and I feel like an idiot.*" Maddie let out a huge sigh and half turned away.

Natani didn't quite know how to respond. "I had no idea. I don't think... I mean, we never really got any traction with Keith either, though maybe... but no, I don't—"

Maddie pulled at her ears. "I'm not talking about *Keith.*"

Natani was incredulous. "*Zen?*"

“No! No, you idiot, *you!*”

“Oh. Oh! Ooooooooooh.” ... “Does that... do you... *what?*”

“No! Look, I’ve been around keidrans enough to know that it’s not unheard of for friends to... you know?”

Natani was still trying to recover. Cling to what made sense. She knew what Maddie meant; she never had, of course, but... “Yeah. It’s not that unusual.”

“Well, among basitins it *is*. It’s simply not done. It’s not even *thought about*.”

Ah. “Only... you’re not among basitins.”

Maddie nodded. “And I started thinking. On the island, everything is set up so that it’s... easier. But in Wreathwood, only the basitins behave like that, and out here... there isn’t even the law. I’m... *curious*... and I’m not even supposed *not to be and that outfit isn’t helping*.”

Oh. “So you like... women?” That thought felt the wrong shape.

“*I don’t even know!* I just know that, if this is a way that friends can help each other, then you’re the friend I’d like to... Whether you’re a guy or a girl. I... trust you.”

Well, there *were* things she was curious about as well. Only... “You said it yourself, that this isn’t a basitin thing. Isn’t there a reason for that?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think there *has* to be, at least. But maybe there is, and maybe I’ll get hurt. Maybe it’s an awful idea. I’ve thought about that as well. But if it is, it’s my fault.” Maddie looked her in the eyes; it wasn’t her ‘pleading puppy’ shtick, but it was a plead. “*Please*, will you help me figure this out?”

Natani realized she wanted to. But... did this fit into Maddie’s master plan? Yes. And it was too much to play into. Put it all on the table, then. “Just so we’re clear... this *is* still part of that thing you’re doing to balance out Alaric, right?”

Maddie tried for shocked, but she couldn’t switch gears fast enough. She grinned, ruefully. “*Dammit!*” She sighed. “I guess the jig is up, huh?”

Natani grinned back. “With some people, you look at what they say...”

“Yeah, yeah... with others you look at what they do.”

“... and with the dangerous ones you look at the *consequences*. Shouldn’t have told me that if you didn’t want me to listen.”

“You weren’t supposed to use it on *me!*”

Natani smiled at Maddie. She was playing it perfectly, but... that wasn’t the

only lesson the basitin had taught her. "... you weren't lying, were you?"

**

After the girls—ha!—had left, the cards had come out again. Zen suspected it was because Keith didn't want him to feel lonely. He would have been happy to just watch the two basitins be cute, but no matter. He could still watch them as they played. It did his old heart good, it did.

*

Keith saw Natani poke her head in. "Keith? I'm calling it in."

"Huh? Calling what in?"

Maddie was there as well. Natani put an arm around her, and Maddie looked away with a blush. Natani grinned at Keith and winked. The penny dropped, and Keith's cards followed it. "Oh. Oh! ...Maddie?"

She looked at Keith, still blushing. "Sir."

His mouth worked for a while. What does one *say*? "... have fun?"

Maddie's blush deepened. "Yes, sir." She glanced at Zen, and her mouth quirked into a grin. "Intending to, sir."

Natani scooped her up, and the two disappeared up the corridor.

Towards the bedroom.

*

The link flashed with Natani's amusement. *Check your jaw, brother. Let me know if he freaks out. In a bad way. I'll play for time.*

For a moment, the only sound in the sitting room was the click of Zen closing his mouth.

Zen and Keith looked at each other, both mouthing 'Maddie?'

Alaric cleared his throat. "I take it this is new, then?"

Keith found his voice. "Yes. Is *that* why..."

Zen found *his* voice. "Keith. Gut feeling. Good or bad?"

"Good. Good! Amazing, maybe... but..."

Zen wasn't so sure. *Maddie!* And his *sister*. "But?"

"What am I going to say to her *mother*?"

*

Nick had already been thinking in that direction. He'd be making his report sooner than Keith or Maddie. He discarded the first three responses that came to mind. "That she's showing initiative in matters of interracial relations?"

Zen looked at him for a moment, clearly amused. The wolf grinned at Keith. "She is always grumbling about how much you like to delegate. Maybe she's just thinking ahead."

Nick put on a thoughtful look. "Actually, has she shown any ambition? Maybe she's making a move."

Zen grinned wider. "Yeah, she's about to be one keidran away from matching your credentials."

"What *were* the terms of challenge for your position, again? The judging could get awkward."

"What am I going to say to her mother?!"

Zen smiled at Keith fondly. "Well, she isn't doing anything... illegal, right?"

Nick nodded. "On the island, the question would be... complicated. But out here, in peacetime? She's in the clear. As the good Lieutenant is aware, I'm sure." Which actually mattered, since knowingly violating a law was illegal. Even if you were wrong about violating it.

"Wait. Peacetime? What about war?"

Nick grinned at Zen. "Does it have a basitin in it? It's basitin territory."

"What am I going to say to her mother?!"

Anything Nick could have said to reassure Keith would have constituted *lèse-majesté*, and that was one of the handful of laws that still applied in his peculiar intersection of deceased and abroad. And while it probably wouldn't have constituted treason, in current company... "It'll be okay." He put his hand on Keith's back, and for a moment lost himself in marveling that that was something he could do.

Keith turned to look at him. "Really?"

"Well. Probably."

**

"We don't have to go through with this, you know. We could even pretend that we did."

Maddie was still blushing slightly. “Wouldn’t be able to fool Zen, right?”
We-ell... but if she still wanted to go ahead... “Maybe not.”

“So we should go for it. For plausibility.”

“For plausibility. Right.”

It was a familiar source of amusement for the brothers—siblings?—that despite being very much in love with Zen, Keith had never *quite* seemed to realize that he wasn’t, strictly speaking, in a monogamous relationship anymore. But with this thing with Alaric, he’d immediately clued in, and insisted on equal opportunity for Natani. She’d taken it—had more or less had to, before Keith had been willing to seriously consider seeing how things would go with Alaric.

It’s not that she minded, exactly—it’s not like there weren’t things she was curious about. Of course there were. Falling for Keith hadn’t erased her appreciation for the female form, and—despite the oddly persistent rumors—those experiences weren’t something Keith could provide. So the opportunity would be welcome, in theory. But she knew it would eventually start to weigh on Keith if she didn’t go through with it, and, well, she hadn’t exactly had anyone in mind. There was, maybe, Kat, but... that might have been even more complicated than just finding *someone*.

This wasn’t a solution she’d considered. She’d never thought of Maddie in that way—it had taken a lot of time to see past her exterior, and by the time she had, Maddie had been a friend, Keith’s underling, the King’s daughter... and *basitin*, besides. But... the suggestion given, she *could* look at Maddie with new interest. And the *basitin* had the right idea; this would bring balance. And Natani trusted that her motives weren’t *too* pure, that she really did want to see for herself. Maybe it would help, with whatever was wearing on her.

So she was game, but she didn’t quite know how to *start*.

It was Maddie who broke the silence. “You’re beautiful.”

Natani struck a pose, showing off the clothes. She realized they were starting to grow on her a bit. “Thanks. You should let Kat know you like it.”

“That’s not... so it *is* her work? No wonder it’s so good, then.” Maddie grinned. “She’s got a lot of courage, giving you something like that.”

Natani smiled. “No courage required. She... had the right. Even if I didn’t think I’d ever end up using these.”

“I’m glad that you did.” Maddie blushed again. It really was very compli-

mentary. “Not because of... y’know. It’s just that... it’s good that you can. Right?”

Natani sighed. “Maybe. We’ll... see how it goes.” Not really a topic she wanted to linger on... she found her way forward. “Speaking of Kat, how would you like a massage?”

“I... don’t let her do that anymore.”

Ah. “Didn’t help, huh?”

Maddie’s ears drooped. “*Really* didn’t help.”

Natani smiled. “Well, how about it?”

“Oh! Oh... yeah. That would be... yeah. Err, do you want me to strip?”

Bless you, Kat. “Well, it wouldn’t hurt. But if you’re feeling shy...”

“No, no, that’s... Only, will you...?”

“I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours?” Natani shrugged. “Fair’s fair.” She stuck her tongue out playfully. “Not like it’s the first time, even if it’s been a while since we took a bath together.”

Maddie blushed. “I liked that, but it got a little... distracting.”

“Ah.” It really *had* been a while. Better to make a joke of it. She grinned. “Were you entranced by my body, little kitten?”

Maddie’s blush deepened.

What am I even doing. Natani cleared her throat. “Well, let’s just both get undressed, okay?”

The top defied her yet again, but Natani took everything else off. Meanwhile, Maddie quickly stripped and neatly stacked her garments, then stood watching Natani with open interest. The basin appeared to have a handle on her bashfulness.

After a last furtive attempt, Natani sighed and turned around. She pulled her hair over her shoulder to reveal her back. “I haven’t figured out how to get out of this thing by myself.”

“Oh, that’s... inconvenient, isn’t it?” She felt Maddie draw closer, and after a moment of hesitation start to undo the top.

Natani thought of the tailor, and smiled. “I think that might be a design feature.”

Maddie laughed. “Ah. Of course.”

Though, Maddie was the third person to help her with it, and *still* Keith hadn’t gotten a chance. Probably not quite what Kat had had in mind.

Maddie got the top undone and Natani removed the damnable thing, taking care in laying it out. Whatever else it might be, it really was a great piece of work. She turned back to Maddie, letting her hair fall behind her again. The basitin was blushing fiercely. Had she ever been that...? *Yes. I just wasn't that honest.* She smiled at Maddie. "It's okay."

Maddie looked her up and down, and the basitin's blush deepened. "You are beautiful."

Natani didn't miss the emphasis. Forced to take the compliment seriously, she found that it mattered. She studied the basitin in turn—fair's fair—and liked what she saw. Keith was the obvious reference, and Natani found herself comparing the two. Maddie was just a touch taller, and her form was softer, her musculature less defined, and her curves curvier, lending her an overall slightly girlier figure—well, except for the hips. She had the most beautiful little breasts.

"Thanks. You are, too."

**

They had gone back to their card game, but it was pretty clear that nobody's heart was in it. The basitins were distracted by each other, and Zen was distracted by the basitins. And thoughts of what might be going on elsewhere in the house. He eventually decided that Keith would just keep playing, and Alaric would follow Keith's lead, so he folded. 'tis always the duty of the old to advance the cause of young love. "That's enough for me."

"Huh? Oh, what are you going to do?"

He faked a yawn and flopped onto the couch. "I think I'll just lie down for a bit."

Keith looked like he didn't buy it for a moment. But then, he wasn't really supposed to. The basitin smiled at him. "Then I guess we should give you some peace and quiet, huh?"

He stuck his tongue out with a grin. "That'd be nice."

Keith turned to Alaric. "How about some more sparring?"

Alaric looked out the window. The skies had gone gray and the wind was picking up. "... inside?"

"Yep."

The basitins stood up, but rather than head for the door Keith came to

Zen's side. The basitin knelt down to give him a kiss. "Join us if you want." Keith kissed him again, and the subtext was pretty clear. Thou shalt not mope.

Zen adjusted his position, lest it become obvious who he wanted to join and where. "I will. Now shoo."

Keith rubbed his cheek, and Zen closed his eyes. The basitin followed it up with an embrace, made awkward by the position. Keith rubbed his own cheek against Zen's, and the wolf's heart melted. *Dammit, Keith.* He gave the basitin a tweak on the ear, and Keith desisted. Zen kept his eyes closed, but he didn't need to open them to know what Keith's smile looked like. He was matching it. "Shoo!"

He waited until the basitins had safely cleared out, then opened his eyes and sat back up. The room felt... empty. Should he have...? No. It *was* a good call. He'd be on the road with Keith soon, and they'd have all the time in the world to enjoy each other. Those two only had today. At least for now.

Still.

He gathered up the playing cards, left scattered after the game had ended, and sat down in the empty love-seat. There was a muffled thump from the direction of the guest room, and he smiled. At least the walls weren't shaking this time. He idly dealt out a hand of solitaire, which didn't go anywhere.

Being nobly self-sacrificing is all well and good when there's someone around to appreciate it, but loses some of its luster when it's just you and a deck of cards.

Another thump, a little louder this time. Keith and Alaric. Spars had a certain way of going, in this house.

Keith and Alaric. Natani and Maddie. *Natani and Maddie.*

Zen and solitaire.

Maybe he could find a nice tree to sit in, just for old times' sake?

A sudden gust rattled the windows, and the skies opened up.

...

He dealt another hand. Solitaire. A lonely wolf's game.

Maybe... maybe if this hand passed, he would check in on the basitins? He was supposed to keep an eye on Keith for Natani, after all.

Who was with *Maddie*.

The hand didn't pass.

Well. Maybe the next one?

... or the next?

... .. or the one after?

After the seventh failed attempt, Zen shuffled the cards yet again, split the deck neatly, drew a deep breath, and threw both halves into the air.

**

Natani was taking her time in giving Maddie the massage. She'd had the basitin lie on her stomach, and started with her back—seemed safest. Natani maybe wasn't as good at it as Kat was, but she liked to think she'd developed a good level of skill over the years—and she *did* have an excellent working understanding of basitin physiology. Maddie was a lot like Keith, and yet not, both familiar and strange under her touch. Judging by the cute little appreciative noises, it seemed to be going over well. Maddie's ears were drooping—in the good way—and her tail would occasionally twitch as Natani worked her back. Maddie looked like she was in danger of melting into the mattress, and Natani found herself smiling. This *certainly* wasn't bad. The basitin had grown shy of being touched over the time they'd known her. Perhaps for good reason. The sounds took on a breathier tone, which only became more pronounced as Natani moved on to the small of her back. They were clearly somewhere in the borderlands between sensual and sexual. Next would be the legs... She stayed at Maddie's back, carefully teasing out the tension in the muscles there. It's not like she was playing for time—wait, yes she was. She'd said so herself.

She cracked the link a bit, careful not to let anything unnecessary leak. *Is he freaking out?*

Zen was feeling all kinds of complicated. *Only in funny ways. You're good.*

Natani put a grin in the link. One does not pity one's brother. *And you?*

Promise not to tell me about it?

She sent all her love. *I wouldn't if you asked me to.*

Relief. *Thank you.*

Natani relented. *If you **really** want me not to do this...*

No, it's... Zen got annoyed. *You just asked because now I have to be okay with it, didn't you?*

Grin. *Now that you mention it... Hey, what are you doing in the kitchen?*

Zen sighed. *Getting an excuse.*

Natani got the idea. *Why **don't** you just borrow Keith for a while? I'm sure Alaric could spare him for a bit. You could...* she sent a few choice suggestions.

You're not helping.

Natani just flashed another grin and walled the link off again, returning her attention fully to Maddie. The basitin had her eyes closed and was breathing deeply. Only the sounds she was making told Natani she *definitely* wasn't asleep.

She circumnavigated the tail and buttocks and got started on her legs, from the thighs on down. Maddie let out a few satisfied-sounding grunts as Natani worked the bigger muscles.

She reached Maddie's calves, and the top of the wrappings still covering her feet, and found herself getting excited. Maddie had always been dismissive, but... maybe she just didn't *know*? And she *had* left the wrappings when she'd stripped... Natani's heart skipped a beat. The moment of truth. She expertly undid the bindings, and started to gently unwrap Maddie's feet.

"Oh, I didn't realize I forgot to take those off."

She was mumbling into the pillow a bit, but her voice hardly seemed laden with meaning *at all*. Natani got the wrappings undone and tossed them on the frame of the bed, then brought her hands to Maddie's calves and continued the massage.

"Ohhhh, that feels nice!"

It was her usual perky tone. "Just nice?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean..." The basitin laughed. "That thing about basitins and feet again? I don't... It's a little silly how everyone's so obsessed about it, really."

Natani smiled to herself. "It is, isn't it?"

"But..." Maddie grunted as Natani tried a firmer touch. "Gods, that feels wonderful. I walked... I don't even want to *think* about how far yesterday, so this is..." She trailed off with a happy sigh as Natani assayed her paws for the first time. "You're *really* good at that. Thank you, thank you, *thank you*."

This was turning into a bit of a detour, but where was the harm in that?

"No problem."

**

There was a knock at the door. Nick disengaged at Keith's signal.

"Come in!"

Zen poked his head in, then entered. The wolf was carrying a pitcher and some glasses, and put them down on the table occupying one corner of the room.

Keith was clearly amused to see Zen, and the wolf shot him back a wry grin. Nick didn't quite grasp the subtext, but smiled as well. He'd thought Keith had seemed a bit concerned earlier, and this looked to be a good outcome. The wolf had almost seemed more thrown by Natani and Maddie than *Keith* had been, and Nick didn't quite understand why. Was there something there? He'd looked for clues in how Zen and Maddie had behaved the previous evening, but had come up with nothing. But then, Maddie's focus had seemed to be hostility towards himself; he didn't think there was anything typical about what he'd seen. Still, surely Natani wouldn't do that to her brother, if that were the case—so what *was* it?

"Thought you could use some water, the way you've been going."

Keith smiled at the wolf, quite charmingly. "Did you have a good nap?"

Zen stuck out his tongue. "Well, you lot kept shaking the walls. How's it going?"

"We're just playing around. Nick's taking it easy on me."

Nick grinned at him. "Hey, I'm just not used to having to watch my hemline."

Keith grinned back. "You should try fighting in a *dress*."

Should he? ... maybe he should.

Zen took a spot next to the table, leaning against the wall. "Well, don't let this old wolf distract you."

Nick would have been curious to see the 'old wolf' fight, but not curious enough to throw away the opportunity to keep grappling with Keith. "Well, shall we?"

*

The basitins resumed their spar, and Zen spectated. Indeed, it was far from serious; and at least as far as he could see, Alaric didn't *really* have any trouble

with the robe. He was taking his steps with confidence, wrapped ankles flashing as he moved. No punches or kicks were being thrown, and the focus seemed to be entirely on grappling and positioning. Bouts ended up on the walls, or occasionally the floor. They were... playful. It lifted Zen's heart to watch Keith in this contest, smiling, laughing, whether he came up on top or not. Perhaps this harkened back to some exercise for basitin youth.

Though if that was the case, Zen rather suspected they weren't playing by regulation rules. Occasionally, one would catch the other in a vulnerable position, and rather than taking martial advantage would nip, or lick, or nuzzle, usually eliciting laughter. Not all of the openings were forced, either.

And some of the holds looked rather suspicious.

Still, while it wasn't *exactly* innocent, he didn't feel like he was interrupting anything, either. At least yet. And who knows, maybe they'd had enough for the day. There had to be *some* limit, even to basitin stamina.

He hadn't dared check on the condition of the bath.

Alaric was still something of a mystery to him. From all the things Keith had said over the years, he'd have expected a being of pure mischief. But even though Alaric had thawed from yesterday, Zen still hadn't caught more than a glimpse of that. The basitin still seemed... watchful, almost, open affection to Keith notwithstanding. And that was basically unavoidable, given Keith himself. Keith never left any room for doubt about how he felt, and that drew a response. To love him, to be loved by him, was to show it. For Zen, for Natani, and, apparently, for Alaric.

How... would it work? While it was still officially only today, it seemed a safe enough bet that it wouldn't stay that way. So what would that mean? From the moment Keith and Natani had become Keith and Natani and Zen, the basitin had never excluded either of them, never left either of them feeling unwanted or unloved. It had fallen to him and Natani to sort out whether private time was necessary, and for whom. And if someone bowed out, it was most often Zen; Keith and Natani's relationship had intricacies that even he, with the link, didn't fully understand, but which he regardless felt called for the occasional moment of absolute privacy. Even if the two were by no means shy in expressing themselves.

Natani usually rolled her eyes and called him brotherly.

He was fine with that.

All of that was as easy as breathing for them, being who they were, knowing each other's minds, agreeing on what mattered most. He guessed Keith would keep to the same strategy, at least try it; indeed, Zen wasn't sure what else the basitin *could* do, besieged by *three* people. Even on his best gallivants, Zen had never quite gotten in *that* situation—though he never set out to break hearts, and he'd done pretty well at that.

Though, sometimes, when he returned home, Keith would show just a *hint* of jealousy... Zen was *almost* certain that it was feigned, for his benefit, but that suspicion did nothing to blunt its effectiveness. Those moments always seemed to result in private time for Zen, so he could assuage Keith at length.

He pulled his mind back on track. So what of Alaric? He didn't quite see Keith getting all *three* of them—though, if it was just to show Keith a really, *really* good time, then perhaps...

Back on track. Alaric. How would they sort it out? Alternating days? That just felt... silly. Play it by ear? How well could that possibly work? He seemed deferential—especially to Natani—and it couldn't come down to them *doling out* Keith to him. The idea just felt wrong. They had hopes for Alaric—hopes for *Keith*—and those hopes wanted an equal. A worthy equal, to be sure, but an equal.

Alaric slammed Keith into the wall next to him, interrupting Zen's reverie. Their struggle reached stability, and they disengaged. Keith rotated his shoulder with a wince.

Alaric didn't look too concerned. "Too hard?"

Keith shook his head. "Didn't brace right. It's fine. Let's take a break, though." He grinned at Zen. "Could use something to drink."

Zen poured a glass of water and handed it to him. When Keith took it, his hand brushed the wolf's. Quite deliberately. The little... Natani's laundry list of Things To Do With Keith flickered through his mind, and Zen almost reached out. The way the basitin was looking at him, it wouldn't have stopped at a touch. Or a kiss. Zen stuck his tongue out at him, then gestured with the pitcher and raised his eyebrows at Alaric.

"Yes, please."

Zen poured another glass. Alaric's hand didn't brush his.

"Thank you."

"So, does this little contest of yours have rules?"

He hadn't addressed the question to either of them in particular, but it was Keith who answered. "It's pretty basic. Getting your opponent on their back gets you a point."

"Oh? That sounds somehow familiar."

Keith rolled his eyes and smiled. "Care to give it a go?"

He looked at Keith, and the basitin almost blushed. It would be a match to one point, and damn the consequences. He was about to refuse—

"I'd like to see that as well."

Huh. He looked at Alaric. "Then how about *you* show me how it's done?"

*

"Sure. If you'll step this way..." Nick was confused. The way the two of them had been looking at each other... what *was* that, if not his cue to take a step back? But here he was, about to face the wolf, wondering whether he should throw the match.

Keith was clearly amused by the situation. "Nick! He'll get you if you let your guard down!"

So that was a no on the throw, then.

*

Alaric fought... politely. It didn't stop Zen from getting completely trounced, but at least he was getting manhandled in an immaculate manner. The basitin was all quiet efficiency and calm demeanour. This was probably how these things were *supposed* to go, if maybe not so one-sided. Zen took it well, taking Keith's example to laugh or smile even when getting utterly destroyed, so as not to discourage his opponent. If he was going to get a point, he wanted it to count. He'd been expecting to be the underdog, of course; he could rarely beat Keith *or* Natani, and watching them spar he'd gotten some idea of Alaric's abilities—Natani's strength in a basitin-sized frame, with technique that put Keith's to shame. So he'd went in holding back, concealing the full advantage of his reach and a few choice tricks, looking for an opportune moment.

He knew it had come when he saw Keith pull up a chair and sit down, pulling his legs up into the seat, not minding his hemline. Naked ankles on full display. If that didn't do it, he was out of luck. On the next bout, Zen maneu-

vered, positioning Alaric so that he should *just* see Keith from the corner of his eye, then played for time. The moment Alaric glanced at Keith, he struck with everything.

*

Through a series of events it took him a moment to piece together, Nick found himself flat on the floor with Zen sitting on his chest. The defeat stung. He'd underestimated the wolf, *and* it had been *exactly* as Keith had warned him. The moment he let his guard down. But as the moment stretched, with Zen still sitting on him, grinning down and catching his breath, he just started to feel ridiculous. He raised his eyebrows. "I think that counts already."

Zen laughed. "Let me savor it. I'm not sure I'm going to get another one."

This... Nick laughed as well. This wasn't someone to fight. This was someone else to play with.

*

The next bout started with Nick grabbing Zen by the tail, much to the wolf's apparent dismay. Keith watched on, smiling, as the melee deteriorated. It quickly became something that, while not intimate, was clearly friendly. Now *that* was more like it. He provided more distractions, aiding this combatant or that as they vied for positional advantage—or disadvantage. The score was cast aside and the match, such as it was, became more even as Nick took on handicaps and Zen stepped up his game. Free-form suited him better. Perhaps suited both of them better.

It went on for a while, but the last bout ended with *Zen* on his back and Nick sitting astride. Of course, it was only the last one because that was when Zen decided to call it. Nick offered his arm and the wolf took it, quite theatrically using it for leverage to hoist himself up, before, also quite theatrically, dusting himself off and finding numerous complaints with his body. Nick seemed the right amount of skeptical, and Keith had to grin.

When Zen came walking past, Keith smiled at him and gave him a 'well, what now?' expression. Zen tousled his hair in response, then was slow in removing his hand. Keith, not wanting the moment to pass, put one hand on the wolf's waist. The moment drew longer... but Zen tousled his hair again, this

time withdrawing his hand, and stuck his tongue out. Keith let his own hand fall away, brushing the wolf's leg through his robe as he stepped past. Zen was being... so very himself. He might actually have to ask Nick to give them a moment, so he could force the issue and give the wolf a proper tumble.

Indeed, Nick was looking a clear question at him. He shook his head in response. Not yet. He grinned instead. "So, did that little contest of yours have rules?"

Nick grinned back. "Not that I noticed. Care to give it a go?"

Keith stood up and stretched, luxuriously, aware of both Zen behind him and Nick in front. "Sure."

**

Natani had given Maddie's feet a *very* thorough massage. She'd found herself a little disappointed that it hadn't been a... bigger deal... for the basitin, and her mind had wandered to being on the road with Keith again. There would be many long days of walking ahead. She and Zen should take the opportunity to give Keith an extra-specially good time.

And, well, she hadn't done all that much travelling lately; her feet might get sore too. And Keith *was* always eager to help.

Maybe she was one of the silly people, after all. She smiled, and shook her head at herself. Figure that out later. "Okay, turn around."

Maddie stirred and slowly rolled over. The basitin still had her eyes closed and was taking long, deep breaths, but her arousal was plain to see. Perhaps it had had an effect after all... or maybe it just hadn't been any different from *other* parts of the massage. The basitin's tail was sticking out between her legs, and Natani gave it a slow stroke. Maddie shivered. Natani spent a moment admiring the basitin's form, and the effect she was having, then started working her way back up Maddie's body. Ankle, shins, thighs... again, she passed the groin by, and Maddie let out a sigh. The sigh turned into a low moan as Natani laid hands on the basitin's stomach. The moan got louder as she skirted her breasts.

Which reminded her. Would she need to evacuate the entire building? "Just how good is basitin hearing, exactly?"

Maddie mumbled her answer. "Oh, the bedroom is pretty soundproof. They'd have to actually... be..." She opened her eyes as she heard what she was

saying. "... eavesdropping." The basitin looked at her guiltily, and Natani thought it was only partially for effect.

It wasn't exactly a surprise at this point. She just smiled. "It stops after today, okay?" She considered some of the things they got up to. "... when you can avoid it, anyway. We'll try to be more careful, too."

Maddie nodded, grateful. "Okay. Thank you."

Natani went back to the basitin's stomach, just slowly rubbing her, and the low moans returned. Maddie watched her with half-lidded eyes. Natani let her hands travel upwards. This time, she didn't skirt the basitin's breasts but cupped them, caressed them gently. Maddie's nipples were hard under her touch, and the sounds she made as Natani made her explorations were getting her own blood up as well.

This wasn't exactly a massage anymore.

Maddie let out a frustrated sigh and looked at her, the same plead she had shown earlier. "*Please.*"

**

He'd *intended* to go take a nap—maybe for real, this time—but somehow he'd ended up taking Keith's seat—still warm—instead, to watch the basitins at play. Just for a moment. Of course.

And play they did. It was more or less a wrestling match by now, almost all groundwork as they tangled, on some level probably still trying to pin the other, on some other level perhaps trying to *get* pinned instead. It looked glorious fun, *had been* glorious fun after that first point. Even an old wolf can feel young at heart.

Still. As their play once again took on more suggestive elements, Zen sighed inwardly. There was only one way this was going to go, and he figured it would go that way sooner with him out of the room. But he knew where that would leave him, and he wasn't even sure he could find all of the cards again.

He glanced out the window at the rain. Less heavy than yesterday, but it was yet another thing to remind him that, a day or so ago... he'd been about to grapple Keith himself, when Maddie had come knocking. And the basitin was so, so very grappleable. Rarely, in fact, had he looked more grappleable than at this very moment, getting pinned by Alaric and putting up suspiciously little struggle.

He could wait. Of course he could. But... *maybe*...

He propped his feet up on the table. If he didn't much miss his guess, this would tell him what he wanted to know. Keith just grinned at him and laughed when he saw, and Zen winked back. Alaric glanced at him to see what was up, then did a double-take. Zen tugged at his robe, to bring the hem a bit farther up his shins, and splayed his toes, and Alaric was distracted enough for Keith to execute a sudden and very efficient take-down.

"Collusion!" Came the muffled complaint.

So there was, perhaps, interest. If that hadn't just been shock value. But how to proceed? The key, he decided, was to go over the top. Make it so it can be laughed off. Serious hopes, buried in humor. Go big or go play solitaire. But what would do it?

An idea flashed into his head.

No, surely not.

But...

Some thoughts, once thought, cannot be dismissed. He put on his best grin. "How about a different contest?"

The basitins had gotten off the floor again. Keith raised his eyebrows, clearly amused. "What did you have in mind?"

"Feet only." Zen wiggled his toes to make the point. "He who comes first loses. Winner gets a treat."

Keith looked shocked at his forwardness, then laughed. "And the treat?"

Alaric looked... speculative.

Zen shrugged magnanimously. "Winner's choice. I'm willing to bend over if that's what it takes to get some action around here."

Keith was pure amusement. "And you're not usually?"

He stuck out his tongue with a smile.

*

Nick was a fast thinker, and he had plenty of time to get past his initial surprise while Keith and Zen bantered. He had little doubt the wolf was serious, but couched in humor it would be easily shrugged off.

But it was a no-loss for him, if he was of a mind to go for it. Oh, Keith would win the 'contest', that much was certain, but that was a loss he would have paid dearly to experience. *That* idea was on the *secret* list. And if he

should win, well, it would be his call; he could pass. Or... not. Looking at Zen, he found himself entertaining new possibilities. He wouldn't mind finding out what that muzzle felt like. Or... he glanced at the wolf's feet again, as he wiggled his toes... other parts of his body. And one good turn would, of course, deserve another. He found himself wondering about parts of Zen's anatomy *not* on display... and needed to pull his mind back on track. Quite apart from the fact that Nick found him easy enough on the eyes, there was the wolf's disposition. There was a ready warmth to Zen that would surely have put him off, had it come from another basin, but he found disarming instead coming from someone wholly outside the strictures of his society. The wolf treated him like he was an equal—like that was *obvious*.

And above all else, he was Keith's lover—and more. There could be no better recommendation.

It couldn't hurt his case with the wolves, either, as far as he could see—though it was becoming obvious that their only concern about him was whether he was good for Keith, or not. But if Zen was actually interested in him, it might be better to... no, he didn't think this was really about him, not with the way the two were looking at each other. But given the way they *were* looking at each other... it also followed that it *had* to be about him, in some way. Was this the wolf thinking ahead, to what something beyond just today might be like? Was the real question 'can we share?'

He knew what he *wanted* the answer to that to be.

Well, whatever else it was, it was an opportunity for him to *do* something. He'd been stuck following Keith's lead—and a good lead it was!—because he didn't quite understand how *anything* worked here, and he wasn't going to risk anything by making careless moves. It had been one unexpected turn after another, but even though this was yet another such, he felt for the first time that he *understood* the situation. Keith was going to turn Zen down, because *of course* he was. Zen would know that as well, so this ploy was aimed at *him*. His first option was to be quick on the draw, make some appropriately inappropriate joke, and excuse himself to give them a clearly much-overdue moment. Alternatively, if he did *nothing*, the status quo would be preserved and the wolf would probably end up excusing himself... or maybe not, depending on how they played it.

He waited for Keith to begin his inevitable line. "I think that might be a lit-

tle—”

Alaric raised his eyebrows. “Keith Keiser... turning down a challenge?”

**

Maddie’s need was clear—and yet not. Natani wanted to answer her, but what was the basitin curious about *exactly*? Besides the obvious? Natani smiled at her. “Do you want me to kiss you?”

“I... don’t know. If you want?”

So Natani did. It was a getting-to-know-you kind of kiss. Maddie was a little clumsy to start with but soon started to get the idea, exploring Natani in turn.

Natani broke the kiss and grinned down at her. “Do you want me to kiss you?”

Maddie smiled back. “Yes!”

She made the second kiss hungrier, trying to rouse Maddie even more. The basitin responded with yearning and frustration. Natani placed one hand on Maddie’s stomach, then traced slowly downwards... The basitin gasped, breaking the kiss, as Natani’s fingers caressed their way past her clitoris to her labia. To cup her mons. Natani held her in the palm of her hand. She looked a question down at the basitin, grinning, a lecherous wolf.

Maddie looked back, wordless, but Natani thought she saw the same question again: ‘Kiss me?’ She did, promising release, and caressed Maddie with her hand. The basitin spread her legs wider and bucked her hips, pushing back against Natani’s hand. Instinct taking over. Maddie broke the kiss again to moan, and Natani drew back. Her fingers slicked up, she began to gently caress the basitin’s clitoris, keeping an eye on her, watchful of the touch being too intense. Maddie gave good reactions, and Natani soon had her gasping for air amidst moans. Almost as quickly, she was gone, her body quaking under Natani’s touch as she finally found release. The basitin had been more than ready. Natani slowly eased up as Maddie came off it, cupping her once more, finding fresh wetness. She brought her hand to her mouth and gave it a lick.

It actually *did* taste a little like strawberries. Go figure.

Maddie gasped for air. “That... that was...”

Natani grinned down at her. “Oh, I think we can do better than that.” She kissed her quickly, promising more to come, then kissed her on the throat,

eliciting a gasp. Natani started working her way down, and as she reached Maddie's beautiful little breasts, the gasps turned into moans. She spent a good while there, nuzzling, licking, even nipping a bit, getting the Keith experience. It was fun! She made a note to give him a bit more leeway the next time he decided to camp out in her bosom. She especially liked how Maddie reacted when she licked her nipples, circling their hardness with her tongue. The basitin was clearly very sensitive. "I like your breasts."

Maddie laughed. "I kinda got the idea."

Natani smiled at the realization. "I've never gotten to say that before."

Maddie got up on her elbows. "Hm? I'm your first lady lay?"

Natani grinned. "Let's say... yes." She butted the basitin with her head, and Maddie collapsed back onto the bed with a laugh. Natani gave her breasts one last nuzzle and continued on, licking and nuzzling her way across the squirming basitin's stomach. That should have been enough time to recover... she gave Maddie's clit a stiff lick.

"Gods!"

Maddie didn't need much prompting to spread her legs, and Natani relocated between them. She took in the basitin's scent, pleasantly different from anything she'd previously experienced. She started lapping at her, cleaning her fur of her excitement. To her slight surprise, she found herself more than willing to focus just on Maddie's pleasure. Maybe Keith was rubbing off on her... and no wonder, with all the rubbing together they did. Hopefully it worked both ways.

Besides, Maddie's reactions were adorable.

"Are you really going to...?"

Natani answered her with one long lick, getting a better taste of her strawberry, and Maddie had no more words. Natani took her time getting the lay of the land, getting used to the fresh perspective. The *act* wasn't exactly foreign to her, but... how to best *perform* it? She snuck one arm around the basitin's leg, to bring her hand to rest on her lower abdomen. She could reach with her fingers *just so*... Maddie gasped and Natani nodded to herself, satisfied. She started out slowly, trying to figure out how Keith did the things he did. She went first for the things she particularly liked, followed by the things Zen liked, for good measure. She couldn't watch Maddie very well now, but the basitin gave clear signals both in the lovely noises she made and in how she moved in

response. Pretty soon, Natani thought she had what she needed to mount her assault on the bastion of Maddie's womanhood, the temple of her simmering muliebrity, and to plumb the depths of her quivering quim—

Sheesh. Now I'm doing it!

It took her longer, this time, to work the basitin up to a frenzy. She didn't know if it was the different touch of her tongue, her clumsiness, or just the simple fact of Maddie's need being less now. Natani didn't mind; she was enjoying the experience. She alternated between showing the basitin just how long a wolf's tongue was, and just how precise when she teased at the basitin's stiff clit—and when her tongue was elsewhere, her fingers were never far. She found that Maddie could take a lot of stimulation without it being too much, so she pushed accordingly, eager to grant release. If there would be a time for Keith-style marathon sessions, that would be later, when they were more familiar with each other and she surer of her technique.

She had to admit to some interest, on all fronts.

When she thought Maddie was getting close, she focused solely on her clit, kneading it with her tongue, pushing, pushing. The basitin let out her loudest moans yet and bucked her hips, thrashing against her. *That* was better. Natani stayed with her as it subsided, easing back on the pressure but also looking for an opportunity to begin pushing again.

Maddie squirmed and laughed. “Stooooop!”

Too much. Natani backed off, grinning up at the basitin.

“How.. *How do you ever do anything else?*”

Natani laughed. “I think that means you're not done yet. You know what they say, the third time's the charm...” She started lapping up Maddie's juices again. Freshly squeezed strawberry-basitin.

“Natani, wait.”

**

Alaric had bitten! But Keith had quickly pulled him into a huddle in the corner, and Zen was now watching them confer, oscillating between worried and very worried. What were they talking about? It was no use trying to overhear basitins whispering.

Keith nodded to Alaric one last time, then turned to walk towards Zen, pulling his tail into his robe as he came. The way he did that... Keith's expres-

sion was pure mischief, but it softened into love as they looked at each other. He leaned over Zen, to whisper into his ear. "We're up for it, but... are you sure you wouldn't rather just have a little match with me? Nick wouldn't mind stepping out."

Keith leaned back to look at him, concerned, so... Keith. Zen fought hard not to wrap his arms around the basitin and never let go. But as tempting as that offer was, there *were* reasons to go through with this. He grinned at Keith. "And if I don't?"

The basitin grinned back, mischief returning. "You have *no idea* what you're in for."

"Promise?"

Keith leaned close to whisper again. "Promise." The basitin pulled away, rubbing his cheek against Zen's as he went, tempting him even more. Keith turned around, pulling his robe off in one clean motion. Now fully naked, he swatted Zen lightly with his tail, then let it trail through his lap as he walked away. Zen's eyes being glued to his rear was the only thing that saved him from having his tail grabbed. Zen tore his eyes away to glance at Alaric, and found that the basitin was as preoccupied with the front half of Keith as he'd been with the rear. And who could blame him? Alaric, likewise, visibly struggled to glance back at him, and they shared a smile and a moment of understanding. *Good taste*, he thought at the basitin, and even with no link to carry it he felt that the idea got across.

Alaric pulled off his own robe, smooth in his motions despite the weird circumstance, and let it fall away. He was nearly of a size with Keith, but generally girthier; more clearly muscled and a bit broader of chest and shoulder... though narrower at the hip. Zen's eyes wandered to his basitinhoo, already at full attention at the sight of Keith. Ah, youth. Yup. Generally girthier.

Zen realized Keith was looking at him, an amused expression on his face and in the tilt of his ears. Was that another 'good taste'? He smiled back. "I hope the idea isn't to just keep teasing me as long as possible."

A grin. "We'll see." It wasn't very reassuring. Still, Keith turned to Alaric. "It seems our judge is feeling impatient."

Judge? Good enough an excuse to feel a little less like a complete pervert, watching them. Zen grinned. "Yeah, I haven't got all day. Busy schedule and all that."

Alaric snapped a salute, which Keith for some reason found utterly hilarious. He mimicked the gesture, unable to keep a straight face. “Your honor.”

Something to do with basitin protocol, Zen guessed. Alaric had been joking about challenges earlier; maybe this was to do with that. He settled back in the chair, propping his chin up with one arm, and tried his best to look bored and impartial. He gestured with his free hand and reached for some likely words. “You may proceed. May the best basitin win.”

Another burst of laughter from Keith, and Alaric smiled. Probably close enough. Both basitins bowed from the waist, then turned to face each other. Another salute, and for a moment they just looked at each other, smiling. Keith stepped closer and kissed Alaric, and going by how the other’s tail curled it wasn’t exactly innocent. Zen smiled and magnanimously let the (probable) breach of protocol go. He’d have to ask about that one day. Keith broke the kiss and stepped back, leaving Alaric looking a little stunned.

Both basitins sat down, leaning back on their arms to leave their legs as free as possible. Zen realized that Alaric still had his feet wrapped, and apparently intended to remain that way. “Wrappings?”

Alaric grinned at him. “A ruling, your honor?”

Zen considered. That should feel... interesting. And it’d be new for Keith, at least as far as he knew. He waved his arm. “I’ll allow it.”

There was some vying for position, and for a moment only feet met feet... but it seemed quickly decided that playing defense was out, as quick, careless moves were unlikely to benefit... well, anyone, really, in that terrain. Thus, a demilitarized zone was born, and both adopted a policy of unfettered access, laying the groundwork for a truly mutually beneficial arrangement, promising growth and prosperity for both.

Zen shook his head, amused. Natani would have really let him have it for that one. *I need to stop reading Keith’s books.*

**

Natani looked up at Maddie. “Hm?”

“If you’re still going to—and oh gods please do—I’ve heard that you’ve got a little something... extra.”

Natani arched an eyebrow. “Heard, or overheard?”

Maddie had the cheek to grin at her, so Natani gave her a nip on the thigh

before sitting up. Well. The basin *was* curious; it only made sense. Still...

She got off the bed and went to rummage in the cupboard. It was at the back, still wrapped in a towel after being cleaned last. It had been a while. She smiled to herself. ‘Something extra’ was a pretty good name for it, really. She grabbed it, and, on second thought, the jar of lubricant. It *was* sized for her. More or less.

She put the jar on the bed-stand, then handed the toy to Maddie, who had sat up on the bed to watch, curious.

It was a large anatomically non-attributable phallus in gleaming black, complete with a somewhat menacing leather harness. Maddie turned it over in her hands, testing the material. Firm, but a little pliable. “That’s... big.”

“These things have a way of working out. I’ve got lube as well if it looks necessary.” This was making her uncomfortable. “It’s your first time?”

“Yeah.” Maddie handed it back to her, then smiled. “Well, you know. But...” she looked at it again. “... *yeah*.”

Natani tried not to think of her own first time. Even alone. Maddie certainly seemed calm and... curious. Excited. She even had her ears all the way up. It was pretty adorable, really. Natani separated the harness and let it drop on the bed, then tried to hand the toy back to Maddie.

She didn’t take it. “Would you...?”

“... sure.”

*

It was obvious something was up with Natani. Maddie reached out to touch the wolf’s cheek with her fingertips, hoping it wasn’t too presumptuous. “Something wrong?”

It seemed to snap Natani out of her sudden funk. Her smile returned, and she turned her head to give Maddie’s palm a lick, getting a laugh. “Nothing you need to worry about, little kitten. Just... let me know if anything feels wrong.”

Maddie nodded. “I will!” She put her arms around the wolf’s shoulders and leaned in for a quick kiss. It was going to be fine. How could it not be? Natani kissed her back, and she realized. “That was my first time kissing someone!”

Natani smiled at her. “Could have fooled me.” She leaned closer. “Care to go for a second?”

Maddie did, and she made it a longer one. She was feeling playful now, and

she was loving the way the wolf responded to her. All amusement and strength. Pure Natani. Maybe the reason people weren't always having sex was that they sometimes stopped to kiss. Though, that had been... she wasn't sure *how* Natani thought she was going to beat that second time, but she sure wouldn't mind the wolf trying. Her excitement started building again, and her hands went to Natani's breasts, almost of their own volition. They felt heavy in her hands, so different from her own.

Natani nudged her out of the kiss with a grin. "Yeah, I don't think you're done yet."

Maddie's hands stayed where they were. "But I get to play too, right?"

"After. If you want." Natani almost sounded like she hoped Maddie wouldn't. What was *up* with her? The wolf seemed to gather herself. "Now lie back, if you still want to try this." She boinked Maddie on the nose with the dildo. Maddie made a face, but did as she was bid, toppling over into a spread-eagled position. Natani scooted over to sit between her legs, shifting her tail out of the way. Maddie made it curl around the wolf.

Natani laid the toy down on her stomach, and Maddie laughed at the sensation. "You really think that's going to fit?"

Natani grinned. "Well, some of it at least. Ready?"

"Yup!"

The wolf nodded, but again there was something odd about her expression. Natani didn't give her time to think about it, moving the toy, pulling it off her stomach. It grazed her mons, and she shivered at the sensation. What was to come? Still lower, until the tip came to rest against her lips. It felt cold against her heat, and she tensed up instinctively.

Natani placed one hand on her thigh and squeezed it gently. "Just relax. There's no hurry."

Maddie focused on her breathing—she'd been doing a lot of that, when the wolf had been massaging her. Gods, what that had been like. She let the tension melt out of her body. She was in good hands. Very good hands. Still nothing. Natani was just kind of... holding it against her. "Natani? I think it's okay now."

The wolf smiled at her. "It might feel a little cool, but it'll warm up. Just remember, if anything feels wrong..."

She laughed, to show that she wasn't worried. "Are you *trying* to make me

nervous?”

Natani stuck her tongue out. “Point taken. Ready?”

“Please.”

The wolf pushed, just a little, not enough to do anything yet. She moved the tip against her slowly, looking for the right angle or just trying to work it in between her lips. Maddie almost wanted to laugh at how careful she was being, but the surge of love she felt for the wolf overrode the amusement. She’d expected her to be a bit more... and just like that, the tip slid in. She gasped at the new sensation, and Natani immediately stopped. It was just an inch or two—she didn’t really know how to tell—and it did feel cool, but more than that it felt... How odd, to have something *inside* her. Well, not that she hadn’t—but nothing of *that* size. It felt... different. Foreign. She realized she was pushing against it and relaxed, causing it to slide in a bit further—Natani must have been maintaining pressure—which caused her to push at it *again*. Now she *did* laugh. “It’s so weird!”

Natani smiled at her. “I think that’s good-weird. You’ll get used to it.”

She wanted to move her body—shift *herself* on it—but with her legs spread and Natani between them her options were kind of limited. She tilted her hips instead. That felt... interesting. Very interesting.

Natani grinned at her. “Would you like to take over?”

“No, I just... keep going. And you don’t have to keep stopping. I think I’m getting the hang of it...”

The wolf took her at her word and continued to work the toy into her. She still went slowly, and occasionally pulled out a bit before pushing on, but she didn’t stop. The feeling of foreignness slowly faded, either as the toy warmed up to her body temperature, or just as she got more used to it, and it was replaced by an... intensity. She was being filled; *Natani* was filling her. It didn’t matter that it was just an object; it was still the unexpectedly gentle wolf, an act of her will. She found herself breathing heavier, and there was an odd trembling low on her stomach. Surely that must be all of it? It felt like it had to be. How much more could there be? But still, with yet another gentle push, another slow thrust just a bit further than the previous one, there was more. Maddie couldn’t keep her hands at her sides anymore; they went to her face, the sides of her head, pulling at her ears. It was almost too much, but it wasn’t enough. Natani pulled out a little, then began long, slow strokes, almost

pulling out completely on each one. But she wasn't pushing farther anymore. Maddie knew the wolf was watching her, and she didn't know what for, so she acted out everything her body gave her, every twitch, every moan, every gasp. It felt like it belonged, now, with Natani's long, even, confident strokes, and her body writhed with it. But it wasn't... she looked at the wolf, pleading, not knowing for what. Natani's expression softened to something she'd never seen before, and the wolf was beautiful to her. Natani lowered her head, ducking out of her sight, and she realized what was coming just before it happened. The wolf's skillful tongue on her, complementing the rest, urging her on. The sensations tore through her like a bolt of lightning and she was gone, far gone, clutching at the sheets, her toes curling, her hips spasming, jerking, causing ever new sensations as Natani continued to drown her in pleasure.

*

Maddie *gushed* into her mouth. *Huh*. Well, the taste wasn't disagreeable, so she gulped it down. Were *all* basitins blessed with volume? She let the dildo get pushed out by Maddie's throes, offering only token resistance, then gave her one gentle lick. The basitin had been able to take more than she would have guessed. She sat back up. Maddie was still going. She smiled to herself. Now that, *that* had been more like it. She moved to the basitin's side and softly stroked her stomach, waiting for her to come off of it. Slowly, the quake subsided and her breathing steadied.

Maddie opened her eyes and looked at her, and Natani didn't recognize the expression. The basitin took her by the arm and maneuvered her, pulling her closer, bringing her alongside. Natani went, lying down next to her, and Maddie buried her face into her chest tuft. Natani tucked her in and pulled her into an embrace, stroking her back gently.

*

That was when Maddie knew. She stayed in the wolf's arms a while longer, taking comfort, sorting out her feelings, but she knew. She pulled away so she could look at Natani. The wolf let her go, but not any farther than she wanted to. She had to smile at that. Joy and sorrow. Natani looked at her, curious, concerned, comforting, wholly beautiful. She had to explain. "This..." No, that

was the wrong word. “Wreathwood is my home now. I’m never going back.”

She could see the wolf reject a few flippant remarks, and wondered what they were. She wouldn’t have minded. “What about your mother?”

Tears. She hadn’t expected it to hurt that much. Maybe it wouldn’t have, an hour ago. But she was different now. “I don’t think I’ll ever see her again. I can’t go back just to visit. That’s not how it works. And even if I could... just to reject it all? I...” She buried her face in the wolf’s mane again. Natani waited patiently as her tears ran their course, stroking her back, soothing.

Finally, with a long sigh, Maddie was done. Sorrow *and* joy. She let what she had lost fall away, and, enveloped in the wolf’s warmth, focused on what she had gained. Natani seemed to sense the change in her mood, and she in turn could sense the wolf working up to something. With a rumble of her chest, Natani cleared her throat. “So, would you say that was life-changing?”

Maddie laughed, unbridled, and pushed the wolf over on her back. She sat astride her stomach to look down at her, smiling. Natani, relieved, reached up to touch her face, to wipe what were left of her tears away. Maddie leaned into her hand, then kissed her wrist, then followed her arm down...

**

The basitins had sorted out their legs and settled into position. Keith got the first touch, slowly tracing the pad of one foot up the underside of Alaric’s erect shaft. When he reached the tip, he grabbed one side with his toes and pulled opposite, bending. Alaric’s reaction was palpable. As was Zen’s. He *knew* how that felt, was right there with the basitin in his imagination, and felt his own body stirring, unbidden. Keith pulled back, resting both feet against Alaric’s groin, the other basitin’s balls cupped between his naked ankles. Alaric rallied, caressing Keith’s sack with his toes while his other foot tried to catch the base of his shaft. Keith’s tail thrashed and he arched his back, giving Alaric an opportunity to trap his manhood against his stomach, giving it a long stroke with his wrapped foot, paying Keith back. Alaric focused on the head, massaging it with his pad, pushing against Keith. With a gasp, Keith went lax, causing Alaric to lose his hold; but he quickly pushed his advantage, shifting closer and trapping Keith’s shaft between his wrapped ankles.

Keith seemed to be letting himself get lost in the pleasure, barely putting up a fight. Zen didn’t quite trust his performance—was he toying with Alaric?

Or... was he looking to throw? Was that what the warning had been about? What would Alaric ask for, if he won? He really *didn't* know what he'd be in for. Still, looking at Keith, the basitin's expression one of pure pleasure, his foremost thought was that he wanted badly to be a part of it. Though he supposed in a way, he was. Who knew how extra-specially kinky a 'judge' being present made this for the basitins? Not him. That was the problem. Maybe he should have made it a three-way duel, with a penalty for the loser... He would've been lucky to last a minute, and then he would have owed them *both* a treat... he lost himself for a moment, in imagining all the ways that might have turned out. Or what if Keith had thrown? He sighed to himself, though it was close to a whimper. He hadn't quite been reduced to pawing at himself, but he was painfully hard, willing the basitins to end this torture and do something, *anything* to him.

It looked close. At some point, Keith had recovered, and both basitins were clearly feeling it now, eyes locked, bodies straining, nearly panting. Alaric was using one of his feet the way he'd used Keith's stomach, earlier, pinning the basitin's member against it with his other, massaging the head with his pad, pushing against the toes of his other foot, shifting them, pressing back... an Alaric win looked all but inevitable—until Keith broke out all his best tricks at the last moment, and as both basitins jerked and groaned, Zen had no idea which had finished first. As they both collapsed, gasping for breath, Zen realized there had been no great explosion; hardly any issue, and what there was was mostly clear. That gave him some idea of just how busy they'd been, earlier. *Guess that rules out cleanup duty.*

Keith was the first to lever himself back into a sitting position. He wiped himself off on his discarded robe, then cleaned Alaric's feet, still near the scene of the crime, before tossing the robe at the other basitin with a grin. "Let's try to keep the laundry down."

Alaric laughed, still on his back. "Oh gods, that towel..." He too levered himself up and wiped himself down, before cleaning Keith's feet... perhaps unnecessarily thoroughly. He actually blushed! Keith nudged him to leave off, but his smile made it clear he meant no reproach.

That's all well and good, but... Zen cleared his throat. "So, who won?"

They both looked at him, seated on his throne, pitching a tent. Keith raised his eyebrows and grinned, and Alaric did another double-take, then quickly

came back for a third look. Zen winked at him with a grin. Always nice to get a reaction.

Keith smiled a smile that Zen did not trust at all, but which left him tingling with anticipation. “*You’re* the judge. Who came first?”

“... neither of you?”

The basitin grinned. “Correct. Would you remind his honor of the rules, Brother Alaric?”

“I believe the exact stipulation was: ‘He who comes first loses. Winner gets a treat.’”

Keith was still looking straight at him, though from his tone he spoke to Alaric. “And if neither of us lost?”

“I believe it follows that either neither of us gets a treat... or we both do.”

“So, your honor...” Keith stood up and stepped closer, his tail swishing slowly, on the hunt. “Which shall it be?”

It wasn’t much of a question.

**

Maddie was all over her. Natani laughed and sat up, scattering her. The basitin looked at her curiously.

Natani stacked some pillows against the headboard and reclined in a half-seated position. It was comfortable enough, and it felt good to be less... prone. She grinned at Maddie. “Just keeping an eye on you, little kitten.” It was a little less of a joke than she would have liked.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about me! But...” Maddie looked a little skeptical. “Are you really going to keep calling me that?”

Natani beckoned her closer. “No good?”

She came. “No, it just... can it be just between us?”

Natani scratched her under the chin, causing her to squirm. “Sure thing, kitten.”

“What, changing it already?”

Natani grinned. “Well, it’s a mouthful.” She put a hand on the basitin’s shoulder. “You’re okay?”

*

Maddie smiled at the wolf's concern. How to convince her? "Yeah. Better than okay." She looked at Natani, unguarded. "It wasn't a surprise, exactly. I suspected. Now I know, is all." She stuck her tongue out, mimicking the wolverine gesture, netting a smile and another scratch under her chin. She just savored it for a moment; it felt wonderful. "And earlier..." she flushed at the memory. "That was *incredible*. But the way I feel now... it's like..." How to explain it? "You know how if there's a noise you're used to, you sometimes only notice it when it goes away? It's like that. Like for *years* I've had an annoying hum in my ears, or an itch I couldn't scratch, or something prickling at me, and now it's just... *gone*. So yeah, I'm okay." She leaned in to kiss the lovely wolf, putting it in something better than words. She was better than she'd ever been.

*

Maddie's mood was infectious, and Natani found herself relaxing in the kiss. She'd never seen the basitin quite like this. But then, she *had* said *years*. The way she'd described it made her think of the onset of heat, and her heart went out to Maddie. But surely it hadn't been that bad.

Surely?

The basitin pulled away to look at her, a wide grin on her face. "So, my turn?"

Natani had to laugh. "Fine, fine! Your turn."

*

Maddie darted back in for a quick kiss, then kissed Natani on the cheek, on the throat... imitation was the sincerest form of flattery, after all. She reached the wolf's breasts, and was again fascinated by how different they were from her own. She brought her hands into play, feeling their weight, and shot Natani a questioning look. The wolf rolled her eyes, but seemed happy to let her do what she wanted. So she did, nuzzling, licking, nipping, returning everything the wolf had done to her. She relished every reaction she got from Natani; the little intakes of breath, the low moans, even the occasional growl. She looked for new things; grazing a nipple with her teeth earned a yelp. When she tried suckling to make it better, Natani laughed, and she had to stop to grin. She nuzzled again, and found a secret thrill in feeling her ears rub against them;

against the wolf.

Continuing to play, she let one hand wander down Natani's stomach. The wolf brought one of her own hands to join it, placing it over hers, guiding her where she had been going anyway. She rested her palm on Natani's mound, remembering how pleasant that had felt. She could feel the wolf's wetness and heat with her fingers and smiled to herself, satisfied. The angle was weird, but it wasn't entirely unlike doing it to herself. That gave her the idea to face the wolf's side and move closer, and it became more familiar. Though, she couldn't feel her touch, of course... so she watched Natani, looking for clues in the wolf's expression.

Natani smiled at her. "Kiss me?"

Maddie's heart leapt. She did, putting some force into it. It was time to pay her back. She started moving her hand, at first just rubbing all of Natani with her palm. The wolf moaned into the kiss, and her hand was there again, guiding Maddie, coaxing her into doing other things. She happily played along, caressing, teasing, rubbing; with one finger, with two. Natani's hips trembled under her and she guessed the wolf was getting close, so she leaned back to watch. Natani had her eyes closed.

*

Maddie's mouth left hers, and Natani focused on the basitin's quick, clever fingers. She made the effort to stop guiding and interfering; to relax and let it happen. Maddie had it, was eager to bring her pleasure. When it came, it was a long, slow release of tension that left her panting slightly. She exhaled a breath she felt she'd been holding for minutes and opened her eyes.

Maddie looked a little consternated. "Was that it?"

The ambition of youth. Natani laughed, and kissed her, gratefully. "It's not *always* fireworks. You did good."

The basitin grinned slowly. "... but can do better?"

Natani stuck her tongue out. "Well, maybe."

Maddie kissed her again, wiping away her smirk, then darted away, giving her breasts a nuzzle before passing on, licking her way downwards. Continuing the circuit. As Maddie made her way down her stomach, the ease Natani had been building up began to evaporate. She *wasn't* comfortable with this. She hated to face that, but it was true. She wasn't past it, after all. She was strug-

gling with what to do about it when Maddie nearly *jumped* to lie between her legs. The basitin could *move* when she had a mind to.

Natani panicked and tried to push her head back, but accidentally got her by the ear. She quickly let go. “Sorry!”

*

Maddie looked at the wolf for a moment, puzzled. What *was* this? Natani had pulled her hand away, but it was still hovering near her. Ready to stop her? The wolf looked... torn. “Natani... first of all...” she nuzzled the wolf’s palm, then turned her head to rub her ears against it. She shivered with it, and when she was finally able to coax the wolf to rub back, she didn’t even try to stop her tail from doing what it would. “First of all... you *really* don’t need to worry about that.” She smiled at the wolf, beatific. “You can touch me however you want, right now.”

*

Natani was touched, and found herself smiling, her earlier panic disappearing. “Oh?” She scratched Maddie behind the ear, causing the basitin to tremble, then stroked down the back of her head only to come back around and scratch her under the chin. “However I want?”

Maddie made some kind of sound of assent. Her eyes had slid almost closed, and her tail was speaking quite clearly. Natani kept scratching her under the chin, beckoning her, and slowly she came, on all fours. Natani maneuvered her back up across her stomach until the basitin bumped into her breasts, then switched back to scratching her ears. Maddie settled down against her. Natani slumped lower on the pillows to make the position more comfortable, then brought both of her hands to bear. The basitin melted, and in moments she was purring.

It was downright unfair, really. She had *years* of practice. But, smiling at the ceiling, she didn’t think Maddie was going to complain overmuch.

*

Natani’s hands on her were making it hard for Maddie to think. She’d had no idea that just being touched by someone could feel so good. Not like *this*. Her

world had constricted to the circle of Natani's arms, a world filled with the wolf's warmth and her own purring. She never wanted it to end. But there had been something. A second of all. There was something wrong with the wonderful, wonderful wolf.

"Natani..."

The wolf rumbled under her. "Yeah?"

Maddie tried for an exasperated sigh, but it became a happy one. "Would you... stop... that?" The question came out as rhetorical.

"Do you really want me to?"

With a struggle, Maddie found her arms and slid them up against Natani's body, crossing them over the wolf's arms. She shifted her weight, and Natani's hands fell away. She instantly regretted the loss, but soldiered on, finding her skeleton and enough muscles to wrestle herself into an upright position. She sat on Natani's hips, leaning over the wolf and looking down at her. Natani looked like she felt, and she forgot what she was about to say. She smiled goofily. "Careful, I might fall for you."

Natani grinned. "I'd treat you well."

"... You would, huh." There wasn't anything she didn't like about the way the wolf was looking at her. Whatever the problem was, she really didn't think it had to do with her. She grew more serious. "Natani... what's wrong?"

The wolf grew more serious as well. "... I guess you wouldn't believe 'nothing', huh?"

"I could pretend. If you really wanted me to."

*

Natani smiled at the basitin. Pretending wouldn't do any good. It never had, really. She sighed. "I'm afraid."

Maddie grinned. "What, that I'll make you forget all about Keith?"

Natani reached up to give her ear a tweak. "Don't try and save face for me."

The basitin rubbed at her ear. "I always wondered what that felt like."

Natani stuck her tongue out. "Well, now you know."

Maddie hesitated for a moment. "Afraid?"

"It might seem strange to you, with the way you've been going, but this used to be... hard for me. Very hard."

Understanding dawned. "Is it because of the..." Maddie made the interna-

tional hand signal for ‘the thing that is up with you.’

“That’s part of it.” But then, Zen hadn’t really had all that much trouble, in the end... “It’s a part of it, but maybe not as big a part as I thought.” She sighed. “I thought I was done with this years ago. Turns out it was never *sex* I was okay with. It was *Keith*.”

“But... just now...” Maddie pulled at her ear and blushed. “And... earlier. What... what exactly is it that you’re afraid of?”

Natani smiled at her. *Of course* a basitin would think of intimacy, first. But no. “Not being in control.”

“Ah. I see how that would...” Maddie looked thoughtful. “In that case...” the basitin took Natani’s hand and guided it to the top of her head, smiling. “I’m okay with you being in control.”

*But I’m not. Not with **having** to be.* Still. It wasn’t Maddie’s fault. Natani found her smile. She gave the basitin’s ears some more attention, then gave her another scratch under the chin. Her reactions really were adorable. “Still not satisfied, little kitten?”

The basitin leaned down to kiss her. She was really starting to get the hang of it. “Only if you want me to be.”

That was one way to go about it. “I guess that’s a yes, then.”

“... wait. Which does that mean?”

Natani laughed. “Let’s give it a try. But it might not happen.” Those were the old words, to take the pressure off. But there was steel in her heart. She *would* do this.

Maybe.

She reached up to touch Maddie on the cheek with her fingertips. The basitin looked surprised, then smiled widely before turning her head to kiss her palm. Yeah, she understood.

Maddie followed her hand down again, going slower this time. The care she was taking rankled a bit, but it was also... heartening. And other things, as the basitin once again returned to her breasts. Natani *wanted* this to work. For both their sakes.

Maddie popped up. “Could you sit up a bit more? I’d like to be able to see your face.”

Natani straightened up with a wry grin. For someone not in control, Maddie was a bit on the bossy side. “Better?”

“Better.” The basitin laid herself down between her legs again. “Your hand? Could you...?”

Natani rolled her eyes, but she placed a hand on Maddie’s head, giving her a scratch behind one ear for good measure. The basitin mrowed, swishing her tail. The hand didn’t feel necessary, at least for the moment. Though... understanding might have curbed Maddie’s enthusiasm a bit, but Natani though she saw a new spark of determination in the basitin’s eyes. And... Maddie usually got what she wanted. Natani felt something stirring inside her at the thought, and her voice came out a little hoarse. “Your turn.”

**

“Up.”

Zen rose, very aware of the confines of his robe. Keith tugged up at the side of the garment, and he got the idea, reaching into the neck to pull the whole thing off and send it flying. Giving him no time to take stock, Keith guided him, firmly, backing him against the narrow end of the table. Well. That gave away some of the game. Zen leaned against the table, grabbing the edge for support, and tried not to let his excitement show too much. Was that really what Keith had in mind?

*

Keith knelt down, wall-side of Zen, and looked at Nick. Time to make introductions. It was a bit of a detour from the plan, but he was curious, and he needed to know. Nick had gone along, but was it just that? And how on board was *Zen*, really? What he had in mind probably wouldn’t work if this was just half-hearted exploration for one or both of them, so in that case... Well. Keith caught Nick’s eye and signaled him to approach, pointing him to Zen’s *very* hard member, knot and all. There was no putting this genie back in the bottle, but there was more than one way to make a wish.

Nick approached, kneeling opposite him, and Keith thought he liked what he saw. The other basitin seemed unable to take his eyes off Zen’s knot. Keith smiled. The wolf would like that, too.

Nick tore his eyes away to look at Keith. “Is this...?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh.”

The other basitin glanced at the knot again, then looked the entire thing over. Keith thought he seemed rather... intrigued. Nick opened his mouth, but didn't seem to find the words. Then, as if remembering it was actually attached to someone, he glanced up at Zen, blushing a little. Keith glanced up as well, to see Zen looking rather adorably smug.

Nick returned his eyes to the prize, and once again opened his mouth only to close it again without saying anything. But then, maybe it wasn't words he was looking for... Keith extended his tongue and gave his side of Zen's shaft a lick, looking at Nick. Care for a taste?

The other basitin blushed again, and Keith wondered that in all the years they'd known each other he'd never seen that until today. Never *really* seen Nick, before today. He'd spent all that time looking away. Nick got his blushing under control and extended his tongue, first getting just a taste, then giving a long lick down the side. The latter was accompanied by an appreciative sigh from Zen. Keith saw that he'd closed his eyes. Probably meant that the wolf was trying to hold back.

Yeah, he didn't think he needed to worry much.

Keith gave his side another lick, nudging it toward Nick, who nudged it back with a grin. They batted it between them for a moment, before Keith started slowly migrating wolfward. Nick matched his pace, and they both nuzzled up to Zen's knot at the same time. It *throbbed* between them and the wolf groaned, then groaned louder when they started licking at it. The knot swelled slightly, and Nick's eyes went wide. Keith grinned at him and drew back. Nick followed suit. Zen's member twitched between them, and the wolf whimpered. Keith stroked one of his legs gently, and slowly, the twitching subsided. That had been very close, and if Zen had moved at all... the wolf must've been dying to buck his hips. Hmm. Could they take a longer detour? He eyed the room. They'd probably set a new distance record... No, too ambitious. Some other time. If there was such a thing. No, better to just—

Nick got his attention with a twitch of his ear, then glanced at the tip of Zen's member, then looked a question at Keith.

Nod, smile. Go for it. A tip of the ear to suggest moderation. Nick moved to directly in front of Zen and carefully licked the tip clean, then took it into his mouth, getting a good taste. Zen visibly throbbed again, and Keith was

tempted to let the other basitin get more than a mouthful... but, again, some other time. He put his hand on Nick's chest. Let's not get carried away. The other basitin released Zen, looking a little disappointed and licking his lips. Keith tilted his head, signaling for him to resume his place, opposite.

They grabbed Zen by the legs, lifting, and tipped him onto the table.

**

Maddie started slowly, lapping at Natani's fur, working her way closer to her wetness. The wolf's hand rested lightly on her head, but wasn't guiding her; it moved *with* her, not the other way around. Natani's scent enveloped her, more powerful than she'd ever experienced it before. She very much liked it. And the wolf's taste—she very much liked that, too. It... suited her, somehow. She reached her target and got a fresh taste from the source. Natani certainly seemed excited, despite the earlier. As she got to work trying to figure out what Natani had done to her, and how well she could put her tongue to use, she was rewarded with a low moan from the wolf. Natani's tail twitched under her, tickling her breasts. She liked the position, liked that she could see Natani's expression. Getting the wolf to moan, seeing the pleasure reflected on her face, was a thrill. She shifted her focus to Natani's clit, and immediately the wolf's face contorted in more pleasure. Natani looked like Maddie had felt, when she had been under the wolf's tongue. Just the memory of that was enough to rekindle her own excitement, no matter how sated she had felt earlier. She could feel Natani's loins tensing and relaxing, and the wolf's hand grasped at her, momentarily pulling her closer. The hold grazed her ears, and she let out a small moan of her own. She let her excitement carry her, building on what seemed to be working, watching the wolf.

*

Natani closed her eyes, and let out a long moan as Maddie did something particularly devilish. It wasn't like being teased by Keith, who knew *exactly* what he was doing; no, Maddie's inexperience lent her a certain erraticness that was, in its own way, even more torturous. Still, Natani found herself moaning under the basitin's tongue, more and more, as Maddie honed her skills on Natani's clit. She forced herself to remove her hand from the basitin's head,

moving it to her own thigh instead, giving one ear a long stroke as she went. She was getting closer, and she wanted this to work without the crutch. But the action had taken her out of the moment, and she couldn't quite see her way back. The trick was to *be* relaxed. *Trying* to relax didn't really do much.

*

The wolf removed her hand and immediately seemed tenser, and Maddie didn't think it was the good kind. She gave Natani a little nip on the inside of her thigh. "Natani?"

The wolf opened her eyes to look at her. "Mm?"
"My ears. Could you...?"

*

Natani laughed softly. "Sure." She didn't believe Maddie for a moment, but if that was what she asked for... that was what she was going to get. She rubbed the basitin's ears gently, and for a moment Maddie seemed to lose herself in it, her eyelids growing heavier. But she recovered her focus and got back to work, and it was Natani's turn to close her eyes. She kept caressing Maddie's ears, though.

*

That had clearly helped, though now the difficulty was in keeping her attention on the task at hand. Perseverance under adversity! She managed to keep her eyes open and on Natani's face, and her tongue at work. She had a pretty good idea of what worked, now, and focused everything in an attempt to push the wolf over the edge... before her own distraction overwhelmed her. It was a long push, but got easier as Natani's hand stopped moving, the wolf too preoccupied with herself to keep it up. She was panting, and her tail was twitching constantly now, bringing strange and pleasant sensations to Maddie. She was growing increasingly aroused herself, and knew her own tail was swishing wildly. Finally, with one last gasp, Natani was there. The wolf bucked her hips against Maddie's mouth, and her hand clutched at her, keeping her close. She kept going through Natani's throes, urged by the hand on her head and the memory that the wolf had done the same. It began to subside and she was just

about to back off, when the wolf's hips bucked again, even more explosively, accompanied with a long, *loud* moan. The wolf's hand fell away, and she lay there, twitching and moaning. Maddie sat up, amazed.

*

Natani let out a long sigh. All tension seemed to have left her body. That, that had went better than she'd expected. Maybe she wasn't past it, but... she wasn't still at square one, either.

"Was that... twice?"

Natani opened her eyes and smiled at Maddie, a little goofily. "Uh-huh."

"Is that what you were trying to...?"

"Uh-huh."

"So I can...?"

Natani laughed. "I don't know! I'm just one wolf." Or two, depending on how you looked at it. In truth, she'd learned that through Zen. It had rankled a bit—It was *her* body!—but she couldn't begrudge Zen taking to it so well, after her own experiences. And, well, she'd taught her brother a thing or two about *his* body, as well.

*

Huh. Well, she was looking forward to finding out! There was still so much she didn't know... the dildo caught her eye, laying by them on the bed. *So much* she didn't know. She picked it up and gave it an experimental lick, then made a face. Taste was *not* its best feature.

Natani grinned at her. "The real deal tastes better. Don't know if you'll like it, but I can promise you *better*."

Well, that wouldn't be hard. And the toy might not taste good, but... "Where'd you get this, anyway?"

Natani quirked a smile. "... I can see if I can get you one. Might take a while, though."

"Really? That'd be... I'd like that."

"That size? Smaller?"

"Smaller. I think." She grinned. "If I can borrow this one sometimes?"

Natani laughed. "I'm sure something can be arranged."

There had been a harness... Maddie found it, then quickly figured out the workings. The toy slotted through, and then the flared base could be locked into place—the end had an interesting texture to it—and then the buckles...

*

Natani had closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them again she found Maddie sitting by her side, on her haunches, quite peaceably, wearing the strap-on and looking *entirely* too innocent. Natani burst out laughing. “Did... did you have something in mind?”

“Oh, just... wondering... if you were satisfied.”

Being penetrated, being vulnerable... No one should be able to be that disarming, that well armed. Natani sat up and looked at Maddie, smiling. The basitin matched her expression, and Natani felt compelled to give her another scratch under the chin. Maddie purred, eyes half-lidded, an image of indulgence. Natani tipped her head up and kissed her, with gratitude, then stroked her cheek gently. Maddie leaned against her hand and looked at her with a beatific little smile, and Natani’s heart melted. It *would* be okay. “I *am* satisfied. But if you’re still curious about something, well...” She pulled the basitin into an embrace. And poked herself in the stomach. “Besides, I seem to have made you hard.”

Maddie snickered, then pulled away. “How do you want to do this?”

“Lie down on your back?”

Maddie did, and Natani straddled her. It was the easiest position for her, but she still didn’t just put it in. Rather, she sat on Maddie’s thighs, with the piece de resistance against her stomach. Maddie sought out her hand and gave it a squeeze, and she was touched by the gesture. She took both of the basitin’s hands in her own. She *did* trust Maddie. As long as the basitin understood...

Natani took the dildo in one hand, bringing Maddie’s hand as well. Instructive, after all. They steadied it together as she raised her hips and positioned herself above the tip.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she settled down onto it. It was a familiar feeling, though it had been quite a while. Usually she was on the other end, and even that had grown rare now that there were... better means. Still. Her mind flashed to Keith panting under her, and she grinned. It *did* have some advantages. You could go for a *long* time... Maybe she should bring it on the trip. For

old times' sakes.

**

Nick was left holding Zen's legs, watching Keith as he stepped to the side of the table. Keith put his hand on the wolf's wrist and looked down at him. "You okay with this?"

Zen growled. "*Gods* yes. Just get *on* with it!"

Keith leaned down to kiss the wolf at some length. As he did, he rubbed one of Zen's cheeks with a hand. There was that gesture again... and Nick had to stifle a laugh as the wolf's tail banged into his legs.

Keith broke the kiss, and Zen looked up at him with longing. "... or you could do that."

Keith smiled at the wolf, and gave his cheek another stroke. "Just gotta get the lube. Okay?"

Zen sighed. "Okay."

Keith grinned. "That's a good wolf."

Zen growled, and Keith darted away, drawing Nick's eye as he went... to a cupboard in the corner. "Does *every* room in this house —" Nick looked at Zen, and interrupted himself. "— that's a yes, isn't it?"

The wolf grinned at him. "Not the vestibule." Nick considered. That'd probably be because— "We haven't figured out where to put it."

Nick laughed. Yeah. He looked at Zen, who was grinning back at him with his hands behind his head. Something about the situation caught at him. He smiled at the wolf. "Comfortable?"

"Yeah, I'm good." Zen sighed, then grinned. "My balls are killing me, though." The grin mellowed into a smile. "You?"

It wasn't his body Zen was asking about. Nick grinned. "Yeah. I think I am." *And I may feel like my dick is about to fall off, but saying that would be going off-script.* Keith seemed to be under the impression that he had infinite stamina, probably because he himself seemingly *did*. Nick hadn't had to disabuse his friend of the notion yet, but it was becoming a very, very close thing. The wolf, meanwhile, seemed to have the opposite problem. *Balls, hm?* Alaric figured his leverage and decided that yes, he could just adjust his grip a bit, shift one foot back and crouch a little... He nuzzled Zen's heavy sack carefully, and the wolf gasped. He'd found he rather liked the wolf's scent, and this

didn't do anything to change his opinion. He started licking, slowly, teasing the large orbs, the short fur tickling at his tongue. Something like a growl, a low rumble, began to emanate from Zen.

After he'd thoroughly slathered the wolf, he straightened back up to see Zen looking a little dazed... and that the wolf had dripped a fresh mess on his stomach. He grinned. "Any better?"

Zen let out a contented sigh, then laughed. "No, not really. But... thanks. For the effort."

Nick shrugged. "Any time."

The wolf laughed again. "Don't say that unless you mean it."

His instinct was to repeat himself, but he hesitated, and while hesitating realized that Keith was leaning against the wall, holding a small jar, grinning at him. How long had...? He... might have gotten a little carried away. But... he didn't blush this time. "Come here and give me a kiss?"

Keith went from brief surprise to a wide smile, and stepped closer, to put his arms around Nick's neck and give him exactly what he'd hoped for. It was very, very tender. When he was done, Keith leaned his head against Nick and looked at Zen. "What d'you think?"

"I think you should *get on with it!*"

Keith laughed and put the jar on the table, almost against the wall. He removed the lid, and Nick could see that it held a white-ish salve of some sort. Good. Any more of the nuts, and his dick really *might* fall off.

Keith—somehow still hard—quickly lubed himself up, thoroughly... then stopped and looked at Nick, smiling. "Mmm... could have asked you to do that." Yes, he could have. But Keith didn't wait for a response, instead moving on to applying more of the lube to Zen's ass. There was an intake of breath from the wolf.

Preparations complete, Nick passed his place—and Zen's legs—to Keith, who let the legs fall on his shoulders while he positioned himself. Nick couldn't help but look at Zen's feet, right in front of his face, and missed the moment entirely. There was a satisfied sigh from the wolf, and when he turned to look, Keith was already moving, thrusting in and out of Zen. Keith quickly found his pace, and Nick took in how he was standing, how he was holding Zen's legs, how and how far he was moving... and built an idea of how it would feel to replicate it. Apparently, this was a very precise thing.

Zen sounded amused. “Does that really take both of you?”

Keith glanced at Nick, grinning. “I think he wants something to do with his mouth.”

Well, he’d pretty much gotten it down anyway. Nick stepped up the side of the table, feeling a little too conscious of the wolf’s eyes on his not-quite-stiff manhood. Zen raised his head up a bit, apparently in anticipation.

*

Alaric looked down at him. “Er...”

Zen rolled his eyes and made the first move himself. He wanted to do this before the... distraction... got too much for delicate work. He stretched his neck to get closer and gave Alaric’s semi-hard shaft a playful lick. Not that far from how Keith tasted—a different motif on the same flavor. The basitin didn’t seem to have an objection, so, maintaining eye contact, he gathered the whole thing into his muzzle, suckling lightly. Alaric looked suitably entranced.

For a few of Keith’s thrusts Zen just held there, letting the slight swaying of his body do the work for him. Keith felt amazing inside him, and every thrust was like another drop in a bucket, building towards... something. They’d got it all figured out; the speed, the depth, the angle. Too fast, didn’t really work. Too slow, didn’t work enough. Keith had given it a good try—was *always* willing to give it a good try—but no matter how good it felt, it always got to be too much for Keith before it got to be too much for Zen. He took that as a compliment, really. They’d given it a try with Natani’s little implement of doom, as well, but that had dissolved into laughter. He just couldn’t take it seriously. But... two *basitins*? That, that was serious.

But Alaric hadn’t gotten instantly hard in his mouth. Zen didn’t think it was indifference, so... perhaps he wasn’t as indefatigable as Keith, after all? Zen started working his tongue, gently, *gently*, and Alaric let out a long sigh, his ears drooping happily. As his mouth grew full, Zen went for a smile. *Yeah, I’m pretty good at this.*

*

The wolf’s muzzle was exquisite. As Zen gently coaxed him into full hardness, Nick had to use the table for support. His tail curled of its own volition. The

wolf's expression warranted a response. "That is a good wolf."

Raised eyebrow, cocked head. 'Did you really just say that?'

Nick laughed. "Sorry?"

A shrug, a look. 'It's fine, but... remember who has your dick right now.'

The wolf was surprisingly expressive with his mouth full. Nick gave it another go. "You're *amazing*."

Another smile. "That's more like it.'

Nick was fully hard again, and with the way the day had been going he should have been on fire... but something about the soft heat of Zen's muzzle, the tender care of his wonderful, wonderful tongue, was alleviating the soreness. And this was an awkward position, too... What would it be like to have the wolf between his legs? Zen strained to completely engulf him, pushing his nose against Nick's stomach, and thoughts dispersed. The wolf held there for a while, apparently with no trouble. His tongue never stopped, and Nick could do nothing but lean harder against the table and let out another long sigh as Zen lavished him. He let some of his weight fall against the wolf, pushing back against his muzzle. Zen didn't seem to mind, and he wanted badly to start thrusting slowly. To let the wolf, so obviously willing, coax another climax from his battered body.

With regret, Nick pulled back. Zen let him go, looking up at him questioningly, still holding part of him in his muzzle. As good as it felt, Nick still had a part to play, and if the the wolf could get him to spend himself here—which Nick rather suspected he could—he might not be able to play it. No matter how good Zen was. He smiled down, and the wolf seemed to get the idea, pulling back all the way. Nick found he ached more in the open air than he had in Zen's mouth.

The wolf settled back on the table. That position just now couldn't have been very comfortable. But Zen wasn't done. He turned his head to the side and nudged Nick with his free hand, beckoning him nearer, up the table. Nick took the half-step to follow Zen, and... the wolf immediately nuzzled his balls. He gasped at the sensation, and the wolf started licking them, lapping at them slowly with his tongue. Nick shuddered, his tail curling again, his eyes almost sliding closed. This... this probably wouldn't be too much stimulation? Right? No matter *how* good he was? He gasped again as Zen took one of his balls in his mouth, tugging at it carefully—positioning him, he realized. He let the wolf

guide him a bit more to the side, feeling guilty about forgetting to think of his comfort when he was being so... the wolf licked at him again, and he couldn't find the words. Whatever it was, he wanted more of it. He looked down at Zen, speechless. The wolf smiled at him again, then reached up with a hand to touse Nick's hair. He had to laugh at the unexpected gesture. Who *was* this? He didn't know how he had expected Zen to react to Keith's little plan, but this, somehow, wasn't it. Zen's hand withdrew, the wolf bracing himself against the wall, and Nick let himself get lost in trying to make sense of the wolf... and the sensations of the wolf's tongue on him.

His reverie was interrupted when, with a grunt, Zen's tongue ceased, his eyes sliding closed. The wolf let out a long, low moan, and Nick glanced at Keith, surprised. The other basitin looked intent, but smiled and winked when he saw Nick looking, then nodded at Zen. He'd just been focused on what the wolf was doing to him... almost forgetting what Keith was doing to the wolf. Nick's eyes were drawn to Zen's member, sticking out over the wolf's stomach, fully hard—more fully hard than he'd thought possible. The knot looked even bigger than before. How could that ever...? The wolf's manhood twitched and throbbed in time with Keith's thrusts, and with almost every thrust more pre oozed from the tip. There was a trail down the top of it, and the wolf's stomach was a sticky mess. He swallowed at the sight, his mind filling with images of reaching out, of... he caught himself, his hand already extended, and looked at Keith. The other basitin shook his head, grinning, and Nick grabbed the edge of the table instead.

**

Natani shifted her weight against Maddie's hips, and the basitin gasped. The toy was a clever bit of work, and there was opportunity for pleasure for the one wearing it as well. Natani exhaled, taking stock, getting used to the fullness. It wasn't Keith, but it wasn't bad. And it *was* Maddie. She grinned down at the basitin. "So, how do you like the guy experience?"

*

Maddie looked at the wolf, towering over her. She gave her hips a little thrust, and Natani drew in a breath. The pressure and texture of the toy, the feel of

the wolf's weight against her, was... interesting. She grinned back. "I think I can see the appeal." She gave another thrust, and Natani exhaled.

"So I see. Maddie..." she trailed off, and for a moment they stayed like that, still except for their tails slowly mingling between Maddie's legs.

"Yeah?" Curious, nothing else.

"I want to leave this to you. And it... might be hard for me. But... if I don't tell you to stop..."

"... don't?"

Natani nodded.

She damn well would stop if she didn't like what she was seeing. No need to advertise that fact to Natani, though, with the wolf looking that serious. She gave Natani's hand another squeeze, and wrapped the wolf's tail with her own. Natani smiled. That was better. "Okay. You can leave it to me." She grinned. "I'll be gentle."

Natani stuck her tongue out. Also good. The wolf lifted herself off the toy and swung to the side, getting down on elbows and knees. She looked back at Maddie and gave her tail a little wag, grinning.

Maddie sat up. It was an enticing view, to be sure... she leaned forward to give Natani a lick. The wolf leaned forward, almost out of range. Tempting her? Maddie leaned back, and batted at the wolf's tail. "Natani?"

"Yeah?"

She put one hand on the wolf's rump. "Y'know, I like looking at you..."

She gave a little nudge and Natani played along, rolling over at her touch. The wolf stuck her tongue out again. "I get the feeling you just like seeing me on my back."

Maddie grinned. "Well, it is a nice view..."

That had felt like it meant something. On her back... her stomach? Maddie put one hand on Natani's stomach, and saw the wolf's arm twitch. Guess there was something to it. She ruffled the fur slowly, watching the wolf's reactions. Natani seemed to be struggling with herself. Maddie *did* like the sensation of the wolves' fur, longer and more unruly than her own... and also the sensation of Natani's muscles under her hand. They kept tensing if she shifted her hand quickly, but eventually the wolf seemed to grow more relaxed, both in her expression and her abdomen. On a whimsy, she put her face into Natani's stomach, nuzzling, licking. The wolf actually laughed! She'd take that for a good

sign. Natani's tail wagged, slamming against her makeshift erection, and Maddie laughed as well. She straightened up again, and seeing Natani smiling at her, started to position herself between the wolf's legs. Easiest would have been to just lean over her, and Natani's breasts looked like they would be *just* perfectly in reach... but she didn't want to take her hand off of the wolf's stomach, or her eyes off of her face. So she spread her knees instead, lowering her hips, seeing if she could line it up. Natani played along, lifting her legs so Maddie could get hers under, raising her hips to meet. Looked workable. Maddie settled into something like a stable position, then grabbed the shaft of the dildo with her free hand—feeling a good sort of ridiculous doing it—and positioned the tip against Natani. The wolf nodded, and Maddie thrust her hips. The tip slid in, and the wolf let out a low growl... but it didn't feel threatening. Maddie remembered how easily Natani had taken all of it when the wolf had been on top, so she didn't take it anywhere near as slow as Natani had, with her. She couldn't quite work the shaft all the way in, between her legs being up against Natani's and the awkward angle. But that probably didn't matter. She tried a short thrust, and the wolf growled again. Maddie ruffled the fur on her stomach, and the growl changed register. She thrust again, faster, and the growl became a gasp, then a moan, and Natani's expression melted. The wolf's tail was wagging between her legs, occasionally giving Maddie a thump.

*

Another low growl escaped Natani. This was... had Maddie known this position should have been the most difficult? But what the basitin had done... a simple gesture, but it had done wonders. She wanted to put her hand on Maddie's, just to touch her; but that would probably lead to a misunderstanding. So she put both hands behind her head, instead. Hands off, indeed. Maddie grinned at her, and she stuck her tongue out in response. What Maddie was doing was working for *her*, but the basitin didn't seem affected herself. "Y'know, if you get the angle just right..."

*

Curious, Maddie began experimenting, and quickly found that if she held herself upright, leaning back a bit, with her hips out, then when she thrust... The

base of the shaft connecting them pressed against her *just right*, and she mrowed at the sensation. She thrust harder, and gasped. Yes, that was definitely... she tried again, and this time moaned in time with Natani. Looked like it worked for both of them. She kept thrusting her hips, her own pleasant tingling slowly growing in intensity, the wolf's moans growing louder. It surprised Maddie how quickly she had the wolf panting. She slid her hand lower on Natani's stomach, reaching for Natani's clit with her thumb. The wolf jerked with a long and ragged moan, her eyes squeezed shut, her release obvious. The sight of it was such a thrill to Maddie that her own excitement peaked, and she shuddered as the sensations washed over her, but she could still keep moving her hips. Indeed, it wasn't always fireworks. But then, the wolf hadn't said to stop...

**

Zen snapped back into the present. His mind was starting to wander, turning in on itself, getting lost in the pleasure. Every thrust pushed him infinitesimally closer. The bucket had a leak, but the drops just kept... on... coming...

He snapped out of it again when his head shifted, planting his nose right in the Alaric family jewels. His world filled with the basitin's scent, and he thought he heard a yelp. He blinked his eyes open, feeling muddled. "Sorry."

Alaric laughed, so he did it again. Yup, a yelp. He grinned up at the basitin, who had that cute slightly befuddled expression again. Instinct said to do something about it, but he kept his hands where they were, renewing his grip on the table, as another wave of pleasure threatened to wash him away. Free hands were a liability. Sometimes, this ended with him grabbing himself. Needed to brace, hold on to something else, give instinct other things to do. He forced himself to focus, renewing his hold on the link. That, too, had threatened to slip.

He wanted to give Alaric another lick, to make up for the nose, but the basitin had stepped back just a bit. That let him see that right at the tip of his basitinhoo, there was a pearly bead. He licked it away, getting his first real taste, and smiled at Alaric, satisfied. *Ha! Got you.*

Then he heard himself moan again, and there was no room in his world for anything except keeping his hands where they were, holding the link for dear life... and Keith, moving inside him.

*

Nick watched Zen lose himself again, his eyes hazing over with lust. Nick's hand went to where the wolf had licked him. Somehow, Zen had coaxed something out of him. He longed to feel the wolf's tongue again, and found he was stroking himself. To keep hard, of course. Not let it go to waste. He forced his pace slower.

Nick kept an eye on Keith, to make sure he didn't miss his cue, but his eyes kept returning to Zen's feet, on Keith's shoulders, swaying in time to his steady thrusts. One of the wolf's legs was twitching. It was mesmerizing. Zen moaned and splayed his toes, and Nick found he didn't have an excuse to keep touching himself.

Eventually, the signal came to 'circle behind.' He was never going to look at squad signals the same again... There was room enough on the wall side of the table to situate himself, reach the jar of whatever it was that passed for lube. The white salve felt slick and cool against him. The coolness was welcome. He gave himself a good coating, then got so distracted by one of Zen's feet being *right there* that Keith had to elbow him to get him back on track.

The switch went off without a hitch. Nick didn't let himself get distracted by the sensations and quickly matched what Keith had been doing—angle, depth, tempo. The other basitin nodded, satisfied, and Nick immediately got distracted by the sensations—hot, tight, and very, very slick. Still, he kept the pace. The stimulation was almost uncomfortable, and again he remembered how much he'd been through today. Still, with Zen laid out like this in front of him...

He needed to get Keith on a table.

For comparison purposes.

Obviously.

Nick settled in for the long haul, thinking endurance thoughts.

*

Zen whimpered when Keith withdrew and he felt his legs passed, but almost immediately Alaric was there. The thought that it was him—*another* basitin—made up the few lost strokes. Did it feel different...? Keith was beside him, now. He couldn't think, could barely, just barely, hold the link. He'd never

been this close, not like this, had no idea how far there was left to go. He felt there, in the middle of it.

“Zen?” He focused on Keith. All the gods, but he loved Keith. The basitin reached out to stroke his cheek, gentle even now. All the gods and more.

“Zen?” He thought he made some kind of sound in response. It seemed to satisfy the basitin, because he grinned and Zen could feel something hot and hard press against his upper arm. “Guess what this is?” He was still... of course he was. Wait, had he even...? Keith leaned closer, to stage-whisper into his ear.

“We can keep doing this for *hours*, you know? As long as it takes.”

The basitin kissed him, the final drop, and his world unraveled. All control fled him, the link slamming open as his body could no longer contain him. It would be up to Natani to—

**

Oh crap! Oh crap! Oh crap! Oh crap!

They met in the maelstrom, and for a moment, there was no Natani or Zen—only both. Both minds open to both bodies, too close, too immediate, too familiar to divide into themselves. They spun, a roiling storm of need and desire, the charge building ever higher, searching for a path to ground, shying from any they could not both embrace.

The kiss! Keith! The kiss!

Lightning struck.

**

Nick had been starting to wonder if Zen hadn’t already reached some kind of final destination on his journey, and was now just *staying there* to spite their efforts. But no. The real deal left no question. Immediately after Keith kissed him, the wolf’s entire body tensed up, then *erupted*, shooting his first jet. He clenched so hard that it broke Nick’s rhythm, and he couldn’t do anything except lean his weight against the wolf’s legs and hold on for dear life, trying to keep from getting kicked off as Zen thrashed. The wolf had wrapped his arms around Keith, and, judging by the basitin’s ears and tail being near vertical, was kissing him back. He’d never seen anything quite like it. He’d never seen anything quite like *any* of it. Zen just... kept going, painting the walls. The only

reason he hadn't painted *Keith* was that most of it was going *over* him. Nick, still inside him, not daring to shift in case he got thrown back, felt like he might come away from the experience fit to be a Messenger.

Finally, *finally*, the wolf began to settle down, and Nick let out a sigh of relief. The kiss was still going, Keith bent over the wolf. Slowly, Zen's arms around him relaxed, and the basitin regained his freedom... not that he went anywhere. Just when all had grown silent, a bit of the bounty dropped from the ceiling, hitting Keith on the ear.

*

Keith checked his ear.

Huh.

He looked at the room—and the ceiling, the rather staggered-looking Nick, and the wholly passed out Zen—and had to laugh. Well. *That* had been a success. And... he'd seen the flash in Zen's eyes. Of all the possible things...

And the kiss. *Gods*, the kiss. He shook his head slowly in wonderment. He felt charged, like all his fur should be standing on end.

"Help me with him?"

Keith looked at Nick, and... *No. This will not do.* Maybe something had reached him in the kiss, or maybe it was just everything that had been going on, but... for the first time, he thought he truly understood what the wolves saw when they looked at him, what those words *meant*. He found his own interpretation of the idea, and grinned. It wasn't that you *take* what you want. You *give* what you want. *You give what can't be taken.*

His steps felt unusually light as he circled around, coming up behind Nick. The other basitin was clearly expecting him to take Zen's legs. Instead, he embraced Nick from behind, letting his erection rub against the base of his tail, his hands travelling down to Nick's hips. He was still half inside Zen, which Keith took as a good sign.

Intake of breath. "Keith?"

He pushed slightly, and Nick slid deeper into the wolf, coming to rest against Keith's hands, cushioning the two. He felt Nick's tail twitch against him, and smiled. "You didn't come yet, did you?"

"No, but... this was about him, right?"

"Uh-huh. But you did a really good job, so... wouldn't it be a little sad if it

ended like that?”

“But... he’s asleep.”

“And what a way to wake up, huh? And, you know...” He pulled his hips back a bit, letting his cock draw a haphazard pattern on Nick’s buttocks. “I didn’t come either.” He pushed against the underside of Nick’s tail, making his meaning very, very clear, and felt the basitin tremble against him. He shifted again, back to his original position, hugging Nick from behind. His ears twitched. “I mean, if you want to put him to bed first, that’s fine. But...” he licked a very specific spot on Nick’s neck, and felt his tail jerked between them. Nick knew what that meant. “... I don’t think I can let you just get away.” Maybe it *was* something like a promise. But, with Nick almost balls deep in Zen, maybe there was room for such a thing. He leaned his head against Nick’s back. “Unless you want me to?”

Nick sounded hoarse. “No, I... please don’t.”

Keith smiled. “Please don’t what?”

“Let me get away.”

He gave Nick’s neck the lightest possible nip, and felt his whole body tremble in response. “Okay.”

He pulled his hands free, then took a half-step to the side, dodging around Zen’s leg to reach for the lube. He kept one hand on Nick at all times. Not letting him get away. Fresh dollop of the stuff in his hand, he considered. Mm, might as well... No such thing as too much lube, and this stuff wasn’t as long-lasting as the nuts. He pulled Nick back further, until just his tip was in Zen, then reached around with both hands to lube him up again. It was a very, very slick business. Nick trembled under his touch, enough to pop out of the wolf, his dick settling against Zen’s balls. Keith cupped the tip, rubbing it against his salved palm, before positioning him again. A nudge of his own hips encouraged Nick to thrust forward, slowly sliding in. Keith got his hands out of the way, this time, and Nick sank all the way in, his balls coming to rest against the wolf’s ass. Zen’s tail gave a little twitch, prompting Keith to lean to the side to get a look, but he was pretty sure the wolf was still completely out.

Nick let out a long sigh. Keith smiled. “Feel good?”

“Yeah. But... asleep?”

“Under the circumstances? He’d think it was hilarious. But if you want it to be just the two of us...” Keith poked at him again.

“I’ll... take your word for it.”

Good. Keith gave Nick’s neck another lick, and he relaxed with a sigh, letting his weight settle against the wolf. Didn’t look like he was planning on doing a lot of moving... which suited Keith just fine. That might be just the ticket.

He lubed himself, getting his cock every bit as covered as Nick’s was. The position could be challenging. But... slow and steady gets the job done. Preparations complete, he positioned himself with intent. “Okay?”

Nick sounded a little hoarse. “Okay.”

Keith let his tip rest against Nick’s tight entrance, giving the other time to relax himself. He teased at the base of Nick’s tail gently, and heard an appreciative mrow. He’d started to get a pretty good idea about some of the things that worked for his old friend. He increased the pressure a little. Nick gave, and it was his turn to mrow. He could feel his own tail curling just as Nick’s twitched under his hand. He kept pushing in, slowly, watchful, not letting the sensations overwhelm him. It was a tight angle. Again, Nick proved himself more than able, and before long he found himself completely engulfed, coming to rest against the basitin, resting against the wolf... he slid his arms around Nick, embracing him, and just held there for a while, occasionally giving a little twitch of his hips. He knew *he* liked that... and evidently, Nick did as well. He let out a long exhalation, his ears drooping, and Keith could *feel* him relax. “That’s...”

Keith smiled. “Yeah.” He started moving, small, slow motions, and nuzzled Nick’s neck, occasionally giving a little lick to just the right spot. Keith let his hands slide down to Nick’s hips, regretting the loss of closeness a bit but wanting more room to move. As he pulled out farther he gave Nick a little nip to make up for it. Another shudder. He built it slowly, nipping a little harder with each longer stroke, until he had his full range; from barely in to bottoming out. Nick trembled and moaned, his tail twisting between them. Keith moved one hand to the base of it, teasing at it gently as he switched to licking for a while, then taking a firmer hold when he used his teeth again. Nick moaned louder, his tail going stiff, his ears quivering.

Keith took his other hand from Nick’s hips, bracing against the table instead, and now every time he was pulling back the other basitin would follow a little, sliding out of Zen a bit—and every time he thrust back in, it would carry Nick home as well, bringing an even more powerful shudder from him. Keith

could tell Nick was getting close, so he let himself get engulfed in the sensations, not damming the pleasure to prolong it. A few more thrusts and Nick was almost there, so he slammed home a little harder, grinding him into the wolf, and tugged on his tail, nipping. He felt Nick clench around him, and with a long, loud moan the basitin began to spend himself inside Zen. Keith kept the push and his hold on Nick's neck, and repaid every clench with a little tug on his tail. There was more than one way to milk a basitin.

And stopping here... wouldn't do either, so when he felt Nick was *almost* done, he switched back to licking and let his own instincts carry him away, holding the other basitin close and bucking his hips with small, tight thrusts. Just when his cup was about to overflow, he felt Nick clench around him again, his entire body going stiff. All thought ceased.

**

Maddie lay collapsed against Natani's chest, buttressed against her breasts. The wolf was insensate, and she nearly so. She wasn't sure if she was still inside Natani. She'd tried to pull out, but wasn't sure if she'd succeeded. She couldn't really feel her legs.

She'd lost count of how many times she'd climaxed. Or Natani, for that matter, though that last one had made all the others look like cheap imitations. That was when she had finally given up and collapsed on top of the wolf. No way was she topping that.

Natani stirred under her, then groaned, coming to.

Maddie tried to sound contrite. "Sorry."

"What..." Natani's voice was hoarse. "What for?"

She made the grin audible. "You didn't tell me to stop."

Natani laughed, exhausted. "Slacker."

Maddie tried to thrust her hips, but she wasn't sure if that did anything. The wolf chortled, so maybe. Maddie let out a long sigh. She was satisfied beyond satisfied, and she was *exhausted*. The only thing missing was... she could feel the wolf's hands travelling up her body. One settled on her back. The other came to rest on her head, and Natani began stroking one of her ears with a thumb.

She exhaled, and could feel herself melting into the wolf. That... that would do. Her eyes slid closed and she began purring, and Natani chuckled again.

“Curiosity satisfied, little kitten?”

Maddie was already drifting off, and answered by modulating her tone. Though... there *was* something.... and her nature demanded it. She struggled to find her voice. “Natani?”

“Yeah?”

“You and Zen can switch bodies, right?”

**

Keith had a goodly moment to himself—his arms around Zen’s legs, propping up Nick—to consider the perils of being too successful. He needed one of these jokers to wake up to help him with the other! Granted, he probably could have woken one or both up, but... he smiled. It was a problem he was happy to have. Still, if he’d known that was going to happen—

Zen started to snore, and Nick began to stir. Keith laughed quietly to himself. Saved by wolf sinuses.

“Mmh?”

“Welcome back.” Keith kissed the back of Nick’s head. “Can you stand?”

“Yeah, I... whoa!” Maybe not.

“Take your time. I know what that can be like.”

“You... of course you do.”

Smile. “Yeah. Think I do, anyway. We can compare notes later. But first, we need to get sleeping beauty here to the bed.”

“Me too. I think.”

Keith leaned against him. “*All of us.*”

They eventually managed to extricate themselves and haul Zen over to the bed without banging anything up too badly. The wolf, of course, began to stir just when they finished laying him out. This bed wasn’t so huge—three would be a snug fit, especially with one of them being a stupidly large wolf. Keith saw no problem with that. He slipped into bed, past Zen, taking the wall-side, then beckoned Nick to follow. He did, taking the opposite side of the wolf, not at all shy about being right against him. Good.

Keith smiled at Zen as he opened his eyes. “Welcome back.” The wolf blinked, focused on him, and then smiled with such obvious love that Keith’s heart melted. He leaned down and kissed him gently.

Zen sighed happily. “I love you.”

Keith laughed. “Yeah, I got that. You too. And earlier... was that...?”

The wolf shook his head. Later.

Keith nodded. “How are you feeling?”

*

Zen closed his eyes for a moment, taking stock, considering. He could tell that Natani was sleeping, and didn't look deeper. He closed the link tight. After something like that, you need to just be yourself. He let out a long sigh and opened his eyes. Squeezed between two basitins. Well, there was a thought. For later. Much later. He smiled at Keith again. “Never better.” But... *two* basitins. “And...” he rolled to his side, slowly, and propped himself up on an elbow. Never hurt to loom a little, for a bit like this. “Alaric?”

*

Nick became freshly reminded that Zen was *big*. But not threatening. He smiled up at the wolf. “I think you can call me Nick now.”

“Oh?” Zen smiled. “Well then. Nick?”

Yes, indeed, the wolf could call him that. “Yeah?”

“I'll have to pay you back for that.”

Nick grinned at him. “Oh? What—”

Zen leaned in and kissed him, and there was nothing submissive about it. And... Nick found himself wanting to yield. He could tell Zen was leaving him enough space to pull away, but... here, away from the world, he was free to be who he wanted to be, and this was someone Keith trusted with his life. He didn't *want* to pull away. He didn't want to have the *room* to pull away. So he gave some back, in invitation, wanting to see if he could draw the wolf in.

He was not disappointed.

A long moment later, the two looked at each other, a little breathless. Nick recovered first, and flashed a slightly shaky grin. “Interest payment?”

*

Zen laughed, and rolled back on his back. Keith was propped up on one elbow on his other side, looking decidedly amused. The basitin raised an eyebrow at him. “And what about me?”

Zen gave him a brief kiss, and a lick on the nose. “You, I have some credit with.”

Keith returned the lick, then settled down against him, with his head on Zen’s shoulder and one arm around his neck. After a moment, Nick did likewise on his other side, and as the two basitins jostled, trying to both get comfortable at the same time, Zen wondered if this was what it was like for Keith, between him and Natani.

He could get used to it.

“... wait, what happened to the ceiling?”

After a nap, a spot of cleaning, and a peaceable bath, Keith had decided that the thing to do would be to draw a sketch of Nick while he had the chance. And it wouldn't do to exclude Zen, of course. So why not have them sit together?

"Okay, that looks good. Are you comfortable?"

He'd put them in the love-seat. Zen had one arm across the backrest and his feet planted on the ground. Nick had his feet up and was leaning lightly against Zen, cradling a mug of coffee. Keith was seated opposite, at one end of the couch.

Nick raised an eyebrow at him. "Quite. And it absolutely has to be like this?"

"It's to do with the light."

Nick took a sip of his coffee and made a show of considering the room, then tilted his head to address Zen. "Blatant lie?"

Zen nodded gravely. "*Completely* shameless."

Keith just grinned at them. He loved how comfortable they were with each other now. He began his sketch, starting with the framing details, giving the pair some more time to settle.

*

Nick took another sip, letting the mug linger near his nose. The smell, the taste, it was all wonderful. He returned the cup to his lap, and the scent of the wolf mingled with the smell of the coffee. He smiled. All wonderful. He shifted a little closer. Important to have a comfortable position... ah, the hell with it. He leaned his head against Zen's shoulder, letting his ear rest against the wolf's neck. He knew Zen wouldn't mind. Keith grinned at him, and Nick decided to see if he could get the hang of the wolverine style of sticking out one's tongue. Judging by the reaction, yes.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so at peace. There was no...

"Zen?"

"Hm?"

"Is it always like this here?"

He could hear the grin. "Like *this*? No. But... yeah, this is what it's like."

Nick let out a sigh. He still had all of his responsibilities. But you always focus on the ones that you can do something about at the moment... and here, now, that was *none* of them. "I can't even remember the last time I wasn't do-

ing anything.”

“Feeling restless?”

He thought he’d heard concern in Zen’s voice. The wolf was... Nick flicked his ear against Zen’s throat, and the wolf chuckled. Nick let out another sigh, making it more clearly content. “Just the opposite.”

Zen turned his head to do... something, but Nick was too distracted by the sensation of the wolf’s neck rubbing against his ear to catch what. But then, maybe that *was* the point. Sneaky. A smile came to his face, unbidden. The wolf was... a surprise. He looked across at Keith, busily sketching, occasionally glancing up at them. Their eyes met, and Keith’s smile mirrored his. A day of surprises.

*

Keith had caught Zen’s little gesture and committed it to paper, along with both their expressions. It was turning into a good picture indeed. He quickly got all of the essential details down, then proceeded to mostly just kill time. Why break up a good thing? He took the opportunity to do some quick expression studies of both of them—he’d finally found what it took to get Zen to stop making faces, after all.

Eventually, Natani and Maddie entered. Natani had forsaken the gender war gear for a more typical robe, and Maddie was in her uniform. Both were smiling, but Maddie got her poker face on when she saw Keith looking. Keith nodded at her, amused, then smiled at Natani. “So, how was it?”

Natani leaned over to give him a kiss on the cheek. “A gentle— a *lady* never tells.” And she laid down on the couch, putting her head in Keith’s lap. He was astonished; this was beyond rare. He freed up one hand to scratch her under the chin, and she almost purred.

He turned to Maddie, who had settled into one of the chairs with a very satisfied expression. “What did you *do* to her?”

Maddie grinned. “A lady never tells, sir.”

Keith shook his head in wonder.

*

Natani felt something crumple in the couch, and dug up a slightly battered

playing card. “What’s this doing here?”

Zen shrugged. “I had a bad hand.”

“What were you playing?”

“Solitaire.”

Ah. Natani flicked the card at him, missing completely. There was a loud twang as it careened into the banjo in the corner.

Zen grinned at her. “Aren’t you dressed a little plainly, sis?”

Natani stuck her tongue out. “Think about it. I’m just quitting while I’m ahead.” She eyed Zen and Alaric, seated opposite from her, Zen looking rather satisfied with himself, Alaric somewhat... unnerved. Hmm! This was worth re-joining the link. She did, and gave Zen a poke. *Oh-ho? What’d I miss?*

Zen radiated serenity. *Can we keep him?* On seeing Alaric’s expression through the link, he slid his arm around the basitin. That seemed to help, but Alaric still looked a little on edge.

Natani managed to get a good look at the sketch Keith had been working on. The basitin had a certain way of showing others what he saw...

Natani smiled, in the link and out. It seemed to put Alaric at ease, and that made Zen palpably happy.

Are you in love, brother?

Zen returned the smile. *Not yet, sister. You?*

He felt... hopeful, almost? Natani was surprised. *You’d be okay with it?*

I got over myself, somewhere in there. It was obviously good. For both of you. He considered for a moment. *I think Keith called that, too.*

It was... too good an opportunity. No pity, no mercy. *She has a big ask for you.* Natani passed Maddie’s body-swap question to Zen, making sure to convey this wasn’t something she was pushing for personally. His reaction was... complicated. It was fascinating to watch.

Well. I have that in my head, now.

Natani stuck her tongue out. *That’s for some of your sister gags.*

Zen grinned back. *Still worth it.*

Natani sent Zen her love. *But to answer your question...* She looked at Maddie, who managed to find that moment to look back and stick her tongue out. Natani grinned back. *Still friends. Though... I... certainly wouldn’t mind if that happened again.*

Zen was a little dry. *Including that bit at the end?*

... *we may need to do some scheduling.* She re-centered their perceptions on Alaric. *Especially if Keith isn't always going to be on hand like that.*

*So we **can** keep him?* Zen wagged his tail in the link, making Natani laugh. *Do you trust him?*

Zen was amused. *I have a good feeling about him, but that's too hard a question for this old wolf to answer. I'll leave it to Keith to figure out.*

Natani considered. *I think he's for us, because we're for Keith.* She smiled. *Or because Keith is for us. But beyond that... he's absolutely up to something, and there's no way it doesn't involve Keith.*

*

Keith happened to choose that moment to scratch Natani under the chin again. To Zen's amusement, his brother was *very* distracted by this. Natani might have been using this opportunity to act unlike himself, but Zen suspected some real changes might come out of it, too. Curious, he let himself feel the sensations as well. It... *was...* quite... good.

The basitin let up, and Natani returned to coherence. Zen smiled. *He'll love you any way you let him. That's how he is.*

Agreement and love. *And that's why we have to take care with the ways we give him.*

The memento. The idea had been to give it to Maddie before they set off for Karnak. *You've changed your mind again.* But that also meant...

Natani sighed. *I suppose I have.* She looked at Nick, who was looking back at her and Keith curiously. *And yes, that means we can keep him, now that you mention it. If he wants to be kept.*

That was what he'd thought. The memento, though... Well, it was mostly Natani's decision to make. Leaning the other way, to let her hone her thinking, came easily to Zen. *He would want it.*

He would.

Who are we to say?

Natani smiled. *And who is **he**? Thirty years, Zen. **Thirty years.** Can you even imagine?* He couldn't. Not really. Natani continued. *We can't make him carry that. Not if there's a better hope.*

Nick again. Zen smiled. *So he's hope, now?*

Natani arched an eyebrow. *What would you say?*

He looked at Keith, and let his mind settle on the two basitins, painting a picture of his perceptions for Natani.

Certainty.

*

Keith scratched Natani under the chin again. That she was enjoying it was doubly obvious, once from her reactions, again from Zen's expression. The room was overtly quiet, despite the chatter undoubtedly going on between the wolves. Nick had seemed uncertain, for a moment, after the girls—ha!—had entered, but had settled back down. Maddie, too, seemed content to sit in silence. She looked happier than she had in a long, long time, and Keith had to smile. He wondered if they could ever really talk about this... and realized that Maddie would occasionally reach up to rub the tip of one her ears. Ah. Keith caught her eye and brought one hand up to the tip of his own ear, giving it a little tug. They shared a moment of understanding before looking away, smiling. Perhaps they could.

*

Nick had had to fight the urge to sit up straight when Natani had entered. He actually had some idea about her, now—the three of them were like an equation. If you knew enough about Zen and Keith, you knew something about Natani, as well. He'd fought the impulse because he had a very distinct feeling that the wolves *really* didn't put a lot of stock in hierarchy. Still, his instincts were his instincts, and it took Natani smiling at him to really make him feel comfortable with his current disposition again. This... might take some work. At least he'd stopped calling her sir and/or ma'am... but, of course, he'd done that because she'd *told* him to. The humor of that might be lost on the wolves, but he was sure Keith would find it hilarious. Maddie as well, if they got back on civil enough terms for him to tell her. He had some hope, there, and took it as a good sign that she seemed happy to coexist at the moment—not that it had anything to do with him.

Natani. He found himself very curious about the wolf, despite the gap he perceived between them, and found himself searching for things he could talk with her about. Keith was an obvious topic, but seemed like it could be a dan-

gerous one. Magic. That was it. She seemed... unusually proficient, as he understood these things. It would make for a safe venue to defer to her, too. And maybe conversation would bring familiarity...

He startled, realizing he was thinking of having a place here. Of... belonging, in this lawless place where he'd scarcely spent a day. Well. The basitin who had once fallen off a bridge for all the wrong reasons had certainly come a long way. And... what if he really *did* have a place here? Keith had said 'today', and they were all going their separate ways tomorrow—but what if it *wasn't* just today? And what if he had the option to go with them, instead of going back?

Would it be worth it, to keep working for something he'd probably be cursed for? Against *this*? He realized he didn't know. And the price of freedom was that you had to make your own decisions.

What was it that Natani had said?

He drew a deep breath, then exhaled. "Keith... I need to talk to you for a bit."

**

Zen was sitting on the back porch, watching the two basitins in the distance. Clear night, full moon up and out. Easy enough to see. After Nick and Keith had peeled off, Natani and Maddie had decided to take a bath, leaving him alone. Natani had pinpointed the two for him, possibly to curb any arboreal inclinations.

Not that he would have.

Well, maybe for a gag.

There *were* some lovely trees hereabouts.

The basitins were far enough away to not be overheard—even by ears keener than his, he suspected—but he could get some idea. Nick seemed to be doing most of the talking, and he was pretty animated... but it didn't look like an argument. Explaining something, was the feel of it. He leaned against a pillar and waited, watching.

Zen woke up with Keith rubbing his cheek. He grabbed the basitin and pulled him down to the—wait, this wasn't bed. He'd nodded off. Keith was laughing, so he gave him another hug before letting him go and sitting back up. Nick was

nowhere to be seen. “Nick?”

“He’s inside.” Keith sat up next to him and smiled, patting his lap. “You know it looked comfy.”

Zen smiled back, giving his head a little shake. “I guess it’s been that kind of day, huh?” And he laid down next to Keith, with his head in the basitin’s lap. *It was comfy.* He sighed happily. “Just don’t call me a good wolf again.”

Keith grinned, and scratched him under the chin. “I won’t. You *are*, but I won’t.” Zen let out a low growl, but his heart wasn’t in it. Keith kept scratching, and the growl transformed into a rumbling. Eventually, Keith stopped. “Thank you for being so... you... today.”

“You too.” Zen smiled. “That sketch bit? And... earlier.”

“Oh? Which did you prefer?”

Zen reached out with his hand to find Keith’s tail, then brought the tip to his mouth and nibbled on it. He... might have been thinking about things to do if he ended up in this position. He smiled at the basitin’s amused expression. “That’s... not an easy question.”

*

“Good answer.” Keith scratched him again. The wolf closed his eyes and turned his head, rubbing against his thigh. Keith lost his train of thought for a moment, smiling down at the wolf. Natani *and* Zen. He let up, and the wolf opened his eyes, looking a silent complaint at him. “Were there... complications?”

Zen burst out laughing. “That was almost a *very* weird situation. Gods, the *timing*. But... you were there.”

Keith thought back to the kiss, and his mouth went dry. “Very there.”

Zen grinned at him. “Any questions about how we feel about you?”

“... no.” He stroked the wolf’s cheek slowly. “None at all.”

“That’s... good...”

“Some questions how you feel about Nick, though.”

“Smooth segue, ambassador. I think you can tell. And... speaking *personally*...” He grew more serious. “I wouldn’t have done what I did if I hadn’t had a... feeling... about Nick.”

Keith grinned. “I thought you were just really horny.”

Zen stuck his tongue out.

Keith thought back to the kiss the two of them had shared. How they'd looked, afterwards. How they'd been behaving, since. He smiled. "You two had a bit of moment there, huh?"

Zen just nodded.

"It matters that he told you to call him Nick, you know."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

*

It had felt like it mattered, too. Zen got lost in thought, and when he found his way back to the present Keith had a faraway look in his eyes. And the basitin had left off scratching him, which was clearly objectionable. "Was that him explaining his master plan just now?"

Keith sighed. "Yeah. He actually came clean for once. I'm trying to figure out if I wish he hadn't."

"Huh. That big?"

Keith nodded. "Well, it is, but..." He gave Zen another scratch, but quickly seemed to get lost in thought and stopped. Zen could feel Keith's hand travel down to his chest and settle there. Well, that was nice too.

Zen stuck his tongue out. "I see how it is. Keep your basitin secrets, then."

Keith grinned. "Sorry. He didn't swear me to secrecy or anything. It's just... I'm surprised he even told me. And it's nothing to do with us here. But that's not what I'm having trouble with."

Zen nodded slowly. "Then what is?"

Keith just stroked his chest absent-mindedly and didn't answer. After a while of this, Zen took the basitin's hand in his own and gave it a little squeeze.

Keith startled, then smiled at him. "Sorry. Can you get Natani?"

Turned out they were just about done with their bath. "Be a while, but he's on his way."

Keith grinned at him. "You said 'he'."

Zen stuck his tongue out. "Oops."

They waited for Natani in silence, Zen nibbling on Keith's tail whenever the basitin got too distracted to remember to pet him.

*

Natani grinned at Zen, laying there with his head in Keith's lap. Well, well. She sat down on Keith's other side and spent a moment just looking at the basitin, then put her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. "What's up?"

"The future."

Natani smiled. "Ah."

Keith sighed. "He told me what he's up to. And it's... I should be cheering him on, offering to help him. But..."

"But?"

Keith smiled wryly. "I want to tell him that he's welcome here. If he is."

Natani raised her eyebrows at Zen. "Do I even need to ask?"

Her brother grinned back. "I vote with you two."

Natani rolled her eyes, then looked at Keith. "And you? Do you trust him?"

"I want to." He sighed. "Not completely."

Natani nodded. "He's welcome. And I think he's clever enough to stay welcome, whatever it is he's scheming."

*

Keith looked at the both of them. Zen was grinning, full of mischief. Natani had that smile that said she liked what she was seeing. "You two..." He had no words.

Natani pulled him into a hug, and Zen, still laying down against him, gave his tail a squeeze.

"So what do I do about this?"

"You tell him, and then it's up to him."

"That simple?"

"That simple."

Of course it was. Keith leaned his head against Natani's chest, smiling to himself, enveloped in the wolf's clean scent. That was the matter of Nick dealt with—so of course, that left Maddie. What had been the words? Ah, yes. Keith pulled back, grinning. "So, how do you feel about Maddie?"

Natani rolled her eyes. "About the same. Though..." She smiled almost wistfully. "She might turn my head a bit more now."

Keith stroked her cheek, and she leaned into it. "Was it just a one time thing, then?"

"Maybe. I think she got what she wanted."

Keith raised his eyebrows. “Then wouldn’t she come back for more?”

Natani stuck her tongue out and grinned. “Maybe she would. I think I left an impression.”

“Lady-killer.”

“I am, aren’t I.”

He could have gone for jealousy, of course, but... never. Not with Natani. Different strokes. Devoted, not petulant. He smiled at her with all his heart. “Are you going to go on a string of conquests now? Will you still make time for me sometimes?”

Natani kissed him, very gently. “Don’t worry. You still have the girliest hips I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh?” Keith kissed her back. “That’s... good. I guess?” He looked at the wolf, and had no words for what he felt. She was more glorious than she knew. He had no words, so he kissed her again. With intent.

Natani laughed. “*Still* not satisfied?”

“Without you?”

*

Keith’s tone spoke of plain impossibility, and Zen laughed quietly to himself. The basitin had gotten to Natani. Of course he had. Zen sat up, stretching. This had all the hallmarks of a Keith/Natani moment, and it would fall on him to entertain the guests. Keep them out of hearing distance.

Or not, at this point.

Hold, came the word from Natani. And to Keith, “Tomorrow.” Keith looked at her, and it seemed a wonder that Natani persevered, but she did. “*Tomorrow*“, she repeated, and nipped on Keith’s ear—no, she *held* it in her teeth. Not tightly enough to hurt, but... firmly. The basitin closed his eyes, trembling slightly.

One ear free, brother.

This wasn’t in any of the books. *How do I do this?*

*Very carefully. When you **really** need to get his attention.*

“Tomorrow”, Zen echoed. He felt that was called for. He nuzzled Keith’s free ear, hesitating, and it rose against his mouth in invitation. Ah well. He replicated what Natani was doing, erring on the side of caution, and could feel the basitin trembling. It felt like a dangerous thing to do.

Keith let out a long sigh. “Tomorrow.”

Natani released her hold and started licking her teeth marks out of the basitin’s fur. Zen followed suit. Natani’s tone was playful. “You might want to try and get some sleep tonight. It’ll be a *long* day.”

Zen grinned, catching on. “And there’ll be all that walking, too.”

*

Keith was exactly where wanted to be. He leaned against Natani’s chest. “... tomorrow.” He could hardly wait. Though... he pulled back, looked at both wolves. “What if Nick wants to come too? If he’s welcome... he’s welcome, right?”

Zen looked thoughtful. “Could always use more arm candy.”

Natani grinned at him, then looked back at Keith. “Mm... he’s welcome. And who knows... maybe all three of us can agree on *something* that needs to be done to you.”

Now *there* was a thought. “... are you sure it has to be tomorrow?” Natani made a move, and Keith grabbed his ears protectively. “Kidding, kidding!”

Natani kissed him instead. “Behave, you.”

“... I will.” Keith nuzzled Natani’s cheek, and she responded in kind. They nudged at each other playfully, rubbing their cheeks together, quietly reaffirming their feelings.

*

Zen didn’t need the link to feel the love in the air. He didn’t normally go for the mushy stuff, but he had his limits. With an exaggerated sigh, he put his arms around the both of them.

**

Nick was leaning against the doorframe in the kitchen, nominally watching the proceedings outside through the window. He couldn’t really see anything, mostly the tips of the wolves’ ears, occasionally a bit more if they straightened up. The view wasn’t the point—this was a defensive move. He didn’t know where Maddie was, and he didn’t know what they were talking about outside—and that was a dangerous combination. He figured if he stood here *just so*,

he'd present a more tempting target.

"Don't *ever* mess with that."

He still hadn't heard her sneaking up on him. Nick turned to face her. "I wasn't planning to." He smiled. "If anything, they've been messing with *me*."

To his surprise, Maddie smiled back. "They do that." The smile disappeared. "I don't trust you."

This... was probably for real. But... could also have been Maddie testing him in some way. Or, of course, both. "And yet, you've been helping me." She looked likely to object, so he went on. "Or, at least, you haven't been hurting me. I'm sure you could have."

A grudging nod.

It wasn't that Maddie's apparent dislike of him wasn't *genuine*. It might have been. It was that it was *apparent*. If she really had it in for him, she wouldn't be blatant about it; certainly not in a way that was tantamount to lobbying for him. Of course, it didn't necessarily follow that she was acting for his *benefit*, either. Just that there was some overriding concern. If he assumed this was the outcome Maddie wanted... well, even if he wasn't sure what her motives were, he was pretty sure he liked them. Thanking her would, probably, be missing the point; apologizing for dying on her, patronizing. Maybe the best compliment he could give would be to let her know he didn't have her figured out.

He was in danger of developing a habit of being honest. "I don't know what you're doing, exactly, but I don't think you have anything to worry about from me."

It was the most cynical pair of ears he'd ever seen. "I'm just supposed to believe you're playing fair?"

Ah. He looked back outside. How to tackle this? Even if he explained exactly how he felt about the wolves, he doubted Maddie would believe him. What *would* she believe? "Oh, but I'm not. I'm planning on still being around in five years." He glanced back at Maddie. "There isn't anything fair about that." No tells. He hesitated. Saying 'Natani' would feel like an accusation. "Do you love them?"

No obvious reaction. "You're right. There *isn't* anything fair about that."

That was a maybe. And there really *wasn't* anything fair about it. "I'd give them more time, if I could. But I don't have that power."

Maddie just raised an eyebrow at him. He sighed. “Any oath you care to name. I’m on their side.”

After a while, she snorted. “And what would I have you swear by? Your life? You’ve already died once. Your name? I don’t even know what you go by. No, I don’t think I can trust your oath. But...” she sighed. “Maybe I can trust *you*. About this.”

Alaric extended his arm. “I’ll never betray you. About this.”

Maddie quirked a smile and shook his hand. “Truce. About this.” She sighed again. “I’m glad you’re alive, boss. Don’t make that change.”

**

“Oh, did you know we’re apparently married?”

“... we are?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Wait... all of us?”

“Well, not me and Zen... *I think*. We’re a little unclear on the details.”

Keith looked at Natani. “Husband?” He cocked his head. “Or... wife?”

Natani kissed him. “I’ll be both if you’ll be both.”

Keith grinned. “Deal.”

“Hey, what about me?”

Keith gave Zen a sideways glance. “Oh, you’re clearly a wife.” Zen stuck his tongue out, but Keith kissed him, gently. Caressed his cheeks, gently. Looked at him, devoted. “Husband.”

Zen blushed adorably, then cleared his throat. “Husband.”

Keith leaned into him, and it was Natani’s turn to put her arms around the two of them.

**

They leaned on opposite sides of the doorframe, waiting for the others to come back inside. The silence hardly felt barbed at all. Alaric found himself touched by Maddie’s words. The lieutenant had become formidable. That he could no longer read her... he hadn’t realized that was something he’d given up, when he’d chosen to die. It was still worth it, but... a little less so. He caught sight of Keith as he stood up, and Zen, tousling his hair. Less, and less, and less.

He felt it would be discourteous to leave Maddie wholly without cause for offense, so he waited until the timing was just right; the last opportunity to get a word in before the others opened the door. “Nice ankles, lieutenant.”

*

Maddie let herself bristle at the comment, narrowing her eyes at Alaric’s amused expression. Of course he’d noticed. It had been too much to hope for that he hadn’t.

It shouldn’t have mattered, especially now.

It still did.

After the others had entered, and Alaric turned to face them, she let herself cool. Keith flashed Alaric a smile and took him by the hand, leading him away. Maddie watched as Alaric’s expression changed, his tail giving a happy little swish, and again dared hope that he might be for real. If he’d been bluffing, she couldn’t tell. But then, she never had been able to. When the two basitins disappeared into the guest room, closing the door behind them, she stalked off and made a show of muttering under her breath about sleeping with the enemy.

*

Zen watched her go. *Speaking of which...*

Natani rolled her eyes and gave him a nudge. *Go get her.*

He started after the basitin. *Tell me again why I’m not just taking the couch?*

I’m just doing my own version of what she’s been doing.

*And what **is** that, exactly?*

Natani just laughed, and Zen shook his head.

**

Zen found Maddie sitting on the edge of the porch, looking up at the sky. He sat down next to her. “Hey, princess.”

No reaction.

He scratched the back of his head and tried to figure out where she was looking. The moon?

“Awoo?”

Maddie laughed and glanced at him, but quickly grew quiet again. There was a melancholic cast to her ears.

“What’s wrong?”

She sighed. “He saw my *ankles*.”

Zen scratched at his chin. “I could hold him down for you to unwrap.”

Maddie looked at him, incredulous. “I know, I know, it’s a metaphor—”

“Do you really think...” she tilted her head. “Well, maybe you *could*.” She grinned, and laughed again. It was a good sound.

Zen grinned. “I wouldn’t mind giving it a shot.”

She stuck her tongue out. It suited her. “I think you’re just looking for an excuse.”

“Maaaaaaaybe. You should probably know... we decided he’s welcome to stay.”

Maddie nodded. “I figured you would.”

She didn’t seem displeased. “No complaints?”

“No. I hope it’s right.” She was quiet for a moment. “I just wish I had something better than *hope*.”

Ah. “Used to having people figured out, are we?”

Maddie shrugged. “I’m *good* at what I do. But... he’s *better*. Hells, he was a general at *nineteen*. Master General, even.”

“Keith was a general at nineteen.”

“Yeah. Because Alaric made him one. *From beyond the grave*.”

“... you may have a—”

“That’s... that’s it! He’s dead!” Maddie rolled her eyes at his expression.

“*Legally* dead. He was declared dead, so he *is* dead, as far as the law is concerned. I assumed he was working under an alias—there’s ways—but with the way the laws are written...” She looked intent. “I’ll have to check, but I think I see the loopholes. He’ll be able to do *so much*. But I might be able to figure out what his position entails...”

Zen let her disappear into her own world for a while, but comedic timing waits for no wolf. “So that’s a no on holding him down, then?”

Maddie laughed once more and looked at him, all grins and mischief. “I’ll let you know. And... don’t ever change, Zen.”

He resisted the urge to tousle her hair, then did it anyway. Gently, and

mindful of her ears. She didn't seem to mind. "I won't, princess."

*

Maddie reveled in the wolf's affection, encouraging more of it. Alaric could wait. She'd catch him by the tail yet; she had somewhere to start now. Though... would it even matter? She wasn't really basitin anymore, and didn't *have* to pursue the matter, even if Keith didn't countermand her. But... she looked at Zen, endearingly confused by her behavior. She was still Madelyn Adelaide, and it couldn't hurt to have one over on Nickolai Alaric. For her and hers.

But it was too nice of a night to get started yet. She took Zen's hand and pulled it around herself, leaning against the wolf. "I'm not a basitin anymore."

That didn't seem to help the confusion. "... okay?"

She laughed again, and that seemed to satisfy the wolf. He held her carefully, like she might bolt at any moment. And, well, maybe she might.

Zen cleared his throat. "You know, you'll always be welcome here."

Maybe he did get it. But to choose *that* word? "Always?"

"Always isn't the same as forever."

"Was that supposed to sound wise?"

"Did it?"

"... a little."

"Then yes."

They sat and watched the moon together, in companionable silence.

Well, mostly.

Maddie tried it out. "Awoo?"

Zen laughed. "Awoo."

After a while, Maddie decided that no, she wasn't going to be doing any bolting tonight. She got up, then sat back down between Zen's legs and leaned back against him. The wolf put both of his arms around her and held her, a little less gingerly. He really did let her get away with too much. The sounds of the summer night, the steady beating of Zen's heart, the once again welcome warmth of the wolf's embrace... she yawned. Wolves were very comfortable, and it was getting late.

*

Zen couldn't stop smiling. She hadn't seen Maddie like this in a long time. But she was already about to nod off, and he couldn't stay like this all night.

... though he was a little tempted to try.

Still. "You can sleep with us tonight, if you want." He could feel her ears perk up. "As long as it's just sleep." Maddie shifted away to look at him, and Zen covered his chest protectively. "I'm very particular about my chastity."

Maddie rolled her eyes, then put on her best doe-eyed expression.

"Couldn't you take the couch?"

Zen laughed. "Turn that off. I'm not going to get kicked out of my own bed."

Maddie stuck out her tongue, the basitin way, and Zen tousled her hair again. He hesitated for a moment. He'd never quite decided to do this, but... "Y'know, that thing you asked Natani about?" He hesitated again. What a topic. "If you were just messing with me? *Well done*. But if you were seriously asking... I think I'd agree to it."

Maddie looked surprised, then smiled. "I was just messing with you." Zen breathed a sigh of relief. Too soon. Maddie's smile slowly widened into a grin. "But I'll think about it."

**

They found Natani in the sitting room. She had a lamp lit and what looked like every map in the house spread out on the floor—even the one of the Basidian Islands. In front of her was one showing the western part of the continent, and she was doing something with a piece of paper on top of it.

Maddie caught on first. "Oh, is that the house?"

Natani didn't look up. "Yup."

Zen realized it was the floor plan—more or less, anyway. Didn't look like she'd taken too much care in making it exact. She had it rotated to match the map, and was marking compass points along the edge, muttering to herself about noon.

Zen was still inclined to use his mouth rather than the link. "Thinking about expanding?"

Natani flashed him a grin. "Something like that." She glanced at Maddie, who had sat down to watch her but had immediately started nodding off again. Zen stood ready to catch her if she *literally* fell asleep. Natani smiled at them

but didn't say anything further.

When she was done, Natani folded up all the maps and tidied them away, then folded up the piece of paper she'd been scribbling on and stowed it in her robe. She stretched and yawned, loudly enough to startle Maddie. "Maddie? Are you sleeping with us?"

"Mm? Yeah."

Natani grinned. "Do you need to be carried?"

Maddie blinked, then looked at Zen. "... would you?"

Of course he would. He lifted her up into a princess carry. Obviously.

Maddie laughed. "Princess carry?"

"Obviously."

Nick awoke, and opened his eyes to find it was already starting to get light out. That he'd slept so late was a testament to yesterday... and how late he'd been up. With Keith. And there he was, still, less than an arm's length away. They had more or less fallen asleep talking. He let a few happy moments pass, just looking at the sleeping Keith. Would have let more, but nature was calling. As was the smell of coffee. One or the other might have woken him.

He snuck out of bed, careful not to disturb Keith, and dressed quickly. He hesitated with the wrappings, then, looking at the sleeping form, draped them over a chair and left them there. When would he, if not now?

He hesitated again at the door. He didn't want to wake Keith, but... he returned to the side of the bed, to lean over the sleeping basitin and kiss him on the shoulder. Keith mumbled something in his sleep, and Nick couldn't keep a smile from his face. He kissed him again and was rewarded with an adorable little satisfied sound.

I could be here all morning at this rate.

He forced himself away and left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

After seeing to his other matter, Nick circled around to the kitchen entrance. He was feeling oddly elated from going barefoot. The feel of the dewy grass on his naked ankles... so deliciously un-basitinlike.

It was Zen he found inside, nursing a cup of coffee. The wolf was robed. He looked tired.

Zen smiled at him, then glanced pointedly at his ankles. "Oh?"

Nick grinned. "I'm going native."

The wolf nodded. "It's a good look. Does that mean you're staying?"

Nick shook his head, his mood faltering a bit. "No."

"Ah."

Change of topic, change of topic. Nick sat down across from the wolf. "You're up early."

Zen stuck his tongue out with a smile. "I got kicked out of my own bed. Maddie is the *rudest* sleeper I've ever seen."

What was going *on* with Maddie and the wolves? Nick found his grin again. "Are you sure she was asleep?"

"Not in the least." Zen smiled fondly. "Natani didn't seem to be having any trouble. It was pretty cute, honestly."

Nick thought of and discarded three different overtures that might have netted him some more insight into Maddie. "That sounds nice. Is there more coffee?"

"Sorry, I didn't think anyone else would be up. But... you can have this? I'm actually feeling pretty awake already."

He was, too, but... "... thanks." He took a sip, letting his ears bristle at the taste. Zen laughed, and Nick passed the mug back to the wolf with a smile. "It's really good."

"Thanks."

They traded sips for a while in silence. The house was quiet, but the dawn chorus was in full force outside. Many of the calls were unfamiliar to him.

"So you're really not staying?"

Nick smiled faintly. "No. I have things I need to do." He shook his head, bemused. "I'm offered everything I thought I ever wanted, and I'm going to walk away. I didn't see *that* coming two days ago."

"Maybe it was more than you wanted."

"... no." He grinned. "Just more than I *thought* I wanted."

Zen smiled, amused. "Okay. Then..." The wolf scratched at his muzzle. "It's not like you're rejecting Keith, right? I don't think I'd buy you doing that."

He smiled at the wolf. That was something of a vote of confidence. "Right. I

don't think I'd buy that either. But... it'll be a while. And far."

"A keidran while, or a basitin while?"

"Basitin."

"Ah." Zen took yet another sip, then looked at him with a small smile. "I think I know what you're up to."

Nick brought a finger to his lips, then pointed his ears at the ceiling in what he hoped was a credible Maddie impression. Though, he needed to update his thinking about her... at any rate, Zen seemed to get the right idea, going by his smile.

The wolf raised his eyebrows, clearly skeptical. "... but no point in speculating, I guess."

Nick nodded, grateful. It was a little suspicious that he'd meet Zen like this, and if Maddie heard about his plans, it needed be from Keith. He had some more of the coffee. It was almost out. "Thank you. For... everything."

"Just being myself."

He smiled at the wolf. "Thank you for that, then."

Zen grinned back. "You too. I think." The wolf finished the coffee. "Well, we'll probably come with Keith if he needs to visit the island. We get a little antsy if he's away for too long."

Keith wouldn't need to. Nick had seen to that. "That would be nice."

Zen didn't look like he believed it, either. The wolf stood up slowly. "Well, I guess I might as well get started on travel preparations. Who knows how long the rest of them are going to sleep."

Nick watched him walk to the door, and felt like something was slipping away from him.

He was *done* feeling like that.

"Zen?"

The wolf turned back, curious. "Hm?"

"Weren't you going to pay me back for something?"

*

Zen looked at Nick. The basitin's expression was open, his meaning clear. It wasn't a joke, not even a little.

Zen thought about Natani, but he knew his brother's mind; love and amusement, and maybe even some more peace of mind about Nick.

He thought about Keith; would the basitin feel betrayed, by either of them? Even if he was, he'd never make an issue out of it—but that just made Zen think twice as hard. For his part... he couldn't see it, not with who Keith was, and not after yesterday. And while he didn't fully understand Keith and Nick's relationship—he doubted *they* did, at the moment—he thought Nick asking was proof enough.

He thought about Maddie. Well, she *had* kicked him out of bed... He knew it wasn't to eavesdrop, because if he really concentrated he could feel the ghost sensation of her still snuggled up against Natani. To interfere with Keith and Nick? No, he wouldn't do that, and she knew that he wouldn't. To be alone with Natani? Not *this* early. And if Natani was right, sharing the bed with both of them had suited Maddie—indeed, the basitin hadn't seriously tried for anything else. Had even pulled him closer, and borrowed one of his shirts to sleep in. So if that was something Maddie actually *wanted* to do, and yet she *still* kicked him out—and only come morning, at that... Too complicated. Gut feeling: would doing this hurt Maddie? No. Annoy, maybe, and that he was fine with. If he was wrong, he'd apologize.

He thought about Nick, and smiled. “Are *you* trying for *Maddie's* position, now?”

Nick grinned. “No, but now that you mention it... maybe Keith could use more help? He does seem to have an awful lot of responsibilities. We could each take half.”

Zen went for his best grin. “Even half is a lot to take.”

*

A bit on the corny side, but it still made a shiver run down Nick's spine, especially when Zen stepped closer. Well, like for like. “I'm pretty adaptable.”

A small smile flickered on the wolf's face. “Well, I did notice that you haven't had any trouble sitting down, and somehow I don't think it's because of a lack of attention.”

Nick's mind flitted to the previous time Keith had given him ‘attention’, and he blushed. *That* had been a surprise. More than one surprise. What were they talking about? Right. “He was gentle. *Very* gentle.”

Zen smiled fondly. “He's always gentle. A *huge* tease, but always gentle.”

“He is, isn't he? A tease, I mean. How'd that happen? He used to be so...”

“Huh.”

“What?”

The wolf was clearly amused. “I thought you were supposed to smart.”

Nick could imagine either or both of the wolves being the answer, but didn’t see how it would be *obvious*. Maddie definitely wasn’t it, so that just left —“*Me?*”

Zen smiled. “I’ve heard about some of the stuff you did to him.” Grinned. “Seen enough to believe what I heard.”

Nick’s world shifted around him. Could the wolf be right? To have had that much of an effect... and it was more than that. That was how Keith was with the wolves.

That was how he showed love.

Nick looked at Zen, speechless. The wolf reached out to softly tousle his hair, and he swallowed, his eyes misting over. Zen sat down next to him, one leg astride the bench, and pulled him into a sideways embrace. Nick turned to face Zen, and the wolf’s arms shifted around him, holding him close.

Zen gave him all the time that he needed.

Maybe the wolf got his gentleness from Keith.

Eventually, Nick pulled away a bit, but the wolf’s arms remained around him. He wouldn’t have had it any other way. Zen was smiling at him. “Finally figured out that you matter?”

Nick laughed. “Thank you.” Smiled. “For being you.” He leaned his head against the wolf’s chest. He had himself again, and a smile on his lips. In his voice. “So you think I’m a tease?”

Zen straightened him up by the shoulders, then tilted his head up by the chin. Kissed him. Thoroughly. “I know it.”

Yeah.

Nick had closed his eyes for the kiss, didn’t open them again when it ended. He let his smile do the talking.

It got him another kiss.

The wolf was a very good kisser.

Nick let out a contented sigh and opened his eyes. He wanted to look at Zen. The wolf looked like he felt.

Zen’s voice had gotten a little huskier. “Do you know why you tease someone?”

He did. “Why?”

Zen took Nick’s hand and brought it to his groin. He could feel the wolf through the coarse fabric of the robe, feel his heat. He wasn’t fully hard yet. Nick looked for the knot with his fingers, only to find it when it firmed under his touch. It throbbed in his hand, and Zen let out a long sigh. “Because you want to get a reaction.”

Yup. His own pants were feeling very tight. No wonder Keith was happy to wear robes...

Zen stood up, pulled him up as well. Maneuvered him against the end of the table. Pinned him there for a kiss. Started undressing him, between kisses. The shirt came off easily, and the wolf ran his hands across Nick’s back, pulled him against himself. Nick could feel him, hard, against his stomach. Zen spun him around, and Nick’s heart leapt, but the wolf was just getting at his belt. Buckle undone, Zen pulled it off the loops and let it clatter to the floor. He ran his hands to where Nick was straining against his buttons, then started undoing them, one by one. The wolf was slowly grinding against him, and he longed to push back but didn’t want to make it harder for Zen to get to him. Buttons undone, the wolf slid one hand into his pants to liberate him. Nick shivered as Zen teased him out. Free, Nick pressed back against him. The wolf spun him around and kissed him, hungrily. Nick welcomed it with all he had, then caught his breath as Zen pulled him close. He could feel the wolf throb between them, against his stomach; and himself, against the wolf’s thigh. Zen’s hands roamed Nick’s back and found the button for his tail loop, leaving both his tail and his pants free. The wolf stroked the base of his tail, with short, sure motions, and he gasped, leaning his head against Zen’s chest. The wolf teased his hands into Nick’s pants, grabbing his ass and pulling him away from the table. The pants fell down to his ankles. Zen shifted his hands lower and lifted him up, seating him on the table, and the pants slipped his ankles, leaving him naked. The wolf kicked them away, then kissed him again. On the table, it was easier to return the kiss, and Nick wrapped his arms around the wolf’s neck, reaching for that moment they’d had on the bed. Zen obliged him, and again the exchange left both of them a little breathless. Only this time, it wasn’t stopping there. Nick looked at the wolf, yearning for more.

To his surprise, Zen laughed. “I’m not going to ask you if you want this, because you want this. But...” He grew more serious. “I don’t like hurting people

I care about.”

Something in the look in Zen’s eyes, in the way he had said it, told Nick that this mattered. Needed a serious reply. He kissed the wolf, lingering, then smiled at him, stroking his neck. “That’s good. I don’t like being hurt by the people *I* care about.” Well, serious-ish. He was in good hands.

A smile flickered on Zen’s face. “I don’t want any fool basitin bravery. It hurts, you tell me. You want me to stop, you tell me.”

“And if it doesn’t hurt? If I don’t want you to stop?”

Zen kissed him again. “You can tell me that, too.”

Before he could retort, the wolf pushed him on his back. His feet came up as he went down, and Zen grabbed him by the ankles. Firmly. But gently. The wolf guided Nick’s feet, placing them against himself, high on his chest. Zen started massaging his ankles.

Nick hadn’t been expecting this. He did nothing to hide his reaction, splaying his toes against the wolf, letting his tail do what it would, even letting out a little mrow.

“You like?”

Nick grinned. “Lose the robe, and I’ll like it even better.”

Zen released his ankles, and Nick hooked his legs with his arms to keep them out of the way. The wolf’s hands went to the neck of his robe but he seemed to catch himself, taking a step back to look at Nick. He grinned. “Interesting position.”

Nick mimed a kick at the wolf with one leg, but Zen caught it... and kissed him on the pad of his foot. Nick blushed, fiercely, and the wolf gave him a wink and a smile. Zen released his leg and Nick caught it again, wondering if the wolf understood just how intimate that gesture had been. ...maybe he did. Nick blushed again.

Zen disrobed, and Nick caught the hood with one foot, pulling the garment toward himself. The wolf let him have it, and the robe landed on him, covering his chest and face. It smelled of Zen. It had been a moment of whimsy, but that was what he’d wanted. He felt the wolf take his legs again, and brought his hands up to gather up the garment. He took a sniff of it and smiled at the wolf. “It’s got your scent.”

It was Zen’s turn to blush, curiously enough. “I figured you wanted it for a pillow.”

Good idea. He balled it up and packed it under his head... but he left a sleeve free where he could reach it and bring it to his nose. He did, and the wolf blushed again. Interesting. Thoughts of possible mischief dispersed as Zen shifted his position, and Nick could feel him poking against his balls. The wolf inched closer, sliding up him, until he could feel the heat of Zen's knot against his sack, see the shaft alongside his. He tore his eyes away to look at the wolf, swallowing. This was quickly becoming real.

Zen stepped away again, his hands on Nick's ankles, bringing his feet down to his wolfhood. Nick shivered as he could feel the shaft with his toes, then the knot, then the whole thing throbbing between his ankles. He spread his toes against the wolf's stomach, and found his smile. "Liked what you saw yesterday?"

Zen grinned at him. "I was kicking myself for not making it a three-way duel."

He shifted his feet, and the wolf grunted. Yes. "... we should do that. Or maybe..." He felt a thrill at the idea. "Maybe it should be you seeing which one of us you can make come first?"

That had been a hit. "Who's the winner?"

Nick grinned. "*Everyone.*"

"I like the way you think."

The wolf shifted Nick's legs again, sliding against them, and Nick felt something sticky on his shin. "So I see."

"Oops." Zen brought his legs back up, stepping closer, and leaned down to lick the spot clean, looking at him. "Can't have that."

Nick shivered. "Might have... missed a spot."

Zen smiled knowingly. "Well then."

And the wolf did a very thorough job of cleaning his leg, starting from the top and slowly working his way down. Zen did things with his wonderful, *wonderful* tongue that Nick had never even considered. When the wolf popped up to look at him, he pleaded silently for him to continue—and Zen started over again with his other leg.

A timeless moment later, the wolf straightened up again. Nick had to remind himself how speaking worked, reach for the words. "... are you trying to convince me to stay?"

Zen grinned at him, licking his lips. "I'm not doing anything out of the ordi-

nary.”

Gods. “... I’ll take that as a yes.”

*

Zen gave Nick a nip on one ankle, eliciting a yip. “Grab your legs.”

Nick did, this time crossing his arms to grab himself by the ankles, and Zen stopped for a moment to admire the basitin. It might have been an even better position than the earlier one. He noted the mess on Nick’s stomach, then grinned at the basitin and stepped around to his side. He could just about get his head in under Nick’s arms... *Now* he’d had a decent taste of the basitin. He licked his lips again. “Missed something.”

The basitin gave him a look that badly made Zen want to kiss him. But Nick gestured, with an inclination of his head. “Still got something.” He meant Zen himself, still hard and with something to show for it. “I could help you with that.”

Wasn’t in the plan.

Screw the plan.

Zen moved the bench aside so he could step right up to the table. Nick shifted his head closer, opened his mouth, let his tongue peek out. He had his eyes on the prize. Zen leaned over him, brought his tip to the basitin’s mouth. Nick licked it clean, making him shiver, then looked at him expectantly. Zen shifted closer, as close as he could without getting on the table, and the tip entered Nick’s mouth. The basitin massaged the underside with his tongue, looking up at him, smiling with the side of his mouth. Cheeky little... Zen pulled back, then leaned down to kiss him, pushing Nick’s head into his makeshift pillow. The basitin egged him on, and he answered in full.

He finally broke the kiss, then kissed Nick on the throat before straightening up. Looking at him, he almost went back for more. Almost. Instead, he stepped to the cupboard that had what he needed. He held up two of the nuts, tried to speak, cleared his throat, tried again. “You okay with these?”

Nick laughed. “I think I’ll survive. I’m just surprised we didn’t use all of them up yesterday.”

Zen grinned. “Someone keeps sending us a bunch.”

The basitin stuck his tongue out, making the expression work. “How nice of them.”

Zen stepped back up to him, shaking his head. Time to get down to business—though... Nick was still holding his ankles, and the sight of him enticed Zen to go for another lick. Or two. Or, as the basitin moaned again, three...

*

When the wolf finally straightened up again, Nick saw him glance at the fresh mess he'd made, could *see* him consider repeating that part as well. He caught Zen's eye. ***Please just...***

The wolf nodded, grinning, and started to lube up. Nick wasn't sure it was even necessary. Zen cracked one of the nuts open, and instead of using it on himself... Nick gasped as the wolf worked the viscous liquid *into* him. This done, Zen cracked the other one—*Two?!—*and coated himself, then carefully cleaned his hands on a towel. Good call, that stuff didn't taste particularly—Nick blushed at his own thought. But surely the wolf would be handling his legs, and... licking...

The first part of it came immediately true as Zen grabbed his ankles again, once more positioning Nick's feet against his broad chest. This time, there was no robe in the way, and he worked his toes into the wolf's mane. The feel of the wolf's fur against his pads, between his toes... He felt Zen poking at him again, hot against his entrance. The wolf looked at him, and Nick swallowed. Well, he sure as hell was lubed. Zen pushed, and as the tip slid in he remembered again—'I'm not going to ask if you want this, because you want this.' The wolf had been so, so right. But—and he had to smile at this, almost laugh—Zen had still put his legs right where he could kick the wolf off. Even by accident. Inch by inch, the wolf entered him, and he focused on staying relaxed, his hands at his sides, concentrating on the sensations as Zen filled him. Until he could feel the impossibility of the wolf's knot against him, pushing, spreading him—and withdrawing. He sighed as Zen pulled out, then splayed his toes on the back-stroke; when he again felt the knot against him, he wanted to arch his back, try to push against it. But he wasn't free to move, and again Zen withdrew, leaving him whimpering. So it went, the wolf making long, deliberate strokes, sometimes just touching the knot against him, sometimes pushing, sometimes pushing until *surely* that had to be it—only to withdraw. And with each stroke he could feel the pleasure build, his own member jerking in response, as the wolf worked to pay him back; gentle, careful, but relentless.

*

Zen shifted Nick's legs to his shoulders, and wasn't sure if the basitin even noticed. Nick was writhing under him, gasping, moaning, panting, his hands grabbing the sides of the table, holding on for dear life. Zen picked up his pace a bit, then eased back down when it looked like it might be *too* much. At this rate, the basitin would not last until he was in—and while he'd count that as a win, well, if he only had one shot at this... he was going to make it count. He went for another big push and Nick thrashed under him. It was close—very close—but again his intuition told him to pull back, and again he did, leaving the basitin panting, pleading at him with his eyes. It would happen if it would happen. He wasn't going to force it, no matter how much he wanted it, no matter that the basitin wanted him to.

Trick it, now... he turned his head, nuzzling one of Nick's ankles, giving it a lick, a careful nip with his teeth. The basitin squirmed in a different way, and he figured he might be on to something. He straightened up and caught Nick's ankles again, then went for another push—a slow and steady one, barely leaning his weight into the basitin, his knot straining to enter. He started caressing Nick's ankles, and the basitin gasped. As he did, Zen shifted ever so slightly deeper inside him. Definitely on to something. He nuzzled one of Nick's feet, looking at the basitin. He'd liked this...

Zen went to town, accompanied by one long continuous moan from Nick, only broken by gasps for breath. Very, *very* slowly the small pressure proved to be enough, the knot sliding in, until—as the thickest point passed—Nick *pulled* him in the rest of the way. They were tied. His knot surged, and Zen had to fight with everything he had to not immediately go over, to see that Nick was okay, to see that he'd get there. The basitin had his mouth open, his ears were quivering, and Zen could feel his tail wrapped tightly around his leg. Nick was clenched around him, hard, and there was a constant stream of pre from his member.

He was teetering right on the edge, but he still needed a little push. So Zen began to move. It was a very tight business, and every time he pulled back at all, tugging on his knot, he had to fight his every instinct. He had maybe an inch of motion, but... you can do a lot with an inch, if you're determined. A few of the short thrusts, and Nick's eyes rolled back. Zen could feel the beginning of the tell-tale spasms, and let himself go, letting the feeling of completion

carry him away, bracing to stay standing as his pleasure caught up to him. It wasn't like anything else in the world.

*

Nick found himself, then nearly lost himself again. The feeling was unreal. He fought to steady his breathing, to get control of himself. Somehow, he acclimated to the sensations.

He opened his eyes, exhaling. Zen stood there with his eyes closed, smiling. He looked like he could do with some propping up. "Zen?"

The wolf opened his eyes, looked at him. Smiled wider at the sight of him. "Hm?"

Nick shifted his legs, gingerly, so his feet rested against Zen's shoulders. He almost didn't know how to move with the wolf inside him. "Come here?" He'd been about to say something else, but couldn't remember what it was.

Zen shrugged his legs off, letting them slide under his armpits, and as the wolf slowly leaned forward, Nick wrapped his legs around him. Zen shifted inside him as he moved, and Nick gasped once more at the impossible sensations, mrowing. The wolf came to rest with his elbows on either side of Nick, and kissed him.

It might as well have been Keith, with how gentle he was. Nick wrapped his arms around Zen's neck and returned it in kind, letting all his feelings show.

It was a long kiss.

Nick tried to look at the wolf, which was difficult when at the sight of him he found himself kissing him, or the other way around. *Eventually* he succeeded, only to find he'd forgotten what he meant to say again.

Ah. Yes. That would do. He tried for a grin. "Second interest payment?"

Zen laughed. "*Greedy*, aren't you?"

He stroked the wolf's neck, smiling. "People keep saying that, for some reason."

"I wonder why..." Zen gave him a lick on the nose, then grinned when he made a face. "Well, get your money's worth. It'll take me a bit to get loose."

"No hurry on my account."

"... might be a bit longer."

*

The two went back to looking at each other, and Keith decided this was as good a time as any. He might have left them to it, only he wasn't sure Zen's legs could support his chivalry.

And, well, he needed the kitchen.

He cleared his throat. "Good morning."

Keith was happy to see the same smiles for him they'd had for each other. He could get used to Nick looking that goofy. "*Keith!* Come here?"

He did, and Zen made room for him to give Nick a kiss. The other basitin was almost bubbly... Keith looked at him, then reached out to touch his ears.

It wasn't a decision. That was the point.

Nick looked even goofier. Even better. Keith kept stroking his ears and slowly, his eyes slid closed. He was almost purring. Keith looked at Zen, looking at both of them, smiling widely. He kissed the lovely wolf. "Well done."

Zen looked at Nick. "Can we keep him?"

Nick opened his eyes, looked back at the wolf. Clearly, they had spoken about this. But Keith played along. "How about it?"

Nick sighed. It wasn't quite regret. "I can't. ... no, I *could*. I *won't*. It's..." Nick looked at him, and Keith could tell he'd never change his mind. "It's for *all* the Keiths."

"Are you sure it's... right?"

Nick smiled. "No."

Keith sighed. "Then I'm behind you all the way."

Zen cleared his throat. "I think that would be me."

"... point taken."

Nick stuck his tongue out in a wolfish grin. "Oh, it's more than that."

Keith grinned at him, then ruffled the fur on Zen's neck. "I see you've been a bad influence." The wolf shifted to kiss him, and Keith let himself get caught. But, he thought he'd heard... "Do that again." Zen did, and Keith grinned. "I meant the movement." The wolf shifted his weight again, and indeed, there was a reaction from Nick. *Hmm...* He leaned down to get a look between the two of them. "O-ho?" Keith reached into the space between their bodies, running a finger down the side of Nick's hard member. "What's this? Not satisfied?" Zen caught the game, shifting again, and Nick gasped. Keith could feel him twitch against his hand. He smiled at the wolf, who was looking speculative. "Kiss him?" Zen did, languidly. That... might be a good call. Keith reached

again for Nick's ears with his free hand and stroked him, gently, while stroking him, gently. He kept it up and leaned down to give Nick's neck a lick. With intent.

It was a matter of moments. Nick spurted into his hand, and Keith kept massaging his tip, coaxing out all he had to give. If Nick moaned, it was into Zen's mouth. Finally, he went lax. All of him. Keith straightened up, but kept stroking Nick's ears. The basitin's eyes were closed, and how he *was* purring. Keith showed Zen the mess in his hand, and to his surprise the wolf started licking it clean. He laughed quietly, letting Zen lap it up.

There could be other uses for that tongue. Or maybe... he glanced at Zen's tail, slowly wagging side to side. And while the wolf was tied to Nick, too; what would *that* be like for him? But... no. He thought what these two needed was some peace and quiet, while they still had time. Keith put the thoughts out of his mind, letting them fuel his appetite for... later.

Zen had finished cleaning his hand, and was looking at his crotch in a way that Keith could only characterize as highly meaningful.

... maybe just that much?

... no. He rubbed the wolf's cheek. "Nice try, but I think I need to get you to bed."

Zen leaned his head on the table, next to Nick's. "I suppose."

That he gave it up that easily meant Keith was right. He put his arm around Zen's neck and leaned down to give Nick a kiss. The basitin opened his eyes and smiled at him. Goofier and goofier. Better and better. Keith grinned. "It'll take a moment for this good wolf here to get out of you, so would you like something to eat while you wait? Perhaps a fresh beverage?"

Nick laughed. "What, does this come up a lot?"

Keith smiled. "In a way."

Zen groaned where he lay. "Those are usually my lines."

"... wait, what?"

The wolf levered himself back up to look at Nick. "Natani. We can switch bodies with each other. It's a bit of a secret."

"Huh." Nick looked at the wolf, then at Keith, raising his eyebrows. "*Huh.*"

Keith grinned. "Zen doesn't usually get carried away like this."

"I didn't get carried away! There were no beds free!"

Keith gave his ear a little tweak. "Well, you could have woken me."

Nick grinned. "Or not."
Keith laughed. "Or not."
"... wait, what?"

Eventually, Zen got himself loose, and Keith saw them both to bed in the guest room before getting on with breakfast.

And cleaning.

And they'd *just* washed the windows, too.

**

Zen turned on his side with a grunt. Nick grinned at him, and the wolf stuck out his tongue in response. For a moment they just looked at each other, and neither could keep a smile from his face.

"You know, I never called you sir."

"... please don't."

"Are you sure? I *did* enjoy serving under you."

"Oh, shut up."

"Make me."

Zen kissed him, and it did shut him up. For quite a long moment. When the kiss was over, Nick sighed happily, looking at the wolf. How to address this feeling? "... you weren't really going to pack, were you?"

Obliquely, apparently.

Zen smiled at him. "Figured that out, huh?"

Another quiet moment passed with them looking at each other. Eventually, Zen reached out, making to touch his head. "Do you mind if I...?"

Nick laughed. "*Now* you ask?" But the wolf understood. Of course he did. Touched, Nick reached out himself, to touch Zen on the cheek. He thought he knew how to do this... And as he caressed the wolf slowly, Zen's expression went from surprise to a slow smile that threatened to spill off his face. Yes, he knew how to do this.

Taking it for the answer it was, Zen completed his own gesture, tousling Nick's hair before starting to slowly stroke his ears. The wolf knew exactly what he was doing. Nick sighed happily under his careful touch. He kept his eyes on Zen's, and could see his own feelings reflected there.

The feelings swelled until being at arm's length was no longer enough, and Nick surged closer, burying his face into Zen's chest and wrapping his arms around the wolf. Zen laughed softly and returned the embrace, stroking his back.

Everything with Keith was complicated, so complicated. There was so much between them. At one moment, they were like kids at play, at the next, something... else, then something else again. And he loved complicated; thrived on it. That was another reason he wouldn't stay, though it wasn't one he had given. As wonderful as these few days had been, he wasn't sure he could handle this kind of peace and quiet in his life on a permanent basis. Though...

Changing tack, the truth was, also, that he loved his home. That Keith didn't—couldn't—broke his heart, even if he understood well why that was. Perhaps it was *because* he understood. It was his secret hope to somehow reconcile the two, in time, and if that wasn't quite the *point* of anything he was doing, it was at least a hopeful agenda item. He wasn't sure if it could be done, but if there *was* a way... it surely didn't involve the mainland. Yet another reason not to stay.

He needed all the reasons he could get, to not stay.

So everything with Keith was complicated, but *this*, he thought, laying in Zen's embrace, was simple. The wolf shifted his hold, and Nick could feel one of his hands make its way back to his head. His ears. With another contented sigh, he let himself get lost in the sensations. This was pure happiness. He realized he was purring.

And Zen only had a handful of years left. There was no way Nick would ever be done in time. This really could be the last time he ever saw the wolf.

*Reasons **not** to stay, Nick. Reasons **not** to.*

He wouldn't stay, but... could he find a way to visit? He could. The once. But just like he wouldn't stay, he wouldn't use that. Not until it was already too late. Was there any way to bribe Nora, get more favors? Nothing came to mind. He'd have to think on it. Later. He squeezed Zen tighter and snaked one leg between the wolf's, anything to get even closer. Zen played along, their legs mingling until both were comfortable, the wolf holding him close, all the while stroking his ears.

He didn't have to go *just* yet.