

"Was that first story **really** necessary?"

— No name

Going Far

"Going Far will take you places.
Places that make you ask
questions like, 'What's this say
about Maddie's Daddy?'
'What **did** Natani do in Karnak?'
'Oh, God, why can't I stop crying?'
and 'Is this too far or not far
enough?' "

— avwolf

amenon

About the author

At the time of publishing, amenon is wanted by the Basitin East Empire in connection with the previous books in this series, *Entertaining Possibilities* and *(Knot) Too Late*. They are charged with, and we quote *in part*, “Implied lèse-majesté, libeling the living, defaming the deceased, slandering the unliving, [...] general heinous calumny (premeditated), willful unlawfulness, *and* the lewd depiction of ankles in a public work.”

A reward has been offered for any action that will lead to the author being brought to trial.

We await with interest to hear what further charges will be brought following the publication of *this* book.

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This book was made possible by a grant from the Alaric Estate.

-----BEGIN PGP SIGNED MESSAGE-----
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Dead of Night

Dedication

To those who don't look away.

But if you thought *Two of a Kind* was too much, you may want to skip this one.

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Dead of Night

Natani slowed down as they approached the bedroom door, then came to a stop with his hand on the doorknob. Alaric could hear nothing from within. All was quiet in the house, except for the soft patter of rain on the roof. The wolf drew a deep breath, held it, then let it out in a slow exhalation, radiating new calmness. Another heartbeat, and Natani opened the door.

Alaric followed the wolf in. A single lamp on the bedstand illuminated the room, pushing back the night. Zen was lying in the big bed, with Keith kneeling by his side, leaning over the gray wolf. Had they just kissed? Both turned to the newcomers. Zen looked... tired, but still had his usual glint of mischief.

He didn't look like he was dying.

Zen smiled at him, and Alaric could tell the wolf had caught his thought. But Zen didn't say anything to him, looking to Natani instead. "Any luck with Maddie?"

Natani shook his head. "No, but there's still..." He closed his eyes, and half the crystals on his necklace lit up. The thrum of magic was so powerful it set Alaric's teeth on edge. But after mere moments, the light faded. Natani opened his eyes and looked at Zen, his regret plain as day. "No. She must be traveling."

Zen nodded, accepting, then turned to Keith, still kneeling by his side. "Tell her..." and Zen whispered something to Keith, too low for Alaric to pick out. Keith listened, and laughed, but the laughter turned to tears. Zen pulled him close, soothing him, and Alaric's heart constricted.

This was really happening.

It was too soon.

Alaric felt Natani's hand on his shoulder. The wolf was looking at him, the pain in his eyes calling out to the pain inside Alaric. He hesitated for the briefest moment, then put his own hand on top of Natani's and reached out to the wolf. Their minds came softly into contact, and they shared what comfort they could. It was the most intimate thing they'd ever done.

There's nothing we can do?

Nothing that he'll allow.

... And we have to honor that?

Natani went still for a moment, poised; then flashed to amusement. *Sometimes, you have to let go.* From amusement to tenderness, as the wolf leaned down to kiss him on the forehead. *Thank you.*

Alaric hadn't been kidding, though.

They let the connection fade, but Natani left his hand on Alaric's shoulder, and Alaric his on top. Zen and Keith had finished, and the basitin had pulled away, wiping his tears. Zen looked at Keith, love obvious. The wolf smiled. "Oh, and tell her... that cutesy thing she does? Worked every time."

Keith laughed, and wiped fresh tears from his eyes. "I will. I think she might know, but I will."

Zen nodded, and turned to Natani. "Natani... this is it. I'm grateful, but when I slip, you let me go. Okay? You hold the link closed."

There were tears in Natani's eyes now. "I... yeah. I will."

Zen extended his arm, and Natani stepped closer, taking his hand from Alaric's shoulder. The wolves clasped forearms, and Zen looked at Natani, serious. "You *hold* it."

"Yeah." Natani swallowed. "I'll... see you later, brother."

Zen gave his brother's arm one last squeeze, then let go. "Yeah. Later."

Natani nodded and stepped back, next to Keith. The basitin put an arm around the wolf.

"Keith..." Zen just looked at the basitin, and his expression said everything. "You know."

"Yeah." Keith wiped his tears again. "And I won't ever forget. I promise."

Zen nodded at the basitin, then beckoned him closer. Keith came. The wolf tousled his hair, and something about it, the care he took, said it was for the last time. Zen let his touch play over Keith's ears, softly caressing, speaking his love. For the last time. Alaric stood and watched, his heart tight in his chest.

Keith leaned in to kiss Zen, taking his time with it. The wolf slowly wrapped his arms around the basitin's neck, and Zen half-pulled Keith onto the bed to give his response. He was even slower to let Keith go, but eventually he did, laughing quietly. "To the last, huh?"

Keith buried his face in the wolf's mane. "Yeah."

They parted with one last look, needing no more words. Keith took Natani's hand, then looked at Alaric and touched him on the shoulder. Alaric almost couldn't bear to look back. Keith's expression made it undeniable.

He could hear the smile in Zen's voice, even now. "And now... I think I need to say goodbye to *this* idiot in private."

Natani and Keith nodded and, with lingering looks, left the room, closing the door behind them.

Alaric stood there, looking at the wolf. Nora wouldn't help, and he'd had little luck even reaching any of the other dragons. But maybe if Natani...

"Nick?" Zen's voice was gentle. "There's nothing you can do."

Alaric met the wolf's eyes, and saw the truth of his words. The possibilities in his mind narrowed, collapsing into each other until the only thing that remained was this moment. He was out of time.

Nick sighed. "Yes there is. I can be here."

Zen grinned. "You always were the smart one."

And you always knew how to get me.

Nick knelt at the wolf's bedside, and Zen reached out to stroke his cheek. 'I'm yours.' How could he, at a time like this...? Tears welling in his eyes, Nick fumbled to return the gesture. Zen smiled at him, wiping away his tears. "Does this bother you?"

Nick stared, incredulous.

Zen stuck his tongue out. "I mean that whole 'dying nobly in battle' thing your people have going on."

"Ah." It hadn't even crossed his mind. Why was that? "I tried it once. It wasn't all it was cracked up to be." Zen laughed at that, his pure, honest amusement so familiar, and so precious, that Nick couldn't help but smile. "Besides, the basitin fear is being... feeble. Infirm." And Zen looked as well as he ever had. Tired, that was all.

The wolf smiled. "Magic has its uses. But there are limits."

"There really isn't anything...?"

Zen shook his head. "I'm on borrowed time. I would have gone in my sleep, but Natani felt it and... I can't explain any of it. But it cost him more than it got me." The wolf stroked Nick's cheek again. "That I get to say goodbye is as much of a miracle as I can ask for. So if Natani tries again..." Zen sighed, then smiled wryly. "Well, if I can't stop him, Keith will. But I think he'll let me go now."

Nick swallowed his tears. "He will."

The wolf nodded slowly. "And... will you?"

Nick looked at Zen. It was impossible. "... do I have to?"

Zen was quiet for a long moment, but his hands filled the silence, caressing Nick's ears, ever so careful. Comforting. Eventually, the wolf started to find his words. "With wolves, it's... I used to think that it was... pride, you know? That people wanted to die with some dignity, not... railing against the world. Not being *unseemly*. But... that isn't it at all. I get that now."

"Then... what is it?"

There were tears in Zen's eyes, now. "You, Natani, Keith... Maddie... would I ever leave any of you? But... it's the last choice you can make, when there are no choices left." The wolf's voice cracked. "It's the last goddamn thing you can ever do for the people you love. So you *do it*. You let go, so they can let you go."

*And you let them go, so they don't **have** to rail against the world.* Nick's eyes filled with tears as the last of his stratagems crumbled away, unworthy. Zen pulled him into an embrace, and Nick buried his face in the wolf's chest tuft, Zen's scent enveloping him. For the last time. The wolf's winter coat wasn't quite in yet, and it never would be. Nick would never see that again.

There were so many things he would never see again.

But this wasn't the time for that. His heart near to bursting, Nick pulled away and wiped his tears. "Okay."

Zen had his own to wipe. "Okay?"

"I'll let you go. But it's under duress. Would never hold up in court."

Zen laughed. "That sounds about right. But... thank you. That makes it a little easier."

Nick stroked the wolf's cheek. "For you... anything."

Zen flashed his grin. "A last kiss for the dying?"

How could he not? Nick kissed Zen, pouring out all his love, and the wolf responded in kind. They spoke wordlessly of all they had had. All that would be lost... but wasn't, not yet. They looked at each other, smile meeting smile, love meeting love.

"Any other last requests?"

Zen arched an eyebrow, thoughtful. "Try not to make too much trouble for the world?"

Nick had to grin. "I can't promise that."

The wolf feigned a sigh. "Ah well. History will remember that I tried."

Nick stuck out his tongue. "If I tell history."

Zen smiled at him. "You will. And you know what they say, it's the winners that get to tell it."

Nick's heart caught. "... yeah. I will."

“... how about one last kiss?”

I thought you already had that. But of course, he kissed the wolf. Playful, this time, teasing him for having asked more than once... and Zen responded, reminding him what happens to teases. One last time.

The wolf sighed. “I should warn you, there’s every chance that getting an erection would literally kill me right now.”

Oh, you idiot. Nick laughed. “Better be careful, then.”

Zen stroked his cheek, one last time. “I always am.”

“... yeah.”

“... one more?”

He leaned in.

It really was the last one.

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

Castling

Dedication

To avwolf; For being avwolf.

And to those who survived. Grab a mug of your favorite hot beverage and settle in.

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Castling

Natani woke up... in the sense that some part of him was no longer completely asleep, and trying to muggily understand why.

Keith wasn't there in his arms.

Well, that would do it.

Natani came a little more awake. He was tangled up in the blankets, but otherwise alone, in the bed, and, by his senses, in the room. The gentle swaying of the ship spoke of easy weather, and staying in bed, and being rocked back to sleep.

There *was* the sense of sunlight through his closed eyelids, making a different argument, but it was *early*. Half the world away, Zen was fast asleep.

Maybe Keith had just went to the bathroom or something.

... but this *was* the day they were supposed to arrive. Maybe in the afternoon, Kat had said. If the winds held.

With a groan, Natani untangled one arm and reached for his crystals. Nobody in the bathroom, or even below decks. On the deck, he found Kat, then Evals and Mike, and... at the very bow of the ship, Keith. Natani pushed his awareness out farther, past the bow, and found nothing but open ocean and some gulls.

He sighed. Still... he couldn't really blame Keith. He understood what it was like to go back to your people. The basitin maybe didn't have anyone trying to kill him, but... that had never been the scary part. Not really. And if he was only going to start fretting on the day, that was better than Natani himself had done.

And Keith never would have come back for himself.

Natani growled, defeated. Yeah, he was going to have to get up. He got his other arm free, and rubbed at his face, shading his eyes as he slowly opened them. It was just the one porthole providing light, and their cabin was on the side of the evening sun, but it was *early*, and his eyes stung with the light. He wrangled the blankets—and the sheets, as it turned out—off himself, and laid there on his back for a moment, buck naked and not particularly caring. The day wasn't quite hot yet, but even moving this much he was starting to feel the warmth.

And his fur was already a matted mess, from the previous evening and night.

Natani scratched at himself, smiling languidly at the memories. They'd retired early, skipping even their sparring, and the cabin had still been baking with the evening sun. That hadn't stopped them from making it even hotter. And Keith *did* like the heat... Natani scratched lower, as his mind wandered to much more pleasant thoughts than getting up. Lower still, across his stomach...

But Keith was standing up there, right now, waiting for sight of his homeland.

With a sigh that turned into a huge yawn, Natani levered himself up into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. On the chair, within reach, were the clothes they'd decided on for him—and on the back of the chair, his magical wrappings... as well as some entirely non-magical ones. Modesty aids, in the basitin sense. Natani hesitated for a moment—there was basically no way he was going ashore without a bath, so he'd take them off again for that if nothing else—then

reached for the foot wrappings. Best get in the habit. To, from this morning, follow the laws.

At least in public.

Natani wrapped and bound his feet and ankles, sure in his motions. He'd been practicing, with Keith's help. And he'd kept practicing, long past where he'd needed it, because of what it was like for the basitin. As odd as the wrappings had felt at the start, he'd gotten to the point where he didn't mind them at all. One flash of them, and he could have Keith making bedroom eyes at him.

So maybe Natani was more about the *letter* of the law than the spirit of it.

He got up, stretching his entire body, muscles trembling as they came awake, flexing his shins to make sure the wrappings didn't impede him too much. They didn't. He yawned again, running his hands through his hair, getting it out of his face and into some semblance of order. He really did need that bath. Natani wrapped his chest, an action so practiced it required no thought at all. After that, he pulled on the loose-ish black pants, with the extra-modest tail-hole—the things these people worried about!—and then slipped into his trusty old vest. It fit like a glove, and it was still by far his most favorite piece of clothing. He didn't bother buttoning it up—that, apparently, wouldn't even raise an eyebrow. Basitins.

Natani wondered for a moment what kind of reaction he'd get in Kat's *other* outfit—the one he'd worn when he marched into Karnak.

He'd probably start a war.

Not that she almost hadn't in Karnak, if for rather different reasons.

Natani slotted a few crystals into some of the more easily accessible secret pockets in his vest, but left most of them. He did tuck the small leather pouch that held the flawless crystal in his pocket, though. After the time he'd spent charging the thing, he didn't want to let it out of his sight.

Natani stepped to the porthole for a look outside, and winced at the brightness of the day. But, better to acclimate his eyes now than to be blinded stepping on deck.

Blue ocean, blue sky, and not a wisp of cloud.

He yawned once more, then opened the door.

He still had to shade his eyes when he emerged on deck. So much light. Even the wood of the ship seemed to glow under the sun, and he didn't dare glance at the sails. The wind was strong, cutting the worst of the heat, full of the scent of sea and salt; ever-present on the ocean, but strong enough to register anew. Natani couldn't see clear to the bow, but off to the side Mike and Eval were doing sailory things. The fox waved to him, followed by a gruff nod from the dog. He nodded to them in response. The sun was barely a fourth of the way to its zenith. Keith had much to answer for.

"Morning."

Natani turned to look at Kat, and winced. She was wearing white. "You're way too bright."

The smaller keidran stepped into his shade, cutting a lot of the glare. In a blouse and pants, she too was properly dressed for their destination, up to and including wrapped feet. Only the hat wasn't white; a black leather tricorn.

Natani was pretty sure he'd never seen any of the clothes before today. "Nice outfit."

"Thanks. Thought I'd try my hand at tailoring again. To..." Kat shook her head, then smiled. Was it a little forced? "Keith's at the prow."

Was there something else she wanted to say? "Thanks. How long has he been up here?"

"Not long. Ten, fifteen minutes."

Kat seemed to expect him to go, but something told Natani not to just leave her standing there. He arched an eyebrow and gestured, and Kat followed him forward, to the side of the main mast. From there, Natani could get his eyes on Keith. The basitin was leaning against the railing, brown cloak furling in the wind. The pose didn't make his Keith-angst senses tingle, so he leaned against the mast with a yawn. He peered past Keith at the horizon, but there was nothing there, only endless shimmering ocean.

"We're still set for this afternoon?"

"Yup. Should be seeing land soon."

"Already?"

"It's the mountains. Not that tall in the greater scheme of things, but they do poke out."

"Ah." And Keith would know that, of course...

"About that..." Kat's tone became rather sardonic. "I take it that Zen is still under the weather, and won't be getting off?"

Natani grinned. "I'm afraid so."

"You're sure he didn't just get off at an earlier port?"

"We didn't stop anywhere."

"We could have."

Natani looked at Kat's deadpan expression, and smiled. She was a very good friend to have. "Thanks. But he *will* be disembarking... maybe tomorrow."

One way or another.

Kat nodded.

Hmm... could that be it? "Did you want to spend more time with him?"

Kat smiled. "Well, he *is* a lot of fun. And a completely shameless flirt."

Natani grinned. "I don't think he could turn it off if he tried. You should come visit us sometime, see him in his natural habitat."

"Oh, you know. It's hard to find the time."

And yet here she was, going months out of her way to personally take them on this trip.

Just like Eric had.

How had Natani not seen that? But... Kat was so... *effective*, so helpful, that it was easy to forget she could have worries of her own.

"Kat... is everything okay?"

A look of wide-eyed surprise, only partly mock. "Natani... are *you* starting girl talk?"

Natani stuck out her tongue with a smile. "Maybe I am. Times change."

"They... do, don't they." Kat looked at her for a long moment, and when she smiled, it didn't look forced at all. "Thank you for asking, but... I'll be fine. Go take care of your basitin."

Well, if she was okay... "Some other time?"

"I'd like that."

And maybe it wasn't just Zen that had been a little scarce during this trip. "Err, and sorry about the early night yesterday."

Kat waved a hand, dismissive. "I get it. And you're always welcome to come visit the ship if you need to... get away. Just make sure to forget something here."

A very good friend to have. Natani nodded to her. "We'll keep that in mind. Thanks."

Kat tipped her hat at Natani. "A good captain thinks of her passengers' needs."

"Then you're the best I've ever had."

Kat opened her mouth, then closed it again with a shake of her head. "We'll have that talk, okay? Some other day."

And with that, Kat turned with a wave and walked away, leaving Natani squinting after her and scratching his head.

Well. Some other day.

Natani left his spot in the shade of the mast and started toward Keith. Softly as he stepped, and even coming against the wind, he could still Keith's ears twitch when the basitin picked out his approach. But Keith didn't turn, letting Natani come right up to him. He plopped his muzzle on top of Keith's head, and slid his arms over the basitin's shoulders, embracing him. Keith relaxed into his touch.

It was the most natural thing in the world.

Keith swept one of his ears against the side of Natani's muzzle. "Hey."

"Mmmmmnh."

"Thanks for coming up."

Natani yawned, reaching a bit to make it more theatric. "We're going to watch for land, and then you're coming back down with me."

He could heard the smile in Keith's voice. "Deal."

Natani grinned, squeezing Keith a little tighter. "You bet your ass it is. I need my pillow."

Keith reached up with a hand to scratch him behind the ear, and Natani slumped against the basitin, pure indulgence. Keith took his weight without complaint, only scratching more vigorously, and for a few glorious moments Natani let his tail beat out the rhythm of the waves. But, this wasn't bed. He let up, keeping his arms around Keith but taking up his own weight again. Keith shifted against him and let his hand fall, giving Natani's cheek a stroke on the way.

There were no more words. None were necessary.

They stood there, waiting, Keith's hands on the railing, Natani's arms around Keith. They fit together, stable against the swaying of the ship as it sliced through the waves. The sun was hot, but the more annoying thing was how it lit up half his face, so Natani occupied himself with using the ambient mana to bend some of the light away, reducing the glare... until another yawn would shatter his concentration, scattering the shade and bringing laughter from Keith.

Not an awful way to spend a morning, if you couldn't be in bed.

Eventually, there was a polite clearing of throat from behind them. Natani turned to look and found Mike, smiling brightly and holding a tray with two mugs of coffee. "Compliments of the Captain."

Natani spotted Kat leaning on the railing on the upper deck, looking in their direction. Natani nodded his thanks, and got a wave in return. Off to the side, Evals kept glancing at them as he

worked, or pretended to. Natani returned the fox's smile. "Thank you. Both of you."

"Oh, it's—" Natani raised his eyebrows, and Mike caught himself. "—That is, you're quite welcome."

Natani nodded with a grin, then passed the first mug to Keith, who called out a "Thanks!" and got his own "You're welcome" from the fox. Natani grabbed the other one, and Mike departed with a little bow.

Ah well. He was getting there.

With the coffee, too. Zen would have been proud. By the time Natani was done with the mug, he was starting to feel like maybe the day *had* already started, as unlikely as that seemed with the sun not even halfway up yet.

Suddenly, he felt Keith go tense. The basitin turned his head a little, and Natani could tell he'd seen something. But as hard as he squinted at the hazy horizon... "I don't see anything."

Keith's voice was quiet. "It's there."

Well, no reason to doubt him. But Keith stayed tense.

It had become real.

Natani shifted against Keith, to remind the basitin that he was still there. After a moment, Keith relaxed a little, but Natani could tell he was still elsewhere.

Well, it's not like he didn't understand. But... there was no point in worrying. When it would be time, it would be time. And until then...

Natani smiled to himself. "Keith?"

"Yeah?"

Natani nipped him lightly on one ear. "Remember what you did before we reached Karnak?"

*

Kat noticed as Natani and Keith left the railing, and headed below decks. Natani was messing with the basitin's ears as they went, and Keith was dodging him... but not well enough to actually get away. Even in her funk, Kat couldn't help but smile at the sight. Natani was a dear friend, and though she didn't know Keith quite as well as she knew the wolf, she liked him and respected him, both for what he'd done for Wreathwood, and for making Natani smile like that.

And maybe especially because—as Maddie liked to go on at great length about—he was constantly shirking from the one to do the other. That was just having your priorities straight, as far as Kat was concerned, though she wouldn't have dreamed of interrupting her friend's rants to say so. And as much as Maddie loved to complain... Kat was pretty sure she actually agreed. She did always come through for her boss, after all.

The two disappeared below deck, and Kat shifted her eyes to the horizon. She still couldn't see anything unaided, but after fishing out her spyglass it only took her a few moments to spot the distant peak of a mountain just barely peeking over the horizon.

Apparently, Keith had very good eyes. Or maybe Natani had done more than just play with shadows. If you can gather light with a glass, then why not with magic?

She was about to call out the 'Land ahoy!' when she noticed that Evals and Mike were, rather than seeing to their duties, talking. Or by their stances, arguing. Kat sighed. They were good

workers, but sometimes it took a little prodding to keep them on the job. And these seas were a time to be on the job.

Just as she got close, the tone seemed to shift, Mike breaking into a smile. "Did you just...?"

Evals scratched at the back of his head, awkward. "So sue me. Like I said, I just... call 'em like I see 'em."

The fox grinned up at him. "I thought you also said that an old dog can't learn new tricks. But if you can..." Mike slid his arms around Evals' waist, the grin melting back into a smile as the fox's muzzle drew close to the dog's, Mike still maintaining eye contact. "Maybe I should try to teach you some more?"

"Oh? Err, um... what did you..."

"Well, what would you say about—"

Kat cleared her throat. "I would say that we've got land on the horizon, and I need at least *one* of you on deck at all times until we reach port."

They both snapped to attention. "Ma'am!"

"After we're secure, you can take the rest of the day off."

Mike was quicker on the draw. "We won't start unloading today?"

"No. I have a feeling our cargo might be worth more in a day or two." And little point in paying for shoreside storage, if they were going to be berthed anyway. She smiled. "Besides, I wouldn't want to overwork you two."

They both nodded, Mike smiling. "Ma'am."

"Now back to work. We'll be there soon enough."

"Yes, ma'am!"

They scampered, and Kat returned to the upper deck. When she glanced back, she saw Evals looking slightly dejected, then Mike sneaking up to him to whisper something into his ear, setting the dog's tail wagging. When the fox darted away again, Evals got back to work with renewed vigor. Kat shook her head, smiling. He was a curmudgeon, but for Mike...

And there was that feeling again. Kat lost herself for a moment, gazing out at the sea. Surrounded by people in love, seeing all the little ways in which they completed each other...

How long was she going to keep pining for a memory?

A memory of a man who, if she was *really* honest with herself, never was?

She thought of the people in her life, and suddenly wanted very badly indeed to be back on the mainland.

Maybe that was all there was to it.

But there was work to be done.

Kat got her spyglass out again, and found that the peak on the horizon had been joined by another, giving her a better fix. They were maybe a mite west of where they wanted to be... she got to work figuring out their exact approach.

But every once in a while, she would find herself looking out over the ocean, thinking about a certain someone, of how their smile lit up the room. How there was never a boring moment. And she would yearn for home.

Natani started shedding his clothes as soon as they got in their cabin, laying the pants and vest on the bed, leaving just the wrappings on his chest... and ankles. Keith was slower in getting undressed, leaving time for Natani to lead, probably unsure where *exactly* this was going. Natani grinned as he saw the basitin's eyes dart down to his still-wrapped ankles. The contrast of the white cloth against his brown fur was like a magnet for Keith. Which was funny, because it's not like he *normally* ogled Natani's ankles. Only when they were wrapped.

Natani went to rifle through the desk drawers, and decided to make a show of it, leaning down to bend over, then shifting his weight to just one leg so he could cross his ankles, resting one on top of the other, stretching his toes... he even raised his tail, just for good measure, though he couldn't guess if Keith even noticed at that point.

It would have been misdirection, anyway. He found what he was looking for, nestled amidst the books and books of basitin law; his trusty old dildo and harness.

It was only appropriate, really. They, too, were coming back home.

He turned back to face Keith, flourishing the toy and giving the basitin his best shit-eating grin.

Keith was still stuck on the last button of his shirt, blushing beautifully from Natani's little show. The basitin's lips parted in surprise, only to soon curve into a small smile. "So when you said 'What you did before we reached Karnak'..."

Natani dug deep and dialed the grin up even further. "What else? Any objections, soldier?"

It didn't have to be this... but Natani had clearly stuck a chord.

"No, sir."

The words might as well have been 'I love you', and the look Keith gave him said it all over again.

"Then lose the clothes."

The mock-command came out softer than he'd intended.

Keith conquered the button, and slipped out of his shirt as Natani slipped into the harness. The basitin glanced at him while folding his shirt, and Natani struck a pose, one hand on hip, inadvertently sending a shiver through himself as the toy shifted against his groin. It wasn't like having a dick, but it *was* its own thing, and always put him in a certain mood. Keith played to it, turning away almost fully before starting to remove his pants, quite sensuously, slowly sliding them off those wonderful hips of his, even glancing over his shoulder with a coy little smile as he worked them lower... until he bent down all the way, toes splayed to better hold his balance, and yes, lifted his tail.

It *was* tempting, but Natani had a better idea. He turned the heavy chair around to face Keith, and sat down, leaning back and raising one of his feet to present it to the basitin. "Unwrap me?"

So maybe it wasn't *exactly* like Karnak.

Keith quickly squared away his pants, now naked down to his own wrappings, then turned to face Natani, affording him a good look at the basitin's front. Turned out they were both hard. Keith stepped closer to take Natani's leg from out of the air, then knelt, guiding the leg down with him, the way he held it almost reverent. He set Natani's foot down on his knee, then teased out the end of the long strip of cloth wrapped around Natani's ankle and slowly started to

unwind it, his fingers sure but ever gentle. He made it such an act of devotion. And every once in a while, he'd look up, straight into Natani's eyes, sharing the moment, and Natani couldn't help but be touched by the depth of feeling there.

Why hadn't they gotten into this years ago?

When Keith was finished, and Natani's ankle fully naked, the basitin took his foot in both hands, cupping his heel and his pad, and carefully lifted it up to place a soft kiss right on the ankle.

It made her feel like a bloody princess.

Maybe that was why.

Natani moved her leg, sliding her foot up the side of Keith's muzzle. Keith's hands fell away, and Natani turned her ankle to press the pad of his foot against the basitin's cheek, doing his best to give him a stroke with her toes. After a moment he moved the foot on, resting it on Keith's shoulder. The basitin turned his head to nuzzle against her ankle, near rapturous.

This felt like it might go on for a while.

After two whiles, Natani reached with her toes to give Keith a little tweak on the ear, and cleared her throat. "Do... the other one?"

She let Keith do his thing, lavishing her with attention that should have been humorous, but was so honest—so *sincere*—that she could only see it as the expression of love that it was. And so, every touch, every caress, every gentle act of devotion called for an answer, more and more and more, called for something every bit as honest and sincere and thorough and true.

Overflowing, Natani grasped the basitin's muzzle with her paws, getting Keith to look at him. "Come here."

Keith took her feet into his hands, and placed one last, tender kiss on each ankle before gently setting them down, then slid up between Natani's legs, nudging at the toy with his muzzle before looking up at him, a question in his eyes.

Natani stroked the basitin's ears, his hands speaking the language her toes weren't quite deft enough to. Maybe with some more practice. Keith smiled at his touch, beatific, but it wasn't enough; Natani nudged Keith onwards, and the basitin came, first straightening up on his knees, then raising up against the chair. Natani leaned down to meet him, and muzzle met smiling muzzle.

The kiss wasn't quite like Karnak, either. Keith didn't have to tease him, or coax it out of him; Natani was there from the start, cupping the basitin's face, not letting Keith get away as he kissed his ears stiff. Keith answered masterfully, welcoming, accepting, hinting at yielding... and when Natani wrapped his arms around the basitin's neck to better push against that yield, Keith responded by reaching out for the toy, grasping the shaft, stroking it slowly to make the base rub against Natani's clit, making his whole body tingle.

No question where this was going.

Natani let his hands roam down the basitin's back, grasping lightly at the base of his tail, eliciting an adorable little breathy moan from Keith before firmly grasping the basitin's ass with both hands and pulling him up. Keith rose, clambering onto the chair, sliding his knees over

Natani's thighs to straddle him, suddenly above him; and for a brief moment, Keith was looking down at him, his hair framing his face, that coy little smile good enough to eat. Keith dipped down for another kiss, sliding his arms around Natani's neck, and Natani responded, pulling the basitin deeper into his lap, tight up against the toy. Keith started grinding against it with his hips.

Natani gave the basitin's ass one last loving squeeze before letting go, teasing at his tail with one hand, the other gathering up both the toy and Keith's hard dick, pushing them together. He gave them a few strokes, aided by small tugs at Keith's tail to spur him on, then when the basitin started really getting into it, Natani stopped, just holding so that every buck of Keith's hips had him thrusting into Natani's hand and up against the hard toy.

The kiss grew more frustrated, and after a moment, Keith's humping started to wind down, the basitin rising up to pout down at him, even his ears an accusation.

He was so adorable.

Natani flashed a grin. "Lube me up."

Keith clambered off, muttering in mock-indignation, quickly betrayed by the small smile and sidelong glance he did so well. He gave a few provoactive little swishes with his tail as he looked for a pot of lube among their belongings, then returned with it, handing Natani the pot and the lid to hold. Keith scooped up some of the salve, then leaned forward to kiss him, at the same time grasping the tip of the toy with a reverse grip, pushing it down and away from Natani's body, making the base push against his clit *just* so. Natani grunted, and Keith smiled, teasing, tantalizing him with the sensations as he lubed him up. Getting some payback.

For a moment, Natani just took it, but Keith kept pushing, stealing away with quick little kisses. And he'd left Natani holding the damn pot, too... Natani freed up one hand by replacing the lid, then brought it to the side of Keith's head, his thumb on the basitin's cheek, his fingers curling around the back of Keith's neck, tangling into his hair, holding him still. Natani pulled him into a kiss, hot and heavy, giving the basitin all the answer he could have hoped for, until Natani could feel Keith's hand on the toy slowing, ceasing its teasing, then coming up to Natani's shoulder for support as the basitin leaned into him, drawn in, lost.

That was more like it. Natani eased up, gradually, stroking Keith's cheek with his thumb, until he finally broke the kiss, leaving the basitin breathless and blushing to the tips of his ears. For a moment, Natani just looked at Keith, taking in the sight, before giving him one last, gentler, kiss.

"Take a seat, General."

Keith looked at him for two heartbeats, then burst out laughing. "Did you have to put it like that?"

Natani grinned. "No good?"

"No, it's... I'm not gonna get that out of my head for the rest of the day."

"Maybe that's what I wanted."

"You..." Keith sighed, but couldn't stop from smiling. He kissed Natani on the forehead, then pulled him into a loose hug, bringing Natani's head to his chest, catching him by surprise.

"Hm?"

Keith gave him a squeeze, and a small nip on the ear. "I love you."

Oh. Natani smiled to himself, as Keith gave the nipped ear a little lick, then nuzzled against it. Natani reached around the basitin with his free hand to return the hug, nuzzling into Keith's chest tuft. Change of plans, maybe? Would be a shame to waste a good erection, but that's how it goes, sometimes. He flicked his ear against Keith's muzzle. "Wanna do something else?"

"Mmm... no. I got you lubed and everything. And..." Keith popped back into his field of view, looking him straight in the eyes. "... you got me wanting it."

Natani grinned. "Oh? There are times when you don't?"

Keith nuzzled against his cheek, complete with a little sigh. "*Really* wanting it."

Yeah, Keith was trying to get his blood up.

Yeah, it worked. Natani nuzzled against Keith's throat... and nibbled, carefully, pinching the skin with his teeth before licking it better. He could feel a little tremble go through the basitin's body. "Then... take that seat."

He did leave the 'general' out this time, though. And he could tell that Keith had noticed, by the way the basitin smiled as he leaned away. Natani was still holding the pot, so Keith took the lid off for a moment to scoop up a bit more of the substance, then proceeded to make sure the lube job was complete. As he did, Natani leaned to the side and set the pot down on the floor, then straightened up in the chair, still sitting near the front but not leaning back.

Done with the lubing, Keith seemed to be considering how to tackle the toy. Natani grasped it by the now-slick base, pointing it toward the basitin and getting ready to hold it steady. Keith took it as a suggestion—or inspiration—and shot him another of his coy little smiles before turning around and backing up between Natani's legs, his tail raised, giving Natani a very good look at the basitin's beautiful rump. Natani reached out with his free hand to give it a solid grope, admiring the supple firmness, before guiding Keith by the tail to line him up. The basitin found his target, and Natani got to watch, to feel through the toy, as Keith stretched to accomodate him, the tip pressing against his tight opening, the resistance pressing back against Natani, sending tingles up his spine, until suddenly it was in and the basitin let out a shuddering sigh. Keith stayed still for a moment, and Natani could well imagine the sensations of Keith squeezing around the tip, getting the feel for it... and relishing in it. Keith started lowering himself, his hands going to Natani's knees for support, and Natani had to brace the toy hard with his hand to stop the stimulation from being too intense. Inch by slow inch Keith backed into Natani's lap, the toy sliding into him, filling him, until finally, the deed done, that cute ass came to rest on Natani's hips and against his hand, and all the rest of Keith against the rest of Natani, leaning a little to the side so they fit together, Natani's longer muzzle alongside Keith's.

The basitin was shaking a little, and already breathing pretty heavily. He really *did* really want it. The weight wasn't all on the toy anymore, so Natani slid both his arms around Keith's midriff, leaving nothing between them and hugging him close, giving him a moment to get settled. Keith put one arm on top of his, and the other came up to find Natani's muzzle, to stroke at his cheek. Natani smiled, rubbing the side of his muzzle against Keith's.

They couldn't have had this moment if Natani had been in Zen's body, not quite like this. The knot would have gotten in the way, except at the end, or with very great effort. And that... would have been a shame. Keith loved this kind of closeness. Natani wasn't quite sure if that was a basitin thing, or a Keith thing. Maybe it was both. But he did, and Natani loved giving it to him.

And giving it to him. Natani moved his hands to the insides of Keith's thighs, spreading the basitin's legs wider, then lifting them up while getting his own knees in between the basitin's, spreading his legs again to leave Keith sprawled on his lap, his feet dangling in the air. Everything lined up, and the basitin let out a cute little moan as he sunk some tiny measure deeper on the toy. Natani moved his hands again, to on top of Keith's hips, pushing down on him for juuuust a bit more depth. Natani felt Keith's tail give a twitch against his stomach, and the basitin's trembling grew more pronounced.

And holding Keith down—pressing the base of the dildo against his clit—was bringing Natani some very good sensations, too.

Keith's hands found his, making to shift them, clearly not serious, then settling on top. "Ah... How... how am I supposed to move like this?"

Natani grinned. "Oh, you're not." He nuzzled against Keith's neck, finding the right place, then gripped the fur there with his teeth as he flexed his hips, drawing a ragged moan from the basitin. Natani nibbled on Keith's neck, each playful bite resulting in a little jerk from the basitin that, joined as they were, went straight through both of them. Natani answered each with another miniscule thrust, and a heartbeat later, the next nibble. "Why would you?"

Keith moaned his name, but Natani didn't think it was a complaint. How to make it even better? Keith's ear was twitching, in Natani's field of view, in a way that was either an invitation or just a testament to how well he was doing. Natani craned his neck to lick along the broad side of it, and Keith pushed the ear back against his muzzle. Invitation, then. And they were such big ears... Natani licked his way to the tip, gathering the tuft there in his muzzle and holding it lightly with his teeth. Slowly, he leaned back in the chair, bringing the breathless Keith with him, until he was once again leaning against the backrest, Keith on his lap and against his chest, the basitin's head under his chin—but those convenient, adorable ears still in reach. He let go of the one he'd been holding, and gave it a little lick of apology, eliciting a strained sigh from Keith.

Then he went for the other one, nibbling along the back of it, feeling Keith shudder with every careful touch of his teeth.

They really were *very* sensitive.

He raked his teeth along for a bit, bringing a sharp gasp and a stronger tremble.

You had to know exactly what you were doing.

And Natani did. There was a soft, breathless moan from Keith as he found *just* the right spot.

Natani smiled to himself, easing up on the teeth, giving Keith a moment of relief and gentle licks... then switched back to the other ear and started again, but more slowly this time. As he did, he also began pushing on Keith's hips with his hands. Keith's weight was more evenly on him now, so Natani took advantage of that, rolling the basitin on the toy, grinding deep into him. Keith responded beautifully, a bundle of breathless moans and tight need in his arms. The basitin's dick jumped every time Natani got the angle just right, and with some of the more clever things he did with Keith's ears. It was mesmerizing, and Natani made a game of it, trying to get Keith into a good rhythm, pushing out more and more of his slick pre with every twitch.

The way the toy was rubbing against his clit, Natani could feel his own climax building, and could tell it would be one of those slow ones that went on forever and left him a complete mess. It would have been very easy for him to get there, and maybe his thrashing under Keith would

have been just the thing to get the basitin off... but if not, the moment might be gone, the buildup lost. So he shifted a little, pushing his own pleasure further away. Subtler movements, teasing the basitin, focusing on *his* pleasure, Natani using every trick he knew to build it up.

Keith was a moaning, mewling wreck, his dick twitching almost constantly now, steadily dripping pre. Waves of tenseness went through the basitin, and Natani could see him splaying his toes to the same deep rhythm. Just a few more little pushes... Natani chomped on Keith's ear, right on the edge of too much, and the basitin cried out, his arms shooting up to wrap around Natani's neck, trying to somehow pull him even closer.

"Natani... I... I..." Keith's voice was as tense as the rest of him. Natani started chewing on his ear softly, ready to bring him home. "I want to kiss you."

Not the way he'd expected that sentence to go. Natani opened his mouth, freeing the basitin's ear, and Keith twisted against him, pressing his muzzle up against Natani's throat, wanting to reach, not able.

Not what he'd expected. But...

Natani stopped. "Can you get up?"

He couldn't. Natani pushed out of his recline and helped Keith get his feet back on the ground, and slowly the basitin was able to pull off him, off the toy, and stand. He was shaky on his feet, and when he turned to look at Natani, he had tears in his eyes.

It had been a long time since Natani had seen him that vulnerable. He smiled at Keith, gentle, lust completely forgotten for the moment. "Hey."

Keith leaned in to kiss him, needy, and Natani found his lust again. The basitin pushed closer, getting his knees up on the chair, straddling Natani once more. Natani leaned back under his onslaught and Keith pursued, never letting up, not for a moment. He was so hungry for it! The basitin went up on his knees, raising his hips above Natani's lap, and Natani pushed the tip of the toy under him, making Keith shudder as the tip nudged past his balls. A fresh dollop of the basitin's pre dropped onto Natani's stomach. The toy found its target, and Keith immediately lowered himself, but couldn't even get half of it in with the angle they had.

Natani nudged him out of the kiss. "Can you get your legs—" Keith was on the same page, first pushing his knees forward, then bracing with his hands against the armrests to try and lift himself. Natani straightened up and wrapped his arms around the basitin's rump, shivering as Keith's dick was pushed against his bound chest. He held Keith steady, taking some of his weight. "I've got you."

Keith got his legs up long enough to wrap them around Natani's back, ankles snug against the base of his tail, and Natani lowered the basitin into his lap, Keith's cock tracing a line down his chest to nestle against his abs, hot, hard and throbbing. As the toy slid home, and hips met hips once more, Keith's breath caught, then escaped in an almost soundless moan. The basitin drew a slow, ragged breath, a picture of need, and looked at him so, so...

Natani kissed him, and Keith wrapped his arms around Natani's neck, returning the kiss so fiercely that for a moment, Natani was lost in it. Slowly, he worked his own arms around the basitin's back, holding him tight, giving as good as he got until they were left looking at each other, panting, the moment so tight they could barely breathe for it.

Natani shifted his hands lower, grabbing Keith's ass and pulling him tight on the toy. The

basitin gasped, his eyes falling closed, lost in the sensations. Natani tugged on his tail and Keith whimpered, his legs squeezing tighter around Natani. He let his tail wag against the basitin's ankles, not willing to let any part of Keith go unloved. The basitin dipped his muzzle against Natani's neck, nuzzling his throat, and Natani could reach his ears again, just licking this time, soothing his teethmarks out of the soft fur.

He started bouncing Keith slowly in his lap, and the basitin cried out, his short gasps and moans muffled against the side of Natani's throat.

The toy was off center, and the angle wasn't there for Natani, and he didn't care. He nuzzled the side of Keith's muzzle, the basitin rubbing back, almost frantic, love for love. They were each other's. Keith's panting quickly grew even louder. Between being filled and smearing a sticky mess all over Natani's stomach, his release was only moments away.

Natani nipped on Keith's ear. "Let me look at you."

Keith pulled away, his eyes still closed, holding his panting for a moment to bite at his lower lip, then releasing the breath, his eyes opening to gaze at Natani, teary, lost in love and lust.

It was the hottest thing in the world, and the loveliest.

Natani pulled him tight, filling him to the utmost, and Keith trembled, right on the edge. Natani kissed him, nothing but gentle this time, the most tender of touches. And it was enough, as he'd known it would be. Keith tensed around him, moaning into his mouth as the first of many waves of release broke on Natani's chest, the heat of it seeping through his wrappings. The basitin's jerks broke the kiss, and he buried his face against Natani's neck, too lost to do anything but hold on as Natani continued to slowly pump him on his lap. Natani stroked at his twitching tail and nuzzled his trembling ears as Keith rode out his pleasure, painting Natani's stomach white, the first great jets giving way to lesser ones, and then the last few just barely squeezed out against his abs as Natani wrung him dry.

Finally, Keith slumped against him, having nothing left to give, and Natani eased, shifting his arms around Keith to a gentle embrace. He leaned back with a sigh, settling against the backrest, a heavy creak bringing a flash of panic before he decided it would hold. Natani chuckled, and there was an answering hum of amusement from the basitin. Keith was breathing deep and steady, radiating pure contentment. Natani stroked his back slowly, then lifted one arm up to his head to caress his ears, smoothing his fur, speaking his love. Keith sighed into his neck, a sound of pure joy, and Natani almost thought he might—

Keith started purring, slowly building into a great deep rumble, and Natani smiled. He kept one hand at the basitin's ears, stoking his engine, but moved the other down to the basitin's rear to hold him close. Keith couldn't really slide off, wrapped around Natani as he was, but there were more comfortable and less comfortable—

Something shifted, and suddenly the angle was there again, the base of the toy finding its mark, joining them, bringing some of Keith's weight bearing straight down on Natani's clit, the toy transferring the vibrations from deep inside the basitin straight into Natani's most sensitive spot. He gasped, and kicked out involuntarily. Keith stirred, and the purring started to fade.

"No! Just... keep going."

Natani found Keith's ears again, and the basitin seemed to understand, settling back down, the rumbling beginning to deepen again. Kicking out had broken their connection, so he looked

to find it again, shifting himself and the basitin. This time, he was expecting it and didn't kick out, but his breath still caught with the force of the stimulation, Keith's engine rubbing out a tight rhythm against him, the touch pure magic. He tried to keep the weight off, to make it a little less intense, to make it last—

Natani came, one of the hardest orgasms of his life, his whole body going tense, legs stretching out, then kicking the air, toes splayed—a keening moan escaped him as he lost all control of his body, his whole world bending around the point of their joining, clutching harder at Keith, making more of that impossible pressure.

The basitin responded, wrapping himself tighter around Natani, his purring growing stronger and stronger until it filled Natani's world to bursting.

“Can you stand?”

Natani became aware, of himself, sprawled in the chair, and of Keith, sitting in his lap, looking at him with a smile on his face. Natani had been looking at him, too, but now he found his arms and wrapped them around the basitin's neck, pulling him closer. Natani licked his cheek, then nuzzled into his hair, against the base of his ear, taking in his scent. It was a very good scent.

Keith laughed. “Can. You. Stand?”

Natani sighed happily. His legs felt distant. “Probably not.”

“Well, can you help me get up?”

Natani let his hands roam across the basitin's back, settling into a loose embrace. “Why would you want to get up?”

Keith leaned away again, with some effort. His legs were still around Natani's lower back, and the toy probably still in him, though it felt like the harness had gotten loose. “Because this is getting uncomfortable.”

Now that the idea existed, Natani woke to all the little and not-so-little complaints his body was making. But he just looked at Keith, and after a moment the basitin gave a little shake of his head, with that same beautiful smile, then leaned back in to give Natani a kiss, tender as only Keith could be. Natani lingered on the kiss, feeling his own smile, then licked Keith's other cheek, making him squirm and laugh.

But yeah, the bed would be much better. “Let's see what we can do.”

With some difficulty, they managed to untangle themselves and Keith was able to get up, even if he was a little shaky on his wrapped feet. Natani watched as he stretched, not putting on a show this time, yet still utterly beautiful. And he was still at half-mast, even after how he'd blown earlier. He looked very lickable, and for a moment Natani thought about asking him to come closer, but he didn't want to start something he might not have the energy to finish. The early hour was catching up to him, big time.

Natani yawned, and Keith looked at him, amused. “Let's get you to bed.”

“You, too.” Natani smiled. “Pillow.”

“Yeah, yeah...” Keith started clearing the bed, moving the clothes there over to the table. “Can use it, too, after that.”

Natani fixed his posture in the chair, then leaned forward, elbows on knees, turning his head

to look at Keith. He felt worn down. "Yeah. You were amazing."

"I was? Natani..." Keith came to his side, raising one hand to Natani's head, to his ears. Natani closed his eyes with a smile, and soon felt Keith's other hand joining in. The basitin's every touch was a gentle caress. Natani could have used a proper scratching, too, but complaining was the farthest thing from his mind. He understood. He felt Keith getting closer, and opened his eyes again. The basitin's expression was an echo of his touches, pure love. He came closer still, crouching down next to Natani, his hands shifting to Natani's cheeks, speaking the same message in a different language. Keith kissed him, and Natani smiled wider.

The basitin shook his head, smiling. "How can I still be falling in love with you?"

Natani didn't have a clever response, so he just spoke the truth. "Because I love you so much that it keeps pulling you in."

"That's... what it feels like."

Honesty felt like just the thing. "That's what it's like for me."

For a moment, no words were possible. Keith leaned his head against Natani's shoulder, his arms sliding around his neck. Natani nuzzled into his hair, rubbing one of the basitin's ears with the side of his muzzle.

Slowly, Natani started leaning more of his weight into Keith, until the basitin laughed. "Need a hand?"

"I'll take one."

Somewhere in there, Natani's chest wrappings had gotten mostly undone, and as Keith helped him up they slipped off and fell to the floor, releasing his breasts. He let them be. Keith offered his support, and Natani leaned on him, not necessarily because he needed to, but because he could. They made their way to the bed, and Natani sat down hard near the edge, a grunt turning into a satisfied sigh. Soft. Soft was good.

He lifted one knee into bed, half-turning to face that way, then looked up at Keith, smiling. He was tired, but there was one more thing he wanted to do. "Lie down and give me your feet."

By his expression, Keith felt just a bit more in love with him again.

And that was how it was supposed to be.

Keith scooted into bed, then turned over onto his back to put his feet into Natani's lap. Natani started unwrapping him, keeping an eye on Keith's reactions. He wasn't trying to entice the basitin, and wasn't looking to start anything—he just wanted to do this for Keith. Another gesture of love. Of course, if it did start something... but Keith remained calm, apparently still sated enough from before that the touch was just a touch. Natani got the wrappings off, then ruffled the fur on the basitin's ankles before throwing the strips of cloth onto the footboard of the bed.

One slipped off.

Ah well.

Natani clambered into bed, on his hands and knees. Keith reached out to him, and Natani snuck into the basitin's arms, settling down beside him, laying his head on Keith's chest. He *had* asked for a pillow, so why not? After a moment, one of Keith's hands found his head, running through his hair for a few strokes before settling on his ears. This time, there was a bit more of a scratch to it, and Natani smiled against Keith's chest, settling in for good, letting his tail wag

lazily behind him.

He'd had the idea to wait for Keith to go to sleep first, but he was too tired, too content to worry that much. Keith wasn't about to sneak off, and he wasn't about to mope. Not with Natani there in his arms.

He still wrapped an arm around the basitin's midriff, holding him close. Just to make sure.

Just as Natani was drifting off, he felt a burst of elation from Zen, but his deep relaxation absorbed it, turning it into ripples that weren't enough to make him stir. Sleep called.

**

Zen was sitting on the couch, with a book in his lap, pretending to read. Occasionally, he even remembered to turn the page. But he spent more time looking at Maddie, sleeping curled up in the love-seat across from him. Somehow, he'd gotten a blanket on her without waking her up, so it was just the tip of her tail, a wrapped ankle, a sleeved arm—she was wearing civvies, for once—and her head poking out.

Zen just couldn't keep the smile off his face. She looked like an angel when she slept. And—

So what were you so happy about, earlier?

Zen sent his joy into the link. *She made me breakfast in bed!*

Ah. Natani's familiar amusement surrounded him. *I **thought** that was a little early for you to be awake.*

Agreement. Zen grew a little more serious. *I think she wanted the company. She hasn't been showing it, but I think she's nervous.*

More amusement, pointed at the sleeping figure. *So I see.*

Zen rolled his eyes. *She dozed off after lunch. I don't think she got a lot of sleep last night.*

Natani poked him for his memories of the day, and Zen gave him the overview. Natani absorbed them, then flashed to clarity in that way he had. *Ah. You didn't sleep together.*

No? Zen wouldn't have minded sharing a bed, but would Maddie really want to?

Oh, brother.... you should have made an excuse for her. Said you were feeling lonely in that big bed.

He hadn't been.

Okay, maybe a little.

She would have made so much fun of me.

But she would have come, and she would have slept better. And you wouldn't have had to spend an hour cleaning the kitchen.

Hey. I don't regret that breakfast.

Love. Of course you don't.

Would Maddie really have? Could it be that she had wanted to? Casting his mind back now, there had been a few threads of discussion throughout the previous days that *could* have been pointing in that direction. But they'd never shared a bed before, not just the two of them. It was only those rare times when Keith was out and Maddie was in, that they sometimes—or was it almost always? Zen furrowed his brow. Was it *always* always?—slept together in the big bed, all three of them. Like a family, if you didn't think too hard about it.

You really think she would have slept better?

She's sleeping right now, isn't she?

It was a good lunch.

There was a very tender feeling from Natani. *And you got that blanket on her.*

I... did, didn't I. Zen looked at the sleeping figure, and let just a bit of the love he felt flow into the link, acknowledging Natani's point, showing he wished he'd have realized it himself. *Thanks.*

Love, amusement. *Hey, what are sisters for?*

Making fun of their brothers, mostly.

That's how you know I love you.

Zen couldn't help but be touched by the sincerity. He smiled. *I thought that was telling me how to be happy.*

The amusement swelled. *You must be confusing me with your brother.*

Ah. How silly of me. I don't know how I could make that mistake.

Natani sent the idea of giving Zen a kiss on the forehead, complete with all the feelings behind it. It was impossible not to be caught and carried along with his mood, and Zen responded with ruffling his—her? *Natani's*—hair. For a few moments, the siblings tousled with each other in the link, pure enjoyment.

I take it the honeymoon is going well?

Natani's response was the purest, deepest happiness, scattered with images of Keith, some of which actually made Zen blush, and all of which made him yearn anew to see the basitin. To hold him close, to kiss him, to coax out some of those same expressions, and the ones that Keith made just for him... To team up with Natani, and pour out all their love, and to feel Keith respond...

Zen sighed, full of longing. But it was a longing made sweet by the promise of fulfillment. Not even hope, but certainty.

Natani was gentle. *You sure you don't want a few minutes with him?*

Of course he did. But he also wanted to wait. Unless... *It's still today, right? How's he doing?*

There was a moment of profound stillness, broken by a rueful sigh. Natani presented himself, making Zen fully aware of his appearance. He was immaculately groomed. Not a single strand of fur was out of place, and all of it had been brushed until he shone. Even his hair had been tamed, and was floating gently about his frame.

How on earth had Keith...

Natani still carried himself well, but there was just a tiny bit of awkwardness, of defiance, there. Daring Zen to say something. And sure, he could have teased. But Natani hadn't had to show him. That was worth honesty. *You look good.*

Natani looked for the barb in that, but there wasn't one. *It's... not exactly me, is it.*

No. But you can pull it off.

The feeling reverberated, and they could both feel something shifting; some old, buried, forgotten tangle between them had come loose, and was made right again, disappearing into smoothness. They shared their puzzlement; neither remembered what the cause had been.

But Natani stood easier now. *Well. Thanks.*

Zen had to be a *little* brotherly, though. *Now we just need to do something about your fashion sense, and you'll be halfway presentable.*

Natani grinned. *Hey, I've got way more fans than you do.*

And more than he wanted. Zen smiled. *Is Mike still being adorably awkward?*

Nah, he got over himself. Pause. Mostly. Sigh. It's so stupid. I even knew him. Not that we ever really talked or anything, but... y'know?

Zen liked the fox, not in small part because he was so taken with Natani. *He's a good guy. Cares about people.*

Yeah... Oh, you should ask him to make you some coffee. He's gotten pretty good.

Really? Nice. I thought he had the knack for it.

It seemed like Natani was about to say something else, but he abruptly halted, his expression slowly turning into a look of such tenderness that it had to have something to do with Keith. There were a few moments of love-filled distraction, and then Natani's attention returned to Zen. He was grinning. *Keith says he still loves you, even though you've been neglecting him.*

Zen laughed. *Is that his way of telling me not to worry?*

Natani's grin melted into a smile. *Yeah.*

Zen dipped into his love and longing to give his words more weight. *Tell him I'm going to show him just how much I love him when I see him.*

Natani relayed the message, coming back with a smile. *Is that a promise?*

It's a promise.

A few more moments, and then Natani returned fully, with a twinkle in his eye. *He says he's looking forward to it.*

Zen smiled. *He's really handling it well, huh.*

Yeah. He's a little nervous, but... Natani gestured at himself in all his groomed glory, then stuck his tongue out. Zen nodded. He knew how fine a line Keith must have walked, to get Natani to sit still for that. Tugging on his heartstrings in just the right ways. And if the basitin could do that, he was fine. It was only when he lost sight of himself that there was real cause for concern.

Hey, felt amazing, right? Keith really knew how to handle a brush.

Natani closed his eyes, sighing. *Yeah. It's just...* Natani showed Zen how it had felt for him, to just sit there and be taken care of. To be loved until his heart ached, and still do nothing. How the feeling built with every stroke of the brush, every look at Keith. Every look *from* Keith. And when it was finally done...

Zen's eyebrows rose. *You held it in?*

*Yeah. And then **he** kissed **me**. And I just...* That simple, gentle kiss had somehow been enough to sap all of that built-up charge, leaving Natani at ease, the relaxation leaving him loopy with Keith's love. The kiss had turned into playful nuzzling, muzzle to muzzle, Keith's smile matching Natani's, overjoyed. *...melted.*

Keith had gotten all the way through to him. Zen released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, and with the breath came his own joy, joining with the memory of Natani's, celebrating it. With that, came Zen's feelings about Natani and Keith; how the two of them were together. And from there—

Zen's feelings for Natani begun to unspool into the link. His breath caught again, but he let it happen, watching Natani carefully, but with an open heart.

His brother.

The partner he could trust without a thought.

His *little* brother, whom he loved to tease—and to be teased by, even if it made him a little gruff.

Off came the layers.

The one Zen had looked after, when he'd needed looking after—and ever since, because Natani's happiness meant the world to him.

The only family he'd had left.

His strength; the one he had lived for, when for himself, Zen would have laid down and died.

And...

His little sister, whom he'd do anything—*anything*—to save, to protect, to keep from harm.

No matter what.

Natani drew a ragged breath, his mouth working for a moment, only to close again. There were tears in his eyes. Finally, he released the breath, a wavering smile coming to his face, and for a moment, he felt very young. *You dork.*

Zen could breathe again, and the flood of relief brought his own tears. *I know that's not—*

Natani embraced him, with all his strength, and the words fell away as love answered love, every bit accounted for. Finally, Natani drew away, wiping tears from his eyes, his smile still shaky. *I swear. You two are going to turn me into mush.*

Zen wiped his own tears, flashing a grin. *I'm pretty sure that's what we want.*

Oh, I should probably— Natani ducked out for a moment to check on Keith, leaving Zen almost alone with his emotions. Slowly, he started packing them back into his heart... but not as tightly as before. Natani returned, smiling. *He's very confused, but I'm holding him so tight he's got no room for complaints.*

Zen laughed. *He's...*

Yeah.

Keith was why they could have this moment.

They recomposed themselves, sharing thoughts of the basin. And the feeling of him in Natani's arms, even if that was cheating a bit. And Zen may have borrowed Natani's body just enough to give Keith a squeeze of his own, and a whispered 'I love you.'

But no more than that.

Except to hear Keith's response.

Natani hadn't even needed to give way. They were so close, in that moment, in that intention, that two could fit where only one should. Not since the first moments of the link had their connection been so complete, and never before had they felt so easy with each other.

The thought was shared, and they both smiled, then grinned at having both smiled.

Zen sought to break the mirror. *When do you land?*

Natani chased the thought, starting to untangle himself. *Maybe two hours. But I don't know if anything will happen today. It's gonna be close to curfew, so maybe we're just going to get settled.*

Already? Zen glanced at the window. The day was overcast and promising rain, but not much past halfway over.

No long evenings here, remember. The sun goes straight up, and straight down. Natani found his own brand of amusement. Very orderly like that.

Huh. Right. Zen stuck his tongue out. Think some old King of theirs sorted that?

Probably. A smile. Or maybe it was Adelaide. I could see that.

Zen's eyes were drawn to Maddie. She was shifting a little in her sleep. Are you worried at all?

Mmm... a little. I haven't been thinking about it.

You never did tell me what was in those letters.

A brilliant flash of amusement. Some of it is private. Some of it you wouldn't want to see. And what's left... Grin. ...would just confuse you more.

I'll take your word for it. I just hope...

Natani joined him in looking at the sleeping Maddie. It won't be for nothing. No matter what.

I guess you're right.

Just— Natani suddenly smiled. Keith is starting to squirm. I think I should see to him. Any more messages?

Zen returned the smile. Nah. He knows.

Yeah. Natani nodded at Maddie. Take good care of her.

As good as she'll let me.

Natani answered with a very complicated sense of amusement that made Zen suddenly self-conscious. Natani followed it up by giving him a kiss on the forehead... then flashed to far simpler amusement, and grinned at him. She can't be very comfortable there, can she? You know how she sleeps.

Before Zen could react, Natani ruffled his hair, then disappeared, leaving only a lingering grin behind.

Dammit.

But... he was right. As cute as this was, a bed would be better.

Without thinking too much about it, Zen got up and went to Maddie's side, squatted down next to her, and started gently stroking her ears. After a while, her breathing changed, but she didn't open her eyes. Zen kept going.

Her ears were the softest thing.

Maddie let out a small sigh, then spoke, mumbly. "I'm not a baby."

Zen smiled, leaving her ears alone with one last touch. "No, but you were sleeping like one. Princess."

Now she opened her eyes, to give him a long-suffering look. Zen placed a kiss on her forehead. Maddie just looked at him for a moment, then laughed. "Okay, what's with the goofy look?"

"I... had a good talk with Natani."

Maddie's ears perked, and she shifted under the blanket, trying to stretch. "Did they get there?"

"No. Still a few hours out. Probably arriving too late for anything to happen today."

She settled back down. "Mm... I wouldn't be too sure. Mom will want to see them, so if there's

nothing bigger going on, she will. And she moves fast. And then there's Alaric..."

Zen watched her disappear into her own world, figuring out all the odds and angles. She was wide awake now, so maybe he'd botched this. His legs were starting to get tired, too, squatting next to her. "Maddie?"

"Hm?"

"Coffee or sleep?"

Three heartbeats, and she yawned. "I guess another nap wouldn't hurt. There's still time."

"Good, coz I was just thinking that I could use one." Zen worked his hands under Maddie, then stood, lifting her up, blanket and all. She made it easy on him, without looking like she was doing any such thing. And she did not protest as he carried her out of the living room, or past the door to the guest room. Natani really had been right. On reaching the master bedroom, Zen didn't as much lay Maddie down as roll her out, helped along with a pull at the blanket she'd gotten wrapped in. She settled into a sprawl in the middle of the big bed, taking more space than seemed possible. Zen grinned. "That's more like it. You were looking a little cooped up."

Maddie flopped onto her stomach, stretching out all her limbs, not coming anywhere near any of the edges. "I don't think I need *this* much space."

"That's good. Leaves some for me."

Zen pulled the curtains closed, leaving the room dimly lit. He glanced at Maddie, and, seeing no objection, took off his shirt and hung it up before sitting down on the edge of the bed. He stretched a bit and yawned, making more time for her to say something. She didn't, so he got into bed, taking his normal place. As he did, Maddie reeled herself in to make room for him, but didn't otherwise move away.

Zen stared at the ceiling for a moment. Should he?

Yes. Yes, he should.

He turned to his side, facing her, and raised an arm, welcoming. "C'mere, Princess."

Maddie's answer was an arched eyebrow and a skeptically cocked ear.

Zen grinned. "I figure if your head is here, you probably won't kick me in the face. Seems to work for Natani."

Maddie laughed, and drew closer. Zen kept his arm up, and with a few halts and a look at him, she eventually came all the way, touching her muzzle to Zen's chest briefly before backing off just the tiniest bit, her breath still tickling his chest. Zen let his arm down, catching Maddie in a loose embrace, and she shifted a little, settling in by his side. He heard a small sound, and thought she might have been taking his scent.

Zen shifted his arm more comfortably around her. "Do you miss Natani?"

"Mmm... not really. I love her, and it's always nice to see her, but it's not like..." She trailed off for a moment. "It's the same for her, right?" There was a bit of a grin in her voice. "She hasn't fallen for me or anything?"

The specifics of Natani's feelings for Maddie were something Natani kept to Natani's self, but it sounded right. "Yeah."

A moment of silence. "Do you... miss Keith?"

"I do. Very much. It's the longest I haven't seen him in years."

"You can't switch when it's so far?"

“We could. But it was a good opportunity, so I wanted to give them some time to just be... them.”

“Is this that thing that you do that Natani always complains about?”

Zen smiled. “Probably. But sometimes I’m right.”

“Huh.”

She didn’t have to sound so surprised.

The silence stretched, and Zen got to wondering if he’d missed a beat again. Maybe Maddie would have liked to talk to Natani, after all.

“Zen?”

“Hm?”

“Since you miss Keith... the ear thing... I... wouldn’t mind.”

Zen’s heart nearly burst, but he kept his voice even as he reached for Maddie’s ears. “That’s very thoughtful of you.” He touched her, gentle as could be, stroking along the length of her ears. Softly, softly...

Maddie sighed. “I’m still not a baby.”

Zen smiled. “I know.” But he didn’t change anything. Maddie sighed again, but the tone was more wistful. Zen kept it up, listening to her breathing grow calmer. He shifted a little to make himself more comfortable, and Maddie nuzzled into his chest, rubbing against him for a moment before settling down again. Zen could feel her relaxing against him, then feel the change as she slowly slipped away to sleep.

Still he kept stroking her ears.

Rain started pattering on the roof, the sound joining their breathing and the almost inaudible little noises Maddie made in her sleep.

He’d always liked the sound of rain on the roof, and now he would like it even more.

After a time, he could feel a deep rumble starting within Maddie.

She was purring.

Zen held her like she was the most precious thing in the world, because she was.

**

Outside, the last lines were tied, making the ship secure.

Far away, yet nearer than ever, Zen was sleeping, lightly, dreaming of guarding a treasure.

Natani found himself smiling. Good on them.

He opened his eyes and looked at Keith, sitting by him on the bed. Natani gave the basitin’s hand a squeeze. “Let’s go.”

Keith got up, letting go of Natani’s hand and taking a moment to adjust his clothing, and how his sword hung at his hip. The weight was not quite what he was used to. His outfit was as basic as the blade, unremarkable except for the insignia denoting his rank. No ostentations ambassadorial garb, not for the island. Nobody here would be impressed. And no armor, though he was dressed to fight. The only hindrance to speed was the brown cloak on his shoulders, and that could be shed in a hurry. At his best, he was too fast for Natani, and as he stood there, he looked at his best. The only thing ruining the prim and proper basitin look was the soft smile

directed at him.

Natani returned the smile and stood, patting himself down one more time to make sure he had everything. He nodded at Keith, and the basitin opened the door, leading the way. In the corridor they met Evald and Mike, coming the other way, the smaller fox leading the very willing dog by the hand. Natani smiled at them both, recognizing what they were about, and, for a wonder, even Evald returned the smile. He exchanged nods with the dog, and as they passed each other he felt a strange sense of camaraderie. Had something changed, or was it just his own mood? Keith's gaze lingered on the passing couple, a smile playing at his lips. Natani caught his eye, and they shared a moment of understanding, silently wishing good on all the lovers of the world.

Just before they reached the deck, Natani reached out and put his hand on Keith's shoulder. The basitin stopped, turning to look at him.

Natani smiled. "You know how we agreed we'd behave while we're here?"

"Yeah?"

He stroked along Keith's muzzle with a finger, bringing it under the basitin's chin to tilt his head up for a kiss.

Tender.

Lingering.

Natani smiled again, letting all the love shine through. "I'm going to be on you every chance I get."

Keith was blushing a little, his ears raised. "The law..."

"I know."

Keith nodded slowly, a little wary, wavering between concern and trust. Trust won, and he let out a long exhalation, returning Natani's smile. "Natani..." Keith got up on tiptoes to press his muzzle against Natani's cheek, and a warm shiver passed through the wolf as the basitin gave him a lick. "Thank you." Keith held the contact for another moment, then lowered himself. He was looking up at Natani, but he stood tall. "Let's do this thing."

On the deck, the city rose up before them, climbing and dipping and winding its way up to the walls of the castle, and the towers rising up beyond. And much higher still, on the side of the mountain, the King's Keep gleamed in the evening sun. The gulls and other sea birds were making a racket, hounding the fishing boats coming in, and on the air was more than just the endless scents of salt and sea—earth and stone, smoke and food, countless people living their lives.

Natani looked at Keith, trying to gauge his expression. "Home?"

A wistful smile. "No. Just a place where I used to live. Though..." Keith looked at him, and the wistfulness went away. "Yes, because you're here."

In normal circumstances, that would have drawn at least a kiss. But not far off, at the head of the gangplank, Kat was talking with an officious-looking basitin—probably the harbormaster—and even if Natani maneuvered Keith to hide them behind the mast, they would probably still have eyes on them, from another boat or the shore. They were in public.

So instead, Natani made to fix Keith's cloak, which was absolutely fine to begin with, and surreptitiously stroked the basitin's cheek with his thumb. And by Keith's expression, it did the

trick.

Keith touched the clasp of his cloak. "Thank you."

But his real response was in how he tilted his ears, just a bit, as he looked at Natani.

When the big gestures are off the table, the small ones grow to fill their place.

Keith looked at him for a moment longer before turning and approaching the gangplank. "Captain."

At Keith's interruption, the basitin official assumed a waiting position, expressive as a stone. Kat turned to look at Keith, amused at the formal tone. "Ah, Ambassador. Going ashore?"

Keith smiled. "As wonderful as your ship is, duty calls. But we'll be back. Zen is staying behind, and so are our belongings."

"I'll be sure to take good care of them."

"Please do."

Seizing the opening in the discussion, the presumed harbormaster cleared his throat. "General. The King's messenger is waiting for you."

He nodded to the pier, where a single basitin stood facing the foot of the gangplank, donned in the garb of a messenger, ears hanging low under his cap. If he was looking back at them, it wasn't obvious.

Keith's voice was neutral. "Then we'd best be off."

He shook hands with Kat, then went on to exchange nods with the basitin before moving on. Natani followed smoothly, first shaking Kat's hand—he would have rather hugged her, and the feeling was clearly mutual, so the weirdness of it became something fun—then nodding at the basitin and wishing him a good evening. In Basitin. The man's response came a second or two late, after Natani was already past, so he looked back and waved in acknowledgement. The basitin looked genuinely surprised.

When they were midway down the gangplank, Natani spoke to Keith under his breath. "That *was* the right phrase, right?"

"Yeah. A little friendly, but I think that's what you meant."

"Yeah."

They stepped on the dock—wood, but very solid—and the world stopped moving with the waves, jarring after so long on the sea. They took a moment to adjust. Theirs was the only ship moored here, and on the dock itself there was only the solitary messenger, but on land, some ways off, there was a small crowd. Some seemed like they were just going about their business, perhaps heading home near the end of the day, but others were clearly looking their way. Natani saw Keith take them in, and, with a sigh, adjust his sword on his hip before approaching the Messenger.

The Messenger was waiting politely, his hands folded before him, never quite looking up at them, radiating polite deference. So very unlike himself. Nickolai Alaric, hiding in plain sight. If Natani hadn't already known, his eyes might not have told him.

Keith betrayed little, and nothing to anyone who didn't know him intimately. "Messenger."

Alaric bowed. "General. I am Nickolai, messenger to the King. She requests your and your partners' presence. Today if convenient, first thing tomorrow if not."

"You share a name with the previous Master General."

“Yes. The King finds that quite amusing. Some have even said that we look alike, though I have never been able to see it myself.”

Keith pretended to consider. “Well, he had the scar... but when he was younger, perhaps.” He scrutinized Alaric for a moment longer. “Of course, one does not inquire about the lineage of a messenger.”

Alaric bowed again. “Of course. Especially when one thinks one already knows.”

Keith grimaced, then glanced at Natani, rueful. “I guess I had that coming.”

Natani grinned. “Yeah, you did.” And to Alaric, in Basitin. “Please do not mind my idiot husband.”

Alaric looked at him, and Natani thought he saw a flash of genuine amusement, though it was quickly buried under the more obsequious sort. “Master Natani, I assume? I did not realize you spoke our language.”

“Only a little, I’m afraid.”

“Your pronunciation is quite good.”

“Thank you.”

Natani liked Basitin a lot more than he liked Human, but the language was completely unnecessary on the mainland. Hells, it wasn’t even all that necessary on the island, since the average basitin knew the other languages well enough to get on. And of course, there was no such thing as a basitin book on magic.

So it wasn’t the most useful of languages.

But it had been more than worth it, to be able to whisper ‘I love you’ to Keith in his mother tongue. And it had sort of... gone from there.

Keith was looking at him, and Natani could tell he was torn between being called an idiot, and a husband. “I’m not sure how to feel about you knowing that particular expression.”

Natani grinned. “I asked Maddie to teach me anything she thought might come in handy.”

Keith sighed. “Ah. Of course.”

“You have a very good subordinate, husband dearest.”

Keith’s ears quivered. “... yes, I do.”

Alaric cleared his throat. “Will you be answering the summons now?”

Keith rallied. “Ah, yes.”

“And Master Zen?”

“He is... indisposed at the moment.”

“Very well. If you have everything you need...?” An almost imperceptible glance at Natani’s neck, where a mana necklace might have hung. But Natani’s crystals were all secreted away in his vest, and the small leather pouch hung tight against the base of his tail under his clothes.

Alaric would have appreciated that.

“We do.” Keith looked at the crowd milling about on land. It had gotten larger.

“Well then, if you will lead...”

Keith did, and Alaric and Natani fell in. When they started moving, there was a change in the crowd, some basitins rising to heightened attention, others falling back. Most proved to be spectators or hangers-on, but Natani still counted over a dozen who were now intently watching Keith, forming a loose semi-circle around the foot of the dock.

Prospective challengers. At least Ariana wasn't there. In fact, Natani saw nobody he recognized, either in the challengers or in the crowd.

Keith reached the end of the dock, then took a few more steps before coming to a stop, looking the challengers-to-be over, giving off his best air of I-don't-have-time-for-this-bullshit. The assembled combatants cast glances at each other, some clearly deferring, until only three still looked like they wanted to go first. A few more moments, and two of them grudgingly turned aside, leaving just the one. A sergeant, by his insignia, and maybe a decade older than Keith. He was half a head taller, too, and had a strong build. Heavy armor, worn with use, well cared for.

Just when it seemed decided, the Sergeant looked away for a moment, to somewhere in the crowd. Natani couldn't follow his gaze, but he soon turned back, stepping forward to face Keith.

"Keith Keiser!"

The language was formal, and went over Natani's head, but he recognized the set phrase 'strength befitting a general.' Coupled with the fact the the man hadn't given Keith his title... it was as Keith had expected. They didn't want his position; they wanted him to prove he was fit to hold it.

The full qualifications for the position of Ambassador General were rather complicated, and while fighting strength didn't quite directly figure into them—same as with the Intelligence General—strength also wasn't explicitly *excluded* from the requirements. And unlike the Intelligence General, the Ambassador represented their people to the world. Strength mattered to these people, and they had never seen Keith fight.

Keith would have been the first to agree that he hadn't deserved the position, for that reason and more. But that was then. Keith responded to the challenge, in what seemed to Natani less than polite terms. The Sergeant hunkered a little, though whether as a reaction or just to take his stance, Natani could not say. Keith drew first, but did not assume his position, instead turning his head to look at Natani.

It would have been nice if he'd been wrong about needing to fight.

Natani nodded to Keith, then moved aside with Alaric, leaving the duelists their customary ten paces. He sat down on the edge of a bollard to watch, keeping his back to the sea. The crowd was calm, with none of the rowdiness or hooting one might have expected from keidran or humans. Some chatted amongst themselves quietly, but all had their eyes on the combatants. As far as Natani could tell, nobody spared as much as a glance at him.

The Sergeant had drawn his weapon, electing to go with a single sword to match Keith, though he'd had options. Keith still hadn't taken a combat stance, not offering even that measure of respect, instead standing at ease, his sword pointing out to the side, looking at the man with clear disdain. Everything about him said that he held the challenge beneath contempt.

Natani sighed quietly to himself.

The Sergeant approached slowly, unfazed. He raised his sword, and as he made range, in what could only be a provocation of his own, he opened with the most basic thrust in all of Basitin Standard. Testing a new pupil. With a flash of grim amusement, Keith parried, then skipped ahead a few years in the curriculum and went from there, taking the offensive. The Sergeant acquitted himself well, meeting every attack correctly, but Keith gave him no room to reverse the flow.

Natani let himself relax, and took a moment to scan the audience. The mood had shifted a bit, and there were some nods of appreciation.

Keith kept speeding up as he worked his way through the forms. By the time he was approaching mastery, the Sergeant was struggling to keep up. Keith went faster again, now leaving clear holes in his tempo, creating opening after opening that he could have used but did not. Provoking the man. Natani wasn't sure what he was working towards; the Sergeant's armor was formidable, but his helmet left his chin uncovered, so Natani kept expecting Keith to take his speed advantage and go in for a punch. One solid uppercut ought to do it, and it seemed like the cleanest way to end it without risking serious injury. But Keith just kept pushing, and finally the man took the bait, going for a big swing, all finesse forgotten, trusting in his strength and his armor.

Keith caught the swing with his sword, not giving an inch, and Natani could feel the steel strain through the web of the enchantment holding the blade together. They went crossguard to crossguard, and Keith dug his feet in, stopping his opponent's charge, then pushing him back a step. Another. The Sergeant rallied, not willing to lose on pure brawn, and pushed back with all his might—

Ah.

Keith let him come, then pushed his sword aside to get inside his guard, dipping down to get under him... and lifted, *threw* the man, with all his strength, lofting him clear into the harbor. As the Sergeant briefly hung in the air, Natani caught the look of unalloyed admiration on his face and thought he might rather like the man after all.

The Sergeant landed in the sea with a massive crash.

Keith stepped closer to the edge of the dock and stood there, face expressionless, eyes cold, gripping the hilt of his sword. But Natani knew that he was thinking about whether he needed to jump in after the guy, and how that would rather ruin the scene.

Thankfully, the Sergeant seemed to be a hell of a swimmer. After a moment, Natani saw Keith's hand relax, just a smidge.

The crowd was still silent. The duel was over, but not concluded. Natani looked at them, then at Keith. Somewhere behind him, the Sergeant broke the surface with a massive gasp.

Natani turned to Alaric, and spoke quietly. "You strike me as someone who's knowledgeable about the law. There's something I've been wondering about..."

A few minutes later, the Sergeant hauled himself up the side of the pier, still in his full armor, water streaming off of him. As soon as he got on level ground, he collapsed, panting raggedly. Still, it only took him a few moments to gather himself enough to force himself up on one knee, and remove his helmet. There was a fish in it. He didn't look up, so it was probably only Natani and Alaric who were close enough to see Keith's expression soften. For a moment.

The Sergeant tried to speak, went into a coughing fit, then tried again. "General."

Keith looked at him for a moment, then sheathed his sword. His expression thawed. "Sergeant. Someone else might have left the armor."

The Sergeant struggled to his feet, and Natani was rather impressed that he managed to

stand at attention. "It's my father's armor, sir. Sooner let the fish have me."

Keith looked at him for a long moment. "Your strength honors him."

Natani was probably the only one who understood just how far that was from what Keith wanted to say.

"Thank you, sir."

Keith gave him a nod, and with that, it was done. The Sergeant, at ease, half-collapsed against the nearest bollard just as Natani got off the one he'd been leaning against. The other challengers had clearly lost interest, and while the crowd wasn't yet dispersing, some of its attention had turned inward. All eyes weren't on Keith anymore.

It was now or never.

Natani walked up to Keith, and put his hand on the basitin's shoulder. Keith just had time to realize what he was about to do as Natani repeated his gesture from the ship, stroking along Keith's muzzle to cup his chin and tilt his head up for a kiss.

Keith tensed, but Natani offered reassurance, and after a breathless moment Keith took it, letting himself be eased into the kiss. Natani used the opportunity to let his magic course through the basitin, looking for hurts to heal. He found none. Keith recognized the sensation and smiled, and Natani let that break the kiss. Murmuring from the crowd was starting to reach him, and, legal or not, he wasn't sure how far to push it.

Natani looked Keith in the eyes, but spoke loudly enough to be heard a ways off. "The kiss of victory."

Keith caught on, but his answer was quieter. "That's usually..."

Just a whisper, now. "I know."

Natani very deliberately didn't look at the crowd, though he kept all his senses peeled in case of trouble.

None seemed to be coming.

A demure clearing of a throat drew their attention to the Sergeant, who'd had a front-row seat from his bollard. The man was blushing. "I fear I was too modest an opponent for such a reward."

Natani smiled at him. "Oh, but that was a very modest kiss."

The blush reached all the way to his ears. "Ah, if you say so, sir."

Sir, even! Natani's position in the basitin hierarchy was a very nebulous thing, and doubtless this was just a reflection of the man's new esteem for Keith. But still... "Have you ever considered a tour at Wreathwood?"

"I... can't imagine the General would want me, sir."

Keith looked at Natani, then at the Sergeant. None of the Slighted General remained; this was the real Keith, now. "I... would, actually. You might be just the man we need to hold the kitchen."

"The... kitchen, sir?"

"The tactical situation gets pretty complicated around lunch." Keith smiled at the man's bafflement. "Wreathwood is a pretty unique posting. But... I think you might have what it takes, one way or another."

As the Sergeant was mulling that over, Natani shifted his footing to get a glance at the crowd. He was expecting to see residual awkwardness or disapproval, but the gathered basitins were all

business again. Another challenger had stepped forward, and was waiting for Keith to finish with the Sergeant. A lieutenant, this time. Perhaps in his late thirties.

He was holding two spears.

Natani kept his tone neutral. "Can I take the next one?"

"Huh?" Keith turned to Natani, then saw the man.

Natani grinned. "I kinda wanna see which of us can throw farther."

Keith looked at Natani, and Natani could tell that the basitin saw straight through him, and how much the gesture meant to him. Keith still didn't miss a beat, but Natani could hear the love in his voice. "That's hardly fair. He isn't wearing heavy armor."

"He's a lieutenant, though. I figure it balances out."

"Well, maybe..." Keith looked at the Sergeant. "How strong is he?"

"In the Twenty, sir. Near the Ten."

Keith nodded, then looked again at the challenger. "Sorry, Natani. I think I should take this one."

"You just want another kiss."

Keith looked at him, and there was the love again. "I... do, actually."

Natani smiled. "So go kick his ass."

Keith returned the smile, and held it for a moment longer before growing serious again. He unfastened his cloak and handed it to Natani, then turned to meet the challenger. Natani folded the cloak in his arms, and watched Keith saunter forth, one hand resting on the pommel of his sword. This was the good-humored General, deigning to go along with a challenge.

Before the Lieutenant launched into his spiel, Keith pre-empted him. "So I suppose you want to see how I'm with a spear, now?"

"Yes, sir."

Well, at least he said 'sir'.

"In the Twenty, are you?"

"Yes, sir."

Keith scratched at his chin. "Well then, how about we make this a bit more even. Your spear against my sword."

The crowd went quiet. That handicap, to someone of the Lieutenant's strength, was bordering on an insult.

But of course, Keith *was* a general.

"Sir, I—"

"Or perhaps I should go unarmed?"

Good-humored, but with a layer of steel underneath.

The man looked at Keith, his face inscrutable, at least to Natani. "Very well, sir. My spear against your sword."

Keith nodded, and took a few more steps away from the water, the crowd shuffling around as he shifted their arena. Natani backed up to the water's edge, next to the Sergeant. The man made to vacate his seat on the bollard, but Natani shook his head and he settled back down. On Natani's other side was Alaric, an image of stolid patience, waiting with his arms folded. Nobody else was close enough to hear.

“So, is this who you looked at before you fought?”

“Ah, yes, sir.”

The Sergeant didn't seem too startled. Natani nodded to himself. “Because it would be a bigger embarrassment to lose to a sergeant?”

“I... couldn't say, sir.”

A few other possibilities came to mind. It could have been to try and wear Keith down a bit, or just to see how he'd react. Or even to better establish his strength. Losing to a high-ranked lieutenant might not even really be a problem...

At any rate, this was starting to feel like something someone had put thought into. Alaric would probably have a good idea who and why... and of course, it was possible *he* was the one behind it. He would certainly have an interest in who Keith fought. But... spears? Would Alaric do that?

Perhaps he would. Natani didn't look at him. There was no way to couch this as a legal question, and at any rate, Keith was about to fight. How strong was a top twenty lieutenant? The only trick they'd prepared was that broken old sword, held together with magic, that Natani could break at will. Time it right, and it would let Keith force the fight to continue unarmed. But they had only agreed on signals for an even fight, sword against sword, and none of them would really work if the opponent had a spear.

Keith had better know what he was doing.

The combatants had found their spacing, facing each other along the pier. The crowd formed something like a three-quarter circle around them, with Natani and his two companions at the center of the gap. He didn't know if that meant anything more than people being unwilling to stand where ‘getting out of the way’ meant ‘going for a swim’, but it worked for him.

All eyes were on the duelists. The Lieutenant was at the ready.

Keith drew; no flourish, but his sword caught the sun anyway. He took his stance, and two heartbeats later the Lieutenant lunged, driving a thrust at Keith's upper body. Keith deflected it, metal ringing on metal, and stepped in on the Lieutenant's backhand side. The man adjusted immediately, leaving no opening, and they were off, a fierce dance of sword and spear. The Lieutenant pushed hard, using every advantage of his reach, but Keith answered with his sword and his speed, forms meeting forms, weaving a defense that held the assault at bay. Natani could see Keith settling in, getting into the man's tempo, and released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. The Lieutenant was strong—the strongest he'd ever seen with a spear—but he didn't have an edge.

Keith had gotten the Lieutenant's measure, and was adjusting to fighting him, his movements getting smaller and more precise as he honed his understanding of his opponent. It was the dirty secret of Basitin Standard that, despite the ideal, there were no Standard Basitins to practice it, and so at the higher levels things started becoming more fluid, based on the idiosyncracies of the individuals. And so, while a sword doesn't beat a spear as a rule, a specific sword may yet beat a specific spear in specific circumstances. Natani could see Keith trying, pushing his knowledge, searching for a sequence that ended in victory. But while he got advantage a few times, the opponent was too skilled, too aware of his own scant weaknesses, for Keith to overcome the weapon disadvantage. He could push the forms to make what should be a loss into a draw, but

no farther.

But Basitin Standard wasn't all Keith had. Natani saw him smile, and knew it was about to end. Keith pushed his next advantage hard, to within half a step of victory, then farther, overextending—and as his opponent tried to punish, for just a moment, Keith went beyond the forms.

The shaft of the Lieutenant's spear hit the ground with a reverberating crack, then bounced back to clatter, the tip pinned down by Keith's foot. The Lieutenant crouched over his weapon, pulled down before he let go, Keith's sword at his throat.

Keith held the pose for a moment, then withdrew his sword, sheathing it in the same motion. He stepped off his opponent's spear. "Good fight, Lieutenant."

The man bowed his head. "General."

Still there was no cheering, but that was simply the basitin way. Natani scanned the crowd, and could not find a single pair of ears that didn't look impressed. General Keiser had just become real. Many, especially among those in uniform, were saluting. Keith was looking at the crowd as well, returning nods, acknowledging the salutes, putting people at ease. Still the general, but mellowing into himself. The Lieutenant picked up his weapon and disappeared into the crowd, leaving Keith alone at the center of attention.

Natani had been ready to go out there and give him that kiss, but now he hesitated. He knew what it was like to get the people behind you. And this was more than that. For Keith, this was like the homecoming he'd once dreamed of. That he might have had, if not for Templar plots and Alabaster's mad hatred.

Respect. Admiration. Recognition.

And if Natani went out there, that would change.

Should he really do that, when he could just wait until they were more private?

Keith turned to look at him, and Natani had his answer. He handed Keith's cloak to Alaric and started forward, setting his misgivings aside. Steady. Confident. If you're going to do a thing, you might as well do it right. The crowd's attention was drawn to him, and while he kept his eyes on Keith he could still pick out some looks of alarm, and of embarrassed expectation. The murmuring started before he even got to Keith. When he did, he could feel that all the eyes were either on them, or deliberately averted.

But he didn't pay it any mind. He just kissed his husband, as one does. And he had no intention of cutting it short this time. As long as he didn't break contact, it counted as a single kiss...

Keith was expecting it, this time, so there was no tension to overcome, but Natani soothed him anyway, just in case he was more nervous than he was showing. Keith's answer was gratitude, for the worry, and mischief, to say it was needless. Natani piled on the love in response. Keith made a small sound, and put his hand on Natani's chest, not to push him away, but to ask for more. Natani gave it, and again looked for injuries. There was nothing significant, but Keith had pushed himself, and Natani eased some of the strain, yielding more gratitude.

He wasn't so lost in the kiss that he'd forgotten his surroundings; he was just pretending he had. The murmuring had died down, but now he could hear steps approaching from behind. Probably Alaric, rather than the Sergeant. The steps stopped, and a throat was cleared. Very

primly.

Natani waited for the second throat clear, then started to break the kiss, withdrawing slowly. For a brief moment, Keith drew on tiptoes after him, leaning against his chest, lingering.

Muzzle fell away from muzzle.

Natani cleared his throat. "The kiss of victory."

Keith let out a breath and opened his eyes, and it was pure Keith. No facade at all. Natani's heart caught at the sight. This wasn't really a time for Keith to be showing softness, and he didn't have to. Natani hadn't kissed him *that* thoroughly. No, this was for Natani's benefit, and the message was very clear. Anything this cost him wasn't worth having.

Natani nodded, and felt Keith give his chest one more brief press, right above the heart, before letting his arm drop.

"Your cloak, General."

Alaric was offering up the garment, poker-faced as ever, but Natani noted with some amusement that his hat was a little askew.

"Thank you."

Natani looked around for other reactions. The crowd had thinned a little, and he could see people moving away, but all around them was a sea of awkward and embarrassed ears. They'd had quite an audience all the way to the end. He didn't find anyone he'd say looked approving, exactly, but it was far from the most hostile crowd he'd faced. Most were just uncomfortable and embarrassed, and Natani smiled at them, neither apologizing nor mocking. The ones that were purely flustered, like the Sergeant—again!—he blessed silently in his heart, as he did the rare few who looked thoughtful. Though perhaps they were just the scheming types, too busy for outrage. And then there were the angry ones; some near smoldering, some hard-faced and cold, men and women who had seen What Should Not Be. Natani nodded at them as he found them.

Yes, I see you.

No, I don't care.

He looked for the Lieutenant as well, but could not find him. People were starting to peel off in numbers now, as it became increasingly clear that there was nothing more left to see.

At the last, he looked back to Keith, still by his side, wearing his cloak again. They exchanged smiles. No regrets.

"Shall we?"

"Let's."

As they set off, Natani wondered briefly if linking arms would have been okay. He couldn't think of a specific prohibition to it... but it wasn't something they normally did, anyway, and he preferred to have both of his hands free. It had been a while now since anyone had tried to kill him in a crowd, but some habits die hard. Though, in a city with few or no mages, there wasn't much need to be alert.

And basitins weren't exactly known for shanking people, anyway.

He did draw eyes as they moved through the crowds, but it would have been odd not to, being a head taller than almost everyone else. And a different race. Mostly they paid him no mind, or quickly dismissed him. Some looked back after finding Keith by his side. A few blushed, and he grinned at them, friendly. After a while Keith got tired of the reactions the Ambassador General

was getting, and hid his insignia. Quickly, nobody paid them much mind at all. People would notice Natani, see that he was with a basitin and a messenger, and their eyes would slide right off again. Natani was startled to realize that none of them recognized *him*. He was in a city full of people that had no idea who he was.

He rather liked that.

They were passing through a market square—some of the vendors were already packing it in, but it was still pretty busy—when one particular stall caught Natani’s eye. Ice cream on a stick. One of the three great basitin inventions. He pulled Keith up short, and pointed.

Keith laughed. “One does not usually stop for ice cream when answering a summons.”

Natani stuck his tongue out. “Who said anything about stopping? We can eat while we walk.”

“Fine, fine. But I’m good.”

They were at the stall now. “You sure?”

Keith nodded, so Natani just bought one for himself. He smiled at the vendor’s surprise as he collected his change and the ice cream bar. People *really* didn’t expect him to speak any basitin.

“Oh, this is really good.”

Keith, already starting to move away, turned back with an amused look. “Oh?”

Natani took another lick. “Yeah, even better than in Wreathwood.” He smiled, extending the bar towards Keith. “See for yourself.”

Keith did, biting off a bit of the tip. “Oh, you’re right.” He licked his lips. “Maybe I’ll get one after all.”

Keith chatted up the now rather flustered vendor, and Natani’s eyes went to Alaric. He was still deadpan, but he *was* looking at the ice cream in Natani’s hand. “Oh, do you want one too?” Natani grinned. “A bar, I mean. Not a taste.”

“One does not usually offer a messenger food.”

“Well, this one does. Least we can do for your having to put up with our nonsense.”

To Natani’s considerable amusement, it looked like he had Alaric—or at least this persona of him—speechless.

He got an even better idea. “Actually, does the *King* like ice cream?”

“I... believe she does, yes?”

“It’s settled, then.”

As soon as Keith had his bar, Natani went again, this time buying two and giving the vendor a tip for the hassle. Natani handed one to Alaric, who reluctantly took it, then wrapped the other in a tight shell of air. That would let it keep its own temperature. He probably looked insane pocketing some ice cream, but ah well.

They started walking again. Keith took a small bite of his ice cream, then looked at Natani from the corner of his eye. “Mmm... yours was better.”

“Oh? Wanna switch?”

They did, and Alaric muttered something under his breath.

“What was that?”

“I was just saying that it is quite a lot of nonsense, sir.”

Natani just grinned, and Alaric took a very restrained lick of his ice cream. Somehow, he’d managed to make even that prim. Natani shook his head, then glanced back. It looked like the

vendor might do quite a bit of business from people coming by to see what that all had been about.

The ice cream really did taste a little different; that part hadn't been a ruse. And watching Keith's expression as he ate his, Natani remembered how he'd seemed a little disappointed that first time they'd had some in Wreathwood. Natani smiled to himself, watching Keith reclaim a bit of his youth. Memory was a funny thing.

Even after all that was left of their ice creams was the stick that Natani was chewing on, there was still a change in Keith; in how he walked, how his eyes lingered on some of the buildings they passed, in the tilt of his ears... When they came to one particular crossroads, a smaller street branching off the thoroughfare they were on, Keith slowly came to a stop.

He spoke softly, looking down the street. "There's a park, not far from here. I used to play there, a long time ago. With a friend."

"Wanna go check it out?"

He shook his head. "We don't have the time."

They started moving again. "Tomorrow? I'm sure Zen would like to see it, too."

Keith looked at him, another one of those silent I-love-you's he was so good at. "You want to go sightseeing?"

"Yeah. Anything you want to show me." Natani grinned. "Maybe some of the stuff you don't." He let the grin fade. "And... the graveyard. I want to pay my respects to your parents."

Keith stopped dead in his tracks. "Natani..."

"Yeah."

He knew.

It wasn't a joke to him that they were married.

Even if they rarely took it seriously.

Keith's voice was quiet. "Zen too?"

"Of course."

Keith's smile was a wavering thing as he reached out to touch Natani's cheek. "You keep finding ways."

The whole display must have been quite indecent, but Alaric didn't even hem.

Keith's smile solidified into incredulous amusement. "What are my parents going to think?"

Natani grinned. "Wouldn't your mom be all for it? And what's your dad got to complain about, exactly?" He stuck his tongue out. "You outdoing him?"

Keith laughed, and they started moving again. The streets were mostly empty now, people having either made it home, or gotten past them heading outward.

It wasn't a bad looking city at all, and Keith's expression made it beautiful. Natani cleared his throat. "You know, I wouldn't mind spending some time here. Really get to know the place."

Keith looked at him, but didn't say anything. The slightly sad smile was enough.

Natani's smile wasn't sad at all. "The reception could have been a lot worse, you know. And I'm not saying I want to live here... though who knows, maybe that'd be worth a shot."

They were Keith's people, after all. And if flirting in public meant sitting with your ankles a

little too close together... well, that was just charming, in a way. If they could make a place for themselves here, then maybe...

"Are you imagining you and me and Zen strolling through the streets, arm in arm?"

"Well, you'd need one hand free for the ice cream, obviously."

Keith laughed again, and shook his head. "I was just thinking how I feel like having some of the Wreathwood stuff now, actually."

"So, what, you think you might be able to squeak by with one keidran husband, but two is just too much?" Natani grinned. "I think that might be just the thing, really, to push it over the edge and make people throw up their hands."

A quirky smile. "I can kinda see that, actually. But..."

Keith trailed off, and Natani let him think. He had that expression that said he knew how he felt, but wasn't sure why.

A few blocks later, Keith continued. "Even if that's true... even if we could get away with that, because I'm the Ambassador General, and we can both throw people in the harbor—"

"And Zen is charming."

Keith smiled. "—and Zen is charming, is that okay? Take that sergeant back there. Say he wants a keidran beau of his own—"

"Picked up on that, huh?"

"I'm not saying he does. But if he did, am I going to say to him, 'Become the Ambassador General'? Or am I going to say 'Come to Wreathwood'?—"

"Which you pretty much did."

"—which I pretty much did, yes." Keith sighed, but it was all theatrics. "Would you stop interrupting?"

Natani stuck his tongue out in response, complete with the thoroughly chewed ice cream stick.

"The point is, the answer can't be 'Be strong enough to beat others', because then, what happens to the others? And if the answer is Wreathwood for him... then it has to be Wreathwood for me, as well."

Natani nodded slowly. When he put it that way... maybe this never *would* be home for Keith again. Natani wouldn't have gone back to the wolves either, under the old ways. Still wouldn't, even if for rather different reasons. And did he miss it? No.

But something told him that this mattered. And while this was where Keith had been a child... maybe they weren't his only people. His mother had been a Western basitin. Maybe Keith had grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins...

Maybe there was a place for him where those objections didn't hold. And if so...

A familiar building caught Natani's eye. "Is that the bathhouse from back then?"

"Ah... yeah."

Natani grinned. "You can add that to the places I want to visit."

Keith glanced at him sideways, his look full of quiet glee. "You want another bath? Already?"

Natani couldn't even scoff; he'd walked right into that one. And as his mind flashed back to Keith gently brushing his fur...

Maybe... maybe he really did.

Natani gave Keith her best smile. Let him wonder.

Keith nearly tripped over his feet, and Natani laughed. "Can we actually go in together?"

"I'm... not actually sure. That's a question for the legal scholars."

Alaric cleared his throat. "I have been briefed on the situation. You indeed could. Though if I may say so, sir, a private bath might be advisable. Especially if there is a chance that you might not... behave. And of course, you need not depend on a public bathhouse. Accommodations have been prepared for you at the castle."

A smile flickered on Keith's face, then faded. "Speaking of getting away with things..." He looked back at the bathhouse. "If you were a woman, basitin or otherwise, I *wouldn't* be able to go in there with you. We wouldn't even be able to live together." He smiled his sad little smile again, and looked at Natani. "So where does that leave almost everyone?"

Natani looked back down the street, and over the sea of roofs stretching toward the harbor.

He scratched at his chin.

"We might need a bigger city."

Keith laughed, and Natani loved that he did.

They started walking again, and Natani wondered if there was anything to the joke. There weren't really any basitins who *lived* in Wreathwood, at least officially. Was there any way to change that?

Keith smiled at him. "I know that look. Very few people would come. Maybe none."

"Why is that?"

"Because it would mean failing at being a basitin."

"And why is *that*?"

Keith looked toward the castle, not far now. "I'm still trying to figure that one out."

They walked the next while in silence. As the walls grew ever closer, Keith revealed his insignia again. Natani noticed his hand going to his sword a few times, adjusting how it hung at his hip.

When they came at last to the bridge connecting to the castle, Keith breathed a sigh of relief. "I was half-expecting someone to be waiting to challenge me here."

Ah. It was the middle bridge of the three. The same one Keith and Alaric had fought on. But there was nobody on it.

They started across, and Alaric spoke quietly, breaking character for the first time. "Ariana was thinking about it, but she's gone to the front. You should expect it when she returns."

Keith shook his head, not that they hadn't been expecting it. "Is she *still* looking for scars?"

"Alas, yes."

Basitins.

Alaric almost smiled. "That Lieutenant was one of hers, and what you did to him isn't going to make her any *less* interested in fighting you."

"Hers?"

"So to speak. She's officially the Arms General's First Lieutenant now, but widely considered strong enough to challenge. Including by the Arms General."

Keith nodded, as if that made sense. Ariana *not* challenging someone strong?

Natani raised his eyebrows. "So why doesn't she?"

They were nearing the castle gate, and it was Keith that answered. "Because her father is still the Master General. It's not quite law that a parent and child can't hold two of the seats, but... there's bad precedent."

Natani grinned. "So I guess you don't have to worry about her taking your position, even if she kicks your ass again."

Keith laughed. "Probably not. I doubt she wants to be anything other than Arms, anyway. Maybe Master."

They passed the guards, Natani trying out his Basitin again for a cheerful 'good evening', and entered the castle. Alaric took the lead, making a beeline through the yard and into a doorway. Natani had no memory of the layout; perhaps he'd never passed through these parts. A few turns along a corridor brought them to another door, opening into a grand hall. But it was empty, and they passed straight through, emerging into a covered walkway that periodically opened onto courtyards on both sides. Curiously, Keith seemed to be darting glances at each as they passed...

Keith froze, just for a heartbeat, and Natani followed his gaze.

Was that...?

With a huge grin, Natani strode into the courtyard. A beat later, he could hear the basitins trailing after him. At the very center of the open space, on a plinth, stood a statue of Keith, standing tall, one hand resting on the pommel of his sword as if it were a cane. The statue was naked—well, except for the ankles, which were exquisitely wrapped—and *exceedingly* anatomically correct.

Natani rounded on Keith, tail wagging, so full of mirth that he didn't even have a line; he just gestured at the statue as if he was presenting treasure. Keith was scratching at the back of his head, a radiant blush on his face as his eyes kept darting to the statue, but he managed a wavering smile at Natani's reaction.

Alaric interjected, still stonefaced, but with just a hint of a gleam in his eyes. "Ah, yes. A piece by the late General Alaric. I believe it is titled 'Standing Proud'."

Natani let out a long breath. "Well."

Keith cleared his throat. "Well."

Alaric went on. "There were some concerns, but as it was the only piece of statuary available of our new Ambassador General, the decision was eventually made to erect it here to commemorate his rise."

His rise. Natani could barely breathe for joy. "It's certainly a... monumental erection."

"Yes, sir. It's proven quite popular with the youths. I understand there's a custom of rubbing it for good luck."

It was taking everything Natani had not to laugh until he cried. His own voice sounded distant to him. "That would explain the shininess."

Alaric had apparently exhausted his fun facts for the moment, and Natani could only admire his poker face. Keith looked to be dying. Natani took a moment to compose himself, looking up at the darkening sky, taking in the unfamiliar fragrances in the air, unusually aware of everything, even of how solid the stone felt beneath his feet.

There was such beauty in the world.

He looked back at the statue, and let out a long breath. He spoke the words very precisely.

"The penis is immaculately sculpted."

Keith groaned, and sunk into a squat.

"It's funny you should say that, sir. Apparently it was touched up some time ago, in the middle of the night. Quite mysterious."

What a world. There was that breathlessness again. "Well, it certainly wasn't touched down."

"It caused quite a stir."

Natani let out a happy little sigh. "It always does."

There was a whimpering sound from Keith.

"Yes, sir."

But for Alaric to have have gone that far... "Any idea who did it?"

"I believe the general assumption is that it was the dragon."

Of course. "Ah. Yes. Knowing Lady Nora..."

"Yes, sir."

"Is she around?"

"She has not been seen in a few weeks. It is thought that she has flown to the mainland."

But has she? If she took an interest, she could be a huge help... or a huge hindrance, and it was anybody's guess which it would be. It was a sobering enough thought that Natani was finally able to move past the magnificence of the statue.

At least for the moment. He grinned at Keith. "We should have lunch here sometime. See it under the daylight. I'm sure it casts an interesting shadow."

Keith looked up at him, his expression his own special blend of good-humored and long-suffering. Natani let propriety slip, trailing his fingers along one of his ears in a caress.

I love you.

Keith sighed. "Sure. Why not. I don't see how that could possibly be a bad idea."

Alaric sounded cheerful. "It's actually quite the popular spot. It's so easy to tell the time."

"Wonderful."

Natani laughed, and they moved on.

Except he came back, to give the statue a little rub.

For luck.

They made it all the way to the inner keep before the thought of meeting King Adelaide began to loom large in Natani's mind. The problem wasn't that she was the ruler of a powerful empire, or even how she might react to why they'd come. It was that Natani had slept with her daughter. Was *still* sleeping with her daughter, almost every time they met.

Maddie had wanted to be the one to tell her—of the two of them, anyway; what Alaric might have already said by then was anybody's guess—and Natani had respected that. The young basitin had written a long letter, and Natani knew only some of what had been in there. Maddie had had a lot to say to her mother, and to her King.

And that was enough, Maddie had said. There was no need for Natani to write as well.

But there was. So after Maddie's letter was well on its way, Natani had penned her own, explaining that, while she understood that it wasn't a typically basitin thing, she felt sure that it

had been good for Maddie, as it had been good for her, and that she would continue to be there for Maddie, and do what she could to help her understand herself and be happy. As her friend. And—barely able to make herself write the words, but she *had* said she'd do it—P.S, could you please enclose with your reply a tool such as you provided me, except a little smaller. And yes, with all the accoutrements.

King Adelaide had replied, just a few lines, asking when she should be expecting grandchildren.

Natani had still been trying to figure out how to answer that when another letter had arrived, this one longer. The King had elaborated at length how she knew that Natani had her daughter's best interests at heart, and how she was sure she had nothing to worry about. It had been almost reassuring, except for the fact that the King had happened to casually mention both that she had a very large army, and that, generally speaking, she didn't even need it in dealing with any personal disagreements.

Natani had shown that letter to Maddie, later, and the basitin had gotten a little misty-eyed before giving Natani a kiss and telling her she had nothing to worry about.

With the letter had come a box. Instead of just the one toy, the King had sent a whole set, all various shapes and sizes.

They were monogrammed.

That hadn't been an awkward gift to make *at all*. But Maddie had certainly appreciated it.

... they both had.

Natani had written to thank the King, and that had been that.

Well, except for another note late in the fall, again inquiring about grandchildren.

Natani was *almost* certain she wasn't serious.

But either way, standing in the ante-chamber of the King's Quarters, Natani felt rather aware that while she had been pretty confident about being on good terms with the King when they'd had an ocean between them, right now, there was just a door.

Alaric knocked and, presumably hearing something, peeked inside. "Natani and Keith Keiser, your majesty."

A moment later, he pulled the door open, and gestured them in. It was a large, comfortable room, and looked well lived-in. Several other doors led away. King Adelaide was sitting in a large leather chair. A book lay open in her lap, but she was looking at the three of them. She had her legs up under her, and Natani suddenly recognized the pose as one she had often seen from Maddie.

The King was even larger than Natani remembered, and at a quick guess her strength had not diminished. The white fur might have been further along her ears now, but she still radiated that same quiet power. It had unnerved Natani when they had first met, but now...

Suddenly, he knew exactly what to do.

As soon as Alaric pulled the door closed behind them, Natani spoke. "Are we private?"

The King closed the book in her lap, and looked at him, amused, measuring. "Just the four of us."

Natani walked up to her, fishing out the ice cream bar from his pocket. He let the wrapping of air unravel and handed it to the King, who took it, intrigued. "For the tea. And—" Natani stepped

closer. Even sitting down, she was barely shorter than him. He made to lean in, and saw no rejection... but some prudence wouldn't ruin this. "May I?"

The King smiled. "I don't recall asking you."

Natani smiled back. "But I'm not the King."

He kissed King Adelaide, regardless, giving his long-overdue answer to her challenge. Strength, without aggression. Confidence, without presumption. And more than anything else, appreciation and respect.

It wasn't the kiss the King had given him, even if it was similar.

It was his own answer.

And it didn't taste like tea, this time.

The King went along with it, and Natani thought to wonder if she ever got lonely, standing at the top. Then she met him in the kiss, really met him, just briefly, and he knew that she did.

They broke the kiss, on the edge of the chasm of that question. Natani had meant to finish with a '—for the rest', but he'd lost the tempo, and for a moment they just looked at each other in mutual recognition.

The King nodded. "You have grown up. My daughter has chosen well."

What was there to say? "Thank you."

The King smiled. "And perhaps she has been an influence, as well?" She looked past Natani. "Nickolai is feigning nonchalance, but you may have broken Keith."

Ah. Yes. Natani turned to Keith, and had to smile at his poleaxed expression. "Just paying an old debt."

Keith sounded a little faint. "Well it's... important to pay your debts."

The King stood, a towering presence next to Natani. "Well, gentlemen. You have arrived awkwardly close to curfew, and so a change of venue is in order. Natani, if you would accompany me; I would like to discuss with you the purpose of your visit."

"Just me?"

The King directed a smile at Alaric and Keith. "I'm sure these two have some catching up to do. And since it would not do to imply that I do not entirely trust my Ulterior General, I will state it outright: I do not entirely trust my Ulterior General."

It was rather in the name, wasn't it.

Alaric bowed. "Very wise, your majesty."

"You may join us when you judge the time to be right. But now, my ice cream has begun to melt."

*

Keith watched as the King led Natani to one of the doors. It opened into a stairwell, and he found himself suddenly relieved that it wasn't a bedroom, then blushed at having thought that, then blushed harder when his mind insisted they remain on the idea a while longer.

Natani and the King.

The thought made him a bit weak in the knees. Natani looked back at him before passing through, and Keith could see himself being read, and the wolf's amusement. Natani turned to

whisper something to the King, then whisper again to answer the King's quizzical expression.

The King turned back to Keith. "Where *are* my manners? Have a seat, General."

And now he had to contend with the mental image of King Adelaide, wearing nothing except a strapon and maybe a cheeky grin. He managed some kind of probably-response, and the two left, though not before Natani sneaked in one last grin, complete with his tongue poking out.

That wolf...

He loved that wolf.

"The last time I saw you look anything like that... Natani had just left the room with an Adelaide, actually." Nick grinned at him, all hint of obsequiousness gone. "Go figure."

Keigh laughed. Nick had a way of drawing connections. "And just like then... I had no idea. Do you know anything?"

Nick shook his head, ears hanging low under that horrendous hat. "Well, I can surmise in general terms. I do know that the last time you two were here, they had a private audience. I do believe that's the only time they have met before now, so that gives us the when. And I think I know some of the what, since the meeting struck me as curious at the time. Why would the King want to speak privately with someone from your group, or Natani specifically? I looked through all the reports that she might have been acting on, and discovered a discrepancy; the medical records disagreed with the rest of the accounts on the number of males and females. But the records were never amended, and so I assumed I'd only uncovered an admittedly odd clerical error. Of course, later on word reached me—I dare say reached most of the world—that told me that 'clerical error' wasn't in the direction I'd expected. But why wouldn't the King have corrected it if she knew?"

Keith had to smile at Nick's excitement in puzzling it out. It was so good to see him again, and acting like himself. "So the King knew Natani's secret, when it was still a secret, and decided to keep it." Keith felt a new, more personal sort of appreciation for his King.

"And it has something to do with a kiss!"

"... I wonder if *Maddie* knows anything about this."

Nick went suspiciously stone-faced. "I would be happy to tell her."

Keith laughed. "Don't you dare. It's their business."

"Oh, very well."

Keith looked at his old friend, and... hell, this apparently wasn't any kind of day to be proper, anyway. He took Nick's hat off, and Nick's ears, freed, sprang up with the same surprise that showed on his face. As it should be. "That's much better. I didn't like seeing you like that."

Nick smiled, touched. "Keith..." And then, the smile turned teasing in an instant, just like old times. Nick kissed him, and Keith let him, even though his ears flushed with the thought of where they were.

But of course, that was the point. To be... well not kissing him, maybe, back then, but to be doing something illicit in the King's own quarters. Keith could well imagine how the idea would have tickled Nick. Still tickled him, clearly, as Nick worked those same feelings into the kiss.

It was odd that a kiss could be nostalgic for a time when there had been no kissing, but this one was. It was so very Nick, and on his own side, Keith found himself once again responding to his old friend's teasing, letting himself be a little awkward, because he always had been. Briefly,

Keith found himself wondering what kind of trouble Nick would have eventually managed to talk him into if he'd stayed on the island. It wouldn't have been small. As soon as you gave him the tiniest opening, you were done for.

Without ever breaking the kiss, Nick had slowly backed him into a wall. When Keith could feel his ears flat against the wood paneling, Nick finally ended it. He grinned. "The kiss of victory."

Keith laughed. Of course. "Taking your cues from Natani now?"

"Why wouldn't I? They're very good cues."

That Natani had been able to do that, in front of a crowd, and not get them into trouble... mattered much more than it should have. Maybe the wolf was right that they could actually all three live here, and be... welcome enough, after a fashion. Accepted.

Not that they'd want to.

And even if they did, Keith's objections still stood.

So why was he so happy about it?

"What are you thinking about?"

"Just... the walk up here."

"Yeah, you looked like you were enjoying the sights."

"I was. It was so weird seeing some of the old places. Like a half-forgotten dream."

There was that teasing smile again. "And the statue?"

Keith narrowed his eyes. "More of a nightmare."

"Oh, come on. You know you liked it. Natani's reaction was amazing."

It... had been. "I still can't believe you did that."

Nick grinned. "My only regret is that you knew to expect it. If I had guessed you'd be coming here so soon, I never would have told you."

Keith shook his head. "I knew it was *there*, but I didn't expect it to be so... *accurate*."

"An artist must never compromise."

"Oh? Then maybe I should paint *you* wearing nothing but your wrappings and hang it up somewhere. Maybe gift it to the King."

Nick's ears perked up. "Oh, I'd like that. Well, not the King part necessarily, I think I'd rather keep it for myself... would you do that? I'd love to pose for you."

Keith sighed, defeated. "I should have known. Yeah, I guess... I would like to do that, if we're being serious. If we have the time."

Nick smiled. "That shouldn't be a problem, going forward." Keith hoped Nick was right to sound so certain. "There's a lot of things I'd like to... oh, how's Zen? Still cracking old wolf jokes?"

Keith grinned. "From 'things you'd like to do' to 'Zen'? He'll like that. He's doing great, but not so big on the jokes anymore. I think they stopped being funny when he got his first bits of gray." Nick's expression was... complicated, for a moment. Keith understood, though. "He's getting old like the King is getting old. And it's mostly just a bit of gray at his temples for now. He's quite dashing, and he knows it."

Nick nodded slowly, then smiled. "I'll remember to be impressed."

"I don't think you'd need to fake it."

When they'd left for Karnak, Nick had joined them on the road, just for the few days he could spare and still make his ship. They'd done plenty of catching up, of course, but Nick had spent almost as much time with Zen as he had with Keith. Keith hadn't minded; there was something about seeing his old friend and one of the loves of his life meshing together so well that had made him deeply happy.

And besides, Natani had still been a bit jittery about the part he'd—she'd?—chosen to play, and Keith had been more than happy to do all that he could to help the wolf relax.

It had been quite the trip, before they'd even gotten anywhere *near* the city.

"Okay, what are you thinking about *now*?"

Keith grinned. "The trip to Karnak."

"Ah." Nick looked at him for a moment, and then, there was that smile again. "That's a good thought..." Keith felt Nick's hands on his belt. "And I've still got one kiss of victory left."

Nick went down to his knees, and Keith's pants went with him.

"Am I the only one who thinks it's just a peck on the cheek?!"

*

They emerged onto a towertop, and a quick glance told Natani that it was the highest in the castle. There were chairs and a table there, but a glimpse of the ocean drew him to the parapets. The view over the city and harbor, cast in sunset hues, was breathtaking. He could pick out their ship at the docks, so small in the distance, and started to try and trace out the path they'd taken.

The King joined him, eating her ice cream. She was smiling. "Thank you for this. It's been a long time since anyone brought me ice cream."

Natani hesitated briefly, but the day carried him forward. He spoke quietly, even though he didn't think there was any risk of being overheard. "You... *The King* doesn't really have friends, does she?"

"Indeed not."

There was no hint of sadness or resentment in her voice, and Natani didn't get the feeling she was being deceptive, but there had been an inkling of something in that kiss. And Natani could somewhat imagine what it must be like, after his... or her... own sort of fame. "Ever feel like being just a woman?"

The King smiled at him, amused. "I do, and then I am. But by myself."

Natani blushed, shook his head, and looked away, smiling. He cleared his throat. "Thank you, by the way, for that first gift. I didn't quite understand to appreciate it at the time."

"You are quite welcome. I am glad it has proven useful."

For a moment, they were quiet. It was a comfortable silence. Natani could remember how wary, perhaps even intimidated he'd felt the first time he'd met the King, both by what she'd had over him, and if he was honest with himself... by what she was.

It had been a long road since then, through some strange places.

"Oh, I can see Keith's statue from here!"

"Ah, I was wondering if you'd seen it yet. Quite distinct, isn't it?"

And it was facing this way, too. *Pointing* this way, one could say. Natani shook his head,

grinning. "How can he get away with stuff like that?"

"By being very, very clever. Though it helped him greatly that I found it amusing."

The King had finished her ice cream and was chewing on the stick, and it solidified for Natani the odd sense of kinship he felt for her. Out over the sea, the sun was about to hit the horizon. "So what's with the curfew?"

King Adelaide smiled. "It's an old trick." She gestured around. "We are in the castle, and as we are *in* the castle, we are not outside. And yet, we are also not in a room, so we cannot be in the *same* room. And so, there can be no problem."

Natani sighed. Basitins.

"There's a bit more to it than that, but I don't know if you'd be interested in the subtleties."

Natani considered it. "Something about this part of the castle being okay for both male and female habitation, because of the King's and Generals' quarters?"

The King raised her eyebrows. "Very good."

"I've been studying a bit, with Keith's help. It all makes a... sort of sense, after a while."

"That's quite wise. One easily forgets, but this is really not a place to act rashly." She smiled again. "Unless one has the law behind one's self, of course. I heard about your kisses of victory."

Ah. "Will that cause problems?"

She shook her head. "Not for you. If you started a fashion, then perhaps something will need to be done to curtail it. We shall see." The King looked at him. "I suspect your being here will make things quite interesting. I assume you came as a male on Nickolai's recommendation? I do not mean to imply anything, only that it is a change from your recent campaign, and a change that most would assume would lead to greater difficulty in coming here."

Natani nodded. "Yeah, it was on his advice. It's good for me, and it's good for Keith, and that's enough for me. I assume it also gives him some kind of precedent for male/male unions?"

"Correct again. I see you understand not only our legal system, but how his mind works. The latter is considerably more complicated."

Natani smiled. "Will it work, though? Seems like a flimsy argument."

"There's a few different ways to take it, but indeed, it will not work. Or I should say, it *should* not work. If he could trick the opposition into arguing in a certain way, then some possibilities would open up."

That sounded like something Alaric might be good at. "So you think it will happen?"

"No. If he tries, I will stop him."

Natani looked at her, just as the last light of day pulled past them. "Why?"

"It is far too big and unpredictable a change."

"And that's why they shouldn't be together?"

The King simply nodded. "Yes. Though I suspect they will find their own way. And I do not begrudge them that. Quite the opposite." She smiled at his confusion. "Come, sit. You were so good as to tell me about the wolves when we first met. Now, allow me to tell you about the basitins."

They sat down, and despite the chairs being wood Natani found it quite comfortable. Above, the sky was quickly deepening toward black, and he could already glimpse some of the brightest stars.

The King began to speak. “Basitins—and I speak here always of us as a race—have a very strong need to know our place. For us to have the civilization we have, requires the law. The law forms the structure within which a single basitin can find their place. This allows individuals to come together to form the whole that is our society, with the minimum amount of uncertainty. For uncertainty is very hard on us. You must have seen this yourself, in Wreathwood?”

He had.

“For a while, it was our best and brightest that took that assignment, because I told them it would be a challenge, and it is a very basitin thing to rise to a challenge. But they did not understand. What they faced wasn’t tough competition, it was a *lack* of competition. A lack of structure.”

And many fell apart. Some few—like Ariana—had weathered it fine, but most had been miserable.

“Of course, that beautiful bit of nonsense with the Western embassy has made it easier, but it is still a difficult place for one of us to be. Or I should say, for *most* of us to be. Over time, I hope for Wreathwood to become a place where those few who chafe here on the Isles can go. Like Lyn’knoll or the far north, but less final. Recognized, and admitting the possibility of return. For the advantage of all.”

“I was just thinking about that earlier, whether it was possible to get more basitins there. That’s the plan?”

“That is my intent, and I have Nickolai working towards it. But it is a complicated balance to strike, and may still take some time. I do not know how many will take that path when it exists, but some surely will.”

They were quiet for a time, Natani thinking through—with his limited understanding of basitin law—some of the implications of expanding his own rather peculiar legal status wider. It would break some of the fundamental assumptions of the system... and if the law was indeed like a blueprint for basitin society, what would the results be?

Eventually, the King spoke again. “There has been much change in the world lately. And perhaps, in time, we too shall change. But we still feel Order’s touch heavily on us, and it is the very nature of order to resist change.”

“But you *are* making changes.”

She nodded. “Yes. Many Kings have chosen to take the view that the law is perfect, but it is not. It can be improved. Indeed, since it *can* be improved, it *must* be improved. Because...” She smiled at Natani. “As you may have surmised, I am myself something of a free spirit, if perhaps not quite to the same extent as some of the others you know. But as King, it is *my place* to bear responsibility for all those who are *not*. The law serves those who follow it, and must only be changed to make things better for them. To make the gears run smoother, never to throw them into disarray.”

“And Alaric feels differently?”

“Well, he is not King. A part of his duties is to look for changes that should be made, and how to make them, and then to propose them to me. And he has quite a mind for it. I do not think he intends to try what we discussed, but that is the scale he dreams at. In some instances, his ambitions are within a hair’s breadth of treason.”

Silent was the implication that those were the cases the King knew about. “So what is it that he wants?”

“This is supposition on my part, but... if there is anything I know, it is basitins. And while this basitin may be one of the most peculiar I have ever known, he is still a basitin. You know about Keith’s parents, yes? How they lived and how they died?”

“Yes. His mother was a Westerner.”

The King nodded. “And his father was one of my generals. The Arms General, after myself, and one of my Lieutenants before then. So I knew them about as well as I know anybody. Keith was... a sweet child.”

Natani smiled. “A sweet man, now.”

“Then I am glad. I feared we might have destroyed him. But for the purposes of this story, it matters most that that was how he was when young Nickolai met him.” She smiled. “And that one was not a sweet child at all. He was rather more typically basitin. But he *was* drawn to Keith. And after the death of Keith’s parents, and Keith’s exile, he was warped by the injustice of it and dedicated himself to Keith’s restoration. Yet when Keith did return, they clashed. For Keith was still not a typical basitin, and did not fall into the fold. Did not take the place that had been prepared for him. The Master General fell... and Nickolai decided that it wasn’t Keith that was wrong, it was the rest of us. He saw past the law, to the purpose of the law. What we have been discussing.”

“But Keith already has a place now, as the Ambassador.”

“Yes. But I believe what Nickolai wants is a society that does not clash so with him, without sending him halfway across the world. A society with... well, more Keiths.”

“... would that really be so bad?”

“Disastrous.”

“Why?”

“Why did Cornelius marry Cathleen, even though it was prone to tragedy? Why did Albion help him, by forging her papers? Indeed, what in the end so twisted him that he killed her, and pursued an insane vengeance on her son? Why did Keith not kill you, when ordered to? Why did Nickolai Alaric... well, pick anything, really.”

Natani furrowed his brows. He could guess the answer, but not the point behind the question. “... love?”

The King sighed. “Love. Every exile’s downfall. Whenever you find a basitin breaking the law, it is for love. The one thing stronger than duty. I have long suspected it was a prank one of the other masks played on Order.”

Natani was speechless for a moment, his mind rebelling against the idea. But there it was. “*That’s* why you live apart. Why procreation is a *duty*. To... *reduce* love.”

The King nodded.

“That’s...” He finally fully understood why Maddie had said that she was never coming back. “That’s horrible.”

“I am sometimes inclined to agree, but it is how things have been for a very long time. It is what we know works.”

And Keith... Keith didn’t quite get it, not yet. Was that why Maddie had never explained

herself? But then... “What about the Westerners?”

“They have struck their own balance. We could not imitate them any more than they could imitate us. Both need the other to survive.” The King looked at him. “I know this does not sit very well with you, but it is what I wanted to talk to you about. While you and your brother are here, whatever else you are, you are also potential agents of change. I would ask you to be careful, and to discuss things with myself, or with Keith, before acting in ways that could prove consequential.”

“But the kisses weren’t a problem?”

“It was something any basitin could have done, had they thought to. Highlighting problems with the law isn’t wrong, it may just result in them being fixed.” She smiled. “Of course, the freer among us will not thank you for getting any of their favorite loopholes closed, so you may wish to be careful.”

Natani nodded. “I wasn’t planning on rocking the boat too much. I don’t want to make things more difficult for Keith, either now or in the future. Though... I don’t think there’s much chance of him ever living here again.”

Not after having heard it put like that.

“And yet, I do not think he hates this place.”

“I... don’t think so either. I think it’s more that he’s resigned to stay away.”

“So for his sake as well, I would ask you to refrain from anything that might hurt us. And if Nickolai seems to be up to something, I would ask you to tell him to err on the side of caution.”

“Tell him? Is this something you can’t talk to him directly about?”

“There is that, too. But I would supplement my authority with yours, odd as that is for the King to say.”

“My authority?”

“He defers to you, yes?”

“Well, initially, at least. I told him to knock it off. Maddie thought it had something to do with my magic, but since I’m pretty sure he’s been talking to a—” The pieces clicked. “Keith. He defers to me on *Keith*.”

The King smiled. “As I said, a most peculiar basitin, but a basitin still. To cast it in my frame, I suspect you are the Keith King to his Keith General—and that may be a higher office to him than mere King of the East Basitin Empire.”

“Huh.” It made that odd basitin sort of sense. Though... “You seem oddly calm about that.”

“There may be things I cannot let him do, but there are many more things I would have his help in. I do not dislike his devotion, either to Keith or to his people. And if his goal is to bring the two together, then it is not in his interest to hurt either. I only worry that he may misjudge. Like I fear he may have in bringing you here.”

“Ahhh... you have the wrong idea there. We aren’t here because Alaric wanted us to come. He didn’t. We’re here because *I* wanted to come.”

The King raised her eyebrows. “The magic detection system? It would be very useful, but I did not think that could possibly be your real motive.”

“And it isn’t. Though I do intend to make it. No, I’m here because... do you know about the Riftwalls?”

"Those ancient portals between distant places?"

"Yeah. I want to make a new one."

"You can... do such a thing?"

"The keidran have long since forgotten how to, but the humans have spent a lot of time studying them, and have pretty much figured them out. Only one snag... the method they came up with requires being in two places at once." Natani grinned. "I'm uniquely qualified."

"So your brother..."

"Isn't really with us, yeah. He set sail with us, and by all appearances he is currently holed up in our cabin. But he's actually back home."

"You wish to connect us to the mainland. The disruption of trade, the troop movement opportunities..."

"It will be well protected, and secret. I did think about putting the other end in Wreathwood, but Alaric said you would not like that. That having the sea in between is a *good* thing."

"But then... why are you telling me this? If it's just for their benefit, surely you could have done it without my knowledge."

"Because it isn't just for their benefit. It wasn't even the two of them that gave me the idea. Your daughter wants to see you." For the first time, Natani saw King Adelaide look shocked. "*That's* why I'm really here."

**

Maddie paced around the cellar, dodging the few crates that were there and keeping well clear of the ominous stone archway that hugged one wall. She wasn't bothering to hide her nervousness now. It was only Zen there with her, anyway. The wolf was sitting on the floor, cross-legged, facing the archway, draped in so many mana necklaces that they probably could have done without the lantern.

Zen turned his head to look at her. "About ready to start now."

"Anything you need me to do?"

"Come sit with me."

Maddie stopped, a little hesitantly. She still had a lot of pace left in her. But they probably didn't want the distraction. She sat down next to Zen, crossing her wrapped ankles under her. She'd had such a hard time deciding on whether to wear the wrappings, but ultimately had. To go without would have clashed with the substance of her rebellion. Even though she wouldn't have normally worn them here. She sighed.

The wolf tousled her hair, and when she gave him a long-suffering look, pulled her into a one-armed hug. "It'll be okay."

Maddie let her head rest against his shoulder for a moment. "You don't know that."

Zen grinned at her. "Yeah, I don't. But it'll be okay."

Maddie sighed again. But somehow, she did believe him. A little.

Zen rolled his shoulders and turned to face the portal-to-be head on. "Okay, it's time. I don't know how long this is going to take..."

One by one, the mana stones the wolf was wearing began to glow brighter, then fade. In the

archway, something formless began to take shape. The crystals flared brighter, two by two now, and Zen grunted, closing his eyes. He swayed with forces Maddie could not see.

“Are you okay?”

“It’s like... it’s not like anything.” The wolf quirked a grin, but it was part grimace. “But it’s a little like he’s shoving a stack of books at me and saying ‘hold these’, only it’s an entire library.” Three by three. Zen staggered, and Maddie put a hand on his shoulder. “He’s like... a whirlpool. I can barely... stay...”

Maddie slid closer to the wolf, then went up on her knees behind him, resting her chin on top of Zen’s head and putting her arms around him. Zen had sat with her like this any number of times, but it was a first for her. It always helped anchor her, so maybe...

Zen leaned back against her, just a little. “Thank you. That’s...”

She squeezed him tighter, willing it to help.

It went on for some moments longer, faster and faster, until mana flared under her arms, impossibly bright, washing the world blue. Suddenly it blinked out, and for a moment she felt blind in the mundane light of the lantern. Inside the archway, a vague surface shimmered, like a gateway into fog.

Zen sagged against her, limp, and Maddie’s heart jumped into her throat. She laid the wolf down on the floor, carefully, tamping down her panic. Zen was breathing, but it was shallow, and his pulse was slow. He looked haggard. Maddie clutched at his shoulder, but he didn’t react.

*Don’t you **dare** die on me.*

Blubber later. What should she try first? Water? Medicine? Going through the portal? Some of the mana crystals still held a charge, but she could do nothing with those.

Maddie heard something, felt the air move, spun, and saw her mother. There was no time to feel anything. “Zen collapsed. Is Natani okay? Did—” Maddie discovered to her muted surprise that her mother was an outsider “—he say anything?”

Her mother turned around and stepped into the shimmering gray, disappearing cleanly. After a few seconds, Alaric appeared... wearing a messenger’s outfit? Maddie filed that away for later. Alaric crouched down next to Zen, looking at him, checking his pulse. As if Maddie already hadn’t done that. He nodded to himself, and showed some relief, but didn’t say anything.

Her mother returned, bringing Natani, supporting her. The wolf looked exhausted, but not as bad as Zen, and she was awake. Alaric made room, and Natani half-collapsed next to her brother. Keith had come through behind them, but Maddie stubbornly refused to leave her place, and he stayed standing, looking down at Zen.

Natani touched Zen’s face and closed her eyes, and one of the crystals still glowing on Zen’s chest brightened briefly. She opened her eyes, letting out a tired sigh. “He’s going to be okay. Just got hit a little harder than I did. All that switching.” She looked at Maddie and found a little smile for her—just how worried did she look?—then turned to Keith. “Bring some rum.”

Keith raised his eyebrows, but didn’t delay in obeying, making good time up the steps into the pantry, then back down with a bottle. He handed it to Natani, who uncorked it, took a sip, then froze for a moment, her fur standing on end, before going into a huge coughing fit. After she got herself under control, she took another sip, managing it better, then corked the bottle and set it by her side. She shook her whole body, like she would to shed water, then drew a deep breath

and exhaled. "Okay, that's better."

Maddie looked at Zen, and her stomach lurched again at how weak he looked. "What happened?"

Natani cracked her neck. "Had to take the long way around. As the earth curves. Wasn't counting on that." She let out a huge sigh, then placed her hand on Zen's chest, closing her eyes. A blue glow, and his breathing got easier, his expression less strained. Not quite back to the happy goofy sleeping face Maddie had woken up to, but close enough that she could feel her heart unclench. He really would be okay. Natani sighed again, opening her eyes, and looked at her. "He's okay." The wolf gave her a look, and nodded her head towards her mother.

Maddie stood up, and Keith took her place at Zen's side, Alaric still hovering near. Maddie finally looked at her mother properly. She'd gotten older. Maddie had known that, but it was still a shock. And she was looking at her like she always had—well, when Maddie hadn't been causing trouble, anyway—with a small smile and a world of patience. Not really what she'd been expecting. Tears welled in Maddie's eyes. None of this was going to plan.

All of her speeches forgotten, she looked at her mother, and tried to remember that she was a woman now.

And she was. "I meant what I said. And I don't regret anything that I've done. But I'm..." her voice broke a little. "Mom, I'm sorry I let you down."

Her mother was taken aback, then gentle, so gentle. "Oh, little kitten..."—off to the side, Natani went into a coughing fit, drawing Keith's concern, then waving it away—"You haven't let me down, not at all. Just the opposite. I'm not the King because I like taking orders. You're my daughter, and you're forging your own path, a whole new one. I'm proud of you."

And she meant it.

It was too much, piled on top of the relief of Zen being okay. Speechless, Maddie hugged her, wrapping her arms tight around her mother's midriff. She smelled of home. A heartbeat later, she could feel her mother's arms around her, like she'd hoped, soothing her. As if she were still a child.

Maybe some of her still was. "I missed you. So much."

"I missed you too, little kitten. And you're all grown up now. We have a lot of catching up to do."

"Yeah. There's so much I want to tell you about."

Her mother gave her a squeeze. "And we'll have time now." Maddie felt her turn to the others. "Thank you, Natani. You have done me a great friendship in this. And Zen as well, though I don't suppose he can hear me?"

Maddie let go of her mother to look at the wolves, but she stayed by her side, and her mother kept one arm around her. Natani was grinning at Keith, still tired but regaining her usual humor. "You should try kissing him awake."

Keith looked at her and her mother, slightly awkward.

"We are quite outside the law here, and I am your guest. Please, don't hold back on my account."

Maddie just nodded at him, and Keith flashed her a smile in response. He leaned down over Zen, kissing him, very tenderly, and the wolf stirred a little. He did it again, and Zen began to

return the kiss, then wrapped his arms around Keith and pulled him down, rolled him over on his back, and pinned him, then proceeded to kiss his ears stiff.

Maddie couldn't have stopped herself from smiling if she'd wanted to. Natani was laughing raucously.

After a few more moments of making Keith squirm, Zen lifted himself higher, smiling down at him. Keith smiled back, blushing up to his ears.

"Keith."

"Hey."

"Do you have any idea how much I missed you?"

"Well, you never checked up on me..." Keith caught himself. "But, uh, we've got company."

Zen looked around, saw her, and smiled. Then Maddie could see his gaze move on to her mother, next to her, starting from somewhere around her navel and trailing up to her face. The wolf stood, leaving Keith to scamper up after him, and stepped closer, looking up at her mother. "I... never knew I had a thing for taller women."

Maddie closed her eyes, mortified.

Her mother sounded amused. "You're quite sure he is fine?"

Natani sighed. "Yes."

"Thank you for your part in doing this. I am deeply grateful."

"It was my pleasure." Maddie thought he was going to go for some cheesy compliment, but it was even worse. "Anything for the Princess."

She opened her eyes. "I'm not a..." But she didn't even have the heart to finish the complaint.

Zen didn't wait for it, anyway. He'd found Alaric, and gave him a wide smile that Maddie only resented a little. "Nick."

"Zen. It's good to see you."

"Think you can find some time for me every so often, now that we've got this gate and everything?"

Alaric returned the smile, and it was weird to see him so open. "I'm sure I can fit you in my schedule."

Zen grinned. "Is that what you're calling it now?"

To Maddie's horror, her mother joined in. "Ah. It must be quite tight, then."

Alaric actually blushed! Zen gave her mother an appreciative nod. Keith looked surprised, but a smile was playing at his muzzle. Natani just had the smile.

There was a lull, and her mother filled it. "I suddenly find myself in a situation that offers unique and unexpected possibilities. I realize that I am a guest, but if I may set the agenda?"

Natani nodded at her, and there was a general murmur of assent.

Her mother took her diadem off, having to duck a little to get it past her ears. She held it in her hands for a moment, then set it down on a crate. "What I would like to do, is to sit down with all these clever young people and explain to them why what they want to do won't work. Basitin to basitin."

Maddie found a fragment of her rebellious spirit. "And if it *would* work?"

Her mother smiled at her. "Then we're all in for some interesting times."

And Maddie realized she would actually hear them out.

Huh.

Alaric looked conflicted. “Your majesty... there should *always* be a King. Even here, I’m not sure you can...”

Her mother nodded, amused, and picked the diadem back up. “I suppose you are right. Very well. It can’t be any of the three of you...” She looked at Natani, then shook her head and smiled. “Let’s not make things *too* difficult for young Nickolai.” She turned to Zen, and handed him the diadem with very little ceremony. “Would you keep this warm for me? You look tall enough.”

Zen took it, clearly intrigued, and put it on. It was a little big for him, but then, so was the title of King.

It still stayed on, though.

Alaric and Keith both snapped to attention, and Maddie wasn’t quite sure how serious they were being. *She* certainly didn’t feel inclined to accept *Zen’s* authority after having rejected her mother’s, but she played along and saluted anyway. Maybe it would make him uncomfortable. And if not, there was always insubordination.

Zen looked at the three of them, thoughtful, then at her mother. “... I suppose I shouldn’t abuse this, huh?”

Her mother shrugged. “This lot won’t obey you unless they want to, anyway. And something tells me that young Nickolai over there wouldn’t mind being... subject to your royal prerogative.”

The wolf looked at her with genuine admiration. “I do believe that is what I will call it now, yes.”

Maddie suffered in silence.

“A good choice, your majesty. Scepter jokes are terribly overdone.”

Zen nodded at her mother, smiling, then looked at his troops. His eyes met Maddie’s, and there was... a flash of something there, an inkling that the wolf had gotten one of his more hare-brained ideas. But he turned away, to Alaric and Keith. “At ease, gentlemen.”

They relaxed, but Maddie decided that she wasn’t a gentleman and held her salute.

Zen turned to look at her, and there it was again. Then the wolf smiled, gentle, serious, open. “You too, Princess.”

Maddie had a hard time deciding which objection to make, but dropped the salute anyway. “Look, if mom isn’t even King—”

“I know.”

The wolf’s meaning hit her, and her eyes misted up. *His* daughter. She swallowed, and turned her head, blinking away tears. “*Dammit*, Zen.”

A few moments, and he could hear Zen shift. “Please excuse my impropriety, ma’am.”

Her mother sounded thoughtful. “I do not think she refused you, and so, you have nothing to apologize for. But you *do* realize there’s sufficient precedent to construe that as a legally binding adoption, yes?”

“I don’t think that’s the important part.”

“I do believe you’re right.”

Maddie was torn somewhere between hugging Zen and storming out.

Her mother continued. “But wait, what does that make *Natani*?”

Zen sighed. “A very naughty aunt.”

"I'll say! She even kissed *me* earlier!"

What.

"It's a long story, okay!"

Her mother spoke again, all confidence, and Maddie could imagine her smiling at Natani. "Not that long. I would be happy to tell it if you don't want to."

Natani sighed. "Fine, fine, I'll..."

Maddie laughed, through the tears in her eyes, and looked at her mom, Natani, Zen... "You idiots."

They all smiled back at her, and Maddie finally broke, hugging Zen, but also her mom. They returned it one arm each, and after a moment she could hear Natani get up, then felt the wolf's hand on her shoulder, and a kiss at the top of her head.

She had never felt so loved.

Her mother sounded cheerful. "I seem to have acquired quite the extended family."

Maddie disentangled herself and wiped her eyes, but they were all still smiling at her, and she nearly welled up again.

Zen looked at her, gentle, but addressed her mother. "I think perhaps we should all go upstairs and sit down for a moment."

He led the way, but did not pull Maddie along, and she was grateful for that. She needed a moment to compose herself.

With an understanding glance at her, her mother followed Zen. "That sounds splendid. Perhaps the serious talk can wait a while. And I've heard good things about your coffee, your majesty..."

"You like coffee? It would be my pleasure."

"I'm usually more of a tea drinker, but I'm ready to be impressed."

"Oh, I can do tea, too."

"I'll have to try both, then."

Zen and her mother went up the stairs, trailed by Alaric, then Keith, who gave her a look and a smile before he went. Her boss. Her... father-in-law?

No. He wasn't that. Zen was Zen. Keith was Keith.

Natani remained, and when the others were gone, gave her a kiss. Just their hello. Maddie hugged her, and Natani returned the embrace, then freed up one arm to stroke her ears. Maddie burrowed her muzzle into the fur at the wolf's neck, and stayed there longer than she'd intended.

Natani let her be.

Finally, Maddie let out a long breath, then pulled away and went on tiptoes to give Natani a kiss of her own. "Thank you. You can go ahead, I'll be right behind you."

Natani nodded, and with one last touch at her ears, followed the others, collecting the bottle of rum on the way.

Maddie sighed in the center of the empty room. Upstairs, there was noise and light and warmth and... family.

She had her mother again. And Zen... that the wolf had done that...

Maddie sat down on a crate, to collect herself, and looked at the portal. It was pretty eery, but not in a foreboding way.

Something bumped her shin. It turned out to be a white cat, rubbing its cheek against her leg. Maddie picked it up, holding it by the sides, and looked it in the face, serious. "I know you're secretly a dragon."

Oh? And how did you figure that out, little one?

Maddie grinned, delighted. "I didn't. I just say that to every cat."

Amusement filled her mind. *You. I like you.*

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Fool's Mate

Dedication

To another mystery person, for further reasons of mystery. Even though avwolf is probably the only one who would get the spoiler, and he's already read the story.

Hey, I'm nothing if not thorough.

Also to Laruf. You're never going to read this book, but if you get lucky, somebody might tell you there's a dedication :p

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Fool's Mate

Zen shook himself awake from a dream of endlessly bailing water. That was weird. He hadn't even been near a boat in ages... but the dream quickly receded and he curled back up on the couch, smiling as reality reasserted itself. They'd finally finished cleaning the house. The whole place was spotless, all the musty smells gone, replaced by the pleasant scents of spring as they aired the place out. A breeze tickled Zen's fur and he looked at the windows, still ajar. Those were sparkling clean, too. They might have gotten a little carried away... but, well, they'd had little else to do while they waited, and... it *was* going to be their home.

Their home with Keith. Just the thought of it filled him with warmth and brought a smile to his lips. He missed the basitin badly, and couldn't wait to see him again. Show him what they'd done with the place. Give him a proper welcome. Home. Tomorrow!

Those were the thoughts he'd dozed off with, so how had he ended up in a dream about bailing water?

He became aware of a faint 'scritch, scritch', and found its source; Natani was carving new grooves in the armrests of his chair. He was staring down an empty corner of the room something fierce, and the book he'd been reading earlier lay forgotten on the table, next to the one on basitin anatomy Zen had been leafing through.

Natani felt... tense. Zen let his good feelings flow into the link, hoping for an echo, but Natani was closed up tight and they just washed over him. This was weird. Zen had thought that Natani had gotten most of the fuming out of his system days ago. Certainly, he'd been in a good mood this morning. And at any rate, this didn't quite feel like that; there wasn't enough anger.

Zen's eyes drifted to the windows, and to the new green of the trees outside. The buzz of life. Surely, it was still too early? But it fit.

"Already?" He still sounded surprised, even to himself.

The scritchng stopped. Natani sighed. "Yeah. What gave it away?"

Zen sat up, stretching, and saw the shavings on the floor around Natani. "Well, shredding the furniture is a pretty good hint."

Natani looked at what he'd done. "Oh. Damn." He put his hands in his lap, holding them together. "I'll... fix that. Later."

Zen nodded. "Isn't it a little early?"

Natani sighed. "I think it's all the traveling we've been doing. My body hasn't quite caught up."

True enough, they'd been all over the place. Still, a year ago it had been later...

They were wonderful memories. Zen and Keith had still been a very new thing, still finding their feet. The basitin had been absolutely lovely, so receptive, so... happy for his love that Zen had fallen for him over and over again during those first few weeks. But when the time for estrus had come, Zen had still done the brotherly thing of sneaking away, freeing up all of Keith's attention for Natani. They'd both chided him for it, a little, but he would always be glad that he'd let them have that, just the two of them. It was a special time, for those who were mated.

Of course, it was still a pretty special time for those who weren't. He'd gone out to take in the

sights of the season, as it were, and... even that short time with Keith had taught him more about being a lover than he'd ever known before. And that wasn't the only thing that was different. For the first time, he'd been completely free of the guilt of knowing that his brother was suffering. Indeed, whenever he'd needed a bit of inspiration, all he'd had to do was dip into the deep current of lust and love in the link.

He'd made quite the reputation for himself, as someone whose heart might be elsewhere, but whose body was very much there. Ready to help those in need.

Quite the reputation.

"What are you grinning about?"

"Just thinking about last year."

"You'd better not be planning to—"

"No." Zen shook his head. "Definitely not. Maybe I *should* be, but... I want to see him." Natani looked likely to object to his 'should'. "Besides, last fall wasn't up to me."

"Well... maybe. I think you could have stuck around if you really wanted to."

Maybe he could have, at that. But he'd at least had a really good excuse, and, well... it was hard to see going away as the wrong choice. Spring had been really good for Keith and Natani, and he'd certainly not had anything to complain about, so why not repeat it? And it *had* been good, but... even more than in the spring, his heart had been elsewhere, and he'd hurried back when he could.

And now, he already hadn't seen Keith for weeks. Zen wasn't going anywhere.

Still... it was too bad *Keith* didn't go into heat. Though, Natani argued, that was because he was always *in* heat. And indeed, both times when Zen had made his way back to them, he'd found an exhausted and very, *very* satisfied Natani, and a Keith who still somehow had the energy to welcome him back. Who wanted his love. Could never get too much of it.

Zen sighed. "Tomorrow."

Natani matched his sigh. "Unless there's another delay."

"It sounded like a sure thing to me."

"Well, I hope so." Natani grimaced. "If this starts for real... ugh."

Hmm... "The first few days aren't that bad, right?"

Natani rubbed his face. "No, not compared to... later. But..." He sighed. "I wasn't supposed to have to deal with this again. And... I *miss him*. Damn *wolves*."

Zen smiled faintly. "I'll drink to that. Speaking of...?"

Natani shook his head. "No. We tried that, remember?"

"Err, yeah." Early Magi Brothers strategies for dealing with estrus. Not the best one, as it turned out. "Just one?"

"I... guess that'd be fine. Who knows, maybe it'll make me feel like eating something."

Zen rummaged through their pantry, doing a bit of sorting as he went. They maybe hadn't been all that orderly in storing all this stuff...

One part of making the place livable had been stocking up. The supplies themselves had come from the basitins, delivered to a few useful locations through varying indirect means.

Maddie had been in charge of that, and Zen wasn't entirely convinced she knew *herself* how some of it had got there. But it had. Zen smiled to himself, thinking of the little ball of chaos. So they hadn't needed to worry about where to get all this, but none of the supply locations had been very close—Keith was pretty intent on letting this place *stay* forgotten—and so it had fallen to Zen and Natani to haul all of it, for that last leg. Lots of hiking through the woods.

Zen hadn't minded. Three assassination attempts within two days did wonders for one's ability to appreciate some peace and quiet. If only Natani hadn't... Zen shook his head. No. His brother had done exactly what he should have. It was the wolves who were wrong.

He found where Natani had put the bottles. Basitin ale—no, they'd made *that* mistake already. Basitin *rum*—only if they needed to blow something up. *That* stuff was purely for Keith to drink, and just about the only thing that could actually get him proper drunk. Zen stowed the bottles carefully, smiling to himself. Drunk Keith was utterly adorable.

He found the keidran ale, and poured out two mugs. Not even full. Enough for a bit of a buzz, that was all. He carried the mugs out to the sitting room, and very deliberately put Natani's down on a coaster. They stared each other down for a moment, Zen staying deadpan.

Eventually, a flash of amusement cracked through Natani's irritation. He took the mug and shook his head, almost smiling. "Thanks."

Zen grinned. "Any time, brother." He put his mug out for a toast. "To Keith."

Natani clinked it with his own. "To his fuzzy butt."

They both took a sip. It was good stuff. Zen settled back down on the couch, contemplating Keith's anatomy. Natani seemed to be doing the same, nursing his drink in his lap. Zen raised another toast. "To his ears."

Natani matched the gesture with a faint smile. "His tail."

Another sip. It really was good.

Zen raised his glass again. "His eyes."

"His *hips*."

They took another sip. Natani had sounded more than a little wistful there. Zen smiled. "I can't help but notice that you're thinking below the belt."

Natani snorted. "I'm going into heat. What's your excuse? Ears and eyes, hmm?"

That *was* what he'd said. It was weird... it wasn't that he couldn't appreciate Natani's line of thinking, but... it was like he was past being horny. All he could think of was kissing Keith, seeing the joy in his eyes, in the tilt of his ears. And that coy little smile... of course it would lead to things. It always did. But... "I guess I'm just... in love."

Natani gave him a lopsided smile. "At least you didn't say 'hopelessly' this time."

He almost had.

"Anyway, I know what you mean. It's not like I'm going to jump his bones the moment he gets here... no matter what my body is telling me. We need to welcome him properly, first. The both of us."

Zen grinned. "Yeah."

What that would look like, exactly, would depend a lot on Keith. Maybe a nice, relaxing bath... or maybe not *just* relaxing. But the bath here was great, and it could easily fit all three of them, and Keith really liked a good soak. Then there was food, of course... but most importantly,

just being with him. The kisses came first.

They nursed their drinks, in quiet partially shared contemplation. Zen let his anticipation leak into the link, and could feel Natani mellow a bit more, but there was still an undercurrent of frustration there. Not that Zen could blame him. He had *some* idea of what it was like.

Zen stared down the bottom of his mug. He'd been skirting around this thought ever since he realized what was going on. "Natani?"

"Hm?"

"What if we switched?"

He never could keep up with Natani's reactions in these moments, but the end result was guarded curiosity. "... why?"

Zen scratched at the back of his head. "Well, it's like you said. You weren't supposed to have to deal with it again. I know you *can*, but... haven't you done it enough? And since I'm pretty used to the body now, I kinda feel like... shouldn't I have offered earlier? All those times you were stuck with it. I could have taken a part of it, but I didn't."

Natani covered his face with one hand. "Oh, you idiot. Of *course* it would be something like that."

Zen bristled a bit. "Well, what else could it have been?"

Natani looked at him with a long-suffering expression. "To be with Keith."

! "I'd never..."

Natani sighed. "Of course you wouldn't. It might actually be a good idea. Look... I *never* would have let you do that, even if you'd asked. My body. My problem. It's bad enough that you had to help me. I wouldn't have put you through that."

"I never minded helping you."

Natani smiled, and love shone through the exasperation. "And I never hated that you helped me. Just that I needed it."

Fair enough. But... To be with Keith? To share a heat with someone you loved...

"I know how you feel about him. I can't *not* know. And I know you think he can't possibly love you as much as you love him. But... you're wrong."

"I don't—"

"Yeah, you do."

Maybe he did.

"So... do you want to?"

"He'd... really say yes?"

"I'd be surprised if he didn't."

Natani wasn't *always* right about Keith, but it never paid to bet against him. And... Zen *could* imagine Keith saying yes, much more easily than he could imagine the basitin saying no. It was the question he was having trouble with.

"I know it isn't exactly the way you'd like it to be, but... it's what there is."

"That's not..." He joked about it, but did he really want Keith to be a girl? No. He wanted Keith to be Keith. He'd just never thought *he'd* be the girl. So to speak. But... "It's the way it can happen. It's what you got."

Natani nodded.

"But what about you? And Keith. Even if he'd be okay with me..." Natani was rolling his eyes, so Zen looked for something irrefutable. "You can't tell me hasn't been looking forward to it. Or that you haven't." How could he take it, at their expense?

"Zen... when has it *ever* been at my expense? Or Keith's? It's been a year. Would you just *learn*?" And Natani made his case in the link, with pure emotion; how this was the kind of thinking that had put Zen up a tree in the first place. How they all wanted each other to be happy, and how that tendency for self-sacrifice only got in the way. How, if anything Zen had ever done had hurt Keith, it had been going off on his own, without a word. That if Zen needed this more than Natani did, then Natani wanted him to have it... and so would Keith. And that Natani could actually use a less distractable body at this time, thank you very much.

Zen swallowed. There had been a lot of conviction behind that. "Sorry."

Natani sighed. "I love you, but... you need to get over being the big brother all the damn time. Don't just decide by yourself what's best for us."

That was a thorny patch, best avoided. "What was that last bit, about my body?"

Natani gestured at the book he'd discarded on the table. "These books. I never realized how much there really was to magic. And considering how half the kingdom wants me dead... we're not going to stay holed up here forever, and sooner or later they're going to stop underestimating me. So when they do..."

"... you'd better have some new stuff up your sleeves."

"Yeah. And it's more than that. This stuff is *fascinating*. It's... you know that feeling when something suddenly makes sense? It's that, over and over again. So yeah, I could actually do with not being completely sex-crazed for a week."

Zen grinned. "You think you won't be distracted if you've got my body?"

Natani grinned back. "*Less* distracted. I figure I might be able to get away once in a while." His tone softened. "Give you some privacy."

Zen blushed. Originally, the switching had been much more about giving Natani time in a male body, but over time that had changed. Zen had found that he didn't exactly *hate* being in Natani's body... far from it. They never quite talked about it, in so many words, but of course Natani knew. And so did Keith. Zen had hesitantly made himself clear in every way except words.

Neither of them had judged him for it. Of course, he couldn't even say why they would have—it was Natani's body! And if Natani could borrow his, then of course Zen could borrow Natani's—but still, there had been that feeling that he was being... disrespectful, somehow. It still hadn't completely faded.

But yes, being with Keith in a female body had become a real part of their relationship, not just something incidental. It was a different experience, and it was something he'd never had with anyone *except* Keith. Something just for them. A special kind of special. So if he let himself think about it, sharing a heat with the basitin... fit. He found himself hoping Keith really would feel the same way.

Yeah, he wanted it.

Zen grinned, nervous. "Well, I wouldn't be much of a brother if I didn't help you with your studies, right?"

Natani rolled his eyes. "Just get yourself in here if you're going to."

Zen pointed at Natani's chest. "Wrappings." It was kind of an odd thought, but not having the breasts there always felt... disconcerting... to him when he felt like they *should* be there.

"Right." Natani reached into his robe, and as he started pulling out the long strip of cloth, his breasts snapped into being. "I've got an idea for a spell that might make it less weird for you, actually. Should try that at some point."

Zen raised his eyebrows. "Sure. I'll be your guinea pig."

Natani bundled up the strip of cloth and tossed it on the table. "All good?"

Zen nodded, and closed his eyes. He let his consciousness loose from his body, allowing it to flow to Natani's end of the link. Natani made room for him but remained, helping to settle him in, and Zen gained a new understanding of the tension he'd been feeling. There was no language for it, but Natani was holding his mind in a specific way, focusing on... not focusing on his body? Zen tentatively replicated it, and Natani nodded, slowly easing off, then flowing away to enter Zen's vacated body.

Zen opened his eyes to see Natani already stretching and rolling his shoulders. He'd gotten to be quite at home in Zen's body, and Zen had to admit that he carried it well, if a little differently. Still, he was a handsome devil, if he said so himself.

Natani grinned at him, amused. "Still a little in love with yourself, I see."

Zen stuck his tongue out. "Well, can you blame me?"

Natani rolled his eyes, then leaned back on the couch with a happy sigh. "Well, it does have its charms. How's it feel?"

He hadn't been thinking about it, because that was the way Natani had left him, and the reason quickly became clear. He shifted his position, to sit more like himself, and as he did, felt the coarse fabric of the robe against his nipples. That was enough to spark an... awareness... of the body that was more complete than any he'd felt before, from the tips of his toes to the tips of his ears. His breath caught as he felt a need like never before deep inside himself. The thought of doing something about it floated into his mind, unbidden, and his nipples grew hard, causing further echoes from the fabric, and the thought of the feel of the fabric, of anything, against his body, between his legs...

Natani was like a bucket of cold water. *Tamp it down! Tamp. It. **Down.***

Somehow, with help, he did, at least halting it, but he had to fight to even keep his breathing steady. He had maybe been hornier in his life, but not recently, and not for no reason. *How can you **deal** with this?*

Natani was frowning. *You've got it worse. Or maybe it's the lack of practice... but you're spilling badly. Whatever you do, keep your mind off of it. And don't think of—*

Keith! Images of the basitin in various states of undress flooded his mind. Images of exactly how, and how eagerly, Keith could scratch this itch. Just the thought made Zen shudder.

The water was a little less cold, this time. **Goddammit, Zen. DON'T. THINK. ABOUT. HIM.**

*

Natani wasn't sure if he was reaching Zen anymore. He was in full meltdown, face screwed up, tail wagging furiously. Even his scent had grown stronger as the heat blossomed. The pheromones had no power over Natani, but the feelings and images spilling from Zen were another matter; Natani's control was threatening to fray under Zen's sheer *horniness*. Keith was in for a time, that was for sure, if Zen made it that far. At least he wasn't pawing at himself yet.

Zen's right hand jumped to his groin, the sensations of him pressing down on his crotch echoing in the link, and Natani could feel himself grow hard in response. He shot up from the couch, stumbling a bit—*damn* these tight pants Zen liked to wear—before grabbing Zen's wrist and forcing his hand away. "It doesn't help." Zen's left hand joined the fray, and Natani grabbed that as well, forcing it back to the armrest. "It doesn't help!" Uncomprehending, Zen began squirming against the chair, so Natani headbutted him, hard. The pain made it through, and he could feel Zen coming a little under control. He knelt down next to his brother. "It. Doesn't. Help. It makes it worse."

Zen was almost panting. "But it feels so..." words failing him, the rest came through in the link.

Natani gritted his teeth. Yes, he knew what it was like. And he knew that there wasn't anything Zen could do about it. "Trust me, it's not enough. It's never enough. Just... hang in there." He tried to see if he could take the body back, but Zen was all... tangled up in it. Maybe Natani could have forced it, but he wasn't sure what that would do to them.

Magic... could he put Zen to sleep? Without affecting himself?

"What about... what about that toy of yours?"

Natani hesitated, and Zen sensed that, growing more excited, before Natani pushed back on him. "No. That wouldn't do it." He wasn't quite completely certain—he'd never tried, after all—but he kept that from Zen. Hope was a dangerous thing. "It isn't something you can take care of yourself." He put the grim certainty of that into the link, and felt Zen accept it. He eased up on Zen's arms, hovering near until he felt sure Zen would stay put, before quickly adjusting his clothing. *Damn pants.*

Zen's eyes were drawn to Natani's crotch.

Neither of them could quite tell where the thought came from.

"No."

"Of course not."

... but the idea hung between them, heavy in the air. Natani looked at Zen—looked at his own body. He knew exactly what that body craved. That knowledge had been burned into him, in far too many seasons past. Keith, bless him, had finally sated that desire, but... that was Keith. Something done *to* Natani. *For* him. Well, for both of them. But not something Natani had done himself.

And here, he could. He could give his body all that it had craved, all that he had denied it, with his own power. He felt an echo from Zen. It wasn't just the heat; somewhere deep, there was a matching desire. To take all that *his* body had to give. They didn't look too closely at each other's reasons, but both could feel the desire growing stronger, the pieces aligning, until they

were hanging by a thread, an excuse away.

Zen swallowed. "It's just... it's just touching yourself. What can be weird about touching yourself?"

That would do. Natani pulled Zen from the chair, and he came eagerly, going to all fours on the floor, ass up. Presenting, though still wearing the robe. Natani unbuckled his belt and tugged his pants down, pulling his stiff member free. Zen backed up against him, tail wagging against his erection, ass pushing against his knot, rubbing, almost senseless with need. Natani grabbed his tail by the base and hiked up the robe with his other hand, then hooked the hem with his thumb. Leaving Zen exposed. He was beyond wet. Natani lined himself up, guiding the tip in, and with one solid thrust, hilted himself, his knot still small enough to only meet the briefest moment of tantalizing resistance before pushing in.

The bodies were a perfect match for each other. Zen shuddered around him, clenching, already near to his first climax with his heat, and Natani had to limit the link as much as he could to not get carried away with it, and just start pounding away, rutting Zen for all he was worth, chasing both their pleasure. *This* body did have limits, and he had to make it last, even if he felt like the doubled pleasure might have let him just... power through. That was a false confidence. Probably. His knot was quickly beginning to respond to Zen's coaxing, and Natani tried to tug it out before they were tied. Zen didn't want to let it go, and the feel of him clenching around it made Natani's toes curl, but he tried again, harder, and it came free with a wet pop. Zen whimpered at the loss, his tail continuing to twitch in Natani's hand.

Zen was so eager for it, *yearning* to be mated in a way that Natani never quite had. He'd spent so long fighting it that even in fulfillment, he never embraced it in quite that way.

But he could answer it. He began to thrust, slow and steady, each time teasing with the knot but not pushing it in, his thrusts growing harder as the knot grew larger, until he was slapping it against Zen with almost full force. Zen came, hard, squeezing around him, but Natani didn't slow, keeping his own pleasure in tight check even as Zen gasped and moaned, clenching around him even harder, pushing back with his hips, his head first sagging, then dropping down to his arms. Natani was going as fast as he could now, with the *damn pants* still around his thighs, and Zen had barely recovered, panting, when he was gone again, pushed back over by the relentless thrusting and the rhythmic slam of the knot against him. Natani could feel the heat begin to recede a bit with the second climax, but it wasn't enough, not yet. Still, he had to slow, then stop, gritting his teeth, to not get carried along with it. Zen pushed back against him, grinding against his knot in the throes of his release, still begging for more, whimpering with the body's need. Natani spaced him by his tail, denying, delaying. That would be the end of him, and it wasn't time for that. Not yet.

Finally, Zen started to come off it and calm down. He was a shuddering, panting mess, still leaning his weight against Natani's knot but no longer striving to push it in. Natani wasn't quite ready to continue, and to give himself something to do he pulled Zen's tail out of the robe, letting the hem fall on his back. In the calm, he was becoming aware that his—and Zen's—knees weren't too happy about the floor. And he'd had about enough of the pants, too. He pulled out, then stood up.

Zen looked back at him, still panting. "That... helped."

Natani pulled the pants off. "Not done yet. Couch."

Zen nodded and got up, pulling the robe off and letting it fall to the floor before kneeling down on the couch, his forearms on the backrest, ass raised in invitation, tail still wagging, a little less frantically now. Natani stepped up to him, and only had to lower his stance a bit to line himself up. Again, he thrust straight in, until his knot rested against Zen's entrance. Zen let out something between a sigh and a moan as he was filled, and Natani put his hands on Zen's hips, aiding while he pushed a bit harder, not to force the knot in, but to make Zen lean farther forward over the backrest. Now, he could stand like he wanted, and didn't have those pants limiting him. He pulled almost out, then started with slow, long, full thrusts, each ending with him grinding against Zen for a moment before pulling back for another one. The slow teasing made the heat grow again, until Zen was all moans, wordlessly urging him to go harder. Natani started speeding up, and Zen quickly came again, squeezing on his cock and moaning, his head hanging down past the backrest of the couch, tongue lolling as he panted. Natani kept increasing his pace, slamming the knot against him with every thrust, and once again Zen came off his orgasm already most of the way to the next one. Natani was barely hanging on himself, and the ache in his balls told him that would have to be enough. He'd make it enough. When Zen began to crest again, Natani put the full force of his hips into the next thrust, pulling back hard on Zen's hips, and slammed the knot in.

Natani's focus faltered for a moment and his mind opened more fully to the link, to Zen's moment of pure heat-fueled orgasmic bliss, and Natani was there with him as he gasped, breathless, barely believing it had happened, body squeezing with all it had around the knot, tying them and milking the first of many long jets from Natani as his aching balls constricted. Natani leaned forward, shaky, putting his arms on both sides of Zen on the backrest and propping his shins against the seat of the couch, struggling to stay standing as he gave everything he had to douse the heat. Zen shook under him, lost in fulfillment, and Natani leaned down to pin his brother's body against the backrest and stop him from falling, barely hanging on for the both of them as the shared orgasm wracked their bodies.

Long after he had no more to give, Zen still squeezed a rhythm on his tender knot, unconsciously trying to coax more from him. But it had been enough. The heat had receded, for now, and when Zen came back to he was more or less himself.

The wolves shared a very sheepish moment.

Natani sighed. "We get untied, switch back, and *never speak of this again*."

"Deal." A few moments passed. "... still don't have the hang of that getting untied trick, huh?"

"Well, maybe I'd have better luck if you *stopped squeezing me like that*."

"Err, sorry."

A moment of silence, as Zen tried to get Natani's body under control... and in that silence, the sound of someone clearing their throat. The wolves' hackles went up. Zen looked to the source—the doorway—and out of long habit Natani looked the other way, in case it was a distraction.

He felt Zen's elation. "Keith!"

Natani caught wind of Zen's intentions and barely had time to catch his brother by the hip before he tried to lunge toward the basitin, tail wagging, the small matter of *being tied* momentarily forgotten.

Natani turned to face Keith, with rather more trepidation. What would he think? But Keith looked at him, from smiling at Zen. The basitin looked a little bewildered, but Natani saw no hurt there. They looked at each other for a moment, searching each other's expressions, and Keith went from bewilderment to calm reassurance. Natani let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, and found his smile. *Keith*. "Hey. Welcome home."

Keith dropped his bags at the doorway and stepped closer. He was in simple travelling clothes, pants and a tunic, feet wrapped. He came around to the front of them, where they were leaning over the back of the couch. "Home, huh? I... guess it is." He reached out with both hands, touching them both on the cheek. Zen leaned into the gesture, his tail still wagging, and after a moment, Natani did too. Keith scratched them slowly, smiling, then pulled them both into a hug, the gesture made a little awkward by Natani still being mostly on top of Zen. They both nuzzled him as best they could, welcoming him, relishing his scent. Keith sighed happily, then let them go. "I'm *home*." He flashed a grin. "So... is this another Magi Brothers strategy for dealing with heat?"

"No."

"No."

Keith smiled gently, and asked again, for real. "No?"

"No."

"Definitely not."

"... might have worked, though."

Natani hung his head with a sigh. "... let's not think about that."

Keith looked at them, thoughtful. "So... let me guess." He scratched Zen's cheek again, causing his tail to wag fiercer. "You wanted to see what it was like, then couldn't handle it?"

Zen blushed. "Yeah."

Keith reached out to Natani again, and okay, maybe his tail did a thing, too. Keith knew just how to touch him. The basitin smiled, with a hint of mischief. "And... what about you?"

"He made some good arguments, okay?"

Keith laughed. "And what were those?"

Natani grinned. "Nothing weird about touching yourself."

"I... huh." Keith laughed again. "I... guess there isn't, huh." He kissed Natani, and put some incredibly fake wistfulness in it. "Do you even need me for anything anymore?"

Natani nipped at his ear. "Yes! And we weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

"Huh. This was always the date."

Of course. Maddie. A fun surprise, she'd say. Mean it, too. Probably.

And well, okay, it would have been.

... still was, despite everything.

Meanwhile, Zen had been giving his own answer to Keith's question about being needed by trying to nuzzle at his crotch, which he couldn't quite reach. Keith crouched down to kiss him instead, and the wolves became aware that the heat was starting to flare up again, kindled by the basitin's presence. It wasn't unconquerable yet, but it was there. Natani's knot had maybe deflated a bit with the shock of Keith's appearance, but now, between the way he was kissing Zen, and the way that caused Zen to squeeze a new rhythm around Natani—all ground that had

been gained was lost.

Natani nipped Keith on the ear again, causing him to stop. "Not helping."

Keith grinned, a marvellous display of fake innocence. "Oh?" Keith came up from his half-crouch, and Natani could see that he was hard as well. Zen made another fruitless effort to reach him, tugging slightly on the knot as he did so, and Natani had half a mind to try the same. Two out of two wolves agreed; Keith needed a thing or two done to him. But the basitin stepped away, possibly reading them, then started to walk around the couch. "Well, maybe I can give you a hand." What was he planning? Natani turned his head to follow Keith, and became acutely aware of his own ass sticking up in the air. Keith wasn't going to... avail himself, was he? That didn't seem like him, but he was definitely up to *something*. Natani let his tail give a wag, oddly excited by the prospect. He was a little high up for the basitin, could they shift lower? But when Keith touched Natani's rear, it was just for a moment, to say 'I'm here', before the basitin crouched down behind them.

Natani felt Keith's hand on his inner thigh, gentle and welcome, and then... the basitin leaned his forehead against Natani's buttock? "Keith?"

"Ah, sorry. The scents..." There was a shuddering breath, and Keith leaned away, moving his hand from Natani's thigh to low on Zen's stomach.

Natani had been more focused on his own sensations, but as Keith slowly traced his way toward their joining, he was drawn to Zen's. The basitin's touch was electric for him, and Zen was all but biting his lip as Keith gently, ever so gently, probed the slight bulge Natani's knot was making. The whole area was tender with that pressure, and Zen's breathing quickened as Keith's fingers approached Zen's clit. When they settled around it, not touching, Zen whimpered.

Keith sounded a little lightheaded. "You're really in there, huh."

Natani let out a sigh that turned into a groan as Zen *squeezed* on him, pulling him deeper by the knot. "You're not making it any easier. For either of us."

"Sorry, I got a little..." Keith's hand went away, provoking another whimper from Zen. He was growing desperate again, and what would it take to satisfy him if he was already tied? Natani's thought was interrupted as Keith squeezed his hand in between the wolves, pressing against the base of Natani's shaft, behind the knot, his thumb dragging against Natani's sack, keeping it out of the way.

It was Natani's turn to shudder. "What... are you doing?"

Keith was shifting his hand as he spoke, pressing against this or that part of the base. "Well, blood has to go in, right? So if I can find the right spot..."

Keith's fingers settled on a place, and Natani could feel a counterpoint to his heartbeat there. He didn't immediately feel any different, but quickly, it started to feel almost as if... "Um, Keith?"

"Yeah?"

No doubt about it, his knot was getting *more* engorged. "Blood has to come *out*, too, right?"

"Oh!" Keith eased up on the pressure, but left his hand where it was, and Natani could feel the basitin shifting his weight before the other hand appeared, pressing up against Zen, feeling out the knot again. Zen trembled at his touch, and Natani could tell that he was barely holding back from trying to grind against the basitin's hand. Keith pressed on the base of Natani's shaft again, feeling the knot swell in response, and Zen began to pant.

Natani drew in a breath, bracing himself against the force of Zen's need, quickly spiraling back out of control. "Keith."

The 'do something' was silent, but he thought he felt the basitin nod. For a moment, he could feel Keith's breath on his sack as the basitin ducked lower, then leaned forward... and gave Zen a lick. With a gasp, Zen jerked under Natani, pulling on his knot, the sensation and the feelings flooding the link causing his control to crumble. Natani pushed forward, sinking ever so slightly deeper into him. Keith's tongue fell behind, but he quickly followed, teasing at Zen's clit while Natani pinned him into the couch.

With a drawn out moan, Zen started to come once more, clenching around Natani like a vice as the first throes of it took him. It was a slow tip over the edge, an endless moment of heat and lust and tightness before the first spasm was past, giving way to a heartbeat of laxness, followed by an even stronger spasm as he was well and truly gone. Natani was dimly aware that the body he was in wanted to answer, *somehow*, never mind that they were already tied. Even lost to the lust, he was still aware enough not to try and pull out, but he moved as he could, tugging at Zen with his knot in short, fitful bursts. Another twirl of Keith's tongue, another clench from Zen that made Natani pant and groan, and then Natani could feel through their shared awareness as Keith's tongue was replaced with his hand, the basitin's fingers gently teasing at Zen even in the mids of his rapture. Natani was already nearly gone himself, his nuts starting to tighten in response to the impossible pleasure and Zen's constant milking, then clenching harder with the hot, wet feel of the basitin's tongue drawing up his sack. Keith found his goal, and that was the last straw. Natani's whole body clenched, his mind opening fully to the link, and the world fell away.

*

When Natani finally went limp, Keith was expecting it and had a good hold on both wolves, ready to keep them stable. Unfortunately, he'd misjudged one axis and had to catch Natani's rump with his face to stop them from tumbling on him. Ah well. He pushed back and managed to shift Natani's weight forward and off his muzzle, without tipping the whole couch over. Tied together at the hips, Zen slumped on the backrest, Natani slumped on Zen, and both with their arms hanging over, they were actually pretty stable. But that 'tied together' was a problem. Keith figured he *could* have just tipped them sideways onto the couch as they were, but... he was pretty sure they didn't want to wake up like that. *Especially* if it was back in their own bodies, and they usually sorted themselves out in their sleep. So he freed up a hand and snuck it in between them, looking again for the artery, this time on the other side. He wasn't sure if he found it—maybe wolves were just different?—but whether it was his touch or just being down for the count, he could feel the knot start to grow smaller. When he thought it was small enough, he started gently trying to tug it out. Eventually, it came free with a plop. Keith pulled Natani all the way out of Zen—or was that Zen all the way out of Natani?—and was hit again with their mixed scents. He'd been pushing back his own excitement, looking out for the wolves, but now the heat haze threatened to wash over him again. His eyes were drawn to the glistening member before him, and with barely a half a heartbeat of hesitation he found himself leaning forward to nuzzle it.

Give it a little lick. Then a big lick, all the way up the back, from tip to knot... The taste of both of them, after so long, and with the heat... before he knew it, he'd licked Natani's softening erection clean, working his way down from the knot to the tip, where he caught one last pearl of the wolf's seed. He suckled on it for a moment, but there was no more to be had. Except...

Keith caught himself, shaking his head to clear it. This was no time to be doing something like this! ...and yet, he knew the only reason he hadn't gone for Zen as well was that he couldn't quite reach. He forced himself to focus, and to reassess the situation. He should be able to push Natani off and have him land on the couch without sliding off. Then he could tip Zen the other way, and get them both into a sitting position...

It worked, and after a bit of wrangling, Keith was sitting on the couch between two sleeping wolves. After a moment, he nudged them both to lean against him. So they wouldn't tip the other way. Of course. He focused on the wolves' warmth, and their steady breathing, and willed his own excitement to subside.

Eventually, he succeeded, and let himself relax. It had been a long day—a long few weeks—and it was good to be off his feet. The couch was comfortable, too. But mostly it was the wolves. This wasn't quite the same as laying down between them, one's or the other's arms around him, but it wasn't too far off. Smiling to himself, he slid his hands down both their arms and took their hands in his, sliding his smaller fingers between theirs. He didn't have a good excuse for that one. He didn't care. He'd missed them.

Keith was just about to doze off himself when he felt the wolves stirring. Both squeezed his hand, rather than let go, and he smiled, oddly grateful for that. Maybe he did need some reassurance, after what he'd walked in on. But if there was any hesitation in his heart, it soon melted away as the wolves, still leaning against him, began to nuzzle him and lick his cheeks. Keith laughed. They were matching each other almost perfectly, but...

"You didn't switch back."

Natani, still in Zen's body, opened his eyes and grinned. "Told you he'd know."

Zen nuzzled into Keith's neck. "Hey, I didn't disagree."

"So... what's up? Seeing if I've still got it?"

Natani gave his hand one more squeeze before letting go, and then turned to face him, pulling one of his legs up on the couch and propping his head against the backrest to watch the two of them. He smiled at Keith, then Zen. "Tell him."

Zen nuzzled Keith's cheek again, nudging against him for a brief moment before also shifting away to face him. He too let go of Keith's hand, but only to take it again, this time in both of his. He fidgeted for a moment, opened his mouth, then closed it again. Glancing at Keith, then away. Keith looked at him with great interest. Natani was always Natani, but ever since Zen had gotten more comfortable with the female body, he seemed to... play into it, acting a little differently from how he would normally. The word 'girlier' seemed inevitable. It didn't seem to cause any tension between the wolves, so Keith had mostly just taken it in stride; it had been a hitch in thinking of the wolves as who they were, rather than the bodies they were in, but only a small one. If Zen in a female body was a bit less of a charmer, and a bit more of a sweetheart, well, he was still Zen; and in truth he was always both. But Keith had never seen Zen quite like *this*. Not since he'd confessed had the wolf ever seemed this uncomfortable. Taken by that memory, Keith

used his free hand to reach out and touch Zen on the cheek, and to turn his head to face forward. He saw Zen recognize the gesture, and smiled at the wolf. "What is it?"

The wolf blushed slightly. "Would you... would you share this heat with me?"

Oh. He'd never thought of that. Why'd he never thought of that? Keith's smile widened. "Yes! I would love to."

Zen squeezed his hand. "You... wouldn't rather it be Natani?"

How to answer? It was a meaningless question, because there was no world in which Zen asked this unless Natani was for it, and there was no world in which Keith would refuse this when it came with Natani's blessing. He wasn't choosing between them; he was choosing between having this with Zen, or not having this with Zen, and that was so easy it was no choice at all. How could the wolf not see that? What did Keith want to say, to answer that look of vulnerability in Zen's eyes? That odd timidity that made Keith's heart ache with recognition?

"Zen..." He kissed the wolf, gently. "I love you. Would you believe that, already?"

By the smile that slowly dawned on his face, together with the deepening blush, maybe Zen did. The wolf kissed Keith back, but left him the initiative, so he took it, repeating what he'd said, if in not so many words. Finally, Zen was satisfied, and broke the kiss to rest his head against Keith's shoulder. Keith embraced him, and there was a long exhalation from the wolf. "Okay."

Keith smiled into his hair. "Good." He felt Natani shift closer on the couch, then the wolf's arms wrapping around him and finally Natani's warmth pressed up along his back. Natani nuzzled one of Keith's ears, then gave it a lick along its length. Keith shuddered with it, and Natani did it again. Keith let out a strangled, happy sigh. "You approve, huh?"

Natani gave him a squeeze. "Yeah."

Keith hugged Zen tighter and leaned into Natani's chest. Natani took Keith's weight, their connection becoming even more complete, and for a moment Keith just reveled in the sensations of both the wolves, one holding him, one being held, both beyond precious. He nudged Zen to raise his head, then kissed him, wanting to express what he felt in that instant. With the link, it should reach both of them... and indeed, Natani nuzzled his ear again, and Keith could feel his smile. Zen escaped the kiss to give Keith another lick on the cheek, and he laughed. What would Zen be like in full-on heat? Keith didn't know, but he felt sure it would be different from how Natani was. And whatever it was like, Keith would do his best for him. He found Zen's cheeks with his hands, scratched him there until the wolf grew placid, then pulled him up to see his happy smile and give him a little kiss. In response, Natani gave Keith another lick.

Keith let out a long, happy sigh. "How are we going to do this?"

Zen got that slightly distant look in his eyes that meant the wolves were conferring. Finding their balance, in a new situation. Keith fancied he had gotten pretty good at reading them, but this was something he couldn't easily follow. Zen looked increasingly determined, and eventually, Keith could feel Natani nod. Zen looked at Keith, fully present again. "We were thinking..." the wolf blushed. "If you can satisfy me after it starts for real... then we'll switch."

Oh-ho? "That... sounds like a challenge."

Natani sounded amused. "Thought you might see it that way."

But that didn't feel quite right. Keith looked at Zen, and wondered. He thought he saw the gist of the wolves' argument now; Zen obstinate that Natani should get his rightful turn, even

though it was Zen's first time. Natani pushing back, because it was always too easy for Zen to put him first... but having to yield because Zen was close enough to right. And he *was*. Still...

Keith smiled at Zen, then tilted his head up to address Natani. The wolf couldn't see his grin, but that didn't matter; all the best grins are audible. "And then when I satisfy you?"

An amused little sound, shortly followed by Natani carefully raking his teeth over one of Keith's sensitive ears. Right. Answer. Keith let out a little exhalation at the intense touch, trembling, and the wolf held him tighter. The teeth were followed by a long lick, soothing, and Keith sighed with it. Natani finished by placing a kiss on the base of his ear. "Then... we switch again."

Keith turned his attention back to Zen, only to be met by a kiss. It was his turn to be told how Zen—how both of the wolves, with Natani still at his ears—felt about him. What they wanted to do with him. Keith was very aware of his erection, caught uncomfortably in his pants, well before they eased up at all. And so were the wolves. Zen took one hand to Keith's inner thigh, slowly made his way up, then cupped Keith's sack through the cloth, massaging, slowly, gently. Natani, meanwhile, moved one of his hands down, tracing the contours of his hardness with his fingers before pressing against the underside of his tip, rubbing in small, circular motions. Keith could feel Natani growing hard against the base of his tail, and helped it along with a twitch or two. Or maybe the twitches weren't voluntary. They had him nearly panting with his need for them. It had been too long, and they were so...

Natani caught the tip of one Keith's ears in his mouth and tugged. Keith nearly whimpered. He could hear the grin in the wolf's voice. "Feeling a little tight there?"

Zen freed up his mouth so Keith could answer, and now he did whimper. He searched for something clever to say. "Well, unlike some people, I'm wearing pants."

It didn't quite work.

Natani shifted against him, and Keith thought he could feel the wolf's knot rub against the base of his tail. "Noticed that, huh?"

Kinda hard not to. But Keith found his footing, and grinned. "I wasn't sure you had it in you, after earlier."

Zen blushed, and Natani slumped, lodging his muzzle between Keith's ears. "Err, yeah... what would it take for you to forget that ever happened?"

Oh, so that's how they wanted to play it? Keith smiled, and the words spoke themselves. "I'm sure you can think of something."

Cue taken, Natani unbuckled Keith's belt, and Zen reached around him the other way to get to the button to free his tail. Bumping against Natani's erection as he did? Probably. Keith didn't quite know what he thought of what had happened between the wolves, but at least at the moment, the idea of that incidental touch did nothing to ease his excitement. Natani snuck his hands into the front of Keith's pants as Zen tugged on the back, working the pants down and off Keith even though he was sitting on them. Natani cupped his member, keeping it clear of his pants as Zen pulled them round his ass. Natani just held him, not stroking, but his direct touch, the warmth of his hands, felt even better than the teasing earlier. One hand went lower, gathering his sack just before Zen pushed his legs together to get the pants off his thighs. One finger ventured lower still, teasing, and Keith swallowed. How were they planning to 'make him

forget'?

Apparently, not like that. As soon as the pants were clear—Zen lingered a moment on his ankles, making Keith shiver—Natani planted Keith properly on the couch, his back to the backrest. They looked at each other for a moment, speaking without words. Keith raised a hand to stroke Natani's cheek, and the wolf kissed him, hungrily, pushing him back. Keith's arms went around the wolf's neck, imploring him to never ease up. Keith could feel Zen's hands on his knees, and spread his legs under the wolf's guidance. Zen knelt, then reached up along Keith's sides, and he could feel the tantalizing tickle of Zen's breasts against his shaft. Zen wrapped his arms around Keith's lower back and pulled; Keith followed, sliding down the couch. His head hit the backrest and Natani kissed him deeper, pinning him there. Zen's arms left him, and Keith could feel the wolf's breath on him, hot, and then shuddered as he felt that long tongue start lapping at his balls, teasing the tender orbs around. He was ready, so ready, and yet they teased. Keith took one of his arms from around Natani's neck, reaching for, finding the wolf's shaft, hard as his own, hanging in the air, just in reach as the wolf crouched over him. Keith wrapped his fingers around it, feeling its heat, feeling its pulse in his hand as he gave it a squeeze, then a slow stroke down to the tip. Back up, slowly, slowly, and Keith hooked his thumb and forefinger above the knot, squeezing it, tugging on it. He felt it throb in his hand, and Natani kissed him even harder, almost with a growl. Zen, still nursing his sack, pushed his legs wider apart, and Keith pleaded with Natani in the kiss for release; to take him right there, if that was what the wolf wanted. Natani pulled away, leaving him panting, and Keith let him go, now pleading with a look. But rather than lining himself up, Natani knelt down, next to Zen, who shifted over to make room. The wolves both grabbed one of his legs, by a wrapped ankle, pulling them against themselves as they went down on their haunches, so on the one foot he could feel Natani's stiffness give the occasional throb right against his ankle joint, and on the other, the rub of Zen's wetness as the wolf rocked slightly. Leaving one hand each on his ankles, holding his legs close, they used the other two to grab his wrists, stopping him from doing anything except reaching new heights of erotic frustration as slowly, oh so slowly, *both* wolves now nuzzled up to his sack and put their tongues to work, reducing Keith to a whimpering, aching mess. Occasionally, one or both would make their way higher, licking him clean of his quickly accumulating pre before retreating back to his thoroughly slathered sack. Keith couldn't find his words—he wasn't sure words were possible—but as his desperate need grew, the wolves' expressions grew softer, until finally, *finally*, Zen took his tip into his muzzle, suckling, teasing the underside of his head... while Natani ducked down to *really* pay him back for what he'd done with his tongue earlier. Keith's whole body went rigid as the moment of his release came, as if all of him was squeezing down to a point to erupt into the wolf's eager mouth. His world seized up, then resumed with that first, luxurious jet squeezing out on the wolf's waiting tongue. After the second one, as he felt Zen swallow around him, he remembered to draw a ragged breath. After the third one, the wolves switched in an instant, Zen pulling off in the same motion as Natani engulfed him, pushing down until he could feel the wolf's nose against his stomach, and his long tongue pushing out to tease at his balls, drawn tight against his body, striving to give the wolf what they both wanted. What they got, as the wolves, in immaculate concert, wrung out of him a climax worthy of the weeks they'd been apart.

An eternity later, Keith's entire body went slack, finishing with his toes uncurling somewhere under the reassuring weight of the wolves. His loves. Natani slowly pulled off him, lingering at the tip for a moment and swallowing one last time before joining Zen in nuzzling and licking his nuts—very, very gently this time, easing rather than teasing, reminding them how to unclench. The wolves had let go of Keith's wrists somewhere during his throes, so he reached out to touch them, stroking the sides of their muzzles, trying to tell them how much he loved them. The wolves slowly nuzzled upwards, beckoned by his touch, and he stroked their faces, their hair, even scratched them behind the ears, netting a deeply amused look—so lovely!—from Natani, and from Zen a gentle blush, something Keith knew he wouldn't have shown in his own body. Both their tails were wagging. Higher still they came, levering themselves onto the couch, and Keith embraced them both, pulling them to himself, squeezing his face in between theirs, cheek to cheek to cheek, slowly rubbing. I am yours, and you are mine. The wolves returned the embrace, and Keith melted into them. He realized he was purring. He let his hands roam their bodies, chasing their contours, feeling out their symmetries and asymmetries. The gesture hadn't started out as sexual, but as his hands encountered on the one side Natani's still hard member, and on the other its counterpart, it reached his fuzzy and imprecise consciousness that it was no good that he was the only one who'd felt that. Almost absent-mindedly he let his hands roam over those most intimate parts, tracing the shapes of his beloveds, the yielding hardness of Natani as Keith played with his knot, the yielding softness of Zen as Keith dipped his fingers into his groin.

Natani chuckled near his ear. "And there he goes."

Zen sighed happy agreement on the other side. "So he does. Can never get enough."

"Not before you do." It was such a simple thing, obviously true, but for some reason both wolves made little sounds, as if surprised. They pulled away a bit to look at him, both with smiles on their faces and love in their eyes. Both kissed him, gently.

Keith kissed them back. Love and devotion.

Natani sighed, but he couldn't hide the happiness he felt. "You're impossible when you get like this."

Zen buried his face in Keith's neck. "Impossible." But there was something in his tone, in his breathing, that told Keith his light touches on the wolf's groin were having a stronger effect than he'd thought. The nascent heat? He probed a little stronger, and Zen shuddered against him, already near his release, his tail twitching as he nuzzled into Keith's throat, under his shirt, taking his scent. Keith pulled his other hand from stroking Natani—a shared glance told him the wolf understood him perfectly—to embrace Zen, and to caress him. Keith stroked his hair, his ears, his cheeks, and held him close as he pushed him over. Keith's palm grew wetter, and with a long, shuddering exhalation, Zen was done. Keith stroked his cheek again, and the wolf unburrowed from his shirt, pressing a kiss, full of smiles, against Keith's lips before falling into a curl beside him, his head on Keith's thigh. Keith scratched him again, smiling.

There was a happy, unguarded quality to Natani's voice that was like precious music to Keith. "If wolves could purr..."

Natani had straightened up, and was standing by the couch. Keith let his eyes linger on the wolf's erection, then looked up at him and smiled. "And how about you?"

Natani grinned. "Want a taste?"

It was an invitation to be coy, but something about the moment had him as disarmed as the wolves. "Yeah."

Natani shook his head, then smiled. "You really are impossible."

"And you love me for it."

The wolf sighed, obscurely defeated, before leaning down to kiss him. It was very tender, this time. Couldn't let a wolf forget about their needs, though... Keith reached out once more for Natani's member, catching the tip between his fingers, rubbing in small circles. He left off petting Zen for the moment to free his other hand, raising it up to ruffle the fur on Natani's cheek. But as he did, he realized where that hand had been; at Zen's groin. It was rich with the scent of a wolf entering heat, and not just any wolf. A wolf he loved.

Keith broke the kiss, and when Natani looked at him, he very deliberately brought his hand to his muzzle and gave it a whiff. Looking at Natani, he let the heat haze get a hold of a corner of his mind, letting the lust shine through. With the hand at Natani's groin, he ran his index finger across the underside of the wolf's cock, and felt it twitch under his touch. "How about that taste?"

His mood caught the wolf, as Keith had known it would. Natani got his knees on the couch and shifted closer, giving him easy access. The wolf towered over him. Keith straightened up from his slouch, thinking clearly enough to make sure he didn't roll Zen off him. On the contrary, the wolf's head ended up more in Keith's lap, not entirely by accident. Keith took his heat-touched hand to Natani's cock, giving it a few good pumps with a tight touch, transferring some of the essence. Then he let the hand fall back to Zen's head, slowly scratching the wolf behind his ears, and with the other, guided Natani's tip to his mouth, to his tongue. Instantly, Keith felt the wolf's member give a twitch, and was treated to some of his pre. He swallowed it, then began to lick Natani clean, enjoying the curious mixture of maleness and heat, letting the lust of it lend a certain hunger to his actions. He had Natani enthralled; the wolf loved it when Keith surrendered to the call of the heat, of *his* heat, the call to love and adore and fulfill. And this, this was not far different. Every time he felt a twitch, or a slow throb, under his tongue, Keith returned to the tip to collect his prize. When he reached the wolf's knot, the trips became frequent indeed.

Finally, Natani was clean again, glistening in front of him in all his glory, beginning to pant with the pleasure of Keith's attentions. Keith took the tip in his mouth, suckling, massaging the underside with his tongue to invite yet more pre, then slowly started pushing forward, taking Natani into his mouth until the wolf reached his throat, then *swallowing* to push even farther... until his nose met the wolf's knot. Keith held there a moment, then thrust his tongue as far as he could, giving the underside a long, heavy lick. Natani shuddered with a groan, depositing yet more down his throat, and Keith smiled around his prize. He still had it. Slowly, *slowly*, he pulled off until just the tip was left in his mouth, milking out two more spurts on the way.

Natani was leaning on the backrest of the couch with one hand, his panting heavier. He was having to hold himself back, Keith could tell... with a nudge, he thought he could get Natani to

straddle him and start thrusting into his mouth. The idea held a lot of appeal, especially in his half-lusted state, but it would dislodge Zen... and after how the wolves had teased him, doing this the slow way suited Keith better. So he kept just the tip in his muzzle, angling to press it against the roof of his mouth as he massaged the underside with his tongue. He wasn't teasing, exactly, but it was a slow build. That had its advantages. Keith took his free hand to Natani's sack, rolling the heavy nuts in his palm, feeling their weight, then gently massaging them with his fingertips. There was a huff from the wolf and he half-tensed, before relaxing with a groan. Having his sack tumbled could still feel pretty odd to Natani, but he'd learned to appreciate it, and Keith was rewarded with even more pre. He felt Zen stirring in his lap, nuzzling down to Keith's own member, not quite hard but getting there. The wolf took his tip in his mouth, beginning to suckle on him slowly, and Keith let out a long sigh around the cock in his muzzle. He gave Zen one last scratch behind the ear—which the wolf rewarded by going down deeper on him—before taking his hand to Natani's shaft. He could tell that the wolf was close. Still, he did not swallow Natani again, though that would have done it; it would be a waste for the wolf to spend himself down his throat. Keith kept up his campaign, massaging the underside of the wolf's leaking tip with his tongue, one hand gently tugging at his balls, and the other... he squeezed down gently on the wolf's knot, then cupped it, sliding his fingers behind it, around the base. He felt Natani brace himself to hold still, and looked up at the panting wolf. Their eyes met, and Keith *tugged* on the knot, squeezing it at the same time. The knot swelled in his hand, Natani drew a shuddering breath, and he could feel the wolf's nuts draw tight against his body. Keith kept squeezing the knot as, with a massive groan, his whole body stiff, Natani began to unload into his muzzle, in slow, big jets that erupted against the roof of his mouth before coating his tongue, heavy with Natani's taste. Keith let it pool, then swallowed before his mouth got full, then let it pool again, all the while gently palming the wolf's sack and maintaining his hold on his knot, squeezing, coaxing a full orgasm from the wolf. As if they'd been tied.

Natani had a lot to give, and Keith took all of it, looking up at the wolf, watching his expression melt into hazy joy.

That was the biggest bounty of all.

Finally, with Natani half-collapsed against the backrest, thoroughly spent, Keith loosened up on the knot so the wolf could start to grow soft. He swallowed the last of Natani's seed, once again fascinated by the fact that the wolves tasted different to him. They hadn't believed him, of course, but he'd continued to get it right.

Even with the blindfold.

And his hands tied behind his back.

The fact of it was, the brothers had different flavors.

He'd grown to like both long ago.

Keith let the softening Natani slip out of his mouth, then placed one last kiss on the tip before letting go. Natani completed his collapse, sliding down to sit next to him, facing him. In Keith's lap, Zen was nuzzling against the base of Keith's member, his long tongue occasionally darting out to give it a lick. Keith rather suspected the wolf had plans for it, and was looking forward to finding out, but for the moment he was more than content to watch Natani's rather dazed expression.

The wolf kissed him, and it was the sweetest thing, pure love and satisfaction. Natani shifted how he sat, propping one elbow on the backrest to settle his hand on Keith's head, thumbing the base of one of his ears before starting to gently caress it. Keith let out a happy sigh, and Natani matched it, then gave him another kiss.

The wolf chuckled. "I'm not sure I can stand."

Keith nuzzled his cheek. "Well, do you need to?"

Natani nipped at the tip of his ear gently. "I should get dinner started. Clearly, you're hungry."

Keith grinned. "I don't know, I feel like I just ate." But of course, that wasn't quite what it was about, with Zen nuzzling at him. He looked at Natani, and could have built a house on the understanding between them. Keith smiled. "I guess I could use something more to eat. It's been a long day."

Natani returned the smile, then leaned close. They nuzzled each other's cheeks for a moment, and then, with a last kiss, the wolf pulled away and stood up. Slowly, testing his feet. He found his footing, then stretched, a rather magnificent sight. He looked at Zen's pants, discarded on the floor, and, with a smile, took off his shirt and let it join the pants, standing fully naked.

A rather magnificent sight.

Natani picked up a book from the table—Keith didn't catch the title, but it looked rather impressive—then with a grin and a wink at the two of them, started towards the door.

The book reminded Keith. "Natani?"

"Hm?"

"There's a bunch of letters for you." Keith nodded his head at his bags, laying discarded in the doorway. "Package in the bag on the right."

Natani's ears perked up, curious, and he squatted down to rifle through the bag, his tail swaying slowly as he kept his balance.

The wolf never not looked good to Keith.

Natani held up the right package, looking at him, and Keith nodded. Natani stood back up, looking at the wrapping, thoughtful. "Should I leave this until later?"

Keith smiled. "I think it *can* wait, but I don't think it needs to." Most of them were from the female wolves who had been... well, not as much *part* of the delegation, as adjacent to it. Natani had made more than enemies that day.

Natani nodded slowly, looking at Keith, then left the room with his book and his package.

And his letters.

After a moment of quiet, with Zen still seemingly content to just nuzzle at him, Keith gave one of the wolf's ears a gentle tug. "Hey."

Zen's voice was a sigh. "Hey."

"How are you feeling?"

"Horny and in love."

Keith smiled. "I guess that makes two of us."

He could practically feel the wolf rolling his eyes. "Think we should do something about it?"

"The first half, yeah. The second half, never."

Zen raised his head slowly, getting up on his arms to look at Keith. "You really are impossible,

you know.”

Keith kissed him, and the wolf yielded, then nuzzled his cheek, then neck, then sighed as Keith put his arms around him. “Being touched by you right now is... I don’t really have words for it.”

“Is it the heat? Is it getting bad?”

The wolf shook his head, or maybe just nuzzled deeper. “No, it’s there, but that’s not... well, it’s part of it. But it’s seeing you, and you wanting to share this with me, and...”

Keith waited a moment, but the wolf didn’t continue. “And?”

Zen pulled away from his neck to look at him, clearly hesitating. Keith stroked his cheek, waiting patiently. Zen struggled, but found his words. “And... what happened between me and Natani.”

Bweh?

Zen laughed at his expression, a lovely, easy sound. “Not because it was Natani. Because it was my body.”

“Ah.” Keith grinned slowly. “I didn’t think you were *that* in love with yourself.”

Zen stuck his tongue out. “I’m not. But...” the wolf grew more serious.

The silence stretched. “Is this where I say ‘but?’”

Zen snorted, then, after a moment of visibly struggling with himself, sighed. “... would you?”

Keith smiled, gentle, not teasing. “But?”

“I...” Zen gathered himself, and found a wan, pained smile. Keith’s heart went out to him. “I... hurt someone once. I was young, and stupid, and didn’t know what I was doing. Well, I guess neither of us did. But... I wasn’t the one who got hurt.”

Ah. There had been shadows of that in the past, in how Zen looked at him, in how oddly careful he sometimes was... Keith could see the shape of his catharsis, of... taking what you had to give. There was a sort of penance to it, though Keith wasn’t sure if that was really the... right way to think about it. Could see, too, how tangled up Zen, the protector, could get over hurting someone. He stroked the wolf’s cheek. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

Zen opened his mouth, then shook his head. “I think... I think it’d be too easy right now. I should be in my own body. After... all of this.”

Keith nodded. “Do you want me to hold you to it?”

Zen smiled, and it was a bit better than wan. “Please do. I think... I can talk about it now. With you.”

“It’s a promise.” Keith caressed the wolf’s cheek again. “And... I’ll still love you.”

There was the smile he wanted to see. “Yeah.” The wolf gave him a kiss. “You will, won’t you?”

Keith returned the kiss, pulling Zen closer, offering him reassurance. The wolf took it, and they moved past the moment, forgetting the later and focusing on the now. Keith let his hands roam the wolf, cheeks, neck, sides, breasts... his nipples were hard, so Keith gave them a little tweak, eliciting a cute little gasp. Keith cupped the wolf’s breasts, lifting their weight, slowly massaging with his fingers, and Zen grew hungrier in the kiss, needier, pleading for satisfaction. Heat-tinged. That called to something deep within Keith, and he felt himself growing hard again.

He nudged Zen out of the kiss. “Wanna sit on my lap?”

The wolf blushed. "Yeah. I think I do."

Keith shifted into a better position, and Zen straddled him. For a moment, all Keith could see was the wolf's stomach, then his breasts as he lowered himself, searching out Keith's member with one hand to hold it steady. Guide it in. Keith sighed at the slick, sensuous, hot tightness of the wolf as Zen's weight settled on him. The closeness was delicious; not just their coupling, but Zen's thighs against his hips, his feet pressing close on either side, the wolf's arms loosely around his head on the backrest, casually touching his ears... and Zen's breasts in his face as the wolf leaned forward, making himself more comfortable.

Keith settled his hands on the wolf's waist, letting his arms rest along Zen's thighs, then nuzzled his way to a nipple, giving it a playful lick, cherishing how he could *feel* the wolf sigh against him. "Comfortable?"

He felt Zen's tongue on his ear, paying him back for the nipple, and shivered. The wolf's voice was a close rumble. "More than ever. I mean... it's normally good. You know it is." Keith fancied he could hear the wolf blush. "But it's still a little weird, you know? But right now, it just feels... right. Completely right."

Keith had been nuzzling for the other nipple while the wolf spoke, and now gave it a lick. "The heat?"

He felt the wolf's muzzle against his ears as he nodded. "Yeah, I think so. It's like the body is saying, very loudly, *this is how it should be.*"

Keith smiled. "And you're not arguing?"

"No. Right now, I don't miss my body at all." A long sigh from the wolf. "Though, that blowjob you gave Natani was something else."

Keith grinned. "Felt that, huh?"

"Every lick."

"Well, I couldn't exactly slack off after what you guys pulled on me. Had to give it my best shot."

Zen chuckled, a warm rumble. "Well, you outdid yourself. That bit with the scent was inspired."

Keith laughed. "I know Natani." He smiled mischievously. Maybe Zen would hear it. "What about you? Do you think you'd like that?"

The wolf nipped him on the ear. "I think I want to find out." A short pause. "I'm not sure I could stay as calm as he did, though."

Ah.

Keith placed a kiss on the wolf's heart, or as close as he could get, anyway. No mischief, now. "You wouldn't have to, if you didn't want to. You won't hurt me."

A half-strangled little sound, and the wolf leaned away, shifting tantalizingly against him as he did. Zen looked down at him, tears in his eyes. "Dammit, Keith."

He reached up, taking the wolf by both cheeks. He longed to kiss him, but couldn't reach. "You won't."

"How do you always..." but instead of finishing the sentence, if it even had an end, Zen came down, crouching. Keith couldn't reach the wolf, but the wolf could reach him, and did. The kiss held the deep, tender feeling of an unreachable place being touched, of something broken

beginning to heal. Keith knew it well, too well, and his tears welled in response.

Miracles exist, but they aren't free. Someone has to make them.

Zen let out a long, ragged breath, then nuzzled into Keith's neck. Keith couldn't really get his arms around the wolf's body, so he settled for wrapping them around his neck instead. It seemed to do the trick, in a pinch. Another long breath from the wolf, then a short laugh, almost easy. "I'm starting to feel like we're pretty bad at this sex stuff."

Keith grinned. "Well, depends on what you're looking for. I think we're doing okay."

"... yeah."

Zen stayed snuggled up, and Keith wasn't going to complain. He hugged the wolf closer. "You know..." this felt like the time. "You don't have to be in that body to do this."

Another short laugh. "What, sit in your lap?"

Keith raised his eyebrows. "Well, now that you mention it... I wonder if I could reach you with my mouth if you did."

"... okay, now I kinda wanna try it."

"But you know what I mean."

"... yeah."

Keith tried to make his voice as tender as his feelings. "I'm not saying that you have to. If this is how you want it to be... I'm fine with that. Really. I'm just saying... you can, if you want to. I wouldn't find you any less cute." No response. "I guess what I'm really saying is... if you're holding back, or forcing yourself to act in a certain way, you don't have to. But if you want to show a different side of yourself based on the body... then that's fine. They're both beautiful to me."

"Mm..."

Keith nuzzled into the wolf's long hair... and caught a whiff of the heat-scent. Of course. He'd been stroking Zen earlier, with that same hand... but Keith didn't let it carry him away. Not quite the time.

After a few more moments, Zen drew up, and to Keith's relief the wolf was smiling. "I'll... think about it, okay?"

Keith returned the smile. "Sure." Now? ... Now. Keith pulled a lock of the wolf's hair to his muzzle, giving it a whiff. Zen looked at him quizzically, so he grinned. "The scent. I scratched you with that hand, remember?"

"Ah." The wolf looked thoughtful. "It... really has a strong effect on you, huh?"

"When it's Natani." Keith smiled. "Or you."

Zen raised an eyebrow. "I suppose you're going to say we have different scents, too."

Keith grinned. "Now that you mention it, maybe you do. I'll have to keep a nose—" he felt Zen's hand, briefly, where they were joined, before the wolf pressed it against his nose, rich with his scent, straight from the source. Of course. The brothers thought alike. Keith's nose flared, and as Zen slowly dragged his fingers across it, even his *ears* went rigid. He breathed in, letting the lust become him, but not ceding control. As the wolf's hand passed to his cheek, he turned his head, following, seeking the enriched fingers with his tongue.

Zen let him suckle on his fingers, then kissed him. Maybe it was the scent in his nose, but the wolf's tongue tasted even better than his fingers had. Keith clutched at the wolf's hips, and Zen

began to move, grinding slowly against him. Keith groaned into the kiss, and they parted.

The wolf looked a little overcome, himself, gazing down at Keith, his hips slowly pumping. "Yeah... I like it when you get like that."

"The scent gets stronger, too. And... I haven't given into it yet."

"Why not?"

"Because this is just the beginning. When it really starts... slow isn't going to cut it. So while we still can... I'd like this moment to be just like this."

Zen nodded, and settled against him, the gyrations of his hips making his breasts rub against Keith's face. The wolf whispered into his ear. "I'm in your hands."

The brothers thought differently, too. But then, it was Zen's first time. Keith didn't answer in words; instead, he found a nipple, giving the hard nub a flick with his tongue, letting Zen's reactions draw them both deeper into the lust. He began answering Zen's movements, swaying in counterpoint. They found each other's rhythms, meshing, evolving, until they moved together, their tight coupling a perfect harmony of slow, indolent pleasure. Keith's hands were on the wolf's hips, aiding in their dance, but his muzzle and tongue were free to tease at Zen's slowly swaying breasts, nuzzling, licking, circling the nipples tightly with his tongue, even forming a tight seal and suckling, tugging on the sensitive flesh. Zen in turn teased at his ears, licking along the ridges, nipping, even taking a tip in his mouth and giving it a tug. Teasing fed teasing, and they spiraled on, never speeding up, but growing ever more aroused, more in tune with each other's pleasure, more enthralled by the sensations of their joining, of flesh meeting flesh, lust meeting lust, love meeting love. They were both breathing heavily now, and for Keith his climax had become something inevitable; he could see the cliff coming, even if it was still a ways off, and he could not reach it first, because if he did, his body would fail his silent promise to Zen. He was about to reach between their legs, to give the final push, when he felt the wolf tense, going rigid in the moment before his release, and then it came, as, with a shuddering groan, Zen squeezed around him in rippling pulses. It broke their rhythm, and they grew still, except for the quaking inside the wolf, and the weak twitching of his hips. Keith pulled down on him, desperate to join him, so close—and between squeezes, Zen gathered the tip of one of his ears in his mouth, and on the next wave, *tugged*. Keith tumbled off the cliff, pushing uselessly up into the wolf, his world narrowing into this moment where the pleasure they had built up crashed over them.

He held tight to his lover in the storm.

Two or three eternities later, Zen sighed, and Keith loved the contentment of the sound. "Slow was pretty good."

They were still as they had been, except Zen had slumped, resting his head on Keith's. It was a good way to be. Keith smiled into the wolf's breasts. "Yeah."

"Is your ear okay?"

Keith laughed, but gently. He flicked the ear, sweeping it across the side of Zen's muzzle. "Yeah. Maybe don't make a habit of it, but it got the job done."

Zen gave the ear a reconciliatory lick, and Keith sighed happily. He worked his arms around Zen's back, but it wasn't quite what he wanted, with how much he had to reach. Perhaps there

were better ways to be. He put an arm out and started lowering himself on the couch, and Zen got the idea, lifting off enough for him to slip out from under. Keith, on his back now, opened his arms to beckon, and with a beautiful smile the wolf came, laying his head on Keith's chest. Keith's arms fell around the wolf's back, holding him close.

It was Keith's turn to sigh contentment. "That's better."

He felt Zen nod. "Yeah." After a while, the wolf continued. "The heat... it's going to get even better?"

"Probably? More intense, at least. Why?"

"I've... never felt anything quite like that before."

"Oh?" Keith couldn't have stopped his grin if he'd wanted to. "Does that mean I'm a better lay than Natani?"

Zen laughed. "You're never going to let us live that down, are you?"

"Should I? I mean, if you really want me to forget about it..."

The wolf shifted, getting more comfortable. "It's down to Natani, I think. Mention it at your own peril."

Keith grinned. "I will."

"Fool basitin." But the wolf's tone held nothing but love.

Keith scratched Zen behind the ears, and smiled as the wolf's tail thwumped into the backrest. "Fool wolves."

"I guess we are, to fall for a fool basitin."

No response was necessary, so Keith spent the next while in silence, stroking Zen down. The wolf seemed to be growing somnolent in his arms. It was still light out, but Keith couldn't blame him. He was still riding high on everything that had happened, but he could feel a crash looming. It had been many nights since he'd slept either much or well, and today had been but the last in a string of long days. Though... the honest fatigue of the trip felt better than the fatigue of too many meetings with too many blowhards. But fatigue it still was, and he was very much looking forward to curling up with the wolves, and getting some real rest.

And yet, he didn't want to miss any of today, either. There was still a lot of day left, and even more than sleep, he wanted to see what it would hold. Dinner would be first. Natani might have actually started on it by now... indeed, if he listened carefully, he could pick out some kitcheny sounds, though he couldn't smell anything, at least not yet. But perhaps his nose was just too full of Zen's scent.

"Keith?"

Maybe the wolf wasn't so sleepy, after all. "Yeah?"

Zen got up on his hands and knees and shifted himself higher relative to Keith. He got the idea and moved toward the edge of the couch, making room for the wolf to squeeze in beside him. They settled down nose to nose, Keith feeling a little precarious until Zen put an arm and a leg around him, holding him close.

The wolf booped their noses together, then wrinkled his. "I really did a number on you, huh."

Keith grinned. "Yeah."

Zen gave his nose a long lick, causing Keith's ears to bristle. "Better?"

It was Keith's turn to wrinkle his nose. "Now everything smells like wolf slobber."

Zen stuck his tongue out. "So deal with it."

Keith did, nuzzling under the wolf's chin and down to his throat, wiping his nose on the soft fur there. He pressed down and could feel Zen's pulse under him, and held there for a few heartbeats, enjoying the unusual sensation. Then he reversed himself, smiling. "Better."

Zen kissed him, matching his smile. "Silly."

Keith was content to be silly as charged, and to enjoy the wolf's embrace. Shades of male-Zen?

The wolf grew more serious. "About what you said, about how I'm in this body..."

Apparently! "Yeah?"

"Do you think there's a problem?"

Keith smiled. "Didn't I tell you that I don't know?"

Zen booped him on the nose again. "But you brought it up."

So he had. "Yeah."

The wolf gave him a flat look of 'elaborate.'

Keith tried. "You could say that I'm... aware... that if I hadn't made that request, back then, on our first night, to be with Natani... you wouldn't be in this situation."

Zen growled, a warning tone. "Don't you *dare* think of regretting that."

Keith laughed. "No regret. But... I'm aware. I made a choice, and it affected you."

The wolf looked at him for a long moment, then sighed. "... I'm going to end up sitting in your lap, aren't I?"

Keith grinned. "Well, it would the manly-Zen thing to do."

The wolf laughed. "I swear, you get me all tangled up."

Keith kissed him, mischievous. "And you love me for it."

"Yeah." Zen reached up touch one of his ears, stroking, soothing. "I do."

Keith buried himself in the wolf's chest—though unusually, but not unpleasantly, it was really his bosom. Zen held him tighter, and Keith nearly purred. He slid his arms around the wolf, just to be closer, and let out a long, satisfied exhalation. This, too, he had missed.

And yet... "You know, I really did mean it, that you can be different if you want. You don't have to do this for me."

Zen stroked his ears. "I know. Right now, I'm doing this for myself. I missed you, you know."

Now Keith did purr, a little, then found his grin. "I mean, I'm just saying... if you wanted to put on a dress, I'd support you."

Zen laughed, a great joyous rumble all around him. "Man. What would Natani say about that?"

That... might not have been a complete dismissal. "Well, Natani can wear a dress too if he wants. Who's going to stop him?"

Another laugh, longer this time. "Nobody. That's who."

"Damn right."

They spent the next while mainly just enjoying each other's presence, and Zen seeing how hard he could get Keith to purr.

Pretty hard.

Eventually, Zen announced what the scents wafting through the house already had. "Dinner's up."

Keith stretched, or as near as he could with a wolf wrapped around him, flexing his legs and pushing up against Zen's chin with his head. Zen chuckled, giving him one last squeeze before letting him go. Keith got up, retreating with a kiss and a smile to watch as Zen stretched in turn, limbering himself before slowly sitting up. The wolf's answering smile was a little fuzzy. It had been a bit of a sleepy moment, for both of them.

Keith looked for his pants—they'd somehow ended up in the far corner of the room—then considered the profoundly naked Zen, and the fact that Natani had left all his—well, Zen's, really—clothes behind. Naked dinner? Seemed impractical... but maybe also a little fun? But while he was musing, Zen retrieved his robe and wriggled into it, and so Keith followed suit and pulled his pants back on.

Keith went to gather up his bags, next, kneeling down to make sure they were still secure, and Zen stopped next to him, flicking the tip of one of his ears. "Bring anything for me?"

Keith grinned up at the wolf. "Sorry, just myself."

When he stood back up, Zen leaned down to kiss him, tilting Keith's face up by the chin. The kiss lingered, and when Zen pulled back, it was with his best grin. "I'll take that."

Keith sighed, leaning his head into Zen's chest. "I... guess I could give you my leftover rations?"

"... actually, hand 'em over. I feel like I'm in charge of the pantry at the moment."

"Oh?" Keith handed Zen that bag, and the wolf took it. "Is there anything I'm in charge of?"

Zen tousled his hair. "Just relaxing, for now. We've got a handle on everything."

If the wolves wanted him to take it easy... he wasn't going to fight them. Not right now.

"Like what we've done with the place?"

There was clear pride in Zen's voice, so Keith looked around, both in the corridor, and poking his head back in the sitting room. He'd only had eyes for the wolves, earlier. The house felt... comfortable. And everything was certainly clean. "Well, I barely recognize it, really. The last time I was here, it was a little difficult to tell what was real and what wasn't..." he smiled at Zen. "But yeah, I do."

"Do you remember the bath?"

"Oh? There's a bath?"

Zen grinned. "Oh yes."

It would be wonderful to soak for a bit... and Zen's grin was pretty promising. Keith smiled, letting his tail do a happy little swish. "That... sounds nice. After dinner? And you guys, too?" He grinned. "Since I'm in charge of relaxing."

Zen tousled his hair again, smiling. "We don't have a choice then, do we?"

"Guess not."

In the kitchen, the table was laden with food—meat, meat, and more meat, Keith noted with amusement, though he also spied some vegetables and even potatoes—but his eyes were quickly

drawn to Natani, seated on one of the long benches, but off to the side from where he'd set any of the places. He'd found a robe for himself, probably not wanting to risk naked cooking. Before him were two small piles of letters, all of them already opened. He was reading one, frowning.

Keith felt Zen's hand on his shoulder. "I'll put these away."

Zen went to a door—that'd be the pantry, then—and Keith stepped up to Natani. He still didn't look up, even when Keith reached out to touch him on the ear—just flicked it against his palm—so Keith put one leg over the bench, then slid his arms around the wolf's neck before sitting down, facing him. That did the trick, and Natani turned to look at him, the frown becoming tinted with amusement. But it was still a frown.

"What's up?"

Natani looked at him, and Keith saw something unusual, for the second time that day. Worry. "Did you get the wolves?"

Ah.

Still...

Keith smiled, mischievous. "I've got all the wolves I want." Natani gave him a long-suffering look, but Keith thought he was amused—maybe even touched—despite himself. Keith kissed his lovely wolf, to deepen the moment, then held for a space, watching Natani's expression. He teetered, then started back toward worry. Keith put on a thoughtful expression. "Though, I think your favorite councilman actually tried to hit on me."

Zen barked a laugh from the pantry. Natani's look was a mixture of pure affront and awe. "The *balls* on that guy."

Keith grinned. "But yeah, I got the wolves. They've committed to Wreathwood."

"But..." Natani glanced at the letters. "I started something, didn't I."

Keith nodded. "Yeah. They weren't very happy with you." He let his voice cool. "But then, I wasn't very happy with them. In the end, everyone stayed... polite."

"I should have just... grinned and borne it."

"No."

"It was foolish, and reckless, and—"

"And *right*. I would have stood with you, if you'd let me. I still would." Keith still remembered the weight of Zen's hand on his shoulder, Natani's way of bidding him—bidding them both—to stay back, when he'd finally risen to the bait.

And *how*.

"But that would have been—"

"Dangerous?" Keith smiled. "Irresponsible? Risking the peace? Yeah." Keith let his arms slide off from around the wolf's neck, and took Natani's head in his hands, caressing his cheeks, ruffling the fur. "There are things that I'm willing to regret, and things that I'm not. I'm with you." He grasped the fur on the wolf's cheeks lightly, then let go. "No matter what." He looked at Natani, resolute. This was the way of the world.

Slowly, Natani's almost vulnerable expression filled up with love. The wolf leaned in, kissing him, letting him know he felt the same; so tender that it brought tears to Keith's eyes. Natani pulled away, and his smile was one of the softest expressions Keith had ever seen on him. "It's a good thing I stopped you, then."

Keith wiped his tears, returning the smile. "If you say so."

Natani looked up, and Keith felt Zen's hand on his head. He turned to look, and there was no question how Zen the big brother felt about Keith's declaration to stand with Natani. Zen straddled the bench behind Keith and sat down, hugging him tightly from behind, and now it was Keith's turn to feel a little vulnerable, with the joy of seeing them again and being with them. Being loved by them. Natani kissed him again, and Keith kissed back, but it was for the both of them, and he thought he felt both in the kiss. Sometimes, in some things, the wolves were as one. Keith put one of his hands on top of Zen's arms, circling him, and the other around Natani's neck, pulling him closer.

A handful of peaceful moments later, Zen loosened his hold and gently nipped Keith on the ear. "We should eat before the food gets cold."

Natani smiled. "Yeah, I'm starving."

Zen sounded amused. "Found your appetite, then?"

Hm? "Have you been ill?"

Natani touched noses with him. "Just missing someone."

... Oh.

The places had been set on three sides of the table, with a stool at the head, but Zen kept Keith where he was—albeit turning to face the table—and Natani re-set the places as they'd been sitting, with Keith between the wolves. They crowded him a little, seemingly unwilling to draw away, hands busy with food but all their tails a tangle behind them. It made finding the space to eat a little difficult, but Keith wouldn't have dreamt of complaining. He would have rather done without the food, good as it was after cold rations, than without the closeness.

After the meal, Zen was picking his teeth with a stick of celery. "So, what's next for Wreathwood? The tigers?"

Keith yawned, the food heavy in his stomach. "Yeah. We've got who we need now, but I'd like to have everyone. The folks up north are probably willing to come to us, but the tigers... maybe not. So I'm officially on my way there now." He smiled. "Though, I'll get delayed. And... might end up putting it off. If you guys have other plans?"

Natani was looking at the letters, thoughtful. "No, I..." He sighed. "I don't know what to make of this. It would be really good to know who some of these are from. Not many are signed."

"Maddie can probably help you there. She's the one who brought most of them in. After you two left, she thought it would be a good idea to insinuate herself 'behind enemy lines', as she put it. Apparently, she was a bit of a hit."

Zen grinned. "She would be."

Natani shot his brother an amused look. "Is she part of your delegation?"

Keith shook his head. "No, she's staying behind. There's a lot of practical decisions to be made, still, and... well, I'm not going to be there. Not without you guys. But we could send word to her. Having her come by here would probably be easiest. She should be able to get away for a bit."

Zen cleared his throat. "Would that be after the, um..."

Keith grinned. "Yeah. I was thinking we'd stay here for..." He'd planned for two weeks, heat permitting, but suddenly felt greedy. "... three weeks?"

Natani nodded. "And then, the tigers. Probably."

Zen sighed. "Jungles? In midsummer? ... if you'll be there, I'll be there."

Keith smiled at him. "As if you're not interested in the natives."

"Right now," Zen pulled him into a one-armed hug, "I'm only interested in you."

And Keith believed it, too. He nuzzled into Zen's neck. There was a spot there that was just... right. "... yeah."

Zen sounded thoughtful. "Though... tigers have a heat in the summer, don't they." Keith laughed, but the wolf took on a more serious tone. "You know... I'm not actually sure if I'll want to."

Keith gave Zen's neck one last little nudge, then pulled away. The wolf looked serious, too. "What, thinking of becoming a one basitin guy?"

"I wouldn't want to..." the 'hurt you' was unspoken, but very clear. The wolf radiated sincerity.

"Zen... None of that needs to change. You don't have to be with me every second of every day. Just... don't run away."

"I... I won't. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Just don't forget."

Zen pulled him close again. "I won't."

Keith rested his head against the wolf's shoulder, content. He heard Natani shifting, then felt a touch on his cheek, his ear, his other ear, and each felt like a blessing. Finally, the wolf leaned in to give him a kiss, light and playful. The kiss broke into a shared smile, and Natani gave him a last lick on the cheek before standing up. "I'll get the bath going."

That sounded good.

Zen let his arm fall away from around Keith, then bumped him upright. "I'll clear and do the dishes."

As the wolf got up, Keith stretched and yawned. "I'll help."

It wouldn't do to get too lazy.

Zen tweaked him on the ear. "I told you, not today. Let us take care of everything."

Well, he *had* been working hard... and he didn't exactly hate the idea of being taken care of. Of the wolves wanting to take care of him. Keith settled back down, leaning his elbows on the table, then slumping on his arms when Zen cleared enough space. The wolf shot him a grin, but continued to work in silence. When he'd cleared the table, he took an apron off a peg on the wall, revealing a smaller, pink apron underneath.

Keith looked at it for a moment, then sighed. "... That's for me, isn't it."

Zen flashed his best grin. "How'd you guess?"

"Juuuust a hunch." It was a very them thing to do. And harmless enough. Though... could he turn it around on them? The image of himself in the apron, and nothing *but* the apron, came to Keith. Could he actually pull that off? ... for their reactions? Yes, he could.

Zen looked at him, suspicious. "What are you smiling about?"

Keith did nothing to hide the smile. "Oh, nothing."

Zen's suspiciousness faltered as he caught Keith's mood. The wolf shook his head, smiling, and came over. He leaned down, and Keith raised his head from his arms so Zen could give him

a kiss. The wolf finished with a nuzzle, tickling his cheek, then sighed, all happy exasperation. "When you get like that... I think I really could be a one basitin guy, and never miss— ... hang on, I already am, aren't I."

Keith laughed. "That's where I was going with that, yeah."

"Huh." Zen grinned. "So we'll be okay as long as I don't woo another basitin?"

Keith smiled. "Zen, *we'll be okay*. ... Though, you probably shouldn't try that. My troops have it hard enough already."

There was that grin again. "Or maybe not hard enough?" Keith laughed, and Zen reached to touch one of his ears, smiling softly. "I think I can manage that."

Keith leaned into the wolf's hand, prompting him into heavier petting, then slowly let his head fall back on his arms, looking sideways at Zen, relishing the sensations as the wolf gently teased at his ear. Keith let his tail wag freely, then made it curl around Zen's ankle. The wolf smiled at being captured, and continued to pamper Keith until his eyes grew heavy and his tail relaxed, letting Zen go. The wolf leaned down to kiss him on the cheek, then went back to his chores, humming to himself. Keith watched him work, listening to the clinking of the dishes, and slowly drifted off.

Keith awakened to the smell of coffee, and found that Zen had just put a mug down near him. His mind a little fuzzy, he stretched carefully, yawning. The dishes were done, and Zen's apron was back on the peg, but he didn't think he'd been out for much longer than that. Which was probably good. Sleeping on a table wasn't the most comfortable.

Zen pointed at the coffee. "Want some rum with that?"

Keith smiled, reaching out to him. "I'm already a little drunk on you guys."

"Oh?" Zen took his hand, smiling. "Want some wolf, then?"

"Always."

Zen came up behind him, and Keith shifted to the edge of the bench, giving the wolf room to sit down behind him. It would have been better if the bench had been a bit wider, but they made it work. Zen wrapped one arm around Keith's midriff, then used the other to hand Keith his mug before picking up his own. Keith leaned into the wolf lightly, finding a place against his breasts, then brought the mug to his nose, taking in the smell for a moment before trying a careful sip.

Zen's coffee.

He was so happy to be with them again.

Zen gave him a squeeze, and, overcome in the moment, Keith rubbed against the wolf, striving to be closer, regretting even the clothes between them. Zen tightened his hold and nuzzled Keith's ear, and he quieted down, content again.

He really was a little drunk on them. Keith settled against Zen, finding all the places they could be in contact; from the tips of his ears all the way down to his waist, then their thighs, knees, ankles... Keith was snug between the wolf's legs. They sipped their coffees in silence, Keith occasionally rubbing against Zen's neck, and the wolf pacifying him with this or that touch.

Eventually, Natani returned. "Bath's about ready."

Keith looked at him, smiling without thought, then reached out with his free arm. Natani

smiled, coming to take his hand and sit astride the bench next to them. The wolf kissed him, softly, and Keith let out a happy little sigh against his muzzle.

Natani nuzzled his cheek, still smiling. "You're like this, huh?"

Keith didn't know how to answer that, but he didn't need to. Natani nuzzled down to his neck, pushing him against Zen, and Keith let out a little involuntary purr.

Zen laughed. "We're going to end up on the floor if you start playing."

Natani grinned at him. "And?"

"We've still got coffee!"

"Okay, fair point." Natani gave Keith a long lick on the cheek, making it hard for him to hang on to his mug, then went to pour himself the rest of it. He sat down on the other side of the table, this time, but within seconds his feet found Keith's, nudging, settling so their ankles were together, Keith's pinned between the wolves'. Deeply intimate, in a way that was maybe unique to the three of them in the whole world. It was too bad his feet were still wrapped.

Natani smiled at him across the table. "You're going to like the bath."

Keith nudged at Natani with his toes, and the wolf played along, shifting his feet and trapping Keith's toes under his own. The gesture might as well have been an embrace. Keith sighed happily and took a swig of his coffee, and might have dropped the thread of conversation altogether if Natani's expression hadn't prompted him. He was going to like the bath? "Oh? Does it come with a wolf?"

Natani grinned. "It comes with two."

His ears perked against Zen's neck, earning a soft chuckle from the wolf. Both of them... "It's big enough?"

"Easily."

Keith took another swig of his coffee.

A bathroom break later, Keith stood in the room with the bath. Sunlight filtered in through the high windows, sparkling on the surface of the nearly steaming water. And the bath...! It wasn't as big as one of the public baths on the island, but it was easily big enough for the three of them. More than that, big enough that they wouldn't be packed in. He would rather have liked that, as well, but... there was room to move! The door opened, Zen trailing him from the bathroom, and Keith grinned at the wolf. This was way more than he'd been expecting.

Zen grinned back, obviously enjoying his reaction. "Lose the clothes, hm?"

The wolf led by example, pulling off his robe and putting it up on a shelf before going to the pails to get some rinsing water. Keith couldn't help but mark how Zen walked, with a bit more sway to his hips than he'd expect to see if the wolf was in his own body—or certainly, from Natani. He tried imagining both those things, and couldn't help but smile. But then... how would he himself have behaved, in a different body? Odd thing to try and think about. He shook his head, wondering, then started shedding his clothes and putting them away. To finish up, he sat down on a bench to unwrap his feet. He raked his fingers through the matted fur on his shins and ankles, scratching, sighing happily at the sensations, at finally being unbound. It had been too long.

Zen dumped a pail of warm water on him. Keith barely had time to get his ears down before the torrent hit, and he sputtered, quickly turning into laughter. He was dripping wet, and he felt wonderful. He looked up at the wolf, grinning down at him, still dry except for some of the splashback. "I'm going to pay you back for that."

"Oh? Think you'll need a ladder?"

Keith poked his tongue out at the wolf. "Well, I could stand on the bench, or jump. But maybe you should just sit down."

Zen's grin mellowed into a smile, and the wolf sat, giving one of Keith's dripping ears a tweak as he did. Keith grabbed the pail, then went to fill it again, leaving a trail of water in his wake. The pail was rather large, and quite heavy when full. Keith carried it back, and Zen looked up at him in expectation, then closed his eyes and flattened his ears. Keith took it slower than Zen had, initially splashing the wolf when the pail was too full to do otherwise, but then slowly pouring the rest out over him, aiming first for the bridge of the wolf's muzzle, then running the stream up to his ears, and from there in circles. It finally petered out on his already sodden chest, the last rivulets running down between his breasts. Zen opened one eye, in case it was a trick, then the other, then grinned before shaking himself vigorously, spraying Keith.

Curse his short fur. He was still trying to decide how to retaliate when Natani entered, stopping just inside the door as they both turned to look at him, Zen doubtless matching the glint in Keith's eyes.

Natani shook his head, smiling. "Do what you gotta do."

So they did. Keith made sure to empty his bucket first, then quickly hid behind Zen, leaving him to take the brunt of Natani's shake. They shampooed themselves and rinsed again, faster work for Keith with his short fur, so he used his lead to splash the wolves again before escaping into the bath. The water was just the right kind of hot, and felt wonderful. Keith crouched down, immersing himself up to his neck, and grinned back at the wolves, taunting. They came, answering his mood, almost at a stalk; wading in at two different angles, with a clear intent of 'Oh you'll get yours.' They closed in, but just before they were ready to strike, Keith pounced at Natani, trying to carry him down. The wolf had read him, and was ready, bracing against him to halt his momentum and, after a teetering moment, slam him down into the water on his back. His world distorted by water, Keith tried to assess the situation. Rather than bearing down, Natani was waiting for him to come up. He would be too much on alert, but Zen was closing in... Keith hooked a leg in that direction, mostly blind, caught something, and could feel Zen start to slip. Natani broke his stance, to assist, and Keith grabbed him by the ankle, pushing away, kicking the water to put more force into it.

Both wolves fell. Keith spun, trying to get clear, hoping he wouldn't. They met his expectations, Natani getting one arm around his waist, Zen pinning him by the shoulder with his fall. It became a glorious tangle of a melee, Keith vying for leverage, trying to get in a situation to break away as they tumbled in the water. The wolves, on full alert now, moved perfectly together, so completely unbeatable that he didn't even need to hold back; every attempt to get away met with overwhelming, irresistible force saying 'you're not going anywhere.' Straining, he rapidly burned through the fresh energy of the coffee, his body growing heavy again in the hot water, but the pure joy of it, of being with the wolves, carried him past tired, until he began nearing

exhaustion. As he lessened his struggle, the wolves' touches became softer, but still they said 'you're staying right here.'

Finally, they came to a stop with Keith firmly in Natani's arms. The wolf sat up, and Keith came with, not even a token protest left in him, leaning his head on Natani's shoulder. Zen adjusted his hold, and both wolves had their arms around him, with Zen nuzzling at Keith's neck, pinning him into Natani. They were all breathing heavily.

Natani kissed Keith on the top of his muzzle. "Got it out of your system?"

"Yeah, I..." What was it, that he had been doing, exactly? His eyes were drawn to the flickering of sunlight on the surface of the water, and he suddenly found himself in a half-forgotten memory of playing with Alaric... with Nick. That hadn't been the game, not exactly, but... the importance of that part of it, of being caught, had grown in the years when there had been no-one there to try.

Keith's heart caught in his throat, and he must have made a noise, because Natani murmured over his ears, "Just let it happen."

In these moments, Natani knew him, truly knew him, and that was the most difficult, the happiest thing of all. The deepest love.

Keith cried like a baby. For Nick, the friend he never deserved, and yet who'd loved him so; only later had Keith understood the true depth of his devotion, and to this day he didn't quite know the nature of those unspoken ties between them, only their strength. And he never would, because he'd never realized in time, never understood the words he could have spoken to avert disaster. He cried for Laura, the timid girl who had come to live among strangers, just for the hope of seeing him again. He should have given that more weight, and not her betrayal. But he'd only given up his resentment at the end, when he should have gone back years ago, to face her and ask for an explanation, ask why she had broken his heart. A letter, a messenger, *anything* but those years of fruitless bitterness. He cried for his parents, for whom he could have done nothing, but who had been taken from him, leaving him alone. He could not have known to save them—could not have even known they'd need saving, they were his *parents*—but he'd spent years hating his father, feeding his every good memory of the man to the flames until there was nothing left. Not even hatred. He should have at least understood that his father was as innocent as Keith himself was; that he could never have hurt his mother.

As he cried for all the should haves and would haves, the wolves never left him, Natani soothing him as he cried on the wolf's shoulder, Zen holding him so tightly it almost hurt. And slowly, from somewhere deep a truth emerged; all of it, every painful step, was a part of the path that had led him here. And that, he could not regret. He would not trade it for anything, and so, he could not just hate his past, and his failures, no matter how costly or painful. And so, some of the pain got out, some of the love got in, and the memories grew a little less painful.

The tears ran their course, as they always did, leaving him exhausted and tender... but not in pain. He let out a huge sigh, and Natani's soothing hands came to a stop. Keith could feel Zen's grip on him lessen, haltingly. When he had some semblance of freedom again, Natani nudged him toward the other wolf. There were signals and signals, between them. Keith turned to Zen.

The wolf had his ears down, tears in his eyes, and a look of complete misery on his face. Ah. Zen had never seen him quite like that, but surely Natani would have... but of course, it was Zen.

He would see a loved one in pain, and that would be it, no matter what Natani said.

Keith put his arms around the wolf's neck, pulling him close, cheek to cheek. "I'm fine. Sorry to make you worry."

Zen pulled him into a hug. "I didn't know what to..."

"You did the right thing." Keith found his smile, as the wolf held him closer. "You're still doing the right thing."

"But..."

He just wasn't going to get it. Keith shifted, straddling the wolf's hips, then straightened up, the added height of sitting on the wolf's lap putting them more or less face to face. He pressed his nose against the wolf's, then nudged up, turning it into a kiss, then leaned into Zen, harder, harder, until they toppled into the water. Keith kept the wolf pinned against the floor of the bath for ten or so seconds, before breaking the kiss and sitting back up for a breath. He grinned down at the wolf, distorted by the water but appearing quite animated. Keith could feel Zen start to shift under him, and then the wolf pushed himself up on his arms, breaking the surface. He looked a little lost, which was a marked improvement.

Zen gave an exasperated sigh. "Dammit, Keith. How am I supposed to—"

Keith leaned down to kiss him, letting his gratitude bubble out. "Thank you for being there for me."

The wolf sighed again, giving up his protest. A smile was starting to form on his face. "Well, what else am I going to do?"

Keith smiled at him. "Exactly."

He was aware of Natani, sitting next to them, and turned to look at him, finding a smile matching his own. They exchanged a look, but Keith didn't give him time to say his line; he simply kissed the wolf, all quiet gratitude, and slid his arms around his neck, before slipping past him into the water, pulling Natani down on top of him.

Natani pinned him against the floor of the bath, and he didn't stop at ten seconds. It wasn't a fierce kiss, but it was very solid. Adamant, that Keith wasn't going anywhere.

A few more tears may have found their way into the bath water.

Finally, they surfaced, and Keith gathered both wolves into an embrace. Natani returned it, nuzzling his ear as he did, and Zen wasn't far behind.

Keith thought he could feel Natani's smile, against the arch of his ear. "Ready to get out now?"

Was he? He felt tired, near exhausted, and the water was so wonderfully warm... and the wolves even more so. "I'd like to soak a bit more." Anything but honesty was unthinkable, just then. "If you'll stay with me?"

And of course, they did. Keith eased himself deeper into the bath, then let the water carry him, settling in to float. The wolves joined him, hands finding hands and feet finding feet to keep them all together. Peace, after the ruckus earlier. Keith relaxed, wholly, letting the heat soak into him, to ease the aches and hurts of his body, as the warmth of the wolves did for his heart.

Of course, he thought slowly, as he watched the sunlight walk the ceiling, one day, the wolves would be gone. But it was not this day. And when it came, he would have no regrets. They wouldn't allow it, and neither would he.

And that had to be enough. A clean wound doesn't fester.

The wolves shook themselves off, spraying water everywhere, then sat Keith down on the bench, dropped a towel on him, and went to work on drying him. Keith tried to help, but they wouldn't have any of it, and so he sat there, his hands between his legs on the bench, the towel still covering his eyes as the wolves started with his ears.

It did feel wonderful. Zen was very careful, Natani much rougher, but... it was the right kind of rough. The wolf knew what he could and could not take, and even while Keith squirmed under their touch, his tail curling with it, it was never too much. And Zen, with his obvious care and tenderness... Keith wanted to wrap his arms around them both and never let go.

The wolves left his ears moments before the impulse became irresistible, Zen moving on to rubbing the fur on his face dry while Natani took care of his hair. When Zen got to his cheeks, Keith leaned into his hand, and smiled to himself as the wolf faltered for a moment. He could practically hear Natani rolling his eyes, so he wrapped his tail around the wolf before he could say anything, and heard an amused sigh instead.

It was so good to be with them again!

They got to his shoulders, and Keith could actually see again. He shared a smile with Zen, who was still rather wet after shaking himself off. "I want to dry you, too. At least your head." Keith half-turned his head, and tugged on Natani with his tail. "You, too."

There was that audible eye-roll again. But that wasn't the same as 'no.'

The wolves did his arms, then continued down his chest and back, Natani slowing down a bit; perhaps just getting more into it, or perhaps to keep better pace with Zen. This was something new; his ears were a common target, as were perhaps some other parts, but they'd never gone this far out of their way to get him dry. Not that they made it seem like they were doing a chore. These weren't caresses, designed to entice, but he could feel the love in every touch. Even when they moved down to his stomach and sides, and he shivered with his ticklishness, they stayed gentle, and didn't tease.

Keith swallowed, a little overcome. "If you guys ever want to do this again..."

Zen took one look at him and kissed him, tender as anything, loving as a wolf, drawing out his tears. Natani licked him on the ear, then dried it with the towel, causing him to laugh. Zen glanced past him at Natani, just to make it clear he was speaking for both of them. "You can count on it."

His waist was next, and the wolves had him stand. He had to lean on Zen's shoulders for support as the wolf verrry carefully dried his sack, thumbing over his jewels with the towel, while Natani worked rather more brusquely at the base of his tail. He firmed up, aroused—he wasn't *dead*, after all—but the wolves didn't make anything of it, past Zen glancing up at him with a smile. Keith let out a long sigh as they worked down his thighs, trying to get himself back under control. Past his knees. Keith braced, but still shivered as the toweling reached his shins, firm and vigorous, and when they grabbed at his ankles with the towel, there was no stopping his erection. They had him sit down again, to get to the bottom of his feet, then his toes as he splayed them, quite involuntarily. They lingered there, and Keith let out a very long sigh.

And then the wolves were done. Natani gave him a quick kiss, then went to drain the bath and start herding all the water they'd spilled back towards it. Zen stayed behind, so Keith stood, and pointed at the bench. Zen plopped down in his place, even mimicing his position of sitting with his arms between his legs. For the first time since they'd gotten in the bath, Keith caught a whiff of the heat scent, though it was faint, even below the rather mild case of 'wet wolf smell'. A reaction to his reaction? That caught his arousal, but he willed it to fall. He'd wanted to pay them back for the start of it, after all, not the end.

Though...

"Is the heat okay?"

Zen nodded, smiling. "Yeah. It's starting to come back, but right now it just feels... nice." Keith grabbed a dry towel and plopped it down on the wolf's head, and Zen laughed. "Did I have an option there?"

Keith smiled, not that Zen could see him, and started carefully drying the wolf's ears, using both hands on the first one. "I think maybe you did."

The wolf was already wagging. "Can I pick again?"

Keith massaged the wolf's ear gently through the towel, working his thumb along the base, watching his tail pick up even more speed. "Well, do you want to?"

The ear tried to flick against his hand, and Zen sighed happily. "Not... just now."

Keith kept working, smiling. After the ears, he dried the top of the wolf's hair—and his bangs—enough that they wouldn't drip, then moved on to his face, the bridge of his muzzle... he was very thorough on the cheeks. Zen kept his eyes closed throughout, and the smile on his face was simply beautiful. He looked almost as happy as Keith had felt. Keith pressed a small kiss on the wolf's lips, and Zen opened his eyes, surprised. They shared a smile, and Keith rubbed again at his already-dry cheek before stepping around the wolf to get at his hair.

He wanted to keep going, but at the same time, Natani had about gotten the place tidy-enough and might be thinking of taking matters into his own hands.

Zen seemed to have been thinking in the same direction. "Two of us, one of you, lots of fur. I can take it from here."

Keith put the towel on the wolf's shoulders, then put his arms around his neck. "Some other time?"

Zen rubbed against him. "Sure."

Keith kissed him on the ear, smiling. "Either body?"

The wolf's breath faltered for a moment, then he laughed. "Either body."

Keith grinned, then found Natani with his eyes. He was just reaching for a towel. "Natani?"

The wolf froze for a moment, then grabbed the towel and threw it to Keith with a sigh. "Fine, fine."

Natani took Zen's place on the bench, and Keith placed the towel on his head, but he was careful not to cover the wolf's eyes. Instead, he smiled down at Natani as he got to work on his ears, keeping a close watch on the wolf's expression. If possible, he was even gentler, even more deliberate than he'd been with Zen. He put all the love he felt for the wolf into every one of his touches, along with his hope that it got through clearly. Natani was prickly to being coddled; not that he thought Keith meant anything untoward with it—they understood each other—but it

remained a sore spot regardless. Zen was more open to it, even in his own body, and so Natani had naturally been left with less to deal with—but Keith never wanted Natani to forget any part of what he felt for him, even if it was a little uncomfortable, and so he cherished these rare chances. Keith lingered on Natani's ears, and slowly, slowly the wolf's expression softened into a smile, his eyes drawing closed, and yes, Keith could see his tail start a slow wag.

Keith dried the wolf's hair best he could, then moved on to his face, like with Zen, drying his forehead, the bridge of his muzzle, then gently rubbing along the curve of his smile, thoroughly ruffling his cheek-fur, setting his tail wagging a little faster. He looped the towel around Natani's neck and closed with a tender kiss.

The wolf let out a long exhalation, a flickering smile on his face, then opened his eyes. "You're still like this."

Keith kissed him again. "I suppose I am. What are you going to do about it?"

"Maybe I'll put you to bed."

"Oh? How will you make sure I stay there?"

The wolf nudged Keith's muzzle with his own. "Maybe I'll tie you down."

Keith let the blush come over him, but he wasn't embarrassed. "Maybe you should."

Natani looked at him for a moment, then took him by the sides of his muzzle and pulled him in for a kiss. It was still gentle, though. Keith laid his hands on the wolf's shoulders, leaning into him a bit, and returned the kiss.

It was a tender tangle, between them, with all their feelings for each other; but slowly, the balance shifted, and they found once again that place where they most completely meshed; Natani asserting himself with gentle strength, Keith yielding, leading, provoking. Natani rose to him, figuratively and literally, standing up without breaking the kiss, turning them around, and sitting Keith down, the impact on his rump doing nothing to curtail his rising arousal. The wolf broke the kiss, but lingered, and Keith sighed against his muzzle, letting his hands fall away from Natani's neck.

The wolf nudged him with another nuzzle, then straightened. "Hang tight, okay?"

Keith smiled up at him, wistful. "Yeah."

Natani got to work drying himself, and Keith noted with some satisfaction that the wolf had responded to their kiss just as much as he had; he wasn't quite hard, but there was a lot to look at. Zen picked up some speed as well; he was still suspiciously damp considering that he'd already had some time with the towel, and Keith got the feeling he'd been more interested in watching him and Natani. And fair enough, it wouldn't have gotten *all* of them done any faster, anyway.

Keith could still almost feel the wolves' tender touches on himself, and it was a bit of a shame that he hadn't gotten to fully repay the favor... but on the other hand, he now got to admire both of their bodies at length as they toweled themselves off. They'd just about shed their winter coats by now, so they weren't the complete floofballs they would have been a month earlier, but they still had longer fur than his, and that meant more work getting dry.

Keith let his tail do what it would, and gave a few well-placed appreciative sighs as one wolf or the other looked at him. The brothers were well-matched, Natani's body more obviously muscled, but Zen's also fit and, as Keith could personally attest, plenty strong enough when he

had the wolf's arms around him. The wolves were very solid and very there; lean muscle and soft fur and utterly, utterly beautiful to him. He let his eyes roam over them shamelessly, shapely ankles and calves to powerful thighs and loins... his eyes lingered thereabouts for a while, before moving on to muscled stomachs, broad chests and Natani's shapely breasts; they would have been too large on a lesser frame, but on Natani's body, they fit perfectly.

Keith was glad beyond words that Natani didn't much regret the body anymore. To see someone you love in pain, and be powerless to help... Natani caught his eye and smiled, amusement streaked with tenderness, then flashed a grin... and both wolves turned around, facing away before bending down to start working on their legs.

Keith laughed, but it was a little strangled, and became a deep sigh when the wolves raised their tails and grabbed their ankles. 'Hang tight' had been the word, and he did feel a little tight, hanging there. They grinned at his reaction, then got serious—and less deliberately sexy—again, and Keith got himself back under control. The wolves finished, standing before him tall, proud, and very fluffy.

Keith smiled at them, letting the wistfulness show. "I want to brush you guys sometime. And I don't just mean your backs."

Zen looked intrigued. Natani shook his head, but he *was* smiling. "What's next? Plaiting our hair?"

"Well, why not?"

Keith reached a hand toward them, and Natani stepped closer. Keith pulled him near, and then, on impulse, buried his muzzle in the wolf's stomach, smiling into the wispy, soft fur, backed by solid muscle. The body's good, clean scent, and just the faintest whiff of arousal... he would only need to lower his head a bit and he could be nuzzling into the the wolf's groin, pressing his nose against the base of his shaft, perhaps darting out his tongue for a taste of that alluring scent... but the thoughts remained thoughts when he felt Natani's hand on his head, rubbing at his ears. Keith let out a small purr, and could feel Natani's stomach tighten with the wolf's answering chuckle.

"Yeah, I think it's time to take you to bed."

Before Keith really even had time to answer, Natani had scooped him up into his arms, one arm under his thighs, the other under his back.

Keith had no problem with this, but felt like protesting was the done thing. "I can walk, you know."

Natani smiled down at him. "What's that got to do with it?"

"I guess nothing." Keith grinned. "Just try not to bang my head, okay?"

Natani stuck out his tongue. "Maybe you should hang on tighter, just in case."

So Keith did, wrapping his arms around Natani's neck and pulling himself tight to the wolf, nuzzling into his mane, even fluffier than his stomach. There was a small sound from Natani, telling Keith he'd scored a point. Natani re-secured his hold, then started walking, slowly and deliberately, Keith swaying slightly with his movements, the friction of fur on fur both slight and precious. At the doorways, Natani turned sideways, careful not to bang Keith's ankles on the doorframe. Keith just held on tighter, smiling into the wolf's fur. With every step Natani took, Keith could feel the wolf's muscles tensing with the effort of keeping him stable, but his

breathing never got ragged, and his hold never faltered. Yup. Plenty strong.

Natani spilled him into a sprawl on the bed; cool, clean sheets, and a mattress that was firm, but not too firm. It was no wolf, but for a bed it felt very good. Keith got his bearings, and discovered that the bed was *huge*. It might have fit them all twice over, though maybe not.

He laughed. "What are we going to do with a bed this big?"

Natani sat down on the edge, next to him, and Zen was already climbing in. Keith reached out to him, ruffling his chest fluff, catching a fleeting feel of those breasts. Zen grinned at him and came a-nuzzling at his stomach, playful. Keith grabbed at him, pulling him close, then rolled them over so he sat astride the wolf's hips, leaning down to look for that spot on his neck again. Zen tipped him to the side, and away they went, rolling across the bed.

Natani laughed. "I think you just answered your own question."

Zen landed on top of him, pinning him down with a part of his weight, the wolf's breasts rubbing against Keith's ears.

Keith turned to look at Natani, both to look at Natani, and because turning his head meant more rubbing. He smiled. "I guess I did. Come join us?"

Natani joined the fray, and Keith found himself wrestling 400-something pounds of lean-muscled wolves. He wouldn't have fancied his odds if they had been serious, but it was pure play rather than a contest, and he could end up on top just by willing it. It wasn't like the bath, where he had been looking for something; this was pure exultation in each other. He even started a tickle war that he knew he could only horribly lose, which he promptly did, laughing with tears in his eyes under their combined assault until he begged for mercy. They relented, nuzzling him instead, all smiles, their tails a-wag as he rubbed their cheeks. There were quick kisses, Keith darting in and out, answered by a lick here or there, or a slower kiss. He got both wolves on their backs, and rubbed their stomachs; Natani broke first, pinning him down and nibbling on his ear as he squirmed, helpless and loving it.

Underneath it all, there was that thread of arousal, what he knew had to be a shared thought; that here they were, together, naked, all kinds of options available to them—but none of them pressed it, even when a chance touch could easily have led that way; nor did the faint scent of Zen's beginning heat, tantalizing as it was, grow stronger. They reveled instead in the simple intimacy of the moment, every gesture not a lover's touch, but a loving touch.

It was pure bliss for Keith, after their time apart.

Finally, from a half-seated position, he pulled both wolves into an embrace, an arm around each neck, then pushed them over, collapsing on top of them, happy just to lie there. After a beat, the wolves caught his intention, and shifted, letting him fall between them. Keith let out a sigh as they worked their arms around him and nuzzled close, their legs mingling with his.

The room was lit in sunset hues.

Natani licked him on the cheek. "All tired out?"

Keith turned his head to that side. The wolf pressed a kiss to his lips, Zen started nuzzling his ear, and Keith let out a happy little purr. There was a deep weariness in his body, but it was definitely the good kind. "Yeah. I don't think you have to worry about me going anywhere."

Natani gave him an I'll-believe-it-when-I-see-it look. "How about a massage?"

That, would be very nice. "You want to spoil me even more?"

Natani licked him on the nose. "You know you want it."

"... yeah."

"It's okay to ask, you know." Natani grinned. "And it might be a while before there's another opportunity. I think you've got your work cut out for you."

Two wolves—more or less—in heat? Yeah. "I guess so. Then..." he smiled at Natani. "Will you give me a massage?"

The wolves disentangled themselves, ducking out from under his arms, leaving Keith to settle on the mattress, spread-eagled. He didn't even have time to regret the loss before their hands were on him, smoothing his fur and teasing out the kinks in his muscles, starting with his arms, one wolf per, then joining together to work on his neck and back. Keith thought he'd been relaxed before, but as the wolves found and eased out even the deepest tensions in his body, he practically melted into the mattress, his soft groans slowly turning into fitful purrs.

Natani sighed. "He's going to add this to his list, isn't he."

Keith could hear the grin in Zen's voice. "Well, there's two of us. I figure he can only pamper one at a time, so the other can still get stuff done."

Ooooooh. "So, like... I'd get a day with each of you?" They had time, too, before they needed to travel. If they even *were* traveling.

Zen's voice mellowed into a smile. "I'm up for it." A little hesitant. "And yes, in either body. We need to have that talk, anyway."

Keith reached for Zen with a hand, found a knee, and gave it a squeeze. "I'd like that."

Silence from Natani.

It was okay to ask, right? "Please? I mean, if isn't too much. But I'd like to."

A sigh. "You're *not* plaiting my hair."

That was almost as good as a yes. Keith laughed. "I'm sure we can reach some agreement."

"No promises. But... you've... got a date."

Keith looked for Natani's knee, and found a shin instead. He gave it a squeeze, and after a moment, felt one of the wolf's hands on top of his. Keith took it, and for a moment they held hands. "I'm looking forward to it." When the time came, he wasn't going to push, but... it felt like it could happen.

Natani let go of his hand, only to touch him on the cheek. The gesture was a little ambiguous, in this context, but it still made Keith's breath catch. Natani's hand traced its way to his muzzle, and Keith gave his palm a lick, smiling. I am yours, and you are mine. Natani took it off-script—or maybe changed the language—by rubbing his ear, then giving it a flick before going back to the massage.

When the wolves reached the small of his back, they were no longer just *alleviating* tenseness. There were areas on his body that would always get a reaction from him, and as Zen carefully massaged the muscles around the base of his tail, Keith grew hard against the mattress. It wasn't the first time he'd gotten a massage like this, and he loved the curious mixture of tight arousal and loose relaxation that the wolves' touch could bring out in him. The wolves moved on to his buttocks, enjoying themselves a grope or two while they were there, and then his thighs;

the large muscles there needed a lot of work, and it wasn't a *particularly* sensitive area for him, but occasionally, one of the wolves would send a finger caressing down the inside, tickling his sack, and his erection had no hope of abating. When they reached his calves, the wolves' firm touches made him strain all the harder against the mattress, even as they worked to loosen him up, and at his ankles, their gentle, subtle grips made him groan, nearly overcome. Finally, the wolves came to his pads and the bottoms of his feet, their clever fingers kneading with practiced care, making him moan and splay his toes, only to tease those as well.

Keith sighed into the mattress as the wolves toyed with his feet. They knew exactly how to fan his arousal higher and higher. The massage would continue with turning around, and no doubt they would lend a helping hand, or muzzle—or two, remembering how they'd greeted him earlier. Or maybe they would tease him some more first, maybe get him to make a bit of a mess on his stomach before finally helping him out. And after they'd taken care of him, the massage would continue...

But as wonderful as that would have been, his arousal had brought out a much deeper ache in Keith.

And it was okay to ask.

Keith raised his tail, and let the blush come over him. "Natani? Would you..." He felt the wolf shifting, straddling his thighs, that wonderful weight pressing him into the mattress, then shifting again as Natani leaned over him. Keith could feel the wolf's member slide against the base of his tail, firm, until Natani's knot nestled right against it, making Keith let out a needy little sigh. The wolf lowered his head next to Keith's, giving one of his ears a heavy lick on the way. He looked at Keith, with a wolfish smile, and Keith looked back, blushing up to his ears. "Please?"

The wolf kissed him, nudging at his muzzle, and Keith responded, repeating his plea without words. Natani broke the kiss, then pressed his nose against Keith's cheek, his breath a tickle, his voice a smile. "Of course."

Natani lifted off him, and clambered off the bed, presumably to get some lube. Zen stayed with Keith's feet, moving so he could reach both of them easily, then continued to play with his pads, kneading them with his thumbs. Keith shivered, with both pleasure and anticipation, and became aware that he'd started making a bit of a mess between his stomach and the sheets.

Keith could spy Natani out of the corner of his eye as the wolf returned, settling down next to him on his haunches. He couldn't see what Natani had brought, but that question was answered when he felt the familiar tingly viscosity of a favlow nut dripping down on his opening, followed by the wolf's fingers. Natani took his sweet time lubing Keith up, all the while accompanied by Zen's gentle teasing at his pads, and while the intent might have been just to feed his need... the care Natani was taking reminded Keith of their early days, and his heart filled with love even as he moaned under the wolves' touch.

Natani's hand left him, and Keith swallowed as he felt the wolf straddle his thighs again, one hand pulling his tail aside, and then a familiar, hot, slick pressure, so unlike the wolf's fingers, pressing under the base of his tail, dipping down, inward... Keith yielding, readily, despite the girth, as the wolf slowly, deliberately gave him what he'd asked for. A deep shudder went through Keith's body at the intensity of the sensations as the wolf filled him, inch by inch, and he

ached to thrust back, to hurry the moment that was coming, until finally he could feel the knot press against his strained opening, hot and impossible, both fulfillment and a promise of things yet to come.

Then, with Natani hilted inside him, Zen grasped Keith by the ankles... and started pulling his feet together. Keith shuddered, his tail jerking wildly against Natani's hand as the tight fit became even tighter. Natani shifted his position, pulling a moan from Keith, leaning over him, and reached to touch one of his ears, loving, soothing. Ankle met ankle as Zen brought his feet all the way together, and Keith let out a strangled breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

The wolf felt so huge inside him, and still the knot was only pressing against him, giving slow hot throbs against the base of his tail.

Natani's hand on his ear, offering comfort, love, assurance... "You okay?"

"Yeah. Gods, but that feels..."

He could hear the wolf grin. "It's what you wanted, right?"

Keith let out a laugh, but it was transformed into a moan by its own force. "Y-yeah... more?"

Another moan, as Natani leaned down, hands on either side of Keith for support, to place a kiss on his cheek. Several more moans as the wolf looked for his position, no matter how careful he was being in his movements. Keith felt Natani's toes next to his knees, then burrowing under them as the wolf angled his hips, the change forcing a wonderful tension all along his shaft, deep in Keith. Keith's toes splayed, only to be met by Zen's gentle fingers, and he whimpered, needy and unashamed, as Natani got down on his elbows, his larger frame shadowing Keith's. The wolf nuzzled at his cheek, offering a little lick, and Keith tilted his head, finding the wolf's muzzle in a kiss that was made very awkward by the angle, even as Natani's knot kissed his entrance in a way that was just right. With a sigh, he brought his head back down, and Natani rose higher, nuzzling at his ears.

The wolf started moving; slow, short, heavy thrusts, filling those last few inches over and over again, soothing his ache, pressing him into the mattress, and Keith's world became pleasure. Every time the wolf pulled back, even as little as he did, Keith clenched on him, begging him to stay. Natani obliged, grinding even deeper against him, and Keith mewled with every thrust, a ball of need.

Originally, all of this had been for Natani's benefit. Gods know where he'd gotten that strapon, but he'd had it, and he'd wanted to try it, and Keith... could understand why. He'd been apprehensive; first about the thing itself, then about whether it wouldn't just be a weird parody of the real thing. If it wouldn't just be a disappointment.

If *he* wouldn't just be a disappointment.

But looking at Natani, he wasn't going to deny the wolf. So they gave it a try. That first time, they'd just gone at it—they'd been smart enough to use lube, at least!—and Keith just hadn't been able to cope. But he'd seen the excitement on Natani's face, and he wasn't ready to give up. So they'd left the harness out of it, and Natani had used the toy with his hands instead. That had still been difficult, but it had gone better, especially after Natani thought to use his wonderful, wonderful muzzle to give Keith a bit of a distraction. Keith didn't think he'd ever forget the sensations of that first time, clenching on the toy like crazy as Natani's tongue coaxed out all he had to give. Natani had kissed it to make it better, afterwards, but he'd still been sore the rest of

the day, and tender the next.

So the first time had been mixed at best, but he'd been okay to keep trying. It had felt like maybe it could work. And it did get a little better, the next few times. The distractions a little less necessary. But Keith was still too... tense. It felt like they were making progress, but... whenever they tried the harness, it ended up being a repeat of that first time. And Keith could see that with each failure, Natani was getting less enthusiastic.

So Keith had started sneaking the toy away, for some solo practice sessions. Having the pressure off made a big difference, and he'd *finally* started getting used to it. Even into it.

And one of those times, Natani had walked in on him.

That was when they'd made the harness work, and that was the first time Natani had come from grinding against the toy while buried deep inside him. After seeing the wolf in that moment—Keith on his back, with his legs wrapped around Natani's waist, the wolf standing over him, *in* him, thrusting and bucking his hips in tight little jerks, a look of pure electric bliss on his face—any misgivings Keith might have had were gone. He'd wanted Natani to have *that* **any** day of the week. And for a while, that's what it had been like; they'd barely had sex any other way. That phase might have died down sooner, except somewhere in there was the first time *Keith* had come from Natani bucking into him.

He'd liked the wolf's expression even better, that time.

And when the toy had given way to this, a real live wolf pressing against him, flesh to flesh, it had gotten even better. Not because the toy wasn't good—it still saw use, sometimes, and to great success—but because like this, Keith knew that Natani—or Zen, as the case may be—was feeling good in the same way he felt good; that with every tight, delicious thrust, Keith was giving the wolf what he himself got, when the roles were reversed.

Well, almost the same, as Natani grinded the knot against him, causing him to tremble under the wolf. He couldn't quite imagine what having one of those was like. Taking it, though, he'd gotten quite familiar with, and he knew that in this position, with his legs closed, there was just no way.

But that just made it easier for Natani to tease him with it. Every thrust, Natani pushed it against him a little longer, until he was barely moving at all, just slowly grinding the knot against Keith, hot and heavy; only taking that ultimate pressure off for short moments, and then only to bring it back again with another tight buck of his hips, making Keith gasp and clench around him, his own trapped erection trying to jerk under him as the wolf's weight ground him into the mattress.

Zen was still at his feet, teasing endlessly, and Natani's muzzle was still at his ears, nuzzling, licking, nipping, making that part of him tremble like the rest. It was too much, all of it, but also not enough; Keith flung his arm up, hooking the wolf's neck, working his fingers into Natani's hair and pleading wordlessly for him to come closer. The wolf shifted more to one side, bringing another drawn-out moan from Keith among his panting; and then the wolf was there, up close, looking at him, their gazes meeting, both half-lidded with lust; Natani nuzzling at his cheek, licking at his muzzle... they made the kiss work better this time, hunger meeting hunger. It would have made his toes curl, but Zen was there, pressing against them, pushing against him even in that.

That was the last straw. Keith moaned into the wolf's mouth, feeling the inevitable. "I'm going to..."

Natani straightened up, rapidly, still hilted, and Keith shuddered with the force of the movement. The wolf got his legs out from under Keith, then pulled back, pulling Keith on his side, Zen helping with his feet. Natani never pulled all the way out, and the sensation of *turning* around the wolf drew a ragged moan from Keith, already overloaded, teetering past the edge but before the fall. He felt Natani's knee pressing against his thighs and curled his legs, into a sideways sitting position, giving the wolf room to rut him again. Natani slammed his hips in, and there was the knot again, pressing, grinding, making Keith's freed erection jump in the air, his toes curling, Zen not there to stop them this time. He felt his balls draw up to his body, and the start of that first deep clench around Natani, drawing a grunt from the wolf but not stopping him from relentlessly teasing Keith with the knot—

And there was Zen, muzzle bobbing for his lap, the wolf's tongue gathering Keith up and guiding him sideways into that wonderful, hot muzzle, just as his first spurt worked its way through his shaft. He jerked, in no control of his hips, pushing deeper into the wolf's mouth, leaving the knot behind, exchanging it for Zen's nose pressing into his hip, but only for a heartbeat; Natani pushed forward, bringing them tight, bringing Keith home as the overload of sensations wrenched an even stronger clench from him, his hips thwarted from movement by the press of the wolves but still twitching in place as he loosed his second volley into Zen's throat. Keith grasped at the wolf's head, uselessly pulling him closer, barely, just barely having the presence of mind to consider that it was okay to do, that the wolf could handle it. Zen's answer was the wolf's long tongue, pushing along his shaft all the way to the base, tickling at the side of his sack, angling to lap at his churning balls.

Keith's eyes rolled back, his mouth hanging open, his whole body shuddering as the orgasm wracked its course. Natani never stopped grinding against him, not until it was done, Keith's hands going limp, letting Zen pull away a bit as the wolf tenderly licked him clean, coaxing out the last of his seed before letting him slide out of his muzzle, only to lean closer and nuzzle past his shaft to lap at his sack, gently easing the tenderness there.

Keith returned to the world, releasing a breath that had gotten caught amidst his throes. When he filled his lungs again, he caught another whiff of Zen's heat, stronger now. Natani had shown him the small mercy of stopping, letting him rest, but the wolf was still in him, knot resting against his entrance. The wolves weren't done, not nearly.

And he was fine with that.

Natani grinned at him. "How was that?"

Keith looked at the wolf, making his slow smile a show of languid indulgence. There was no acting required. "A very good start."

The wolf leaned down, drawing an appreciative sigh from Keith at both the sensation of Natani's girth shifting inside him, and the wolf's face drawing closer. Keith couldn't really roll on his back with the wolf pinning him, so he turned just his head to meet the wolf in a kiss, and he sighed again, reaching with a hand to ruffle Natani's cheek. There was a lot of heat in the wolf's kiss, but it was contained, Natani keeping it aside for the sake of meeting Keith in this moment. Keith returned with love, love, love, as taken with the wolf as the wolf was with him.

Natani's laugh broke the kiss. "You're impossible."

Keith let his head fall back to the side, to avoid getting a crick in his neck. Besides, it let him try out some of his better sideways glances. "And what are you going to do about it?"

Natani gave a short thrust with his hips, and Keith let the moan roll straight through him, stoking both their fires. And the wolf did do it again, to the same results, but didn't rise to the bait, didn't get carried away; rather, stopping again, pressing his muzzle against Keith's cheek, giving him a lick and a promise of things to come. "Stay right there. I'm going to stretch my legs a bit and lube up again."

Was the wolf going to try to knot him sideways? By his grin, probably! Keith answered the grin with a slow smile. "... okay."

Natani rose, and pulled out, slowly, leaving Keith feeling empty but full of anticipation. The ache in him had been appeased, for the moment, but it was still there, waiting for the moment his hips would finally be pulled snug against Natani's, their bond fulfilled.

Keith's attention was drawn back to his groin as Zen continued to lap at him, rolling his orbs with his tongue, and Keith picked up the scent again. The wolf had been like that earlier, too... was the heat making him crave Keith's scent?

... more than usual?

Keith reached down to scratch Zen behind the ear, then stroke his muzzle. "C'mere?"

The wolf nuzzled up his stomach, Keith guiding him with his hand until they were muzzle to muzzle, Zen lying by his side. The wolf had a hazy look about him. It had to be the heat, and Keith wondered again that Zen was so placid with it. Keith kissed the wolf, stroking his cheek all the while, overcome with the need to tell Zen that he loved him, and was there for him, and wanted to help. The wolf's answer was almost a plea, needy; something that would have set the wolves' blood boiling had it come from Keith, but not something Keith was accustomed to receiving. So different, and yet so precious his heart filled with it.

Keith pulled away. "What do you need?"

Zen looked like he wanted to whimper. "You. More. Anything."

Keith's mind filled with images; Zen on his stomach, like Keith had just been, with Keith on top of him; or the wolf on his back, with his legs wrapped around Keith; on all fours, his head falling on his hands as Keith took him from behind; straddling Keith, leaning over him, his hair falling around them as the wolf rode him for all he was worth. Should they take a moment? But there was Natani again, clambering onto the bed. That in itself meant there was another way. And if Zen enjoyed his scent...

Keith kissed the wolf again, promising release. "Turn around."

Zen returned the kiss, lust tinged with gratitude, then pushed himself up off the bed to turn around, bringing himself groin-to-muzzle with Keith. The wolf looked for his place, inching his hips closer and closer, the scent getting stronger and stronger, until Keith could finally dart his head out and score a lick. Straight from the source, the taste was liquid scent, and Keith fell into the heat haze, hungry for more, pushing closer, insistent. He heard a distant moan, and the wolf opened his legs, one rising away to give him easier access, Zen practically thrusting his hips at Keith's muzzle. Keith sunk his tongue in as far as he could, as eager for the wolf's bounty as the wolf was for him to have it. A stronger moan, and Zen shuddered under his tongue, the scent

growing even more powerful with the wolf's excitement. Keith wrapped one arm around Zen's rump, pulling him closer until he could lay his head down on the wolf's trembling thigh, settling in for a lavish banquet. He pulled back a bit, to give the wolf's clit a friendly little kiss, and as soon as his tongue made contact with that delightful little nub, he felt all of Zen tense. No teasing, then! He pushed, circling the wolf's clit tight with his tongue, drawing a long, ragged moan from Zen before easing off and starting to lap up the wolf's release, smiling at the happy sound of panting and the thwumps of the wolf's tail hitting the bed.

That was much better.

Natani must have held a moment, not wanting to disturb, but now Keith felt the wolf's hand on his thigh, reminding him of his presence. Keith wrapped his tail around Natani, best he could, and that was all either of them needed to say. The wolf started lubing him up again, and Keith shivered in anticipation. But he didn't forget about Zen, and he settled back in with his cheek on the wolf's thigh, his tongue drawing deep from Zen's bountiful spring, letting the scent of the wolf's heat wake in him a thirst to match.

Zen, meanwhile, had come off his high and was shifting, angling himself, his thigh tensing under Keith as he arched his back to nuzzle towards Keith's groin... Keith opened his legs in turn, and Zen completed the circle, his muzzle pressing into Keith's thigh, inching forward, the wolf's breath on his balls... followed by that wonderful, wonderful tongue, lapping at his sack, making Keith tingle, then roaming wider, even wrapping around the base of his shaft to give it a little tug.

And all the while, Natani's insistent fingers kept working at Keith, promising more to come, making him moan into Zen.

Natani still took his time, but not to the point of outright teasing, and soon Keith felt the wolf's hands leave him for a moment, and then that slick, insistent, precious heat pressing against him. His legs weren't together now, but they *were* open in exactly the wrong way, making the angle awkward, and the fit, if anything, even tighter. Natani solved the problem by hooking his arm under Keith's raised knee, then leaning forward, using his weight to push Keith back more fully onto his side, leaving his rear exposed and his leg dangling over Zen's side. Zen gathered it up, tucking it under his arm, leaving both of Natani's hands free as the wolf positioned himself again, angling to press at his entrance once more.

It was an unfamiliar angle, but the wolf had used a lot of lube, and Keith was more than ready. Still, his tongue stilled for a moment, and he just focused on breathing—his nose inches from Zen, every breath a new dose of the purest lust—as Natani filled him, inch by hot inch, pressing at his insides in ways oh-so impossible and oh-so familiar, equal parts intensity and pleasure. Keith's member kept twitching as Natani hit all of his buttons, and Zen pulled back, retreating from his lathered sack to gather the tip of his cock into his mouth. Keith shuddered at the unfamiliar sensations of the wolf's tongue pressing against the topside of his tip, then groaned as Zen rested his head back on Keith's leg, the wolf's muzzle pulling down on his member, then groaned louder as Natani sunk even deeper, an electric jolt wringing out a hot dollop of his pre right into Zen's mouth. Zen angled his head down, easing the pressure on Keith and freeing up the wolf's tongue, letting Zen gather up his pre before starting a slow suckle on his tip, waiting for more.

And more he got, as Natani first kissed his knot to Keith's tight ring, then started to pull back... only to work those last few inches into him again. And again. And again. And again, every slow thrust a new moan from Keith, every kiss of that knot making his hips give a tiny little jerk, causing Zen's muzzle to tug on him even as the wolf's tongue gathered up what he had to give.

But he couldn't just lie there and take it; Zen needed him. And so, he forced his mind back on task, giving the wolf a long lick, then plunging in to sate his thirst, then pulling back and placing his muzzle right at the wolf's clit. Every twirl of the wolf's wonderful tongue around his tip, he repaid, kneading at Zen's clit with as much force as he knew Zen could take. The wolf's tongue on him grew more erratic, and Keith answered wild with wild, soon starting to lose his focus in truth as Natani kept plowing into him, time and again, more and more intent, Zen's lust feeding back into him. Keith was already close again himself, the scent and the sensations far, far too much, but Zen still beat him there, his whole body tensing again, then finding its release, making Keith's cock shake with the wolf's muffled moans. Natani's thrusting faltered for a moment, only to steel and redouble, pushing Keith closer and closer. Zen's tongue never ceased, so neither did Keith's, pushing and pushing and pushing at the wolf, all through his orgasm—until Zen tensed *again*, bucking his hips in an even stronger release, breaking Keith's rhythm.

“Did he just—?”

Natani's panting was heavy in the air. “Yes! Keep going!”

So Keith did, even as he felt his own orgasm begin to unwind, deep inside him in that place that only the wolves could touch. Zen thrashed against him, all semblance of control lost, or maybe bent on keeping his teeth away from Keith, now pressing deeper into his muzzle with every one of Natani's desperate thrusts. Keith didn't think the knot could go in, not at this angle, and as Zen went rigid *again*, then closed his legs, vicing Keith's head in between, Natani seemed to agree; he lifted up at Keith's hips with one hand, and tried to pull up on his top leg with another, *anything* to let his hips open up just that little bit more—

The knot slammed in, hot, huge, impossible, and it was as if Keith's whole body clenched down on it, trapping it, sealing it, never wanting to let go. His hips jerked, the sensation of Natani in him, *completely* in him, throwing him so far off the edge he wasn't sure he'd ever find his way back. That last thrust slammed him to the hilt in Zen's muzzle, pressing the wolf's nose tight against his sack even as his first jet forced its way from his clenching balls into the wolf's throat, swallowing around him. And Natani—Keith could feel the wolf throb and twitch, so hot inside him, then let go, tensing in waves with his release, Keith clenching on his knot in response, adding to the involuntary twitching of their hips, the sensations feeding back and forth as they wrung each other dry.

All three of them were a long time coming down.

Keith was gathering himself, still buried between Zen's legs. The wolf had relaxed his death grip, and it was now just the weight of the leg pressing down on him, not the crushing power of its muscles.

It wasn't at all unpleasant, really.

His muzzle had been thoroughly drenched by Zen's throes, and even now he could have let

himself slip, and fall towards the trance-like state of the heat haze—but right now, sated as he was, sated as he thought the wolves were, he could also just be, and let it wash over him, sweet and pleasant and full of promise for later.

Natani shifted, minutely, drawing Keith's attention back to their joining, and it was a wonder he had ever thought of anything else, so profound was the wolf in him, *sideways*, and so precious the feel of the wolf's hips tight against his. Though, with Keith's foot up, still tucked under Zen's arm, the contact wasn't quite as complete as it could have been. And he didn't think Natani could be very comfortable maintaining that position, hips low, knees spread.

Completing his inventory, Keith could feel the weight of Zen's head on his thigh, and the wolf's breath on his softening member. Zen had let him slip out of his mouth, but Keith didn't think he'd spilled anything.

All he had free was one hand, wrapped around Zen, so he reached up, blind, looking for Natani. It was a muzzle that met him, licking his palm, and Keith suddenly wanted the wolf down there on the bed, with him, close, more than he thought he'd ever wanted anything. He nudged at Zen with his muzzle, and the wolf stirred, raising his leg again, then slowly rolled away onto his back. Keith looked up at Natani, the wolf looking back down at him, and words weren't necessary. Natani gently lifted him by the hips, matching their motions as well as he could to not put strain on their tie. Keith had no useful leverage to help, but the wolf had him, and slowly, ever so slowly lifted him up until he could get one of his own legs behind him, then begin letting Keith down, coming alongside. Keith let out a long sigh as the wolf laid down next to him, easing the tensions between them—and *inside him*—as Natani settled into a position that was something much more familiar. He felt beloved, both inside and outside; the knot pulling their hips together, and Natani taking care of the rest, pulling Keith to himself and tucking him under his chin. The wolf's folded arm provided them both with a pillow, and his other arm drew around Keith in a loving embrace. Their legs mingled, looking for a comfortable way to settle and easily finding it.

Keith got his arm out from under himself, crossing it over his chest to meet Natani's, laying his hand on top of the wolf's, lightly grasping his fingers. He reached up with his other arm, running his hand through Natani's hair, finding an ear to cup. It flicked against his hand, and he looked for the wolf's muzzle, rubbing him on the cheek, then trailing forward. Natani gave his palm another lick, as Keith had known he would. He lingered for a moment, feeling the wolf lap between his fingers, then brought the hand away, reaching for Zen, still on his back nearby. Keith could reach his knee, and soon after he had, Zen's hand came to join his. Keith tugged on it, and the wolf slowly sat up, the very picture of disheveled beauty, his hair a mess, his smile wide and easy and wonderful. Keith tugged again, and Zen came, slowly getting down next to him. When Keith could reach his muzzle, he did, stroking Zen's cheek and guiding him in for a kiss. Zen drew near—and started licking Keith's nose and muzzle, very thoroughly, as Keith squirmed and laughed, unable to defend himself against the assault. It did get the scent out, and when Zen was satisfied, he shifted so Keith could duck his head into the wolf's chest tuft, nuzzling deep into his cleavage to wipe the wolf slobber from his poor nose. This accomplished, Keith drew back, and Zen returned with his muzzle—and *this* time, the wolf kissed him, light and playful and full of love. Keith reached up to scratch him behind an ear, and the *thwump* of his

tail against the bed made them both smile. They looked at each other for a moment longer, and Keith nudged the wolf lower, closer. Zen saw his intent, nodded, and gave his cheek a lick before moving down, bringing his head under Keith's chin, nuzzling into his chest. Keith held him close, hand on his head, thumbing idly at his ear and watching his tail wag as Zen made himself comfortable, going into a curl so his feet could meet theirs in a happy tangle.

That, that was much better. Keith could feel himself begin to purr, a deep and rolling rumble, the vibrations reaching all three of them as the wolves held close.

A perfect moment.

Well, almost.

Keith clenched around Natani, drawing a long happy groan from the wolf, then cleared his throat, loading his voice with mischief. "So... am I a better lay than Zen?"

Natani chomped on his ear, but at least he didn't use teeth.