Rind

by Jenner (bella)

Summary

Part III of the Rift Series.

In a post-apocalyptic future, a war for Earth has devastated the planet and torn civilization apart. Six alien species - each fleeing destroyed homes and at war for their own survival - have come through a quantum rift to make a new home on our small, bountiful planet. Decades of war have ended with the establishment of an interplanetary Peace Accord -- and now all of humanity must work to rebuild.

Six years after Peace is established across an occupied Earth, a lonely wolfe exile in the midst of a snowstorm stumbles across a most exciting treasure named Gustin, who happens to be a Human of Particular Importance.
Gustin & the Wolfe

Winter, Year Six (2nd Moon)

It was snowing when he opened his eyes. Warm snow. No, wait, that was just water. It was raining then. Was he outside? He couldn't focus his eyes. It was very warm to be outside. Something was tickling his nose. Hair - fur? He sneezed. Fur.

He tried to sit up. A strong hand pushed him back down. Alright. Lying down it was, then. He moved one hand to his eyes. His arms felt rubbery, slow, his fingers dangling from their sockets. He blinked twice.

"Are you alive or not, human?"

He tried to answer in the median, but his tongue wouldn't quite obey.

"I guess you're live enough if you can move."

The figure, still blurry, rose and disappeared into the blended shadows of the room. He began to work on not allowing the blurry shadows to be quite blurry-shadowy, but the whole scene seemed oddly resistant, and quite determined to remain a fuzzy blob. Gustin gave up and tried to swallow. The figure must have been watching him, because immediately he was being hoisted upwards by his shoulders and his lips were pressed against a cold rim. He did his best to take a sip. It was fucking cold, but he swallowed it and the room reagitated itself; when it settled, he could distinguish colors. He swallowed again and his tongue moved freely in his mouth. He tried to bring a hand up to grip the cup. The moment it was released to his care, he realized he'd overestimated his muscle control, but the shock of the cold water on his groin did enough to compensate.

"Dammit, human!"

He fell back onto the bed. A low growl and now the shapes were getting clearer. He recognized a head, shoulders - a face, a body (not a bad body), legs, a tail. Fuck. A tail.

He wished his vision would re-blur so he wouldn't have to deal with this, but he seemed to be inexorably drawn towards lucidity. The figure was back in front of him now, bent over with a cloth, trying vainly to sop up some of the water.

"I ought to make you clean this up." the figure groused.

"Wha'r yu?"

The head looked up at him but didn't answer. He could make out a face, sort of - features were coming into focus now. A heavy jaw, strong nose, low cheekbones, dark eyes with slivers of grey, and - fuck, there was that tail again, moving behind him. Pesky thing. Shattering the illusion that he'd been rescued by some tall, dark and handsome Psire and reestablishing the fact that he was in fact now a prisoner of war in the Wolfish Empire - or something like that. What was he lying on? It felt...fuzzy. He moved his hands. His fingers wiggled a bit. It was furs. Lots and lots of furs. A pile of death. Nice.

Then hands were on his hips, lifting him, beginning to slide his pants down -

"Whoa!"

the figure looked up, startled by the sudden clarity in the speech, and the strength in the hand which stilled his own.

"Wha'r you doing?"

The surprise disappeared, and a scowl returned.

"Wet. You and me and my bed, thanks to you. Can't sleep wet, human."

Gustin frowned. He didn't like this guy's attitude.

"'f I wan'em off...I c'n do it myself."

The wolfe put his ears back against his head and stepped away from the bed. His face (a very handsome face, sulky though it might be) came fully into focus, as did his size, as he drew himself up
to his full height.
"If you're going to behave like this, then the next six months are going to be very difficult, for the both of us."
Gustin had no idea what the hell that meant, and he didn't want to ask. Luckily, his feet had recently begun working again, so he didn't have to. He just bolted.
Caught

The surprising part was when he actually made it to the door. The unsurprising part was when, milliseconds later, he found himself face down on the cold wooden floor, arms behind his back and face pressed to the ground.
"Get off of me!"
He wriggled, nearly wresting free at first from his captor, but thereafter finding himself locked in an unbreakably tight grip.
"Be still, human!"
The voice was as gruff as before, but not particularly more upset. Good to know, then, that he was of such value and threat to this wolfe that his near escape was viewed as nothing more than a minor inconvenience.
"Let go of me!"
Gustin had stopped fighting, but his words still had a sparring spirit to them. The wolfe scoffed, picked the human up one-handed, and half-carried him to the door. Confused, Gustin allowed himself to be dragged along. At the heavy wooden door, the wolfe growled and used the other hand to pull it open. It slid slowly to the side, resting heavily on its bearings, and Gustin thought he felt the whole house shake with its movement. Gus meant to take two deep breaths to steady him for the chill outside, but he only got through one and so was just halfway prepared when the wind hit him.

He had expected it to be a bit cold, but he certainly hadn't expected this. This was painful cold; screaming, unbearable, icy, bone-soaking cold, and it cut through the thin layers of his clothing instantly. Twisting in the wolfe's grip, he tried to escape the frigid onslaught, but wound up just writhing in place.
"Look."
The wolfe said, tersely, shoving him closer to the outdoors. Gustin did as he was told; he looked. Outside, the earth was white. White sky, white space, white earth. The wolfe spoke again.
"Know what that is? It's snow, human. Storm's been through. You run, you won't make it past my territory line. Freeze first. You understand, human?"
Gustin nodded - he would have agreed to anything to convince the wolfe to close that door. Agreeably, he did just that, releasing Gustin back into the house and using both hands to slide the heavy door shut.

He turned to face Gustin, who was standing where he'd been left, looking now only slightly unsettled and distantly amused.
"Well, I'm glad we had this talk. While I get to work thinking of a plan B, why don't you tell me what you kidnapped me for?"
Gustin's eyes, Kellar thought, were awfully bright for a human who'd just woken up where this one had. He banished the thought immediately, scoffed and turned to wander off into the center room. He had no need, he reminded himself, to complicate the situation further.

He had walked away. Just walked away. Rude damn host, this wolfe was. That was why he preferred his men tailed - made them much more civilized. Gustin stood in the empty open room for only a moment before turning to tag along behind him.
"I asked you a question, you know. Even a Lout wouldn't be rude enough not to answer."
The wolfe was crouched over a stone fire pit in the center of the round room, working something over, but from his low position, still managed to give Gustin a pretty sharp sideways glance at his mention of the word Lout. Gustin lowered his eyes, a move that worked with pretty much every species, until the annoyance seemed to have passed.
Looking around, Gustin began to process. First step, he thought, find out where you are. He'd been running information (sort of - a bit of a forced vacation, one could say) about the northernmost Pack when he had been attacked. He'd been planning to go the median path between Wolfe territories, reaching an entranceway near the south side of GreatLake by noon and taking the quickest undergrounds the rest of the way back to Psire territory. If things went according to plan, he'd be back in their colony within six days and sleeping in a nice soft bed in seven. Days eight and nine would probably be spent getting to know the locals; day ten would be spent eating anything within six yards, and days eleven through forever would be spent repeating the rotation. That was the plan. Things had not gone according to plan.

In front of him, the wolfe adjusted his position and Gustin quietly admired the sinewy shift of his muscles beneath thin clothing similar to Gustin's own. A thick grey tail swept across the floor behind him. No, things had definitely not gone according to plan.

It was snowing. Gustin knew that much. So, connecting that to the path he'd been on, he must be...nowhere near far enough North for this to be right. Where was he? Casting around for some clue, Gustin took in the home he'd found himself in.

The entire structure was wood, and although parts of it looked weathered, other parts seemed fairly new. Massive beams, too massive for just one human to have put them into place, held up the domed ceiling; around the room, small windows were cut, which now had doors of their own drawn across them, and were, Gustin guessed, shuttered from the outside as well. The floor beneath was also wood - rubbed smooth and dark from wear. In the center of the room, there was a large stone fire pit, the heat from which spread outwards in trickles to warm the room. There were furs and rugs of various sizes hanging around the room on the walls, and a bed was pushed off to one side, in the corner.

Not a bad home for a packless wolfe. Gustin was quite sure, after all, that this wolfe had no pack. What else would he be doing living alone in this snowy expanse? His pack must have abandoned him. The reason why remained a mystery, but Gustin did know that such things happened. Wasn't sure why, but he knew they happened. Had never seen the situation with his own two eyes - all the wolfes he'd ever come into contact with were absolutely insistent on the idea of living as a unit - but he knew they could exist. And that was all that mattered. Knowing things was, in fact, his business, and it suddenly occurred to Gustin that while he was here, perhaps he could learn some more about these loner wolfes; the information could come in handy some time in the near future, after he escaped.

Escape. Right. Ought to get on that. Looking behind him, Gustin realized that the room he'd seen the main door in was attached to this big round room that he was in, and that other smaller rooms also seemed to be attached, at random angles to the one they were standing in. He'd been so bent on making a break for it when he'd woken up here that he'd had no real time to take in details. But Gustin was a pragmatist above all else, and so, with the snow piling higher and higher outside, he suspected he would have plenty of time coming to contemplate his temporary home. The wolfe's voice stirred him from his thoughts.

"I did not...kidnap you."
Gustin raised an eyebrow.
"Are you the one who attacked me by the greenwoods?"
The wolfe made a sound but didn't answer.
"Well? Are you?"
The wolfe made a sound, closer this time to a growl. Gustin growled himself, which surprised the wolfe long enough at least to get his attention.
"Answer me."
This time, the wolfe raised an eyebrow.
"No. I am not."
He turned back to his fire pit, poking at it a few times before continuing,
"It does not matter how I came to have you, human. I have you now, and I don't intend to lose you until our problem is solved."
"Our problem?" Gustin asked skeptically, unsure how he'd become involved in whatever issue this wolfe had.
The wolfe growled.
Gustin sighed.
"Right. Our problem. In it together; a regular unit. Victim and attacker. Very nice. Well, why don't we at least practice a few formalities, then, since we're apparently going to be working together?"
The wolfe didn't move from the fire pit, but there was a short exhale of breath which Gustin took to signal interest.
"Why don't you first tell me who you are?" A sideways glance.
"You ask me who I am, but do you know who you are, human?"
Gustin was silent for a moment, unnerved by the sudden change in tone that came with the cryptic answer. Stepping away to put some space between him and the wolfe with some very possibly scary intentions, he replied,
"Gustin. And you are?"
The wolfe eyed him for a moment before returning his attention to the fire pit.
"I am wolfe Kuskellanar Mik'reamn'amirra of Arem'mir."
There was a pause.
"Wow. I'm going to call you Kelly for short."
Kuskellanar growled.
"Kellan?"
The growl dropped off. Gustin sighed again and took up a seat on a small round mat that was set by the fire pit. This seemed like the beginning of a better-sit-down sort of day.
Gustin woke up slowly. It was his ninth morning in the house. He sighed, rolled back over on the furs. He'd kept track of the time, like a prison, through scratches on the wall and by how long his nails had grown. Annoyed with waking, his stomach growled. In the center of the room, backlit by the rising sun, Kuskellanar was cooking first meal. The smell of rabbit meat and the small, flat, dough that Kellan fried wafter over to him. Gustin slid his legs over the wide splay of furs that the wolfe called a bed, put feet on cold wood and jumped over to the small patches of furs leading a path to the cooking pit and bathing rooms that Kellan had laid down on the third morning that Gustin had complained.

The wolfe grunted a greeting as he approached, but otherwise didn't acknowledge him. This was how things had been for the past six days - there seemed to exist a covenant of silence between the two. Kellan would not speak about his intentions for Gustin, and in turn asked Gustin no questions of who he was, where he came from, or most importantly, what he knew.

Kuskellanar's rising was what woke Gustin every morning. The human slept on edge, half-awake, constantly terrified of waking mid-sleep to find the wolfe in any number of horrific positions he'd imagined. Gustin had learned, over the course of his twenty-seven years, that a vigorous imagination was one of his greatest defenses. Preparing for the worst situation kept one's heart beating. So even the littlest sound woke him.

That first night, he'd tried to sleep on the floor by the fire and been dragged over to the bed by Kuskellanar. He'd thought of bolting again when the wolfe had put large hands on his hips, but the wolfe snorted and laid him forcibly in the bed, placing him purposefully between himself and the wall, and turned on his side to sleep. That night had been a long night.

The next day, Kellan had showed him how to use the bathing rooms - after a few days, he had even given Gustin an assignment, teaching him how to make soaps from animal fat. Growled at him when once he did it wrong and nearly spoiled an entire batch. Gustin had been in a lot of sticky situations in his life, he reflected, had faced a lot of dangers and had a lot of threats made upon his person, but there really was nothing quite like Kellan's growl. The low tremor in the wolfe's voice made him stop short every time.

Gustin slept continuously on edge.

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It was the eighteenth morning. The snow was just as high. Kellan opened the door once, every morning, for only a few seconds, to blow new air into the room and taste the wind. Gustin caught on after a few times, and would wait by the door to catch his only glimpse of sky before the same brown-grayness of the walls swallowed him completely again.

Kellan generally went out sometime in the mid-morning; Gustin knew the time only because the gray in the sky which could be seen through the two high, tiny windows faded to a gray-blue and the distant but persistent sound of water dripping alerted him to the fact that the sun was out. He'd managed to get the door open once, when Kellan wasn't home, just because the four walls had felt so damn close around him and he'd been so desperate for space, for sunshine, for the crisp bite of clear air that tasted like cold rain-snow and bird feathers and smoke and maybe, distantly (Gustin imagined) like home.
It had taken him almost twenty minutes to get the damn thing closed back again and in the meantime, three fires had gone out and the entire house had gotten a chill which lingered for days. Kellan had growled at him when he came home, gone out again and returned with armfuls of smaller furs to stack on the bed. It was the first night they hadn't spoken at all, and the first night Kellan had slept close to Gustin.
Twenty-three days in, and Gustin was sure he would go insane with boredom. The snow was incessant - anytime it seemed an inch was gone, three more came to replace it. How Kellan navigated through it was beyond him. Kellan had shown him how to access the small water supply he used; Gustin was now assigned such fascinating duties as cleaning the skins of fresh furs and rinsing dishes and clothing with the soap they mixed together in the afternoons.

Delightful as these duties were, they left about five straight hours every day when Kellan was gone for Gustin to do nothing. He'd gotten in the pattern of spending himself about three times a day, just to pass the time; a practice he hadn't had at since adolescence. After only a day or two, though, that lost its edge and he began to long for a change - a partner - maybe the wolfe? He'd watched him, when Kellan was stripping for his bath or still sleeping in the night when some minor sound had woken Gustin and he lay there trying to sleep. He knew he should be holding out against the enemy, but he was desperately bored and the idea was looking more appealing all the time.

Kellan hadn't shown an interest in him, however. Whenever he moved, changed, bathed - the wolfe was usually engaged in some other activity, carving or cutting meat or stitching furs. Not even a blink. Not even a twitch of nose or ear. Gustin had even experimented with it, concocting reasons to position his body suggestively by the fire or the furs they called a bed, yet still: no reaction. Which he thought was odd, considering how well it had damn sure worked the rest of his life.

He sighed and wandered over to stroke himself by the window.

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By the mark of the moon, Gustin thought he had explored every opportunity for activity within the house, every nook and cranny, every object or idea. So the two small blue jugs, one half-filled and one full, that he found in a cabinet by the carving-place surprised him. They were round, about the size of his head, and completely unmarked. He pushed one. Inside, liquid sloshed. He pulled it out, set it some distance from him, looked at it suspiciously. If it could kill him, he definitely didn't want to open it. But if it was noxious or dangerous or human-killing or something, Kellan would've probably warned him off it, like he had the little machine which Gustin was pretty sure he'd almost lost a finger for touching. Kuskellanar's behavior was interesting; the wolfe thus far did not seem interested in harming the human, only in fairly preserving him till the end of this mysterious six months he kept mentioning to Gustin. So Gus didn't really think he had any reason to worry. He opened it.

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Kellan had spent the day tracking his nearest neighbor to the north, a Layer castoff who had somehow made his way into an abandoned cabin and was constantly leeching Kellan's own water supply. He'd caught the male's scent the previous morning and had spent today looking for him, sure he was up to something. The water was problem enough, but he certainly couldn't have the damn thing catching scent of the human in his home. Keeping him there, unmated and unguarded, was risky but necessary. Definitely necessary, Kellan reminded himself, if he ever wanted to go back home. In his mind, he pictured Ideste's face and knew immediately that he did. He shook his head then, angered by his own silliness. Ideste was gone; he knew it. He'd been young when Kellan had seen him last, just rising to the beginning of his birthing age and certainly would not have waited around for a wolfe as old and foolish as himself, with no promise or hope of his ever coming back. Yes, he remembered, Ideste was gone. Defly, he made his way through the coursing snow, deciding that today, he would track the Layer almost until nightfall.
Kellan hadn't expected to find anything out of the ordinary, really, when he'd gotten home. Hadn't expected to find half the place toppled, that was for damn sure. Hadn't expected to find a fire out, water spilt on the floor by the bed, or furs out of place and spread across the ground. Hadn't expected to find Gustin drunk.

"Human!"
A little mew came from one particular pile of furs by where the bed used to be, before it was deconstructed and made into various piles around the room.
Kellan felt a growl beginning, low in his throat, but suppressed it. He kicked the pile instead. Gustin yelped, then surfaced, brown hair mussed and green eyes glassy. Upon recognizing his attacker, he smiled wide, childish delight at the appearance of his roommate. Kellan squashed down any warm feelings about this and put on his snarliest face.
"What are you doing to my home, human?!"
For some reason, the snarl didn't seem to work. Gustin giggled, stretched out to collapse over Kuskellan's left foot, wrapping one hand around his ankle.
"You're hoooooome."
Kellan didn't like this at all. Very out of character.
"Human, are you ill?"
The human burped, and Kellan was hit with a rather ugly, sharp scent. It burned his nose. He jumped backwards.
"Human, are you ill?!"
More giggles, then Gustin shook his head as if to clear it, rolled over onto his back on the floor, rubbed his stomach with one hand.
"Nooo....lonely, though."
Through some contorted movement that Kellan really didn't think would end with Gustin standing, the human managed to get to his feet and face Kellan, who had safely placed himself behind one of the small fur piles by the carving-place. Gustin put on his best alluring look.
"I missed'ou." the slur sure sounded sexy to him. Kellan flattened his ears against his head.
"Human, stay where you are."
Gustin was already in the process of making his way across the room towards him, though, and didn't listen. The fur pile nearly tripped him up (he'd forgotten he'd put one there) but he pressed on.
Kellan wasn't sure which way to run and in his hesitation, Gustin found an opening. Faster than Kellan expected from a human, particularly a sick one, Gustin was on him, one leg between Kellan's own, a head on his chest and two hands winding their way under his clothing to touch bare skin and the touch was startling - shocking, because he hadn't felt it in such a long time and now here was this human, a little mate, and he was warm and willing and his eyes were so damn green -

Then the sensations changed, became lighter, softer and then disappeared all together and suddenly it became apparent to him that Gustin had fallen asleep. Kellan wanted to whine and growl all at the same time, but tamped down on both and just sighed instead. He had become achingly hard, damp and prepared for a mating in just the few moments that the human had been touching him. He had planned to stop the encounter anyway, but still. He comforted himself with the thought that although unsatisfied was bad, sleep was good. Sleep, at least, would ease this fever that his charge seemed to have been struck with. Maybe he would sleep like sick wolves, and be out for days. That might be a nice change of pace. At least then the damn thing wouldn't talk to him so much in the mornings.

As it turned out, sick humans did not sleep like wolfes. They slept like rabid wolfes. Gustin woke three times more after he took them both to the bed (which he had to halfway reconstruct): twice to molest him and once to throw up in the cooking pit. Kellan was very worried after that, but afterwards, Gustin slept solid and so the wolfe tried not to worry and get some rest himself.
The next day, Kellan lingered around the house long into the morning, ostensibly because the wind was too strong for hunting, but Gustin knew it was because the wolfe was worried and wanted to watch him. Gustin, for the most part, felt fine. He'd woken up mostly sober around ten and had managed to get the room to stop spinning by eleven, so long as he was prudent with movement. He therefore chose to lay in the bed until twelve. Kuskellanar paced in the center room, occasionally lifting his head in an odd way towards the door, and eventually the fog cleared and Gustin came to realize that he was listening for something.

"What are you doing?"
Kellan's head snapped around, his face guilty. He furrowed his brow and grunted in response.
"Mmm. Good. It's a talking day, then."
Kellan snorted, went back to pacing. After a few minutes, he went over to the cooking pit, moved the top from the heavy pot that had been hanging there and ladled some stew out into two bowls.
"Noonmeal."

Now it was Gustin's turn to grunt in response. Trying not to disturb his inner balance or set the room to spinning again, he slowly sat up, swung his legs over the side of the furs, and padded across the floor to Kuskellanar. They ate in silence at the newly-carved low table, both crosslegged on the floor, across from one another. Kellan sniffed the air, seemed to be considering something again when he spoke.
"I woke last night in a hunger."
Gustin looked up at him, couldn't comprehend the cryptic words, and turned his attention back to his soup, responding inattentively.
"Great."
Kellan looked annoyed at his nonchalance.
"A hunger I have not felt so strongly in a long time."
"I've told you before about eating so many potatoes."
Kellan growled.
"A hunger," he corrected sharply, "of a different sort."
Gustin's eyes widened and he swallowed down his mouthful.
"Oh."
The pieces fell into place. Awkward.
"I believe this was caused by your behavior last night. Or maybe by your extended presence here."
Gustin narrowed his eyes at the accusatory tone.
"I'm sorry that you can't cope with a little flirting. I'll try to restrain myself from now on."
Kellan waved his hand impatiently.
"This is a matter of larger issue than simple sluttish wantonness."
Gustin took outright offense to that.
"Hey! I had a few too many, and I got a little flirty with my - being generous here - housemate. It's happened to the best of us, and I'll be damned if - "
Kellan cut him off again.
"It's triggered my season."
Gustin paused.
"What?"
"My season. It was in abeyance. Now it's not. Ever since the night."
Gustin closed down on another mouthful, looked thoughtful, then suddenly afraid.
"So...are you in heat right now?"
Kellan blinked at him, took another swallow of stew.
"I assure you, human, if I were in season right now, you would have no need to ask that question."

Gustin wasn't sure whether or not to count that as reassurance. He did, however, decide to count the fact that one little act of flirtation had reawakened the wolfe's latent sex drive as a compliment of the highest order. It all seemed roses to Gustin, so he wasn't sure why Kuskellanar seemed so concerned about his return to an active lifestyle, so to speak.

"But I will be, before the springtime."
That was why. Winter freeze still kept them essentially trapped here together, sealed into their little home in the snow. Far travel would be difficult for Kellan, and anyway, it wasn't as if Kellan would leave him alone. Gustin was, as he had been reminded many times, Kellan's ticket home and he wasn't about to lose him. Gus chewed his stew.

"Oh."

"And when my season begins, Gustin, I will not be nearly so inclined, as I was last night, to resist you."
Gustin swallowed convulsively, his throat still tasting of rabbit.

"So what are we going to do?"
They were quiet that evening and into the night. Kellan sat up late, carving containers and small figurines out of wood, seemingly avoiding going to bed. Gustin sat up and watched him, played with his toes, then watched him some more. Eventually, he spoke. "We're going to have to deal with this eventually." Kuskellanar snorted. "You can't hide from it forever." Now he growled. Gustin growled right back, sighed, and rolled over to go to sleep on the bed, sick already of trying.

The morning was less awkward. Kellan had, in the end, occupied his usual space in the bed at night, and a quiet night seemed to have put some distance between them and their potential problem. They ate, and Kellan opened the door for a breath before heading out into the snow. Gustin contemplated going back to bed, but ultimately decided to try for a more active day, and went first to clean up after breakfast. Gustin was scrubbing dishes in a small wooden water bowl when he heard the first thump. It sounded like it was coming from above the house, and he immediately was concerned. He put down the bowl, laid the cloth quietly on the side. Another thump, then another, and now it sounded like someone was walking out there. Nervously, he called out: "Kellan?" No reaction. Which meant it wasn't Kellan. Which meant he probably shouldn't have given away his position, or even his presence here. He began to look for a way out. The thumping was moving around in circles, in a spiral pattern from the center. The person was looking for the edge. The house was built to sit low and blend - it wouldn't be so easily visible in the heavy snowfall. The footsteps continued. Gustin crept over to the bedside, threw on another three layers of Kellan's clothing, secured in place with small ropes he'd braided, and wondered what he would do about shoes when the time came to run. Kellan had hidden his. The footsteps stopped. somewhere near the bathroom. They'd found the edge now, and would just need to work their way over to the door. Then there was a rustling and the rapid thumping that indicated that they'd done exactly that. Gustin heaved in a breath - he felt like a sitting duck; had Kellan even thought of this, all these times he'd left him in here alone? Human and vulnerable and unarmed and probably pretty delicious-looking. He hadn't, probably, because Kellan, it seemed, never thought of him at all. Gustin was just beginning to feel sorry for himself when he heard the most unexpected sound of knocking at the front door. He froze. It could be a trap. Was it a trap? Or a trick, rather? It was the oldest one in the book - someone would come to the door in a snowstorm, feigning need and then bam! they'd knock him out, steal what meager possessions Kellan had, and then carry him along for a snack on the road. Unless he got particularly unlucky. Unless it was a Lout. This struck cold, cold fear into his belly and Gustin resolved immediately not to open the door. If he even could open the door. Wait, of course! This was all a ridiculous debate, because there was no way in hell he'd be able to heave that door open again. The one time had been enough. Whoever it was would have to wait for Kellan.

"Come on, Kellanar, let me in! My paws are da-ya freezing off out here!"
Gustin froze at the voice, judged it quietly in his mind. Male, most definitely, not that he'd really expected different. Raspy, like a wolf's, but higher somehow - brighter? Younger, definitely, but tangibly different...
"Kellanar! Please! Have some pity on an old Layer soul!"

If Gustin had had ears like a wolf, they would have flattened to his head, then perked up in interest.
A Layer. A Layer, indeed, was one species with which Gustin had never had the pleasure of making contact. All his information came to him second hand. First person experience, however much preferential, had proven difficult, as the Layer colonies had been difficult to locate and seemed to be largely located in the center of Wolfish land. If this was indeed a Layer, and a Layer who knew Kellan and was friendly at that, then this might be the opportunity of a lifetime. That was the sort of information a human could eat well for centuries on. Gustin began to think about opening the door.

"Kellanar...it's cold...so cold....my fingers are getting numb. My - my vision's going black. Tell the Mother I said goodbye...." A few hacking coughs. Gustin couldn't help it - he laughed. The coughing stopped immediately. Now there was a growl, low like Gustin was familiar with, but not nearly so menacing.

"Now I know Kellanar isn't there - no wolf laughs like that. Open the door, invader, and if you've killed my friend, you won't live to see another moon."

Now that was interesting. Friend. In all the days he'd been here, he had never heard Kellan refer to anyone as friend. Gustin began to be very very interested in opening the door. He meandered over to the front alcove and leaned towards the weaker side.

"I'm not Kellan, but your friend's not dead either. He's gone out hunting - we're all out of rabbits. He'll be back by nightfall, if you'd like to return, but the price we charge for hanging around here is that you answer a number of questions and most decidedly do not eat Kellan's houseguests."

Outside of the door, the Layer's ears flipped skyward.

"Da-ya! And who are you?"

As Gustin contemplated the answer to that question, the Layer worked it out for himself.

"Don't tell me the old thing's gone and gotten himself a mate!"

The last word was said with mock shock, and Gustin laughed again.

"Well, now you absolutely must let me in, because as the closest thing old thing's got to a brother, it is required by Layer law that I approve you. And no need to worry, because I am an herbivarian."

"Vegetarian."

"I'm cold, is what I am."

Gustin frowned.

"I'd love to let you in - can't open the door, though. It's just too heavy for just me. Maybe if we pull together?"

"Very good. Love the plan. To the right, now. Together on three. Airu, Nemel, Satri, Kerec, Three."

They heaved together and the door slid halfway, blasting arctic frost into the room. Gustin stepped back, covered his face, as a creature looking like nothing if not half-a-wolf leapt in. He threw his weight into shutting the door behind him, letting it slam heavily into place. Then he stood up fully (okay, maybe more like 3/4-of-a-wolf), slapped the snow off both ears, shifted into a fully animalized form, and shook himself completely, splattering snow and ice bits from gray-brown fur around the room, onto Gustin's clothes and into his hair. Gustin just stared, open-mouthed. The animal-form Layer looked up at him from bright sand-colored eyes, grinned as much of a goofy, sharp-toothed grin as his animal form's canine face possibly could, and spoke, gazing up at Gustin with open interest.

"A human mate. Well, I'll be damned."
The Man, The Myth

The visitor had protested that he was hungry as well as cold, and he had beautiful light golden eyes, and so Gustin caved and was warming some stew over the fire. The Layer took it gratefully and ate noisily at the new low table. Gustin watched him finish the meal with an amused expression. At the end of it, he licked the bowl desperately and then his mouth, glancing casually up at his human host. Gustin felt a pang somewhere low. Opportunity, perhaps, was presenting itself. He edged closer, leaned over the low table.
"So you live around here, then?"
The Layer looked mournfully at the bowl, which Gustin got up to refill, casting a glance backwards at him, interested now in more than the creature's life story. The Layer gave him a curious look.
"As around here as one can. I stay to the north about twelve miles, ten when Kellan doesn't track me."
"Oh." Gustin set down the soup and settled himself closer to the Layer. He had strong hands, well defined fingers, and his arms flexed as he lifted the bowl and Gustin began to wonder if he was muscled as nicely as the wolfe. Gus smiled a little at the Layer. The Layer grinned back, set the bowl down, languidly stretched long legs out before resettling into a relaxed position.
"So you haven't even told me your name."
Gustin grinned cheekily.
"Well, you may have to tempt that out of me."
The Layer raised a speculative eyebrow.
"Temptation? That's a game I may be quite good at."
Gustin smiled broadly, showing bright teeth. He leaned over, close to the Layer's face.
"I've got another game I could show you."

Smoothly, he moved in for a kiss. The Layer regarded him coolly. Gustin smiled a little, nervously, backed up. Maybe it was too fast? The Layer was still staring, only now the stare had turned from cool to cold.
"Despite how little respect you may have for bonding vows, human," he spat, "I will never interlope on another's mate. The innocence of our original flirtation has ended."

Gustin laughed a little as he realized the confusion. It was pretty admirable of the Layer to turn down what was so blatantly offered; honorable, in fact. And any human worth their salt knew there was nothing hotter than honor. Gustin was just itching to get his clothes off. This would be simple: just tell him the truth.
"You don't have to worry. I'm not Kuskellanar's mate."
A series of emotions and expressions too multitudinous to describe crossed the Layer's face like a spinning wheel before finally slowing to settle on intense.
"You are not mated to Kellanar?" Gustin shook his head. The Layer's smile began to return. Gustin breathed a silent sigh of relief and put on his most inviting smile.
"We're barely even roommates."
"Good. Then you can mate with me. Now."
Gustin's grinned. This day was going a lot better than he expected.

~

Dotre was here. He could smell it. Fire in his heart, Kellan ran now. He'd been stupid, so stupid. Leaving the human here alone. Of course Adotre had come. Of course Adotre had doubled back. Of course Adotre would smell his heat. Of course he'd have a challenge on his hands. Stupid fucking
move.
Snow crunched under his feet. His heart pounded in his chest. Stupid fucking move. He arrived at
his front door, skidded into it, sat dazed on his haunches in the snow for a minute.

~

"What was that thump?"
"Nothing. Come, lay down."

Then the door was dragged open and biting winter air came whipping briskly in.
"Fuck!" the blast had Gustin, now half-dressed, ducking for cover in the far corner of the room. The
Layer Adotre, however, was on his feet in an instant, hackles raised, head lowered, teeth bared and
sharp for Kellan. Both shifted, growled and circled each other. The wind ruffled their fur, made them
look even larger and more imposing. Adotre chanced a bite first, snapping at Kellan's face and nose.
Kellan drove him back with a series of quick shoulder swipes before circling back and preparing for
a charge. The growls crescendoed as the two separated, rushed each other, and met clashing in
midair. Gustin couldn't keep track of who was who and who was on top and who was beneath, but
when the movement stopped - as suddenly as it had begun - Adotre was on his side, panting, and
Kuskellanar was shifted human above him. Kellan exhaled angrily, one arm firm around the layer's
neck in a chokehold. Adotre growled; he had lost the fight, but his animal half still screamed for
release, enthralled by the possibility of a mate and unwilling to relinquish such a desirous prize.
Kellan tightened his hold.
"Next time, it breaks, Layer."
Adotre amenable went slack and Kellan released him roughly.
"Get out."

Adotre cast one last, meaningful look at the pile of furs where Gustin was just barely visible, then
slapped his tail against the wall and left. Kellan watched him go, slammed the heavy door behind
him in one last show of strength. Then his attention turned to Gustin.
"Come. Here. Now, Human."
Gustin swallowed. In the fray, he'd managed to cover himself up to decency at least, but he wasn't
warm and he wasn't dressed like usual. There could be no doubt about what he and the Layer had
been intending to do. Kellan looked evenly into his eyes for a moment. Gustin shivered under the
scrutinizing gaze, approached slowly. When he got within arm's reach, Kellan reached out, taking
firm hold of his arm and snatching him closer.
"I don't know what game you are playing, human, but it ends now."
Gustin shook his head vigorously; Kellan really seemed to be angry and Gus didn't want to incur his
wrath.
"No - no game, wolfe, honest. I - he said he was a friend of yours; I just let him in because of that, I
didn't intend..." he trailed off. "I'm sorry, Kellan."
Kellan exhaled heavily and released him.

"You are almost more trouble than you will be worth."
Gustin frowned, rubbed his arm, still standing close to the wolfe, but casually putting some distance
between them.
"What does that even mean?"
Kellan glanced sidelong at him. Gustin began to become annoyed.
"Tell me. You've kept me here a month now under the guise of some big plan, but now I'm
beginning to think there's nothing to it but exile madness. Am I right, wolfe?"
Kuskellanar growled.
"You are quick to lose your docility."
For some reason, this lit a fuse.
"Don't tell me about docility, Kellan! You keep me locked in this place - a damn prisoner, you don't
speak, you don't play, you won't make love to me, and the one time i get an hour - an hour! - of outside contact, you show up and go berserk. And then you act like you can't tell me what you've even got me here for. Well, I've got news, Wolfe - I'm a runner. It's what I do. I've run from places a hell of a lot worse off than this, and storm or no damn storm, I'm getting answers, or I'm getting the hell out."
"You are a ransom."

Gustin paused - he hadn't expected such swift capitulation. He turned this over in his head; wait a minute - a ransom?
"Wait a minute - a ransom?"
"Yes. I intend to sell you back to them in the spring."
"Them?"
Kellan looked at him curiously.
"You don't remember?"
Gustin thought back, tried, but no, last thing he remembered was running through the greenwood and then an attack from all sides, it seemed...
"What should I remember?"
"You were raided. By the nearest Wolfish pack. Intended you for breeding. Storm hit, they had to make quick shelter. A transport tipped. I stole you in the confusion."
Gustin frowned.
"Wolfes raid all the time. I am a drop in the bucket. Why pay ransom for only one human who probably goes unmissed anyway?"
"Not a normal human."
Kellan shrugged, began to wander off towards the fire pit.
Gustin's eyebrows shot up. This was news to him. He followed Kellan across the room.
"Wait, what? You can't just say that and stop. What's not normal about me??"
"You're wanted."
Gustin shrugged. This was not news to him.
"Always have been. Why now?"
Kellan began to poke at the dead embers.
"You run information. You know many things about this territory. You know many things about the Louts, the Psires, and us. You are crafty, clever, and never caught. This has come to the attention of one of the pack's Alphas. He is looking for you."
Gustin swallowed, anxiety level rising. He'd fallen into a trap - this was a trap, the simplest one of all. Runners knew better.
"And you are a bounty hunter. You're turning me in to my enemies to reap a small reward."
Kellan shook his head.
"I am an opportunist, and an exile. The reward will not be small, and this Alpha is not your enemy. He does not mean to harm you, he means to breed you."
Gustin's stomach flipped twice.
"Tell me there's another meaning to that word."
"There is another reason that he seeks you so zealously."
"I don't know if I want to know..."
"There is a superstition - a rumor, of sorts, among the Wolfes. Your appearance has coincided with a prediction from the oracles on Arem'mir. They expect that you are the one whose arrival precipitates the sublime fusion of Wolfe and Man. They have told us that the one who heralds the unification will understand the Wolfe." Kellan paused. "As you do."

Gustin furrowed his brow.
"You mean that I speak Wolfish? That's just practice, and many hours of study. Any human could do it."
The fire was relit. Kellan left it and turned to face Gustin fully.
"No. Any human can learn Wolfish. No human but you can understand the wolfe."
Gustin stared blankly.
"I'm still not getting it."
Kellan sighed, walked some distance from Gustin, and shifted suddenly, seeming to collapse into his
elegant, furry form. Shaking his heavy body, he took a moment to groom himself before lifting his
head to look up at Gustin.
"When I speak in this form, only you can understand. No human before you, and no human since.
This is your gift, Gustin, and this is why they seek you."
Kellan snorted, shook himself and reappeared in human form. Gustin stared. Kellan stared back for a minute, then wandered off to sniff at the leftover soup. Then, as if sensing a change, he paused there, by the fire pit, and sniffed the air instead. He blinked a few times, turned to face Gustin (still staring).

"Human."
"Huh?"
Kuskellanar growled.
"My season is close."
Gustin took two steps back and held his hands up, almost tripping over the pile he'd been kicking.
"Close? Close like how close? You said spring...you said at least a moon."
Gustin could hear the anxiety in his own voice, and wondered if he sounded so scared to Kellan. The wolfe growled a little and shook his head as if to clear it.
"Had I been spared your antics, human, it would have held off."
"Antics?! I haven't - "
Kellan straightened up to his full height and Gustin began to feel a bit intimidated.
"You lured a competing male into my home."
"He's your friend! I don't even know him!"
Kellan stared evenly at Gustin.
"You behave that way with males who you do not know?"
Gustin lifted one side of his mouth.
"Bet you wish you knew."

Kellan narrowed his eyes at that, and suddenly the sarcasm didn't seem like such a good idea.
"I have been gentle with you thus far, human, but I have come to believe that I will have to teach you differently."
Gustin didn't like this.
"Come here."
The human shook his head.
"Come, human. Now."
He shook his head more vigorously and put a bit more space between them. Then he got a stunning display of wolfish speed and determination as Kellan crossed the room in two bounds and caught him around the shoulders. He struggled; Kellan tightened his grip. Gustin relaxed, went slack, and the arms loosened. He took the opportunity to try to bolt and they tightened instantaneously.

"This really isn't necessary; I honestly think I learned a lesson, I mean, it's just that I'm too trusting, and we - "
Kellan moved one hand to cover his mouth.
"I do not think that you understand the seriousness of what you've done."
Gustin brought his eyebrows together, tried to look pitiful.
"Had I not returned in the time which I did, you would be a possession of the Layer Adotre at this time, in the middle of your marking ceremony, and your future would be entirely in his hands. He is barely capable of surviving on his own; what would he have done for you? You would be dead in your first pregnancy."

Kellan removed his hand and Gustin looked uneasily up at him.
"You must learn to stop endangering yourself."
The wolfe released him. Gustin didn't move from his spot, only looked at the wolfe with a worried face. Kellan snatched him by the arm, led him over to the bed, where he sat and threw Gustin over his lap.
"You are in a strange place, far from home, and far from safety."
"What? What are you - mec'thal!!"
Gustin swore as the first strike impacted. It hurt, brought heat to his skin and sting to his eyes. He tried to wriggle away, but Kellan caught him, restraining both wrists in one large hand and pulling him back into place.
"When I give you orders, they are for your own good."
"Yes, Kellan, I understand, no! I'm sorry, what are you doing? Don't - endatin!"
"And when I give you orders, I expect you to follow them."
Gustin tried to catch his breath. His ass was on fire. Kellan stroked his back.
"Count them, human. At ten, we stop."

The wolfe struck him thrice more, and Gustin got louder.
"STOP, Kellan, this isn't fair, I didn't ask for this, I don't want to - mec'thaaall, Kellan, don't - mec'th!"
That strike was harder, Kellan reminding Gustin of the wolfe's full strength. Gustin whimpered. Kellan was unmoved. His hand fell again, and again. Gustin stopped wriggling and bit his lip to hold his position.
"Last."
This strike felt the sharpest, most painful because he was anticipating it. Kellan released his wrists, picked up the human, and settled him into his lap, facing the wolfe. Gustin refused to look at him, wouldn't meet his eyes. Kellan turned his chin, but Gustin pulled away and focused on the wall, face angry. Kellan waited.
"You hit me."
Kellan shook his head, gently brushed some of the hair back from the human's face.
"Discipline, not anger."

Gustin shook his head and suddenly, abruptly, tears began to leak from his eyes. Kellan wrapped his arms around him, brought him close to the broad bare chest. Gustin fought at first, but soon calmed.
"That hurt. You hurt me."
Kellan exhaled, rubbed his back.
"Perhaps next time, you will remember."
Gustin didn't respond. Leave it to a wolfe to say just what he didn't want to hear. Don't endanger himself. Protect himself. For what? So that Kellanar wouldn't lose his stupid fucking ransom. Gustin was heavily engaged in feeling sorry for himself, so he didn't see it coming when Kellan kissed him. Gustin broke it and looked to his eyes for an explanation. Kellan grunted and looked away. Gustin's heart was pounding. Was this part of the deal, too? Was this how wolfes exerted dominance over their mates - not mates, actually; ransoms - or was this just Kellan's own particular punishment for what he deemed to be Gustin's misbehavior? Gus ran through the list of his exits in his head, kicking himself the entire way. Leave it to him to get kidnapped by a wolfe, and a rapist one to boot. His confession had been right; he trusted too quickly. He was just working through an escape plan in his head when Kellan spoke, his voice rumbling low and deep from his chest, but with a strange tone.
"That was not...an indication, human. I just meant it to say that I am not...did not want to hurt you."
Gustin frowned.
"I - I don't understand."
Kellan looked at him sympathetically, leaned forward so that their heads were touching.
"I don't either, little one. I don't either."
"Don't touch me."
"You have a limited amount of time for that law to hold."
"Don't do it."
Kellan didn't respond, only snorted.
"I'm serious. I will end you."
Kellan raised both eyebrows but didn't take the bait.

They were lying in bed together, Gustin shivering in between the furs - the home hadn't really
recovered from the chill of the open door earlier. Kellan moved to wrap both arms around him, but
Gustin punched him in the rib.
"Not a chance."
Kellan scoffed and rolled over to face the wall. Gustin continued to shiver. They lay in silence.
"What are we going to do?"
Kellan turned halfway.
"You didn't seem so worried when I first warned you, human."
"There weren't consequences like this when you first warned me."
Kellan scoffed again and tried to go to sleep. Gustin tapped him.
"Maybe we should make two beds."
"So I can wake to you frozen in your sleep? No, human, you sleep here for tonight."
"But what if it - comes?"
Kellan shook his head.
"It doesn't work like that." there was a pause. "I may be able to hold off until the transfer."
Gustin sat up in interest.
"If you can manage to behave."

Gustin frowned.
"It's not my fault, I didn't - "
Kellan turned to give him an even look. Gustin, always a quick learner, backed down.
"I'll be good."
Then it was silent again, save the crack-popping of the fire in its pit.
"So tell me more about it."
Kellan sighed.
"Which part?"
"The heat."
"It's simple. It burns. I can't control it fully, but I can try. If it goes unsatisfied many times, it goes into
abeyance."
"When does it start?"
Kellan shrugged.
"When you come of age."
"When do you come of age?"
"When your season starts."

Gustin quietly contemplated whether this was intentional obtuseness or not.
"When did yours start?"
"The summer I was 19."
"Is that late?"
"Early, on Arem'mir. Late here."
Gustin filed this away for later thought.
"How many did you go alone before it...abeyed?"
There was hesitation in Kellan's voice when he spoke. "It...was satisfied for some time."
This piqued Gustin's interest. "Saucy. By whom?"

Kellan was silent for so long that Gustin thought he wasn't going to answer at all. Finally, he did, but there was real pain in his voice when he spoke. "Ideste."
Gustin got a bit quieter. "Was she...your mate?"
Kellan shook his head. "He. And no, he was never my mate."
Kellan seemed suddenly sulky, even for him, so Gustin let it go. For a full thirty-five seconds.
"Did you want him to be your mate?"
Kellan rolled over to look at Gustin. "What do you mean to pursue, human?"
Gustin was a bit taken aback by the harshness of his tone. "Nothing, I just..." he drifted into quiet and Kellan turned back over. "I thought we might come to know each other, a little."
Kellan growled somewhat, but only to himself. "I did want him to be my mate. I wanted him very badly, and still I do."
Gustin scrunched his eyebrows together. "Well, why don't you try? Go out and get him, seal your season, trade me back, I'll escape, everybody wins!" Gustin clapped his hands. Kellan sighed. "Not that simple, human."
Gustin laid back down. "Why not?"
"Because a very long time ago, I did a very terrible thing, and the only reasons I narrowly escaped death were my age and my exile. If I go back now...I do not believe I have been forgiven."
"Oh."

Gustin thought on this. So his initial instinct had been right - this wolfe was not alone for nothing. He wondered what his crime had been. Hopefully not murder, seeing as they still had to share a bed. But the Layer didn't seem to frightened of him, and if he was willing to do trade, he must be reasonable enough...what sort of thing would get a wolfe exiled, anyway? That kind of knowledge might be useful to have. It might even carry a hefty price tag. Gustin thought of long nights on a Psire island. It would be better to wait - if he pressed for too much too early, it would ruin the delicate threads of trust forming between them.

"Well, what could you do, to get un-exiled? Anything that might make it up to the pack?"
Kellan nodded. "One thing. One thing is all I have. I waited twenty-two years for an opportunity to prove myself. I prayed, but I thought the moon had forgotten me. Now, I have one thing I can do to ask them to forgive me."
Gustin felt a sinking in the pit of his stomach. "What's the one thing you can do?"
Kellan quirked one side of his mouth in a mirthless grin. "I can trade them for you."
A day had passed, and they hadn't spoken about it. There had been a weird tension between himself and Kellanar, and each hour it seemed to grow stronger. Kellan, who had never previously gone out in the afternoons, disappeared suddenly that day, with no warning or explanation. Gustin ate the afternoon meal alone, then tried to spend the time napping, but for reasons unclear to him, visions of caravans and faceless beauties named Ideste kept him awake each time he closed his eyes. Had what Kellan told him been true? The wolfe had no reason to lie.

Gustin shivered. The idea of another wolfe seeking him - hunting him - sent a chill through him. How could he know the wolfe would be anything like Kellan? Maybe he would be cruel and jealous. Maybe he wouldn't let Gustin go outside at all, winter or not. His throat closed up a little at even the idea of it and he felt dizzy.

How could Kellan abandon him to a life like that? How could his own wolfe just leave him? Trade him, that's what he'd said, but leaving is what it was. Gustin shook his head to clear it. This was crazy. Kellan wasn't his wolfe, he was his warden, and there couldn't be any abandoning done when you weren't connected to each other in the first place. And besides, even if he did get traded - it was just a change of scene, nothing more, nothing less. Even if it got ugly...well, it wouldn't be the first sticky situation he'd been in, and he'd always gotten out. Always had and always would. He was a runner, after all, and damn good at it. No thing living, hell or on earth, could ever keep him trapped. Gustin would always get free.

Kellan came home before dusk with a full cloth. He dropped it on the floor and unbundled it without speaking to Gustin. Gus didn't care - he was too confused and annoyed and absorbed with his own thoughts and emotions to even want any conversation. After a few minutes of dividing things into small bowls and slicing rabbits for the cooking pot, Kellan abruptly got to his feet and dropped something on the table in front of Gustin. It floated, midair for a moment, before dance-descending to touch the wood. It was a small red feather. Gustin looked worriedly up at Kellan.

"Did you - "
Kellan shook his head.
"Found a nest. Redchest birds." he paused. "Spring comes soon."
Gustin looked down at the feather and smiled. Kellan had brought him a gift.

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The wolfe disappeared two more afternoons in a row, and by the second one, Gustin was desperately bored. After washing everything within reach, stacking up and counting the excess of soap he'd made on other bored days, repositioning the furs and then re-repositioning them because Kellan complained that he'd tripped over one, and watching the windows for hours, hoping for signs of springtime life, he gave it all up and went rifling through the cabinets for any overlooked stash of Kellan's moonshine. Damn clever wolfe had hidden it all. Gustin kicked the table and went in to take a shower.

Just before dusk, he heard footsteps on the roof, and then the door suddenly shuddered open and Kellan slipped in through the opening, followed closely by the Layer. The sun was setting behind them. The door clanged shut. Gustin looked up, annoyed, then surprised.

"Hey!"
Kellan narrowed his eyes at Gustin's greeting, which the human then realized had come across as excited rather than startled. The Layer smiled a slow smile and inclined his head.
"The Layer eats here tonight, human."
Kellan pushed brusquely past him, removing the cloth slung over his back (which Gustin just knew would be full of dead rabbits and bloody small game, no matter how many times he specifically said he didn't want to see it), dropping his outer layers in a pile by the bed before walking over to check the fires. Adotre sidled up next to Gustin, where he was sitting at the carving workbench, and leaned casually on one arm.
"And I'm starving. You know, this big beastly thing you call a caretaker has had me running like a hare all day - all over the territory with him! I'm desperately tired and cold." A dramatic sigh, then a slightly predatory glance up at Gustin. "A hot bath would probably do me good."
Gustin tried to stay annoyed - he was still angry/confused about Kellan and didn't want to give the wrong impression - but he couldn't help himself; he smiled at the Layer's overdone flirtation. Adotre grinned at this.
"Ah, there it is. That handsome little smile."
The Layer moved a little closer and Kellan growled low from across the room. The Layer moved back.
By the cooking pit, Kellan was slicing meat into the pot that hung over the cooking pit and chewing thickly on something in his mouth. He looked pointedly at Gustin, who got up, sighing, to come and help him. Adotre raised an eyebrow.

They sat crosslegged around the low eating table, each of them equidistant from the others. This only happened because Adotre wanted to be as close to Gustin as possible, Gustin wanted to be as far from Kellan as possible, and Kellan refused to let either thing happen. As a result, Gustin ended up sitting on an awkward corner, which gave him even more reason to be annoyed with the wolfe.

After dinner, Kellan told him that he was going out; Gustin almost dropped the plate he'd been washing. He'd grown so used to their routine that this felt jarring, frightening, out of place, even more so than the weird afternoon excursions. Kellan never went out at night; Gustin had assumed it was too dangerous. Why was he doing it now? What did he have to do? Why was he leaving him again?
"Where are you going?" he tried to keep the desperation out of his voice. Kellan looked at him for a long moment, picked a pinch of the herbs he'd sorted earlier and chewed them slowly, then went back to sorting through a group of knives.
"Only a quick survey, human. We will return quickly and unharmed."
Gustin shrugged, kept on at the washing.
"If it's quick and undangerous, then you should let me go, too."
Kellan rolled his eyes.
"It is too cold for you, human."
"I'll bundle up."
"The woods are treacherous at night. And you cannot leave the home during this time."
Adotre smirked.
"Oh, you won't be going anywhere, pretty thing. Not with Kellan's season as close as it is."
Gustin stillled and Kellan cut his eyes at the Layer.
"Close? How close?"
Kellan poked at the pile of knives.
"It's not clear."
Gustin stared at him. Kellan ignored this and got to his feet, abandoning the knives but taking his carrying cloth.
"You weren't going to tell me?"
Adotre giggled.
"Perhaps he meant to make it a surprise."
Kellan growled low in his throat and the Layer backed towards the door.
"Going, Kellan, going, Old Thing."
Kellan pulled the heavy door open and turned back to look at Gustin.
"I'll be back soon, human. Have a bath, go to bed."
Gustin's heart beat a little faster at the last word, but he decided Kellan had meant nothing by it and so after washing, he took the wolfe's advice and went in to have a bath.
The next day, Kellan was up before Gustin woke, picking quietly at the wood carving table and rearranging some of the furs. Gustin rubbed his eyes, sat up in bed. His head hurt. He hadn't slept well.

"What are you doing?"

Kellan pricked his ears at Gustin's voice, looking just a bit startled. Gustin ran a hand through his hair and blinked at him.

"Cleaning." he said gruffly, dropping the furs where they were and wandering over to the carving bench.

"I cleaned yesterday." Gustin laid back down, rolled over to face the wall. "How early is it?"

"Midmorning."

"You going out?" his voice was muffled by the furs.

"No."

Gustin was suddenly completely awake. He sat up again.

"Is it - "

"No."

"Oh."

He dropped back down.

"My head hurts and I'm cold. Come lay down."

Kellan felt a rise at the invitation.

"No!" he answered, with perhaps more force than necessary. The human hadn't meant anything by it, he knew, but he'd felt the pull of temptation, and the power of his season always surprised him. He hated being out of control. Gustin didn't respond to the harshness in his Wolfe's tone, just wriggled and nestled down further into the fur bed. Kellan had a sudden vision of climbing into that bed, pushing Gustin onto his hands and knees, and sliding his dripping cock into the human; tasting his fear, his pleasure and submission and feeling the indescribable pleasure that comes with taking a new mate. He would be gentle at first, delighting in his mate's moans and whimpers, until the sensation overwhelmed him and the Wolfe rose up, begging him, urging him to take Gustin in the way a mate should be taken - roughly and giving no quarter.

He tasted blood in his mouth and realized he'd been biting his own tongue. Feeling foolish and once again disturbed, he scoffed at himself and stalked off into the bathing room.

When he reemerged, Gustin was up, getting his first meal and dressed for indoors.

"Put more on."

Gustin looked over at him, perplexed.

"Why? The fires are all in."

Kellan shook his head.

"We're going outside."

Gustin felt his stomach do six flips and a somersault.

"Why - why are we going outside?"

He was afraid, honestly afraid, because outside was strange and cold and most of all, it was the place where humans got traded. He didn't want to go outside. He wanted to sit here and eat his soup. It was in this realization that Gustin found an abrupt and unanticipated moment of clarity. He didn't want to go outside. He wanted to stay here, with Kellan. If he went outside, he was obligated to run, and if he ran, then he had to keep running, perhaps for the rest of his life. How long could he make it? He'd run for twenty-seven years now. He kind of wanted to sit down. Kellan was staring at him, equally perplexed.

"Why not?"

Gustin put down his spoon.

"I don't want to leave."
Kellan snorted, made a face.
"I'm serious, wolfe - don't trade me!"
Kellan stared warily at him.
"I don't know what game this is, human, but - "
"No game, wolfe. I...don't want to leave. At least not that way. At least not yet."
Kellan understood.
"I am not trading you, human. The caravan's nowhere near these parts. Now put another layer on -
we need to go outside."

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Kellan had made it seem urgent, but outside, he acted as if he had all the time in the world. He kept a
close eye on Gustin though, and after only three or four minutes, insisted that they go back in.
Gustin, who was, despite six layers of clothing, bitten through with cold, begged for just another
minute more. Kellan allowed it, but after a few seconds, cleared his throat and swallowed.
"Trading you is no longer an option, human."
Gustin looked at him, squinting against the sun, bright snow reflection, and cold. Kellan refused to
meet his eyes.
"My heat comes tonight."
Gustin stared at the wolfe for a moment, then he understood. He turned back to the blank white
landscape, took the wolfe's hand in his. Kellan didn't resist.
Before they went back in, Gustin took one more look at the sun.
Inside, they would not meet each other's eyes. They shared the peculiar silence of strangers in an infirmary waiting-room; at once excited, frightened, and unsettled. Kellan moved first. Gustin jumped when he did, then exhaled, feeling ridiculous.
"We need to make meal, human. Enough for the week."

Gustin nodded, went dumbly into the motions of setting the stew to boil. Kellan went outside, refilled the icer with snow and spent an hour gathering firewood. Gustin walked the house, checking for any last-minute repairs to be made. The day before, Kellan had done the same, patched a potential hole and retied some of the rigging which brought in water. Gustin's fingers itched. His throat felt tight, skin felt hot. Maybe he was the one going into heat.

He wandered around the house, cleaned and laid out all the knives and dishes, shook out the furs and rearranged them the way he liked, checked on soap and water and salt, straightened up the wood and kindling piles in preparation for Kellan's return. Idle at last, and with excitement and fear and worry for the wolfe's mental well-being rolling around in his stomach, he went in to take a bath.

The bath felt ritualistic, the water suddenly seemed of some import. He added to it the oil they made from lemon skins and cleaned himself carefully in order, taking his time with each part of his body. Kellan would be home soon. He took a cloth and dried himself off, waiting in the steam-filled room to hear the door. He wasn't disappointed. He paused then, on the tips of his toes, hearing the quick footsteps and thuds of dropping wood. He wondered if he'd be able to sense some difference in the wolfe - if he would know when it was time. He didn't think he would. Kellan's footsteps circled around the main room; Gustin could hear him sniffing. They crossed the room towards him. Outside the door, Kellan stopped. Gustin held his breath.

"You alright, human?"
Gus exhaled. Kellan sounded normal, sounded fine.
"Yeah. Be out in a minute."

The footsteps retreated and Gustin turned to get dressed. His hand paused over the pile of clothes - should he even bother? He decided it couldn't hurt.

In the main room, Kellan had bowls set out, full of the herbs he'd collected with the Layer, in a straight line by one of the fires. At the end was a bowl of eating size, and he was mixing four or five of the herbs inside of it. Gustin approached him with caution. Kellan looked up. His eyes seemed alert, but his movements were quick and jerky.

"Human."
"The one and only."
"Come. This is yours."
Gustin frowned.
"What is it?"
Kellan glanced sideways.
"Relief. For your Change. I may not be ...of help at the time it begins. When you wake, chew two pinches of this. It will keep the pain away. Should be enough for five days. Pain won't last past three."

Gustin swallowed a knot in his throat. The wolfe had thought ahead; Gustin was impressed and duly appreciative. Kellan was looking up at him, his eyes remorseful.
"I will try, human, to be of help. I apologize in advance if I am unable." this last part was said softly, as with one hand, he held the bowl out.
Gustin took it, set it on the night table Kellan had fashioned in the week before, and made himself a bowl of soup, then went to sit down. Kellan stood.
"I bathe."
Gustin rolled his eyes and nodded.
"You bathe. See you in a bit, then." he went back to his rabbit stew.

When Kellan reemerged, the dishes were washed and the sun was going down. The fires were hot; wood was stacked close to each of them. Gustin was in his bed. His heart leapt into his throat. The Wolfe within him rose to its feet and put its nose to the air.
Kellanar went to him slowly, reverently, with caution and due fear; he was a penitent kneeling at his new mate's throne. Gus stirred, hearing him approach; his breath quickened.
"It's alright, human."

Everything sounded sharper to Kellan now; his own voice boomed in the room. He wanted to whisper. Gustin's heart beat erratically, out of time with his emotions and his excitement. A haze of interest rose towards him, filtered in through his nose to the back of his mind. His wolfe scratched at the ground. Kellan stood beside the bed.
Gus did a quick inhale, then:
"I mean, it's not as if I've never done this before."

Kellan furrowed his brow. Leave it to the human to talk at a time like this. Ruin a beautiful silence, that one could. He decided to just snort in return, which seemed to relax Gustin more than his words before had. His heartbeat slowed, scent thickened.
"I'm just saying. So you know."
Kellan placed one hand on the pile of furs, began to climb onto it lengthwise.
"So I know what, human?"
"That I'm not afraid."
Kellan paused, flexed his haunches. The wolfe sniffed.
"Scent says different."
he placed one hand on Gustin's side. The human turned to look at him; his face was unreadable in the dimming light of just the fires in their pits and no lanterns lit.
"Scents lie."
Kellan watched him for a minute, letting his eyes sharpen to take in the features. He read worry.
"I won't hurt you."
Silently, he prayed to the goddess that he would not. Outside, the moon was rising.

It hadn't started yet, but it was getting closer, encroaching. Kellan told him it would be best not to wait; best not to force it into existence. He'd rather the first time be easy. Gustin nodded, couldn't find the words to agree.

Why did this feel so weird? He'd been in this place in a dozen beds a dozen times before - why did his heart pound now? Why did the air feel so heavy? Breathing was a chore. Moving brought him into closer contact with Kellan, who was now above him, raised on both arms, poised perfectly and waiting.

Gustin kissed him first; Kellan complied, went easily into the embrace although Gus had been told before it was unnatural to the wolfish to do it. He released, needing space and air, and Kellan moved away in perfect time. How had a life in the woods taught him to be so elegant? He wanted to talk. By the moon, he had to talk. The silence made his heart beat faster. He couldn't do this. He couldn't make it happen. Kellan would have to do it. Kellan would have to show him where to go because for the past however-long-he'd-been-here, Kellan had known exactly what to do. He needed Kellan to be there now.

"This is - I mean, it's hard, you know, I just - "
Fuck all, where had the smooth-talking Gustin gone? He hardly knew himself at all. This was a new Gustin - this was nervous Gustin, worried Gustin, sentimental virgin Gustin. He needed the other guy back. Gus swallowed and tried to finish his thought.
"I - you need to...I mean, listen, I - "
Kellan kissed him again, deeply.
"I understand, human."

He glanced outside. Nightfall. Kellan kissed him once more, quickly, then he was dipping his head to Gustin's neck to take in his scent, and he lingered there for a moment, tonguing the cave of Gustin's collarbone, until the human squirmed and he moved on. He dipped his nose down, towards Gustin's chest, encountered the barrier of indoor clothing, grunted and lifted Gustin to strip it off, pushing agitatedly at the pants, too. Gustin complied, quietly, and kicked them off into the dark.

Then Kellan was laving his skin, nipping here and there, but mostly just licking a path down his stomach, and Gustin was sure he was going to stop, but he didn't and suddenly it felt really warm and extremely good, and Gustin looked down to see Kellan's mouth wrapped around his cock, and the wolfe grinning easily up at him. Gustin was hit immediately with a wave of fuck-yes, and Kellan urged him to lie back and began to suck, wrapping his long tongue around the head of Gustin's cock, teasing the slit as he did so.

Gustin hadn't been sure he was going to be able to get hard before, but he had no such qualms at the moment. Kellan was laving his balls, one hand wrapped firmly around Gustin's dick, and the human swore he saw stars. Then Kellan was drawing him back into his mouth, tongue tickling the underside of his cock, one hand caressing his balls and the other working a steady tense-release pattern on his thigh. Kellan moved and Gustin saw the muscles shift in his back and realized how much tension and strength the wolfe was holding in.

Then Kellan's suction grew even more powerful, and the hand that had been caressing his thigh slipped around to finger his ass, and Gustin was coming in hard, unrestrained streaks down Kellan's eager throat. Gus sucked in breath harshly for a moment, the loudest noise he'd made so far. Kellan sat back on his heels, wiped his mouth with one hand, the other back to rubbing Gustin's thigh. His eyes had lightened from brown to gold, reflective in the lowlight. The wolfe was not sated. He blinked, and Gustin, still basking in the afterglow, became a little more aware of exactly what he'd gotten himself into. The glow faded a little, but not much and Kellan shook his head as if to clear it then two strong hands were flipping him over, onto his stomach on the bed.

Kellan's hands worked his sides for a moment, massaging, pulling him back to get him where the wolfe wanted him. Gustin swallowed and tried not to think about it; he was open and presenting as if the heat were his own.
Kellan growled. Gustin jumped. Kellan slapped his ass, hard, in response, which Gustin correctly took to be a warning. He steadied himself and tried to focus on being still. Kellan was sniffing him again, only this time in much more humiliating places and he wanted to move, very badly, but then Kellan's tongue was back and he figured he might as well just stay as is.

He was half-hard in a second, and Gustin reflected that this was the fastest he'd ever been ready again since he was just a kid. Kellan licked at his ass, swirled his tongue there, Gustin realized, in preparation, and his heartbeat picked up again. Kellan pulled away, just for a second, and then it was happening, fast and hard and so much better than Gus had ever expected.

Kellan was thick, but practically dripping with his excitement and Gus only bit his lip for a second in surprise before the wolfe was halfway in. The wolfe moved a little inside him, and Gus groaned quietly, unprepared for it. Kellan nuzzled his back, licked at his shoulder to calm him. Easy, he reassured himself, and in seconds, the pain was gone and Kellan was moving again - perfectly timed, perfectly attuned to Gus' body.

Kellan's thrusts were short at first, testing his mate. Mate. The moon was peeking in the window. Gustin spread his legs wider, invited the wolfe in. Kellan's thrusts lengthened - his cock slid in and out of Gustin, hilt to head, again and again. On one thrust, he bumped Gustin's prostate accidentally
and Gustin gasped out loud; liking the response, he hit it again and again until Gustin was just on
edge. Then the wolfe stilled and something felt different and Gus realized that his impossibly large
cock was growing impossibly larger still, and he tried to move to test it, and Kellan growled with real
menace.

"You move, get hurt."
Gustin frowned, held quite still. Kellan's voice sounded weird; gravelly and confused.
"Let knot fade."

Gustin bit his lip. The feeling of being full got more intense, until the pressure seemed enormous
inside of him, and all the time, Kellan was licking him, nudging his shoulder and with one hand,
massaging his side. The pressure was becoming more painful. Gus bit his lip harder to keep quiet,
tensed his fingers in the furs. Kellan scented his distress, but could do nothing to assuage it besides
kiss his mate and keep him calm. Then there was real pain and Gustin yelped and Kellan groaned
and kissed his neck and released inside of him, shaking a little as he did so.

The pressure decreased immediately, and Gustin exhaled in relief - at least the first one had been
quick. He waited for the swelling to fade completely, but it didn't, and Kellan didn't pull out, either -
he stayed thick inside of him instead. Gustin waited, one breath, then two, and suddenly Kellan
began to thrust into him again, this time with a reckless force that sent his head down to his forearms.
The going was much easier now, post-knot, and although Kellan seemed to have become
unconcerned with Gustin's gratification, he found himself soon on edge again. Kellan's thrusts were
strong, but had slowed a little and were not so vicious as the first, and Gustin was just beginning to
gain some quarter when the wolfe's teeth bared and were sinking into his right shoulder, straight, he
imagined, to the bone. Gustin cried out in surprise as the wolfe came hard inside of him and his own
orgasm overtook him like a wave.

Kellan thrust minutely inside of him for a few seconds afterwards before pulling out completely and
releasing the bite. Gustin whined at the dual removal, jumped to his feet, out of the bed. The chill of
the wood floor hit him, but it felt diminished after the exertion.
"You bit me!"
Kellan looked a bit dazed.
"Sorry, human."
"No! No sorry! You said you wouldn't hurt me and you did - you bit me!"
Kellan was on his back, arms slung out, looking wholly unconcerned with this.
"Huh."
"Kuskellanar!"
At his whole name, he lifted his head.
"Tell me now how much danger I am in. I wasn't aware that biting was part of it."
Kellan shook his head and rolled onto one elbow.
"Sorry, human. Mark won't hurt you. Urge came - don't know why. Wolfes don't usually mark their
humans. Felt the pull for you. Something special about you, human. Think maybe it was the moon.
Had to make you my mate, mark you for her."

His piece said, he collapsed back onto the bed. Gustin stood, stunned, by the fire. Every time he
thought he'd got a hold on things, somebody threw him for a loop.
In The Mating Heat

Kellan took him thrice more under the moon before they slept, Gustin curling quietly into his arms and the smoke rising from the heating fires. Sleeping, Gustin dreamed of snow. When he woke again, strong hands were on his shoulders and Kellan was burying himself in Gustin's body.

He moaned, tried to readjust; his relaxation had made the initial penetration easy, but now, just thinking of the act itself - thinking of Kellan's cock buried solidly in his ass, anticipating the burn, the pain of swelling, the intensity of the fullness he felt inside him - made him tense up, want to pull away. Kellan growled low against the back of his neck. Gus went still, closed his eyes, focused on his breathing and bit hard into one of the furs beneath him to help with the discomfort bordering on pain. The soreness was growing already.

He stayed quiet through it, wishing for another few hours' sleep, a little respite; Kellan finished inside of him, hesitant to pull out, laving with his tongue the mark in Gustin's neck. Gustin let him linger for a few minutes before urging him away, squeezing his eyes against the slick pop of removal and the throbbing sensation of reversion.

They slept again and Gus only woke a little after dawn, with the dark blue of dawn still in the sky, when his dream world exploded into pain.
"Aauugh!"

Kellan's eyes opened immediately at the strangled cry, and he was on his knees on the bed, growling, eyes bright and wild, tail flagging to see what had harmed his mate. Gustin couldn't talk, tried to breathe, tried to remember. What was happening? For a moment, he wondered if he were dying. Then he remembered. The Change. The herbs. Kellan.

With great effort, he reached to the right of him, to beside the bed where the mixed-up bowl of herbs still rested. He picked a pinch - enough? too much? - and stuck it all in his mouth. Don't swallow, just chew. The first bite didn't seem to do much, second time tasted strange; after that, the pain began to subside in his extremities first, then, working its way inward, relieved his entire body. He tried not to choke as it reached his balls and aching cock, sucked in greedy breaths of pain-free air. Kellan was staring at him, composed now but still looking a bit wild.

Gustin pushed himself up on both arms, chewed steadily and eyed his mate. Kellan seemed to be calm and he had to pee. He tried to get up to go to the bathroom. Kellan growled. Gustin considered this. It was an unanticipated consequence. How long was this going to go on? He chewed thoughtfully on the mixture, thankful Kellan had had the foresight to put it together for him. He tried to get up again. Kellan growled, put one hand around his arm. The grip was tight, but it didn't hurt. Must be the chew. Could he feel anything at all? Gustin glanced down to the wolfe's cock, which was once again damp and standing at attention. He exhaled, rolled onto his stomach across the bed, and waited patiently as Kellan took him one more time.

Afterwards, when the wolfe lay panting on the pile of furs, hair fanned out and tail sloping next to him, Gustin let himself out of bed and snuck as quietly as he could to the baths to relieve himself. When he reemerged, Kellan hadn't moved. He breathed a sigh of relief, tried to think of what else he could do. He went to the dish stacks, retrieved two bowls to fill with stew and water. When he turned around, Kellan was right behind him. He dropped both bowls. The wolfe looked angry. He bared his teeth at Gustin; Gus backed away slowly, tried to anticipate the lunge he knew was coming. Gus planned for the right, but confused himself and went left and so ended up facing the carving bench and table with one arm twisted behind him and Kellan breathing heavy on his mark.
"It's OK, it's OK, I'm sorry, Gus is sorry, Gus won't leave, mate here, mate OK, Gus isn't going, it's OK, see?"

he babbled, trying to assuage this wolfe who had become a stranger in his heat. Kellan released his arm, caged Gus's body around with his own, breathed heavily in his scent and nibbled at the mark. Gus shivered with the sensation as teeth brushed over the place he knew he'd been bit before. One heavy hand pushed the back of his head forward; he bent over the carving table. Another hand wandered his back, travelled south to slide down the dip in his ass, slip forward to play with his balls. Against Kellan's cool touch, they felt hot and tense; Kellan released them and moved back up to spread his ass apart.

Gus anticipated pain, but it didn't come, and Kuskellanar groaned as he buried himself deeply inside of his mate. Gus bowed his head as the slipping-in feeling of Kellan thrusting inside of him began to ignite his own sex drive. The sun was almost risen now; light reflected on Gustin's skin, in his eyes, bounced off the worn-down surface of the carving table. Gus felt open, naked as he never had before, exposed in the daylight to his mate's eyes. Behind him, Kellan was knotting. At least he was getting quicker about it now.

Gus chewed resolutely, wondering how long each serving was supposed to last. His jaw was beginning to ache from munching the chew; he stuck it under his tongue. Kellan's knot faded quickly and he was thrusting again, shoving deeply into his mate so that Gustin felt it in his stomach and throat, then pulling out again, then shoving all the way back in to make the little human moan tiny noises of satisfaction. When he came, Gustin wasn't far behind, spurting hard over the table and his own hand, holding his mate tight inside of himself for long moments before easing forward and pushing the wolfe away.

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On the morning of the second day, Kellan tried to take him as a female, and he had to fight tooth and nail to refuse. His Change had been incredible - fast and, thanks to the chew, almost imperceptible. Kellan had calmed a little by the early evening of the day, had let him out of bed so that they both could find food and water; he took the opportunity to wash as well.

He felt sticky and gross, and was sure he smelled pretty rank, even if Kellan didn't seem to mind. In the shower, he stroked himself, checking as he had a hundred times before to be sure that, even with the Change through and his balls gone, he could still elicit a reaction from himself. His cock rose to the occasion and he breathed a sigh of relief. He felt dampness in between his thighs and moved one hand there to touch himself, slipping a finger inside of his entrance. It was tight, and new, but healing quickly, and, Gustin estimated, would be functional by next daylight.

The chew he had now should last through the night; how much longer would the pain persist? How much longer would Kellan be in heat? It was only two days now, but it felt like forever. Kellan's heavy footsteps paced outside, stopped by the bathroom door. Kellan had taken him twice in the showers and it hadn't been a very exciting experience. Water had taken away the natural slickness of his mate's cock, and so the penetration had been rough and forceful. He'd rather not have a repeat. He stopped the water, wrapping himself in a long dry cloth, and left the room.

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Kellan woke him in the darkness, the night before the third day. Gus had slept on his back, had the moon on his face and his hands in Kellan's hair. The wolfe hadn't seemed interested in him since earlier in the evening, when they'd downed a half bowl of stew and three bowls of water each, then Kellan had rubbed himself to completion between Gustin's thighs, his nose buried solidly in the human's hair.
He'd laid like that for a minute, disentangled himself and gone to wander the room a little bit and shift a few times before coming back to bed after Gustin had gone to sleep. Gus had felt him come to bed in the late evening, but didn't remember being touched and had dozed off quickly.

When he woke, Kellan was stretched out between his legs, his hands splayed on Gustin's hips and his mouth working resolutely at his female entrance. Gus whined, wiggling his hips to try to dislodge his wolfe, who only looked up with a sour expression and went back to partaking of the taste of his mate. Gus tolerated it, wondering where it was going when his mate suddenly stopped, rested back on his haunches and regarded Gustin with a tender look. Gus met his eyes, examined the reposeful face in the half-darkness.

With great purpose and a sudden sense of reverence, Kuskellanar looked out the tiny window, up, at the single bright light from the moon, then back down, at Gustin, at his human, his mate. Bowing slowly, he laid gentle lips to Gustin's belly, kissed a line down his stomach to stop just in the middle of the mass of curls that cradled his cock. He stayed there for a moment, breathing in deeply before lifting up to smile, honestly and thankfully, up at his mate. Gustin's breath caught in his throat. Kellan lifted up, rested back on his knees, settled himself into position between Gustin's legs, then put two hands on his hips and hauled him close.

Gustin's heart beat faster. Something in the air, in the way Kellan kissed him and bowed and touched him so solidly, felt strange. Felt different. Felt significant. Kellan was still smiling at him, a half-aware, steady smile, and Gustin wondered if maybe the wildness had faded. The wolfe's brow furrowed as he leaned forward, balancing on one arm as he guided himself into Gustin. Gus tried not to, but felt himself get tense anyway; the feelings were all so new and he was hungry and half-sleepy and more than a little confused.

This time wasn't like those before, though; Kellan took his time with Gustin, easing slowly and fully inside of him before slipping back out. The going was gentler now, and much slicker with Gustin's female parts contributing their own excitement to the effort. Gus felt a burning begin to build inside of him, and when Kellan knotted, it swelled to monumental proportions before bursting, exploding, slipping clear-white fluid down his cock and thighs in little droplets to where he and Kellan were still joined. The wolfe was watching him closely, let the human ride out the waves of his own orgasm before coming himself, pushing deeply and roughly inside his mate with a desperate groan before collapsing, boneless, on top of the little human he'd claimed for his own.

Gustin winced when Kellan pulled out of him and rolled away, his cock smearing wet across his thighs and leg. Kellan was staring at the window, panting happy breaths and dimly smiling. Gustin nuzzled his way under one arm, curled up close to his wolfe's side. Kellan permitted it, held him close, let him stay that way until morning. Above them, the moon shone bright.

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When he woke in the morning, Kellan was bathing and the stew was hot.
In The Eye of the Storm

Kellan had woken sometime before sunup and the heat had faded. Not gone, he knew, but faded, just enough to think and reflect and meditate. Gustin was his.

He'd rolled out of bed after that thought, the emotion he felt unexpectedly strong. He moved silently, padded across the floor to check on the fires. Thought about shifting but didn't feel the urge, made himself a chew to calm his nerves and squatted by the fire instead.

Kuskellanar had a mate.
Kuskellanar the warrior, the silent cub, the fighter, the only son, the alpha Wolfe who swore he would never love another after Ideste had gone.

Kuskellanar had a mate, a little human who he had found in the forest. And now a lit, too, perhaps. Kellan suspected that was why the heat had faded - Gustin needed time to adjust, for his body to heal itself and hold tight to what lay within.

Everything was moving so fast that it worried him; he didn't remember hearing of the Change being so quick. Days, they said it took, but he'd seen Gustin and touched him and been inside of him and he was whole. Maybe the rumors were right. Maybe his human was something special.

They would need a home, it occurred to him suddenly. He couldn't keep a lit a place like this, with no space or green plants or enough food to eat. He had no pack. The insanity of what he'd done struck him; he had no pack, little territory; no way to provide for the human mate he'd taken, or the lit he'd likely sired.

Kellan remembered once, when he was a cub not yet nine, and his father had shifted and taken him to the high cliffs near their home. Kellan, he'd called to ignorant ears, come away from the edge. But Kuskellanar had been a stubborn cub to raise, fearless and not ever ready to step back or down. He wanted to see the view. The soil was rocky, but little grey paws made their way, nimbly, over it until the view of the earth below was just beginning to appear and then somehow, it warped, went all sideways and wrong, and before he could understand what was happening, his father had his throat grasped tight in his teeth, belly to the ground, laying so close to the edge with small grey Kellan dangling from his jaws.

He'd set him down on safe ground, shifted both of them back. Kellan knew he was in trouble; if this had been his mother, she would have beaten him senseless and cried for hours. But his father just said to him, slowly, and without anger or malice, "Kuskellanar, you are my cub and I am your father. Your life is in my hands."

Kellan spit into the fire. He should take his family home. His father would care for Gustin, he suspected; the human could be charming, in his own mischievous way, and the two of them talked about the same amount. His parents would help him; he needed the help. He had no idea how to raise a litter.

He glanced once more at the bed. Gustin was sleeping. Kellan thought again about his home, twice in one hour, more than he ever had since he'd come to be exiled here. His family probably missed him; they had no way of knowing that he was not dead. His mother probably hated him for that, if she was still alive. If he could just get home, perhaps all would be forgiven. Perhaps all would be
well. Ideste would be in the past, and his past would be far away.

Kellan looked over again at the bed; Gustin was waking.

Gustin blinked one eye open first, then the other. He was cold. Kellan was gone. He sat up immediately, looked around the room. Steam rose quietly from the pot over one fire and the sun was filtering brightly in through the tiny high windows, casting scattered patterns on the floor. Kellan was crouching by another fire, chewing leaves and spitting them into the pit. Gustin shook his head, sat up. Kellan turned, looked cautiously up at him. Gus swallowed dry.

"Morning." he managed. Kellan nodded, chewed slowly, then asked: "How do you feel?"

Gustin moved to get out of bed and pain laced through his lower body. He laid back down and flailed with his right hand for the bowl of chew, almost empty. Kellan looked troubled.

"You hurt."

Gus chewed, laid quietly on his back and waited for the pain to subside before he answered. "Is it over? Are you normal now?"

"Not over. Faded for now, few hours maybe. But not over, human."

Kellan poked idly at the fire with a long stick.

"Gustin." he corrected, not even trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice. Kellan blinked at him, chewed and spit.

"Gustin." the wolfe repeated, then went back to his fire and looking troubled.

Gus went back to staring quietly at the ceiling. Minutes passed, then Kellan's voice, gentle, broke the silence.

"Are you alright, Gustin?"

Gus bit his lip and lied. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"About everything?"

Gustin decided that he as definitely not prepared to have this conversation right now.

"Yes. Fine. Everything."

Kellan got up, meandered his way over to the bed and laid one hand on Gustin's thigh.

"The Change is hard on humans."

Gus flipped his legs over the side of the bed, away from Kellan's touch, dangled his feet above the floor and looked decidedly not at Kellan.

"I'm fine."

Kellan tried to think of what to say. No words were forthcoming. Gustin stood, still not meeting Kellan's eyes, and squeezed past him to tiptoe across the bare floor. Kellan put out a hand to stop him. Gustin stared at it, looked from shielded eyes up at his wolfe.

"Please, Kellan. I need to bathe."

Kellan let him go.

Under the water, he expected everything to be clear. It wasn't. The past day - days? how long had it been now? - were foggy and his own role in everything remained unclear. He recognized the sound of Kellan pacing outside of the bathing rooms but refused to acknowledge it.

He felt strange; tingly, sort of, all over. Maybe it was the chew. So what the hell had happened to him? Gustin took two deep breaths and touched himself, his belly which felt hot for some reason, then his cock, which was still sensitive even with the chew and then a little farther behind that and no, he was right, it hadn't been a dream, not a hallucination, and Kellan wasn't lying. His stomach turned a little bit. He took his hand away, bit the sickness down and put his face into the water.

Kellan was pacing outside. His wolfe. His mate? Were they mates now? Was that how this worked?
Would Kellan expect him to stay with him? He hadn't minded staying before, when it was just for a little while, until the spring melt, and then he could make a new decision, but this...this felt permanent. This felt bad. Well, actually, it didn't. It felt weird, but not entirely bad...almost OK. Well, the changing - maybe not OK, but staying with Kellan - might be OK. The idea of the alternative felt a little bad. Gustin didn't like the thought of having to leave him. He'd actually come to like the surly beast.

He needed time to think. What about the other thing? Kellan had warned him before...Gus shut his eyes against the sudden upshot of fear. Right. The other thing. The weird thing. Kellan had tried to explain to him the possibility of a pregnancy. Which would definitely be a top-shelf disturbance to his life, by any measure in the book. Gus was a runner, and kids tended to move slow. Maybe he could leave it here with Kellan? But then who would take care of it while Kellan went out to hunt? And in the winter? And when it grew older? Would it ever remember him? What if Kellan never told it his name?

For no reason at all, tears began to well up at little behind Gustin's eyes. He rinsed his face and tried to focus on the problems at hand without inventing more all on his own. The whole idea seemed pretty ridiculous anyway except there was that pesky new organ that seemed to have situated itself right behind his dick, and seemed to be actively protesting his ability to forget the Change. Memories of sensation, of heat and Kellan coming hard inside of him flashed through his mind. So if he actually could carry something to term...a wolfish mate in heat, some newfound fertility, and a marathon of untempered sex. Odds did not seemed tipped in his favor. Fantastic.

Kellan was just beginning to worry when Gustin reappeared, wrapped neck to toe in a drying sheet. He jumped, looking guiltily at his mate, who was watching him pace very close to the door. "Human! We need to talk."
"Gustin." he corrected, "And yes, we do."
Gus moved past him, made his way towards the little low table to sit and have some stew. He poured himself a serving with a makeshift ladle and glanced up at the wolfe.
"You want?"
Kellan nodded, sat down to join him. The bowl was halfway to his mouth when Gustin spoke.

"I want to know why you were exiled. What happened with your pack?"
Kellan put his ears back; his heart jumped in strange ways. But he couldn't lie to Gustin, not here, not now that he was his mate.
"Why am I exiled?" Stalling for time.
Gustin blew on his soup.
"Tell me what happened."
Kellan wrinkled his nose and scratched at his ears.
"I was exiled because I killed another."
Gustin's eyebrows dipped down a little as he congratulated himself on his good taste in potential child fathers.
"Or so my pack believes."
Gustin half-glanced up at the mention of this caveat, set his soup bowl down.
"So did you?"
Kellan looked troubled, drank his soup, then pulled the bowl back, swirling it around in for long, silent minutes.
"No."
Gustin waited for more.
"I would have killed him, if I'd had the chance. I hated him, wanted him dead. But in the end, I was not the one who did it."
Gustin's face was unreadable when he met Kellan's eyes.
"You didn't do it. So who did?"
Kellan paused. His heart punched in his throat. He knew he could not lie. "Ideste."
A Simple Murder Story

We were young when I fell in love with him. He was the first I'd ever felt this way about, and in my
eyes, he was perfect. I loved him madly, lavished attention on him. I learned to be a hunter for him.
Ideste favored certain game, and I learned to kill them swiftly, bringing them for his evening meal.
My father seemed to like him well enough; he helped me to braid pelts for him and bring him shells
to decorate his hair.

I was eighteen when I met him, my training barely begun. My father served in a regiment parallel to
his father's. His father was an alpha.
Over time, we came to know each other. We courted. In the seventh month of our second year,
Sparo arrived. He began lurking immediately, going after Ideste when he thought I wasn't around or
wouldn't find out. I hated him. We were twenty then.

Here, Gustin interrupted.
"So he was the interloper, trying to usurp your first love...but you didn't kill him."
Still wrapped securely in the drying sheet, Gustin regarded Kuskellanar doubtfully. Kellan shook his
head.
"I didn't kill him, Gustin."
Gustin shrugged.
"Finish the story."

It took some time for it to become clear that his intentions were serious. He went to Ideste's father,
asked permission. Alpha Saanduk adored me, of course, and he was denied. But that made no matter
to Sparo. The hatred between us grew deeper as time passed, and his ardor for Ideste grew stronger.

At the summer festival, in our third year together, I found them in the garden at my parents' home.
Sparo was attempting to force himself on Ideste; my love was struggling against him and crying out.
I beat him senseless there, in the garden. With my teeth, I had planned to tear his throat out, but
Ideste's crying stayed my hand. Ideste was merciful; it was only because of him that Sparo lived
another day.

Afterwards, he was cautious of me. Not cautious enough; I found him twice in the halls, speaking to
Ideste, my poor love too frightened to move away. I wanted to kill him for ever coming near, but the
times were inopportune. I was twenty-one then, preparing to receive my position soon. Ideste was
nearly ready to bond. Still, Sparo continued to haunt us. Then, one evening two nights before the fall
festival, Sparo arrived with a new beta, one from another part of Arem'mir, who he introduced as his
promised mate. Ideste and I were ecstatic. We thought our troubles were finally over. Sparo seemed
occupied enough, and we were happy. Feeling in good spirits, I invited them to dine with us at the
festival. I was eager to put our hatred away, and Sparo seemed to be as well. Ideste was troubled by
the idea, I remember, but I'd thought he was just over-worrying. Ideste had a tendency to do that - to
worry about every minor detail, overinterpret every whisper and glance. I told him all would be well,
that this could be our chance to settle peacefully with Sparo and live out the rest of our lives in
comfort. Wolfes, you see, always seek peace. We fight only when it becomes a necessity.

The night of the fall festival, we went into the dining hall. Everything was arrayed as it always was -
food and banners, colors and drink. Sparo and the promised mate - I don't now remember his name -
were across from Ideste and I. Ideste seemed so nervous at the time, and I couldn't understand why.
Sparo was perfectly calm, polite, kind to both he and I. It seemed all the past troubles were at rest.
But it was all a ruse, and I was a fool to believe it. Sparo left momentarily, excusing himself to bring
drinks for the table. While he was gone, my love began to look a bit pale. The evening was wearing on him, he said, all the festivities and work. We excused ourselves to our room, left an apology with the mate.

Upstairs, he said he wanted to go to bed. I let him sleep. I wanted to stay with him, but I would have been rude not to at least briefly present myself to his family and certain other members of the pack during the meal. When I left, he was sleeping. When I came back, the door was sitting ajar and there was shouting from inside. I entered and saw the only thing I needed to - Sparo's hands were around Ideste's throat. I leapt. I attacked. I shifted. As a wolfe, I bit him, choked him, took him down by the neck so hard I thought I would snap it right then and there. Then there was this sound - this horrible, wet, wrenching sound like heavy rope being cut and he seized up in my grasp and stopped struggling against me. When I looked down, I saw my knife, fallen free when I had shifted, submerged entirely in his heart. Ideste's hand was still on it.

I shook his neck to be sure he was dead, but the blood was pouring out so quickly and so copious that I knew there was no alternative. Ideste dropped the knife. His eyes were empty. He was so terrified. He looked up at me, and I knew in the moment that Ideste had killed Sparo, he had also killed himself. My heart - my heart is still breaking for my lover, Gustin. My eyes will never forget his face. He was too gentle for things like that, too soft in spirit. I was going to protect him. I had to protect him! I was supposed to protect him. And I'd failed.

In a few minutes, someone came. They called the Alphas. I was taken away. Ideste was still in shock, didn't speak out, didn't cry, did not say anything. And his eyes were so empty. I wanted to tell him that I loved him, but I was muzzled and they marched me out.

At first, I think they wanted to kill me. I don't know what stopped them. My youth, perhaps, or some favor Saanduk had for me. I wanted to die. Those first, aching days without Ideste with me, not knowing if he was alright or alive or anything at all, I wanted to die. Some day, only a few hours after dawn, Saanduk came to talk to me. He told me that Ideste was ill, had gone pale because of what I'd done. I couldn't tell him that it wasn't me who killed Sparo. I could not break his heart as well. I could not put Ideste to trial - he was my lover, Gustin. I loved him. I thought he would be my mate. I asked if Ideste had spoken about me. He told me Ideste had not spoken at all. He told me they were going to exile me, that today would be my last hour on Arem'mir, once and for all. They did not let me say goodbye to my family.

The transport dropped me here, in wolfish form, naked and muzzled onto the cold ground. I couldn't adjust at first to the atmosphere - that, and lack of food, made it difficult to shift. I would have starved, most likely, but the Layer found me first, helped me to get the muzzle off, then fed me for the night. I looked on him as a prisoner who sees a dove from the gallows. In my mind, my fate was already sealed. I knew I had been sent here to die.

Gustin was rapt, his legs drawn up under him, his brow creased and eyes blazing.
"What made you want to live again, then?"
Kellan frowned, gazed off into the distance for a moment.
"I simply wanted to see Ideste."
Gustin was shaking a little, wiggling his leg in the way that Kellan had come to know meant he was thinking. Kellan poked at some wood dust with his toe.
"That relationship was different from ours, Gustin."
"Yeah, no shit."
"You are my mate. Ideste was my love, but I never bonded with him under the moon. The positions you hold in my heart will never be the same."
Gustin frowned, then it lifted and a strange expression took its place.
"Great. Listen, I think you need to reexamine what happened to you with Ideste."
Kuskellanar cocked his head. The statement was unexpected.
"In what way, human?"
Gustin looked cautiously to the side.
"I don't think he is who you think he is."
Kellan's look darkened.
"Are you accusing Ideste of being a liar, human?"
"No. I'm accusing you of being a sucker."
Kellan's eyebrows shot up and he sat back a little.
"You call your mate a fool?"
"I think you believed in him too blindly, wolfe. Ideste set you up. At least I think he did. I think he meant to use you to take Sparo out. I don't think the murder happened how you think it did."
Kellan frowned again.
"Enlighten me, human." he said, dryly. "How do you believe it occurred?"
Gustin shrugged.
"I think Ideste and Sparo were having an affair."
Kellan growled, for real this time, and he was on his feet, snarling across the space at his human mate.
"How dare you! Who are you?! You are nobody! Just a spiritless whore - you are not like Ideste! You are not like me! You know nothing of my lover, nothing of Sparo and his unceasing madness, nothing of the things I witnessed between the two, and nothing of our love!" To Gustin's total shock and surprise, Kellan took the bowl he'd been sipping, threw it violently into the fire pit, and turned on his heel and left for the bathing room. A moment passed.
"Geez." Gustin said quietly to no one. "That reexamination didn't seem to go well."

Kellan stayed in the other room for as long as he could. But by evening, the need was back, and he had to emerge or suffer painfully alone. Gustin was pretty worried by then, even looked relieved to see Kellan come stalking out of the bathing room with that look in his eyes that said he was unprepared for anything less than what he wanted. Kellan took Gustin over the low dinner table first, then twice after they made it into bed and seemed interested in a third but then dozed off, sometime after midnight. Gustin laid awake, staring at the moon.
A Shower in the Morning After

Kellan's outburst got pushed away as the season reconvened and Gustin had to consider more important things, like how he could possibly talk his way out of this one. There didn't seem to be any clear path. He spent a lot of time the next day thinking about the moon.

Then there were two and a half more long, almost unbearable days of Kuskellanar being in season and then suddenly, on the fourth morning, after a good, long wakeup fuck, Gustin dozed off to get another few minutes, and when he came to, the door had been opened and the fires were fresh. Kellan was sitting at his carving-table, working diligently on some fine, little piece with his back to where Gustin lay in the bed. The human pushed himself up on his elbows. A little jolt of pain stabbed at his stomach, on the right side.

"Oh, ow!"

The wolfe snapped around, pushed everything on the table away. Gustin got up, flinched, swallowed the wad of chew he had in his mouth and replaced it with more. This chew was stronger; it was Kellan's own blend, something they'd been lucky to have lying around since Gustin's supply had run out in the first few days of the season. The wolfe came rushing over.

"Are you alright, human?"

His hands were frisking Gustin under the furs, checking his body for obvious injury. His expression looked guilty.

"I'm sorry; I know this time has been rough on you."

Gustin batted away the roaming hands.

"I'm f - look, I'm fine, I just - what were you working on over there? Anyway, listen, can you carry me into the bath? That'd be nice. I feel dirty, but walking is something I'd like to save for a later date, like some time when I don't feel like I just got tag teamed by a pair of Louts."

Kellan made a disgusted face, then nuzzled Gustin's chin.

"I can bring you more chew."

"No, please - this last batch was stronger than the last, and I think I have a nice little glow going."

Kellan glanced at his face, made a weird expression, then nodded.

"You want to bathe. I will heat you a tub."

"No, don't do - " the wolfe was gone before Gustin could finish his sentence. "- that. Damn that tub. I hate that tub. Damn thing's cold and it's always too shallow and I don't want to sit."

Gustin forced himself to stand up slowly, stretch, take an inventory of all the places that hurt, starting with his new and improved girl bits, and then made his way past the rings of heat from the fires and into the bathing room. Kellan was kneeling, drawing water into the stone construction that could loosely be called a tub.

"It's OK. Stop. I'll shower instead."

Kellan looked up at him in alarm.

"Human - "

"Gustin!"

"Gustin, you should not be overexerting yourself."

Gus rolled his eyes. Kellan narrowed his.

"Do not think your newfound status will exempt you from my punishments, Gustin."

Gus pretended to ignore this, although a little chill tickled upwards along his spine. He jutted his chin upwards.

"Kellan, I would very very much like it if I might be left to shower. I'll be out in twenty minutes and I'll be very careful not to kill myself or ruin anything still healing. Please heat me some soup if you are making it, and also get out."

Kellan put his ears back, but got up and without further argument, left the room.
In the meditative quiet of the bathing room, Gustin considered for the millionth time what he had
dubbed 'the Ideste problem'. This problem, as he had come to see it, was that Kellan really had never
gotten unheartbroken from Ideste, because in a lot of ways, his time with Ideste had never really
ended; Kuskellanar had been shipped off and he'd never seen or heard from any of them again. And
then Gus had come along, seemed like a reasonable gift to be exchanged for readmission, but then
that had gone all screwy so now all that was left was a confused, guilty, mopey wolfe - not
something Gustin intended to live with forever.
He paused. When had he started thinking of this thing as forever? Whatever. No time for that now.
Only time for the Problem. The whole story had sounded strange; just a little bit odd, the
characterizations too pure, too clear. Ideste the innocent, Sparo the dangerous thief. If there was one
thing his interactions had taught him, it was that whether the participants be human, Wolfish, Psire or
Lout, there was always something more to the story, always another layer.

Ideste couldn't possibly have been as innocent as he seemed. Gustin wondered for a moment if that
thought was due to some misplaced feelings of jealousy, but decided not and followed it onward. If
Ideste was not so innocent, then that implied he may have been complicit. But complicit in what?
The murder, yes, but more than that - what could he have earned from it? What could he have stood
to gain? If Sparo had been his other lover, in the end, he'd have lost both. Why push the conflict to
that end?

Gus turned under the water, rubbed his temples, sloshed water around the sensitive parts between his
legs.
What did Ideste possibly stand to gain? What did anyone stand to gain? People rarely did things
outside of an expectation of gain and - fuck! Suddenly, memory came clearly to him and the
realization occurred that no matter what he and Kellan had been doing here, in their little winter oasis
of hot rabbit stews and unparalleled coition, there was still, somewhere, a caravan of very pissed off
transporters who had orders from a king to bring home a captive - a human named Gustin. They'd
lost him once, but spring was coming. The caravan would be back.

Gustin considered this new, frightening possibility for a moment. Kellan had told him the reason he
was sought; had described the rumors around him, speaking reverently about them, giving the stories
an almost religious zeal...if that were the case, if he were believed in so strongly, he doubted anyone
seeking to find him would give up so fast. But they'd wanted him to breed; he was mated to Kellanar
now; surely whoever it was would respect the sanctity of the bond! Wouldn't they? Could they just
take him? Were mates switch-aroundable? No. Mating was final and mating was forever. Had to be.
It was the foundation of their law system, after all. The foundation of their lives. A sudden chill
overtaking him, Gustin shook his hair out and stepped out from under the water.
"We're not bonded. We're mated. There's a difference."
Kellan had his back to Gustin, was scraping at something small on the workbench again.
"Well, what's the difference?"
Kellan grunted, and Gustin sighed.
In the two days since the end of his heat, the wolfe been obsequious but uncommunicative. All
further questions about Ideste or even Arem'mir had been met with a stony silence, and so Gustin
had resorted to asking questions about the Wolfish life. Unexpectedly, Kellan swung around on the
workbench to face him.
"A mating is a joining of the body. A bonding is a joining of the spirit."
"Well, which one means I can't get taken by anybody else?"
Kellan swung back around and began scraping again at his work.
"A bonding."
"Which is what we don't have."
Kellan grunted.
"Well, I want one of those."
Kellan's back tensed and he stopped scraping. He shook his head and resumed.
"No." Gustin frowned and nestled down deeper under the furs.
"Yes." Kellan ignored him for a minute.
"No." Gustin threw the furs back.
"No?! I'm the mother of your child!" Kellan's head snapped around. Gustin rolled his eyes. "I could
be the mother of your child." he clarified. Kellan stared at him for a minute, nose twitching. Then he
went back to carving. A moment of silence passed.

"Kuskellanar, I think we need to."
Gustin's voice was tinged with command, and worry. Kellan put down the carving and turned to face
him. Gustin sat up in bed.
"The caravan is going to be back." Some kind of emotion flickered across Kuskellanar's face. "A
strategy is in order."
Kellan scoffed.
"You think I will not protect you. I am a wolfe of Arem'mir. Although we are not bonded, we are
mated. I will guard my mate. And my litter."
Gustin tried to choose his words carefully.
"First of all, there is no litter. Second, it's not that I don't believe that you will do everything in your
power to guard me. But I believe that guarding might be easier if there's something legal-ish to back
it up. Third of all, why not? For someone who was so thrilled just hours ago about taking care of me,
you sure seem quick to turn the offer down."
Kellan shook his head and looked troubled.
"It's not that I refuse you, Gustin, but a bonding is...permanent, and holy. It cannot be entered into
lightly, no matter how expedient it may seem." Kellan shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "We should
come to know each other before we bond."
Gustin shook his head, suddenly feeling overwhelmed.
"This is crazy. This whole thing is crazy. I just went for a walk. I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask for
any of this."
Kellan looked sympathetic for a minute, then stood up, stripped off his clothes and shifted in the
middle of the floor. In animal form, he spoke.
"Can you hear me, Gustin?"
Gustin considered denying, but decided that he had no reason to lie to Kuskellanar. At least not today. Reluctantly, he nodded.
The wolfe plunked down on the floor and flipped his fluffy tail up over the haunch of one leg.
"Then perhaps what they say is right. Perhaps you are the Synthesis."
Gustin shook his head.
"No! I am not the - " he bit his lip in frustration.
The animal Kellan cocked its head suddenly, cool grey eyes narrowing on his shoulder. The wolfe rose and moved forward, leapt smoothly onto the bed and used his muzzle to push Gustin's chin to the side, then licked his tongue into the hollow of neck and shoulder for a moment, and snorted. The wolfe sat back again to shift, and the human Kellan reappeared naked in front of him, still closely inspecting the junction of his neck. He made a sound of worry.
"Well?!" Gustin sucked in a few good, semi-freaking-out breaths. "What are you looking at? What's wrong with my neck?!"
Kellan frowned a little and traced a thumb, lightly, over Gus's skin.
"It appears your worries were unfounded, human."
"Gustin."
Kellan glanced up.
"Gustin. It appears we have already bonded."
Gustin bent his brow deeply down. This thing got more confusing by the second. Good thing he hadn't come here on an information mission, or he'd be sorely out of luck.
"What?"
Kellan shrugged.
"It appears that you are my bondmate, and I am yours." Kellan got up from the bed and began looking around for his pants, seemingly unconcerned with the turn of events that had taken place there.
"Wha - but that is - how do you know?!"
"My mark has not faded."
"It hasn't faded??"
"No. You have healed, but the mark has set itself into your skin. This is how things were done, a long time ago, before the plague on Arem'mir, between a wolfe and his mate. A taking, a marking and a bonding in the time after. If the Moon blesses, the mark stays." Clearly bored of talking, Kellan turned back to his carving, now beginning work on a large slab of old wood he'd scavenged before the snow. Gustin's mind continued to race.

"But...I thought a bonding had to be consensual. I didn't agree to anything! You didn't, either! How did this happen?!"
Gustin was still utterly, utterly confused. Kellan shrugged from the carving table.
"Moon must have wanted me to bond with you. She gave me the urge that wolfes do not feel with human mates, to mark you and take you for her, as my own. She must feel, as you do, that we are short on time."
Gustin felt a vibration and realized he was shivering.
"So if we're bonded...does that mean you can't leave me?"
Kellan paused over this. Clearly, Gustin had no understanding of what it meant - the bond, the mating. He didn't realize that even without a bond, Kellan was his mate. The wolfe would never have left him to begin with.
"No. I will not leave you, Gustin."
The breath he'd been holding released almost quietly enough not to be heard by wolfish ears.
"But your marking may give us some future trouble."
"Why? Why would it do that?"
Kellan didn't speak for a minute, and the only sound in the room was the rhythmic scraping of metal on wood. Gustin spoke up again, his voice this time laced with suspicion. "Why would it cause us trouble, Kellan? What does it mean?"

The scrape-slide continued. The sun slipped in through little windows, casting some light on the floor. Gustin waited.
"It means," Kellan spoke slowly, never breaking his carving rhythm, "that you have fulfilled the second tenet of the Prophecy."
Gustin had very little time to actually feel stunned, because just then, there was a frantic banging at the door and the voice of Adotre filtered in from the door's other side.
"Wolfe! Wolfe! A message from the South! Traders! A caravan comes!"
Kellan and Gustin both raced for the door - Gustin reached it first, but Kellan was only seconds behind, and he gave Gus a particularly nasty glare when he strained himself trying to open it. Kellan scowled and moved him back with one hand.
"You'll be punished for that later, human."
Gus felt a little illicit thrill of heat at his wolfe's low promise.

Then Kellan slid the door open, and Gus felt a blast of wind which he was surprised to find was still cold, but no longer quite so icy. Before he could contemplate that little fact, the Layer slipped in the cracked-open door, shivering and chattering and shaking himself right in the entryway, flinging fur and bits of ice all over the room. Kellan and Gus both winced away from the blast.
"I tell you, Old Thing, the outdoors is no place for a Layer! Not one as delicate and handsome as me."
Kellan rolled his eyes and Gustin smiled, always entertained by the Layer's antics.
"Tell me about the caravan, Layer."
"In a minute. Stew first."
Kellan growled about this, but Adotre padded past him, still in animal form, dripping melted snow across the floor before he plopped himself down at the low eating table and shifted human once again. Gus dragged some of the larger furs off of the bed to cover the now proudly-naked Layer, then ladled up a bowl of stew for him, setting it down on the side of the low table closest to the main fire before returning to join Kellan on the opposite side.
"Thank you, Old Thing's Mate." Adotre took the bowl gratefully in both hands and lifted it to eat. With the bowl raised, he paused, sniffed, and eyed Gustin. "Won't you eat?"
Gustin shook his head.
"I'm not so hungry just now."
the Layer's eyes flicked to Kellan, who showed no reaction but impatience.
"You should eat, human. You must fortify. You are vulnerable."
Gustin made a face at the strange statement.
"I think I'll be OK, thanks."
the Layer looked him over again, then gave a theatrical sigh.
"Fine. Suit yourself. I guess Old Thing will have to tell you to do it. Although I find it the most ridiculous thing in the world the way bred betas like you act. Only taking direction from your mate and such as. Ha!"
Kellan caught it before Gustin did and was halfway across the table in an instant, displaying yet again the wolfish speed Gustin wished he had. He leaned forward, crouched on his hands, his face inches from Adotre's.
"What was it that you said, Layer?"
The Layer's eyes widened, then delight spread across his face, chased closely by mischief.
"Don't tell me you didn't know."
"Know what?" Gustin asked, interested and perturbed by Kellan's violent reaction. Kellan's face tightened.
"I wasn't sure."
The Layer cocked an eyebrow.
"This whole place reeks of lemon. Smells like a damn spring orchard. And you didn't know?"
"I don't smell any lemons." Gustin sniffed around a bit, but got no scent.
"We wolfes don't smell the way you do, Layer. It's not so easy for us." Kellan snapped defensively.
"Besides, we don't smell lemons. We smell sweet."
Adotre shrugged.
"Well. Scent again, then, wolfe, and tell me what you find. I've already told you it's clear to me."
"What is everybody smelling?" Gustin asked again, worried. "Is it me? Are you talking about me?"
he wrapped his arms more tightly around himself. "Is something wrong with me?"

the Layer looked over at him with an expression tender and thick with longing, wistfulness, and adoration.
"No. Nothing's wrong with you, human. Nothing's wrong with you at all."
Gustin looked nervously between the two nonhumans.
"Then what? What is it? What's going on?"
Kellan gave the Layer a warning glance, then turned his full attention back to his mate.
"Adotre says that you smell of lemons. This tells us that you are carrying, Gustin."
Gus didn't respond to this, just stared blankly back at him. Adotre felt the need to cut in, tail beating time on the ground behind him, face unabashedly gleeful despite the deep, dead silence.
"You're pregnant! You're with, Gustin. You and your mate. Congratulations. The Moon has blessed."

Gustin tried to nod, tried to swallow and speak and respond, but felt like he was only hearing echos - he couldn't properly comprehend what was being said. Pregnant? That didn't even make any sense. He tried to imagine what this meant for him. For Kellan. For his life. He couldn't. He tried to focus on the room. He couldn't. The edges of his vision started to black. Oh man. Not today. Not now. Not a good time to learn how to faint. But there it was.
"Oh...shit. Damn." was the last thing he managed to get out as his wolfe and the Layer lunged, the room turned upside down, and Gustin passed out in Kuskellanar's arms.
"Well, he's dead."
Kellan growled.
"He is not dead. He's just sleeping."
the Layer scoffed.
"That's what they tell cubs who are scared of meat. Naive wolf. He's dead."

Adotre reached one paw out to prod at Gustin's chin. Kuskellanar slapped it away.
"Don't touch him. He's sleeping."
"Sleeping like the dead."
Kellan ignored this and focused his attention on Gustin.
"Wake up, Human. Your mate is commanding you to wake up."
Gustin had never been so offended while still partially unconscious. He squeezed his eyes shut, shoved one arm blindly out to swing at Kuskellanar, and rolled over onto his stomach, which promptly made him aware of the fact that he desperately had to pee. Kellan was nudging him. Gustin swung again and made contact. Kellan yelped a little, then cleared his throat and growled.
"Human, if you do not wake, I will assume you are injured."
"Or dead!" Adotre interjected.
Gustin exhaled in frustration.
"Human is fine. Human is not dead. Human is tired. Human would like to continue to lay here and not think about what has recently happened."
Kuskellanar snorted.
"The consequences of our mating must be discussed."

There was a silence between them, and suddenly, impulsively, Kellan felt the urge to touch his mate, to soothe him. He reached out a hand to stroke Gustin's hair, smoothing it back where it had been mussed by the bed.
"Little mate, bearer of my lit, please wake up."
Gustin pouted in his head. How was he supposed to ignore a request like that? With Kellan asking so nicely? Might as well reward good behavior. Gustin rolled over and opened his eyes.

"Human! You're not dead!" Adotre wagged his tail. "Old Thing said you might be, but I didn't believe him."
Kellan's voice was low enough that Adotre read the threat and retreated to the far side of the room, by the carving table. Kellan turned again to his mate. His eyes raked down his body, lingering on his face.
"How do you feel?"
Gustin swallowed.
"Terrified."
Kellan gave him a look of pure sympathy and adoration.
"Everything will be fine, human. I am your mate. I will see to that."
Gustin nodded.
"I know you will."
he propped himself up on his elbows and the room spun a little bit. "Water, Kellan, please?"
Kellan turned to go, but Adotre appeared at his elbow, looking hopeful and already bearing a bowl of water. Kellan took it with an appreciative grunt and helped Gus to sit up and drink.

Gus let himself into the bathing room, then came back to bed and dozed off to sleep again. When he woke, the sun was down, Kellan was watching him, and the Layer was asleep in animal form on top
of a cloth by the fire. Gustin blinked and began to sit up. Kellan was at his side instantaneously, helping to lift him, carrying a bowl of warm stew.
"Human. You wake."
Gus nodded.
"I wake." he licked his dry lips and took the stew from Kellan, realizing in the process that he was absolutely starving. After half the bowl had been downed, he paused long enough to ask about Adotre. "He's still here?"
Kellan nodded shortly.
"His fatigue is such that I am unsure he would be able to safely return to his home." Kellan glanced over his shoulder for a moment at the sleeping Layer, then turned a stern gaze back onto Gus. "He and I have discussed the caravan. Rumours from the South say that it will pass us in two moons." There was a pause while the unasked question hung heavy in the air. Kellan looked directly into his eyes.
"They will be seeking you."
Gustin took at few more swallows of his soup.
"OK."

Suddenly, out of nowhere, he felt the urge to run biting at him; little tiny nips at his back, his ankles, his legs telling him to run, run far away and never ever look back. He struggled against it for a few seconds, then reached out for Kellan.
"Kellan, we have to get out of here."
Kellan shook his head.
"No, mate. The den is safe. You stay here."
Gustin felt something akin to panic begin chipping at his calm.
"No...no, Kellan, we have to leave." Gustin began looking around himself, trying to plan in his head what they would need to pack. "Believe me, I can do it. Kellan, I can! I can get us back to good territory again! We can...we can go south, take refuge in a friendly pack's land. The freeze is not so thick now, it's not so cold; we could make it, Kellan, really we could!"
Gustin suddenly realized his breath was heaving. Kellan cocked his head and put a quelling hand on his mate's shoulder.
"Gustin, if we go into Pack land, you cannot take me."
Gus's stomach dropped. He hadn't even thought of that.
"But - "
Kellan shook his head.
"An exile from one Pack is an exile from all."
By the fire, Adotre stirred. Gustin looked over at him.
"But - "
Kellan shook his head firmly.
"No, Gustin. We stay."
Gustin calmed his breathing to even and swung his legs over the side of the bed so that he was sitting up.
"OK. OK."

Gus shifted; his parts still felt a bit sore, but it was nothing unbearable, and much better than before. Kellan watched him carefully.
"Are you alright?"
Gus nodded.
"Besides the fact that I can't wrap my head around what you're telling me, yes." he rolled out of bed and went over to pour himself some more soup, tiptoeing over Adotre, then focusing intently on holding the bowl steady.
"So we stay here."
Kellan grunted accord.
"And we hide."
There was no response.
"And they won't even know we're around."
Again, no answer.
Gustin straightened up, looking directly at Kellan.
"Wolfe, give me an answer here."
"They know I am about. They know that I live here."
Gustin waited.
"They will sense the change in my scent."
Gustin made a suspicious face.
"What change?"
Kellan turned a little to the side.
"Your scent will be on me. They will wonder about it."
Gustin shrugged.
"So just don't go see them. Don't let them scent you. What's their worry? They're looking for me. They're not searching for you. They won't care."
Kellan glanced uneasily at Adotre. Gustin put it together.
"Unless they are searching for you. Because they suspect - or maybe they know - that you were the one who made the raid that stole me."
Kellan had the good grace to look as if he felt bad about this. Gustin calmly took another swallow of soup, and sighed.
"I really wish that you had mentioned this earlier."
"What is Adotre sleeping on?"
Kellan jerked his head up guiltily from where he was carving a large block of wood by the workbench. He glanced at the Layer, then back to his mate.
"Nothing."
Gustin, never one to let an answer like that go, sipped his stew thoughtfully and kicked Kellan's bench, then walked over to inspect the Layer's makeshift bed.
"Is this a pile of clothes?"
Kellan ignored him. Gus leaned down, towards the pile, and got a whiff of unwashed Kellan. He frowned at the floor, then turned to look at the wolfe.
"Are these your dirty clothes?"
Kuskellanar determinedly did not look at Gustin.
"It is where he chose to sleep."
Gus tilted his head in confusion.
"Why?"
Kellan ignored him, quietly working the tool that was in his hands, his steady motion making thick strips of yellow wood rise up and peel away. Gustin prepared to press the issue, but just at that moment, the Layer woke up, yawning his way into the conversation.
"Breakfast?"
he inquired, in his animal voice. Gustin turned to greet him, lifting his soup bowl in indication.
"Lunch. You're late."
Adotre got to four feet and stretched, then shifted, then yelped as his skin touched the cold floor and shifted back. He padded on four paws over to Gustin and rubbed his head beseechingly against the human's leg. Gus scowled at him, but obligingly poured some soup into a dish and set it on the ground. Adotre slurped it down noisily, licking the bowl so hard that it scraped across the floor. Gustin took it from him and refilled.
Kellan put down his tool, suddenly, and spoke.
"I have considered your proposition, Human."
Gus raised his eyebrows in interest.
"About what?"
Kellan folded his hands in his lap.
"I believe we should move the den."
Gus tried to contain his surprise at Kellan (essentially) admitting that Gus right.
"But if we do so, the move must be completed soon, before you are burdened with the litter such as to make travel unwise."
Gustin swallowed, a sudden wave of fear coming over him; Kellan had made the litter sound like a guillotine, a deadline hanging over his head - a sentence. Was that what it was? He knew that women had died in childbirth, not infrequently...did he carry his death in him now? Gus quickly turned off this train of thoughts, focused instead on Kellan and his plan.
"How soon should we go?"
Kellan furrowed his brow.
"Before two moons. Maybe three. A female must den some moons before the whelp."
Gus narrowed his eyes.
"I am not a female. And I will not 'whelp'."
Kellan looked surprised at the venom in his mate's voice.
"I meant no insult, mate. I only spoke what was familiar to me."
Gustin relented. Adotre, who had inched closer, nosing a near-empty second bowl of soup along,
looked on with interest. Gus sat down on a pile of furs near to the low table.  
"Forgiven. So you agree with me, then. You want to run."
"Not run - move."
Kellan glanced worriedly at Gustin.  
"We must find a den that is safe, stable, and well hidden, in case the birth comes before we can find a pack."

It was Gustin's turn to look surprised again.  
"Find a pack? What for?"
Kellan looked uneasy; he turned the carving instrument over in his hand.  
"So that we may attempt to rejoin."
"But you're an exile! You want to rejoin a pack now? I thought you said that was impossible!"
Kellan frowned, gazing off at a curl of wood on the floor.  
"Unprecedented, mate. But not impossible."
Gustin considered this for a moment.  
"But...do you even want to join a pack again?"
the Wolfe looked up at him sharply, longing and pain written clearly in his features. Gustin considered the silliness of what he'd said. Of course Kellan wanted to join a pack again. Exile made most wolves go mad.  
"Well. What pack?" Gustin mused over the thought. "IceWind comes closest to here."
Kellan cocked his head.  
"You know the details of our packs?"
Gustin grinned proudly.  
"I know quite a bit."

Kellan grunted in response and went back to working his tools over the wood in front of him.  
Adotre quietly licked his bowl clean. Gustin ignored his whine for more. Kellan spoke again.  
"IceWind is hostile; they are too close to the exiles in the Irión, and are unwilling to compromise their borders. They would be an unlikely choice." there was a thoughtful silence. "There appears to be a new pack forming, not far from here, to the south and the west. I was hoping that I might be able to join amongst them..."
Kellan trailed off and Gus quietly absorbed the words, listening intently for the ones his mate didn't speak.  
"...But you'd rather go back to Arem'mir."
Kellan was silent.  
"That's it, isn't it? Joining a new pack isn't the same as going home to your old one."

Kellan grunted from the bench, kept carving. Although the Wolfe wasn't speaking, Gus felt his mate's pain clearly; it resonated off him in waves, made all the clearer if you just listened half the time to what he was saying. Kellanar was a wolf of Arem'mir, above all other things. Even here, banished to this cold corner of a lonely planet, he kept the old ways; he treated his mate with kindness, taught him the songs, observed the holy days, remembered the songs, stories and myths. Still spoke to the Moon.

Kellan dreamed of his home sometimes, Gus knew, because his mate would move frantically in the middle of the night, running in sleep perhaps, jostling his mate awake, and then Gus would watch him and see the stress lines forming, the grimace and the eventual sadness that overtook the Wolfe as the dream, as always, faded away. Gus went over to the Wolfe, putting one hand over his mate's, stopping his carving.  
"Then go to Arem'mir."
Kellan wrenched his hand away. Gus snatched it back.  
"No. I mean it. Tell them what happened. Tell them who really killed Sparo. Tell them it was Ideste."
Kellan turned away.
"I cannot betray my beloved, Gustin."
Gus felt a roll of anger wash through him, but he controlled it as best he could.
"Kellan, please, please listen to me. And don't bite my head off - "
"I would not - "
"- metaphorically. This time. I just - " Gus stopped and bit his lip, unsure how to phrase this correctly. He took a deep breath.
"Ideste is not your beloved, Kellan. The person you were in love with (Gus made sure to use the past tense here) never existed. Can't you see that? Ideste set you up. He betrayed you. And he's a killer! You have to turn him in!"
Kellan began to growl, and Gus leaned forward and placed one, gentle hand on his wolfe's cheek. "For the sake of your pack, and the safety of your lit," Gus whispered, "You have to tell the truth."

Kellan stared a long, long minute at his mate, just taking in what his beta had said. Was it true? Could it be? Ideste, an actor...the possibility was heartbreaking. Their love had been lies? Kellan recalled curling up in Ideste's bed, sure that he would never leave it, never love another, never need or want anyone else, ever again. But then here was this green-eyed little human, and he did want him. How badly he wanted him. And now he had a mate, and a lit, and everything had changed. When Kellan really considered everything, Ideste felt a million miles away. But then he thought of the day they'd taken him from Arem'mir, and the pain was back as fresh as before. Kellan couldn't, simply couldn't believe that his exile had been for naught.

And yet...Gustin was an informer; he noticed things that no one else did, picked up on tiny details that could make or break an escape, an attack, a harvesting plan, a life. Gus weighted his life on knowledge. Perhaps he knew something of this. Anyway, it was often said that betas knew the hearts of betas best...perhaps Gus had sensed something from the story? Perhaps because he was the Synthesis...but was there truth in even that? Kellan shook his head; he needed more time to think. Sounding disconnected, he heard his own voice say:
"I will consider the things you have mentioned here, Human."

Gus sat back, still looking worried. Idly, he rubbed his shoulder, touched the mark. It brought Kellan back from his trance. Ideste would be a problem for another day. Today, there were things to do. Homes to begin to pack, and Layers to tend to, and mates requiring discipline, and plans to make. Kellan cleared his throat.
"We speak now of other things." Kellan felt his tone made it clear that the topic was closed for conversation. Gustin did not feel the same.
"We haven't finished talking about your pack yet."
Kellan frowned.
"Human, I have told you I require time to think. We will discuss this later."
Gus squinted at Kellan.
"Are you sure you're a wolfe? Because you sure run away from things like a rabbit."
Kellan drew himself up, his ego bristling sharply at the attack. From the floor, Adotre giggled. The wolfe silenced him with a glare, then turned it on his mate.
"You will mind your tongue, little mate. Do not think I have forgotten your recent disobedience."
Gustin scanned his memory for clues as to what his wolfe could possibly mean. Then the door, and the promise of punishment it had earned came to him, clear as day. His stomach did a little flip.
"I don't know what you're talking about."
Kellan narrowed his eyes, first at Gus, then at Adotre, who had inched his way so far into the conversation that he was almost in Kellan's lap. At Kellan's growl, he backed up to the other side of the table. Kellan looked again at Gustin.
"Your attempt to open the heavy door, Human." Now Kellan leaned forward, seizing Gus' jaw in his grip. "You must understand that you are Mate, important to me. And my lit? Important to me. I will
Gus wasn't sure whether he was flattered or offended. But he knew that he was definitely turned on. Aggressive, commanding Kellan seemed to have that effect on him lately; must be a side effect of the lit. The wolfe leaned closer so his words could be heard clearly.
"The door is not made for humans, Gustin. Do not attempt to open it again."
Gus didn't answer, the thrill of minor rebellion tickling through him.
Kellan snorted and released his jaw. "It is clear some discipline is necessary." Gus felt a tremor slip up his back. He watched the wolfe and waited. "That will have to wait." Kellan glanced at Adotre. "What happens between us does not require an audience."

Gus bit his lip and didn't know whether to feel relieved, amused, or disappointed. He turned to go and contemplated getting himself another bowl of soup. Kellan's growl once again captured his attention, and he turned to face his wolfe.
"Oh, do not think I will forget, little one, your small disobedience. You'll pay your due, as soon as we are alone."
Gustin simply smiled charmingly at Kellan, raised an eyebrow to make the smile a smirk, and got up to get himself a bowl of water. From the floor, Adotre stared on in fascination. Was this, he wondered, what having a mate was really like?
Adotre hung around in animal form for the rest of the day, sometimes pawing playfully at the curls of wood on the floor whilst Kellan carved, other times following Gus from place to place as he did minor chores. Once, he tried to climb up for a nap in Kellan and Gustin's bed, but a growl from the wolfe warned him down. This made Gus stop what he was doing and look over at his mate. "He can sleep on the bed if he wants. It doesn't bother me."

Kellan, who was looking hard at Adotre and not minding Gustin, shook his head. "It is not a matter of easing your comfort, human. The Layer does not sleep in our bed."

Adotre lowered his head and scratched one ear guiltily.

In the afternoon, Adotre had whined that he was tired of the same old stew until Kellan got tired of his voice and agreed to let him go out and 'catch something interesting' for dinner. A few hours later, he returned bearing a small but prodigious bloody bundle, which Kellan took carefully out of Gustin's sight to be cleaned and prepared. Even after these months, Gus still claimed it made him sick to clean carcass, and so Kellan suggested that now may be a convenient time for his mate to have a pre-dinner nap. Gustin agreed, not because Kellan had practically ordered him to do so, but instead because he actually did, for some reason, feel rather tired, and felt a quick rest might be properly in order.

Kellan and the Layer cooked the meat, using half for the meal, and setting aside half to go into storage. Kellan also neatly sliced up the root vegetables he'd dug up earlier, and Adotre went to the well to retrieve some fresh water. As they worked together peacefully, Adotre yapping happily about things he expected to trade for from the caravan (everything from new pots to a particular piece of cloth he'd seen last spring and hadn't been able to acquire), and Kellan nodding gruffly or grunting when appropriate. Gustin woke up when they were almost finished, and joined in the conversation, noting with only passing interest that although the Layer really needed no encouragement to keep up his chatter, Kellan still seemed to be keeping very quiet.

At dinner, Kellan's silence continued. Adotre had shifted human again and dressed, after Gus had asked the Layer to narrate some of the stories of the Layer mythology for him. Now, Gus sat opposite Adotre, listening with great interest to the riveting and ribald tale of the first Layer King, who, after choosing a bride who would not lay for him, had his stepmother (a powerful magician), turn the recalcitrant bride into a nirruk, something which Adotre described as being similar to a very large duck. "Oh, so it's like a goose."

Adotre frowned. "No. It is like a large duck."

Gustin let this go. "Wait, so who was it who got turned into a large duck?"

Adotre frowned again and looked at Gus, worriedly. "The frigid queen, of course."

"I thought you said 'he.'" Adotre furrowed his brow, then addressed Gustin as one might a small child. "Yes. He. The Queen. The one who wouldn't lay."

Gustin felt as if he must have missed something. "...what?"

Kellan interrupted. "Mate. The Layers have only one gender. They are hermaphroditic. All of them can act the role of either male or female. They are all 'he.'"

Gustin ohh'd, and Adotre looked a little relieved that his pupil seemed to have caught up. But then he
seemed to reprocess the wolfe's explanation, and turned to glare at Kellan.

"But some of us," he said pointedly, "Are more 'he' than others. We do indicate, wolfe. We won't just act whichever way."
Kellan met Adotre's eyes and something seemed to pass between them.
"Ah," was all the wolfe said, then went back to the rest of his meal.
Gustin tugged on Adotre's shirt sleeve, calling back his attention.
"Lay?"
Adotre patted Gus' hand.
"Mate with. It's our word for mating."
Kellan conspicuously cleared his throat. Adotre rolled his eyes.
"And birthing."
Gus raised an eyebrow, then turned back to Kellan.
"Do they -"
Kellan anticipated his question.
"Yes. Soft, leathery-shelled eggs, no more than three at a time, but most frequently one."

Gus jerked his attention back to Adotre, who was looking at Kellan with a strange expression.
"I don't know why this would be of interest to a human mate."
"It might be of interest to all of us, shortly." Kellan answered. Adotre stiffened, and glared at Kellan so sharply that Gus just knew if he'd been in animal form, his hackles would have been up and spiky.
"And why would that be, wolfe?"
There was no affection in his address. In response, Kellan merely shrugged, not taking his eyes off of Adotre.
"After the meal, Layer."
Adotre growled.
"No. Now."
Kellan's ears flicked just the slightest bit.
"We will talk about it after the meal."
"I want to talk about it now."
Kellan swallowed his soup and set the bowl down, his gaze focused intently on the Layer.
"I said after the meal, Nemel." Adotre's ears flicked, and he seemed to shrink back a little at the strange word, his gaze dropping submissively to the ground. Kellan turned his attention back to his meal. "Finish Gustin's story."
Adotre went on, but kept glancing at the wolfe, and Gustin could tell he was tense. The story trailed off.

Adotre had quit eating some time ago, but Kellan took his time picking over his meal, ensuring he'd gotten all the meat off of the bones, then cracking them open to eat the marrow. Gus watched them both carefully. It was apparent to him that Adotre wanted to talk - he kept glancing up anxiously, scanning Kellan's plate, then his face, waiting for an indication that he was finished. Kellan, for the most part, ignored the Layer's fidgeting, only looking up again when he was finished eating, and pushing his plate away.
"Wolfe." Kellan ignored this address. Adotre whined like a pup. "Old Thing, please can we talk? Please?"

Gus wondered what had caused this strange change of behavior in Adotre; usually, the Layer was all personality, all excited bravado. But now he was whining like a cub, abjectly begging Kellan for his attention. Gus pondered over the word Kellan had used. Nemel. It seemed familiar somehow.
Something was going on.

Kellan calmly stretched, then settled into a comfortable position.
"I believe you know, Adotre, what it is we must discuss."
Gus had never heard Kellan use the Layer's name before, and looked over at his mate with interest.
Adotre blanched.
"As you have surmised, my mate and I will be leaving soon."
Adotre nodded.
"We must discuss what you plan to do."

The Layer obviously hadn't been anticipating this turn to the conversation; confusion, then worry, then irritation his face.
"I plan to go with you."
Kellan shook his head.
"You can't go with me."
Adotre stopped short and stared at Kellan. Idly, he used one hand to scratch behind his own ear, a nervous tic that Gustin had noticed before.
"Why can't I go with you?" his voice sounded strained.
Kellan's expression was unreadable.
"Because, Adotre, Gustin is my mate. His place is with me. Yours is not."

Gus schooled his expression carefully not to show a reaction to this. He could sense the tension in the words, in the scene unfolding in front of him. There was a pause, and more scratching, and then Adotre's voice, sounding pitiful, and even more strained now.
"I could be ..."
"No."
the Layer swallowed, then jumped up to his feet and began pacing. Suddenly there was a rush of energy in the room; the tension turned into activity.
"But you said you wouldn't leave me."
Kellan looked up at Adotre.
"I swore that I would never abandon you, and I won't."
Adotre suddenly stopped pacing, and dropped down so that he was sitting with both hands on either side of him on a pile of furs.
"Well, then you can't go away without me."
Kellan shook his head.
"This is not your place, Adotre."
the Layer looked stricken; he squeezed his hands into fists, spastically, on the furs.
"But you can't go away from here. You can't leave me. You said you wouldn't. You promised me, Kellan!"
Adotre was becoming more and more agitated. Kellan, however, remained calm.
"No harm will come to you, Layer. I have planned for this possibility."

If Adotre was even a little bit relieved, it didn't show. He jumped up again and began pacing, anxiously, the ground in front of the cooking fire.
"Why can't I come with you?!"
Kellan put one hand on the table in front of him, flexing his fingers out slowly.
"Because my place is with my mate."

There was a brief silence, then Adotre shifted suddenly, disentangled himself from his clothes, and turned, hackles raised and lips curled back, to snarl at Gus. Kellan, in a flash of movement, got to his feet and stood between them. Adotre looked, panicked, between Gus and Kellan for a minute, then focused his attention on Kellan and shifted back. His expression was pathetic; he looked searchingly into Kellan's face.
"I could have been your mate, Kuskellanar."

Gus stared open-mouthed. Every time he thought he'd got a handle on things, someone pulled out
Kellan was looking at the Layer with a mixture of love and pity. "Adotre. That was never going to happen."

The trembling Adotre had started with became a full-on shake now, and Kellan stepped forward, reaching one hand out towards the smaller man. The Layer leapt back like a rocket. "No! Don't touch me! I don't want you if you're just going to leave! I don't want you if you don't want me! I don't want someone who doesn't love me."

There was something that sounded mysteriously like crying present in the Layer's voice. Kellan pricked his ears and stopped moving forward. His voice was firm, but gentle. "Adotre. Come here."

The Layer looked around himself, whined in distress, then stopped his protesting and began to come to the wolfe. When he was within reach, Kellan seized him by the back of the neck and Adotre stumbled forward, so that their faces were pressed close. The Layer did not meet Kellan's eyes. "What have I told you about love?"

Adotre glanced once at Gustin, as if unsure whether he could say this with an audience. His voice was quiet. "That mating isn't the only form of love." Kellan squeezed the back of his neck, and Adotre bit his lip. "That the way you love me is different; that I am in your care. That you will take care of me as you would your own cub." Kellan squeezed again, as if the action would bring answers from the Layer's recalcitrant throat. Adotre spoke hurriedly. "That you will never abandon me, or betray my trust." Kellan tightened his grip again, and Adotre looked anxiously again at Gustin before the last words crept out, whispered for wolfish ears. "That you aren't anything like my father."

Gus kept his silence throughout the exchange, busying himself making an extensive list of question to ask Kellan when they were alone. He also made some notes on the Wolfe-Layer interaction; first hand observations like this could provide one-of-a-kind information, and could make him a mint when he finally had to run again. In the brain space outside of this that was unoccupied with thought, he wondered about Adotre's father, and how Kellan had come to take on this role. He would have to ask later. Kellan released the back of the Layer's neck.

"Apologize for your words to me."
"I'm sorry."
"As a Layer."
Adotre hesistated.
"I'm sorry, Airu."
"Now Gustin."

Adotre lifted his head to look at Kellan, and for a moment, there was an angry, challenging look in his eyes, but Kellan met it evenly, and Adotre turned his head away. When he spoke, it was reluctant and stilted. "I apologize, Human. For my anger. And what I said. I don't want your mate. He's mean. You can keep him."

Gustin inclined his head in polite thanks. Kellan grunted gruffly and moved to his carving bench. "Sit."

Adotre knelt instead, on the floor in front of Kellan, and Gustin noticed that he was still shivering slightly, with fear or anger or some other emotion. Kellan stared hard at the Layer. "Arrangements must be made before I go, Nemel."

Adotre looked up at him, then dropped his gaze back to the floor. His heart began to pound in his chest. Kellan was looking gently at him; Adotre refused to look away from the ground. "I can no longer act Airu for you."
Adotre tried to breathe through his fear. He felt sick; vulnerable and frightened, like he was a cub all over again, crouching in his mother's bedroom.
"Old Thing, please - "
Kellan raised a hand to stop him.
"You understand, I am sure, what the most appropriate solution would be." Adotre shook more visibly now. He scratched one ear, then rubbed his eyes. Kellan waited patiently. Gustin stared. Finally, the Layer spoke in a whisper.
"Airu..."
"You are old enough, Adotre."
the Layer didn't move, or raise his head. There was a low keening, which trickled off, then silence, then Adotre's voice.
"Who, Airu?"
Kellan settled his hands on his knees.
"The wolfe Iorir."
Adotre glanced hopefully up at Kellan, then away, to the side, then back at the floor in front of him. Kellan exhaled quietly. Gustin sensed it was an expression of relief.
"You know him well. His exile ends soon. He will be kind to you. And he has inquired."
At that, Adotre looked up.
"What...what did he ask?"
There was a pause.
"Whether or not you were mature."
Gus listened with some interest, trying to piece together the puzzle. Adotre focused on something near a fire pit and began to scratch his ear furiously.
"But I am not lay-expressive, Airu."
Kellan's hands flexed just the tiniest bit, a gesture, Gus knew, of annoyance.
"That charade is over, Adotre. The time for games is past."
Adotre looked up at the wolfe, the challenge back in his eyes. Kellan growled. Adotre snapped back into submission, eyes on the floor. But the Layer's uneasiness broadcasted strongly through his posture.
"But...he'll make me lay for him, Airu."
Kellan looked at Gustin, suddenly, catching him off-guard, then back to Adotre.
"And would that be such a bad thing, Nemel?" Adotre looked helplessly around. Kellan leaned forward, speaking to him gently. "You cannot deny your nature forever, Zerrena."
Adotre made a weird motion with his body, as if trying to dodge the wolfe's verbal attack. Kellan patiently waited for him to finish and come back to sitting.
"You will be happy, Adotre. More so if you do not fight it, and learn to let yourself appreciate what you are." Adotre looked up at Kellan almost desperately, as if willing the wolfe to make the words come true. Kellan inclined his head towards Gustin. "Gus is happy, isn't he?"
Gus started at suddenly being included in the conversation. Kellan looked at him expectantly, and briefly, he thought about giving a more thorough and considered answer, but Adotre looked so pitifully up at him that the only thing he could think of was to agree.
"Yes. Very happy. It's weird, but...I am happy here, with Kellan."
Adotre bit his lip and looked back to the floor.
"Can I sleep with you tonight, Airu?"
Kellan frowned, then seemed to relent. He met Gus' eyes. Gus shrugged.
"Tomorrow, you will go home. Pack. Return by nightfall. In the morning, I will send word for Iorir."
Adotre nodded, but still looked worried.
"When you return, tomorrow night, you may sleep with us."
Adotre nodded, and, conversation apparently over, slunk off to the opposite side of the main room,
towards the baths, where a hot shower would await him. Kellan silently watched him go. Gus waited patiently for him to disappear behind the curtained bathroom doors; now he could finally ask Kellan about everything.
"What's going on? Is Adotre getting mated? Why does he get to sleep in our bed? Who is Iorir?! What happened with Adotre's dad?! What do Nemel and Airu mean?!?!
Kellan stared with open-mouthed surprise at his mate's unexpected outburst. Gustin poked him, and he recovered enough to respond.
"Yes, the Layer must be mated before we go. I am his Airu - his Alpha, and he cannot survive without one here in the Irion alone. He'll go mad."
Gus blinked.
"Layers go mad without an Alpha?"
Kellan nodded.
"But wofles don't."
Kellan made a weird face.
"We are not the same, Human."
"But you look pretty -"
"Do not allow yourself to be deceived by superficial similarities. Layers and Wolfes are very different."
Gus absorbed this information and moved on.
"So you're mating him to the wofle Iorir. Who's Iorir?!"
"He is our neighbor to the south and the west. His territory is amongst the largest in this part of the Irion. And his exile ends soon; he and Adotre may go back to his pack. He will be a good mate."
Gus gave Kellan a skeptical look.
"Why don't you let Adotre pick his own mate?"
Kellan shrugged as he turned his attention to the large block of wood, now half-hollow, on which he'd been carving for the past week.
"He can. But I am his Airu; it is expected of me that I do this for him."
Gus contemplated this for a moment, then, in a quieter voice, in case Adotre was in a position to overhear, he asked.
"What happened to Adotre's father?"
Kellan growled.
"Nothing. That's why the Layer left his clan. His father hurt Adotre and his mother, and when he took this to the elders, they did nothing for them. So he left. Tried to take his mother with him, but she wouldn't go. He was only 20 when he ran - a fine age for you or I, but still so vulnerable for his kind. Still a pup. When we came upon each other, he was starving, sick, and half-mad for lack of his Airu. He tried to make me mate him at first; he was so desperate for an Alpha. Together, we went to the caves north of here. I had just arrived from Arem'mir, but I learned quickly to hunt in this land. I fed him, kept him calm for a while, and as he healed, he told me what he knew of this place."
"When he was better, he was different and things changed between us. He began to repress his inclination; he doesn't want to lay-express. After his father's betrayal, he is frightened of being back at the mercy of a corrupt Airu."
Kellan shrugged.
"But he cannot make his need for an Airu disappear, only sleep a little while. So he lives, most of the time, alone in his cave to the north. When the need becomes too great, he comes and stays here. He despises this need, but our arrangement has allowed him to maintain his distance and autonomy, and shield himself from true submission in the way which he prefers."
Kellan took a piece of rough stone and began rubbing it along one side of the wood.
"Unfortunately, his delusion cannot persist. The termination of our arrangement was inevitable,
although I don't think he understood that. Regardless, he must learn to accept himself and his role in
life, and it appears that the time for change is now." Kellan looked up from his carving to meet
Gustin's eyes. "He must learn that there is no shame in being who the Moon has asked him to be."

Gus gathered that there was a message in Kellan's words, but he did his best to ignore it. As if to
reinforce the implication, Kellan flicked his eyes down to Gustin's stomach.
"How are you feeling, little one?"
Gus felt a little heat rush to his face.
"Fine. I'm fine." he tried to change the topic.

"So...the word Nemel. You said it to him, and it was like some kind of magic word - it shut him
down immediately. What does it mean?"
Kellan grunted.
"You will have to ask the Layer to explain that much to you, human. I am unclear on the intricacies
of their language."
Gus noted this and filed it away for later. Then he contemplated his next question. Kellan set aside
the stone and picked up the hollowing tool again.
"So here's a thought: why don't Wolfes mate Layers? Why humans instead? Layers aren't nearly so
hard to find."
Kellan grunted and glanced towards the bathing rooms.

"It can be difficult for a wolfe and layer to breed. Likelihood of pregnancy is low during an
encounter between freshly bonded pairs, and does not improve much with time. In the case of
pregnancy, likelihood of fetal survival can be limited. Mating with Layers would be an ineffective
strategy." Kellan paused. "And there are some...emotional difficulties."
Gus was silent with disbelief.
"And there aren't emotional difficulties that result from the forced mating of humans?"
Kellan furrowed his brow.
"This is different, human. The Layer does not mature, emotionally, in the way that humans and
wolfes do. He will never be much different than he is now; Layers are eternal youths. Many wolfes
find this disturbing, even irritating in our old age. Iorir does not seem to mind."
Gus frowned.
"So is that why you chose him for Adotre's mate?"

Kellan shook his head, and if Gus had been looking at his mate's face rather than his back, he would
have seen a hint of a smile play across those wolfish lips.
"No. I chose Iorir because he and Adotre are madly in love." A scoff. "Even if the Layer won't admit
it yet."
Suddenly, Kellan turned and looked, very seriously, at Gustin.
"You must help him during this time."
Gus' eyes widened.
"Me?! Why me? I'm not the one who wants him mated."
Kellan shrugged.
"You are the only other beta he knows. You have a wolfe mate. Your actions will be his model of
behavior."

Gus frowned. This seemed, already, like a bad idea. Kellan set down his tools and reached both
hands out to Gustin, calling his mate into his arms. Gus went quietly. Kellan nuzzled his tummy, then
pulled him down onto his lap and buried his nose in the side of his bondmate's neck. Gus shivered as
Kellan whispered against his skin.

"Please. Just a small help, that's all he needs. Someone to talk to, now and then. It will ease his
worry, make him feel more comfortable."
The vibrations of Kellan's mouth tickled him, made his skin feel sensitive. How long had it been since he and the wolfe had last mated? It felt like weeks. Gustin counted up in his head. OK, more like a few days. Eternity. He wondered if the wolfe was still frightened of hurting him. Gus tilted his head to allow Kellan better access to his neck.

"Can you help him, little one?" the wolfe persisted. Gus nodded.


With a sudden rush of boldness, he turned, took Kellan's face in both his hands, and kissed the wolfe full-on. Kuskellanar grinned, pulled back from the kiss, and began to nip and lick his way down Gustin's neck to his collarbone, across to the Mark, then back down until his shirt stopped the progress. Kellan was just getting ready to take it off when the sound of footsteps alerted him to the fact that Adotre was done with his bath.

"Hi!" the sulk was gone, Gustin noticed, as the Layer bounded over to them, naked but for a drying sheet loosely tied around his waist, and in human form. "My bath was great. What are you guys doing?"
Just past dawn the next morning, Kellan opened the door for Adotre, and the Layer skipped out, complying with his wolfe's command that he go home and bring things enough for his journey. Kuskellanar watched him disappear off over the horizon, then turned and went back inside to bed the hell out of his mate.

Gustin was sleeping soundly, but the wolfe was quite certain he could change that. He checked the fires first, then padded quietly over to the bed. Settling himself in between the furs, he bedded down between Gustin's cast-apart legs; his mate stirred, but did not wake. Kellan passed his hands over his beta's body, suddenly taken with the glow of it, and kissed his mate's stomach through the thin layer of indoor clothing, drawing one finger softly across the area.

"Hello." he whispered, relishing the quiet moment alone with his lit. "Hello, pup."

Kellan wasn't sure why he'd begun thinking of the lit as 'pup' - Wolfish litters rarely ran less than two. But that was just the way it seemed to go in his head. Perhaps he'd heard it in a dream. Perhaps the Moon had told him. He kissed Gus's belly again through his clothes, then lifted his shirt gently and kissed the exposed area, laving it with his tongue afterwards. Gus stirred and woke, but didn't move away. The only indication that he was awake was his hand moving to stroke Kellan's hair. The wolfe grunted and made his attention more insistent, pushing Gus' shirt farther up and beginning to untie the cord that held his pants. That done, he encouraged his mate to lift his hips and stripped his lower half bare.

Gus smiled happily to himself. Now this - this was the way to wake up. Kellan had his cock free now, and was stroking the human's already-hardening length, encouraging his arousal. Gus closed his eyes blissfully, enjoying everything - the sunlight, Kellan's touch on him, his own dampness beginning to seep down and slicken his thighs. Then there was sudden, ecstatic increase in wetness, and Gustin cried out in surprise and opened his eyes to see his wolfe's mouth wrapped securely around his cock. By the moon, it felt amazing.

Muddled half-thoughts flitted through his mind - how did Kellan get so good at this? Why hadn't they done this more often? Why hadn't he thought to ask about it? - before they all crashed together into some kind of orgasmic jumble as Kellan increased his suction and lifted his mate's legs onto his shoulders. Then that tongue - that beautiful, long, wolfish tongue - was wriggling its way inside Gustin's clenching wetness, and Gus was tangling his hand in Kellan's hair (the wolfe didn't seem to mind), and then Kellan shifted onto his right elbow, so that his left hand could continue to stroke Gustin's cock even as his tongue forced its way farther into his mate's slick passage. When the wolfe paused for a second, Gus looked down at him, ready to swear, and then Kellan grinned and dove tongue-first into him, jacking his cock, swirling his tongue around Gus' female entrance, then back between the cleft of his ass, then forward again and Gustin, a bit abruptly and rather spectacularly, came.

Afterwards, they lay sprawled together in the bed, watching the daylight filter in through the windows.

"You know, you're not so bad of a mate, for a half-wild exile wolfe."

Kellan exhaled happily, then grunted.

"I rise, Human. I must prepare to go and summon Iorir."

Gus released the wolfe so that he could sit up on the edge of their bed.

"Are you leaving now?"

Kellan shook his head.
"In the next morning."
"How long will you be gone?"
There was too much worry in Gus' voice, he realized, and the wolfe looked at him with a curious look that was amusement and pity.
"Just a short time. You will be safe."
Gus didn't say out loud that he wasn't worried about being safe - just lonely.
"When will Adotre get back?"
Kellan grunted as he looked around for his clothes.
"He should arrive this evening. Tomorrow, when I leave, the Layer will stay here with you."
Kellan looked at him. "He will keep you company."

Gustin wondered if Kellan knew what he'd been thinking. He drew a pattern on the bed, then asked, "So you're going to Iorir's home?"
the wolfe shook his head.
"His home is too far. I would be gone too long. I will summon him."
Gustin frowned, trying to imagine what kind of ersatz communication system Kellan could have cooked up in the Irion.
"How will you 'summon' him?"
Kellan glanced over his shoulder at his mate, then drew his shirt over his head.
"His territory is less than half a day's journey if I travel hard. I will go there and mark a place with my scent to indicate my presence, then leave a message carved for him at the spot."
Gus raised an eyebrow.
"Mark your scent?" Kellan grinned boyishly. "Oh, Moon, you're going to piss on a tree."
Kellan laughed.
"It is the simplest way to communicate in the Irion."
Gustin looked at his mate skeptically.
"I think you just like it."
Kellan inclined his head.
"That, too."

The wolfe concentrated for a moment, then spoke.
"After Adotre is settled - after he and Iorir's bonding - you and I will be able to move on. I will speak to Iorir and see what he has learned about the new pack forming, and how soon the caravan truly comes. It is best that we not discuss the den any further at this time. It will be safer if no one knows of our new location, at least until the caravan passes."

Gustin agreed, and nodded his accordence.
"And if the new pack sounds good?"
Kellan shrugged.
"If it is a safe enough place for you to whelp, then we go there."
There was quiet, and the wolfe watched Gus for a moment, then looked thoughtful, his eyes falling to the human's waist, to the bare skin showing where the furs pooled around the junction of his hips. Kellan's breath quickened, just a bit.
"This conversation must continue at a later time, Little One. Kuskellanar desires his mate."
Gus rolled his eyes and smiled at his wolfe.
"Demanding, petulant, and speaking in the third person. How can I resist?"
At Kellan's indignant pout, Gus laughed.
"C'mere, Big One, and kiss Kuskellanar's mate."

They made love thrice more before Adotre arrived, in his animal form, laden down with heavy cloth bundles, each knotted in some peculiar way to keep it tied to his body. Outside, he yipped to announce his arrival, and Kellan got up from where he'd been feasting on Gustin's neck to let him in.
Dinner that night was quiet, with happy silence from Gus, thoughtful silence from Kellan, and anxious silence from Adotre. Suddenly, the Layer put down his spoon and spoke.
"When will he get here?"
Kellan grunted as he chewed some meat.
"The day after tomorrow, most likely." As an afterthought, he added,
"You should prepare yourself."
Adotre ducked his head and nodded, then picked at his stew.
"Are we going to - "
"No. Not here. The mating will take place at his home. I expect we will travel there within half the moon."
Adotre seemed to think this over, then brightened.
"We? So you'll be there for it? You'll be my witnesses?"
Kellan nodded curtly and the Layer's expression brightened exponentially.
"I will make arrangements for your traditions to be followed, Layer."
Adotre blinked rapidly, then ducked his head again to focus on his stew.
"Thank you, Airu." he said, his voice soft. Kellan simply grunted, but to both Layer and Human, it was the wolfe's clear way of expressing happiness.

It took Gus about an hour to process exactly what the Layer had said.
"Wait - 'be there for it'?!"
Kellan had more or less hollowed out the big block now, and was working on smoothing out some of the rougher edges with a porous piece of rock. He looked up from the grinding to his mate.
"Yes. It is required, in Adotre's tradition."
"He wants us to watch??"
Kellan shrugged.
"It is their way."
"I thought you said he was like your son."
Kellan nodded slowly.
"Yes. I am his father, and you are my mate. That is why we must attend. As his family, and his Airu, it is my duty to ensure that in the heat of his first mating, Adotre is not harmed."
Gustin wrinkled his nose.
"I'm all for cultural experiences, but this seems a bit...invasive."
Kellan shrugged again.
"It is their way." was all he said, and went back to smoothing the wood.

Adotre slept in their bed that night, cuddled up between them at the opposite end, kicking them both occasionally in the thrall of his dream-sleep. Kellan escaped it sooner; he left early in the morning to communicate his message to Iorir, leaving Adotre and Gustin alone in the lair for the entirety of the day. Gustin was concerned about this; Adotre was thrilled.

Since his return on the evening prior, Adotre had become Gustin's loyal and inescapable companion, following the human everywhere short of into his bath. He hovered while Gustin made stew, stared at him whenever he spoke to Kellan, insisted on learning how to extract the lemon oils that Gustin used in his baths and on his skin, watched Gustin comb through and braid his hair, and even tried to help him dress a few times.

Two hours into their morning alone, Gus was already tired and getting irritable. He'd been distracted by the new, weird, and occasionally uncomfortable feelings coming from his stomach region, and furthermore felt strangely vulnerable here in the house without Kellan. They hadn't been apart this long in some time now.
Adotre sensed Gustin's mood shift, and tried to compensate by becoming as unobtrusive as possible. Unfortunately for the Layer, this was not very unobtrusive at all. Now they were sitting on opposite sides of a flat board on the floor, carving out bars of soap from a block Kellan had left. They had been working in quiet companionship until the Layer, his brow still furrowed and gaze focused intently on the soap, spoke.

"Human? I have to ask you a question. It's about mating."

Gus raised one eyebrow.

"Alright. Go ahead."

Adotre put down the bar of soap he'd just cut and scratched behind one ear.

"You lay for the wolfe."

Gustin wondered if this was going to go someplace weird.

"Yeah?"

Adotre didn't look up at him as he asked,

"Has it ever hurt you? When you lay for him?"

Gustin wasn't quite sure how to answer that question; if he lied, he ran the risk of making the Layer think there was something abnormal about himself at some point down the line. If he was truthful, he ran the risk of scaring him off something there was no need to be scared of. Time to take the middle road.

"It has, before. But only a little, and never because Kellan wanted it to."

This didn't seem to appease Adotre. He looked uneasy.

"They say that Layers are smaller than Wolfes."

Gus wondered why there was a need to preface this statement as a rumor. It was clear - Adotre, a full grown Layer, was, at best, 2/3 of Kellan's grown wolfe size.

"That's true. You're nowhere near Kellan's size."

Adotre blushed unexpectedly.

"I mean our sex. They say our parts are smaller than a Wolfe's."

Gustin surveyed this and found no reason why it shouldn't be true.

"That may be so."

Adotre was cutting into the soap block again, focused intently.

"And if I'm too small? He'll hurt me then, won't he?"

Gustin shook his head.

"Adotre, what about me? I'm smaller than you, and you wanted to mate me. Did you think you were going to hurt me?"

Adotre flushed a deep red.

"I didn't think I was really going to mate you."

Gus seemed to recall a time when the Layer had his tongue halfway down Gus' throat and he had seemed to think differently.

"Um..."

"I had the urge, sure, but I knew you were Kellan's. And besides, I think my nemel would not have let me." Adotre hung his head. "I don't think I could have done it."

Gus processed this, then shrugged.

"Well, still. You're not too small. I'm smaller than you are, and I was fine mating a wolfe. Remember?"

It was a pretty thin argument, seeing as Gustin knew nothing about Layer physiology or reproduction, but Adotre seemed to accept it. He nodded and his tail resumed its normal happy patter against the woodwork. Then, to no one in particular, he exhaled and said:

"I think he'll want me to lay egg for him."

Gustin tried to maintain a neutral expression. The whole egg-laying concept still surprised him.

"Oh? What makes you think that?"
Adotre shrugged. "He said he wanted me to lay egg for him."
"Oh." Gus mulled this over. "So you talked about this before? With Iorir?"
the Layer suddenly looked uneasy.
"Maybe. Just once. Not a lot or anything. I'm not really lay-expressive, anyway. Iorir just asked me
when we were out one time. Well, more than once, but he only really meant it one time."

Gustin paused.
"OK..."
Adotre seemed worried by Gustin's neutrality. His tail slowed its thumping.
"I mean, we don't talk often. I don't visit him without Kellan. Old Thing says I'm not supposed to."
Pause.
"OK."
"But I mean, I'm my own adult. I can make good decisions, too. I don't need any airu to tell me what
to do all the time. It's not just Old Thing who's clever about stuff."
Pause.
"OK."
"I know stuff, too. And it's not like anything happened."
Gustin raised his eyebrows. Now this was getting juicy.
"OK."
the Layer's tail suddenly sped up its thumping, and he fiddled with the tool in his hand, looking
anxious now.
"OK, something did happen. But that was only one time, and I didn't let him mate me all the way or
anything."
Gustin looked at Adotre across the soaps.
"OK."
"We just sort of flirted, and then he kissed me."

Gustin thought that sounded both boring and like a doubtful end to an evening with an amorous
wolfe.
"Oh. OK." Gus went back to carving soap. Maybe he could carve some pretty pictures in it. Or some
dirty ones. That would be a fun surprise for Kellan. He squinted and tried to envision what images he
could carve.
Adotre's tail had stopped thumping altogether now; the Layer was holding it anxiously in his hand.
"OK, fine, some other stuff happened. But you can't tell Old Thing, because he'll be mad."
"OK."
Adotre exhaled.
"He's already mad enough about the first time."
Gus made a noise of confusion.
"Oh. I forgot you didn't know. Once, I let him use his fingers on me. And he made me drop an egg."
Gustin had no idea what that last part meant, but Adotre practically whispered it, so he figured it
must be pretty dirty.
"Oh. Wow. OK. And that was when he told you he wanted you to lay him?"
"Lay for him. And no, that came later. This time was the time Kellan caught me with Iorir. He didn't
catch me again. But that time, he got really angry. And even angrier when he saw I'd dropped an
egg."
Gustin gave up waiting for an explanation and just asked.
"Dropped an egg?"
"Uh-huh, yup."

Adotre put down the things he was holding and lifted his shirt to expose his chest to Gustin. "Look,
here."
The Layer appeared to be pointing to the whitish patch of skin that Gus had always assumed was a
birthmark. It was vaguely star-shaped, and now, upon closer inspection, Gus could see that it was
slightly bumpy.
"Touch."
It was soft to the touch - a little lumpy underneath, but definitely squishier than the skin around it.
Gus looked up at Adotre.
"Eggs?"
The Layer nodded, and with his finger, traced a slightly-whitish path down the left side of his chest,
to his groin.
"I keep five at all times. Some Layers only keep three, or four - some keep seven. I keep five. And if
I am...excited enough, sometimes it can make one squeeze out and deposit into, um," he stumbled a
little, suddenly becoming embarrassed. "Into the...cavity...place. Where stuff happens."
Gustin blinked up at him. Adotre clarified.
"So it can get fertilized."
"Right, I got that, thanks."
Adotre nodded.
"I can push one down, if you want to see. It doesn't hurt, it just feels weird. And it makes the star get
smaller." the Layer made a face. "And it has to come out if it doesn't get bred. That part feels weird,
too. It kind of melts inside and then just drips out."

Gustin wondered if his appetite would come back in time for dinner, or possibly, ever.
"So anyway, when Old Thing saw my star, he knew I'd dropped an egg, and then he really went
fierce. And he told Iorir that I was an immature mate, and that Iorir was still an insubordinate wolfe,
that he still didn't respect the rules or the chain of authority anywhere he lived. He sent me home for
the rest of it, but what I saw was pretty bad. I think they fought."
Adotre looked away.
"I was kind of surprised that he chose Iorir now. I thought Old Thing still hated him. But I guess that
happened some time ago now. Maybe he thinks Iorir is better now."
Adotre shrugged and exhaled again.
"Anyway, if I lay, I'll probably have to do it twice. First eggs don't usually take." he picked up and
cleaned off the soap-cutting tool, then set it aside. "Well, thank you for helping me, Human. And for
listening to me talk. And for not getting mad when I tried to take your mate the other day. And for
letting me try to brush your hair this morning. And for telling me the mating will be fine even though
you don't know if it will." Gustin nodded politely. "I know you didn't want to spend all this time
with me, but you did, and...it's appreciated."

Gus felt a little tug at his heartstrings and realized how easy it would be for anyone to fall in love
with the Layer. He had a purity about him; an honesty that Gus had never seen matched in all his
days. The Layer's face suddenly brightened; he seemed to be thinking of exciting things.
"Hey! Maybe if the egg is a Layer, we can name it 'Gustin.'"
Gus's eyes widened.
"Please don't."
the Layer looked crushed.
"'Gus'?"
"Adotre - "
"I can't name him Adotre; we'll all get confused."
Gustin waited patiently.
"Adotre. Name him something else. I don't deserve a namesake; I've barely worked out how to live
for myself."
"Yourself and Little Cub."
Gus felt a brief moment of irritation for being interrupted again, but it was washed away in the
cascade of emotions that the thought of his own potentially extant cub evoked. Adotre scratched
behind his ear, then looked up from his carving to meet Gus's eyes.
"When you whelp," the Layer began, "will you tell me what it was like? So that I'll know?"
Gus swallowed.
"I'll do my best."

Adotre's attachment to Gus's hip didn't ease up when the wolfe returned home. If anything, it got even worse. Now, when he and Kellan were together, the Layer stared at them transfixed - as if watching a meteor shower or some sort of vulgar public show. Gus was getting horny and annoyed. At night, however, when the Layer had gone to bed, Kellan kissed him and assured him it would all be over in another day or so. Gustin seriously hoped that his wolfe was right.
The Wolfe at the Door

It was evening, and the three were sitting in quiet contemplation around the home, waiting for Iorir's arrival. Kellan was in a corner of the room, near a rarely-used fire pit, cleaning animal skins while Gus worked and Adotre paced. And paced. And paced. When he passed the human for the hundredth time, Gus looked up and shook his head, and met Kellan's eyes meaningfully. The wolfe looked over at the Layer and called his name.
"Adotre."
He froze turned immediately towards the wolfe's voice. Kellan looked at him, gently.
"You will be fine."
Adotre looked first at Kellan, then at Gustin. Then he went back to pacing.

It was nearing dusk when they heard the first signs of an approach. Adotre had been pacing the entryway now for almost an hour. Kellan and Gustin, working on wood carving and soap-sorting respectively, had politely ignored him the entire time. But suddenly, as they were waiting for the evening meal to warm over the cooking fire, Kellan jerked up his head as if scenting the wind, and then just as suddenly, put it back down. The attention shift was brief enough that Gustin almost missed the clue; Adotre was not so oblivious. He lifted his head and perked his ears forward, clearly straining to make out the sounds.
"Is it him?!"
Gus, who had been quietly carving dirty pictures into bars of soap by one of the smaller pit fires, exchanged looks with his wolfe, who answered.
"Perhaps. Calm yourself. There is some distance yet."
Adotre, expectedly, did not calm himself, but rather began to breathe in a rapid ascent towards hyperventilation, all the while making a weird keening sound under his breath. Gustin put down his pornographic soap and went over to him.
The human put one hand on the Layer's shoulder, then reached up to rub gently behind the ear that Adotre usually scratched in anxiety.
"Hey. Listen. You will be fine."
Adotre looked first at Kellan, then at Gustin. Then he went back to pacing.

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It took Iorir another twelve minutes to arrive. The knock at the door startled all of them - Adotre's anxiety had become both palpable and contagious. Kellan grunted and stood up to go to the door.

Adotre put his tail between his legs, then lifted it, then ran across the room, came back, turned in a circle, half-shifted before he caught himself and went back, and was only finally calmed by Gustin's two firm hands setting down on his shoulder.
"Sit."
Adotre sat. Gustin shoved a blank bar of soap into his hands.
"Carve."
Adotre stared dumbly at it. Gustin prodded him with a small tool.
"Carve. It will calm you. And make you look industrious. Here."
Adotre took the tool and began whittling away at the soap in no pattern in particular, his eyes still firmly on the door across the room which his Airu was preparing now to open.

It seemed to take forever; the door slid slowly on its bearings, and Kellan grunted a little with the effort of opening it.
But then the wind gushed in and the sunlight shielded his face, but there was he - the one, the mate, the exiled warrior, Adotre's own little wolffish prince. He was wearing travel clothes, gray and white to blend in, and Adotre processed idly that the addition of gray must mean that the snow was getting patchier. Spring would come very soon. Iorir and Kellan worked together to close the door, shut out the cold. Gustin looked over at the pits. Two fires would have to be relit. Adotre's tail, usually so upright, was tucked low against his thigh, no thumping of it evident.

Then the Wolfe at the door shook himself, smiled, and pushed back his hood. He was fair - more than fair, Gus corrected. Handsomer than Kellan, truth told, but not nearly so attractive - at least not to Gus. Where Kellan had brute strength in his shoulders that spoke of constant use, Iorir was slimmer, angular. Where Kellan had dark hair, Iorir had silver - a color Gus had never seen before on a Wolfe, and made a mental note to ask about as soon as it was comfortable. He had the same brown eyes as Kellan, the same smoothness of skin and sharpness of jaw, but where Kellan's expression was serious, firm - leaderly, Gustin liked to call it - Iorir's looked more like that of a prankster. No wonder he and Adotre got along.

Kellan walked farther into the room, Iorir trailing some distance behind.
"Mate. I present to you: Iorir. Wolfe of the Irion, trader and healer. He comes seeking Adotre's bond."
Iorir, studiously ignoring the Layer, bowed slightly and reached out one hand to Gustin. Gus took it, shook it, and inclined his head - as much of a bow as he could manage from the floor. Before he straightened back up, Iorir caught sight of one of Gus' particularly graphic soaps that had been cast aside for morphological inaccuracy, and raised an eyebrow. Then, glancing furtively at Adotre, he grinned.
Gus was glad Adotre was already too busy studiously ignoring Iorir himself, or he guessed the nervous Layer would have passed out from embarrassment.
"It is a pleasure to meet the one who has done so well as to grace the honorable Wolfe Kuskellanar with his bonding. I wish you much success in your bond and mating."

Iorir's eyes sparkled a bit as he said the last bit, and he smiled, looking directly into Gustin's face. Gus understood immediately what Kellan had not liked about this Wolfe. He was too forward, too brash, too damn smiley for an old Wolfe like Kellan's liking. But it seemed like that was just a difference of age and upbringing. As long as he was faithful, and as long as he would provide, Gus decided that Iorir might be the perfect type of Wolfe for Adotre.

By now the Wolfe had moved on, and was standing straight up, looking expectantly at Kullanar. Gus wondered what for, but then his Wolfe grunted and indicated the Layer with one hand.
"You may greet Adotre."
Adotre, who had been working very hard to appear to not be listening, pricked his ears up at that, put down his soap (rubbing sweaty palms on his shirt), and turned slowly to Iorir. The Wolfe was staring down at him, the smile gone from his face and an intensity in his gaze that Adotre had not been the subject of before.
"Hello, Adotre." he said.
Adotre coughed a little and picked a flake of soap off the floor.
"Hi."
There was a moment of silence which stretched just long enough to be uncomfortable, and so Gustin leapt in and offered that the stew had probably gotten plenty warm by now, so why didn't they all take places at the table?

After dinner (of which Gus had two helpings), they sat up together a while, talking about the caravan.
"Whence does it come?" Kellan asked gruffly, chewing distractedly on a leftover piece of bone. Iorir
watched him, sitting on a pile of furs. Adotre sat on the floor beside him, but neither of them looked on the other. Gus figured it must be some sort of strange decency thing. Iorir, taking his own bone out of his mouth, grunted. Gus wondered just how wolfes had managed to develop complex language with all the damn grunting they did to communicate. "The east. Up from south, of course. Crossing Big River before the first thaw."
This vague description appeared to mean something to Kellan, because he sat up a little straighter and chewed his bone a little harder. "Soon."
Iorir nodded. "Soon."
"You will trade?"
Iorir nodded again. Kellan grunted.

"We leave soon. I will seek reinstatement in my pack on Arem'mir. My mate will journey with me to do so. If I fail..." Kellan trailed off for a moment, as if uncomfortable considering his own possible defeat. "My mate must have a safe place to birth."
Iorir looked over at Gustin. "My home is always open for family and those of our kind."
Which kind? Gustin wondered but instead licked the bottom of his second bowl of soup. Maybe he should get a third.
Iorir's answer seemed to soothe something in Kellan, because he loosened his vice grip on the bone and gazed off thoughtfully.
"You will look carefully after my only Nemel."
Iorir looked a little taken aback. "He will be my mate. I love him. Of course I will take care with him."

Adotre, losing all pretense, grinned adoringly up at Iorir, thrilled with this profession. Kuskellan gave the Layer a firm stare, and Adotre's eyes went back to anyplace-but-at-Iorir. Gustin took some amusement from that.
Iorir was frowning now; Kuskellanar noticed. "You have worries, wolfe?" his voice was inquisitive, but not unthreatening. Iorir held up both hands. "Not on my mate. On your journey, alpha." Kellan blinked at him. Iorir furrowed his brow even further. "I think I know the wolfe you need to seek."
Kellan's blank expression flashed interest, then returned to blank. "Who?"
"The court interface. He brings the laws from Arem'mir. He hears cases. He may be your best way back to the Old World."
Kellan grunted. "He is loyal?"
Iorir nodded. "Loyal."
"Where can I find him?"
"At the Fourth Point."

This captured Gustin's interest. He had never heard the wolfe speak of such wolfish things before - his stories were always lessons of achievement, literature, culture. The Points of Contact were not in them. They were the places where the wolfes had first set down when they had arrived on Earth; the first places where they had appeared and howled and made their presence known. Those were the old days, Gustin knew, when to steal a mate was to have one. Terrible things had happened at the first seven points. And in the end, it had taken seven - almost eight - years of work before the old way of taking mates had been completely abolished. Not forgotten, mind, but abolished nonetheless.
Gus looked over at his wolf husband. Kellan was chewing the end of his bone.
"The point may be difficult to reach in this weather."
Iorir tilted his head.
"I agree. Wait."
Kuskellanar shook his head.
"No. We cannot wait."
Iorir's eyes narrowed, for just a fraction of a second, and he spared a nanomoment's glance to look at Gustin.
"Why not?" he asked Kuskellanar, slowly.

A man who did not know Kuskellanar would have seen a perfectly calm, rational wolf answer Iorir's question. A man who did know the wolf, such as Gustin was, knew immediately how startled he was. The two wolves faced off there, in the quiet, both of them waiting, for a long moment.
Adotre bit at his fingernails and secretly sat so his shoulder would be touching Iorir. The standoff continued. Kellan spoke.
"My mate is carrying with difficulty. I fear the stress of travel may be too much to bear within weeks. If he or the litter's life is in danger, then we must move."
Luckily, Iorir seemed to accept this.
They spoke a while longer on the possibility of trade, the preparations to make for birth and litter, and the good fortune the moon had granted them with to give them both such fetching mates.
Then, they had gotten ready to go to bed.

For bedtime, Adotre made his way over to his pile of cloth and began preparing to lay down. The wolf Iorir sat up in his makeshift bed closer to the fires.
"No."
Adotre looked up at him, confused. Iorir lifted one corner of the sewn-together fur blanket.
"Come. You are my mate. You sleep here."
Adotre froze, looking from Iorir to Kuskellanar, who was watching them from his own bed. Kellan inclined his head.
"He is your wolf, Adotre." Kellan said unconcernedly, "So perhaps you should at least pretend to obey him."
Adotre blinked rapidly at his Airu, then glanced down at himself. Kellan shook his head.
"He will not harm you, Layer. Nor will he ignore my authority. Iorir will behave."

The last statement was innocuous enough to be taken as an assurance, yet when Iorir met Kellan's eyes, the wolf's expression conveyed immediately that it was, in fact, a command. Iorir lowered his eyes in submission and Kellan, satisfied, rolled back over in his bed. Adotre hesitated one more minute, then acquiesced, weaving his way between the fire pits to his fiancé's bed. He settled in nervously, some distance from Iorir, who laughed, reached one arm out, and drew Adotre into him. There, the Layer laid still, held snugly in his new wolf's arms. After a minute, he lifted his head, checked that Kellan had well and truly gone to sleep, then craned his neck upwards and kissed Iorir. The wolf smiled and kissed him back, thoroughly, at which point Adotre pulled away, intimidated by his own forthrightness. Iorir held him the rest of the night, cuddling him into a peaceful sleep.
You and No One Else

The following morning, Kellan and Gustin began to pack. They would all travel back to Iorir's territory together, the wolfe had decided - go first to the other wolfe's lair to witness Adotre's mating, and then move on towards the Fourth Point. Valuable items could then be left with Adotre at Iorir's. Invaluable items would be carried along.

It took them the better part of the morning to prepare. Kellan and Iorir disappeared outside for some time; when they returned, each was dragging a long, wheelbarrow-looking cart device behind them. "We're loading these?" Gustin guessed. Kellan only grunted. Gustin worried at his lip. "How long will it take us to travel, laden down?"

Kellan exchanged looks with Iorir.
"Day and a half. Maybe two. We camp overnight in Iorir's territory."
Adotre, standing by the breakfast pot, tried not to look too interested in the proposition. He and Iorir, Gustin noticed, were still resolutely ignoring each other, except when they thought no one was looking.

The rest of the day was consumed with packing. Kellan owned far more than he'd let on, but most of it had been hidden away in storage shelters nearby. Gustin wondered how the wolfe had found them in the snow.

The wind was blowing outside, kicking up the loose powder of snow from the top of drifts and between trees and making the air seem grey with its thickness. Gustin didn't care. He stood silent and still in the gusting winter, closed his eyes, and just breathed. Kuskellanar kept close and watched him, worriedly. Gustin heard him pacing, back and forth by the door behind him.
"I'm not going to run away." he said, to no one in particular, except maybe Kellan and the wind.

He held out his hands beside him, stretched them out to watch snowflakes slide in little clumps past his fingertips. He felt cold, and scared, and that aching sense of claustrophobia he'd sensed creeping up on him before was gone, replaced with something different, something lighter. He smiled up at the dimly shining sun.

It ended up taking two days to reach Iorir's lair. Adotre recognized it first.
"You made it prettier!" he cried as they crested the hill that brought the Caves into view. Iorir looked sidelong at him.
"It was always pretty." Iorir stated with a sense of injured dignity.
Amusement flashed across Kellan's face before he hid it, replacing it with a stern expression.
"And when did you see Iorir's home last, Adotre?" Kellan asked, casually.
Adotre, sensing the trap, stumbled backwards over his words.
"I didn't - I don't - um, I for - I don't - not in a long time."

Kellan grunted a warning grunt and kept walking, his effort now reconsumed with dragging the largest of the wagons behind himself.

Presently, they arrived, and Iorir led them into the smaller mouth of one of the newer caves to the south of the main cave entrance and down a series of twisting hallways, barely illuminated by the torch he'd lit once they'd gone inside. They went for what felt like hours, Iorir leading, Adotre behind him and Gus in the middle, with Kellan and the largest wagon closing up the line. As they went deeper in, the air seemed to grow warmer, darker, and more stifling, and just when Gus was about to ask when the next rest stop would be, they rounded one corner and light appeared in the bend.
"You left a torch in?" Gustin whispered, "While you were gone?"
Iorir grunted. "Not me. There are others who share my home."
Gustin glanced back to get Kellan's reaction to this information, but the wolfe's face was cloaked in shadow. He was about to press Iorir further but was stopped because just then, they rounded another bend and stepped into a fully lit room. The room was large - taller than the pathways of the cave had been, and as long as the main room in Kellan's lair. There were piles of furs scattered around, and the remnants of what looked like a fire in the center.

Iorir set down the cart he'd been dragging, leaned back his head, and howled. A returning howl echoed from somewhere in the depths of the cavern, and Gus noticed that across the room, a darkened hallway appeared to lead deeper into the cave. Iorir lifted his cart and headed towards it. The group followed.

"And this will be your room for the duration of your stay, and afterwards, if need be." Iorir walked the perimeter of the room, lighting four subsequent torches as he went, and lighting the room to a nice glow. Returning, he set the torch he'd been carrying into the holster by the doorframe, and moved his cart farther inside. Gustin looked around. The room was cozy, for a cave. Sewn-together furs covered the floor like a rug, and more hung on the walls - insulation, he surmised, although the cave seemed to be pleasantly warm this far inside. There were piles of loose furs stacked on the floor by the far wall.

"I apologize for the lack of fire pit, but there's no ventilation to the outside directly from here, Alpha." Iorir said, bowing in deference to Kellan, who had deposited his cart and was looking around the room.

"Your home is well, and your hospitality is appreciated, wolfe." Kellan returned politely, and Iorir grinned a self-satisfied grin.

After that, the group of them stood uneasily in the room for a minute, except for Gus, who instead wondered what all the tension was about. Then Iorir looked at Kellan, hesitated, and turned slowly to begin to leave the room. Adotre looked nervously between Kellan and Iorir, scratching behind his ear and looking worried. Iorir met Kellan's eyes and Kellan, in his most alpha voice, solved the problem for all of them.

"Adotre. Come. Make your bed for the night. You will see Iorir at dinner."

Relief washed through the group, and Gus realized that the Layer must have been confused about which Alpha he was supposed to follow. Gus made a mental note about that and went about helping his mate make up their own bed.

Dinner was attended by Iorir, another wolfe who looked old and a bit haggard and wouldn't shift out of animal form to talk to them, a wolfe of about Iorir's age who had a thick scar blinding one eye and greeted Adotre enthusiastically, and - most interesting to Gustin - a tall, gangly, strangely built wolfe who looked to be in his teens. Upon sighting this last attendee, Kellan's demeanor changed drastically. He half-shifted, spiking his hackles into the air and baring sharp teeth, using one arm to push Gustin and Adotre behind himself and snarling.

Iorir stepped forward, hands raised in a calming plea.

"Alpha! Alpha Wolfe Kuskellanar! It's alright, Alpha. He was raised by us."

Kellan calmed himself and shook his shift out, still eyeing the youth, who was now crouching on the floor.

"My apologies, Wolfe. I should not have reacted in such a way to a guest in your house."

Iorir was turned away, soothing the youngling, urging him up from the floor. Gus noted that something about the kid seemed just a little off - his build, perhaps, was not common to wolves. Kellan stepped forward, extending his hand to the youngling, who was standing now but still half-hid behind Iorir.

"My apologies, Melloz."
The young wolfe's face colored, and Iorir intervened again, giving Kellan a stern look. "We do not use that name here, Alpha. Here, Adnan is one of us."
Kellan raised his chin.
"Ah. In that case, my apologies, Cousin. I am sure you are a welcome addition to the Wolfe Iorir's pack."
the young wolfe flicked his eyes back and forth nervously between Kellan and Iorir, then very bravely turned and fled the room. After a moment, the old, haggard wolfe got up and calmly limped after him.

Adotre exchanged glances with Gustin, both of them watching the scene with great interest. Gus mouthed a question to Adotre, who mouthed an answer back. Gustin furrowed his brow. "What's a Melloz?" he asked out loud, and all eyes flicked to him.
"We will discuss it later, Mate." Kellan answered shortly. "For now, we must eat, and prepare for Adotre's mating."
At the mention of the word, the one-eyed wolfe looked up from his plate and grinned broadly at Iorir. He shifted, then spoke:
"Why, Alpha," his animal form said, a teasing scold in his voice, "So that's why Adotre's come for another visit. But shame on you - bringing back a mate for you and no one else. And here we thought you were going out for provisions."
Iorir glanced at the company, then grinned back, clearly at ease with this gruff-looking wolfe. "I was." he replied. "I needed something to last me through the winter."
The one-eyed wolfe and Gustin laughed, Adotre looked positively scandalized, and Kellan growled that he hadn't found it all that amusing. Then, suddenly, the animal wolfe sitting on the floor cocked his head curiously at Gus, who was still laughing. After a moment, Iorir caught on, and then Kellan and Adotre did, too. By the time Gus had stopped laughing, everyone was staring at him.
"What? What'd I - oh." Shit. He'd forgotten that whole Synthesis thing was supposed to be a secret.
There was a moment of silence, then the apologies began.
"Alpha, I apologize! Truly, if I'd had any idea - "
"Yes, we never would have said such - "
Kellan raised one hand to stop Iorir and the one-eyed wolfe's apologies.
"Please," he said, looking uncomfortable and glancing at Gustin, "It's not necessary. We are not even sure yet - "
"It's the sign, though, isn't it, Alpha?" it was Adnan, the Melloz youth, who had returned by then and was sitting on a fur on the floor at Gustin's feet, looking awed up at the human. Gus really wished he'd remembered his own rule about always playing stupid.
"Well, yes, but - "
"And did you mark him?" the one-eyed wolfe inquired quietly. Kellan growled.
"That's none of your - "
"He did." Kellan snarled at the confessor, and Adotre shrunk back. "I'm sorry, Airu, but you did. And he is...what everyone thinks he is. At least, I think he is. He has the Listening and the Spell of the Moon. That's already enough for me. She would not send us one so close and then..." Adotre bit his lip, looking down at the ground. "I think they should know, is all, Airu. I'm sorry."
Kellan exhaled and closed his eyes.
"Fine. It is known then." he opened his eyes and fixed each of them with a steely glare. "And perhaps then you understand why our retreat from the Irion must be done in secret, and in such haste. There are those seeking him who would take him from me, and - "
"THEY CANNOT!" Adnan was on his feet immediately, tense as if for a fight. Gus's eyebrows shot up. Where was that sort of self-confidence when Kellan had growled at him thirty minutes ago?
Kellan sent a withering glare at Iorir, who put one hand on Adnan's arm to calm him down. The youth realized his brashness immediately, and apologetically dropped down to sit on the floor by
Iorir's feet.
"Yes, Adnan. We all know the foretelling. He must not be separated from his true mate. Don't worry, younling. All will be well."

Iorir turned back to Kuskellanar.
"Any assistance you need from us, we are prepared to give."
The other wolves and Adnan nodded. Kellan inclined his head in grateful thanks, and Gus began to wonder why it was that he had hardly been a part of this conversation. That was alpha wolves for you. He wondered if Adnan was an alpha in training - perhaps that was the reason for his brashness. Kellan cleared his throat and Gus gave the conversation his full attention again.

"In that case, my first request is that we discuss the mating of my only Nemel, the Layer Adotre. He is the ward of my Mate and myself, and we must be positive that when we depart the Irion, we leave him in good care."

the one-eyed wolfe grinned lasciviously up at Iorir.
"Oh, don't worry, Alpha Wolfe Kuskellanar. Our Alpha Iorir will keep him in verrrrry good care."

In the end, there were not many preparations that needed to be made. The ceremony was simple - just a few words exchanged in private with the moon, then together before the crowd (of five). Then, for the mating, there had only to be a room with a good fire, plenty of furs to make a soft bed, a nurse standing by (whom the one-eyed wolfe had agreed to go and seek out, but in the meantime, Kellan would act the part of), and the Layer's parents to witness.

After the ceremony, Adotre had gone to bathe and speak to the moon before the mating was to take place, and so Gustin had a few minutes alone with his wolfe before they went in to the mating room.
"So are you sure we have to - "
"Yes."
Gustin frowned, all his arguments exhausted.
"Alright, fine. What do we have to do?"
Kellan shrugged unconcernedly from where he was unpacking things on the floor. He set aside some salted meat to be given away to Iorir and his men.
"Nothing. Sit. Watch." he cast a warning glare up at Gustin. "Be silent."
Gustin puffed his chest out.
"I can be - ohh."
the wolfe was at his side instantly.
"Mate! Are you injured??"
Gustin put one hand to his belly and shook his head.
"No...no, just...felt, um, weird for a second. There was - "
Kellan looked pale.
"The cub??"
Gus nodded, then shook his head.
"Yes, but no, it's like - not...bad, just...weird...for a minute." he took a deep breath. "I'm fine. Fine."
Kellan looked unconvinced. Gustin exhaled.
"Check me, touch me, sniff me, do whatever. I'm fine, I just get a little startled by things sometimes."
Kellan leaned forward and tentatively inhaled, sniffing around his mate's neck until he was satisfied.
"Alright. But I demand to be informed of any further startlings."
Gustin rolled his eyes and agreed.
"Ok. Fine. Let's just go and get the Layer mated."

Adotre was sitting naked in the middle of the heated room, in the center of a pile of furs, scratching nervously at his ear. He looked up with relief at Gus and Kellan, then ducked his head back down shyly.
"Hello, Airu."
Kellan went over to the Layer, seized his chin in one hand, and brought his head forward for a
nuzzle.
"Hello, Nemel." he answered, gently.

Adotre gave his alpha an adoring, if nervous, smile, and Gus's heart melted a little at the warmth of
Kellan's gesture towards the Layer. Then Kellan drew back, and seized Gustin's hand to lead him
over to a darkened corner, almost out of sight in the dimly lit room. They waited a few moments in
silence - well, partial silence, but every time Gustin tried to say something, Kellan shushed him.

After a few moments, the furs comprising the door of the room's entrance pushed aside, and Iorir
entered. Adotre sucked in a breath and shifted immediately, sitting on the furs in his animal form.
Iorir, nude, looked once into the shadows, searching for Kellan and Gustin, then, upon finding them,
turned his full attention to the Layer. Kellan squeezed Gus's hand and kissed his mouth, gently - a
plea for silence. It had begun.

In the firelight, Adotre's fur looked a little ruffled and Gustin briefly felt a parent's irritation that
Adotre hadn't even bothered to groom himself properly before setting out into this. Then Iorir
stepped forward, circled the bed once to survey his mate, and stopped. When he did, his shape
blocked some of the light - from Adotre's view, he would be backlit, Gus thought, his face
inscrutable. He wondered if this choice was intentional.

"Present to me, nemel."

Iorir's voice was gentle, but loud enough to be heard in their corner of the room. Gus wriggled down
into Kellan, trying to find a comfortable position. With all this talking, it seemed like things might
take a while.

The Layer swallowed and turned his back to his mate, shifting back into his human form as he did
so. He knelt there, in the middle of the furs, now a silhouette to Gus and Kellan, and then dropped
onto his elbows, ass in the air.

Iorir came forward and knelt on the bed behind him. Suddenly, Iorir pulled his left hand back and
struck Adotre's left buttock. The Layer yelped, and Gus tensed; Kellan's arms tightened around him
to hold him still.

"Did I tell you to present male? Present female to me, Layer."

Iorir's voice was still gentle, but chastising now. Adotre licked his lips and pushed up to his knees;
his hand spasmed as if he were going to scratch his ear, but had managed to refrain himself. Instead,
his awkwardly turned over so that he was on his back, shifted into his animal form, and shifted back
again. Gustin craned his neck to see if there was any noticeable change, but couldn't see anything.
Iorir's satisfied grunt, however, assured him that all must be well. Iorir separated Adotre's legs with
his knee, then moved forward to settle between them. Adotre whined, and Iorir leaned forward and
kissed him, then nuzzled his shoulder.

"Hush. It's me, it's only me. I won't hurt you."
Iorir sat back on his haunches, trailing his fingers lightly down Adotre's chest and stomach. The
Layer whined again, and Iorir's voice got a little sterner.

"No more whining, Nemel."
Adotre shut up, but his breathing, already fast, quickened even more when Iorir swirled his fingers
around Adotre's five eggs.

"Airu, please - "
Adotre sounded sincerely distressed, and now Kellan was tensing, and Gus frowned and squeezed
his wolf's hand to calm him. Kellan relaxed, but not much.

Then Adotre made a strangled cry and Iorir tried to soothe him.
"Hush, little one, I'm not going to hurt you. It's just me, remember? Iorir. This can be - " he glanced up once into the darkness, then shrugged and turned back to his mate. " - this can be just like those times before, OK? Just let me - "

"No..." Adotre's voice sounded teary now. "Don't make me drop it, please don't."
Iorir's voice suddenly got very firm.
"Adotre. Calm yourself. I am your Airu. Do you disobey me?"

Adotre shook his head vigorously and took a few calming breaths. Iorir waited until some of the tension was drained from his little mate's body, then placed his hands on his stomach and began to use his thumbs to slowly squeeze the egg sac. After a few seconds of rubbing, one appeared to loosen and make its way to the thin tube. Adotre's breath quickened, and Iorir leaned over to kiss him, then sat back and continued using his thumbs to urge the little lump farther down Adotre's torso. The Layer began to wiggle, and even across the room, Gus could hear his panting. Iorir maintained his slow and gentle hand, and eased the egg down, occasionally stopping to kiss or lick Adotre as it went. By the time the egg had reached the bottom of the Layer's stomach, Adotre was sweating and gasping and wriggling up for more of Iorir's touch.

Gustin remembered the time Adotre had offered to express an egg for Gustin to see, and was very grateful he'd turned down that experience. Their relationship was weird enough as it was.

Then the egg must have popped its way into Adotre's fertilizing cavity, because the Layer very loudly, and with much ceremony, came. Iorir grinned in the half light and stroked his own cock, letting his mate bask in the afterglow for a few seconds before he urged him to turn over.

Adotre lazily complied, and Iorir urged him onto his hands and knees. Then Adotre glanced over his shoulder, and Gustin could make out that Iorir was finding Adotre's entrance with his fingers, preparing to enter him. Kellan squeezed his own mate's hand very very tight.

There was silence, then a startled yelp as Iorir made the first thrust. Then mumbled words which sounded like cooing and Gustin could see the trembling in the Layer's arms where Iorir stroked them. Then the wolfe pushed in a little more, and Adotre hung his head and keened for a moment - when he lifted it again, beads of sweat were evident on his skin. He reached back for Iorir and was rewarded with more kisses from his mate, more nuzzling and even a lick to the neck. Adotre was biting his lip. Then the wolfe came further forward, and Adotre couldn't keep himself from crying out. The yelp made Kellan's tension snap, and before Gus could stop him, he was lurching forward, towards Adotre.

Iorir caught the movement from the corner of his eye and acted completely on instinct, growling at Kellan and throwing himself forward to sheathe in Adotre completely. The Layer howled out his discomfort, and Kellan recoiled at the result of his own action. Gus had by now managed to get a good grip on his mate again, and pulled the wolfe back into the shadows, whispering some calming words of his own while Iorir kissed the side of Adotre's face to apologize.

The discomfort only lasted a minute though, and Iorir waited it out patiently, although Gus knew from experience that the urge to mate must be burning strongly within him. That at least was one point in his favor - the wolfe had some self-control. Then Adotre pushed himself backwards and Iorir took that as an impetus to move; soon, they fell into an easy, if hurried rhythm, and the sounds and scent of sex grew strong in the room.

Kellan moved closer to his mate, the earlier trauma forgotten, and his own mating instincts rising up in his mind. Gus was not unaffected himself, and as Iorir's pleasure grew more expressive, Gus
found himself drawn in. He reached over to touch his wolfe, but Kellan caught his hand and put it back in his own lap.
"Later." he growled out, and Gus crossed his arms over his chest and pouted.
Soon, the Layer was gasping his pleasure out, and with a low keen, he came. His wolfe came shortly after, growling his orgasm and grinding his hips against Adotre's. Iorir turned them over onto their backs and they both lay panting for a long while, Adotre curled against his wolfe's side, Iorir's arms around him.

After a moment, Kellan rose, pulling Gus by the hand, leading him towards the exit of the room. He stopped them in front of the bed. Iorir lay with his new mate in his arms, stroking Adotre's hair and looking entirely blissful. When Kellan cleared his throat, Adotre looked up.
"How did - was I - "
"Well done, Layer. Well done, Wolfe. Blessings on your bond. And may your first joining be fruitful."

They turned to go, but Adotre struggled free of his wolfe's grasp and reached out to Gustin.
"Gustin, wait!"
Kellan and Gus stopped and Gus turned, a curious look on his face. Adotre almost never called him by his name. The Layer beckoned him over, and, when he was in close range, snatched one of Gustin's hands and placed it to Adotre's own belly. Gus frowned, but the Layer held it there on him, eyes closed in concentration, squeezing Gus's hand for almost a full minute before releasing him. He beamed up at Gustin.
"There. Now I know I am sure the egg will take, so long as it has your blessing, too."

Gustin was beginning to worry about all this superstition, but it was Adotre's night, and he didn't want to ruin the spell. So instead, he grinned, reached forward and touched Adotre's belly once more, then kissed him on the cheek and took his own wolfe's hand and left.
Kellan mated him twice in the night, after they'd returned to their rooms following Adotre's mating. Something in the air must have gotten into his blood, Gus decided, because he hadn't seen - felt, rather - his wolfe in such a furor since they'd been bonded. After they had both sated themselves to the point of exhaustion, they laid entwined in their dark room on the bed of furs, watching the shadows from the fire in the main space flicker past their door. Gus couldn't fall asleep for a long time, and it took him half the night to figure out why; in this small space, this dark room at the interior of a cave, there was no way for him to see the moon.

Breakfast was a grand affair. Grand enough that Gus began to get suspicious.

Gus and Kellan sat at the table beside Adotre and Iorir, with Adnan, the Mellozsian, and One Eye (as Kellan had begun to call him) closing the space between them. Earlier on, the old, ragged wolfe had shuffled in, still in animal form, taken a chunk of the meat which sat on a thick metal plate on the table, and shuffled out again. No one appeared to miss his company. One Eye and Iorir happily discussed possible paths that Gus and Kellan could take out of the Irion as they spread some kind of jam over thick, hot slices of meat. Kellan, chewing idly on his meal, grunted occasionally to express accord or dissent. Gus tried to listen in, but, as usual, the Layer demanded his attention. After a few vain attempts to hang on to both conversations, Gustin gave up and turned his full attention over to Adotre.

"...and I could barely walk this morning, he mounted me so many times."
Gus cast a scandalized look over to Kellan and the others, but no one seemed to have heard but him. Then Kellan's ear pricked ever so slightly, and the corners of his mouth tilted just a bit. Gus squinted at him scoldingly. Pervert.
"...but it was a good kind of damp, you know?"
Adotre, Gus noticed, seemed to have no concept of appropriate breakfast conversation. He tried to divert the topic to the traders.

"Kellan and I are going to leave a few things to you when we go, to be traded. Can you do that for us?"
Adotre nodded and took a meager sip of whatever the spiced drink the wolves made was.
"Yes! I love to trade. Old Thing used to whine about it, but I'm sooo good." Adotre grinned mischievously at Gus. "I have a particular gift for getting my way," he purred, and Gus couldn't stop the burst of happy laughter which bubbled up from within him.
The old Adotre was back - no more of the whining, ear-scratching, constantly nervous Layer that had been with them over the past week. This was the Adotre who had invited himself into Kellan's home, who had eaten all their soup, who had purred and whined his way into their bed. Gus looked over at the Layer. He was preening himself, mild annoyance on his face as he smoothed some of the hair back out of his eyes.
"I DO have a gift." he said, indignantly. "I have wiles."
The exaggerated way the Layer said "wiles" made Gus laugh even more. Kellan pricked his ear again, and Iorir even glanced over, both obviously trying to discern what had been so amusing. Adotre was by now thoroughly irritated, and so as he took another sip of the spiced water, Gus tried to smother his giddiness and focus on the conversation at hand.

"Anyway," the Layer continued as soon as his conversation partner had quieted down, "It's not as if I need very many things - Iorir has an awful lot."
Gus glanced around the main room and had to agree - all around the cave were items of utility and
decoration that made the cluttered simplicity of Kellan's sod house seem downright ascetic by comparison.
"Maybe some things for the egg, though." Adotre frowned, his voice a whisper - he spoke more to himself than to Gus.

Gus was suddenly reminded, through the fluttering of his stomach every time he had the thought, of his own cub he carried. He swallowed down another bite of the salty porridge he was eating. How far along was he? Gus wondered, then immediately wondered when he had stopped wondering if he was even pregnant at all. Somewhere along the line, the rumor had simply become fact.

Kellan was at his neck all of a sudden, nuzzling back the hair where it grew long and curled away from his nape.
"You will need things for the cub, as well."
Suddenly, the entire room was looking at him. Gus rolled his eyes. Sometimes, it was easy to forget about the whole Prophecy of the Synthesis thing. Other times, not so much. Kellan grazed his teeth along the sensitive skin of Gus' neck, and the human arched into the sensation without thinking. Kellan pulled back in surprise, chuckled, then whispered in his mate's ear.
"Human. I only meant to comfort you. Have I excited you instead?"
Gus' face flushed, as he became acutely aware of four pairs of ears all cocked towards him. Gus pushed Kellan away.
"Alright. That's enough. I'm fine. The chosen one is fine. You can all go back to your meals."

Iorir and Adotre exchanged amused glances before the latter returned to his porridge; the former, to his conversation. Gus returned to reflecting on how Adotre's bonding seemed to be having a very noticeable effect on the behavior of his own wolfe.

After all the meat had been chewed off the bones, and the jam had been slathered across every possible surface and eaten, and the porridge had run low, the group sat back in their chairs, savoring the silence. Suddenly, Gustin spoke.
"So is this big a breakfast tradition after a bonding, or...?"
Kellan glanced once at Iorir.
"The meal was for us, mate. To send us on our way."
Gus raised his eyebrows.
"Oh. Oh, well, thanks, but you guys really didn't have to do that. I mean, we can't eat you out of house and home while we're here! Every day with a meal like that, we'll run you dry in no time."
There was a silence. Kellan grunted.
"We won't eat like this every day, mate. Today is our last. We leave at first light."

The dawn was near breaking when they crossed the first water. From the crest of the hill, it had looked glassy in the rising light - a thin vein of ice running red and pink and orange through the hillside, its surface gone gray and stony with the ice of a long Irion winter. Gus flexed his fingers to try to get some of the warmth back in them and kept walking. Kellan had assured him they wouldn't walk the entire time, but here, crossing this great expanse of nothing but white, trackless hills as far as the eye could see, Gus didn't feel so sure.

"Human."
Gus sighed, and his breath crystallized in a little cloud in front of his face.
"I'm here. I'm fine. I'll let you know if I begin to die."

Kellan grunted. This was a pattern they had developed since they'd left the cave; every fifteen minutes or so, Kellan would call him: Human. Then Gus would answer, and Kellan would grunt and keep walking. At first, it had seemed pointless, but eventually, Gus began to realize that it was Kellan's own way of assuring himself that his mate was not harmed.
Gus didn't think he could begin to get harmed, anyway - before he'd left, the Layer and Adnan had weighted him down with so many pendants and good-luck amulets he thought he'd stagger under their weight. This one to ward off sickness, this one to ward off the cold. This one to keep hidden, this one to find a road. Gus wondered why no one had thought yet to invent an amulet to keep toes warm in the unending snow.

They came to the water, crossed it carefully, Kellan always at the head, leading with Gustin behind. The sun was beginning to brighten overhead.

"How much farther?"
Kellan grunted.
"Are you tired, mate?" his voice was gentle, but there was a twinge of worry and irritation in it that Gustin read clearly.
"No." he said, quietly. "I'm fine."
Kellan grunted again.

They marked twelve miles the first day. At night, Kellan found a good shallow cave and built them a fire. They slept inside, out of the wind, pressed up against the walls with their only possessions. Kellan dozed off and on, but Gus couldn't sleep; with the hillside silent as it was, he felt too frightened, too exposed.

The second day, they marked eight miles. Gus' poor sleeping habits slowed them, and the wind blew harder than it had before.

The third day, they marked fifteen, and Gus and Kellan's spirits lifted.

The fourth day, they marked seven before Gus took ill and Kellan began to worry.

The fifth day, Gus was better. A warm front began to move in. They marked nine miles.

On the sixth day, they made four miles and Kellan caught the scent of a wolfe whom he had met before. They tracked the loner three miles to the south and met him there by a small pond in the midst of a thaw. The three made camp together in a thicket, then sat and ate salted meat around a fire. Kellan traded with the wolfe: furs for fresh milk, and the wolfe told them he had seen the caravan. Eighty miles to the south and still moving. Kellan had frowned then, and Gustin knew he must be calculating in his head how much time they had left.

At night, while the stranger slept, Gus shook his wolfe awake.
"Kellan." no response. "KELLAN." he whispered louder. Still nothing from the wolfe. Frustrated, Gustin exhaled, then kicked his mate under the covers. Kellan growled.
"Good, you're awake. What are we going to do about the caravan?" Kellan didn't answer. Gus frowned. "I mean, what are we going to tell them?"
Kellan half-rolled over and stared at the top of their makeshift tent.
"We tell them nothing. We keep out of their way. We make it to the Fourth Point." then the wolfe rolled back over and proceeded stubbornly into slumber. Gustin exhaled and laid away, rubbing his belly where something seemed to be pinching him, and counting the wolf howls he heard in the night.

Two days and twenty-six miles later, they found a cabin. Gus had barely dragged himself and his pack inside before Kellan had a fire lit and snow warming into water. Gus dropped down to the floor in a corner, back pressed up against the wall of the cabin. He put his head down between his knees
and breathed slowly.
"Can we - can we stay here a while?"
Kellan looked over at him, then turned back to poking the fire with great concentration.
"Yes."
Gus looked up, uncertain.
"Yes?"
Kellan nodded.
"You need rest."
They spent three days at the cabin. On the fourth morning, Kellan woke him at dawn and they began to move.

Seven miles south, they met a lone trader who had a transport vehicle. The wolfe offered Kellan and Gus passage to the Mount in exchange for ten furs and a pot; this dropped to six when he scented Gus.
"Your mate is with, Wolfe."
Kellan grunted. The trader frowned.
"They're not meant to travel the Irion in this time."
Kellan scowled at him.
"It could not be avoided, Wolfe."

The trader shrugged, but kept a watchful eye on Gustin as he clambered into the cold, uncovered back of the transport. It was only four hours to the Mount, the ghost city capital of the Irion, but the trader hesitated as they drew closer to town.
"Sure you want to stop here, Wolfe?"
Kellan cast his eyes out across the gray, dismal skeletons of structure. This had been a contested region; the Louts and Wolfish Empire had fought here. Humans had long since fled.

After the first battles, the snows grew thicker and now no one but the exiles and loners of the Irion wandered it. The roads leading into town were cracked, torn up by abuse in some areas and reclaimed by the earth in others. The sea had encroached as well - parts of the city were flooded in the icy water. Kellan blinked out across the cityscape. In the back of the transport, behind him, Gustin was buried far underneath several piles of stitched furs. He sneezed. The trader looked back over his shoulder.
"This is no place for a mate, Wolfe."

Kellan's brow creased, and he blinked twice more. Gustin peeked out at him from an opening in the blankets, and wondered what could be going through the wolfe's mind. Kellan grunted.
"Fine. Move us along."
The trader hesitated.
"I'm going as far as the Dack line."
"South or north?"
"South."
"We'll go."
The trader hesitated again.
"You'll help me load cargo at the stopping points."
Kellan grunted.
"I'll help. My mate rests."
The trader seemed satisfied with this, and he kicked the noisy engine of the transport into gear, gunning it through the empty, crumbling streets of what was once a fantastic city.

"What are you doing in here?"
Adotre jumped at Iorir's voice, not having realized that his mate was already aware of his presence.
Iorir turned to face him, and Adotre flushed guiltily and shrugged.
"I just wanted to - "
"I didn't tell you to leave the room."

Adotre's stomach sank at the chastisement. His Airu had been displeased; he wanted to cry. Briefly, a shimmer of irritation swept through him - Iorir was clearly abusing his emotional state, getting all commanding just because he knew Adotre would be docile just after he'd dropped an egg. But as quickly as that thought appeared, it was subsumed in an overwhelming desire to please his Airu.

"I'm sorry, Airu, I - "
Iorir cut him off with a gesture.
"No excuses. Back to the bedroom."
Adotre sighed heavily and dragged his feet as he turned to head back down the hallway. A few steps away, he paused.
"I have to go out, Airu."
Iorir rolled his eyes.
"You just went."
Adotre put on his sweetest smile.
"I think it's the egg, Airu. Maybe that means it's taking."

Iorir blinked at him, obviously hesitant to allow the Layer to dodge his rules, but equally unwilling to put him or the egg to any harm.
"You still haven't regenerated?"
the Layer shook his head. Since he'd dropped the egg, the space in his star had remained unoccupied - his body hadn't replaced it yet, which meant that either it had begun to take, or the change in chemistry hadn't yet been noticed by his system. They would have to wait and see.

To be safe, Iorir had put him on near-constant bed rest, as the healer had told them that the first two weeks of a Layer pregnancy were the most dangerous ones. Adotre, however, had lost interest in being stuck in the bedroom after the second day, and had been systematically testing for loopholes in Iorir's rules. Unfortunately, despite his superficially playful attitude, Iorir was a powerful alpha, and ran an even tighter ship than Kuskellanar had. The rest of the pack was expected to appear at all meals, as well as reporting for duty twice a day - in the morning for general housework and the evening to hunt. Adotre was expected to help with every chore that Iorir had deemed non-strenuous, but was confined to bedrest (or at least the bedroom) for the bulk of his waking hours.

For a week, Adotre had whined and protested at the rules, but Iorir had been firm, and had furthermore decreed that anyone caught aiding or abetting Adotre in shirking his assigned work or rest was subject to expulsion from the pack. None had been willing to take the risk.

And so one evening, Adotre, after helping to wash the day's dishes and stitch furs, had claimed fatigue and gone early to bed. Late in the night, pumped up on boredom, resentment, and a little of the thrill of defiance, had tiptoed his way out of bed in the middle of the night, itching for just a single run through the melting snow. Iorir had caught up to him not even 500 yards from the cave entrance and dragged him back single-handed; by the time Adotre could sit down again, he'd gained a new respect for his mate's authority. The Layer had been on his best behavior ever since.

However, today, he'd seen a new opportunity for a little excitement. The cave was in a tizzy with the supposed arrival of a new wolfe in the area, as well as the fact that Iorir had received a piece of information from one of the fringe loners, telling him that the caravan was crossing into the northern land, and was probably less than a fortnight away. Iorir had agreed that the pack should send a scout on a reconnaissance mission to look into both possibilities, and Adotre had quietly decided in his head that he would be the perfect candidate.
They reached the tree line before sunset on the 13th day. At least, Gustin figured it was sunset. It seemed really more like dim-light-stuck-behind-some-cloudsset. There was a gray in the air that threatened to overwhelm them, consume them in its numbness. Gustin shivered inside his clothes. Kellan looked back over his shoulder at him.
"Are you ill, human?"
Gus shook his head.
Truth be told, he'd felt better - the cold was seeping through his clothes, making his fingers ache and his toes tingle. The strenuous travel had made him tired, the work (mild though his assignments were) had made him hungry, and the weird feelings in his stomach had made him uneasy. The driver looked back over a shoulder at Gustin and exchanged a look with Kuskellanar.
"We stop here. Your mate rests for the night."

That night, they squatted in an abandoned house (carefully inspected by Kellan and the driver first) and lit two small fires. They ate meat from the day before, and some sweet syrup they had managed to find. For bedtime, Kellan made them up a pallet by the larger fire and settled in as close to Gus as he could, his arm falling heavily over his mate's waist. For some reason, that settled Gustin's belly.

Adotre, on all fours, circled his mate's legs with glee, bumping against him twice, his tail thrashing. Iorir, for his part, was nonplussed. He just kept striding calmly towards the entrance of the cave, Adotre ferreting about, darting ahead of him until called back.

It was the first day since the bonding that his mate was being let outside to play. The old healer had finally showed up (2 weeks late for the bonding), had given the little Layer a thorough check-up and declared him fit for duty. Pregnant, yes, but fit for duty. Adotre had been ecstatic.

And so, after much discussion and debate, Iorir and the healer had agreed on a schedule of rest, diet, and exercise that seemed to satisfy everyone's fears.
Iorir hadn't wanted to risk the egg.
The healer hadn't wanted Adotre's body to grow weak from bedrest.
Adotre just hadn't wanted to stay inside.

"Iooooor! Comeon!" in animal form, Adotre's voice sounded different; his Layer accent made the words slippery, hard to read sometimes. Only names came through entirely clear.

They had reached the entrance of the cave; cold wind was billowing in and freezing Iorir's skin. He set the torch into a resting place on the side of the wall and shifted, following his mate out of the cave and into the bright, blinking sunlight.
As soon as they crossed the threshold, Adotre broke into a run.

Iorir's eyes widened and he bolted off after his mate. It took him more than a quarter mile to catch up to his mate - Layers were slighter, faster creatures and Adotre's pace was difficult to match. But Iorir was a fast wolfe, and he made up to his mate quickly, his long strides closing the distance irrespective of the Layer's headstart. When he got close enough, he snarled.
"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!!"
Adotre had glanced over at his mate's furious face and stopped running immediately, tucking his tail between his legs and settling down into a little ball of sad fluff in the snow.
"I'm sorry."
Iorir was panting, his teeth bared. He leaned closer.
"Healer. Said. NO. RUNNING."
Adotre flattened his ears against his head.
"I'm sorry mate! I forgot."
Iorir growled once more and circled around to stand on the other side of his mate.
"Enough. We're going back home."
Adotre's eyes got big and horrified.
"We're going?!"
"If you can't control your urges, then you can't go outside."
Adotre whined, heartily, a pitiful little squeal. Iorir stared at him.
"I'm sorry!"
Iorir shook his head.
"No. Inside." Adotre looked out over the snow. Iorir growled and stepped closer. "I said inside."
Sighing, Adotre went complacently back towards the caves. He hadn't made it as far as the mounds he'd wanted to get to, but at least now he knew how fast he could get there. That was going to make his escape a lot easier.

On the 15th day, they reached Sabael. The roads were rougher now, and Gus had thrown up twice on the journey there. Kuskellanar had grunted and worried. But now they had a day of rest; they had reached a trading post in the woods, and the scattered population of the Dack Forest would arrive, spottily, to take things from the driver.
Kellan sat in the back with Gus and worried for how cold his fingers felt, and how hot his face. "I'm fine." Gus had told him, more than once. They made camp in the traders' cabin that stood empty at the trading post. Kellan built a fire and made soup for his human.

On the 16th day, when they stopped to load Cargo by the Glen, Kuskellanar felt something change in the wind. Or thought he did - with so much weighing so heavily on his mind, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish what did and did not bear notice. The wolfe stood still for a long moment, silent beneath the woody branches, his nose to the air, the sun filtering down to his coat. He listened, waited to hear back the echoes between the trees. He scented the wind.
For a moment, he believed he was back on Arem'mir.
In the distance, the sound of Gus calling his name captured his attention and he released his hold on the otherworld.
But there had been something.

"What are you doing?"
Adotre jumped and spun around, looking guilty.
"What!? Nothing!"
the Layer tucked the pallet of food he'd been packing carefully behind his back so that Iorir wouldn't see it. The wolfe raised his nose delicately and sniffed.
"Are you caching food?"
Adotre decided that this part of the truth could be conceded.
"Yes."
Iorir blinked at him.
"Why?"
Adotre shrugged and tried to look innocent.
"Dunno, but I bet it's the egg, making me hungry all the time."
Iorir scoffed.
"Hunger doesn't make one hide food." Iorir leaned over, and his voice took on a harsher tone.
"Hoarding is not allowed in a pack, Adotre."
The Layer dropped his head and sighed.
"OK. OK. Sorry."

Iorir regarded him for another moment, then looked away.
"Adotre."
"Yes?"
Iorir glanced at him, then away again.
"I apologize for my hastiness on the day I took you outside. I know you had not run in some time, and your instincts must have been strong."
Adotre sighed. Iorir hadn't let him back out since then. He'd been confined once more to the cave. The wolfe cleared his throat.
"Perhaps we could try again."
Adotre's face lit up in delight. Iorir frowned.
"However, it would ease my mind greatly if you would take care to walk. And also not to wander too far from the den. Until we are more certain of new arrivals in the area, I take no chances with my mate."
Adotre nodded an eager affirmative.
"I swear I'll be good, Airu!"
Iorir raised an eyebrow.
"That remains to be seen. However, at the very least, I think you can go out."
Adotre grinned and stepped close enough to be standing flush up against his mate. He squeezed Iorir close.
"Thank you." he murmured. Then, after a pause: "Can I go right now?"

It was him.
Kellan knew it was.
He didn't know how, or where, or when he'd arrived, but he'd know that scent anywhere.
Ideste was in the forest.
It was almost too easy. The snowy ground pounded beneath Adotre’s feet as he ran, full-speed, across the mounds and towards the tree line, carefully and thoroughly ignoring the voices howling his name behind him. He glanced back once, over his shoulder to see the rest of the pack giving chase, 5 black dots scattered on the snow of the horizon. They were close enough that if he stopped now, they would catch him. But they were also far enough that if he kept going, he could make it to the tree line and away.

Running was hard, burdened down as Adotre was with flat pallets of food and sacks to carry hunting spoils in. But he was still a Layer, and he was still faster than them. The tree line approached, bobbing up and down in front of his eyes, veering closer. The sound of Iorir howling, desperately, carried out across the tundra, and Adotre felt a brief pang of guilt and Semel-ness strike him. He ignored it, aimed himself between two large pine trunks, and disappeared into the greenwood.

Gustin was hot. Too hot. His skin was flushed, now, all the time, and Kuskellanar suspected fever. It was a frightening word, out here in the heart of the Dack Forest, where light could barely penetrate and no healers came to help.
Kellan had spent the morning bringing water back from the river; cold, icy water that Gustin whined at because it froze his overheated skin.

Their trader transport watched them impassively; disappearing for minutes at a time when a new customer arrived, then reappearing at the door of their round tent shortly afterwards, his arms crossed over his chest, watching over Gustin. Kellan passed by him as he went outside for more water. When they brushed shoulders, the trader turned and followed him. Outside, he stopped Kellan with one hand on his arm.
"Mate's sick."
Kellan nodded.
"I know."
"Needs a healer."
Kellan's throat thickened and he wanted to growl.
"I know, wolfe."

The trader looked into Kellan's eyes for a moment, and in another wolfe, this would have been a challenge, but to Kellan, it seemed something less. It seemed as if the trader were searching him; for what, Kellan did not know, and he briefly wondered if the wolfe knew what Gustin was. But how could he know? The trader looked away, breaking their contact.
"IceWind comes soon." The trader said this, then spit the remnants of some concoction he'd been chewing off to the side. A chill came over Kellan, but he ignored it. "Healer'll be with them." Kellan nodded, as if a great thing had been settled, but in reality, they were far from it. Gustin could not be taken to the healer without being revealed; were he to be revealed, Kellan's possession of him might be challenged. Suddenly, on the wind, he caught again the scent of the one who had betrayed him. Ideste.

It didn't take much travel for Adotre to find the scent of the forest's new arrival; he picked it up about six miles into the trees. Slowing his pace to a trot, Adotre wound his way between the low branches and tall rocks that characterized this part of the forest.

The wolfe had been through this way recently; the path, though crudely hidden, was clearly trodden
down and there were bent branches here and there. Adotre slipped between them easily. The wolf must be large, then; larger than Iorir. Adotre felt another pang of guilt when he thought of his mate, who by now must be sick with worry. He wondered how far Iorir would have followed him; into the greenwood, certainly, but beyond that? Layers learned early how to disappear into the forest; Adotre would not be found again until he was ready to be found.

The Layer shifted to rearrange some of his pallets, tying ropes tighter that had loosened during his journey. When settled, he shifted back, stretched his back, and put his nose to the ground. If he paid attention, he might find the new wolf before nightfall.
Kellan woke just after daybreak, still in The Glen. The smell of meat, roasting over a pit hit him first, then the smell of the forest, the sound of the river, voices, laughter, splitting wood, the smell of fire, the chill of the room, the lingering taste of the sweet syrup he’d eaten the night before, and last, the nauseating smell of Gustin’s fever, and the fur blanket and clothes he’d been sick on the night before.

Kellan stroked his mate's hair back from his face; in the daylight, Gus always seemed so pale to him; so small and fragile. The wolfe lifted one of the human's hands; they were cold.

Footsteps at the doorway; Kellan looked up.
The trader nodded a greeting.
"Buyers are here, wolfe. Need to work."

Kellan nodded, his belly tightening with cold apprehension at leaving his mate alone. But there was work to be done.
The trader watched Kellan a long moment; his eyes slid over to Gus briefly, then returned to the wolfe.
"You should cover his neck."

Kellan's hackles rose immediately, and his stomach swirled into a pit of fear and his blood rushed madly through his veins.
"What do you mean, wolfe?" he demanded, although he already knew the answer.
Kellan had messed up. He had been foolish, or careless, or simply inattentive when he'd bathed his mate and the trader had seen. Another wolfe had seen and knew that Gustin bore the mark of the moon on his neck.
The trader met Kellan's eyes and held the gaze. Kellan felt disquieted suddenly; the sharpness in the other's expression made him feel unstrung.
"Your human has the mark of the moon."

Kellan felt the corner of his mouth curl up in the beginning of a snarl. They could not be discovered now, not at this time, not like this, not with Gustin so weak and still sick and in need. They had to make it to a healer. They had to make it out of the Irion. Even as the panic swirled within him, Kellan remained stoic. He glared across the small room at the trader, a man to whom he owed his life, but whose he would take at a moment's notice if he planned to threaten Gus. Nobody threatened Kellan's mate. Nobody threatened the Synthesis.

The trader and Kellan stood there for long, heavy moments, locked in each other's gazes like harts, tangling their antlers in the springtime. Suddenly, the trader broke, looking troubled. He looked away, kicked at the ground.
"Cover his neck." he repeated. "You don't want the others to see."

Kellan grunted and settled his still-sleeping mate down into the makeshift bed, tucking him as far under the furs as he could. Then he rose, dressed, and made his way outside to greet the buyers.
At the door to their tent, he froze.
They were surrounded by the caravan.

Adotre yawned and stretched his front paws out first. The night had been a long one, but not uncomfortable; he had bedded down in a hollow stump that might have been some small animal's den a long time ago. It had been warm and not too damp and sheltered from the wind. After Adotre had found it, he'd eaten one of his food stores and gone to bed.

Now it was morning, and time to resume the trail. Tracking this wolfe was taking so much longer
than he'd expected; the path had broken suddenly, just when the Layer had thought he was getting close, and then reappeared in a totally different part of the forest.

Adotre sighed and shook himself, his pretty brown fur catching the sunlight and warming. *Today would be better. Today would be a lucky day. Today, he could* - the sound of crunching footsteps stopped him in his thoughts.

Adotre froze and his ears shot up, trying to determine the direction of the sound. Then, before he could move or think, or do much of anything at all, a weight landed on him like a missile and a cold blade was pressed against his throat.

"You move, Layer," the voice grunted out, clearly Wolfish, "You die."

Kellan ducked back inside, his mind racing. He had to hide. Gus had to hide. When had the caravan come? In the night, that's when. But how had they gone unnoticed? Surely, someone must have detected the scent of a human? Kellan ran a hand over his hair, shaking his braid loose. He exhaled and rebraided it, trying to think of a plan.

How had they gone undetected so far? From the bed, Gustin woke with a little moan, and Kellan realized. Of course. The sickness. The scent was so thick around them that the wolfes might not have been able to distinguish Kellan and Gustin's scents from the smell of disease. Kellan got an idea. He looked over at the pile of blankets and clothes that Gus had been sick over the night before. It was a disgusting idea, but it was an idea none the less.

Iorir picked his way delicately through the dense undergrowth. Damn his Layer mate, for dragging him into the thickest part of the forest. And damn his pack, for not watching the Layer more closely. And damn his own foolish trust, for thinking he could just turn Adotre loose and all would be well. And damn Adotre, for not considering for even one second that if Iorir lost him, he would lose his egg, his family, and everything he cared so deeply about.

Well. Iorir wasn't about to let that happen. He was going to find his Layer, and when he did, he was going to tan his hide so well that Adotre wouldn't even think of going anywhere without him for a long time.
Outside, the wind was crisp, but warmer than it had been the day before. That was good, Kellan decided; it could help the scent seem stronger. Kellan ducked his head down, letting the hood of his outer shirt shelter his face. As he walked, seeking out the trader, he kept an eye on the wolfes around him.

Most stepped out of his way as he walked; a few just watched him cautiously. None approached. Kellan wanted to yip in congratulations - the plan was working! Wolfes had a natural avoidance of disease; the inclination grew even stronger in the Irion and the Snowy North, where sickness could so quickly mean death. The caravan and the wolfes of IceWind appeared to be repulsed enough to leave him alone. For good measure, Kellan threw in a few hacking coughs. Most of the wolfes stepped farther back.

As he approached the trader, even he, who had seen Kellan hale and hearty just an hour before, was sure to put space between them.
"Wolfe."
Kellan grunted.
"7 bars of iron, 4 of copper, 3 crates of medical supplies, 12 blankets. To the vehicle on the far right."
Kellan grunted, then coughed theatrically and lumbered off to move cargo.

At the vehicle, three wolfes were waiting; two larger ones, most likely warriors, and a smaller. Kellan, arms full with a crate, lifted his head slightly to greet them. As he did, his hood fell back, and he was surprised beyond measure to find himself looking directly into the eyes of an equally-surprised Ideste. They gaped at each other for a minute, before one of the larger wolfes stepped forward, with a roll of his eyes, and grasped Ideste by the arm.

"Hammani." the Wolfe growled, and Ideste looked up, then down, abashedly. The larger Wolfe shook Ideste's arm slightly, jostling him, and old instincts rose up in Kellan; he wanted to snarl. The Wolfe narrowed his eyes at Ideste, who was no longer looking at Kellan.
"Perhaps you should go and find your mate. Spend your with staring at him instead."
The Wolfe turned Ideste's elbow, forcing him with it, and pushed him off in the direction of the other vehicles. Ideste went, but not without a backwards glance at Kellan. The two larger wolfes stared at him.
"And you," the one who had pushed Ideste said, "Load the cargo."

The Wolfe looked skeptically at Adotre.
"So you're a spy."
Adotre grinned boyishly.
"I like to think of myself more as a liaison."
The Wolfe raised one eyebrow and nodded.
"Uh-huh."
Adotre shrugged and went back to tearing meat from the bone that the Wolfe had given him as a breakfast.
"I just came to meet you! And see what's what. It is the Irion, after all. We like to know who's friend and who's foe."
The Wolfe looked as if he were trying really hard to believe this.
"And the alpha - your mate - he sent you to do this."
Adotre paused, then went back to eating.
"Yup."
"He sent his pregnant mate on a potentially dangerous reconnaissance mission in the Irion winter."
Adotre paused.
"Not sent, per se."
"You came without permission."

Adotre bit another piece of meat off of the bone. He didn't like the direction this was taking.
"I came under my own authority! I am the Alpha's mate, after all. That makes me First Alpha Mate. I can make plans, too."
The wolfe stared at Adotre for a second, then shook his head and got up.
"OK. Finish your meal, then get your things. I'm taking you back home."
Adotre looked stricken.
"No!"
"Yes."
Adotre jumped to his feet.
"No, I mean, no! I don't know anything about you yet," he looked, pleadingly, into the wolfe's eyes.
"I came for information, and I can't go back empty-handed," he finished, sadly, doing his best impression of a young and wide-eyed Layer. The wolfe narrowed his eyes, and for one moment, Adotre thought he was unmoved.

Then the wolfe sighed, and sat back down.
"Fine. What do you want to know?"
Adotre dropped down to sit across the fire from him, his tail thumping happily.
"Everything! Where do you come from? Why were you exiled? How long have you been in the Irion? Are you mated? Do you have a pack?"
The wolfe sighed and poked at the fire.
"No mate. No pack. Exiled 3 years, for subversion of the Alpha. I come from a pack in the far, far South. Being here in the cold is punishment enough; the isolation is just garnish to that dish of revenge."

The wolfe was just settling in to feel sorry for himself about the whole thing, but the Layer looked across the fire at him with such an expression of kind sympathy that it lifted his spirits a little. Adotre set the now-bare bone to the side, and wagged his tail a little.
"Well. You don't have to be isolated any more. You can come home with me, and then you can be in our pack!"
The wolfe looked skeptical again.
"Are you sure your Alpha would allow - "
"Trust me," Adotre cut him off, "I'm sure."

Gus woke up in a sauna. Or at least, it felt like a sauna. He was hotter than he'd ever been ever in his life, except one time when he had fallen asleep in a sweat tent. He staggered to his feet and the room spun a little bit. Settle down, room! he commanded. It didn't obey, but that was fine; he could make his way to the door of the tent without it. Where was Kellan? He'd probably left because it was so hot. And left his mate here.

Gus panted as he opened the door; the cool air blew inside and took away some of the stifling heat. Gus looked around the empty campsite. He could hear noise and voices in the distance, but none nearby. Where was he? Nothing looked familiar. They must have moved in the night? Where was Kellan? Everything seemed so confusing; the only thing Gus could coherently understand was the oppressive heat inside and the stabbing hunger in his belly.

His belly fluttered. Settle down, stomach! he commanded it. It, too, disregarded him. Gus looked
around for a fire pit, hoping to see some stew. None was in immediate view. Where was that other wolfe, too? The trader? Had the trader and Kellan both left him? Gus panted, sucking in breaths of cold air that made his chest hurt. His head began to spin a little again. Water, Gus suddenly realized. He needed water.

Kellan's mind was moving so fast he could barely keep up. So he had scented Ideste in the forest! The wolfe was here, on Erim now - why? And had they called him Hammani? And said he was mated. Mated to who? Was Gustin OK in the tent? When would they leave the Glen - the scent might wear off soon, and then - "Hey!" Kellan jumped with surprise as he rounded a corner and walked straight into Ideste. Ideste froze, and his eyes widened. "Kuskellanar!"

In that moment, in the brief second where Ideste was speaking his name, Kellan was transported. For a moment, he was no longer the exile, the killer, the wolfe marked for death; he was himself again, young and in love and so happy on Arem'mir that he thought his heart would burst in every second; he was running in the field behind his father's house, with Ideste at his heels, yipping and chasing and calling his name: Kuskellanar.

Then the moment was over; Kellan was back on Erim with the cold air and the weak food and a mate who was sick with fever. And in front of him, the cause. Gus's accusations replayed themselves in his head. It was Ideste, Gus had said. He used you. He planned it. He manipulated you. "Ideste."

Ideste's eyes widened and he shook his head, stepping forward to be closer to Kellan. "Kellan, I thought it was you!" tears welled up in the smaller wolfe's eyes. "I never thought I would see you again, even when I came to Erim, I thought you were - " he cut himself off abruptly, looking away. "Dead." Kellan finished for him. "You thought I was dead." Ideste nodded, the tears spilling over onto his cheeks now. "I'm sorry, Kellan. I'm so sorry."

Kellan kept his expression guarded; Ideste was making a scene in a place were one was not allowed. They were not meant to know each other here. Whoever Hammani was, he was a stranger to Kellan. And Kellan was meant to be a stranger as well. "Sorry for what?" Ideste looked up, briefly, at the sky, and Kellan recognized his lover's old tell. Coldness filled his heart. Ideste had always looked at the sky when he was lying. "For everything...that happened. For the mistake."

"The mistake."

Ideste nodded. "I never meant for you - I never wanted you to get sent away. I never thought it would get blamed - "

This was the trigger that ignited the welling explosion in Kellan. He lunged forward suddenly, pushing both their bodies between two of the vehicles, blocked by stacked cargo, temporarily out of sight of the mostly-empty campground. The others had gone off hunting or washing or fucking in the woods. No one would see them there. In the cranny, he pushed his face into Ideste's, his words snarled with rage.

"You never thought it would be blamed on me?! My knife, Ideste! My knife!"

Ideste trembled, and his eyes widened. His tail, skinny as it had ever been, twitched between his legs. It occurred to Kellan suddenly, and with a small amount of pride, that Ideste had never seen him like this. Ideste had known him only as a shapely, refined young warrior; he had not yet seen what years of isolation, of grueling work, of vicious battles for survival could create. Kellan had been a foolish,
naive young cub when he had left; the Kellan who now held his ex-lover here, his hands inches from Ideste's throat, was an experienced and worldly wolfe.

Ideste shook his head again.
"I'm sorry!"
"You're not! If you were sorry, you'd have spoken. You'd have confessed to the elders! Told them the truth!!" Kellan exhaled, his breath close and hot on Ideste's face; still, the smaller wolfe did not dare to move. Kellan snarled again. "They took my whole life away from me, Ideste! They took my family and my friends and my training and my happiness and my planet! You thought I'd died in the Irion - did you worry at all that you'd be responsible for another death?! That you would have killed another wolfe?"

Ideste looked away again.
"I told you, I never meant for you to get sent away. I never wanted things to go that way. I never - " he bit his lip, tears pouring now. Sudden understanding washed into Kellan. His breath caught in his throat.
"You planned it."
Ideste jerked his eyes up to Kellan's face.
"No. No, I didn't - "
Kellan shook his head.
"Yes. You planned it. You wanted to kill him. Sparo. But why?" Kellan stepped back, tilted his head as if to get a good look at a new face. "Because he attacked you?"

Ideste looked away, and Kellan saw the change as if a mask had been pulled away from Ideste’s face. His jaw set, and his lip curled, and his eyes went hard.
"Because he took another mate."
Kellan staggered a moment under the weight of his shock.
"But you were mine."
Ideste stared at him.
"We were lovers, Kellan, and barely that. We only laid together - twice? Maybe three times. We were not mates. You never asked to mate me. Sparo did."
Kellan shook his head in confusion.
"You refused him."
Ideste growled.
"No, my father refused him. The silly old man was too busy being in love with you - you and your medals, your awards, your commendations. You, who he was so sure would be the next Alpha."
Ideste looked away. "He never spared a second thought for my choice - my Sparo."
Kellan stared at the wolfe who had become a stranger before his very eyes.
"By the time he asked my father, Sparo and I had already been mated in secret. We only wanted his approval to finalize the bond."

Kellan's feeling at that moment surpassed shock; it went beyond the normal realms of confusion and into some sort of surreality, where nothing was as it seemed.
"Ideste...you killed your mate?"
Ideste growled, then snapped at Kellan.
"My mate betrayed me!"
Kellan took a step back so that he was pressed against the rear of the opposite vehicle, regarding Ideste much as one might regard a rabid wolfe.
"Ideste..."
Suddenly, the smaller wolfe collapsed; he broke down into a pitiful sob that wrenched Kellan's heart, even as it disturbed him.
"I'm sorry." he panted between wails, "I'm so sorry."
Kellan went to him, crouched on the ground beside him, and held him, tightly in his arms.
"What's done is done now, Ideste. None of us can go back."

Gus heard it before he saw it - water. Moving water. He wove his way across the scrub towards the sound, his mouth feeling dry and hot. His skin was cool now, almost cold, but his insides still felt so hot. He needed water. Where was Kellan? Where was the trader? Water, now. Kellan later. Where was he?

Gus reached the shore with no problem; there was no one else in sight, even. Kellan left him? Think about it after water. Water first. In front of him, the river gurgled and popped as it rushed along over the rocks and crags of its bed. No cup. How would he drink? Gus giggled. Drink like a wolf. He knelt down by the riverbed, then bent over to put his face to the water. The first touch of ice to skin shocked him, confused him further, and then unexpectedly, the riverbed buckled, skewing itself inwards and upwards and Gustin felt the shock of cold water soaking his clothes, his hair, his body and his face went into the water, too far, but the riverbed was still waving and he couldn't get a hold to pull himself out and then suddenly he was under, under, and going forward, spinning, hitting his leg against a rock, then his head, then everything was quiet and black.

Ideste had pulled himself together enough for Kellan to release his hold and let the wolf stand up. "Ideste - "
"Hammani," Ideste corrected, still wiping his face on his sleeve. "They call me Hammani."
Kellan inclined his head.
"Hammani. Why did you come here, to Erim? Why did you leave Arem'mir?"
Ideste looked away again, but not up at the sky this time.
"My father died. I had nothing left."
Kellan closed his eyes. Alpha Saanduk had been so close to him; a mentor. He had been the one who had convinced the council to exile Kellan instead of kill him. To him, Kellan owed his life. And now the elder wolf was gone.
"I'm sorry. How long ago was it?"
Ideste shrugged.
"Two years. I came the springtime after."
"Who rules the Pack now, if Saanduk is gone?"
Ideste looked up, meeting Kellan's eyes with a strange expression.
"First Alpha Wolfe Girah-Korrimor. Your father."

Kellan felt a surge of hope rise up in his heart. He turned to face Ideste, putting both hands on the smaller wolf's shoulders.
"Ideste. Hammani. " Ideste looked at him, but it was a miserable non-presence of a look. Kellan shook him. "Hammani! Listen to me."

Ideste looked a little more alert now, but still as if he were haunted by the occupations of the past. Kellan growled in impatience and took Ideste's chin in his hand, forcing the wolf to look at him.
"If you ever want to set right what is wrong now, you will tell the council what you did." Ideste tried to look away, but Kellan held his chin firm. "You will make a full confession and you will clear my name."
Ideste hesitated.
"IDESTE!" Kellan shouted, them remembered himself and lowered his voice. "If you do this, your crimes against me will be forgiven. I will forgive you. If you do this...it can be over."
Ideste looked up at him, met his eyes. Kellan sighed, preparing to confess things he was not ready to confess.
"I have a mate now. A human. He is pregnant. I cannot -" he looked away, feeling weak suddenly.
"I cannot raise my cub in the Irion. Ideste, if you ever loved me, if you ever loved our Pack, and if
you ever loved the moon, then please, please. Let me take my family home.”

Ideste stared at him, then slowly, he nodded. "I'll send a confession if you promise to forgive me." Kellan stepped forward and pulled Ideste into a hug. "I have already forgiven you." Ideste squeezed his arms tight around Kellan's back - the back that had grown so broad with age and work - and took in his scent, just one last time.

An unfamiliar voice broke them apart, and they both jumped back, looking guilty. "Wolfe!"

It was the trader, who had appeared at the head of their crevice and was looking at Kellan with a suspicious expression. Then he shook it off, and Kellan took note of the lines of tension and worry in his face. "You must come quick. Both come quick." he turned to Kellan. "Your mate was in the river."

Kellan bolted immediately, shifting to make it faster, not caring if he got there naked. The other two followed suit, and soon they were three wolfes, pounding madly in their animal forms, racing to get to the river.

There was a group gathered around a lump on the ground - three wolfes of the caravan, that Kellan could see, all looking worried and pale and somewhat angry. Kellan skidded to a stop between them, almost crashing into Gus as he did. "HEALER!" he shouted, frantic at the sight of his mate's blue skin, his still body. "BRING YOUR HEALER!!"

The wolfes looked uneasily between them, and Ideste appeared, out of breath, at Kellan's shoulder. "I'm here," he said, trying to calm Kellan and move him to the side. "I'm here." Kellan whipped around to look at him, and something passed between them unbidden. "Save him," Kellan begged, quietly. "Save him, and that will pay your debt." Ideste was already working, already turning Gustin onto his back and checking for a heartbeat, for his breath, for anything, but he paused and glanced over at Kellan. "No confession?"

Kellan swallowed. "No confession. Just save my mate."
Afterwards

The new Wolfe, Roure, lagged behind as Adotre trotted happily along through the snow. "Alpha's going to be really nice, you'll see. And the others! There's a Mellozsian, too, but he's nice. One Eye is my favorite. He cooks the best. And there's a healer, and she's a human, but she doesn't live with us because she likes to be kept a secret. She lives up in the mountains somewhere. I've only seen her once. And there's an old Wolfe, and he's mean, but you'll like him too. And there's - " Mid-sentence, Adotre stopped talking and scented the air, and it took the new Wolfe only a half a moment to realize that he was scenting someone he knew.

Then, like a beast out of hell, a silvery gray Wolfe came barreling out of the forest, teeth bared and muscles raging, and landed square on Roure's chest, knocking him into the ground. Three others appeared with him, specks of black arriving to block out the sky above, and Adotre yelped and shouted and jumped into the fray.

Iorir was angry; he was furious, and he only wanted blood. But with Adotre in the fracas, he couldn't risk harming his mate; he called the pack off. Each of them panted and grunted with irritation at being taken off a good fight, but they settled and backed down. Adotre helped Roure to his feet; upon seeing them touch, Iorir growled himself and shifted human again; the group followed suit. "Mate! Here. Now."
Adotre hesitated. "You can't hurt him, Alpha!"
"Adotre, come." Iorir snapped. "I'll decide who gets hurt here."

Roure took a step back, his chest heaving as he sucked in air to try to recover from the brief scuffle. Adotre stood his ground and shook his head. "Roure didn't hurt me."
Iorir glanced suspiciously at the new Wolfe, then back to his mate. "Come. Here."
Adotre decided he'd better rush this along. "Roure fed me and he didn't hurt me and he was really nice to me even though he caught me in the forest, spying, and I KNOW I shouldn't have gone, Alpha, I disobeyed your orders, but it's just that since the egg took I've been so bored and I don't want you to think I can't help, that I can't pull my weight in the pack, or that I'm useless. And I KNOW I shouldn't have run, and I should have talked to you, but I'm OK and nobody got hurt and that's less because I did something smart and more because Roure was kind to me, see? And he was so nice he even fed me and he made me a fire and he brought me back home because he doesn't want any trouble, he lives here all by himself with no friends or anything and all he wants is some nice neighbors and maybe a pack."

Iorir stared at his mate, unimpressed. Adotre sensed this, and turned the Layer charm on full-blast. He dipped his head a little, tilting it to the side, and blinked bright, sad eyes up at Iorir. "So, please, Airu? Don't hurt Roure? He didn't hurt me."
Iorir stared at the pair of them for a long, long time, and Adotre worried because he'd never seen his alpha do this before and had no idea what was going to happen. Finally, Iorir spoke. "Adotre. Come here, now."

The Layer shifted, and scampered over to stand by his mate's side immediately. Iorir indicated the rest of the pack, still looking at Roure. "Wolfe. You follow behind with them. My mate and I lead the way home."
Roure relaxed visibly, and Adotre smiled and opened his mouth to thank his alpha. "Don't speak." Iorir cut him off, raising one hand. The Wolfe sighed, and leaned down to kiss the
"I am thankful to the moon for bringing you back to me. And I am thankful to Roure for the same. But believe me," he said, his voice growing firm, "Your punishment still awaits you at our home."

Adotre whined and pawed at the ground.
"But Alpha I -"
Iorir simply stared at him, and Adotre shut up.
"Sorry Alpha. I'm won't do it again promise."
Iorir shook his head, and with a cursory nod to the rest of the newly-expanded pack, he shifted and led the way back across the snowy hills to their home.

"He's sleeping now. He should be fine."
Ideste washed his hands over the pot of warm, soapy water that Kellan had brought into the tent.
"But be sure to feed him. Don't let him sleep too much. Give him this pill, and this chew; pill in the morning, chew at night, once a day for ten days. Don't stop before ten days."
Kellan nodded, then hesitated.
"The cub...?"
Ideste packed things back into the bag he'd carried them in.
"The cub is fine. Good energy. Good blood in the womb. But be careful until the end."
Kellan nodded.
"I will."
Ideste looked around.
"It's warmer in this part of the Irion. Better place to live."
Kellan considered this.
"We'll see."

Ideste stood, looked around the small sleeping area for a minute, then locked eyes with Kellan. In the bed, Gustin woke slowly. Ideste looked over at him.
"So he's your mate?"
Kuskellanar turned to look over his shoulder, then turned back to Ideste.
"Yes. Gustin is my mate."
Ideste swallowed. In the cool grey light, he looked so fragile. The wind had whipped at his hair, and now it stood out of place. Ideste looked down, his pretty grey lashes dusting his cheeks.
"I guess you love him, don't you?"
Kellan nodded.
"I do."

There was a lingering moment of silence, interrupted by Ideste.
"I'm sorry, Kellan. I am. About...everything."
Suddenly the space between them felt impassable. They spoke to each other across a chasm. In the distance, a howl uttered. Ideste snapped his head up.
"You have to go." Kellan filled in for him. Ideste's cheeks pinkened, and he nodded.
"He doesn't like me away for too long."
Kellan tilted his head in understanding.
"I, too, prefer to keep my mate close."
Ideste bit his lip.
"If you need -"
"Nothing."

Ideste searched Kellan's eyes, his face; well aware that this might be the last time he saw his first lover, he tried to memorize every line. Then he looked away. The howl came again, closer this time.
"Travel safe, Kuskellanar."
Kellan nodded and, on sudden impulse, stepped forward and kissed Ideste's head.
"Live well, Ideste."

They parted then; each of them (as if performers in a single, choreographed final dance) turned tail and ran, back through the years of memories, back through the loneliness, the isolation, the cold, back through the silver, back through the achy snow that stuck between your paws, back through the agony of loss and the thrill of love, back across fallen trees and frozen ponds to their mates, their atonements, their other lives.
Adotre shook his mate urgently in the large, fur-pile bed which they shared. Please wake up please wake up please -
"Mate?"
"I have to go outside."
Iorir pulled himself to a sitting position and rubbed at his eyes.
"What?"
"I need to go outside, Airu, please, let me out, let me go, please."
Iorir shook his head.
"Adotre, it's the middle of night. You can go out in the morning."
"No!"
Iorir blinked his eyes brightly at the desperation in his mate's voice.
"No, I need to go outside right now, mate, please, I - oh, no."

The last words were strained, pitiful-sounding, and suddenly Iorir felt the disorienting feeling of the bed around him growing wet. He leapt backwards immediately, away from the source of the dampness, and peered forward to see what was going on. Adotre was sitting, perched on the edge of the bed, his stomach distended and eyes bright and wide in the semi-darkness. He was trembling. He looked fearfully up at his mate.
"I'm sorry."
Understanding hit Iorir all at once.
"Adotre!"
"I'm sorry, Airu! I'm sorry!" the Layer put his hands up in defense, and Iorir calmed his voice immediately.
"No, little one, it's fine. I'm not mad at you." Iorir rounded the bed to come closer to his mate. He couldn't the half-smile that hit his face as he began to understand. "I'm not mad at all. It's your water, sweetheart. You're laying."

Adotre nodded vigorously.
"I'm sorry. I tried to go outside - "
Iorir frowned.
"You're not going outside. My cubs will not be born into a pile of leaves. Come, let's go to the cubbing den. We made a room for this, remember? I can carry you." Iorir cooed to his mate as he came closer. "I'll take you there. It's beautiful. And safe. It smells of the trees."
Adotre, sitting on the bed, continued to tremble. He looked frightened, and a little disoriented.
"Can we go right now?"
Iorir nodded, reaching out to gather up his little mate.
"Yes, we can go right now."
Adotre wriggled a little as he was lifted into the wolfe's arms.
"Airu? Iorir?"
"I'm here, little one."
"I'm scared."
Iorir kissed the side of his head.
"I know. But you're brave. And you'll be fine."
"Oh, FUCK that still hurts!" Gus groaned, panting as the pain subsided. Balefully, he turned his foggy gaze to the Melloz. "Where's my Kellan?"

The young trainee, sweat beading his forehead, patted Gus' shoulder. "The driver's gone to find him. He'll be here soon."

Gus nodded and dropped his head back onto the makeshift pillow behind him.

"Is it coming out soon?" he asked the healer, his words slurring slightly. "I want it out now. But don't want Kellan to - he'll miss it. And Kellan can't miss it because then he won't know where it is."

The healer laughed a little at the garbled sentence. "Don't worry about your mate, little one. The cub will come when it comes. Your job is just to listen to it. If the cub wants to wait for his appa, he will."

Gus felt the insidious tightness begin again. "Fuck. Fuck. It's not going to wait, is it? It's not going to wait for Kuskellan. It's just going to - AUUUGGGGHHHH FUCK THAT HURTS!"

The healer winced and indicated her bag with her head. "Tilo. Go. Get him some bark. Let him bite that. It will help."

Gus shook his head. "No bark. No bark. Wolfes don't bark."

The healer nodded. "I know, sweetheart."

The healer disappeared then, ducking down into the little tent she'd built around Gustin's spread legs, leaving the human alone with the Mellozsian. Gus wince as she poked him, but managed to focus enough to reach out and grab the young assistant's shirt to pull him closer. "Listen to me. Listen."

The Mellozsian looked terrified. "Listen!" Gus demanded. "I'm listening!" he answered, quickly. "The moon got me pregnant." Gus tried to focus his eyes on one thing, but found it impossible. He settled for glaring at a group of moving spots just above the Melloz's shoulder. "So it's HER who should be having this cub, not me! It's a mistake!" Gus shoved the young man away. "This is all a mistake!"

Suddenly, the healer was appearing, her face smiling, her hands messy. "No, Gustin. It's not a mistake. A cub is a gift. And this one is an impatient gift, too. It doesn't look like your cub wants to wait for his appa to get here. Are you ready to push?"

Gus shook his head furiously and the healer shrugged. "OK. On the count of three."

+++++

"AAAIIIRRRRUUU!"

"I'm here. I'm here, little one. Just one more push and it's over, alright? One more push and the egg is right out. Can you do one more for me?"

Adotre whimpered, but took a deep breath, gathered up his strength, and with every bit of energy he had left in him, pushed the last push that caused the egg to slip completely free and plop wetly into his father's hands.

Iorir stared at the thing in his hands for a moment, briefly fascinated and absolutely entranced by the life he held. The eggshell was thin, leathery, and in places almost transparent. There, the outline of a cub showed through. His cub. His cub with Adotre. Iorir was in heaven.
Then the Layer whimpered desperately and lost his grip on consciousness all at once, collapsing into a boneless, furry pile in the middle of the pine needles, just inches away from his egg. Iorir had never been prouder of his mate in his life.

Iorir checked his mate for bleeding and cleaned him up, moving him closer to the center of the room. The center of the room.

Iorir knew what he had to do next.

The center of the room already had a pit dug in it - the result of hours of hard work, going inch by inch through the clay. The pit was just deep enough, and wide enough to be lined with pine needles, soft blankets, leaves, cotton fluff and anything else warm and soft that Adotre could get his hands on. Iorir crept over to the pit and gently, gently placed the egg in it.

A large part of him didn't want to let it go. But he had to, he knew. It was the only way for Layer eggs to survive. Iorir laid the egg in its incubation nest and covered it with two blankets. Then he and the sleeping Adotre curled up around the pit, and Iorir covered them both with a blanket.

They slept there, a little family, until daylight.
Absolutely Perfect

Gustin woke in the morning to the smell of meat frying and people talking. He rolled out of bed, stretching his legs, delighted at how good he felt - it had been eight weeks since the birth, and Gus felt back to running condition. The coming of the springtime had helped; things were brighter now, happier. And spring had come sooner since they'd moved south, to a lower part of the Irion.

Gus dropped both feet down onto the fur-covered wooden floors of their new home, and padded out of his bedroom into the main room first. The smell of frying meat and cooked fruits filled the air, and Kellan, Adotre, Iorir, and the Mellozsian were all gathered around the large dining table, cooing over the twin bundles (one human, one Layer) that rested in Kellan-carved bassinets on the table's surface.

Gus paused in the doorway to smile at the scene. Kellan looked up and met his eyes, and Gus noticed that he looked even more delighted than usual. He picked up their cub and carried him over to kiss his mate.
"Good morning, mate."
He held the baby out to Gus to receive a kiss as well. Gus grinned.
"Good morning to you, too." Gus took the bundle from Kellan. "And good morning, Lucky."
Kellan's eyes narrowed.
"That is not his name."
Gus grinned and shrugged.
"It's easier to pronounce than Keflurialuckamansturr or whatever."
"Kel'luknar is a very simple name."
Gus nodded.
"Right. That's what I said. Lucky."

Kellan rolled his eyes but let it go.
"We have news."
"Oh?"
Gus sniffed the baby, which appeared to be in need of changing. Kellan nodded.
"From my father."
Gus went still.
"On Arem'mir?"
Kellan nodded excitedly, waiting for Gus to understand.
"He didn't."
"He did."
"Ideste - " Gus's mouth went dry, and he felt overwhelmed suddenly, with happiness. "Ideste sent a confession."
Kellan nodded vigorously. Gus frowned.
"So what's going to happen to him? Is he in trouble?"
Kellan shrugged.
"He had the good sense to disappear. He's somewhere in the Irion; with his mate, most likely. But he cannot return to Arem'mir. Ever again."
Gus felt a little relief; much as he had disliked Ideste, the man had still saved his life.
"So you can go back home?" Gus asked. Kellan nodded. "You can go back home!" Gus shouted, startling Lucky. As he soothed him, he kissed Kellan. "That's - that's amazing! When do we leave?"
Kellan drew back, and looked away. Gus waited. Kellan glanced over his shoulder, to where Adotre, Iorir, and Tilo all cooed over the recently-hatched Sodre. Kellan looked back at Gus, his eyes shielded. Gus understood.
"You don't want to go back."
Kellan shrugged. "This is my pack now." he met Gustin's eyes openly, happily, his hand reaching out to stroke his little son's head. "This is my home."

Gus felt his heart warm and expand, and he fell in love with Kellan all over again. He smiled at his wolf.
"I know. It's mine, too."

Kellan smiled an honest smile, which changed abruptly to a frown as Gus shouted and grasped out for Kel'luknar.
"Whoa!"

Kellan jumped as Gus lunged to keep from dropping his baby onto the hardwood floor below. When they had righted themselves, the wolf looked up at Gustin.
"What happened?!"

Gus sucked in panicked breaths.
"I don't know! I don't know - he just - felt like he got smaller!"

Kellan's eyes widened and all eyes in the room looked down to Gus's arms, where Kel'luknar had been replaced with a tiny, whining, entirely black wolf cub wrapped loosely in blue blankets and a filthy diaper. Everyone stared. For a long minute, nobody spoke. Even Sodre, in his little bassinet on the table, was quiet. Gus looked around at them.
"So? What is - what does that mean?! He's changing? He can change? He's not a baby, he's a cub??"

Kellan shook his head, still staring in wonderment at his son.
"No tail, no cub. He is human."
"Just not a normal human." Gus answered, fearfully.

From the table, Iorir spoke, slowly, a smile growing over his face.
"Gus...he's the human who can change his form. That's it. That's the fourth tenet of the Prophecy."

Gus shook his head.
"Oh, no. No. Not this Synthesis thing again. You're not telling me - "

Adotre squealed.
"That's it! All this time, we thought it was you, but it wasn't! It was Lucky! Lucky is the prophesized one! Lucky is the Synthesis! He can understand the wolf, he was marked under the eye of the moon, and he can change his shape like the wolf! He's a wolf and a human, don't you see! He's going to be just like you, but also just like Kellan!"

Gus clenched his wolf's son to his chest and raised an amused eyebrow at Kellan.
"If that's true, we are going to have a hell of a time raising this one."

Kellan grunted.
"Whatever he is, he will be perfect. He is our cub."

Gus smiled.
"Yes. He is our cub, and he is already perfect."

In Gus's arms, the little black cub yipped once, then yawned, shifted, and quietly went to sleep. Absolutely perfect.

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