Underworld

by Mikaiyawa

Summary

after a terrorist attack destroys all they knew a group of survivors pulls together and holds on. Humanity is tough, they’ve survived horrible things, they can survive this.

It just takes a lot longer than they thought before things being to rebuild like the home they used to know.
Chapter 1

2008; such an innocuous number. But that was the year the world began to change, even if most of the world remained blissfully unaware of it.

One terrorist with a group of like-minded biologists created a virus that could mutate humans, mutate them so quickly that the infected human could actually survive the changes. If they were strong enough.

But they weren't interested in people surviving, not really. They wanted a terror attack that would bring the Western world to its knees.

So they tested their little virus.

On their own people.

When some survived as nearly mindless flesh eating monsters they decided it was Allah giving his blessing and handing them the perfect instrument of terror. The Infidels would find their own wives and children turning on them and there was no way they could be stopped.

More moderate folk were used by the village and town to test the virus. When an Imam began preaching tolerance in their mosque, they were targeted. The virus was no respecter of any sacred space, and the ritual washing done before entry wasn't enough to prevent the spread of the disease. In some places it actually turned the ritual fonts into virus baths, never for very long; the virus wasn't sturdy enough to cope with a long exposure to air and water, usually only a week or so was as long as it could last, and that was under ideal circumstances that were never to be found in the real world. But only a few hours was needed to infect entire villages and towns as they came to worship.

Unrest exploded into violence as every fringe hate group tried to take advantage.

Over the fall and winter of 2012 they built missiles to carry their precious cargo of death, built it into stolen ICBM's shells and hurried to get them into position.

On October 12, 2013 they launched them.

The targets had been chosen well, major population centers were hit, the virus spread quickly through the air, the water and best and most surely by simple contact between people.

Within a week a third the world’s population was dead. The West rallied as best it could, surviving soldiers quarantined the sick and cut down the survivors who had shown symptoms of becoming mindless monsters. The expected incidents where healthy people just trying to find safety being cut down as well were carefully hidden as much as possible from the remaining media until formal martial law was declared everywhere. Gathering in large groups was strongly discouraged and what few protesters there were either went underground and vanished or were dealt with in more mundane ways. The healthy were put to work consolidating supplies but fear made even the best organized systems inefficient and fraught with little frauds and hidden thefts and hoarding.

Without the ability to transport quantities of food, medicine and goods economies faltered, populations starved and descended into anarchy. Within a few months a population of over 7 billion was cut down to barely 2 billion.
Surviving scientists and doctors, in their protected enclaves, scrambled to find a vaccine or cure.

They'd learned the disease mutated the human genome, making males in particular susceptible to becoming shape shifters or blood needy photophobes or the more horrifying, mindless, flesh eating monsters. Common vernacular called them vampires, but the shifters were too diverse to be called werewolves, although in some places the term still stuck. The zombie genes though, as the worst variant became called, when it struck it left girl survivors as well as boys. And within two years they learned something terrible.

They didn't have time to find a treatment or cure. And now the changes were set in the DNA of every survivor exposed to the virus to pass down to their children.

Puberty was believed to be the trigger for the zombie variant, and as the orphans who had survived the initial bombings and social disintegration reached their maturity in the work camps a second and then third wave of monsters swept over the world. What had been left of the world population was more than halved.

Survivors dispersed, in spite of all attempts to keep them collected together. Technology was lost or even actively abandoned in the frantic scramble to survive. Older methods had to be rediscovered and revived as humanity scrambled to save itself in some form.

A few of the surviving vampires gathered together and swore a sacred pact.

They might not be human any longer. But they would protect their former kin.

They could taste and smell what the scientists and doctors couldn't detect. They could find the zombie's before they turned. They could ensure they didn't turn. They would step in where humans faltered and try to take up the mantle of fallen authority.

And they would. Slowly word spread and more and more Hunts of vampires swore in their hearts to protect what was left of humanity.

~0~ Reset, four years after the bombs. Helsinki, Finland, martial law year three ~0~

Sammy wanted to cry, but didn't dare waste the blood his tears would take. Theon and Vivian needed fed and couldn't safely get out to hunt for themselves. Even if they could get out without the civil patrols grabbing them and locking them up 'for their own good', they didn't trust their control enough to trust themselves to hunt. So he watched the street carefully and waited.

One of the girls in the group he was watching smelled off, sickly sweet and slightly like something rotten. He'd figured out fairly fast that that rotten fruit smell meant the girl was changing, and not into something as innocuous as a werewolf like Julian and Jason or a vampire like himself. Not that changers and vampires were exactly innocuous.

Zombie.

He focused more carefully as one girl separated out of the pack of just barely teenage girls headed from the school and back to the Home for a work assignment. She'd tried to hide it, but her skin was taking on the distinct gray greenish tones of the zombie sickness. All the makeup did was make her skin tone look even more off, but at least it made her just look sickly to her friends.

Sammy swallowed hard.

This was so fucking unfair. The girl should have the chance to grow up, worry about boys and babies and stupid things that only a few years ago had been normal.
She wouldn't get that chance.

He couldn't let her change.

Quickly Sammy moved, grateful for the fluke of chance that left him with the ability to cope with full sunlight without burning like Theon and Vivian did. As far as the general population was concerned only changers, zombies and normal’s could be out in daylight, and the zombies would avoid it if they could. That a small number of vampires could take full sun right off wasn't well known even to the powers in charge, there just weren't enough of them. As long as Sammy looked like he was on an errand or working none of the security police or civil patrol looked twice at him, and Sammy had learned how to look busy while looking harmless long before now. His old glasses with the lenses replaced with thin window glass and a notebook were the main base of his disguise. He'd added a work-belt with tape measure and a few tools for testing current in an electric line and basic water quality, with those and a official looking badge with his photo and a myriad of colored bars down the side and he was just another government inspector checking to see if surviving buildings were safe to either pull down and recycle or move another batch of orphans or survivors into.

It worked sickeningly well, even with the population of the city dropping daily. The last lot of Security police had snorted at his myopic blinking behind his lenses, his tools and his clipboard and left him alone; never realizing the blinking was an act. It didn't help that his badge actually was real, gotten for a petty bribe from the idiots who were running the city's labor gangs. Inspectors like him had to check and recheck and sometimes recheck again before a work gang could go into an area. And the inspectors could only go in after a martial patrol had swept an area sometimes as many as nine times.

It made a slow process agonizing and sometimes stupidly inefficient. But that made things easier to him to hide and supply his own people. Sammy gave himself a shake to jar his mind out of its woolgathering, he still had work to do, friends to feed and an emerging zombie to deal with.

The other girls had moved on, leaving their sick friend sitting on the step.

Now or never.

God, but he *hated* this.

Sammy moved and smiled down at the poor doomed thing and offered his hand. He wanted to cry, his badge made this sickeningly easy. He didn't want to think about the field day this made for predators with less honest intentions.

Sami had to swallow hard on the sick feeling rising in his gut as the girls cold hand curled trustingly in his warm one.

~0~

Jason had found a Nightliner, a fairly new luxury version that had been abandoned, but it had taken him more time and swearing than he liked to admit to and a lot of help from Theon and Vivian to get the thing running. He missed Mikko and his mechanical skills, and was profoundly grateful he'd hung around with the man as much as he had or they'd never have gotten the bus running again. But now it was running and running well, so they began carefully scavenging fuel, spare parts, food and medical supplies. They'd had a tow bar already, and were going to use Christian's van as a trailer of sorts. The van could go places the Nightliner wouldn't fit, and would let them get into places to scavenge fuel for both. They'd also rigged a rack to put Jason's light motorbike on the back of the van. It could go places the van couldn't, and would be ideal for scouting places
with, and far faster than walking would be.

In some places speed still meant safety.

Sammy's inspector persona and ability to be out in daylight helped tremendously. He'd found a few small and, as yet un-looted, clinics. He'd learned he was faster than he had been and used that speed to ruthless advantage in searching areas that hadn't yet been fully cleared by the martial patrols. Sammy suspected that some of the patrols were just military work parties sweeping up critical supplies before the civil work party's came in to glean whatever else was still useable. He'd dredged his memory for stories from his grandmother about the Nazi occupation for ideas on how to find hidden caches and how to hide supplies where only he could find them again.

With a little caution they gutted the clinics of anything useful in the darkest parts of the night when the normal’s were hiding behind locked and barred doors and boarded up windows and praying that none of *them* turned into a monster in the night. Thanks to his grandmothers stories he'd also found hidden hordes set aside by varying officials and had begun carefully hollowing some of them out from behind. Most of it was supplies the band couldn't really use, like the vials of vaccines for childhood illnesses, things the idiot officials couldn't use either but that the orphanages desperately needed. He'd also found a few cashes of fuels, diesel, kerosene and fuel oils of varying sorts. Some in large drums others in five, ten or twenty liter jerry cans. Depending on who was doing the hoarding Sammy sometimes hollowed those out as well. The one city manager who had the equivalent of several dozen tanker trucks full of fuel he'd cheerfully begun tapping a can or two from every time he went by. Sometimes he'd slip that fuel to people who needed it, other times it went into the horde for their planned escape.

That man had authorized Sammy's inspector badge without ever having laid eyes on him and Jason knew for a fact the man had put a known pedophile in charge of one of the orphanages. The man had suffered an unfortunate accident, but Sammy hadn't been the one to inspect and declare that particular building as safe. He did take a peculiar glee in the outrage that followed the man’s death given it appeared he'd been checking on a horde of critically needed medical supplies hidden in the building with food and fuel enough to keep the orphanage through the winter. The outrage was all the more vicious because it was clear he hadn't intended to use the supplies to keep the orphans, fed, well and warm.

Sammy also brought back a careful selection of firearms and the supplies to use and maintain them. Even empty the ammunition cans were useful, but the ones he brought back tended to be heavy with bullets.

Things like that made Sammy seem a completely different man than the mild tempered one Jason had used to know. The Sammy of now was a lot more brutally practical on a lot of things. The old Sammy would never had carried a semi-automatic pistol, the new one did and had practiced enough to be a lethally good shot. He made sure to be in the line when monthly rations of ammunition were handed out to inspectors and civil patrol leaders, and not just because it would look strange if he didn't.

Jason also sometimes wondered what had happened to the Vivian he had used to know, the normally quiet and gentle man he'd known had turned almost entirely inward and now barely spoke and almost never smiled. Some of it Jason was sure had to do with not knowing what had happened to Elsa and their daughter Sofia. They'd been overseas in America visiting some school friend of Elsa's for her wedding. The rest he was sure had to do with him getting caught in a quarantine sweep and being in that *hell-pit* of a camp they called a safe haven for the sick for over a week before some internal camp turmoil had left him the opening to escape.
Vivian had told Theon that he'd seen Juha and Mikko of Reflexion in there, and that they wouldn't be coming out, but had refused to talk about why. He'd just stared blindly at them with haunted eyes, then he'd curled into himself and refused to speak again for over a week. Even when he did speak it was in a hoarse whisper and Vivian was jittery and kept looking over his shoulder for threats.

Given what Jason had seen and smelled in that place he had a nasty feeling he knew what had happened to the two men. If they were lucky they'd died quickly and together. He just prayed no one else he knew had ended up in that place, Jason only knew of three who had gone in who had come back out. Vivian was a broken man and of the other two Jason knew one was dead, the other had dropped off the radar and was presumed to be dead as well.

Petri had packed an improvised bomb and walked back into the gatehouse of the place and blown it and himself sky high. Something that made Jason quite sure that whatever had happened to his friends Mikko and Juha, well, it made him think how they died hadn't been easy and he really didn't want to think too hard about it. As far as Jason knew no one else had made it out except as ashes on the wind. And that little stunt Petri had pulled had ensured the guards around the place were nasty as hell to anyone coming near. Last week a couple orphans on the way to school from the morning work session had taken an unfortunate shortcut, and had never made it to class. Not even the local feral dogs had been able to get near the bodies until orders had come from on high to go in and pick up what was left.

Jason was sure that had more to do with some high mucky muck coming to visit and not wanting to smell the stench than with any desire to see the two unfortunate children buried properly.

Carefully Jason loaded a box holding every guitar string he'd been able to loot from what was left of their two favorite music stores. Christian had found the places abandoned during his daily work sweeps. He hadn't told the man who acted as his human supervisor much about it, he disliked the man and, like Sammy, was using him more for cover than anything else. If he hadn't had to keep up appearances he'd never have told the man anything. But he knew better than to try hiding in plain sight without some sort of backup plan. Christian had run into a few overzealous idiots already, not many fortunately but enough that having that backup in place had kept him from getting shot, Sammy nominally reported to the same asshole, for a lot of the same reasons. But Christian had skills as a heavy machinery operator, something that if Jason had come through as an unchanged human would have made him highly valuable. It let him take a better quality food ration at the end of each work shift and meant the asshole was determined to keep Christian close and not allow him to be moved around where his skills would actually get used as they were really needed.

Music and musical instruments were not high on the priority lists of things the bastard wanted, any batteries would have been useful but those had been stolen a long time ago, but Christian had mentioned it to them before he'd curled up to sleep in the bed Theon and Vivian had kept warm for him all day. After a few more hours of scavenging Julian would come in and cuddle up to their lone human friend and help keep him warm all night so he could stay healthy enough to go back to his mandatory work shift in the morning.

If Christian didn't work they wouldn't let him take a food ration, and the food rations had supplements in them that they hadn't been able to scavenge yet. Worse, if he missed more than a day they'd send the civil patrol to where he said he lived to see what happened to him. They'd already had that scare once, and Christian had just been down nursing a sprain. They couldn't afford to have him get taken to a camp to see if he'd get better. Once in a camp, well, Vivian was an exception in that he'd gotten back out. Jason didn't think they'd have much luck trying to break in and rescue anyone, not now. They had been lucky and Christian had just been taken to the local
clinic and gotten a wrap for the injury a four day rest pass and a small bottle of pills. But he'd been
disgusted to learn that the sleeping area had been ransacked.

At least Sammy and Theon's paranoia had been well served, there hadn't been much for bastards to
find. A small stash of food, mostly leftover packets from the food rations he got, a tiny bit of
candy, some extra bottled water around the heap of bedding he shared with Julian, Theon and
Vivian. Everything else, and everyone else's gear was hidden behind walls that looked to be solid
brick but were easy for Sammy and the other vampires to move. The little bit of warning they got
from the patrol kicking in other doors in the building as they moved up the street had let them put
everything in place and hide. Neither man got teased again about paranoia after that.

Jason jumped a little when he heard another body moving around their hidden escape, but when he
turned he saw Sammy.

A closer look and Jason swallowed hard. Sammy's eyes were red and he looked exhausted. The
kind of exhausted that didn't come from a long day of pretending to work while searching for
supplies.

“Bad day?” Sammy had been planning a 'check in' with the bastard and to pick up the ration he
was allotted. As an inspector Sammy could pick his rations up a week at a time, not daily like a
laborer like Christian had to unless they had a verifiable note from medical or the supervisors to
pick up more. Notes like that were thin on the ground, they'd been lucky with Christian. Luckier
still that he'd had men he could sort of count on serving on the civil patrol and his work crew. He'd
 gotten carried to the clinic and carried home again and the civil patrol hadn't gone seriously
looking for hidden cubby holes, not when Christian had things tucked in old ammo cans more or
less in the open. That Christian had acted relieved when the patrol had come knocking had
helped. No one with something to hide would act relieved to see a civil patrol.

Sammy nodded as he started helping to load their carefully gathered and tightly packed supplies.
The only real luxuries were the guitars and things to keep them playable. Jason didn't count the
stash of chocolate, hard candy, tea and alcohol as luxuries anymore, those could be critical bribes
to get them out. And the vodka could be used to clean wounds and would keep better than the
peroxide and bleach would. Christian had about blown a gasket when Sammy and Vivian had
quietly offered to leave the precious instruments behind to make room for more critical things.

Space had been made for nine acoustics, one apiece and a few spare just in case. And Sammy had
almost cried.

Jason winced; the almost crying Sammy had done then was for a lot better reason that the almost
crying he was doing now. Then he'd been relieved, now he was clearly unhappy. Gently he
reached out and clasped Sammy's shoulder.

“I fed Theon and Vivi.”

Jason closed his eyes. That meant Sammy had found pre-emergent zombies, as in more than one.
If he'd only found one he'd have barely been upright after feeding their friends.

“Bad?” he asked hoarsely, already suspecting the answer.

“Three little girls who should have been worried about school, clothes and boys and what party
they could get their parents to let them go to Friday night,” Sammy’s voice ended on a strangled
sob. That it was three little girls, who wouldn’t become monsters, never got mentioned.

Three little girls who at least had died painlessly and quickly. Sammy always did his best to make
things as easy as he could, even if Jason had found him cradling a long cold body more than once as he'd been unable to let the poor things go once he'd finished. Wherever possible they were left where they'd be found quickly and given a proper burial. The few times it hadn't been possible they'd buried the poor kids in the rubble piles around derelict buildings and left a bit of a marker even if it was just a name and date in paint nearby. Once Sammy had been forced to pretend he'd found the boy and been able to pass off his unhappiness at killing a zombie as grief over having found a child dead of apparent suicide. It hadn't helped that the boy had clearly known something was wrong and had already taken a razor blade to his wrist. Sammy had just made sure of things for him, so his sacrifice wouldn't be negated by idiots trying to 'save' him.

According to Christian the powers had only found one other than the one they'd caught Sammy with, and thought the kid had died of natural causes and been buried by the kid pack or gang he'd run with. That only about a third of the kids were in orphanages or other work camps with relatives made that theory all to plausible. The orphanages had almost as bad a reputation as the sick camps.

It didn't really help the guilt. Nothing would help the guilt.

Jason hugged his best friend and let him cry brokenly for a few moments. Not because he thought Sammy needed to stop crying, but because Sammy couldn't, wouldn't let himself cry for long, if he let himself cry for long dry sobs would turn into bloody tears, and Sammy had gotten it into his head that he couldn't afford the waste of blood.

Sammy had also gotten it into his head that since he could go out in daylight it was his responsibility to help keep Theon and Vivian fed. And Jason knew that now that the idea was lodged in Sammy's head not even a nuclear bomb would jostle it back out. Whatever change had hit and made him a vampire and fixed his myopia had also done something in his mind. His formerly absent-minded friend now remembered things, had become just as scary in that regard as Joonas had been, was. Was, he decided, just because they hadn't seen their friends didn't mean they were dead.

He had to hang onto that hope. If he lost that hope he might find himself packing a bomb for a futile gesture like Petri's. God knew he had access to enough black powder right now with all the gun reloading supplies Sammy had stolen.

~0~ five years after the bombs, Tommot, Russia. Former Amur Yakustk rail line ~0~

Brian sighed and settled Levi a bit move comfortably into his side. The smaller man had spent most of the day keeping watch and had been forced to lure a patrol away from their hiding place so he needed any sleep he could get. Squeaks was keeping an eye on things now as the train moved west.

The world had gone fucking crazy.

A bunch of crackpot radicals brewing up a hellish bio threat and dropping it all over the place. People turning into monsters, monsters that had been people getting a boost they really didn't need. People dying.

Good people doing horrible things to their fellow survivors out of fear.

Tempest had lost all but four members in the initial round if illness. The guys from Rogue were all gone, at least none of them had checked in on the boards and only Frosti had checked in for Tribe. No one had heard anything from the Miami guys or from most of the smaller teams that had been
gathering for the third round of the world parkour championship competition. Never mind only a few of them could actually make the trip into Russia for the initial round.

They were lucky; they knew what had happened to all their guys. From the heavies all the way down to peripheral members. Good, bad, ugly, they knew what had happened. People had checked in, reporting what they knew about teammates and family. When they went silent and stayed silent it was understood they'd fallen as well. Sugar had said something about sweeps and how the authorities were starting to put people into work camps right before he'd fallen silent, but Brian wasn't sure if that meant Sugar was dead or if technology wasn't something allowed in a camp.

He also didn't know if the powers had finally started locking down the wireless networks and making it harder for folks to get access to a hardline data connection. Something like that would make folks drop off the boards and have them still okay otherwise. It was a tiny frail hope to cling to anyway.

Brian rubbed his cheek over Levi's blond hair and barely looked up when Squeaks swung in the open door of the train car but did when she began shoving the door closed. His eyes narrowed as she threaded the bit of heavy wire through to drop the outside latch from the inside.

“Trouble?” So much for Levi sleeping through. The slighter man stirred in his arms and looked over at Squeaks as she moved closer so she could whisper.

“Inspection station coming up. They didn't see me, but I figure better to be safe and have the latch dropped so they don't jam it where we can't get back out easy.” Brian couldn't see her face clearly in the darkness, but knew Squeaks had done things so she wouldn't have to be the one to wriggle through the tiny gap at the one corner of their car to reopen the door from the outside. Levi was thinner and stronger, but she had longer arms and was more flexible, things that unfortunately were needed to wriggle out that small gap and onto the cars roof with anything resembling safety while the train was in motion. At best her falling would leave her separated from them, at worst she'd be dead.

He didn't blame her. If a little bit of effort now saved a lot of effort and potential injury later it was worth it. Those latches were heavy as hell and hard to jimmy open from the inside if they were locked down properly. It was just a good thing that rail workers were often in an almighty hurry and didn't latch things properly more than half the time. Finding a car half latched or unlatched was so common it didn't raise any alarms, the inspectors would just do a quick visual search of the car and re latch things if they even bothered to do anything.

The brakes began to scream and the train too slow, so just to be safe they all crawled back in the shipping crate they'd found that was empty enough to fit all three of them.

For once he wished he wasn't so damn big. Levi was small enough and Squeaks slender and limber enough that they fit fine, he felt squashed.

Not that being squashed up with his teammates was a bad thing; he just wished it was under better circumstances.

He also wished that one of them still had a working cell phone. His laptop had been their last contact to the outside world and it had suffered a fatal accident protecting Levi from being shot in the back by a hyper Civil Patrol nut-case in Magadan. But better the laptop get shot in the battery than Levi getting shot in the back. They'd ditched the destroyed bit of tech and bailed out as fast as they could go.
Brian was now wishing rather passionately that the season three show hadn't gotten that huge chunk of cash and the wild hair to do a promo show in Russia with all four of the foundation teams. He'd never thought that hanging around for another two weeks to kick around and play tourist would be such a terrible idea.

He also wished that this year they hadn't shifted to teams of five, even if all the injuries of the first two seasons had made it a necessity just to keep enough able bodies around to actually shoot the shows.

The breath froze in his lungs when he heard the door to their car unlatch and slide open.

Oh they *so* did not need this now.

~0~

Levi felt Brian stiffen and felt the hitch in breathing from Squeaks where she was wrapped around his back. But he didn't dare move to brush the wisp of red hair that had escaped Squeaks braid away from where it was tickling his nose. Oh this was not good, so, *so* not good.

Please don't let them check the crates carefully, please don't let them see this one wasn't closed tight and check.

Please don't let them have dogs.

He could hear the chatter of the inspectors, but couldn't understand a word.

Then the door shrieked closed again and the latch clunked home, clunked home with the heavy scrape that said it had been latched properly this time. At least that rasp wasn't followed up with the rattle and click of a secondary lock being put in place. But that was normally only ever done on cars with high value contents, like food, munitions or medical supplies.

“Well *fuck,*” breathed Squeaks in a bare thread of a whisper. “I guess I get to squiggle again later.”

He could feel Brian's silent laughter and hoped that his hysteria stayed quiet. Not that he wasn't feeling a bit hysterical himself right now.

God but that had been close.

~0~ *Riga, Latvia, martial law, collapse of the city center* ~0~

Chriss swore under his breath.

God but people got *stupid* when they were scared. He watched as the city across the river burned; hell, watched the river itself burning from all the spilled fuel oil, and mourned his lost friends. Joonas had been a right bastard since they'd all gotten sick. He was always a bastard when people got sick on tour, but he got worse when some of them hadn't recovered. Maybe it was better that Joonas did what he had, something so crazy and suicidal that it had to work. And he'd be damned if he let Joonas's sacrifice go to waste.

Chriss swallowed hard and shifted a bit to help shield Kris who in turn was shielding Jonne.

He was never going to look at fire the same way *ever* again.

He closed his eyes and quietly recited the GPS coordinates to the cave system that five years ago they'd all gone to on vacation and jokingly had agreed would be a good place to hide out if the
world ended. The place they'd found when on a photo shoot two years before that. He couldn't believe things had sunk so far in only five years.

The world was ending.

He had to get Jonne and Kris somewhere safe. After all they'd been through in that hell pit of a camp they deserved that. They both had been far to pretty to escape the attentions of the so called guards. He just prayed they hadn't seen what was left of poor Antti in the main yard of the camp. Probably a vain hope, but he hoped to god that the bassist had died quickly and hadn't burned down to that twisted husk over the course of days.

Chriss shifted his pack of supplies a bit to try and get it situated more comfortably on his back and nudged Kris who nodded and started Jonne moving away from the river.

He just hoped to god, that Sammy or Jason or somebody was alive and remembered and would be there to meet them.

~0~ Germany, former Canopus train line, headed south ~0~

Adam wanted to cry, but knew if he did he just might give their hiding place away. Birdie and Bailey had worked too hard to get all three of them into this cargo container for him to risk fucking it up. Birdie couldn't take daylight very well, his fair skin burned sickeningly easily now, if they got caught it would likely kill him to be pitched off the train. There wasn't any shelter to be found for kilometers out here, not now. Not for creatures like them. Even just running for trees and brush wasn't a very good option as most of the rail lines had cleared as much as they could away from the lines. Through here they'd even demolished buildings, so there was an empty no man's land for over one hundred meters. Out in the countryside it could be a half kilometer or more.

He couldn't let Birdie die. He'd lost so many people already that the very idea of losing one more made him sick. Adam knew he'd been lucky when the civil patrol had come on a sweep and found him clinging to Japa's cold body. They'd just taken Japa away and left him weeping brokenly in the tiny apartment. Bailey had come and made him pack up a few things and hauled him out before they could come back and drag him off to a camp to see if he was 'infected'. Even the healthy people who went into those camps never seemed to come back out.

The work camps really weren't any better, it seemed to just make it easier for a person to get sick. And just getting a cold now could get you hauled off to the sick camps.

He ducked as the watchman shone his flashlight back over the area they were hidden in. Birdie was small, and he'd been able to curl up in one of the open spaces inside one of the crates. Adam wasn't asking why there were crates of art mixed in with the farm supplies. Bailey had gone straight up and was braced in among the shadowy beams and struts of the cargo above them. All he had to do was keep them from getting caught. They just had to get south where the hunting was better. If he and Bailey could hunt better they could keep Birdie fed without having to kill anyone else.

But Adam knew Bailey would kill someone to protect them, had seen him kill to protect him from a civil patrol officer with an axe to grind. He had faced the unpleasant reality that he'd kill as well to protect his friends when a random idiot with a gun had come patrolling by and tried to force Birdie to service him. Adam had thrown up immediately after, but had still torn the rapist’s throat out before he could do more than throw Birdie to the ground.

The light moved, then it was gone and he could hear the man calling that the car was clear and sliding the door closed.
The heavy latch catching was both ominous and reassuring, they were safe for now.

~0~ Lombrives caverns, France ~0~

Theon sighed and wished again that he could cope with sunlight. Sammy, no, not Sammy anymore, not Sammy Black ever again, just Sami now. Sami was going to kill himself trying to make daylight raids on nearby ghost towns to try and get them comfortable.

They'd laughed when they'd done the promo shoot here, years ago. It had been a grand tour then, with Negative and Lovex and half a dozen other bands all having fun.

They'd joked then that this place would make a great hide out after an apocalypse; the caverns were large and had looping tunnels connecting many smaller rooms together. Most of them were dry year round and had been comfortably cool in the heat of summer.

Chriss, Jason and Sammy and a couple of the other tech nerds had programmed in the coordinates into their phones or laptops and they'd had a great laugh when Jussi had stolen Jyrki's phone to program those little numbers in. The jokes about who they'd want with them for a zombie apocalypse had flown thick and fast for weeks afterwards. Even the fans had gotten in on the act adding their two pennies to the pile of texts, messages and emails.

It wasn't so funny now. They didn't know if either man was still alive, if anyone else from that tour was still alive to even try and make their way here.

Christian had found a lot of drilling equipment from someone who had made their living drilling water wells, with some work they scavenged fuel enough to power the rig and drilled vent holes down into the caves. He, Sami and Jason had done most of that work as all three had at least some clue as to how to work the heavy equipment. It had taken Theon a bit to get over the feeling that they were stealing when they broke the locks on the storage tanks of the gas stations and pumped out fuel left there so they could power the machines. But that had made him feel less sick than their initial trick of siphoning from derelict vehicles left on the roadside. Bad enough they had had to stop several times to move them out of their path, sometimes learning the hard way that the original owners were still in the vehicles. Though learning that Christian knew how to manage a tow truck had been useful for a while, until they'd gotten here it had been worth picking up one of the fuel pigs to clear and then re-block one of the tunnels. Theon hadn't liked re-blocking things, but Jason's theory was if the road was blocked no normal would think they'd come this way. After all who would take the time to clear a road just to block it back up again?

Jason had also loaded the damn thing down with twenty liter fuel cans. Now that they were safely here he, Jason and Sami were raiding every fuel station within their range and draining it as dry as they could. If they ran out of batteries to run the little pump they were dropping a bucket down one of the filling holes and pulling up fuel a bucket full at a time or using a hand pump Jason had cobbled together when they realized the bucket trick wasn't their best option. They'd even hauled large drums to hold extra fuel on the theory they might need it to get things settled and safe for winter. Fuel storage at least was a self-solving problem, Christian had found the nasty smelling detergent that would break down diesel residue and make a container safe for other kinds of storage. It wasn't ideal. But eventually they would need those drums and cans for other things.

What was a little upsetting was the further west they'd come the fewer people there were left. Theon had expected that this cave system would already have occupants, locals, someone, but it had been eerily empty when they arrived. Even the nearest towns looked utterly abandoned, empty even of zombies.

Zombies they'd gotten brutally efficient at dealing with. Christian had raided sporting goods shops
and found heavy crossbows used by sport hunters and the lethal razor barbed arrows that went with them. Between those and the high power rifles Sammy had acquired any zombie they found abruptly ceased being any kind of a threat.

The movie saw about head shots was effective in real life at least, and they all took a page from the kid in Zombieland's book and made sure to shoot twice. Christian had stopped the cardio cracks very quickly though, they weren't really very funny now.

They'd widened a few natural holes in the top most caverns they wanted to use as living space to make chimneys to vent wood smoke and harmful gasses from their little heating stoves and cooking fires. And had learned the hard way it wasn't quite that easy, but eventually they managed. Trial and error got them a lot of vents before they had the last drill bit break and put a permanent stop to any more work. But they could use the rest of the scavenged diesel fuel to run the rock cutting chisel and their lighter vehicles for quite a while if they were careful.

At least they had a lot spare chisel heads for the rock cutter.

Julian had found a glass place filled with automotive glass and the worst of the failed chimney's they turned into skylights by covering them with car windshields and carefully cementing them into place. That had helped some of the other vents draw the smoke out better, at least for the one cavern they were turning into their main sleeping and living space. It wasn't the biggest, but it had the most level floor and had a good natural vent to the sky that had only needed a few narrow spots knocked out. Vivian had been the one to suggest using a bit of the flat slate from the remains of the parks building to make an elevated cover for the vent to keep rain and other weather from coming in. Probably a good idea given there was a trench in the floor leading from under that vent out their door and own the path down to the pool under the waterfall that was their main source of water.

Jason had been the one who found the train car, a small one from a railway museum and gotten it onto the bit of track between the town and the caves. Between them Julian, Jason and Sami were methodically gutting any of the nearby small towns they could reach by both road and rails, which was rather a lot more than Theon had expected. But he and Vivian were kept busy setting up looted shelves to organize looted goods and foodstuffs on. Sami had brought back every set of store shelves he could move and they'd begun filling them with the contents of every grocer and corner food shop they could find. A lot of things were spoiled by vermin, but there was a lot left in metal tins or glass jars that was still useable.

Christian had found the horses and a wagon harness that he'd then modified to pull the train car, and had been declared the default 'driver' as the horses would obey him but got twitchy with anyone else. They hoped with time the animals would adjust to changers and vampires and be less skittish. They'd rather use real horse power than spend precious fuel if they could. The train car could be moved with just Sami and Jason pushing, but the horses moved it much faster and left the two able to watch for trouble.

They had to be careful, because every once and a while there would be a train run by normal’s on the main line of the railway headed toward what was left of Spain, so they'd learned to pull the small car off on a side track and either hide it or make it look more damaged and derelict than it was. Sami and Julian had scavenged aerosol paint from varying places and changed the graffiti on the car every time they went out with it to make it less likely that a normal would recognize it and wonder why a derelict train car kept moving.

One near miss had them hiding as the normal's searched the area for survivors. They had found a trio of kids and dragged them off, so they hadn't looked too much harder once they'd 'rescued'
them. Theon had felt uneasy about the kids’ fate, but Sami had said they smelled normal, whatever that meant. He just hoped they had it better wherever they ended up than they'd had it out here alone. It wasn't like they had seen all that many survivor groups on their way out here, and those kids hadn't been more than suspected by them, so they'd been very careful.

Fortunately they hadn't had anything on the little car that couldn't easily be replaced. Not that the searchers took anything but foodstuffs, and even then it was small and easily hidden foods, like some of the small tins of sweets. Which made Sami remark that the rationing system was clearly not working very well if even the most privileged workers were stealing and hiding food. The punishments for hoarding had to be pretty nasty, or they'd have lost everything that was edible and the searchers had left the forty kilo bags of rice, sugar and flour alone. Maybe they'd just been in a hurry, or had left them and reported them so they could be picked up later, but after that they’d been careful to not load all of any high value item into the train car for transport. They'd cache half or more for later pick up, and cache things in multiple spots. That way if they ever got caught out again they wouldn't risk losing everything they had found.

Julian had quietly confessed that Sami also hunted when they were out. And not like Jason and Christian did for abandoned livestock, but for zombies or the few human's left out here. From what Theon could understand out of Julian's unhappy words, Sami was only killing the humans who attacked them first or who he caught acting as predators of the very few unlucky survivors caught out here. From the sounds of things there weren't very many of the predators left within Sami's jogging range, which seemed to expand almost daily.

He shouldn't complain, when Sami fed he always came back and fed Theon and Vivian.

Vivian lifted his head from where it had been pillowed in Theon's lap.

“I hear something on the rails.”

Theon smiled wanly as they both rose and crept to the one entrance where they could see the track without being seen. Vivian could hear things better than he could now, and if he said something was on the rails, something was on the rails. It was just a question of what, and who.

They both relaxed when they saw Christian walking beside the horses they'd hitched to the train car. He looked tired, but not as sickened and saddened as he had the last time they'd come in. The last time he'd come in Sami had been forced to kill a child who had kept attacking Jason and screaming incoherently. If he hadn't had a silver knife in his hand they might have been able to find another way, but the child had known what he was facing and had armed himself relatively appropriately.

It didn't make it any easier to live with. It had sounded like the kid might have been autistic, but there was nothing they could do about it now. The kid had been alone, so it wasn't like they could even make an attempt at tracking down any family he might have still had.

It was hard to wait until he got the car up into the shaded area where they could go and help, and unless they figured out how to fix the overhang somehow they'd lose that luxury in the next good storm.

“Good hunting?” Theon called.

“Reasonably. Sami found a bedding place where the windows weren't broken and there wasn't too much rodent damage. And Jason found a book shop with some books that'll be useful.”

“Books? Really?” Theon was surprised; Jason wasn't exactly the scholarly sort.
“Yeah. He and Sami were talking about looking for a public library; they might have useful stuff still.” Christian slid the door open on the small car and Vivian let out a low whistle. They'd packed the thing a lot more solidly than he'd expected given how easily the horses had been moving pulling it. “A lot of this stuff is relatively light,” he quickly started unloading and Theon let out a small sigh of relief when he saw thick mats of foam that were only slightly ratty around the corners. Christian grinned at him, and Theon smiled wryly back. Stone floors were hard to sleep on for very long. Piles of sleeping bags and blankets really didn't help as much as he'd thought they would. The stone slowly pulled the heat out of a body and left it aching.

“Where are Jase, Jules and Sami?” asked Vivian softly.

“Setting up another load, we have a sheltered spot and if I can get back before dark we'll be safe enough to load again and come back at dawn.”

Theon grimaced; he hated them being apart at night. But to avoid the usual times the normals ran their trains they had to be off the tracks at dusk and stay clear most of the night.

Christian stopped pulling tatty boxes of books and other small supplies off the car and hugged him tightly.

“I'll be okay, Jason found a working radio and can hear the train operators talking, so we'll have more warning than that one time. We'll be okay. And Sami cleared out the few zombies there were lurking around and scavenged some neat stuff from an electricians shop.”

Vivian perked up a little.

“We could get the wind generator going?”

Christian smiled.

“Yeah, we got spare parts, extra props and everything. Looks like the guy was a survivalist nut of some sort. We’re getting a lot of useful stuff out of his workshop. And Jason thinks with what we found he can keep that radio he found working for a good long time. We just have to be careful about grabbing the solar panels if the weather looks iffy.”

“Good for us then.” Vivian kept the 'we're the ones having to survive' behind his teeth, but knew Theon and Christian had heard it anyway.

~0~ Minskoye, Russia ~0~

Brian grunted and rolled back to his feet to keep moving forward. It was awkward as hell with two satchels bulking out his sides, but it beat trying to run with a backpack. He hadn't heard any sounds of pursuit in a while but he kept going out of habit. If things went to plan Levi and Squeaks would meet back up with him at the tower around sunset and they could take stock of what they’d managed to acquire off the hoarding bastard.

Not that it would be enough. After the hellpit that had been on the other side of Minsk nothing would ever be enough.

Brian paused and looked behind him.

Nothing, empty rooftops as far as his eye could see. Just a bit of smoke to the far east where the burning pits were going. That smoke would likely be here until there weren't any people left to do the burning.
Good. That meant he could turn toward their temporary home.

Measuring distance with a practiced eye he made the leap across the alleyway and caught hold of the ledge with both hands to muscle up and start his run back home.

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Levi wasn't happy as he stared out the broken mess of a window. Squeaks had been here, he could see her portion of the load neatly laid out on the floor. That wasn't what had him unhappy. It was the note scrawled in charcoal on the wall.

*Be back soon. Blood hunger. -S*

That had him upset.

He heard the slap of hands on a windowsill and the huff of breath out of a body hauling itself up and over. But it was Brian, not Squeaks. Not that he wasn't happy to see Brian back so early, it was a tremendous relief really, but he was scared he knew what Squeaks was doing.

He just didn't know where.

“Where's Squeaks.” Levi knew when Brian saw the note from the way his breath hissed. “Fuck. I thought we were done with that.”

“This is the third time Brian. We are going to have to accept that it's going to happen again.”

Brian raked his hands through his hair and swore unhappily under his breath. But then the organized mind under that ragged mop of honey gold hair started working again.

“I hate it when she trolls for rapists,” Brian lamented sadly.

“I'm not what one would call thrilled either man. I don't even know where around here she'd go.”

Levi wanted to yell, but settled for pacing back and forth. Yelling might attract unwanted attention, especially yelling in English. Yelling in Russian would attract attention, but not as much and not as heavily armed. When stressed they all tended to fall back into English, not the Russian they'd been picking up by necessity.

“I know a couple places she might hit. You rested?”

“Does it matter? It's Squeaks. Let’s go.” Levi ducked into the strap of an emptied satchel and handed Brian his other empty one so he didn't have to waste the time emptying his.

They slipped out a different window to take to the rooftops, Brian leading the way.

~0~ Lombrives caverns, France ~0~

Vivian curled up near one of their skylights and paged through one of the books they'd picked up out of the electrician's store room. He'd been the one who learned that the faintly green tinted windshields blocked something in sunlight and allowed him to get into the beam without injury. Theon still got red if he stayed under the skylights to long, but it was better than perpetual shadows. And given that they only had an hour or so of real light from any of them on any given day even Theon would be safe enough.

Jason and Sami had already started hauling usable lumber out of the nearby town and building rope framed beds for each of them. They'd found the plans in one of the books Jason had found and
tools and wood in an old hardware store. The hand crank drills were probably intended more for sale as a novelty than for real use. But they'd been made soundly and given their wind generator and solar panels weren't the best at providing consistent power and fuel for the diesel generator was being reserved to power more important things. Well, they were glad to find good hand powered tools. With the books they found there and in the small libraries they kept finding they were figuring things out through careful trial and error.

As a joke Julian had left the first bed frames leg supports long and tall and thrown a blanket over the tops, but that had made Theon think and now they were building all of them with support braces and rails to hang salvaged curtains off of and laying a tarp and one of the less well-off duvets over the very top. It looked odd, but did do wonders for keeping the drafts down.

Inside the heavy braces of their new beds they'd started putting hooks to hang things, both to keep their clothing a touch warmer and to keep Theon from having to shake a mouse out of his shirt and the reaction he'd had to that. His shriek had gotten all of them hopping, and the mouse had ended up not surviving the experience. Jason had shifted to his wolf shape and had pounced the unfortunate rodent.

Jason had been slightly revolted, but after a good case of the shudders he had accepted that maybe his wolf had a good idea. He just wasn't going to actively hunt mice for his dinner until he absolutely had to.

They'd had one storm come through and lost the further part of the shade overhang and learned that caves were not really as weather proof as a house. This one was relatively dry once you were away from the waterfall and river but it was still drafty as all hell and not what one would call really warm. Things stayed pretty constant temperature wise, but they needed more warmth at night, and would need it even more come winter. So Sami was still hunting for places where they could scavenge bed linens, duvets and the like that were still in reasonably good shape.

They also needed to scavenge more fuel for the rock cutter and Christian could cut holes by the two closer main entrances to put up frames and tarps to act as a primitive weather stop to keep the worst of the wind and rain out. Come winter they were going to have a cold draft coming in if they didn't think of a good way to block the door hole into their sleeping area, their first attempt at trying to cement and brick the hole into a door shape to actually put in a door hadn't worked so well. The cement had just cracked free from the stone and scared the blazes out of all of them by collapsing in the middle of the night. Christian wasn't about to suggest they use more of their depleting supply of ready to mix concrete to try again. They'd already used the rock cutting tool to knock the worst of the uneven places off the corners of walls they would be passing by often and to semi level the worst parts of the paths they'd be using. But none of the bits would chip holes that were small enough to even try to attach hinges to to a regular door to be hung from. Vivian strongly suspected someone on the Parks staff had used the rock cutter, or something like it, to hollow out comfortable seating in a few of the pools the hot springs fed. But as that area had been off limits to them when they'd been here as tourists he really had no proof.

At least the parks people had leveled a lot of the paths already and built a nice hip high rock and cement wall up the path to the waterfall cavern, it kept them from tripping and falling into the deep, cold pool of water below. Julian sometimes complained that they could have placed it just a little closer to the falls, because as it was they had to either climb over the wall to get fresh water or walk all the way down to the pool below. Putting in a hand crank winch and bucket had been suggested, but with the falls being another dozen steps up the path it seemed kind of silly.

Vivian focused back on reading about how you tanned your own leather without fancy chemicals to help. It was revolting, but he had a feeling it was going to be necessary information very soon.
For one Jason kept bringing back livestock, and while the horses and goats were proving useful the few cows were a pain in the ass to deal with. They were good to feed from and after a bit of trial and error Jason had figured out how to milk both the goats and cows and was making primitive cheese to go on the rough flatbread Sami had figured out how to make thanks to another of the books in Jason's initial book shop find. But Vivian was tired of dealing with the cows snuggling up to him every time he went out to check on them. That and the damned cows had to be milked, twice a day, every day or they cried. And Vivian couldn't stand the idea of them being in pain.

Sami and Jason both had started trying to spin shed goat hair into yarn, as the horde of scavenged yarn wouldn't last forever. Vivian had asked Jason to teach him to knit as a way to help stay somewhat sane since he and Theon were both rather stuck here, his initial pair of socks was somewhat misshapen and large enough to go on over Sami's big boots, but if they could figure out how actually make thread he'd have plenty of time to practice. And socks were something they all needed as much as they were on their feet scavenging. Any wool or craft shop they found was looted of every bit of even potentially useful, chalks, cloth, yarn, tools and copies of pattern and instructional books. The last weavers shop there had been a few books on spinning yarns and spindles and spinning wheels as well as a windfall of threads, yarns and fibers, so Jason had hope that they'd be useful in helping them produce useable thread instead of short, useless twists. There had been instructional video disks, but those were useless without any means to play them. The only looms that had been found had been damaged, probably well before the disaster and in all the books there weren't any on how to repair the tools, so they were left behind. Sami had made a few special runs to nearby grocers locations that they'd already gutted of foodstuffs searching for mothballs to keep mice and insects out of the salvaged yarns.

Theon had started putting the bones of vegetable gardens in on the terraces in the valley behind their caverns and above where they kept the livestock. He hadn't much liked having to do it at night, but it needed to be done. They couldn't exactly just go to the market anymore and sooner or later they'd run out of canned fruits and vegetables. That and Sami and Jason had gutted anything useable out of every market and corner shop in every town and village within two days drive of here. They'd even brought back cartons of tiny empty jars for homemade preserves even though Theon couldn't see how they would find a use for things that didn't hold 300 milliliters. Maybe to use to drink out of, but that was it as far as he was concerned, and they'd scavenged drinking cups, bowls, spoons and glasses already. They were ranging further and further out, but that was more dangerous, and at some point they'd be completely out of fuel to run the motorbike and van, probably fairly soon if Sami's increasingly grin expressions were anything to go by.

They all would miss chocolate, even with them hoarding every bit they found it wouldn't last them very long. At least in the course of gutting every shop they could find Jason and Sami had found a few places that still had fruit trees. Most of them the fruit on the branches was nothing like ripe this time of year, but even green apples beat having nothing. And Jason had found a few groves of lemon, orange and apricot, but again there wasn't anything ripe.

They'd started pulling up the railway tracks leading to most of those small towns, with the exceptions being the ones where there were either orchards or vineyards. They left the main lines, mostly because they might be useful later for scavenging runs and they really didn't want to deal with normals searching the area trying to find who had pulled up their railway. The wooden ties underneath they'd muscled up onto the terraces for Theon to pile dirt in. Jason had locked those ties in place with carefully cemented blocks of stone, later he said he'd build full stone enclosures, later when they weren't scrambling quite so much. He just wanted a bit more time to go over the books on building walls without cement or mortar before he tried for anything serious. He'd found one with instructions for making your own cement, but that took far more work than they had time for right now.
Theon wasn't planting anything just yet, it was the wrong time of year for one, for another they had no clue what they were doing and didn't want to waste precious seeds unless they had to. That meant Theon was going through every gardening book he could read out of the lots Jason and Christian brought back and had them looking for more while they were out. They had a hand written list of all the titles and authors they had in their little library, so they wouldn't waste the effort to haul back copies of something they already had unless it was in a language they could use. German, French and Spanish there was at least one person in the group who could sort of read.

Vivian hadn't told anyone how disturbed he'd been when Christian and Julian had quietly confessed they'd gone through people's empty homes. It made him a little sick, but he understood that they really didn't have much choice right now. They'd scavenged food from a few back gardens and seeds and Sami had rescued several potted roses that Theon had turned around and planted near the very top of their valley.

Everyone had pretended they didn't see him crying when he did. Yellow roses had been his mother's favorites.

He pulled his useless phone out of his pocket and stared at it wistfully. He hadn't been able to charge the thing in years but hadn't been able to break the habit of carrying it. He knew Sami and Christian still carried theirs, but they used them for signaling each other and for checking around corners. But he wished, oh how he wished he could hear from Elsa one last time, hear his little girl giggle and say she loved him. He wished he could just turn it on again and see their picture, just once more.

At least their last words to each other had been of love and affection. Not like Katja and Jason, where Katja had told Jason flat out she hadn't wanted to talk to him right then and would talk to him later.

There hadn't been a later. They didn't know what had happened to her or the friend she was going to stay with.

Vivian felt two pairs of arms wrap around him as the weight of the book was taken from his hands. He smelled Julian's musk and Theon's lighter scent and broke down and sobbed.

The next night he'd made his decision.

Vivian was dead; he'd been too battered and broken to survive; only Risto remained.

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Serov, Russia

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Squeaks settled on the sun warmed rooftop and rested her chin on her folded forearms. They had supplies to last a few weeks if they were careful and they had everything tight packed so they could go on the horses. So they didn't need to worry too much about losing anything if they had to move in a hurry. With a bit of luck in hunting she and Levi could help stretch those supplies to last them a couple months, especially if Brian's foraging for edible plants was as fruitful as it had been these last couple days. They'd been lucky in finding an abandoned farmstead with all the livestock, other than the pigs, still roaming free. They'd even had a bit of a laugh at Levi's reaction to finding a partly developed chick in the egg he'd intended to fry for breakfast.

Even better the horse gear to ride and carry packs was still in salvageable condition. It had taken a lot of work and careful puzzling through the diagrams of a few books they found in the remains of the main house, but it was better than jerry-rigging things. Levi could read a little Russian, but it hadn't really helped with the books. He'd said the language was too specialized for what he knew
and gave them some examples that sounded hysterical in the translation.

Funnier was that as cool, smooth and confident as Brian was on the ground or running a city he was awkward as hell on horseback.

Her smile faded. Something told her they'd have plenty of time to become expert on horseback.

~0~ Lombrives caverns, France ~0~

Sami had been sketching on the large flat section of cave wall between their two main storage caverns and the path down to what was now their living area. Christian had found the paint that would turn a bit of wall into a chalkboard and they'd laid layers of the paint over more layers of the waterproof primer on the section of stone wall. He'd laid out the bare outlines of the continent; coastlines and mountains mostly, when he heard a commotion at one of the entrances to their caves. He carefully set down the chalks, because god only knew when or if they'd ever find colored chalks again, and went down to see. The lamps had been at the point where he would have had to refill their oil reservoirs soon if he wanted to keep working anyway, they were safe enough to just leave where they were so he just turned them down as far as he could without turning them completely off. If they burned out they burned out and he'd cuss about having to relight them, but they weren't much of a fire hazard.

The last time there had been a fuss it had been them finding a lone survivor from that long ago photo-shoot and Sami was torn between hoping it was more survivors and hoping it wasn't. Mikko Lindstrom had been hellishly sick when he'd dragged himself up to their proverbial doorstep three winters ago.

Linde had the changer gene, and had been dragging a sledge with the rapidly cooling body of one of his dearest friends. He'd done everything he could for Ville and had kept trying to get them to help; only to find help after it was too late for the more fragile changer to recover.

Sami hadn't been surprised when four days after his arrival Linde had coughed one last time, closed his eyes and followed Ville into death.

They'd burned the pair the next clear day they'd had, and used some of the wooden siding that they'd learned, only after they'd hauled it all home, burned with a thick, toxic black smoke. It had been a risk, but careful tending of the radio had told them that the railway runs had diminished and now would only run past their home once every couple of months. They all suspected they'd stop altogether within another year or two.

Sami braced himself and stepped out into the little entryway and froze when he saw who had appeared out of the predawn gloom.

He half sobbed as he reached for Chriss and was hugged back just as tightly.

“Sorry we’re late.” Chriss whispered. “We had some trouble at the border.” The smile made tears sting Sami's eyes as Chriss continued the old joke between them. “Jonne lost his passport.” Jason grinned and sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck in rueful acknowledgement of the well-worn jab.

Sami sobbed again as he looked at the other people who had appeared. Sir Christus and Jonne Aaron were cuddled snugly together and pressed into Jonne's thigh was a large, lean red brown wolf. Something about the way the wolf looked at them made Sami think it wasn't just a wolf or dog. A breath later and he watched the peculiar eye pulling change of wolf to man and sobbed again as he recognized the familiar sharp features of Mr. Snack, Negative's keyboardist.
They were alive; they looked tired and were all painfully thin and worn but otherwise alright.

They were *alive*.

Sami couldn't bring himself to let Chriss out of his sight for quite a long while that day.

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Theon was thrilled to turn the planning and timing of the garden over to Jonne, and more than happy to become simple grunt labor with Julian, Janne, since Snack said he would rather not answer to his old stage name, and Christian. Jonne got a composting system set up and after a bit of hemming, hawing and a few blushing explanations they'd started dumping their own waste in the piles to mix with food scraps, leaves and grasses and bits of green from the garden. If things worked out correctly in a few years they wouldn't be dependent on their limited looted stock of outside fertilizers.

Kris helped Risto carefully plot out the extent of their home and where to put workspaces. And they'd carefully gone through and organized their looted supplies a *lot* better than they had been. Getting the carefully of the shelving up had taken some effort as they’d had to find then haul cinder block and some more wood planking for the actual shelves. Once those went up they’d been able to organize the last jars, pots and bins of scavenged supplies where they could be easily gotten to. They’d even put up more curtain rods so they could hang lengths of cloth and leather hides up where they wouldn't be in as much danger of being mouse nibbled before they could be used. It let them use more of those silly little cup hooks for something useful anyway.

They'd gotten help from Jason and his new experimental home mixed concrete to carefully block off some passages already as they didn't go anywhere other than a steep and nasty drop into very deep, very narrow holes. With a bit of research in Jason's carefully hoarded library they found their caves connected to others further north, south and west. If they went far enough south there were bats, and at need they could harvest and compost bat guano for the gardens.

Right now they hoped they'd never have to, that cave *stank* so much it was hard to breath anywhere near it.

Chriss helped Sami lay out the map of what was left of their world on the cave wall in colored chalks and charcoal from their fire. The paper maps they had weren't really accurate anymore with dams and levees failing and letting rivers shift their courses away from what they'd known, and they were starting to fade and disintegrate as well as they had been printed on poor quality paper for the most part.

Jason was laying out the blocks of stone and the slate hearth to do a proper fire-pit and permanent cooking place. They'd had a chimney from their first year here; it was long past the time to quit using scavenged hibachi’s and do things properly. Even if they would be using scavenged grating for as long as they had it and would keep bringing charcoal and coal back to pile in heaps in one of the other upper caverns. They still siphoned diesel and fuel oil and brought it back where they could, and any bottle of lamp oil they found was brought back and stored for later use even though they had to be very careful as the plastic bottles that held that oil were becoming increasingly fragile. Sami had started to carry a 20 liter jerry can around when he went scavenging just in case he found a stash of oil bottles that were too fragile to move far, but that still had useable contents. If he found more than that or other fuels he marked the place and they took horses out with a larger container to bring it back in.

Jonne had asked him to be careful of their main fire-pit chimney, and Jason had reassured him by climbing to the surface through theirs.
If they could climb up to the surface through it, they could clean it and not have to be as afraid of a chimney fire.

They kept on scavenging and surviving and watched a few clusters of normal humans moving around the area with wary eyes.

~0~ somewhere in Perm, Russia ~0~

Levi crouched down a bit lower and waited. Closer, just a little closer, now! He leaped up and pounced, the rabbit barely had time to scream before it was dead with a broken neck. He trotted back to their little camp to clean and add this bunny to the rack of six he’d already gotten and hoped Squeaks and Brian had had as good luck as he had hunting. He for one was getting tired of mouse soup. Their horses had it good, they could graze anywhere on the rich summer grasses.

He never understood why Brian could cope with sunlight when most others like him burned sickeningly easily. Just like he never asked why he had a fox like shape where Squeaks was a clouded leopard. It just was. They had more critical things to think about, like where their next meal was coming from and if the next collection of humans would be safe for them to spend time around.

There really had to be a better way to make a living.

~0~ Lombrives caverns, France ~0~

Jason smiled from his bed as he watched Julian creep across the open space between his bed and Theon's. He had to stifle a snicker in the crook of his arm when barely a breath after Julian had crawled past Theon's bed curtains Risto crept over as well.

Those three were hopelessly cute and needed to just give it up and sleep together like Kris and Jonne did.

He’d have to bring it up to Sami that it might be better come winter to sleep together. The bed curtains helped with drafts, but shared body heat would probably do them a better turn in the long run. It wasn't like they'd get clothing mixed up, they'd raided the hardware place they'd gotten their hand tools from and emptied it of everything they thought they'd have any use for, from wire for snares to the little hooks to hang tea cups on that now were used to hook their bed drapes open on and hang other bits and pieces off the floor. They'd even grabbed the remaining usable doors, and used the things to make table tops for workspaces.

He didn't think about the humans that had tried to settle near them, and pushed the memory of sleeping curled around another soft warm body down and out of his mind.

His dreams had that body hard and lean and he couldn't afford that distraction right now.

~0~

Sami was grim when he came back from his foraging run.

“Bad?”

“Zombies.”

Risto winced at how terse Sami was. A terse Sami was generally a bad sign. Jonne let out a little whimper then quietly asked.
“How bad?”

Sami wrapped his arms around the little blond and buried his nose in Jonne's hair.

“Bad. But I'm full fed, so you don't need to be hungry.”

Risto shuddered. All the vampires had been horribly hungry, god knew he was feeling like his stomach was going to devour him from the inside out. Mammal blood worked, but it didn't work as well as human for whatever reason, and none of them could cope with the idea of hunting humans. It was hard enough right now feeding from Sami or the changers.

He watched as Jonne took a few swallows from Sami's wrist, then Theon, Kris and Chriss. He leaned weakly into Sami and reluctantly bit down on the offered wrist and took his few swallows.

“The humans are going semi nomadic.”

Risto blinked in confusion over the peculiar euphoria induced by the pathetic few swallows of blood. At least Sami's odd verbal sidestep had thrown the rest of them for a loop as well.

“Okay? So?”

Sami smiled wanly at Julian's puzzled question.

“One, no one knows who we are anymore, and two, I ran into a couple other vampires, moving fast, but they stopped and passed word.”

“Word?” Now Risto was curious. There had been whispering's about thirty years ago about surviving vampires organizing. He'd barely winced at Sami's jab about no one knowing who they were anymore, it had been painful as hell when some of the last pitiful group of humans that had tried settling near them had held a number of rather die-hard fans.

At least one of them had been able to finally teach them how to spin, and been a huge help teaching all of them more about knitting than they'd known before, even with all their hoarded books of instructions. Before her only Jason could knit at all well; after, well other than Theon, they were all at least passable.

It had still been hard when the last of them had been taken out one winter by a nasty flu virus, there had been nothing any of them could do.

“Moscow is down now.”

There were winces, Moscow had held out as a walled city for a lot longer than anywhere else they knew of. If Moscow was down that meant the last bastion of science as they had known it had fallen as well. It wasn't much comfort that someone had thought to send out the word.

“Some of their folk are setting up territories.”

“Territories?” asked Theon when no one else had the courage.

“Territories. Each group of vampires picks a territory and we go out, we'll try and keep knowledge alive. We'll carry news and tales and trade.” Sami's eyes closed and he swallowed hard. “And we'll hunt for pre-emergent’s. And,” he stopped and had to take a deep breath before he continued. “And we'll kill them.”

“How will we know?” whispered Julian, his face paper white as he huddled into Theon's side.
Risto gulped and wrapped his arms as far around both men as he could reach.

“I can taste the difference. I think all vampires can if they pay attention.” Sami grimaced and half shrugged, but when his eyes opened they were haunted.

“We'll need to teach some basic things then,” Chriss said with a grimace, “fundamental hygiene and sex education for one.”

Risto winced, but agreed. Diseases that had been all but wiped out when he'd been human were making a killer comeback and if people didn't take care of their water supplies they did more damage that any rampaging zombie ever could. He'd also seen a lot of girls barely old enough to carry a baby pregnant. Puberty had taken a hard shift back from the ten or twelve year old age group it had been before the bombs, now it was unusual for a fifteen year old girl to be menstruating regularly. Not that that little quirk had kept them from seeing a few ten year olds with huge bellies from pregnancy, they just weren't commonplace.

He'd dreaded having 'the talk' with Sofia, and now he'd have to do it over and over again?

But they'd be able to feed and not have to hurt anyone.

Well, not anyone who wasn't going to change anyway.

He felt like he was selling what was left of his tattered soul to the devil. From the looks on the rest of the guys' faces they felt the same way and Sami looked like he wanted more than anything to cry.

Christian sighed; he was old now, frail and gone completely white haired. Older than any of them had expected him to get given how crappy things were.

Then again none of them had really expected to make it this long themselves.

“When you have to kill make sure they die as happy as they can be? Some of them know they are changing.” Christian lifted almost blind blue eyes up from where they had been staring at a blank spot of stone floor as he continued to think aloud. “Native American tribes had rituals for coming of age, only we remember the books now, but we could use that. Put a bit of structure back in the world.”

Risto blinked as tears stung his eyes.

Christian was right.

From the sounds of things other groups were grappling with this issue, and for the good of all the Sofia's out there they had to do something.

“We'll need to figure out where our people are, and set up something like a schedule and have things to trade in case.” Risto didn't have to say in case what, they all already had all sorts of nasty ideas of what could go wrong.

Reluctantly they all nodded agreement to Risto's words and began planning what they needed to do to protect their territory.

~0~ flash forward : 150 years after the bombs, Old Moscow area (modern Muska region) ~0~

Grisha swore under his breath. Another wagonload of children dragged out to the back of beyond and left. And this time it hadn't been a left to fend for themselves, it had been left to die.
Sergey was sobbing brokenly as they carried each small limp body out of the wagon.

Small, limp and cold bodies, not a one of these kids could have been older than six or seven. Grisha prayed that their deaths had been quick, but knew just from the marks on the bodies they hadn’t been.

They laid the last one down at the end of the little line they’d begun after they’d found the wagon and its heartbreaking contents.

Sixteen children.

There had to be another way.

He reached out and wrapped his arms around Sergey’s ribs and hugged as hard as he could as the taller man broke down and wept for the waste.

~0~ Kirov area, Russia ~0~

Brian chewed his lip and watched as Levi cautiously took up the reins of the travel wagon. Tal seemed perfectly calm about having a complete novice driving, but Brian had noticed this was the oldest and the smallest of the troops travel wagons.

Squeaks had learned to drive a two horse team and now was working on learning to control a team of six as this troop didn’t have any four horse teams. He knew they all needed the knowledge, but it still made him jittery.

Just traveling with humans made him a bit jittery, but they really didn't have much choice right now. Alone they garnered far too much negative attention.

Bad enough that Squeaks had teased him by doing a handstand on the back of a moving horse, worse that Levi had found his near heart failure funny. Horses were just too damn big for him to be fully comfortable. It was silly, it was childish, but he still couldn’t help it.

At least they were leaving him alone about learning to do more than just ride one of the blasted things.

~0~ Bordeaux region, France ~0~

Risto sighed and shook his head in why amusement. Had he and the guys been this silly when they’d been young?

He watched the small group of young hunters showing off for a small clutch of pretty girls and had to admit, reluctantly, that yes they probably had been that silly and stupid.

His heart squeezed painfully tight when one of the girls huffed at the young men and catcalled back about them not helping with the gathering of all the lovely edibles growing on the riverbank.

Risto ducked his head and blinked back sudden tears.

She was so like Elsa, so like a woman she’d been named for. A woman who had been dead decades before she’d ever been born.

He shook his head sharply and hopped over the edge of the gully to slide down the incline to the riverbank below.

They were all startled, at least until they got a good look at him, then the hunters found themselves
being shanghaied into helping as Risto smiled and took up a basket from the numb hands of a woman who looked nothing like the mother of his child, but who had reminded him of her so strongly character wise that he’d given her the name when she became a woman.

He just hoped that this trip around he wouldn't have to kill anyone. It had been all he could do to not cry last time when he'd had to drain one kid dry because he was already sick and changing into a monster. Explaining to his parents had been the purest form of hell he knew of.

~0~ Muska region, Russia ~0~

Sergey sighed and squinted at the small dust cloud to the east. To anyone who didn't live here it was nothing, not worth the attention, but to him it was significant.

It wasn't moving terribly quickly, no faster than a horse team would.

He felt Grisha lean into his side.

“Trouble?” asked his small lover, one hand still tight around the handle of the water bucket they'd been using to drink out of as they worked on clearing the wheat field of grain.

“I don't think so. Is too slow, too small.”

Grisha nodded, but his brown eyes lingered on the bit of dust even as Sergey picked up the big scythe to start working again. The fosterlings barely noticed the pause, but because Sergey didn't take alarm at the dust cloud they ignored it.

~0~

Close to dusk, Levi grimaced. It was a lot later than he'd hoped get out this way.

They'd been told about a pair of 'Nighthunters' that lived out this way, and all but ordered to check in by a lone vampire. They'd been given a time limit of a month or be hunted down and killed as rouges.

That had been over two weeks ago. Levi still wasn't sure why they were obeying the odd order, well, other than the ‘be hunted down and killed’ part.

Brian had been seriously freaked out by the guy, and both of them were grateful that he hadn't gotten a look at Squeaks as she had been sound asleep in their tiny little travel wagon. She needed the rest, she'd gotten flattened by some bug that had kicked Levi's teeth in last summer.

But the sun was setting.

And there was someone watching for them.

Levi shared a look with Brian and clucked at the two horses to get them moving again.

Best get this over with.

~0~

Grisha nearly wept. Sergey had let out a loud, startled shout and he'd bolted out of their house to see why.

The dust cloud was a wagon with a two horse team and driving it were two men he'd never thought to see alive.
Brian and Levi, men they’d met on tour back before things had fallen in and they'd run back to Sergey's home farm as a good safe place to hide out. They had food stockpiled here, access to clean water and animals that would let him feed even if Sergey got sick again and couldn't feed him. Not that it was as likely now that they had two almost grown boys and a youngster to help.

But that wasn't the same as people. People they knew. People from before.

The hugs they’d gotten had been reassuringly strong and while Sergey had teased Brian about being near horses Grisha had seen movement from the back of the tiny caravan and frozen in shock.

Squeaks.

She was clearly still recovering from illness but was alive and like Brian and Levi didn't look to have gotten a day older in the intervening mass of years.

It was impossible, but she was like Levi and Sergey.

Grisha didn't care, she was alive. Alive and warm and being carried in Sergey's strong arms toward the house.

Their fosterlings were confused, not that any of the three would say anything given how happy Sergey and Grisha both were to see the visitors.

When they learned why Grisha nearly drowned in his tea laughing.

The Sanctuary vampires were sending out runners, one had ordered Brian to check in and followed it up with the or else we hunt you down and kill you bit that Grisha still felt was unnecessary overkill.

Brian was still dreadful with directions and had missed the Sanctuary by kilometers. But Ivan instantly volunteered to ride out and let the Sanctuary know they had checked in.

Maybe not how the runner had meant, but they had checked in. And this way they could keep Squeaks existence under the radar for a little while. Grisha had never heard of another woman becoming a changer, and he wasn't about to let the Sanctuary vampires get their hands on her. God himself only knew what Pioter would do with her. He might not do anything, or he might decide she was an abomination and kill her.

Pioter was hellishly fond of burning people alive as a deterrent.

~0~

Sergey was glad to have help, even if Brian and Levi weren't even as skilled as little Dima. His youngest foster son took some pride in being better at something than a grown up, fortunately Brian was only retaliating to the teasing with tickles followed by gentle cuddles. The boy wasn't like Ivan or Sasha, he wasn't a shape changer he was just a little human boy who had been abandoned by his family due to some idiot of an elder deciding the tiny boy was demon tainted. As if they boy was responsible for his eye colors, he certainly didn't choose to be odd eyed. And one brown and one hazel weren't all that different at arm’s length.

Levi had offered an idea after Grisha had proposed a solution to their little problem about transportation and work.

Grisha thought they should become acrobats in a traveling show, like they'd briefly done while
traveling through one of the more unsettled areas. Sergey agreed and knew a wagon maker that would work for trade and labor. More critically Sergey thought they could provide horses to pull said wagon from their rapidly expanding herd and thought he knew of a troop that would welcome them. It would let them get some of the mares out of the herd and maybe keep some potential inbreeding problems at bay. But the troop wouldn't be coming in range for several months at least as they only tended to winter in the general area.

Pioter might be a right bastard, but he made the area within three hundred kilometers of Sanctuary a safe place to live for human, changer and vampire.

Levi thought they should take little Dima out into the world to find himself a human wife and Grisha could see the point. The child shouldn't have to live a semi solitary life just because his changer and vampire foster family couldn't have a normal life.

As the foster child of acrobats the boy would fit right in with them, and Brian was already teaching Sasha some of the tricks they'd used before to hide in plain sight.

Old Igor wouldn't be able to build the wagon Grisha envisioned for several seasons, even with help skilled help that he didn't really have trained yet. But that would give Sasha time to grow and for Brian, Levi and Squeaks to get fully healthy and learn some things that would help them to hide in plain sight.

Like juggling. Dima was an excellent juggler. Grisha had been reduced to tears of helpless laughter just watching Levi learning some of Dima's favorite tricks.

By the start of winter the gypsies would be back at Winter camp and Sergey could run the idea past their leaders. Maybe next spring they'd go on a test run, Tomas was a cautious sort. If that worked well the following spring Levi, Brian and Squeaks would go with them, and Dima would have a chance to be as normal as any gypsy boy ever was.

~0~

Kris was laughing so hard he wasn't sure he was going to be able to keep his feet. Jonne had both hands over his mouth and was valiantly trying to not crack up but Jason and Chriss had no such restraint. Jason was on his butt already and Chriss was clutching a slender willow tree that was shaking and listing dangerously under his weight.

Sami just sighed and firmly hefted first Risto and then Theon up and out of the mucky bit of pond off their main fishing lake and shoved the raft of bundled reeds up where it was beached and wouldn't drift. Julian had already gone after Sami's headscarf before it was lost in the water.

Kris was sure it was so he could laugh himself silly and not have to do it directly to Sami's face.

But the big man looked absurd with a lily pad draped over his wet hair and a bedraggled flower still on its stem dangling over one ear. At least the makeshift raft had capsized in shallow water and before they were at the far end of the lake and loaded with water lily bulbs, fresh cattail stalks and other waterborne edibles.

“That's it, we're finishing the boat this summer.”

“Um,”

Kris turned and finally fell on his ass. Janne was standing there with a quizzical look on his face and his hands full of woven reed baskets that looked to be full of carefully packed eggs.
“Do I want to know?” asked the changer carefully.

“Harvesting water lily bulbs,” answered Sami tersely as he started searching for his headscarf. “Well, testing a raft so we could anyway. Didn't do so well.”

Julian offered the soggy bit of cloth, which Sami sighed and dragged up a smile of thanks for before accepting, wringing it out and starting to tie back it in place over his dripping hair.

The look on his face when he realized he had a lily pad hat made Kris crack up all over again.

Sami sighed, tossed the sodden head scarf on the bank and dragged Kris and Jason both into the water for a sound ducking.

Eventually they did finish harvesting lily bulbs, cattails and rushes, but only after a great deal of splashing and laughter.

~0~ flash forward: 380 years after the bombs ~0~

Jonne watched as the tribe sent a small group of hunters off to investigate the wails. He wished he’d found the pair sooner, if he had he might have been able to help the mother. But when he'd tripped over them she was already beyond any help he could have given.

Her son though, he was another matter.

He had one hell of a set of lungs on him, even if he was just a tiny thing. This troop had several women nursing babies, including their chief’s younger wife. It wasn't the baby's only chance, but it was the best immediate one. If they refused to pick him up Jonne would double back and scoop him up and sprint for home. His next planned stop didn't have any youngsters ready for adulthood, so it wouldn't matter too much if he was a little late getting to them.

One of the youngest hunters dropped to a knee beside the poor dead woman, recoiled and flipped a hand in a familiar gesture of warding off evil. One that still made Jonne roll his eyes. Fortunately one of the older hunters reached down and pulled the bit of woven cloth holding the baby to his mother's chest back to reveal the little one's squalling face.

Jonne chewed his lip for a long moment as he watched the man's face, the blankness really didn't tell him any of what the man was thinking, but Jonne let out an inaudible sigh of relief then the elder sent the younger back for the chief and the shaman.

Seeing both Chief and Shaman already headed their way comforted Jonne more, but he still held his breath a little when the shaman pulled out a small, well-worn bag that he knew held the bones this tribes shaman had used for generations to divine the future.

One toss and he still might be sprinting for home with a little bundle.

The Shaman did his little song and dance trick, even after all this time Jonne felt it really was just a song and dance game, but it did settle the hunters. Then he threw the handful of small bones, shells and stones and pondered the resulting pattern.

“The boy will walk with change.”

Jonne blinked even as the hunters murmured at the cryptic comment. But the man's next words made Jonne let out another soundless sigh of relief.

“He will bring us luck for as long as he is with us. The good spirits watch over him.”
The Chief nodded and reached out to pull the little one free of the wrappings that held him to his mother and tucked him, dirty diaper and all into his own cloak.

“He will be a brother to my own sons.”

The Shaman nodded and began directing the hunters to gather the needed materials for a pyre, just because the child was good luck didn't mean that they were going to leave his mother's body lying around for evil spirits to use.

Jonne eeled away from his hiding spot and bolted toward home, no need for him to linger now that the little one had a new home.

~0~

Mia glared at the Shaman. As if the man hadn't thrown the divining bones a dozen times and each time had them come up in patterns even she knew were favorable.

“He harms none, he is still a child.”

The old man sighed and looked down at the child who was looking back up at him with wide green eyes. If he hadn't seen the boy change his shape into a pale gold wolf cub he'd have thought Aele's tales were just childish foolishness brought on by a boy jealous of his younger foster brother.

But the child changed, had run at Curly's heels and flushed birds out of the reeds for Bright Eyes to test his skills with a throwing stick on.

Last summer the child hadn't been able to work such magic, but this spring he'd been bitten by a striped viper. Unlike many grown men the child had only sickened and not died, but afterwards he'd been able to change his child skin for a young wolf skin.

Buono had offered the notion that the good spirits that watched over the boy had taken some of the viper's magic and twisted it so the boy could survive the bite.

He threw the bones again and stared down at the patterns.

“There will be good hunting down at the spring.”

The Shaman narrowed his eyes a little at the child's still piping voice, but the look behind those green eyes held no malice.

Pity he already had three boys in training, and one almost ready for the trials that would either make him a full-fledged shaman in his own right or kill him. This boy had a keen eye and an understanding of the patterns of the world that would have made him an excellent wise one.

But three was all he could train at once, and something told him after Aton went through his trials there would be no more apprentices for him.

A shaman who could shift his shape would be a thing to sing stories of around the fires long after this boy child's bones were dust under the Old Souls boots.

He sighed and nodded as he reached out to pat the boy's head.

“Yes there will be little one, the hunting will be very good and Aton will be very pleased with how well his callings have gone.”

The child paused and got a pensive look on his face. But Aton was odd of an apprentice, he'd been.
a man, with a family traveling to visit his wife's tribe. At least until a landslide had swept them all away, only Aton had been found alive in the morass of shifting mud.

He'd had visions, and the shaman had been concerned that those visions would drive the man to his death. But he'd healed, slowly, but he had healed and he'd begun training Aton to keep his powers contained safely.

“He'll be a good shaman, but he won't be like you.”

Mia gaped at the boy but all the shaman could do was smile sadly as he patted the boy’s fine pale hair.

“No little one, no shaman is ever like another.'

He'd have to find a way to protect the boy. He still brought them luck, and perhaps Aton would see fit to try taking him as an apprentice, that would help keep Aele's childish jealousies at bay.

He was no competition for a wife, as no shaman married and very few sired children Aele could salve his pride by having a pretty wife or two or even three if he was successful enough. And then he could gloat over the fat children those wives would produce and when the time came he might take his father's place and lead the tribe.

There was a happy outcry at the camp perimeter, he would have to sit down with Aton, Eammau and Saul. The good spirits watched over this child, so it was a good idea to keep him safe and protected even if he could change his skin for that of a young wolf.

~0~

When the Old Soul came for the tribe’s manhood rites Koira knew Bright eyes and Curly would go into the tent and come out changed. Something would happen behind smoked hides, wreathed in Kesh smoke and drowned out by drumming of the Shaman and his apprentice. Boys would go in and men would come out. If they didn't come out it was because the spirits saw something that was wrong and took them away. The Old Souls always grieved for the lost ones, but Koira knew, knew in his bones Curly would come out a man.

Curly swore nothing would change.

Koira knew things would, men didn't keep the company of boys unless they were their brothers. And even though they had been nursed at the same breast Koira wasn't Curly's brother, not truly. As a man Curly would have new duties assigned to him, and would begin looking seriously at the girls, trying to plant a child in one or more and then looking for a wife.

The Elders had decided Koira wouldn't stand for Rites with the other boys his age. Buono might still be chief but he was old and the other elders found him disturbing. He could change his skin for that of a wolf, so while he might be assigned the duties of a man as far as perimeter guard and hunting were concerned he would never be allowed to become a true man in the eyes of the tribe.

If Aton had taken the old Shamans place things might be different, but Aton had walked into the snow the winter the Old Shaman had died and not come back. The older of the two apprentices had run to the nearest tribe and in exchange for a full Shaman had stayed to learn at their Shaman's knee.

The new Shaman hadn't liked the omens as well as the old one, hadn't liked that the good spirits liked this child and had listened with both ears to Aele's continued complaints. When the chief passed Koira had promised himself he'd find another tribe to walk with.
So all Koira could do was keep watch from the ridge for the Old Soul with his changer eyes and sensitive nose and hope against hope that the Old Soul wouldn’t come today. Hope that none of the other children watching and hoping they would be allowed to walk the Old Soul into the encampment would not see him and walk him in either.

“You don’t seem excited about the coming events.”

Koira yelped at the smooth voice behind him and spun from where he had been lying on his belly to lay on his back and stare up at the slender man with his odd hair. It looked like a badgers back, black on top and white on the sides. Blue eyes that looked like they had seen worlds rise and fall stared out of a very young face.

“One would think all the boys coming of age would be glad of the changes coming.”

Koira gulped and blinked. The Old Soul didn't know what he was, hadn't realized which of the boys he was.

The Old Soul had crept up on him, and this one could normally be heard for a good distance thanks to the chiming shell and silver earrings he wore. Silver and shell to prove to even the most skittish that he was no evil spirit as nothing evil could take the touch of silver without burning and shell was sacred to the sea spirits and they allowed nothing evil in their waters. Not even the best hunters had been able to sneak up on him in years, if he couldn't smell them he could hear them and he hadn't smelled anything human on the breeze.

It was a game among the boys to see who could sneak up the closest, as they all knew if they could get within bow-shot of Koira they could do the same to a deer. Most of the time it was just a game, but the last year or so some boys had made it more painful, so Koira tended to pay close attention to what his nose and ears told him to keep from being struck by stones from the younger ones.

Then his traitorous tongue spoke. He'd sworn to himself that he wouldn't beg, and he failed.

“Please don’t take him away.”

Those old eyes blinked and Koira found himself facing someone frightening, someone who moved faster than even he did as he realized what he’d said and turned to scramble away and found himself being held fast in a grip that even Ulta, the tribe’s strongest man, wouldn’t have been able to shake. Koira fought to not cry like the child he was condemned to forever remain as those intent blue eyes bored into his and seemed to read his very soul.

Eventually the swift warrior receded and the mild man that everyone talked about and the women whispered eagerly of came back into the Old Souls face. The hands that had held him so tightly gentled and Koira had to swallow hard at how tenderly those slim, strong fingers brushed his hair out of his eyes, how tenderly they cradled him close.

“Ah, I see. Changer blood. The elders won't let you be part of the ceremony.” The sad smile that followed those words made Koira blink in confusion, and his next words were even more puzzling.

“Don’t worry Nuori, your Alpha will come. I see you as a man, it will come, you'll see.”

Koira could only nod, and then he did his duty with a heavy heart and led the Old Soul into camp. He didn't register the envious looks of the other children when the Old Soul hugged him and dropped a gentle kiss on his forehead before he turned and greeted the Shaman and Chief.

~0~
Koira watched over the tent all that night, through the next day and well into the evening. The drumming made his heart hurt and the pungent smell of burning Kesh made his head spin. But then the tent flap opened and the Old Soul came bounding out. Koira barely even blinked at the pinkish skirt thing the man had wrapped around his slim hips, even though it was short enough that if he bent over everything he'd been graced with at birth would be on display. The boys who had gone in with him came out on unsteady legs as men, some alone others like Curly and Bright eyes leaning on one another for balance.

He held his breath and counted, twelve had gone in, but only ten came out. Curly and Bright eyes were the last. He let out the breath he'd been holding in a rush of relief.

Koira closed his eyes; there would be two tents in mourning tonight.

But at least it was only two. And Little Bear had always had problems keeping up, always been short of breath and often went blue. The Shaman looked un-surprised that he didn't walk out, but he'd been fighting with the spirits for many seasons to keep Little Bear alive.

Three summers ago they had had ten boys go into the tent and only four men come out. Thank the winds they hadn't had any girls that year, losing girls hit the tribe hard. They hadn't seen that Old Soul since, but he had looked saddened and said he was going to carry the lost souls to the far mountains. He'd headed that direction carrying the tokens the families had given him for the six lost ones.

Koira had never heard of anyone coming back from the far mountains except in legend, and the small blond Old Soul didn't really seem the stuff of legends even if the women he'd done Rites for spoke highly of his skills.

He listened as the Old Soul told the tribe the names of their new men.

He'd given Curly, with his head of wild dark curls, an Old Name, he was Lauri, and Bright eyes with his long lean muscles and far seeing blue eyes also got an Old Name, Janne. The others were more common names, like Little Otter simply becoming Otter and Cricket becoming Singer. Dancer was given an old name, and would be Perre like his grandfather had been, something that made his grandmother's eyes well with unshed tears.

Koira wanted to cry, his friends the boys he grew up with were all but dead, so he quietly shifted to his wolf shape and crawled off to spend the night with the tribes hunting dogs.

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Koira woke to the feel of strong fingers stroking his head. To his surprise he also felt a familiar lanky body wrapped up behind him and heard a familiar snore nearby.

“Silly cub, they wouldn’t forget you.”

Koira blinked up at the Old Soul and let out a small whine of confusion.

“No, you wouldn’t know would you. Did you ever wonder little one? Why the Dark Ones and monsters tend to leave your tribe alone? When everyone you come in contact with has terrible stories?” The strong gentle fingers kept stroking over his head, rubbing with easy familiarity over all the spots that itched in this shape.

Koira shook his head in confusion. Elder Bouno had taken him in as an infant and had him put to the breast of his younger wife alongside her own child. To everyone’s surprise both boys had thrived and Koira still loved Curly, Lauri, as a brother.
“You keep them away little one. Just having you here warns other Dark ones away, your presence protects them and makes our job easier. They avoid you and we don't have to hunt them down for doing harm to our people. Messengers who aren't local are wary because they can smell you and I think you've learned how to smell us so you'll be even more careful.”

Koira felt himself shifting back to human in shock. The Old Soul said ‘us’ when speaking of the Dark Ones. He also implied some things Koira didn't want to think too hard about. These people were all the family he had. He didn't want to lose them.

“Wha, who?” he stuttered the question as he stared into those blue eyes.

“Shhh,” that voice soothed as gentle fingers silenced him by resting over his lips. “As long as they treat you well, we’ll leave you here. But if they hurt you all bets are off. We don't tolerate abusers anymore. Life is too short to be lived in fear and pain. Remember that.” Then he did something that Koira had only ever heard of him doing to the girls, he leaned in and kissed him.

Koira was dazed; he’d never been kissed before, not even in the games boys played together as their bodies made the turn toward being men. Suddenly he understood why the girls liked kissing, if all of them made you feel this wobbly and out of control.

“But, wha...”

“Shhh,” Koira found himself lost in those blue eyes. “Once, long ago, before the sky fell, I was called Christus. But I can’t let you remember that just now. Just remember this, you have a place away from here if you want it.”

Koira was confused but then he couldn’t even scream as he saw the twin flashes of needle sharp teeth, he felt twin pricks on his throat that barely hurt at all and then darkness swept him under again even as his body burned in pleasure like he'd never felt before.

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Kristian trotted away, leaving as always, before the camp awoke. He’d be well away before the drugs he'd laced their beer with wore off enough for them to wake up properly. Any hangover they felt would be attributed to the beer and Kesh from the celebration of adding ten strong men to their numbers. The gifts they’d given him would trade well elsewhere and he was well fed enough that he would be able to share blood with Jonne when he saw him. He'd done a good check of the area before herding the boys into the ritual tent to get stoned enough for him to check, so the risk wasn't as big as it could have been. That and he was sure the poor changer he'd just left curled asleep by his brothers had been far too stressed to do anything but pace and watch. His nose was more than enough to serve as watch over the camp under normal circumstances.

Not that these were precisely 'normal' anymore.

“You don’t normally get that close to them.”

Kristian yelped and lurched sideways, away from the darkly amused voice.

“Perkele! Jason! Give a man some warning!”

“Why? That takes all the fun out of it.”

The second voice was soft, but rich with quiet laughter.

“Sami! Quit encouraging the wolf!”
Kristian squeaked as the larger man pounced him playfully into the tall grass and nuzzled up under his jaw. When Kristian was well and truly breathless the blond looked down at him with serious blue eyes as Jason scanned the horizon for any potential trouble.

“Kris, seriously; I know they look like Larry and Jay, but we can't take the…”

Kristian cut Sami off with a pained wince and light fingers on Sami's lips. They'd had this talk before; he didn't want to hear it again just now. Not now when he felt guilty for leaving a changer child behind. He'd told the boy far too much and had to go back and muddle his memories. He wasn't even entirely sure their tricks would work on someone like themselves, especially not without Kesh's stupor inducing fumes to help. Thank god that even the best weed burned out of their blood in a few minutes or he'd have been far to stoned to do his job last night. Someone had gone hunting the good stuff for last night's ceremony and done a stellar job of drying things out properly. He'd stashed away enough in one of his satchels for several more ceremonies this size.

He'd have to hand it over when they got home or he'd be tempted to use some of it to ease the ache in his chest.

“I know, they aren’t them, they just feel so much like them.” Kristian curled a little into the comforting hold of the bigger man. “It’s been so long, I want to feel like something of them is still out here.”

There were a pair of resigned sighs, and Kristian felt two set of strong comforting arms wrapping around him.

“Come on, Jonne is at Syvä Hyvin waiting for us.” Sami offered softly, not chiding Kris further on his slip with the trio of young men sleeping soundly in the grass only a few hundred meters away.

Kristian let them pull him back to his feet and with barely a glance back at the camp that held a fair haired, green eyed changer child and two men that reminded him of lost brothers and set off with Sami and Jason toward the sinkhole that led to the Down-below and safety. He wanted to be home and safely wrapped up in Jonne's arms.

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Brian waited and when the time was right reached up and caught Squeaks like it was nothing to hold her up in the air. He braced and she tangled their fingers together and pushed up into a neat handstand over his head, after a moment to catch her balance she let go with her right hand. She trusted him to not drop her as he turned them both around in a few lazy circles for the amusement of the night time crowd. He was just flipping her up into the air to drop back into his arms and Levi came tumbling out for his portion of the act. Levi's happy whoop covered the soft grunt Brian let out as he hefted Squeaks high up into the air. She might look lean and lithe but she was solid packed muscle and bone just like he and Levi were.

Brian smiled as Levi palm spun off the walls, did pull throughs and flips off the bars they'd set up and generally ran tricks that if any of the humans in the crowd tried them would have them flat on their ass at best. The aerial kick flips and forward rolls someone with very good balance and a bit of strength could pull off, but not with the speed and height Levi had. Some of the dancers in the troop would shoot Levi faintly envious looks at how high his leaps could go, if they all hadn't been willing to help their fellow performers out they might have had problems. But that was something they had learned a long time ago how to avoid, and it wasn't like they didn't share out any windfalls they got.

Brian could hear the soft awed murmurs from some of the girls about his partner seeming to be
able to fly and knew the gasps wouldn't stop while they were working. There was a reason the shows were staged and timed out like they were, it helped keep them from directly competing with their fellow entertainers.

With Squeaks safe on the ground he could join in and do flips and drops from the scaffolding they had over, around and beside their stage. He still smiled when he saw her balancing on her hands and doing smooth back bends toward the crowd. Her loose trousers hung low enough on her slim hips to show off the mark of Team Tempest on her lower back. The rest of the troop might think it was just a family mark that they painted on in bright colors for the show, but they knew it was ink under that bright paint, set there in the last days before everything had gone to hell.

He might have been drunk that night, but there was no way he regretted his ink, even if most of the time no one saw it without a protective layer of green and black paint.

It might have taken a fair bit of experimentation to find the means to make a good, safe green body paint but now that they had a good mix it was something of a trademark. In every troop they traveled with they got asked why they used green, why not red like so many other performers did. The black no one questioned, everyone used black.

The first time he'd been asked Brian had been caught to flat footed to answer without breaking down in tears, even now the first person in a troop to ask tended to get answered first by a look of near agony. No matter how much time passed Brian would always get caught by the question and remember the arguments about team colors and miss Sugar and Steel, Diddy and the rest of the team. He would always wonder if anyone else had survived back home to wear Tempest green.

Levi had saved that first situation by explaining it had been a traditional color for their family for years upon years. Green was Tempests color, it always had been.

Tradition explained a lot. And even Brian's initial reactions lent weight to them being the last of their line. Even after they dropped out of sight for a few years when they came back people assumed they were children of the family carrying traditional names, traveling in a traditional group of three and wearing traditional greens in their stage gear and in their performance paint.

It wasn't like other families didn't do similar things. One set of dancers used a particular shade of pink that was pure hell to dye and keep, but they did it because it was traditional.

But every time they ran across a juggler named Dima it made Brian's heart skip a little in pain. Especially if that juggler had one brown eye and one hazel eye.

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Adam looked up the hill toward Bailey and Birdie and nodded.

Whoever had been here for the main fish run was gone. They'd left the fish weir repaired and plenty of sign that they'd been productive. Drowned signs of cooking and smoking fires, repaired smoking sheds and rub marks on trees and posts from drying lines being set up and intensively used. The rock cache in the caverns above the river had been resealed up, and another one had been made in another of the holes deep in the cliff wall.

Birdie crept down as Bailey shadowed him in his wolf shape.

“Anything left?” asked Birdie. He was still wary of running into any others like them after they'd run into a group that had ordered Birdie to report in and then to surrender Adam and Bailey.
Birdie hadn't been wild about that. Bailey had been flat out pissed and Adam had learned some things about himself that were a bit uncomfortable to live with.

He'd coped with burning thirty vampires alive, he'd had some nightmares, but it kept Birdie safe.

But back to the question.

“Some fish stuck in the weir and a couple new caches. Not much else.” Adam shrugged. Whoever this group was they were very organized and absolutely not local. The locals claimed that spirits used this river and avoided this prime fishing spot like it was cursed. They'd even go so far as to avoid the whole area at the times of year when the fish ran just to avoid meeting up with said spirits.

Bailey shook himself a bit as he shifted to human.

“So let's go fishing.”

Adam smiled as Birdie nodded his agreement as he carefully untied his battered footgear. They'd have to raid a city soon and see if they could find any old tires so they could replace the treads of his sandals. It was getting harder as dry rot made most of what they found less than ideal or flat out unusable.

But that was an issue for later, right now getting a good fish dinner in their bellies was a lot more important. The people who had used this spot had left a good fire pit and a pile of firewood that they could use. It would be silly to leave it to waste.

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Lauri wasn’t looking forward to the dawn at all.

With the dawn would come the River People, and with them his new wife.

He didn’t really want a wife. Aele said he was being stupid, that he was too old for the boys’ games. But his elder brother was chief now and could get away with saying a lot of things that the Elders would have slapped him silly for before. One of those things was decreeing his younger brother would take a wife, even though he'd only been a man for two years and had yet to get any of the girls he played with pregnant. Normally a man had to have at least one child that he was reasonably certain was his running about before any father would consider him as marriage material for a daughter. Generally a girl had to have a child before any man made her an offer, and only sometimes was that child thought to be his.

Janne wasn’t wild about getting a River Woman as a wife either. But the Shaman had thrown the bones and decreed this generation would marry outside the tribe for the good of the Blood. All they could do was bow their heads and obey. It wasn't something that disliking it could change, not with this Shaman. He wasn't one their old shaman had trained, he'd come here already adult and going gray at the temples to take over when the old man had died and his successor had walked into a storm never to return.

Weak Blood was something they all feared. It meant girls going into the Sleep of Changing and never waking up women on the other side and boys not surviving manhood rites. Omiya had lost all but one of his sons and that last one was sickly and not expected to survive the Rites this fall. He’d never bred to another wife after his first had died and it was likely in his old age he’d have no family at all left to care for him. This Shaman used him as an example of what breeding to close could do. Omiya and his wife had had a grandfather in common, something that was frowned on,
but had been allowed as Omiya and Anya had been so devoted that if separated it was decided they
wouldn't give any children to the tribe. It turned out that other than one daughter they still weren't
giving the tribe any children. Yva had already been married to a young man of the Blue Mountain
tribe and gone to live with his people. As far as Lauri knew she only had daughters, no sons to
send back. Not that even her eldest daughter was remotely of an age to send back even if she had
been born a boy.

It was rather sobering. And if the whispers of the Elders were true that wasn't the worst that could
happen.

If the Blood was too weak the Dark Ones could possess the not yet women and men and turn them
into raving monsters. Monsters that would savage their own families and friends until they were
destroyed. There was no way to exorcise a person possessed by a Dark Ones spirit. The only way
to save them was to kill them and burn the body to free the tormented spirit and cast the Dark One
back out.

Koira lifted his head off his paws, pricked his ears up and let out a low whuf and yanked Lauri out
of his dark thoughts.

Since his and Janne’s manhood rites Koira had developed an uncanny ability to scent the Old
Souls and some of the more dangerous dark spirits. So he and Janne were both looking the same
direction as the white gold head, their hands reaching for their weapons.

A soft chuckle and a familiar head of black and white hair adorned with chiming silver and shell
ornaments came out of the brush.

“I should know better than to try and fool your clever nose twice. Well done Nuori.”

Lauri felt a familiar twinge of jealousy as Koira shifted from lean white gold wolf shape to slender
man shape and threw himself at the Old Soul the Elders called Mäyrä for the stripes in his hair.
Twice a year this Old Soul had found their tribes camp for Rites, twice a year every year for the
last six. And every time since he and Janne had been made men Koira was the one to walk him into
camp, even the unexpected time in midwinter when sickness was sweeping the tribe Koira had
known he was coming before he appeared with his pack sack filled with things that had helped
make people well again. Even if Koira was explicitly forbidden to keep Watch to allow some
other person gain the prestige of walking the Old Soul in, somehow this Old Soul would find a
way to have it be Koira. It was like he waited or actively sought him out for the privilege. Koira
was smart enough that he at least tried to have another child walking in with them, but it was pretty
clear the Old Soul was interested in what Koira had to say.

It made Aele furious. He'd almost lost his mind in rage when he'd heard the Old Soul call Koira
'Nuori’. Koira hadn't been through Rites, he'd never been formally given an adult name of his own
but the Old Soul clearly still considered Koira a man. When he'd come with medicine to make the
sick well he'd trusted Koira to find more of the makings for one tea that worked better than the
others at bringing down the terrible fevers. Had shown him the parts, had him smell and taste
them and sent him after more of some of them. Aele had seethed but as their Shaman, his
apprentices and Wise Woman had been among the sick he'd had no choice but to let Koira help the
Old Soul. The Shaman had recovered, but the Wise Woman had been very old and she'd passed
over to the spirit world as had the older of the Shaman's apprentices.

Lauri had been sickened to find that after the Old Soul left Aele had begun to set all the worst
camp tasks to Koira and was punishing him with a kick or a cuff if things weren't done to his
satisfaction. But he'd also seen others suddenly finding reasons to pick up after themselves a bit
better, so it was only Aele and a few of his cronies making truly horrible messes. After one attempt
Aele had been forced to relent on making Koira dig the camp privy pits alone, it just wasn't possible for one man to do alone. The pits were just too critical to the health of the tribe to just skip, and it wasn't always possible, or wise, to just reuse last year's pit.

What made Lauri more uncomfortable was the fact that Koira had begun calling this Old Soul by a name, Christus. It had started the next time they had seen him for the Fall Rites after Lauri and Janne had become men. They had been coming back from hunting ducks on the lake and Koira had been in his familiar wolf shape. One moment they had been gathering in ducks from the triple kill from a lucky strike Janne had made with his new throwing stick and the next Koira had been off like a slung stone.

They had grabbed their ducks and taken off after Koira, mostly because the last time he'd taken off like that there had been a lone Dark One lurking around the edges of the camp. It had taken the entire camp to kill the thing even with it being sick with the black wound fever, but Lauri never forgot that they owed their lives to Koira's loyalty. His early warning meant no one was bitten by the awful thing. Old man Kullen told them he'd been lucky when he'd been bitten and only lost fingers thanks to the quick actions of the Old Soul they had then, a slim and dark haired man they'd called 'Varjo.'

They'd gone after Koira and found him pinning the Old Soul to the grass, licking his face, tail wagging like mad and making 'Christus' laugh as he buried his hands in Koira's pale golden fur. Then he'd shifted and called the Old Soul by a name and been answered both with the name Nuori and with gentle touches like the Old Soul granted to the girls.

It had been disquieting to say the least. The Old Souls had a direct line to the spirit world, more direct even than the Shaman had, it was rumored that Old Souls could walk into the spirit world in their own flesh and walk back out again. That was a trick even the best Shaman couldn't pull off, they could only cross the boundary between worlds in spirit. Lauri didn't want to lose his friend because Koira had followed and Old Soul's Walk and couldn't come back.

It had also bought to their attention that Koira was staying in wolf shape far more often than he had before their Rites. Unless he had a task that required two hands Koira stayed on four paws.

And here lately, after the Shaman had decreed a generation of out breeding and Aele had started talks with the River People about trading breeding partners Koira was almost never seen in man shape in camp. It hurt not hearing his friend's soft voice and quiet laughter. Hurt more than he'd thought it would.

Janne said he was trying to avoid Aele’s eye and his heavy fists. In wolf shape the worst he got was an occasional glancing kick, and it was easy for his white gold shape to merge in with the other dogs. Only a few of the dogs had fur that wasn't some variation of golden brown and kicking at random wasn't wise as the dogs had value in themselves and the bigger ones used for hunting and guarding the camp might bite back. In man shape he'd get blows for doing the work he was told to do. And the Shaman had begun throwing the bones and glaring at Koira after any bit of ill luck, no matter how small.

Lauri looked up and jumped when he found the Old Soul watching him from a fingers width away from his nose.

Janne laughed at him and accused him of being lost in the clouds. Lauri scowled and looked around for Koira.

“He went ahead so your brother won’t have a reason to be angry.”
Janne’s laughter stopped and the two of them exchanged an uneasy look.

How were they supposed to answer something even the Elders shied away from? They didn't want to make things worse for Koira after the Old Soul left.

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Koira had crept up on a pair of grouse on his way back to camp and by sheer luck had gotten both. So when he came in with his mouth full of the one he hadn’t wolfed down the Old Soul was being fawned over by all the girls nearing womanhood.

He had thought that if he’d been nowhere to be seen when Lauri and Janne brought Christus in Aele would be pleased, but obscurely the chief seemed to still be displeased. Koira ducked his head and quietly slunk in and dropped the grouse at Christus’s feet and hoped that would make Aele happier.

It didn’t.

He managed to keep a yelp behind his teeth when Ollie grabbed him by the scruff and hauled him off to put him to work dragging in loads of firewood.

Later he would wish that he had yelped and attracted attention. Later when he was exhausted, tied and muzzled and only able to watch and whimper unhappily as Lauri and Janne and Aipo floated away.

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Aele dutifully sympathized with Ty, the River People’s Headman. Flash flooding had cost the man a boat and six good men. Only chance had kept the death toll from being higher and taking precious women and children. But Ty's misfortune started an idea up in the back of Aele's mind. His eyes lit on Janne, Aipo and his younger brother Lauri where they sat with their new wives. He made all the polite noises then made his offer.

Part of the bride prices for the three women had been large timbers to hollow new boats from. Timbers they'd hauled down from the nearer mountain sides and counted themselves lucky that it was just labor this time and time not a more costly bride price of shell, stone or metals. A month’s worth of work and they’d floated an even double hand of the huge trees down the river. And they'd brought home some interesting furs for the women to finish curing and baskets of last season’s nuts either stolen from squirrels or picked up off the ground still sound. They'd also left two boys who were almost men with one of the hill tribes as they had found girls that were willing to have them without a bride price. Their Old Soul would be around later and if the boys lived or died, well it made no difference to Aele, they weren't his problem anymore.

He just wished Lauri had fallen for a hill tribe’s girl, it would have cost him less to have him married up there.

If Ty was willing to do the work on his new boats here Aele would see that the three new couples had a proper start up for their news lives. Well, that would be how he offered things, and he might be able to keep some of the gifts to the couples as they couldn't take everything with them on a little boat. He could trade for lesser things and not have the huge loss that these three weddings were costing him.

Ty was willing. Even with having to learn a new way of life he was gaining three able bodies, and not losing three others like he'd expected. He'd get children from those three men, and his tribe
would have some new blood.

And *that* fixed any chance of the Elders deciding that maybe Lauri would be a better chief than he was. He'd have to set a few of his men to 'helping' and see what boat building secrets they could learn.

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Kris frowned.

He wasn't liking what he was seeing. This Shaman wasn't paying attention to the traditions of his adopted tribe and wasn't giving as much weight to Kris's warnings as Kris felt he should be.

If Koira had been purely human Kris would have signaled for help from Jason and there would have been a terrible 'accident' where Koira would have abruptly vanished leaving only a bloodied bit of clothing behind. But Koira wasn't human, they couldn't snatch him and relocate him with another tribe quite that easily, not like they'd already had to do with a few baby boys that the one girl from this tribe who had married into the new shaman's old tribe. The old bastard had sent a nasty set of stories to the new, young shaman there and the poor girl was having her boy babies exposed because of a quirk of chance and her parents being cousins. None of her brothers had any nasty surprises lurking, they were just tending to have asthma and heart problems, things that couldn't be fixed or effectively treated now.

So far all three of her son's had been scooped up from where they'd been abandoned and carried off to new homes without any problems. None of them looked to be having any problems with the genetic defect that had killed three of her brothers. Kris cast a look at the last boy and sighed.

Asthma was going to take this poor kid out too. And the Shaman would be casting long dark looks at Koira like it was his fault that the poor kid’s lungs couldn't cope with Kesh smoke.

Pity Sami was being stubborn. There was a runner due soon, they could nudge the poor kid into running away and possibly get him taken into a tribe further east.

Hell, just pair him to the runner, anything was better than what he was seeing right now. The old Chief and Shaman would be spinning in their graves if they knew.

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Brian hated the waiting, but also knew he was far too conspicuous even after all these years of hiding in plain sight. He was just too damned tall. His golden blond hair wasn't that uncommon and could be hidden easily enough if needed, but his inches were rare nowadays and were flat impossible for him to hide. He and Levi sat by the fire with Stalvus and discussed where the troop would travel next and mused on how well this stop had profited the group as a whole. Levi didn't have the same problem he did given he was somewhat shorter and didn't need blood to function, and Squeaks as a Hybrid was in a better position to hunt for them both. Unfortunately her ability to hunt for them both was cyclical, and with their itinerant lifestyle things didn't always synch up well enough for him to be able to just let her hunt for him.

Not that he liked having her hunting for them at all.

He tried to find comfort in the fact she'd only be taking out men who went after her first and that it was getting close to the time period where she'd *need* blood just as badly as he had those first few years, but it still bothered him that she was off trolling for rapists.

A bump to his hip from Levi got him back on task. He didn't have time to muse on vagaries of fate
and genetics right now.

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Squeaks smelled them before she saw them and followed the faint odor of rot until she found the source. When she saw them her heart broke a little, three kids, all sick, all clearly having been abandoned before they had become ill. Parts of her always asked if they were any different than she and Levi and Brian. But that faint sickly sweet smell forced her mind to answer.

No.

They weren't different, but they still had to die.

Brian was a vampire, Levi a changer and she by freak chance was both and neither. Just like she was both male and female and neither due to her mother's actions while she was pregnant. At least now they'd learned what it meant when she started getting the craving for fresh and uncooked meat and she could go deal with the problem before she was dangerous to her partners or the troop of players that they had spent the last few years traveling with. At least in the weeks before and after her blood hungers she could hunt for Brian and save him the risk of exposure.

Because of that this little zombie pack wouldn't live to cause problems for this cluster of people.

And Brian would be fed without awkward questions from Stalvus or the rest. They'd learned fast that Brian could feed from them without too much risk or damage. All they had to do was eat a bit more, and as acrobats they were all expected to eat a great deal to keep up the energy for their tricks.

Put like that it wasn't a hard decision at all.

Squeaks shook her hair back behind her shoulders and moved after the trio.

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Brian frowned.

Levi was leaning with apparent casualness against their travel wagon, but from the way his eyes were narrowed and the tension in the lines of his arms and shoulders he was highly annoyed about something and rather more ominously Squeaks was nowhere to be seen. Worse some mucky muck from the local town was oozing at Levi in a way that set Brian's teeth on edge just watching it.

With a sigh of annoyance he led the two packhorses loaded with supplies over to the wagon just as if he hadn't registered his partner of god himself only knew how many years was grinding his teeth in aggravation. It was a good thing they grew replacements now, or Levi would have been down to gums by now.

After a bit of conversation and some speaking looks the man who had been driving his partner into a silent fury spoke up again.

And it was all Brian could do to not wring the man’s neck on the spot. No wonder Stalvus had warned them about this place. No wonder the women had pulled out very specific jewelry and wore it conspicuously and traveled in groups of three or more when they went into town.

How much for Squeaks?!

Squeaks was not for sale, not for any price. Not now, not ever.
And not to this guy for a sex toy.

Her swivel hips and long red hair were all theirs. And the fact she wore the mark of team Tempest on her lower back just like he and Levi wore it on their left biceps should have been a clue. The marks showed when they were performing and on Brian and Levi often showed even off stage, even if they forgot to paint them for higher contrast, so it wasn't like it wasn't obvious if you were paying attention.

Clearly not a big enough clue and this guy clearly hadn't been paying attention. Or he just didn't give a flying fuck. Brian wasn't about to put bets either way.

Keeping Levi from gutting the bastard where he stood was all that was keeping him from removing the oily bastard's head from his body.

Both of them were so focused that they both gaped in shock when the bastard's eyes rolled up in his head and he dropped like a rock to the ground.

“Are you two done with the caveman act?”

Brian blinked in momentary confusion as he stared down at the unconscious idiot that Squeaks had just clipped neatly on the back of the head.

“Squeaks, he wanted to buy you!” blurted Levi in indignation that Brian was in full agreement with.

“How for sale my dear SkyNative, now let's get this stuff sorted Stal wants to be gone before the sun rises.” Levi winced and started unloading the horses, Brian grimaced and helped. But he had to smile when he realized Squeaks was looting the man's pockets bare of even lint before she had two of the troops strong men haul him away.

Treat their Squeaks like a prostitute; that would serve him. And Levi had no doubts that the two men dragging the jackass away would stay completely silent about Squeaks theft. They'd been close enough to hear what the bastard had been demanding and both had wives and daughters with them. It wouldn't hurt that Squeaks would distribute what she'd swiped throughout the troop.

Brian wouldn't be a bit surprised if they added a few thumps to the bastard as they dumped him someplace well away from the troop.

~0~

Koira wasn’t sure what was going on, just that the tribe had been on the move and he was running with a small hunting party off in a direction he’d never gone before. He’d never been this far south before and wasn’t sure if they were properly in the tribes territory anymore. Since Lauri and Janne had been gone he felt like he needed to grow extra eyes to avoid Aele's heavy hand and wicked kicks. He’d also had to hunt and gather for himself as no one dared be seen openly sharing food with him. The Shaman was muttering about evil spirits on the move and kept glaring at him. Things were getting unsettled even though his apprentice kept trying to keep people calm. He was trying not to think to hard about where he'd sleep when winter came again. Sleeping with the tribes’ dogs would only get him so far in the cold. If sharing food with him got people muttered at by the Shaman sharing shelter could get them cast out.

At least as a wolf eating raw meat wouldn't sicken him like it could as a man. He just wished the Old Soul had come back through, things were bad enough he was thinking seriously about running away. He wished he considered it sooner, this trip was leaving him with a very bad feeling.

“I don’t think this is wise.” one of the men echoed his unease.
Aele snorted rudely at Itch.

“Other tribes throw things down the well for the spirits. What use do spirits have for things? Why should that wealth rot?”

“It still doesn’t feel right.”

Aele saw him listening and came over to give him a hard kick.

“Get back to hauling worthless cur.”

All Koira had the breath for then was putting one paw in front of the other as he dragged the chief’s sledge toward the Spirit Well Aele and Itch had been talking about.

Suddenly he had a very bad feeling about why Aele had been so insistent that the Shaman and his apprentice go with the main part of the tribe. They would never agree with this.

Why hadn’t he run away as soon as Lauri and Janne had sailed out of sight with their new wives? He could have chewed through the ties tethering him to the tent.

~0~

He didn’t like this, it felt wrong. No matter how much the new shaman hated him he'd never have risked the wrath of the spirits like this.

The pit he was being dangled over smelled of damp and dark and something indefinable. He yelped in pain as Aele kicked him again. He'd been ordered to shift back to man shape, and Aele had the look in his eyes that promised Koira he'd be dropped in the pit without the sling to soften the drop if he disobeyed.

He'd shifted and climbed into the hide sling with extreme reluctance. But better to be lowered down than be thrown. He couldn't see the bottom of the pit from the edge, and Koira wouldn't put it past Aele to drop him and then throw rocks at him to force him to try and work no matter how badly hurt he'd been by the fall.

“If you’re a good dog and fill the hide five times, we’ll drag you out.” Aele grabbed his hair and yanked so he could stare deep into his eyes. “Five times,” he repeated holding up his hand with the fingers spread as if Koira was too stupid to know how to count that high. Lauri's mother had made sure both of them could count, figure and knew the map makers marks before she'd died of winter fever.

Koira didn’t believe that for a moment as he was dropped down into the darkness of the pit. But maybe if he was good they'd leave a rope secured so he could climb out on his own. But what then? Could he go home? Would they take him back at home or would the spirits claim him in his sleep once he'd been in their offering pit? If he was able to get out and they wouldn't take him back, then what? It wasn't like any of the other tribes he knew about would take him in once they learned he'd been thrown out by his home tribe. He wished Christus was due to sweep through, he'd have advice on where he could go.

He knew other tribes made offerings to the Dark Ones in hopes that they would pass them by. Sometimes the Old Shaman had taken gifts after a good year to places only he knew, but Koira didn’t see why offerings of fine fur, woven cloth and decorated pottery would make a spirit pass by one person over another. What use did a spirit have for material things anyway? He'd already noticed that having fine things didn't make one a good person, and his foster mother had always told stories of virtuous folk being helped by spirits and bad ones meeting terrible fates. In many of
those tales the virtuous ones had been terribly poor and the wicked ones wealthy.

He also didn’t understand why there were racks like the ones the tribe’s women used to cure large hides staked out on one side of the pit. Then they'd gotten closer and he'd seen the tangles of white things in and under the racks. Koira had been sickened when he realized the bleached tangles tied in each frame were skeletons, human skeletons. Some of them small human skeletons.

What kind of crimes could women and children have committed to be staked out here by an offering pit? Were they offerings as well? If they were, had they been willing? Had the spirits made their deaths quick and painless? Or had they left them to die slowly and agonizingly of water starvation? Questions Koira couldn't hope to answer, he was no shaman who could speak to the spirits of the dead. He didn't understand why the bones hadn't been gathered up and burned. Any time they stumbled across human remains the Shaman would gather up what he could and burn it, just to be sure dark spirits couldn't use them to stalk the living.

Koira found himself wondering if he was going to be staked out here as an offering to the Dark, or if they’d come and get him for stealing their gifts. Would they care that he hadn't been given any real choice?

But then he was dropped on the broken ground at the bottom on the pit and yelped and ducked as a lit torch was dropped in after him.

“Five times whelp.” Aele called down as if he was too stupid to remember simple instructions.

At least they'd given him a torch. The sun wasn't quite high enough to shine down into the depths of pit yet, but would be soon he could see the light slowly crawling down the far wall.

Shakily Koira crawled out of the hide sling and groped for the torch to begin looking for things that hadn’t been ruined by the drop and later exposure to rain and vermin. That drop that was easily ten times the height of the tribes' tallest man.

On the other side of the pit he found a surprising amount that wasn’t ruined. There were hide slings that were only a little nibbled by mice; they even still had the ropes tied to them to lower things safely down. It was actually a little disturbing, nothing he could see by the flickering torch light was old enough that the hide wrappings had disintegrated to nothing.

Carefully he wedged his torch into a neat pile of rocks and began to sort out what was broken and ruined from the first sling to his left. Then he carried intact things over to the sling Aele was impatiently twitching the ropes on and began filling it.

Before the sling was half filled Aele had the men haul it up.

Aele yelled down that Koira needed to hurry up and that what he’d found was pathetic, barely worth hauling up. But another two unlit torches were dropped down and it took quite a while before the sling came back down empty.

The sun was only just starting to shine straight down into the pit, so Koira wondered if Aele was nervous about stealing from spirits. From the mutterings he could hear, Ollie and Itch were very jittery about lingering here even if there were other mutterings that sounded pleased drifting down to Koira's ears.

Koira scrambled over the broken ground to try and refill the sling. That first lot had been Hill Tribes pottery, decorated like he’d never seen before in blue and green and fine golden tracery. And the pots had been filled with fine worked silver ornaments and fancy carved stone beads.
More than enough to pay even an exorbitant bride price for a dozen young and fertile women for wives for the tribe and all the silver beads had needed was a bit of polishing to be restored to the shine they'd had when new. Aele’s mother had worn a necklace of finely carved turquoise, and some of these beads made those look both plain and crude. The silver stung in the scrapes on his fingers, but no more than that and Koira was quietly grateful to his foster mother for her care in trying to make sure the spirit metal wouldn't burn him. He just wished he'd been allowed to keep the silver bead she'd always made him wear on a thread. It had been the first thing Aele had taken from him when he'd been made Chief and he missed it very badly.

Some of the pots had broken in spite of the care taken to lower them gently and Koira tried to gather up all the small beads and ornaments to pile in the hide sling before he moved on to another that looked to be in good shape. He'd seen the empty sacks all the men carried in their packs, so he knew the loose beads would be poured into one or more so what he didn't send up this time he left just in a loose pile to be sent up with the next load.

The offering bundle he went to was also filled with large pots, and these had been wrapped with wool felted into thick sheets, but mice had spoiled the wool and hide padding. The pots were short, squat and oddly heavy, and they were sealed with a heavy coating of something black that smelled like pine tar, so Koira had to be careful moving them.

Aele called for the men to drag up the sling and this time Koira could hear louder pleased noises as he hauled more of the heavy pots over to where the sling would come back down. Ollie had apparently opened a jar; or dropped and broken one, he was known to be clumsy, and found it filled with fruit preserved in honey. Koira felt his belly cramp up at the very idea of food, and he wished that they'd drop him something to eat and drink, even if it was just a small pouch of dried meat. He couldn't hear water dripping, so even an old water-skin with a dribble in it would have been welcome.

The sling came back down and Koira loaded the last of those pots in and padded them carefully with the furs he found that were in the best shape. Honey fruit was valuable, and if another jar broke there would be more of it than the men above could eat without becoming ill. If they'd had a means of salvaging it that would be different, but they'd brought no pots with them, just the sacks. One never knew if a found pot had contained poison, so they tended not to be used for food unless they'd been found with food bits in them. Some pretty colors leached poison into food, blue and red especially, so it was safer to be sure than risk the numbing of limbs or the madness that the poison caused.

Aele swore at him for making them haul up garbage and threw two of the hides back down on his head. Both of which were in better shape than Koira's own sleeping fur, and then Aele told him he had another load to do to make up for it.

The next load was even more recent, the hides wrapping the package not even mouse nibbled at all. But it was tied so tightly and the cording had shrunk the knots so small that Koira couldn’t get into it without a knife to cut the cords. And he couldn't change and carry a proper knife so he hadn't had more than broken bits of flint to use since Lauri and Jay had left. He knew better than to ask for a knife to be dropped down, just like he'd known not to ask for sacks for the loose beads. At best he'd be laughed at, at worst they'd throw rocks at him. Koira had to roll the bundle carefully over to the sling with Aele swearing at him to quit being lazy and hurry up and get it secured so the men could haul it up.

Koira moved on and lit his second torch; he recoiled in horror when he saw what was in the next sling.
The desiccated remains of a girl and a baby. He wouldn’t touch that one again. No matter how prettily the girls golden ornaments glittered at him. At least this bundle was mostly under an overhang, so Aele wouldn't be able to see it clearly. He might not think to order Koira to load the poor girl into the sling if he found other things to send up.

He found an older, more damaged offering bundle that, again, was pottery filled with beads. Shell beads it looked like this time, the pretty purple ones from the far northern coast, and it took two trips to get all of that bundle pulled up to the surface. By the time he'd gotten the second load tied in place the sun had moved and he was back to depending on the torches Ollie kept dropping down to him. Even the faded beads would have value, and only a few had been faded that he could see.

But Aele was yelling for one more load, so Koira found what he could and climbed in as well. His arms and legs were screaming in pain from all the heavy lifting and he couldn't feel his fingers properly as he groped for the ropes.

But the sling didn’t move.

Aele glared down at him and threw the ropes down, then kicked the hides that had been keeping the ropes from wearing through on the pit edge in as well.

Koira couldn’t help the cry, even though he'd suspected Aele would abandon him down here.

“But you promised!”

~0~

Sami had been hearing a lot of scuffling around in Valkoinen Kuoppa and he and Jason had been bored enough to go investigate. They were all in and wouldn't be going out to check on their tribes for a few more weeks at least and until the summer grains began ripening there wasn't much intensive gathering to be done. They'd been doing a bit of fishing and some light hunting but nothing at all like the heavier work they’d be doing later in the fall. They began to smell smoke as they got closer, but normally when the surface dwellers decided to drop a propitiating offering they did it with a lot of drumming and chanting. This just smelled of wood with a heavy leavening of pine balsam.

Only when they were tying down a criminal or madman did they come silently. The screaming and cursing of the victim tended to do the calling for them. And in cases like that all they could do was make sure the poor wretch had a mercifully quick death. Most of the time one or another member of the Hunt was at least peripherally aware of the person’s crimes, even if sometimes that crime was simply having a difficult personality or being mentally ill. Madness still wasn't something that was dealt with very well by society, and they'd long since lost the medications that could have helped some live normal and productive lives.

It didn't make the killing easier, especially not when the mad person was very young, but at least then they knew it was justified as more than a bitter necessity.

In the rare case they'd left someone who wasn't mad or guilty of anything they shifted them as far away as they could. Usually after drugging them so they wouldn't be able to remember anything about who had carried them away from certain death. The last one had been a girl who had just been unfortunately pretty and attracted the attention of a hunter whose family was in negotiations to marry someone else's daughter. That hadn't set well with the contracted wife, or her father. Sami's miners had been more than happy to take the girl and she was happily married with children far away from her former rival. The ornaments they'd weighed her down with before tying her hand and foot to the offering rack had ensured that no matter what she was left with options.
Sami’s miners held that any jewelry a woman carried on her to her wedding was hers, to be kept for her old age in case she survived her husband or to pass on to her daughters as she saw fit.

The only innocent Sami knew about was a kid in one of Kris’s tribes, but that one Kris was pretty sure the kid would run off on his own. That and the kid wasn’t a small child, so Sami wasn’t terribly concerned right now.

The anguished cry of ‘you promised’ made Sami think they’d gotten another brave idiot who thought picking up what others left behind was a good idea.

Bad enough they had to leave their dying royalty in the pit or throw children down it.

He’d thought after that last massacre they’d have learned not to throw living things and garbage in the pits. Mother Nature washed enough random crap into the pits as it was. They really didn't enjoy having to pick up what was left of girls who had been gotten pregnant far too young, or worse tiny children who had lost their mothers due to idiots not taking proper care of their young wives. Most of the time those little ones were too badly hurt by the drop to be saved and placed elsewhere. Only occasionally were they able to get in place in time to catch them.

At least most of their tribes had better sense, but there were always a few idiots.

Jason huffed and picked up speed, his huge wolf shape covering the ground more efficiently down here than Sami’s two legged shape could match unless he decided to sprint. Not something that was a good idea with how the tunnels down here twisted. Above ground he'd have kept pace easily, and out lasted his Hunt brother, but in the tunnels Jason’s four pawed maneuverability gave him a distinct advantage.

A frightened scream told Sami that maybe he should have grabbed his friend’s scruff and kept him from barreling ahead.

Then he heard something that made his blood boil.

Laughter.

Not happy and joyful laughter, oh no, this was the cruel tormenting laughter of a bully who had his victim trapped right where he wanted him and was enjoying the show. Someone who clearly thought Jason was a wolf who had survived the fall into the pit and would kill the poor child they’d had doing their dirty work for them.

He cleared the corner and found Jason seated on his haunches and staring quizzically at a small human shape that was clutching the smoking remains of a torch in its small hands. There was a small pile of burned torches and a fresh but unlit one not far away from a hide sling and a tangle of ropes. From the size of the figure the humans above had dropped a child down the pit to do their dirty work. An orphan or a foundling more than likely from the ragged way the small figure was dressed. The hide tunic wouldn't offer much protection when the weather turned and he had no trousers at all. Even now there were kids that were considered expendable; when Sami found them he tried to find them other homes, he knew the rest of his Hunt was like minded. If nothing else the ones who made it to adulthood kept genetic diversity up in their tribes.

Sami’s nostrils flared as he listened to the taunting words from one of the figures above, he wasn't as used to this particular dialect as Kris was, but he managed.

“You weren't good enough whelp, the Dark gets to keep you.”

A shared look with Jason and they both leaped for the lip of the pit, bypassing the poor child the
robbers had left to pay for their misdeeds.

Twenty odd meters was nothing to them now. Especially when they were pissed.

It wasn’t a large group, only a dozen or so with horses and dogs. And they’d had the child busy; four travois and a rough wheeled sledge had been carefully loaded with stolen offerings. The hindered horses and dog team saw them, or smelled them, Sami had learned that he put off a smell when he was angry that freaked out animals that weren't used to them. This lot wasn't used to them and promptly panicked which made Sami and Jason's job a bit easier.

The leader of the group yelled that he’d left a proper offering even as the rest scrambled for the heavy boar spears most humans kept around to fend off zombies, bear and the few other large predators that still roamed about. Not that only a dozen men would be able to stop him and Jason. Not after all this time working as a team. If they had been set up in a defensible spot, maybe, but out here in the open there was no way in hell. He and Jason were just too fast and each knew how to divide the idiots’ attention for the other. That and the panicking horses and dogs made it harder for the men to even get the spears to defend themselves with, only a few had anything they could even try to use.

It helped that this lot seemed to be doing an every man for himself thing rather than anything like teamwork.

“I have a recommendation,” Sami warned softly as Jason snapped the first spear poked his direction in two with his massive jaws. Sami let his eyes glow golden as he let his bloodlust free and rose from the half crouch he'd landed in at the pit's rim. He'd learned years ago that a soft and calm voice scared the fuck out of people more than screaming or enraged shouting did. And he wanted these bullies to feel the fear they'd inflicted on that poor kid they'd left in the bottom of the pit.

“Run.”

~0~

Koira had barely been able to light the last torch he was shaking so badly. He’d heard the Dark One’s soft threat, all the more terrifying in its calm and mild delivery, and then the screams had started. Screams and the sounds of men and animals dying, and other noises he couldn't identify, but that sounded horrific. Ripping and snapping and wet crunching noises made all the more terrifying because Koira didn't know what they were. He’d tried climbing the walls but was so frightened that he couldn’t shift away from his fragile human shape. Not that a wolf would have done any better scaling the near shear walls. His hands were bloodied as were his knees and his soft leather shoes were in ribbons but he hadn’t gotten more than his own height off the pit's rough floor before he fell back again. He didn't try any of the dark openings in the walls of the pit; he couldn't feel any breeze coming from any of them. Getting lost underground wouldn't help anyone, and would just ensure he had a slow and horrible death.

Then he heard a series of soft thumps and strange scuffing noises.

In the gathering darkness all Koira could do was spin in place and try and see by the flickering light of the torch.

The things he’d loaded into the sling to take out had been returned to the bottom of the pit, still tied to their travois and neatly covered. Also neatly piled were things he recognized as personal belongings of the men in the chiefs hunting party. He gulped when he saw the beaded and quilled buffalo robe Aele was so proud of draped over a pile of pots tied into the wheeled sledge that he'd
traded so much for last summer.

There wasn’t any blood, but the harness that should have held each travois to the horse or dog pulling it was torn or broken, like it had simply been ripped off the back of the animal it had been tethered to. The harness ropes for the sledge had been snapped and Koira couldn’t tell if the dog team had managed the feat or if something else had cut the leads. He had heard the distinct screams of horse and dog mixed in with the cries of the men in the hunting party. The only difference in their screams was that they were mercifully short, not the prolonged cries the men were letting out.

He screamed in terror when he felt a hand on his shoulder and spun in place.

“Hey, hey, easy with that thing.” A hand easily pulled the torch from his grasp and moved it where he couldn’t use it as a weapon. All the owner of the hand had to do was lift it up and away and it was both out of reach and shedding its light over the area.

Koira backed away from the blocky man with short dark hair and a neat beard just covering the point of his chin.

Now he felt the change flow over him and backed away on four legs, growling in his fright in a hopeless attempt at keeping the bigger man away. His fur was standing on end and his tail was tucked between his legs as he tried to find a way to escape, but he was blocked and being backed deeper into a little alcove.

“A changer? They threw a changer cub down here to do their dirty work?” came another startled voice.

Koira spun and tried to keep both men where he could see them, but they worked with the ease of long term hunting partners and Koira had to move constantly to face one or the other. No matter how he tried he could never keep them both in sight at once, it was always one or the other. He was already dizzy from hunger and thirst, fear just made him sicker.

He let out a cry as he felt strong fingers around his throat, then darkness quickly followed.

~0~

“You killed him?” Jason sounded surprised, but Sami just sighed and shook his head no and then grimaced as he carefully stepped around the puddle of urine on the floor. The strong smell told him the child shifter hadn't been given enough water to function for very long. He'd likely have passed out soon due to dehydration and exertion no matter what. At least with them there he'd have a chance to recover.

“He’s so scared he passed out.”

“Poor kid.” Jason went back to sorting through the reclaimed offerings and other gear from the grave robbers. “Theon will be pissed he missed out on the fun.” Not that Theon was as bloody minded as Sami could be, but a bit of excitement kept him from becoming a menace in boredom.

“I wonder why this lot had a changer cub with them, they normally flip when a kid changes and kill them.” continued Jason as he worked. Only a very few human tribes kept changers after they shifted, most were too afraid. And of those who were too scared to just dump or bloodily murder the kid, well, a bit of powdered silver in a meal and that was problem solved as newborn changers were notoriously fragile where silver was involved. Still murder, but something where they could lie to themselves more easily. Often if an older child or adult changed they freaked out and just
killed themselves, sparing their families and tribes the trouble. Changers weren't immune to blood loss or death from falling from a great height. And compared to the slow agony of death by silver poisoning; well, bleeding to death or throwing oneself off a cliff was merciful by comparison.

Even the few tribes who would permit a changer to live and stay with them tended to not treat them very well. So after a while the chancers would either run away or die either from neglect and abuse or their own hands. It never seemed to register that having a changer, and thus their sensitive nose, might be a good thing to have around when you were trying to ward off zombies and ill-intentioned Dark Ones. And that if you treated your changer well they'd go through fire and hell itself for you.

Then again, all vampires tended to smell about the same, so at least it kept their cover as 'wise ones'.

Sami let out a noncommittal hum as he checked over the limp wolf in his arms with gentle hands.

Less a cub really, more adult proportions, but he was thin, too thin, with ribs, pelvis and backbone showing prominently. Like he'd hit his final growth but hadn't had the food to fill in all the gaps and look finished. It didn't help that his human shape wasn't much bigger than a twelve year old boy. At least his belly was still flat and not bulging like someone who had been severely starved. He wondered if this was the changer Kris was keeping an eye on, one of his tribes had one living with them. He'd been rather unhappy about something the last time he'd come in. Specific elements and not the tribe as a whole, but Sami wasn't sure which sub adult member had Kris unhappy. He'd ask. Later.

“You thinking we need to back-track the tribe that did this and make a bigger example out of them?”

Sami looked up into the familiar level stare of his best friend.

“Can you get the kid to shift back? I want to see if he has marks on him.” His shoulders slumped a little when Jason shook his head mutely 'no.' At least the soft fur under Sami's hands wasn't broken by scars, but that didn't mean much. Jason had a scar or two that his dense black fur hid rather neatly.

“He needs to be awake for my trick to work. If it helps I smell bruises, lots of them on his ribs and he’s made a mess of his paws, but that smells and looks really new.” He leaned in close and smelled the cubs’ breath. “And he doesn't smell like he's been silver poisoned. Scared half stupid, dehydrated and not fed very well but not poisoned at least.”

Sami set his jaw. He'd had to mercy kill more than his share of silver poisoned cubs in the past few hundred years. One dose, only a few grams sometimes, of silver ground to powder would kill a youngster, but it could take days and days of horrible suffering. Once they'd learned that little fact Jason had carefully begun desensitizing himself and Julian and later Janne as well, just to be safe. Now simple contact with silver wouldn't even burn them, something that was useful when they went visiting places, they could pick up and move a silver dish and not show telltale marks from it. Being able to handle silver also meant they could wear silver ornaments braided in their hair and keep suspicions down as all their tribes commonly held the belief that no Dark One could handle the touch of silver. Eating any silver could still make them a little sick, but it wouldn't be fatal.

“We get the cub somewhere safe. Then we can call the Hunt and make an example if we need to.”

~0~
Levi hated it when they had to appear to die so they could avoid questions about the fact that none of them aged. They'd been with this troop almost thirty years, but they'd have to avoid being part of another group of players for at least fifty to keep off the radar of the larger tribe of interconnected groups.

It sucked, not just trading a relatively good living for a much more tenuous one but leaving the people and friends behind.

He'd miss performing, showing off his skills and the awe of the crowd as he landed flips and tricks he'd have killed himself trying back when Tempest had just been a professional team and not the tiny family it was now.

Oh they'd called each other family back then, even meant it, but this was different. Way back when he and NoSoles had just been good friends, teammates and Squeaks a relatively new addition to the team to meet the silly rule that you had to have a girl on the five man competition team.

Even if Squeaks was only technically a girl. Sugar had called her a threesome in a bag which had made Diddy almost kill himself laughing. Of course both men had had to run for their lives when Squeaks had learned, but that had been funny as hell to watch anyway. That girl had red hair for a reason, and it wasn't because she liked how it looked with her pale skin and green eyes.

It had been a long time since he'd thought of everyone's parkour names, well other than Squeaks, she had refused to answer to the name she'd been given by her parents long before they'd died.

Dolores didn't suit her anyway.

So they were back on the road, back to being careful where they stopped and who and what they hunted to keep Brian's blood needs down. At any larger settlement Squeaks could still troll for rapists if she had to. With Brian right there it was a bit easier to quietly grab one and drain him to where he wouldn't be bothering anyone for a while. If possible it was still better to not kill the bastards, but more than once they'd left one with a more permanent reminder of their encounter.

Having the words child rapist carved into a man's forehead tended to cut down on their ability to abuse another victim.

They'd had to repaint the wagon to a far less colorful sort of muddy red-brown. The bright and contrasting colors that made them blend in with the troop would stick out and attract too much attention alone. At least they didn't attract too much attention just from the size alone; a fair number of traveling merchants had wagons that were larger.

Brian had suggested they track down the vampire and changer pair who had helped them hide in plain sight last time they had had to 'die' and see how they were doing. They might be able to hide out for a good long while and even if they could only visit they could check in with the pair and let Squeaks get a good long bit of time with Christof.

Grisha and Sergey were pretty stationary, and had a pretty good life out here in the wilds around what used to be Moscow. If Brian kept the horses going like he had been they'd be at the farm tonight. Maybe this time they'd have better luck and Christof would both be there and be healthy. Squeaks needed to know her little foundling was alright, no matter how big he got.

“Brian? Do you smell that?”

Levi blinked and turned from where he'd been sitting beside Brian on the drivers' bench to look up
at where Squeaks had been resting on the roof of the wagon.  

But then he smelled it too, carried on the wind that blew into their faces.

The distinctive scent of something burning.

Not just a grass fire or some other traveler’s campfire either, not even the richness of the smoking fires Sergey set up to preserve meat.

This had the distinct smell of burning flesh.

He gulped and shared a look with Brian then offered to take the reins.  He might be a changer but in a dead sprint Brian would still beat him.

Brian nodded and passed over the braided leather before taking a dive off the wagon then rolling into a run headed toward where Grisha and Sergey's farmstead was.  He was taking the direct route; they'd be left following the track with the horses and wagon.

Squeaks settled on the seat beside him.

“I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Yeah,” he answered.  “Me too.”  And then he tried to get the horses to hurry a little.

~0~

The column of black smoke was bad enough, getting closer just told him that the house was a loss even though the fire itself was burning out and leaving about half the structure behind.  The barn was intact but the livestock were all dead, dropped here and there like so many discarded ornaments.

A quick check and Brian confirmed a fear.

Every last sheep and cow was drained dry. He moved to check the remains of the house more carefully.

Dmitri's little space was neat and all but empty, it looked like they hadn't been able to reconcile then. Cristof's was disordered in a way that spoke of someone sorting things in a very big hurry. Some clothing was taken as were all his weapons, including that dreadful axe he'd taken off a hunter when the bastard had come trying to kill Grisha for being a dark spirit.

There was a lot of blood.  But the one half burned human body wasn't anyone he recognized.  Had the pair taken in another foundling?  A quick search of what skin was left didn't turn up the mark that Grisha used to mark his and Sergey's foundlings.  Not that that meant much.  Two of the places they normally would put the mark had been consumed by the flames and the one shoulder was a blistered and blackened mess.  The huge hole in the throat told him that whoever the kid had been he hadn't died in the flames, he'd already been dead.

He yelped, jumped, spun in place and landed hard on his ass when a hand landed on his shoulder.  Then he tried to calm his racing heart as Levi's sober face looked down at him.

“Their travel wagons are both gone.  And all the draft, pack and riding horses are missing.  So is most of the horse gear and the granary looks like every spare sack got filled and taken.  From what I could tell from the mess around the forge all of the spare horse shoes and arrow heads Sergey was working on got taken as did a lot of the spare stock to make them.  I'm not sure if the mini forge
got taken or not. It wasn't in the barn but Sergey was talking about fitting it in one of the wagons the last time we were here.”

So that meant only the farm stock was dead, not the horses. And whoever had taken them wasn't planning on being back any time soon. It also meant he'd been here longer than he'd thought or that Levi and Squeaks had convinced the horses to put a move on to catch up.

“Squeaks thinks we need to check the cellar, the one the boys didn't know about.”

“I also think no matter what we need to follow the boys.” said Squeaks as she ducked inside from her own checks on the place. “See what happened here. At least try and find Dmitri and Christof.” Her face was drawn and pale, but Brian suspected he didn't look all that good either and could clearly see Levi swallowing hard to keep from being violently sick.

Brian nodded and with their help searched the floor by the fireplace to see if they could find the trigger for the hatch in the floor.

Levi found it and with care and a lot more grunting effort than they had ever had to put to it before they managed to force the door open.

Reluctantly they slid down the ladder.

~0~

Someone had lit a lantern, but it was only barely burning, Squeaks turned it up and grimaced at the level of oil in the reservoir. They'd need to refill it or work fast, they only had half an hour of light from it at best.

Brian let out an unhappy strangled sound that had Squeaks turning and letting out a distressed cry of her own.

Levi hesitantly moved closer as Squeaks lifted the light so they could all see clearly.

Grisha was dead, not even a vampire could survive having his heart cut out. Beside him on the bed lay Sergey; Brian reached out to touch his shoulder and he shifted enough that they could see the savaged remains of the butterfly that had been tattooed over Sergey's throat. Someone had tried bandaging both wounds from the pile of bloodied linen beside the bed, but clearly they'd given up and just washed the pair as best they could and tucked them into a bed together.

Brian swallowed hard and brushed a bit of sun bleached blond hair away from Sergey's face, and then he reached for the blanket he'd pushed back and covered them both completely. They'd need a minute at least before they could see what was left that could be useful from the disordered tumble of the room's contents.

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They'd spent the night in the barn and the next day took the time to build a more proper pyre for the pair and the other unknown person they'd found in the house. It looked like, in the clearer light of day, that someone had tried to turn the house in to their funeral fire and failed to account for the years and years of fireproofing Sergey had tried to layer on the beams.

Then they'd reluctantly looted the place of any surviving foodstuffs and what few other supplies remained before harnessing their horses again and turning to follow the tracks of the wagons that led west. Brian had carefully tucked Grisha's diaries into a watertight box and tied it securely to the top of the wagon. If nothing else one of the boys deserved to have all of Grisha's notes on what
worked and what didn't for medical treatments for changers and vampires. They already knew Sergey would have taught them both all he could about care and treatments for horses; he'd loved the big beasts like his own children.

They didn't spend the time to even try and process any of the fallen livestock beyond Squeaks rough and ready sheering job on the sheep.

They needed to catch up to the boys.

~0~

Theon watched with some amusement as Kris threaded silver beads onto some of Jonne’s fine blonde braids. It had been a fair bit of time since any of them had checked Valkoinen Kuoppa so when Sami and Jason had brought back a limp and abused cub they’d brought back a few other things. Things that had made Risto curious enough that he, Jonne and Kris had gone investigating.

Kris had gone mostly so he wouldn't get upset at seeing Sami and Jason working on the poor kid. But he'd thought he recognized the poor thing.

They’d come back with pots filled with Hill Tribes silver and stone beads and jars full of the honey preserved fruit Julian so adored. It had taken them several trips to clean the pit out of anything useful and get it into their storage caverns, but they had, even to burying the poor dead princess and her baby above where her spirit could see the stars. As fragile as her empty shell had been they hadn't felt the need to burn her.

One thing he really missed was humans having proper medical care; the poor thing would never have died with proper hospitals still being around. Poor girl had been too young for babies, and clearly the dead preemie in her arms clearly hadn't been her first. Survival was one thing, stupidity entirely another, poor girl.

After the initial washing and checking of the kid Jason had gone out to back track the humans who had dumped this poor kid in the pit and tried to rob it so now they were just waiting for the poor thing to wake up. Chriss had gone along with Jason to help with watching the tribe, but he tended to stay out until the worst parts of winter. If things stayed quiet he'd be off east or south doing god only knew what until he got lonely or bored and came home. Sami just wondered if whatever was nagging both men would settle out; it felt like they'd been on the edge of a major argument for weeks. And no matter what Jonne said about unresolved sexual tension he wasn’t about to meddle in the two men's relationship.

But other than shifting back to human their second day back the cub hadn’t really moved; something that had all of them somewhat concerned. It didn’t help that the kid looked about twelve, short and slender with proportionally long limbs and delicate features and neglected fine white gold hair. He wasn’t tall like Julian or blocky like Jason, but both of them pulled mass from somewhere when they changed, so their sizes in wolf shape could be rather deceptive compared to their sizes as men. Jason’s wolf shape was positively massive, and had been mistaken for a bear several times in the past. It wasn't something he understood, and Theon figured at this point he never would, but it did make him wonder if it was an age thing. Sami's little foundling wasn't much bigger as a wolf than he was as a man.

Sami was getting a bit of honey, vinegar and water down the kids’ throat every few hours, and dealing with the predictable aftereffects, but other than that nothing. His ribs were a horrible purple black mottled mess, but Jason said they didn't feel broken when he'd checked them and his abdomen wasn't swollen up. The kid was breathing fairly easily, if somewhat shallowly, so Theon took some comfort in knowing they weren't likely to accidentally kill the kid by moving him with
shattered ribs and that he probably didn't have any serious internal injuries.

It didn’t help his peace of mind that Jonne and Kris both knew the kid by name. Once he'd shifted back to human Kris had let out a pained cry and reached for him. Jonne had stuffed both hands in his mouth and nearly cried as he gasped the kid’s name.

If you could call calling the kid ‘dog’ to be a name. Nuori wasn't really any better even if it was at least descriptive, the kid was little. He looked at best to be twelve or thirteen, even if he had to be older based on Jonne's wince and remark about him still being tiny. That made Theon think the kid had never been very big. He just hoped the kid was naturally that small and that the prominent hip bones and spine were a result of relatively recent privations and not the long term results of systematic neglect. Not that he thought Kris would have put up with anything long term. He'd snatched kids before and brought them back even if the spur of the moment actions sometimes drove Sami crazy.

Theon closed his eyes and pushed the rage back with years of practice. Life was unfair, and raging about it now wouldn’t help anything. If he raged now Murphy's Law would have the poor kid wake up in the middle and he'd be scared silly. He'd already been scared half stupid by Jason and Sami being a two man demolition team and his own people dumping him down a hole.

According to Kris the kid had been living with a surface tribe all his life and by the standards of humans was old enough for a wife and children. So, in spite of his childlike appearance the kid was adult.

If the tribe he’d been with had been inclined to let him have a wife.

Which according to Kris they hadn’t, at least the latest leadership hadn't. If he and Jonne were right the old leader had wanted the boy to be treated just like all the other kids, but clearly that idea had fallen to the wayside in the transition from old leadership to new. Then again it was probably just as well, changers and vampires, even pre-emergent ones, couldn't breed with normal humans anyway, and Theon had never heard of a girl surviving the change and becoming either. It was like girls just carried the genes for vampire and changer, but never became them themselves.

Realistically that was probably good, god help any vampire girl who got into the hands of an abuser. She’d either kill herself or be in for at least one lifetime’s worth of pain. Not something he'd wish on anyone, but something they’d all seen in the first hundred or so years after the fall. Things going to hell just meant that the bad elements that had survived hadn’t had to worry too much about being punished if they got caught. Well as long as they didn’t get caught by someone with a grudge and a weapon anyway.

Kris said he had been watching how they treated the boy, and so far hadn't seen anything to really trip his instincts. He'd seen things he wasn't happy with, but they all knew good and well that just grabbing any child whose home situation made them unhappy was a recipe for trouble. Taking a child out of a situation like that took careful planning so they could protect the child and keep their cover intact. Kris had managed spur of the moment kidnappings before, but it was always out of time for his normal visits and more targets of opportunity than anything else.

But Kris also had to be careful; he’d been playing Old Wise Man, one of the tricks their kind used to keep themselves fed and to ensure humans carrying the defective genes that made zombies and vampires didn’t live to make their lethal change. Jonne had hit that same tribe once and been forced to drain half a dozen would be zombies, one of which had been mere days from turning and rampaging. They’d made the switch in territories right after that. Just to make sure any lingering resentment didn’t blow their cover. No matter how fast and strong they were, if large enough groups of humans came after them they could and would still go down.
At least with the last wedding Kris had overseen he’d been able to feed enough with little bites from willing girls to come back and feed Jonne as well. In another ten or twenty years enough time would have passed for Jonne to show his face above ground again in that territory. By then no one alive would remember, or if they did no one would believe the words of a slightly mad elder.

Theon's mind spun back as he stared blindly at the fire.

If someone had told Theon in the summer of 2013 that he’d be part of a small group of vampires acting as judges, and executioners for the good of a much diminished human race he’d have been calling security to haul the crazy off to a loony bin.

It had taken them almost fifty years to stop counting years as more than a passing thing. After Christian's death he hadn't wanted to count anymore. It hurt too much. But he knew Sami had kept track, somewhere in the tunnels he had a small cavern that every year around midwinter he would go and make a little tick mark on the wall.

The whole world had crashed because of one lunatic terrorist and his tailored virus bombs. Fifty-three warheads loaded with mutating death and all of humanity had changed. Major Western population centers had been the first targets, not surprising given the terrorists rhetoric, but there had been more than enough of a spread that with prevailing winds and currents no corner of the planet was safe.

And the scientists said the virus was fragile. But all it had had to do was last a week and the world was fucked.

Theon smiled bitterly, for a hellish irony the origin point of the bombs had its population almost completely wiped off the map. Even before the actual fall, when there had still been something resembling regular news coverage it had been remarked on that the Middle East had been hit shockingly hard and fast by the virus. Like there had been bombs that had failed and had fallen back to earth with devastating consequences.

Theon had heard other survivors in the early years claim the lucky ones at a ground zero strike simply died in the mundane aftermath of the conventional bombs that had accompanied some of the virus warheads. According to Jason there were whole swaths of territory down there that no one would stay in if they could help it. The traders who moved through wore all sorts of talismans against evil and protections from the dark spirits that they believed still lingered there. Evil eye amulets made by their Hill tribes from silver, shell and turquoise traded obscenely well down there, so Jason always made sure to carry a sack full even in quick sprints to the area. He didn't need the cover often, but when he did that double handful of trinkets was a lifesaver.

It had taken twenty years for any of them with the vampire gene to stand being out in full and direct sunlight again. Well, other than Sami, he'd been able to cope with full sun right off, unlike the rest of them who had burned under any sun at all and even now preferred to be fully covered if they had to travel in daylight. They’d never forgotten seeing friends go down to the rampaging zombies or worse have to be put down because they were the rampaging zombies. It had taken decades for the nightmares about Marco and Brian to fade away, and Marco had known something was wrong and locked himself away before his final horrifying change. He'd tried his best to protect his brother and his band while he still had his mind. Good intentions had sabotaged his best efforts. Brian's screams had attracted attention, and one of the people it attracted had been armed with a high power hunting rifle. Two shots had stopped Marco, a third had ended Brian's pain. Sometimes that day still figured in Theon's nightmares, but he still was grateful to that unknown man and his aim.

Theon counted himself lucky that his entire band had survived. Christian had been the only one of
them to make it through as a regular old human, Jason and Julian had been turned into shape shifters while he, Risto and Sami had become blood drinkers.

He’d held his best friend in his arms as he’d died of old age and cried. But by then they’d been forced to accept humanity wasn't going to just bounce back, they were going to have to fight and crawl back out of the pits.

And it was going to be a long, slow crawl back up from a new stone age.

They’d met up with the survivors from Negative and the lone survivor of Sami’s other band Essentia by then and Jonne had cried bloody tears as well and promised Christian that when he came back they’d be searching for him. Chriss had been a blood drinker as well, and for whatever reason he was even more standoffish than he’d been before. But he'd been protective of Jonne, Kris and Janne until they'd met up. After he knew they would be safe he would circle out and away for months at a time before coming back and letting people know he was still breathing.

Kris had mentioned that Jonne was convinced that they would find the people they loved again, somehow.

Theon never dared ask what had happened to Larry, Jay and Antti. Janne he rarely saw out of wolf shape unless there was some critical task that needed human hands. Which usually meant winter craft work, heavy hauling or some kind of butchering; otherwise, at least in summer, he was on four paws. And he’d never mustered the courage to ask the former keyboardist why he had mostly given up being human like he had, nor had he asked where Janne went when he vanished for a few days at a time every few weeks. Some sort of hunting he suspected, because Janne always came back with some sort of foodstuffs, something bird-ish usually. Once he'd even come back with a mesh basket made of reeds filled with live ducklings. Some of their descendants still provided them with eggs as Jonne was careful to keep the flight feathers on their wings clipped so they couldn't fly very far. Wild chickens only came back as eggs and dead birds, for whatever reason the damn thing never came back alive and so far none of the eggs brought back had hatched into anything but a terrible stench.

He just kept hoping Janne would gradually shift back to spending time with them as a man over drifting through as a wolf.

Theon also hadn't been brave enough to ask what had happened to Adam, Joonas and Bailey. Chriss hadn't wanted to talk about it to Sami and Sami hadn't pushed.

If anyone would have run from reality Theon would have bet on it being Jonne.

Jonne who had been home with his brothers when an off course missile blew up in the air high over Finland, making the whole country essentially ground zero for the virus. Jonne who had watched as his elder brother turned into a mindless monster and ripped his younger brother apart when he broke down Tommi’s door in worry over their brother not answering their knocks. Jonne, who had had to burn down his own home to the ground to keep that same monster from getting him and his few surviving neighbors and tearing them to pieces, had turned out to be more resilient than anyone really expected.

Jonne hadn’t told them what he’d had to do to his own brother when he’d turned up in the same cave system as Theon and his motley crew. Janne had though, in one of his brief early stints as a man, so they wouldn’t ask about Tommi and Ville and hurt Jonne by making him retell the tale.

Theon didn’t ask how, after the nasty screaming mess of a breakup way back when, Kristian was back with Jonne, he just observed that whatever they’d been through together before they’d gotten
here had made their bond as strong as the one that tied Theon to Risto and Julian. Without recreational drugs and easy access to alcohol Kris had been forced to grow up, and had done so surprisingly well.

But Theon was going to ask why a tribe of humans had kept a changer cub with them and then he was going to sit on Sami if he had to, to figure out why he was acting like a mother hen over someone who wasn’t one of their odd little troop. Normally though, when they found another active changer it was either a poisoned youngster or a solitary who was just passing through and had no desire to stay. This kid was neither, but he was pretty enough, small enough and helpless enough to trip all of Sami’s protective instincts.

So maybe that was it.

It wasn't that Sami wasn't still a mother hen, he was. If anything the change had made that worse when it had heightened his other senses. It had corrected Sami’s near blindness as well and none of them that had needed glasses before needed them now.

Kind of a good thing, it was hard to find an ophthalmologist nowadays. And prescription lenses would be a joke. The closest they got was the sets of smoked quartz wafers sandwiched in leather to stop snow blindness. And they’d only been able to make three sets of those before the tools had been to worn down to be of use. Most of the time they worked with a leather mask with thin slits cut over the eyes or bits of scavenged dark glass if winter glare was a problem. He'd been working on using glass, but had stopped and never picked it back up.

He'd have to remind everyone to keep an eye open for brown or dark green glass bits again, he wanted to make more sets of goggles as the slit leather was less than useful for keeping blowing snow out of a person's eyes. Last winter hadn't been fun, and it had reminded him of the recycled glass idea.

But Sami had shifted his attitude toward humanity in general the most after things went to hell. He’d take on the part of the traveling Wise One but he routinely gave regular humans the crawls, even more than Jonne’s hyper cheerfulness or Kris’s stunning smiles and spacey attitude. Sami was too calm and focused, had been too calm and focused for the decades after the Fall just keeping everyone alive and together as they’d moved south and east to find a safer place to hide. Theon still didn't know what Sami had done some of those times he'd vanished for a few hours and come back able to feed the rest of them.

In his darker moments he was sure he didn't want to know. Sami had demonstrated a level of ruthlessness in recent years that would have made the Theon of 2011 and 2013 think very hard about running like hell away from this stranger who wore a friends face. Maybe even running screaming at the top of his lungs.

But Theon wasn't that man anymore, and Sami would never willingly hurt him.

They'd found a place in this huge cave system and then had started using their ability to cover vast amounts of ground quickly to scavenge the things to make the place comfortable. Scavenged foam and blankets were gradually replaced with rope beds and piles of fleeces and furs and later hide mattresses stuffed full of wild cotton or fragrant grasses. Salvaged bottles, pots and knives still were around, but only because they were carefully cared for to make the precious glass, iron and steel last.

Only a few places had held on to the ability to smelt iron into steel for knives and arrowheads and nowadays a good cast iron pot traded for an extraordinary amount of other goods. Most places recycled broken bits of glass or had fallen back to using copper, bronze, and stone and of all things
re-smelted aluminum cans. Aluminum was probably the most common metal used for arrowheads and spear points now. Scrap had been literally everywhere and it melted fairly easily with charcoal and bellows. While they'd had electricity an old leaf blower had done bellows duty and they'd melted down all the aluminum they could find into rough, reusable sheets, thin puddles more than anything. A mallet and chisel would let them cut rough arrow shapes from that and they could do the finish work with hand tools. Any scrap they piled in a basket to be re-melted into another useable puddle.

Something that still made Theon smile was that they'd taken to looting any music store after the Fall; they had found of strings for their guitars and occasionally picked up intact instruments. Not that there had been many of those. And some intrepid soul in the last couple hundred years had figured out how to replicate the shape of Sami's beloved old Ibanez acoustic. The originals they'd carried away with them all those years ago were still around, but the wood on most of them was thin and fragile. In the territories that Sami served as wise man the offering pits routinely held offerings of gut strings coiled up neatly in little packets of hide. Metal ones just weren't obtainable anymore, and hadn't been for a very long time. The places with metal working skills were turning out pots and knives and sewing needles, not metal guitar strings.

They'd gotten used to it, and while they'd changed their music a little to cope they still made music. Julian still drummed, although he hadn't had snares in longer than Theon cared to think about, and they all played acoustic guitars now and Sami and Chriss had both picked up playing of the kantele variant Sami's northern fishing tribes played. And both often took that instrument with them when they went north as part of their cover. Jonne and Theon would sometimes argue lyrics until the rest of them wanted to drown the pair, or themselves, just to make it stop.

If they put the wind turbine up they even could power things a little, lights and such, but mostly anymore they didn't. Parts were just impossible to replace now and things were so old they were terribly fragile. That and it was pure hell to find replacements for burned out light bulbs. If bulbs with intact filaments and globes turned up they usually were too corroded around the base to be useable, even intact CFU's were unusable more often than not. It was easier to trade to replace the glass on an oil lamp than to get a new light bulb. And their eyes now found artificial lights, even that from their few remaining lights, to be harsh and headache inducing the rare times they bothered. The solar cells they'd had had been victims of hail storms and the bits of silicon wafer that were left were more useful as crow scares on Jonne's gardens or as ornaments than anything else.

Risto's last amp was now just a table at the head of their shared bed after it had finally blown out due to old age. It wasn't like they had much left that needed power, most things had broken down years upon years ago, and their radio hadn't picked up anything but static in almost two hundred years. Even that they powered by hand crank when they did the occasional check of the airwaves. Now they would only do that once or twice a year at most.

Lifetime warranties really weren't meant to go past a hundred years, most wouldn't go past ten, and they had passed that quite a long time ago.

Light was from the very old glass and tin lamps filled with oil that a few refineries still produced with simplified stills. Those few tribes, like the ones who could still smelt metals and blow glass, lived fairly stationary lives, and got what they needed by trade, fishing and farming. Again Sami's territory held most of those groups, at least most of the ones Theon was aware of. If they ever ran short or the refined oil, animal fat held in clay or stone bowls worked just as well, it just blunted their noses for a little while. But a blunted sense of smell wasn't something they needed to be terribly worried about anymore. Even blunted they could smell things better than any human
could. For very short term light or to transfer fire they'd use a dry reed soaked in fat or coated in balsam resin as a sort of candle. The balsam at least smelled pretty good, and Jason tended to keep a good sized jar of the dried out resin balls handy for its use as a topical pain-killer and general sticky properties. The stuff was just too useful for keeping bandages in place. He had a stand of trees that he'd regularly go poke so he could harvest fresh resin and would use the older for balsam candles or to stick bandages in place, or even just to toss into the fire to cover the smell of a space full of men in the winter.

By and large they didn't strictly need the lights to navigate anymore, they'd been down here long enough to know every nook and cranny by heart and Jason had been clever enough to move colonies of phosphorescent fungus into areas where the footing was hazardous and there was no way to get a skylight or vent to the surface to help. Between those things and their own naturally sensitive eyes none of them had any trouble.

Regular humans though, they had trouble navigating the tunnels, and the few that survived being dropped in a pit tended to not even try and move away from where they had been dropped. Some who were literally dropped couldn't move very far. Even those like Sami's little foundling who had torches and been lowered with some care because they were expected to help other humans loot the offering pits tended to not try and find another way out. And Valkoinen Kuoppa, unlike most of the other offering pits, had another way out and up to the surface that was accessible to a regular human; it was one of the ways they normally used if they were headed up to play old wise man or to go hunting.

That reminded him.

“Sami?”

Sami hummed to let Theon know he'd heard and was listening, but he kept the rest of his focus on trying to get a bit more of the honey, water and vinegar mix they used as a sport drink replacement down into the poor kid he held so gently in his arms.

“Did you leave a survivor of your little rampage earlier?” One or two freaked out and hysterical survivors might do them more good than chasing down and exterminating the whole tribe. It had worked in the past when one small group of idiots had gotten brave and tried to loot another pit further east. Even better the three men that they'd let get away to spread the word that stealing from the offering pits was a bad idea had been staked out by other terrified humans hoping to appease the angry spirits by bringing the thieves back to them.

Not that Sami's initial impulse then hadn't been to backtrack and massacre, as that lot of thieves had held a woman at knife point to force her spouse and children to do the actual looting, he'd just been talked out of it. And the stories some of their tribes told made it sound a lot more impressive, and nasty, than it had really been. The poor family that had been used so badly had been moved well away by Risto and Sami and once they'd learned the language that was common at the new place they'd been less than inclined to say very much about why they'd gotten picked up and moved.

“Yes.”

Theon rolled his eyes, joy, Sami was being terse. Lovely.

“Sam~iii.”

Theon hid a grin at the way Sami's shoulders rounded over, and the pained sigh from the bigger man. He had deliberately let his voice take on the whining buzz that he knew drove Sami nuts; it got him the information he was after even if it wasn't from Sami.
“We left two, one running east and one north.” Jason answered as he settled down on the pile of small fleece pieces in the frame he used as a chair. He had his hands filled with heavy glass bottles and offered Theon one.

Theon sighed and accepted, not even bothering to ask where Chriss was if Jason was back. More than likely they'd argued, again, and Chriss was off calming back down. He wished they'd just get over it and fuck already, it wasn't like Jason wasn't stupidly in love with Chriss. Hell if Chriss hadn't been just as stupidly in love with Jason he'd never have come back after their first argument over nothing.

Any time they found a stash of intact glass bottles they'd bring them back and clean them out to refill with one of Jason's ongoing brewing experiments; it was the same if they found cast iron pots or pans or useable scrap metals but it was still something that made Theon absurdly happy. At the very least it meant they had decent beer most of the time, even if he kept having to whittle more birch stoppers to seal the things closed with. Risto and Jason both had the bad habit of pulling the stoppers out with their teeth and spitting them into the fire pit. The scrap metals Sami would take north and trade for other goods. If he remembered he also sometimes took broken glass as they had a small group there with a glass furnace that produced heavy blown glass bottles for trade. But most of the time Sami didn't bring them back unless they were filled with a more valuable commodity. It was just too much of a hassle to move many of them any real distance. But he did remember pretty regularly, and the new bottles were less scary thin on one side than most of the one's they found. Many of those didn't survive being cleaned out and became scrap in the bin for Sami.

It was still easier than having Jonne try and make pottery bottles. He did wonders with jars and dishes, not so well with smaller necked bottles and jugs, even after all this time and practice.

Jason continued after taking a slug from his own bottle.

“I figure the one going east will hit home territory pretty quickly and get whoever's left and like-minded good and jumpy. The ones I saw were unaware of one of their hunting parties being missing and were just going about their business when I turned around to come back.”

Jonne shifted around until he was lying half over Kris's lap.

“I'd rather not wipe them out if we don't have to. They had some decent folks there still.” Kris's tone was mild as he stroked his fingers through Jonne's hair and made the silver ornaments chime softly. It was likely given the size and nature of the group that most of the tribe was unaware of the idiocy some of their own had tried to execute.

“I'll take it under advisement.”

Theon winced. The meant Sami was still in a bloodthirsty mood. But if it had been Julian or Risto wearing all the purple and greening bruises this kid was, well, he wasn't sure he'd be tremendously rational either.

Joy.

He looked at the limp blond Sami was settling down to lay half curled in his furs and hoped he'd wake up soon. He wasn't sure how much more he could take of a broody Sami. Theon shot a pained look at Risto and Julian when he saw Sami rummage out a comb to start working on the poor kids’ hair.

God, he hoped the kid woke up soon, before Sami's fretting overflowed on the rest of them.
Risto sighed and watched the kid crawl out of Sami's bed furs on legs that shook. He knew Theon was hoping the kid would wake soon just in the hopes that having the kid awake would distract Sami from his bad mood. But this wasn't quite what he thought Thee had in mind.

The kid was trying to be quiet, but he'd awakened at least half of them right off. Part of it was that they all knew the noises their home made, so anything different would instantly get their attention. Chriss had learned that the first time he and Jason had argued and he'd tried sneaking back in to try and avoid the inquisition of a worry warting Sami. He'd gotten bombarded by everyone and now just came back openly and dealt with any fallout. A different sound could be the rumbles that were all the warning they'd get of a flash flood headed their way, a rock fall or even a landslide outside in their valley. The last flash flood hadn't gotten their living quarters, but paranoia wasn't a bad thing when your survival option was climb a hot chimney or drown. The rest was he was trying to be quiet, and stealth attempts tended to mean a prank was in the offing. He could faintly see the reflection of the fire off Kris and Jonne's eyes from their pile of shared bed furs and could feel the faint tremors under his hand that meant Jules had awakened and was trying not to give himself away by giggling.

He watched as the poor kid picked his way over to the fire pit and looked up the chimney. At this time of the morning he'd see only a few pinpricks of stars if he was lucky, as they'd pulled the rain guard off a few days before to clean the soot out of the chimney and not replaced it yet, and the stone would be too hot for him to climb. They'd made sure the flue was big enough for one of them to climb and clean, just in the name of not setting their home place on fire by accident. Jonne had been insistent and they'd all agreed a very long time ago. The last thing they needed was a chimney fire. It had been easy enough to put a slate roof a foot or so above the flue top to keep any rain or snow mostly out. A bit of woven lattice made of reeds or thin branches kept the worst of the wildlife out, not that many things tried to come down a chimney that was in use as much as theirs was. Jason kept muttering about doing a more permanent lattice in stone but had never gotten around to doing one, but he got tired of suicidal crickets every spring. Some of the things always got lucky and made it down alive. They seemed to like hiding out in Jason's space and the chirping drove him crazy after a while. But being fair having the damn thing chirping away right in your ear was a bit much.

Then Risto watched as the poor thing sniffed at the open bottles set on the hearth. From the way he crinkled his nose alcohol wasn't something he was used to and he kept cautiously sniffing at bowls, bottles and jars until he found the one Sami habitually kept water in. A few swallows and he carefully set the heavy ceramic jar back down, even though he was clearly still thirsty, and began picking a cautious path across the floor toward one of the dimly lit entrances.

He heard a soft sigh and the faint rustle of Sami getting up.

The kid spun in place, and even in the dimness of the coals in the fire pit the panic on his face was easy to read.

What he didn't expect was for the kid to actually bolt.

Kris was up and out of his shared furs before Jonne could do much more than sit up.

“I'll go after him; he at least knows my face as a friendly one.”

Risto sighed as he felt the warmth that was Theon shift up from behind his back.

“I guess that means he's awake.”
Koira wasn't sure where he was going, but he was sure if he didn't get away and fast something horrible would happen. His foster mother had always warned him that terrible things happened if you were in the hands of a Dark One. Even good people had horrible things happen to them, and right now he wasn't sure if he still counted as 'good.' The stone under his feet was worn smooth and he wondered if that meant the same thing that a smooth path in the wood and plains meant, that it was constantly traveled.

He could smell water and ever so faintly hear it rushing, so he started going that direction, stumbling a little in the darkness as he cautiously felt his way uphill. Water moving might mean a way out. In the tales the Elders told great heroes often escaped the underworld using water. There would be hazards in the water, but at least there he had stories to give him some idea of what to expect and what to do.

What he didn't expect was an underground waterfall, and for the stone to be slick from condensation.

Only a pair of strong hands grabbing him kept him from falling over the low wall and into the deeper darkness below.

“Easy, easy Nuori. Easy, you're safe here.”

“Chr, Christus?” Koira was shaking from several kinds of fear, and near death by falling was only the most recent. He turned into the steadying hands and felt comforting arms and a familiar scent wrapping around him.

He could hear the smile in the other man's voice.

“The very same, carefully Nuori, the path here is very close to the edge, and it's a very long way down.” Koira felt those strong hands leading him back, away from the edge and toward safety.

“Where are we?” He wasn't happy with how frightened his voice was, but at the moment only the Old Soul was here to see it, and he'd seen far worse Koira was sure.

“Here is the waterfall that supplies Satama with fresh water. If you had turned right instead of left you'd have gone down the path that leads out to the hot springs where we bathe and do wash.”

Koira blinked. Dark Ones did wash? They had tribe names? Satama sounded like a tribe name.

“B, but...”

He heard a gentle laugh and felt warm fingers cupping his cheek.

“Even demons need to bathe Nuori and we aren't demons, just men with a very long life-span. We're just men Nuori, just men, and sometimes we stink.”

Koira gulped and stuttered out his next question, to rattled to accept that Christus was trying to joke and calm him.

“B, but I woke, and was in the f, furs with another man.”

He could hear something chiming; his mind supplied him with the picture of Christus and his habitual chiming silver and shell earrings and ornaments. The other man must have nodded his head, but he couldn't see anything beyond a very faint shadow in the darkness.
“That was Sami; he's been very worried about you. We've all been very worried about you. Until you woke we didn't want to set you to sleeping alone.”

The explanation sounded reasonable, but Koira still felt his insides trembling. He hadn't slept in the arms of anyone since Lauri and Janne had been getting ready to marry and Aele had changed plans and sent all three men wedding River Women off with the River People. He'd been tied up behind Aele's tent and had watched in silent unhappiness as the boats carried his only friends away, both surely thinking that Koira hadn't cared enough to see them off.

It didn't really help that he'd felt a hardness in the other man’s loose trousers and it had been rubbing up firmly into his backside. He knew some men took others like a man took his wife and that done properly it could bring pleasure to both. He also knew that done wrong or with hate and rage instead of love it could kill the man who acted as 'wife' and he wasn't sure if he wanted to buy his safety by being the big man’s mock wife. What would happen if he found a real one? Not many women would tolerate a male lover on the side. And the other man was much bigger than him, what if he couldn't take him inside, what if he wanted to take Koira that way anyway? His mind buzzed with fright and impossible questions.

“Kris?”

Koira jerked in fright at the new voice. He knew this voice, it was burned into his memory. It had been the soft one full of dark warning that had told Aele and his men to run right before the screams had started. He backed away and paid no attention to Christus trying to calm him. A large man shape faintly illuminated by some sort of a tiny lamp appeared out of the darkness and came closer and Koira spun to throw himself over the short wall and off the cliff in his terror. That voice meant painful death; he'd heard the screams and he didn't want to face it. Better to hope the fall killed him quickly.

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Sami and Kris both swore, with Kris's words coming out in a shriek, and dove for the frightened youngster, the little lamp in Sami's hand dropped to the stone walkway and went out as it tumbled over. But fear had made him fast even for a changer and the boy was going over the edge before either of them got close enough to catch him.

They both listened intently for a splash in the large pool below. The drop was a long one, but the pool of water below was deep, deep enough that the fall was easily survivable even to a regular human if he fell correctly.

Nothing.

They hadn't heard him hit the rocks, none of them was able to stop a cry of pain when they missed a dive and hit those blasted things so there was no way a child could.

Then Sami heard something flapping, and a faint squeaky cry of a bat.

But bats didn’t live in their caves. Not here anyway. They had to go almost four days travel at a humans walking pace south and west in the tunnels before they had bats.

He smiled as Kris heard the same noises, the sounds of a very large bat echo-locating.

Kris went limp in relief.

“Kid is just full of surprises isn't he?” Sami barely dodged Kris's slap of retaliation.
At first Jason had been amused by the kid proving to be a true changer and not limited to just a wolf shape and a man shape like he, Julian and Janne were.

Now, after hours of following the little imp and waiting for him to tire and land, he was heartily tired of it.

Janne still found it amusing, but he’d seen the kid clear the cave system and get caught in the early morning updrafts. The kid had panicked and changed shapes again. And apparently watching a large bat changing mid tumble to a much larger buzzard was amusing to Janne. If he’d have been there to see it he might have found it funny too, but he’d still been running for an exit after the damn kid. Kris’s frantic scream had gotten all of them up and moving in a very big hurry.

Watching the skies while keeping track of where one’s paws were running though, *that* wasn’t funny or fun to Jason. Not around here with all the sinkholes, caves and cliffs hidden in the tall grass of the plains, add in all the smaller potholes just big enough to break a leg in and he was *not* a happy hunter.

It helped that Sami and the rest of the guys were out here as well, but the blasted kid didn’t stick to any given heading and it was *maddening*. The blasted brat had been flying all day and by now his arms, wings, whatever, had to be tired. Jason was grumpy, tired, hot and hungry; more than ready for the kid to come down.

And now the little menace was circling in one of the afternoon thermals above the cliff line that was above their home and lead off to North Peak and their watching place.

Hell with it.

Jason threw himself out of his wolf shape to flop belly down on the cool stone. To his surprise Janne shifted as well and sat beside him, leaning back on his arms and watching Sami’s little foundling circle.

“That's interesting.”

Jason didn’t even bother to look up, just rolled over to cool his overheated back and laid there with one arm over his eyes.

“What is?”

Janne was squinting up at the sky.

“He's shifted forms again.”

Jason lifted his arm enough to shoot Janne a puzzled look.

“Oh, I don't hear screaming, so?” He was grumpy and hungry enough to be a bit callous right now.

“A smaller bird, I think he's tired.”

Jason sat up and turned so he could see.

“ Took him long enough.” He squinted up at the much smaller shape of a falcon circling lower and lower in the sky. “If I’d known the little brat could take a flighted form I'd never have agreed to
help drag his skinny ass back to Satama.” Jason knew it was just his frustration speaking and from the soft snort from Janne, his friend was well aware that Jason wouldn't really have left the poor kid behind.

Janne's eyes narrowed as he watched the small form circling above them.

“I don't think knew he could before.”

“Hunh?” Not his brightest choice of responses, but it got the point across.

Janne rose, his eyes tracking the faltering wing-beats of the falcon.

“I don't think he knows how to land.”

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Sammy squinted up the rock face at the falcon skimming dangerously close to impact and found himself coming to the same conclusion Janne had just come to. Then his heart froze as the wing beats faltered again and the falcon dropped before he could force his wings to move and only just barely keep him from clipping the cliff face in a very painful and probably fatal fashion.

“Little idiot doesn't know how to land.”

He started running, getting himself into position for the little brats’ next attempt to land on the cliff face. It took several attempts because twice when he moved the little menace veered off in fright. The third time he either didn't see or was too exhausted to care and Sami was able to take the running leap up and out, kicking off the rock face to reach out and catch the falcon and carefully kill his momentum in a controlled tumble on a relatively smooth section of ground. He kept the frightened bird protected in the center of his curl and when he came to a stop carefully kept a firm hold on the trembling winged form. The little distressed 'klee klee' noises coming from the bird were pathetic and at the same time highly annoying.

If he hadn't had a firm hold on that soft feathered body he might have lost the bird a second time as the rest of his friends came barreling up on two legs and four to see if he was alright. As it was the kid tried the flail out of the firm grip Sami had on his wings and body.

At least he wasn't lashing out with sharp talons; he had those fisted up and was weak enough the blows weren't going to leave marks. He also wasn't lashing out with that sharp beak, just crying and weakly struggling. It was like the kid didn't know how to hurt another person to get free.

Or he'd been so severely punished for lashing out that now he was too afraid to, even if he thought he was about to die.

Sami sighed and huffed at the hair falling in his eyes; his headscarf had come off in his tumble. Then he scowled down into the frightened green gold eyes of the bird.

“Change.”

“Sami,” Kris started, and then broke off under the weight of Sami's frustrated glare. His shoulder hurt from where he'd hit the ground to roll and he was hot, tired and hungry enough to be more than a little bit crabby. This had gone on more than long enough.

“Change,” he ordered the bird a second time, and this time the feathered body shuddered and uncurled into the trembling shape of a boy lying belly down over Sami's lap. Firmly Sami squelched the desire to spank the kid and turned the shaking form over in his arms and gathered
him close enough in his arms that he could rise up to his feet. The green eyes were still terrified and the boy didn't even try and move his trembling arms enough to pull his white blond hair out of his face. Though given how badly his hands and arms were shaking and how labored his breathing was Sami wasn't sure trying would have done any good.

He huffed, shook his hair out of his eyes and started walking back down toward the nearest entrance to their cave system. And as he walked he very sternly gave the boy a talking to. The rest of the group exchanged looks and wry smiles as they fell in step behind him. Julian grinned and made sure he found and picked up Sami's headscarf, humans came this way sometimes to hunt, and something like that just lying around would make them jittery.

“First, don't do that again. You scared a decade off Kris's life. Second, don't ever scare me like that again. Third, don't you know better than to fly, especially marathon distances, before you know how to land? And speaking of landing, why in the name of sanity were you trying to land on a cliff face?”

Behind him Kris ducked his head to try and keep his relieved giggles in check, having a set of relieved hysterics would just set the boy off again. The poor kid was already sobbing in terror.

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Koira was shaking in a mix of fear, exhaustion and pain. He was completely confused and unsure if this creature, who was cradling him so gently in his arms, was going to hurt him or not. His big hands were gentle as they set him back in the bed furs Koira had awakened in earlier but his voice was stern, almost angry.

“Sami.” Another man, thinner, shorter and more a golden blond than the one who had been scolding him set a fine boned hand on his captors shoulder and brought the scolding to a halt.

“Sami,” the other man repeated. “Ease up, he's scared silly, all he has to go on are old wives tales and superstition. He'd just been abandoned by his own people, what was he supposed to think?” The smaller man had an easy crooked grin and warm pale blue-green eyes and Koira wondered if he was a Dark One too, or if the Dark Ones took human servants. The blond continued. “Seriously, for all he knows you're just going to eat him.” There was a hint of teasing under those words, but Koira didn't understand the joke. “He's not up for a scolding from Mama Sami yet, give him a bit.”

Another wave of pain from his abused arms had him biting his lip to keep from attracting attention by whimpering. He blinked rapidly to try and keep from crying, but his eyes were burning so badly that he couldn't keep tears from escaping.

One of the wolves shifted into a dark haired man and Koira couldn't help the yelp that escaped as he tried to back away from a slender reaching hand. An action that had him sobbing as his arms, chest and back exploded in pain.

“Janne?”

Koira blinked and looked up through his tears, this man looked nothing like the Janne he knew, he was thin, but not as tall, and his dark hair was long and had a reddish brown cast to it, not short and black that bleached to pale blond on top in the summer sun. But his hands were gentle and his hazel eyes were kind.

“He's cramping up. I think a bit of that liniment Jason makes after a long soak in one of the springs will help.”
Koira wondered why he was getting looked at so strangely.

“Uh, Janne? How do you know that?” asked the smaller blond.

Janne sighed and gave Koira a wry smile before he answered in a far too cheerful tone of voice.

“Because we aren't designed to fly and our arms aren't in good enough condition to support the strain of flying.”

The man who had carried him, Sami, gave Janne a speaking look.

“You know this how?” The tone was still severe, but it was clear this man was accustomed to it.

“The first time I flew I couldn't lift my arms for a week.”

The dark haired changer Koira remembered from the pit spluttered in shock before exclaiming.

“You can fly?”

The resigned sigh and wry expression on Janne's long face made Koira giggle a little in hysteria, but that jarred screaming muscles and had him whimpering in pain again.

“How do you think I knew he didn't know how to land?”

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They didn't trust him to not try and run away again. But Koira wasn't sure if he could walk or even stand at the moment without help, his limbs hurt so much and the cuts on his feet had been reopened and made enough worse by his panicked flight that he left bloody marks on the stone if he tried to stand. Another changer with soft black hair and warm blue eyes supported him in one of the pools of shockingly hot water so he wouldn't slip under and drown and had gently helped him to eat a reasonable meal of stewed meat, rabbit he thought, and several kinds of root vegetables and then helped the one called Janne rub his aching body down with something that smelled strongly of several types of mint.

Then the big blond man was there and wrapping him firmly in a large soft something, not a hide but soft and absorbent and carrying him back to the central room. There he was firmly planted back in the big man’s bed and to his shock had his hair very gently combed out. Once that was done he was fed another bowl of broth heavily laden with bits of meat and vegetables and firmly tucked under more furs and sternly ordered to rest.

Why was he using a valuable bit of woven goods just to dry him off? Why was he dressing him so gently in loose trousers made of similar stuff? Woven goods were expensive trade goods, he'd never even owned so much as a woven ribbon before in his life. What had been used so casually as a towel would have been a good bride price for any of the tribe’s daughters.

He didn't understand why they all seemed to have bed furs here; he'd seen Christus taking a tiny blond that Koira hadn't been able to identify for sure as male or female off into another passage that branched off the main one. Did they all have places of their own? Caves of their own like his own people had tents? Or was the central room like the meeting circle, a place where people gathered? Was this everyone? Or was it just a gathering place for men? If it was just a gathering place of men why was he here? Why were they treating him with so much gentle care? Why, when he clearly had annoyed the big man beyond measure, was he cradling Koira so gently and feeding him like he was a well beloved child and not some creature that was only fit to be dropped down a spirit well and left there.
It made his head hurt and his heart ache. He *liked* being held, *liked* the gentle touch of the big man's hand stroking his hair, but at the same time was scared to death it was a trick. That the instant he relaxed they'd start hurting him just to see him cry and hear him scream.

All the stories of men trapped by Dark Ones told of terrible tortures and games with impossible choices.

Koira hadn't seen any women, but he'd seen fine baskets and hangings of plaited fiber around the sleeping places. And he'd seen beadwork and fine ornaments in silver and gold, shell and stone. Things that hinted at women, at least it hinted at women as far as he understood the divisions of labor from his own tribe. Men of his tribe didn't sew clothing unless they had no other choice, and the examples he could see were well made, if not as decorated as the ones he knew from his own tribe and the peoples they traded with. He even saw things made of woven plant fibers. Things that were expensive trade goods for his people, just lying in casual heaps tangled in with the bed furs, he even saw balls of spun fiber being worked into a tightly patterned tube lying waiting to be picked up in a basket near one of the covered beds. He'd seen tubes like that as trade items, to be sewn to foot coverings or worn as foot coverings, but had never seen them being made before. And the one's he'd seen in passing as trade goods weren't patterned so densely or made of as fine a fiber. He'd had no idea you used pointed sticks to make the tubes, it seemed far too simple a method, he had to be missing something.

He felt his eyes widen when he heard soft cries and moans of pleasure coming from that passageway where he'd seen Christus going with his unidentified 'friend'. The voices were both male, and from the tones of them they were long time lovers.

The light coming down the shaft was slowly fading, and it still confused him that Dark Ones would have so many shafts leading up to the sky and daylight as they did. He thought that by their very natures Dark Ones would avoid light. But the central cavern was filled with light, from the small fire and from oil lamps of clay and stone and some clear, red and blue substances he'd never seen before and from skylights like he'd never seen before. They were just holes cut and then covered over with some clear substance he'd never believed could exist. It looked like a translucent dirty white version of whatever the lamps were made of, but how had it gotten sunk into the rock? It couldn't just be quartz, he'd never seen a piece of quartz that big and that consistently colored. And how would they have cut quartz thin enough that light could get through? Just shaping beads of the stone was more labor intensive than he cared to think about. Just drilling a hole to make a pendant could take days and days of focused labor. He didn't understand how the holes could be so big and so perfectly round. If he'd wanted to try he could probably climb up some of them and touch the covering from the bottom.

Koira huddled down and tried to stay awake to listen to the conversations. To his surprise they ate food just like everyone he'd grown up with. Yes, some of them didn't eat very much, at least not at whatever meal this was, but they still ate. And all of them drank something pungent smelling out of heavy bottles. He'd only ever seen a bottle like that once; the tribe's Shaman had one, made of some heavy clear brown substance that felt like the best glazed pottery. These were brown, and blue and green, even a few that looked like water made solid and had stoppers of birch and wax. It made him wonder if the clear lamps were made of the same stuff.

They sounded just like a normal group of hunters that had come home, not like the stuff of tales and terrible nightmares. Just easy talk about hunting, trading and what things they needed to do as a group, not the terrible things whispered about by the elders. Tales that he now realized might have held useful information, and he wondered now if he'd damned himself by eating and drinking what they'd offered him.
More than the easy banter, as the light faded and the fire was built up they acted more awake, like a group of hunters waking in the morning. He didn't know what to think, he was so horribly confused.

Eventually it was too much and Koira closed his eyes and slept.

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“Stubborn little thing.”

Sami grumbled and half scowled at Jason's flippant comment, but his hand was gentle as it stroked over the boy's hair.

“What? He is.” Then Jason sobered. “I don't think we should leave him alone though.”

“So who gets the short straw?” joked Theon from his nest between a dozing Julian and a wide awake Risto.

Janne spoke up, which made them all jump, they were still adjusting to him being in man shape more often than before. He was sitting up in his bed, rather than curled with his head on his paws like normal.

“I think Julian and I, he seems to respond better to us. And maybe Jonne, he's barely even seen Jonne. He might not remember him from when he was doing Rites in the area.”

Sami considered that for a moment then nodded as he looked to the others for confirmation or further suggestions.

Julian piped up, belying the half asleep look on his face.

“I don't mind, and we can keep him out of mischief for a couple days while his arms and hands heal.”

“Hands?” Theon questioned looking down at Julian intently.

“Mmm, he made a mess of them sometime recently, and his knees and feet, like he was trying to climb something. If he heals like we do it'll take a few days before he's up to using them normally again.”

“Ah, “Jason spoke up. “He tried to scale the walls of Valkoinen Kuoppa when Sami and I were taking care of the poachers.”

“Why? There's a path, or he could have jumped out.”

Theon snickered at Jonne's question and reached over to poke him playfully in his highly ticklish sides, he smiled at the indignant squeak he got. His smile went a bit wicked at how Kris cuddled Jonne close and helped protect his sides.

“We know about the path, I don't think any humans do or the poachers would have used it rather than drop him down in a sling to do their dirty work. And the poor thing has been raised around humans; he probably doesn't know he can jump that high yet.”

Jonne stuck his tongue out at Theon's teasing, but accepted the reasoning with a small nod.

“You still want to make an example of the tribe?” Kris's question sounded faintly sad.
“Not the whole tribe, just the two we let go. Assuming the tribe hasn't staked them out themselves. I also want to make sure that any kids are being treated properly and that whoever was abusing him was in that group we took out.”

“What about collaborators.”

Sami smiled darkly.

“Human nature being what it is, I suspect we'll find any co-conspirators staked out with our runners once we get around to tracking them down.”

There was a round of grimaces.

But Sami was probably right, and now that the boy was safe it wasn't like they had any driving need to hurry. Odds were that any other kids that had been getting sidelong looks would have a reprieve for at least a few months. Long enough for them to do a good look over and plan any removals if they were needful.

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Sami curled up around the sleeping boy. The smell of mint from the liniment Jason made was strong enough to make his nose wrinkle but he was all too familiar with how useful the stuff was and knew better than to complain. To try and kill some of the mint smell Sami buried his nose in the poor kid’s hair. The poor thing was like Jonne, cursed with fine pale hair, and his was dead straight, unlike Jonne's soft waves.

Julian had helped the kid wash again today, so his hair smelled faintly of flowers. Sami made a mental note to gather up baskets full of ceanothus blossoms to dry for later use and to ask Jonne to plant more, flowery or not he liked being clean and they needed to conserve a bit on the soap Jason made until they did a bit of hunting and could build up the fat reserves again. And he was going to have to remember to help Jonne replant some of the soap-root plants down by the river near their summer swimming spots. The stuff was just too useful. That and the flowers made for a tasty addition to their diet. Last summer he'd been teased about grazing directly off the stalks of the plants that grew outside the valley.

The boy had been able to help feed himself today, which was a distinct improvement over the last two where the poor kid couldn't hold a spoon up. Sami sighed, now if they could just keep the kid from flinching every time he or Jason made a sudden move. He was getting tired of seeing those big green eyes watching him like he was going to eat him.

He'd awakened yesterday to find the kid had roused before him and been too terrified to move. It probably didn't help that Sami had been spooned up tight behind him and had his rock hard prick pressed tight into his pert little ass. If the poor thing hadn't been trembling in fright it would have been a nice thing to wake up to, he'd been cradling Koira's bits in his hand and nuzzling behind one ear. If Koira had been willing it would have been a very nice way to wake up. Normally the only times he woke up in company were in the coldest parts of winter, when Chriss and Jason curled up with him, or when he was running his circuit of Rites and had spent the night with one of his tribes.

Jason would elbow him in the gut if he woke up snuggled in like Koira had been, Chriss would tolerate it but would also nudge, poke or elbow if he wanted loose. Jason and Chriss were also grown men, with Jason being almost of a size with Sami. Koira might be grown, but he was petite and fit in Sami’s arms much more neatly. But something about the way the kid froze up and laid there trembling told Sami that the kid didn't have a whole lot of experience with sex in general,
never mind sex with another man.

Even worse for the poor kids’ peace of mind, Theon had been getting it from both sides. Risto had been balls deep in him and Jules had been sucking him off. Between the two Theon couldn't do much more than squirm and beg, and he'd been begging, the kind of 'let me come, I'm dying' begging he did when his two lovers had been holding him on the edge for ages. Given how much Theon loved to tease and torment his lovers it was hardly a surprise that sometimes they'd turn the tables and get even.

Jonne had been watching, and Kris had been just getting warmed up to really make his little lover squirm. Jason had been dead asleep and only god himself knew where Janne had gotten off to. None of them knew for sure where all his trap lines were run or where he was finding some of the other edibles he brought home.

But the poor freaking out kid had a full on view of Theon getting fucked and sucked and of Jonne getting fingered open and had Sami hard and pressed up tight behind him, breathing in his ear. No wonder he'd barely been able to look at any of them. The poor kid still likely didn't know why he hadn't been eaten.

Sami closed his eyes at the memory of Theon's teasing undertones. There was eating, and then there was eating. And the boy was pretty enough that Sami wouldn't have had any problem with making him squirm in pleasure by devouring him in a purely sexual fashion. But the kid was scared silly of him and he liked his partners willing. God, but it was tempting, so fucking tempting to try nudging the kid that direction.

Then Kris had brought up the fact that they'd need to disperse to start doing the rounds of Rites and purges for the late summer and early fall. Several of their tribes had kids coming up into the age range where they would be most likely to change if it was going to happen at all.

The kid had been confused, and Sami sighed as he realized, again, that they really needed a better name for the kid than 'dog.'

Julian had tried to explain, but it was hard to do when they were talking about concepts the kid had no understanding at all of. Like viruses, and genetics. It had made his head hurt as Julian had tried to simplify the concepts enough for Koira to understand. Koira was able to grasp the concept of 'bad blood' fairly well; just the why's and how's had him lost. Not that any of them really fully understood, given that the scientific community near them had gone down within a few years of the bombs going off. They'd barely had time to figure out there were genetic components to everything, and a general sort of idea as to what and where they were, before the second and third waves of maturing survivors made their change to zombies and brought what little had survived the initial disaster crashing down.

Hell, they really needed a better name for the kid. It would give him something less depressing to think about.

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Levi snickered a the way this village's younger males population was all staring in a mix of lust and awe at Squeaks as she balanced on a narrow pole in their performance scaffolding. She paid no attention to her captive audience as she moved helping set up their performance space. She balanced with no apparent wobbles, even with both of her hands full and wasn't even looking at her feet as she worked with Brian to get things set and tied off securely. They might not be part of a full troop right now, but habits had proved too hard to break. If nothing else it would help them
make a marginally better living as they followed the boys trail west.

Well, maybe not so oblivious to her audience. Squeaks had just done a back walkover and held the handstand with her legs split over her a bit longer than was truly necessary. Then she'd followed it up with a hip twitch and grin back at them.

Levi licked his lips and shared a grin with Brian.

Oh yeah, someone was going to get it later tonight.

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It took a couple weeks before the kid relaxed enough and healed enough that Sami felt remotely comfortable letting him sleep alone. While he was healing Kris and Jonne had a grand time sorting through the storage caves for long, straight pieces of wood, lengths of rope, furs and textiles to build and cover a rope frame bed like they all slept in. Koira had been shocked that they would go to the trouble just for him, even though all they did was set up his spot in a nook behind where Sami and Jason's beds were. They hadn't even built him a proper mattress yet, just a hide bag stuffed full of sweet smelling grasses, a more proper filling would have to wait until later in the summer when the wild cotton ripened and marsh sedges flowered. That nook had been a spot they sometimes kept extra firewood in, in winter when none of them really wanted to go traipsing around if they didn't need to, but there were other places for more wood.

In summer they almost never pulled the heavy outer drapes around the beds closed, just the lighter woven ones that kept any bugs out, so he'd been confused as to why they'd needed a framework that went over the bed as well as under it. The fact that all the other sleeping places had loosely woven mesh and heavy leather drapes didn't really help. They were all so used to each other that half of them slept nude in summer and sex wasn't something that always needed the minimal privacy of a closed drape. Only when it got horribly cold or hellishly windy did they close off the leather drapes to get away from the drafts and huddle in close for warmth. Even the bug mesh didn't get dropped very often, usually only when spring flooding had the mosquito populations booming enough that the plants Jason put on the fires as bug repellant and the sedges that were mixed in with the cotton of their mattresses wasn't enough to keep the pests out.

Then again Koira had been confused at the very concept of a frame bed; most of the semi-nomadic types didn't really use them much unless they were at winter camps. Even then it was more for older and high status individuals, and Sami was pretty sure whoever had been taking care of Koira the last few years, they weren't high status.

It had made Sami angry enough that he'd had to go take a run up to the North Peak just to calm down from seeing how shocked Koira had been to get new furs of his very own. Learning that he'd handed over the products of his own hunting and labor to others just made his blood boil, everyone deserved to enjoy the fruits of their own labors. Sharing was one thing, being used as near slave labor was another thing entirely.

When he'd gotten back from that calming run, Jonne told him that Kris and Janne had gone out hunting and taken Koira with them.

He hadn't been sure how he felt about that, conflicted was a mild term.

But then he'd been gone checking his northern tribes for hidden nastiness under the guise of Rites. Of the thirty odd young people he'd checked over he'd only had to drain three. A decided improvement over last year and one village having none of its small crop of sub adults make it to adulthood. At least his northern tribes were rather pragmatic about things, and they'd just shrugged
and gone on hoping that next season would do better.

But Sami suspected his northernmost sea going tribes knew how their lost ones died and had a good suspicion as to why. Sami might sometimes give them the creepy crawls, but he could sense what they couldn't and would make sure that their loved ones at least died peacefully rather than turning into monsters that would kill more of them in decidedly horrible ways. Sami just wished they could sense the defective genes before the kids hit puberty. Not that losing kids was better than losing near adults, but it would sometimes make it easier on him and his folk to not have to drain six or more adult sized near zombies all at once. At their age a mouthful or two of blood every other week was sufficient as long as they had normal food to eat. Not that they couldn't hold more, sometimes a lot more, it just made them feel bloated until they were either able to share or had burned it off through exercise. Human blood was best but anything warm blooded would work and Sami knew Theon and Risto enjoyed biting Julian in sex play and that Julian got off on being bitten by his lovers.

He'd brought loads of dried and smoked fish, jars of fish oil and distilled white lamp oil back and a good lot of reindeer hides, amber and even several heavy waxed and wrapped rounds of hard reindeer milk cheese. Jason made cheese every now and again from the milk from their herd of horses and from the collection of goats that lingered near their home, but that tended to be soft and mild and usually got eaten fairly quickly. For whatever reason Jason still couldn't make a firm cheese that would stay sound all the way through. Either the center went bad or the rind was nasty, so Jason kept to what he knew and firm and hard cheeses were traded for not made in house. They'd have to make some pan bread so they could have something to stuff the lovely cheese into so they didn't feel like such pigs eating it with just their fingers.

He'd come home from his first sweep of his northernmost groups to find that Theon and Risto had done their sweeps and had a slightly worse death count, but better feeding. So Jonne at least was full fed and not slightly blood starved. They'd come home with varying sorts of preserved meats and fruits, in shell nuts and again leather, fur and bits and pieces that could be traded for other things elsewhere. Then he'd left for the other half of his sweep, this time with an extra pair of horses so he wouldn't unnerve his people quite as much.

Jason had been gone south toward Tarifa already with some of the lot of silver, shell and turquoise they'd pulled from the offering pit they'd gotten Koira out of. With a bit of luck he'd come back with preserved shellfish, salt, sugar, and rice and woven goods from the coastal weavers. Last time he'd found a trader local to the area who made a good hard cheese and come back with enough rounds to actually keep some aside for winter. He might even bring up glass bottles filled with the scented oils he used for some of his concoctions, the last batch of coastal lavender had proved very useful as it covered the aftertaste of Kesh in water and helped calm stressed humans. Sami had expected that he'd beat Jason home, Jason had to use a pair of their horses to haul everything and was limited to their speed, so it would take about a week to get down that far and another to return. He was also taking down a few of their yearling males as they both traded well and needed to be culled out before they needed gelding to keep the herd somewhat manageable. If it had just been him Jason could have made the trip in four days each way, just under three if he was really in a hurry. Sami could make the same trip in less than two if he pushed it, but he'd be hungry and snappish when he got there. And neither of them could carry much in the way of trade goods if they hurried like that.

They knew there was a vampire doing sweeps for zombie blood down along the coastline there, but he'd avoided contact so Jason was letting him be. When he wanted company he'd make himself findable, until then they'd let him alone.

What he hadn't expected to find when he got home was Janne staring up at a pale speck circling in
the sky.

Janne in man shape, something he wasn't used to seeing every day anymore, but was still sure he'd be happy to get used to again.

“Janne?”

Janne didn't take his eyes off the circling speck.

“He's stretching his wings.”

Sami blinked, that couldn't mean what he thought it did.

Then the speck folded its wings and dove through a passing flight of doves.

Sami yelped when he saw a small gray feathered form plummet. But it wasn't Koira; his pale falcon shape circled down after the other bird in a casual looking spiral.

“He's getting better.”

“He what?!”

Janne looked back at him and smiled.

“He's getting better. He's making about every forth kill now.”

Sami blinked stupidly as he set his heavy packs down and moved to pull the travois and packs off his mountain bred horses so they could go down into their hidden valley and graze. These three mares knew the routine, and would walk down without having to be led and would graze outside the enclosure they'd built until someone let them in with the rest of their small herd. Later he'd go down and give them a measure of grain and a good brushing.

“And you think it's wise to just let him fly alone?”

“I've been up there with him the past few days. Sami, he needs to learn to trust us, he won't if we keep him tied with nursing strings. Theon, Risto and Kris are in from their second sweeps. Kris had another bad one.”

Sami winced at the change in subject. That meant somehow they'd missed one.

“How bad?”

Janne helped him sort things that needed to go in now, from the things that could wait a bit. The fresher foods were going in now. More than likely they wouldn't last more than a few days.

“Small transient group from a lot further east than we go, they had one turn and go on a rampage. It was messy, took out the rest of the adults.”

Sami winced, at least that meant they hadn't missed one, but Janne was continuing.

“Then it hit one of the mountain groups, and Kris had to help them kill it. And had to mercy kill one of the older hunters who had been clawed and bitten.”

Sami winced again. zombie bites didn't make normal people zombies, not unless that person also carried the defective gene and had somehow escaped turning at puberty, but they did become infected horrifyingly fast with a nasty black wound rot that nothing could stop except amputation
and cautery. Mercy killing meant that the bite wasn't where you could just amputate. Not that amputation guaranteed survival. So far Sami hadn't seen anything other than a vampire or a changer that could survive the wound rot and the only thing that could clean a fresh wound and prevent the rot was a large quantity of distilled spirits. Not something anyone made in large quantities anymore and not something easy to carry around when you were on the move like most folks were now. Even they hadn't done a distilled batch in a while. They'd had to re-purpose most of the copper tubing from the still into arrowheads and fishhooks one winter. They hadn't found more metal tubing to replace it. Reeds worked on the short term, but Jason hated the hassle of checking, rechecking and changing the things out.

But they also hadn't tried going into the ruins of any of the nearby major cities either. They'd have to at some point. Probably fairly soon if they wanted to have any hope of finding anything still useable after all this time.

“Better news they took in the surviving children and near adults from the transient group. If any of them make it to adulthood it'll be a good infusion of new blood for that group.”

“How many kids?”

“About a dozen, someone shoved them into one of their traveling wagons and locked them in. The oldest is about ten. Jonne was with Kris when I came up; he was full fed and sharing, but he said he was lucky that there weren't any he had to kill this time for actual Rites.”

Talk about a mixed blessing.

He just thanked god that zombies, once they turned, were too stupid to work a lock. They were persistent enough to batter a door down, but not smart enough to twist a knob or flip a latch and pull.

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Sami wasn't sure what to do with the kid. He was trying to pull his own weight, and he had a reasonably good understanding of wild edibles, even some things they hadn't known were edible, or hadn't known were edible after drying, cooking or other processing, and handy. But when it came to keeping up with Jonne's hidden gardens he was clueless. On the good side he could, would and did help haul dirt for a new planting bed and water up to the hidden terraces. On the bad side he had no idea how deeply to plant the seeds or how heavily to water them.

For now Jonne was making sure things didn't get drowned or dry out. And the kid was learning, he just wasn't used to the concept of farming. But he was trying his hardest to learn everything Jonne and Jason had to teach him.

Interestingly he hadn't understood the concept of cotton either, or why they'd want the stuff. The sedges he sort of understood, at least as far as insulating footwear was concerned, but the massive quantity had him confused. He'd picked his hands bloody helping though, and between the lot of them they'd gotten enough cotton and fragrant sedges to make Koira a proper mattress and replace the stuffing in their old ones. Picking the seeds out that their rough gin missed was a bit tedious, but crushed the seeds gave out a good clean oil for the lamps or for more personal play. Jason only reserved out the stuff that was naturally colored in something other than off white to spin into yarn to knit into socks, gloves, fingerless mitts and the shorts they wore as underwear in winter. Any extra of the off white he turned into bandages. The old cotton and sedge mix from the mattresses they'd reused, with an addition of more fresh dried sedges, to stuff fat cushions with to sit and lean on as they did other work around the fire or to lounge on down by the hot springs or the river. The old stuffing from the cushions they put in a bin to use as tinder or wicking for the lamps. By the
time the cotton got that far it was generally a dingy gray color and not really fit for any other use.

Koira did know how to hunt and fish, even if he was clueless as far as gardening went, and he knew how to preserve what he caught. So he was really helpful when they hit a river in the middle of the spawning rush that fall. Vivian had to fish him out of deeper water once, when he slipped and went under, and that was more to keep him from getting hurt shooting the little bit of artificial rapids they had built behind the weir. Other than that small slip he had made himself useful clubbing fish they'd scooped out of the weir onto land, hauling a net to herd fish into the weir and later when time came to clean everything and string it up to smoke and dry. Jason had had a good trading run and come back with more than enough hard cone sugar, good white salt and various vinegars to preserve everything, even the jars of roe they collected. Not that he wasn't still boiling down seawater for more of the coarse salt, just in case they happened to need it. If nothing else it was good to keep green hides stable until they could tan them properly.

They still had made pigs of themselves on the fresh fish eggs while they worked on preparing fillets for smoking and drying. Sami had told the kid he could eat after he realized he wasn't diving in with the rest of them, just looking on wistfully, and the look of surprise on Koira's face had him pissed all over again at the folks who had raised him. But Koira had enjoyed the treat just as much as the rest of them once he'd relaxed. Having Jason call him over specifically when they found a white fleshed Salmon to sample her eggs had helped.

After that it had become a bit of a game for each of the guys to find some special bit or other to make Koira sample. At least they were all sampling little bites; otherwise all of them would be too stuffed to move.

Sami dragged more wood over to the smoking sheds and used his axe to break the sections into smaller chips. Some of the fish was salted and smoked, some dried, and the fish eggs were packed in salt and brine in heavy jars. Jonne made most of their storage jars, but a few back in the caverns were older ones, picked up from the wreckage of curio shops. Carefully he fed the fires under the sheds with fragrant wood chips and looked over to where Koira, Jonne and Kris where tending the drying racks. Checking and turning things and taking the pieces that were fully dried and packing them into the bent birch boxes Jonne and Janne had made last spring that weren't quite watertight yet. For whatever reason the first few they did each spring were never watertight like the later ones they made. Janne and Jason were off seeing if the bee hives they'd raided last year were doing well enough to raid again and had taken several of the watertight and sealed versions of the birch boxes as they were significantly lighter, and less fragile, than the pottery jars. The wax they'd used to seal the interiors wouldn't damage or taint any honey like pine pitch or sea tar might.

From the yelping, swearing and amount of pungent smoke drifting on the wind he suspected at least the nearer hive had had a prosperous year. Jason would grump a bit about scraping bee's stingers out of the honey thieves hides, but he'd enjoy the treat just as much as everyone else. He'd also carefully spin honey out of some combs if there were enough harvested so they could have honey later. Wax was always useful once they'd cleaned it of bee parts and pollen.

Then there was a flash of pale feathers and Sami was spinning in place to see Koira taking to the air.

They'd had the usual compliment of freeloading birds trying to steal free meals from the drying lines, but apparently Koira had gotten fed up and was going up to try and drive the thieves off from above.

He stood and watched as a frustrated Koira falcon dove with his talons fisted and dropped several of the gulls out of the sky before they realized they had more to worry about than the stupid ground
bound two legs and scattered.

When Koira came back down and shifted to kneel panting in frustration on the ground Sami let out a soft snort of amusement.

At least what he'd killed was actually edible, if a little fishy tasting. And the wing feathers would be decent for arrows. Even better some of the gulls had some naturally black flight feathers; it saved dying them for his arrows. He'd have to go hunting for those blasted cactus bugs again so he could do another set in red for Theon. Iron oxide worked great for leather, but it sucked for anything else.

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Brian yelped and popped his wounded finger into his mouth to suck on it. The blasted needle had gone right through his calluses but when he pulled it out it didn't seem to be bleeding.

“You okay?”

Levi plunked down on the bunk beside him and checked his hand.

“Yeah, needle bit me. It's a lot easier when Squeaks does the sewing.”

“You are just lazy, and you split your pants out, so you should get to mend them. Are these to low?” Squeaks did a turn so Levi and Brian could both get a good look at how low the performance pants she was working on hung on her hips.

Low enough that the bottom of the Tempest mark on her back wasn't cut off, but not quite so low as to start showing the cleft of her ass.

More than low enough to get both their attentions fully focused on her. She turned the rest of the way around.

“Guys?”

“Mmm?” Brian blinked and grinned. “Just admiring the view.”

“You. Trying to get out of working today more like.”

Squeaks squealed when Brian pounced and pinned her securely to the other bunk.

“When I work, I work. But all work and no play makes Brian a dull boy.”

Levi let out a lecherous chuckle.

“We can't have that.” He pounced and began peeling the leather of Brian's trousers down to expose his ass.

“Hey! I thought this was pounce on Squeaks day.” Anything else he had to say was lost in a gasp as Squeaks slid her hands up under his shirt and pinched his nipples.

“I dunno, make Brian scream and beg sounds good too.”

Brian groaned as he felt Levi's wicked clever tongue teasing his backside.

“I can roll with that.”
All he could do was hang on and go wherever his two lovers wanted him to, it felt too good to be worth trying to stop them.

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The frosts and first snows brought another flurry of activity as Jonne's gardens had to be winterized and the last produce brought in and preserved. They'd gutted a few winter squash, brined and toasted the seeds and introduced Koira to the concept of pie. A little milk from one of the goats, some sugar and a few careful pinches of spice in some of the cooked and mashed gourd flesh all wrapped in a thin pastry shell made from a bit of fat and coarse ground grain and they had their version of pumpkin pie. The rest of the squash Jonne had carefully hung in one of the cold caverns so they'd stay sound as long as possible. The concept of sweets other than honey and fruit was still more than a little foreign to their little foundling.

Sami still felt uneasy about Koira taking to hunting the skies alone, but Janne had taken to flying with him again after he'd managed to get hurt trying to take down a swan and limped back to one of the outlying caverns. They'd gone looking for him when he hadn't been back by sunset, and Sami had fussed at him the whole way home. Then he'd refused to let Koira sleep alone, ostensibly in case he needed help getting to the chamber pot in the night, but more because he'd felt the need to feel that Koira was safe in his arms.

Fortunately Koira hadn't broken anything, just wrenched both shoulders and slightly twisted a knee in his fall. Sami had just been sickened that Koira hadn't done more than pull the oldest fur from the cache pile to curl up in. Koira just said he'd been too tired to go after the better ones, but none of them quite believed him. If he'd said he hurt too much to dig out the better one's they'd have believed that, it took almost a month before he could move normally again without pain. And that alone hinted that had Koira been human he might have been left with a permanent disability after his injury.

Not that pain kept him from trying to pull his weight, even if it drove Sami crazy. And if Koira had been human he likely wouldn't have been hurt trying to pull down a swan with a simple dive bombing run from above. He'd have been stuck trying to shoot the uncooperative birds down with a bow or trying to take them out with a throwing stick or sling.

The next time Koira had taken on a swan he'd shifted to a much larger form and taken down two, mostly getting the second one by accident as the first swan fell into its flight path and the silly thing broke its neck. Between them, Janne and Koira were stocking the winter larder with varying types of waterfowl. With the ice caverns slowly filling with fresh meats to freeze solid for later use and the cool ones with vegetables and whole and sliced dried fruits, and baskets of nuts and jars of grains Sami wasn't about to complain about a bit more variety. Last winter he'd gotten heartily tired of fish and venison. Even going out and playing Wise One it had still been fish and venison.

He'd never thought he'd see the day when he said he missed pork. But wild pigs weren't as commonplace as they once had been, the things still bred like mad, but since the bombs only a few piglets out of a hundred would live to breeding age. The virus that mutated humans at puberty killed pigs when they went through their equivalent and in the process made what was left unpalatable to just about all the predators Sami knew about. Even the vultures and foxes waited for a few days before they scavenged a dead pig.

Only a few places even tried to keep them domestically anymore. And Sami had yet to learn how they determined if a piglet would survive to breed or not. He knew they had a method, but the few places he knew of that still bred pigs hadn't felt like sharing the information. Maybe they could try tracking down a sow and relieve her of a few piglets next spring. With Koira and Janne spotting
from above they might be able to corner one and have a bit of suckling pig for a change.

At least the caverns they actually lived in stayed fairly warm compared to the weather outside. That and with all the feathered things Janne and Koira were bringing back meant plenty of wing feathers for arrows, down for bedding and smaller body feathers for new pillows. It was oddly comforting that now he knew why Janne had always come back with birds after he'd taken a few days to himself, though he did wonder why the older changer hadn't just let them know he could fly right from the get go.

After the winter snows were solidly upon them Jason convinced them to go thin the bison herds a bit, to pad out the larder, to go after some bigger hides to replace the ones that acted as door baffles to keep the cold wind out of their living spaces and warmer air out of their cold storage areas and to see if they couldn't lay in a big enough store of fat that Jason could do another largish batch of soap with it in their winter down time. So they'd taken the double walled tent and been stuck actually using the thing because they tripped over another set of human hunters. Jason and Julian had been a bit grumpy; but they'd been in wolf shape at the time and had been presumed to be dogs. To keep from freaking the humans out they'd had to stay in wolf shape. Janne had been endlessly amused, if the spark in his hazel eyes was anything to go by, but he didn't mind running on four feet in the cold.

Koira had been flying in his smaller eagle shape and that had shocked and impressed the humans to no end. But Koira had seen them and had wisely decided it was safer to just stay a bird and come to Sami's arm. Sami just sighed when he heard two of the men whispering about what kind of powerful medicine Sami must have to have an eagle come down out of the sky to his fist like that. Theon and Risto thought it was hysterical, but they could sleep warm curled around each other even if their third was curled up in a snug little den the snow. Sami had been looking forward to another legitimate reason to cuddle Koira's slim body close at night.

They'd been as gracious as they could be with the humans. And had helped them bring down and process several of the bison. It wasn't a tribe they normally dealt with, but a group that had traveled for several weeks just to hunt here, specifically because of the large bison. They had had a shaman ask, it sounded more like a demand to Sami than a request, hide, meat and bones from this lot of bison for some ritual or other so three of the young men in the group could marry the women of their choice. Risto had muttered it sounded more like a way to get the men out of the way so the girls could be safely married off elsewhere. Sami half agrees and wanted them to get what they needed and just go already.

But they seemed determined to 'help' them get a few of the great beasts as well. Joys of social obligation. Sami still wished that they would just be rude and leave already.

With Koira spotting from above it hadn't been hard to bag a few individuals off on their own and not panic the rest of the herd. Sami was sure the humans thought he had some magic that let him see through Koira's eyes and not that they had a preset series of signals in place to indicate which animal to target. Janne and Jason were more than smart enough to not get stepped on as they helped keep those individuals isolated. And as wolves they didn't cause more than a minor stir with the herd. The bison kept an eye on them, but not like they would have a larger pack, and sometimes that helped the hunters take down a choicer specimen while it was distracted.

Julian tended to stay between the wounded animals and his lovers, but so far his care hadn't been needed. So far they'd had pretty good luck getting reasonably fat and healthy specimens, even if the humans' tisked over them being lean this year, so things were looking good for a big batch of soap later. Even better they'd been doing pretty well at not making a mess of the big hides in the initial kill or in getting them off the fallen animals, so replacing the baffle hides with fur on skins wasn't
going to be an issue. Then again practice helped, even if they didn't regularly take down larger animals in large numbers like this. The old hides would have their torn edges cut down and be reused for other things.

"Two more you think? Jonne and Jase would be happy if we got another male with a fat hump."

Sami felt odd talking about Jason like he was both female and not present, but the other hunt leader was listening in as he made sure his men all had good portions of the meat stewing in the central pot. That and Jason was looking at him with laughing blue eyes and had clearly been enjoying his discomfort. The humans had been rather awed that they had a huge old cast iron pot just to cook in, and two more slightly smaller ones for processing. The things moved just as easily filled as empty and Sami wasn't about to admit that normally they hid the drafted things together in a heavy coating of fat and tight wrappings in one of their outlying storage caverns. With the entrance closed behind a pile of heavy stones they didn't need to worry about any bigger animals making a mess of things and what damage the mice did tended to be minor. That and none of their tribes would disturb a cache of rocks that wasn't marked with something identifying it as belonging to their tribe unless it was a screaming dire emergency. They believed that there was magic sealing their cairns, and if they used magic so would everyone else. And they believed that those magic's would severely punish thieves, unless they were in very dire need.

"How is the rendering going Kris?" Sami hedged by asking, from the spark of amusement in Theon's eyes the other man knew what he was doing, and was enjoying Sami's discomfort.

"Pretty well, another day and what we've gotten will be frozen and freeze dried pretty well. Risto was pretty happy with how well things are packing down and how well Oulu was behaving in harness. Those birch boxes Jonne made last spring are working really well for fat storage and to pack dried meat in." Kris answered as he carefully scraped the roasted marrow out of one of the leg bones of one of their kills. They'd been roasting and eating the marrow on site this year rather than hauling the long bones back, but they had appearances to keep up, and in most tribes the marrow bones were a treat that the hunters enjoyed far more often than the rest of the tribe.

Sami smiled, for some crazy reason Jonne had started naming their horses after towns they'd played in. It beat 'horse one' and 'horse two' he supposed. Oulu was pretty young, and Risto hadn't been sure if he'd deal with being in a harness actually hauling anything, so him behaving was good news. And he knew what the humans didn't; Risto was taking loads off to their nearest cache cavern and hiding it there for later pickup. Just the leaner freeze dried meats and other relatively low value portions, but he was moving enough that they weren't leaving useful things behind. He was even boiling down hooves and hide scraps in their littlest pot for glue, something that would be useful later in the spring when they checked over and redid their beds. Jonne had giggled himself half silly the one time they hadn't checked and midway through that summer Theon's bed ropes had failed dumping all three onto the stone floor. Now they were more careful.

For now the stubby bison horns were safe, Jonne had mentioned he wanted to make a few new cups and another ladle and they'd agreed to try and bring him the horns if they could. And Sami reminded himself to ask Koira to keep an eye out for herds of wild cattle; Janne would let him know if he saw anything. This herd was more bison than cattle for whatever reason. They'd have to hit the clay pits next spring and dig up a good lot so Jonne and Risto could replace some of their broken crockery. Most of the things they got out of the offering pits were too big or awkward to be useful for more than storage. Though Sami still found it amusing to use one of the flatter offerings they'd found to piss in at night. Probably not at all what the creators had had in mind when they'd covered it in elaborate gold patterns.

Sami didn't even flinch as Koira dropped in beside them with a hare in his talons. The human
hunters stopped for a moment to just watch as Koira chirped up at Sami and then tore into his dinner. Sami just smiled and stroked gentle fingers down Koira's feathered back as the eagle diligently ripped his dinner into chucks he could easily swallow and went back to his conversation with Kris and Theon.

“So, two more shouldn't be too hard to get home. Maybe a third if they keep turning up a bit lean. We can always use the hides.”

Theon nodded as he sipped at the broth in his cup. Kris nodded as well as he cracked another marrow bone with easy skill and handed part of it over to Theon.

“A little extra can't hurt. It's not like we would be going back empty armed. And didn’t Jonne want to redo the airlocks anyway?”

Sami nodded at the bit of detail Kris dropped, things like that made the humans relax a little more, but then he sighed when Kris started laughing. He’d already felt Koira stropping his beak clean on one of the legs of his folding stool. He looked down in time to see laughing green gold eagle eyes looking back up at him. As a bird Koira was much bolder than as a wolf or a man.

“You finished?”

Koira chirped at him and happily hopped up on Sami's fist when he offered it, showing more care than any real raptor would of the hand under that mitten. Then he sidled over onto Sami's shoulder and preened the fur trim of his hat and the little bit of hair that had escaped confinement.

No wonder the humans thought he used magic.

Sami gently poked Koira in his belly feathers.

“You are going to end up to fat to fly.”

Koira just chirped at him and fluffed his feathers as he hunkered down on Sami's shoulder, making a warm spot where he snuggled in close.

He couldn't even get respect from a stupid bird, but at least this way the kid wasn't cowering away from him.

~0~

Etta was right; the dogs were far too intelligent to be merely dogs. Alta watched and listened as best he could without seeming to listen to the other hunting party. They seemed to simply be men, but Etta and Touma had heard the slimmer blond one talking to the thinner black dog as he stroked its fur with every indication that the dog would understand him. He called the dog by a man's name and talked to him.

Then the dog acted like it had understood and run off to help the bigger black dog and the leaner red one, who also carried men's names, circle around and cut off a lone bison from the herd and chase it right into the best place for the hunters to shoot it. In fact the only animals that acted like animals were the horses. And that was before they'd actually made a kill and the men had made Etta think they weren't just men. The bigger blond that they all seemed to defer to as hunt leader had demonstrated a level of strength on helping tear open the rib-cage on that first carcass that none of them felt was natural. Only after that did Tula venture to try and draw the big man's bow.

Alta had been un-surprised that Tula hadn't been able to pull the string back far at all. Even the slender man with dark hair and sad eyes drew a bow Alta wasn't sure Etta could pull, and he was
their strongest and best archer.

It was also a bit eerie that none of them seemed to eat as much as his men. They all drank often and deeply of hot herbal teas and the rich meaty broths that the thin one with the badger colored hair they called Kris made, but didn't seem to need to eat large amounts of food to keep warm. Oh they savored the marrow as much as his own men did, and had made up an odd flat bread in a pan to spread it on, but didn't seem to need it the same way. In fact Alta saw Sami often doing the fine work of fletching arrows barehanded so the other thinner blond, Theon, didn't have to. The fire was warm, but not warm enough in his opinion to do fine work like making arrows, not outside in the wind even with the windbreak they'd set up to help keep the fire going. And they had an astonishing number of arrows, tipped in sky stone, flint and various metals. Each man had arrows fletched and marked in his own color pattern and Alta would have loved to know where they had found the pigment to color feathers red and blue and that clear golden yellow. Red and yellow ocher would paint the rings on the shafts, but wouldn't dye feathers.

And then there was the eagle. The bird wasn't particularly large and while the markings on his feathers were of an adult bird, Etta felt he was a young bird. None of them had ever seen an eagle with green shading his golden eyes or an adult bird with such pale feathers, nor had they ever heard of one willingly coming to a man's fist. This bird not only had odd eyes but he brought ptarmigan, rabbit and hare back and surrendered them without fight or fuss to Sami, the other groups hunt leader. Alta had seen the bird bring back several fat ptarmigan after one of the darker haired men, the sad eyed one that Alta had never quite caught the name of, had muttered about being heartily tired of bison after they'd been eating it for so many days running. Not the actions of a mere beast. And the man had thanked the bird like one would express ones gratitude to a hunt brother for the consideration and had the bird preen his short curly hair with apparent affection. He'd never seen any raptor show any affection to any other living creature, even other raptors. Alta wasn't sure birds had the capacity to show affection to their own young. This bird showed clear affection for all the men and had even taken action to warn one of the not-dogs about a wounded bison making the turn to chase him while he was distracted. No wild bird would fly in the face of a charging bison unless their nest was threatened, and even then Alta didn't think they'd try to bloody the bison's nose with talons and beak to make the point clear.

This bird even allowed himself to be petted by his men. Tula had been brave and dared to stroke quick fingers down the birds back and only been chirped and blinked at for his boldness. Sami stroked his head feathers and scratched under his wings, actions Alta was sure would have resulted in bloodied or lost fingers were the bird ordinary. But this bird appeared to enjoy the caresses and took extraordinary care to not put his sharp talons through any of the men’s coats where they would be injured. He was even gentle enough that he hadn't hurt Theon when he'd been taken up on a thinly gloved hand.

Etta thought they were hunting with spirits. And as time wore on Alta began to wonder if his friend might not be right.

He only hoped the spirits were as benevolent as they seemed.

Or they could be hunting bison for all eternity.

~0~

Getting two more bison proved more work than Sami thought they were really worth.

The first one went smoothly enough, they found a large bull off more or less on his own and Kris had taken him down with a clean arrow strike to the eye that was neatly followed up by Sami's
spear to the throat.

The second one though proved to be a problem. A largish pack of regular wolves had the herd a bit jumpy and it made stragglers that weren't sick, and thus very lean, rather hard to find. If they hadn't had human 'helpers' Sami would have taken down a couple of the sick or weaker animals just for the good of the herd and left them for the wolves. But they had watchers, so he had to behave like a human.

It was rather annoying, taking down a bison for the wolves would solve two problems, three if you counted the health of the herd. It would keep the wolves occupied, and the herd would settle. And the wolves wouldn't be looking to steal a kill from the hunters or potentially trying to take out a hunter.

Jason had managed to spook one animal away from the herd, but then Sami, Risto and Theon had all either missed their shots or hadn't gotten clean ones and the wounded animal had bolted back to the safety of the group. Kris hadn't even taken a shot because he'd been in a bad position with one of the humans in his sight line. He probably still could have taken the shot, but hadn't wanted to risk the young human startling in the wrong direction and getting hurt. Jason had huffed and belly flopped into the snow and Janne have given him a speaking look.

Sami just growled and scanned the sky to see where Koira had gotten too. It took Kris breaking up in giggles and pointing; not up into the sky, but deep into the milling herd, before he found the wayward changer.

The blasted bird was perched on the back of a bison, in the middle of the herd, an animal that had one of Theon's distinctively yellow and red fletched arrows sticking out of it. Sami closed his eyes. This was as bad as, or worse than flying into a bison's face to save Julian from being trampled or kicked. If he had been in a position to help Julian he'd have done something just as stupid he was sure, but that wasn't the point.

“I'm going to kill him.”

That just made even the humans break up laughing.

At least it made it easy to track the damn bison as he tried to stay in the middle of the herd and gradually failed as he bled out and weakened. When the blasted thing finally went down and Sami and the rest were able to walk up Koira was still perched on his back.

Sami sighed at him and held out a hand.

Koira launched at it and settled chirping happily as he sidled his way up to Sami's shoulder.

Sami didn't much care that he was adding fuel to the human hunter’s superstitious idiocy as he scolded Koira

It didn't help that after he fussed for a breath or two Koira would chirp at him, just like they were having a conversation. And that after he leveled the order for Koira to 'not do that again' Koira proved that large raptors could droop, pout and do big sad eyes just as well as any human, and he even added some sad sounding chirps as if he was trying to apologize.

Sami wished the boy would shift to human shape, even if it would panic the humans.

Then he could spank him.

~0~
Sami sighed in relief as he waved to the lot of humans as they finally headed off toward home, they'd taken a long way around to try and get them to take a hint and just go away without having to be rude about it. Mere moments after they had walked out of sight Julian was back in human form and pouncing Theon into a snowdrift.

“Did'ja miss me?”

Sami groaned and scowled up at the sky where Koira was idly circling, then shifted his glare over to Janne and Jason.

“You lucked out.”

Janne shifted to human with a shrug. Jason just gave him a bland look and a typically canine shrug and kept moving. But Jason could haul more in his wolf shape with a travois than he could with a pack as a man. Given they were held to the speed of the horses it wasn't that big of an issue.

“So we make up for it later. Things happen.”

Sami grumbled; he knew very well things happened, but he still was a bit grumpy about having lost half his manpower to having to pretend to be merely human and beast. A gentle hand on his shoulder made him huff out a sigh and nod.

“At least you had Alta and his lot to help with butchery, and we did get more than we'd planned. Six clean, undamaged hides will have Jonne in a tailspin. And the other two we can use for bedding or rugs or something.” His eyes glanced up where Koira was circling, giving Sami a hint of what the 'or something' meant. The kid needed a new coat, mittens and boots rather badly.

Sami nodded. They'd rigged travois for Jason, Julian and Janne to drag as well as the larger ones for the four horses when they'd had human watchers and they'd each had their own heavy hauling packs. And they had two of the outer cashes nicely filled with processed meat for later pickup. They'd also stocked three other cashes with a good lot of emergency supplies so it wasn't like useful things were getting left behind. Once they had the horses safely home and weren't held down to their speed they could get all but an emergency stash brought in within a few days if all of them hauled. Or they could do it in a week and one trip if they used the animals. It would depend on how full fed the vampires felt.

“You do realize there are going to be tales of a tribe in these hills where the men can charm eagles down out of the sky?” Janne teased and Sami huffed as he looked back up at Koira.

“Yeah, I know. Now do me a favor and go up there and get his skinny ass down here.”

Janne laughed at him then shifted to the red tailed hawk that they now knew was his preferred daylight flighted form and hopped up onto Sami’s wrist for a boost to get airborne.

Theon and Julian shifted the loads for Janne and Julian around to be more comfortable to drag or carry in human shape and got moving again, but neither of them were like Jason where they could haul a significant amount more by staying in wolf shape.

Sami waited by Janne's new load until both birds headed down to land by his feet and change. Koira looked down at his boots for a moment before looking up at Sami with those big green eyes. With a sigh Sami just shook his head, he'd scolded the kid once already and clearly he'd listened.

Now whether or not he'd obey, well, that was another question entirely.

“Just, don't do it again, okay?”
Koira nodded and quietly took part of Janne and Julian's loads as they headed up the path that would take then over and around to one of the slopes down to their cavern system.

Sami was so distracted he didn't see or smell the slender human hunter hidden in the brush who had been watching with wide shocked eyes. Tula lay there trembling until the moon rose and only then was he able to force his shaking limbs to move so he could run after Alta and his fellows.

Etta had been right. The dogs weren't just dogs, they were men, and the eagle a beautiful maiden. They'd gone hunting with spirits and survived.

~0~

Just after midwinter they were snowed in with a nasty storm, one that Kris had only just been able to beat in. He'd gone off to a midwinter gathering to do a round of Rites and had come back full fed but profoundly unhappy. He'd curled up with Jonne in their shared bed and just huddled in close for several days as the winds howled above and outside.

The rest of them had been doing a lot of sleeping and cuddling, some eating and sex play and some routine craft work. And they kept that routine up until Kris felt ready to talk about things. Experience told them all that pressing would just make Kris clam up and get defensive.

“I picked up another group from the east. A bunch of kids.”

“Another group of the Wagoner's?” Sami asked without looking up from the project he had in his lap. He'd noticed that lately their trouble spots with outsiders tended to be eastern Wagoner's. It made them all wonder if there were fewer vampires as you went east, or if their versions of Rites were just more terrifying to kids.

Kris shook his head.

“Kids on snowshoes, they were running away from their people's version of Rites.”

Sami's head came up from where he was stitching the sole on a new boot for Theon.

“Another zombie change?”

“No just three stupid kids who lived through a big snow slide. The other four didn't make it. I got them back to the Blue Mountain troop. None of them has the blood so I spun it as their surviving the avalanche was the spirits declaring them men. Shear dumb fucking luck.” Kris fell silent.

Sami went back to his stitching and Janne to idly working some of the reeds Jonne had gathered last spring into a basket.

“One reminded me of Antti.”

Sami looked up again, just in time to see Jonne drop the coat he'd been piecing back together in a heap on the floor and wrap his arms around Kris.

“He looked like Antti, and he smelled like him and I couldn't tell him anything. Not even why I gave him the name.” Kris broke down and cried, tears making little red track marks down his face. Quietly they gathered around him and offered silent support as he sobbed.

“I couldn't apologize for not being able to save him before. I couldn't do anything.”

A familiar and much missed voice spoke up.
“If it helps I came in about three days after you, and they seemed to be settling in just fine. Several of the younger single women were, um, helping Antti with his sling and the bandages on his arm. But the language lessons seemed to be more practice in kissing than anything else.”

Kris jumped and spun in Jonne's arms. Chriss just unwound his snow crusted scarf and peeled off his mittens.

“Chriss!”

The taller man just smiled, bent down and cuddled Kris close before he leaned over and dropped a quick kiss on Jonne's upturned lips.

Something had changed. Before Chriss hadn't been one for casual kisses.

“Chriss?” Sami asked hesitantly as Chriss finished peeling off his snow and ice coated coats and settled them on the drying racks near the fire to thaw and dry out.

“You know that vampire we could never catch down south?”

There were nods and a smattering of questioning noises in response to Chriss's question.

“I tripped over him this fall.”

There was a long pause as Chriss dipped out a bowl of hot tea and smiled at a very puzzled Koira who was half hiding behind Sami.

“Well?” Risto asked, impatient with Chriss's version of theatrics. “Who is he?”

“Lauri.”

That provoked a series of rude noises, they'd known almost as many Lauri's as they had Ville's. And both names had been so commonplace as to be absurd.

“Which Lauri, Chriss?” poked Theon as he settled back a bit into Julian's side.

Chriss took a slow sip of his tea before he answered.

“Yholen.”

“Birdie? Birdie made it out?” Theon, Sami and Jason all asked in near unison.

Chriss nodded and settled himself down on the fur covered pad between Jason and Kris.

“Birdie made it out. And he had a couple changers with him.”

Sami sat up sharply, Chriss looked happier than he had in decades, hell, in centuries.

“Who?”

Chriss smiled.

“Adam and Bailey. And they could tell me what happened to Joonas.” This time the smile was wry as the others clamored to hear details. Chriss looked over at Theon and toasted him wryly with his tea bowl.

“Old age, the last we saw of the bastard he was bringing a burning bridge down on his own fool
head. And the cock sucking bastard lived to die of old age surrounded by kids and grand-kids. He got separated from us in Antwerp but caught up to them in the Warsaw railway exchange center. He's got descendants all up and down the coast now.”

Somehow they all found that strangely comforting.

~0~

Chriss had waited until everyone else had settled in to sleep to pull Sami aside and talk to him.

“Birdie says he's seeing a lot more folks coming this way from the east. And they seem to be moving through, not coming in to trade and going back. Jason may need to keep an eye out when he goes south for trade, and ask if they are crossing the straight. So far I haven't seen any signs of the settling to our west, they have to be going somewhere.”

“Something going on in the east we need to worry about? Most of our recent trouble spots all seem to be centered on groups coming from the east.”

Chriss shrugged.

“If there is, the tribes I've run across aren't talking about it where I can hear it. Which doesn't mean much.”

Sami grimaced and nodded; sometimes being 'old wise men' backfired and folks assumed you just knew things. It was aggravating as fuck when you were fishing for information. Very few trustworthy vampires traveled outside their territories anymore, only a very small number made it their livelihood to travel between territories carrying news. The last Speaker they'd run into had been coming up from the south, not the east. So that meant he was looping back to where Home was for him, and wouldn't have anything to tell them about migrations. Assuming he would tell them, which he might not if the migrations were to get away from political upheavals.

“How long are you staying? Until thaw?”

“Longer I think.” Chriss smiled and let his gaze drift back to where Jason was working on mixing one of his batches of scented oil, the kind they used as lube. “Jason seemed happy with the idea, and it would let me give Kris a break from Rites, he's been having a run of bad ones lately.”

Sami felt some indefinable tension leave him.

“Jason's not the only one who's glad we'll be seeing more of you.”

Chriss smiled

“Here's a question back. Who's your little bird?”

Sami blinked in confusion.

“My little bird?”

Chriss grinned at him.

“White gold hair and pretty green eyes? Who's watching us from his furs? That little bird.”

Sami turned and looked and caught a fleeting glimpse of green eyes looking at him in the firelight before they were hidden behind closing lids. He turned back and blinked at Chriss.
“That's Koira; he was dropped into Valkoinen Kuoppa by a hunting party of humans.” Sami paused to think. “Just after last mid-summer I think. Right before you went out on one of your longer wanders.”

Chriss's face went serious, this tugged at his memory but the memory wouldn’t come.

“Offering?”

“No, to rob the pit for them.”

Chriss made a soft but very rude titching noise, but his face reflected his understanding.

“Idiots. That's worked so well for the last dozen hunting parties that have tried it.”

Sami couldn't stop the wry chuckle.

“The lesson needs periodic reinforcement.”

“Clearly,” was Chriss's dry comment as he gently shoved Sami back toward his furs. “Bed Sami, we both need sleep.”

Sami smiled and obeyed.

Interesting that Koira felt the need to watch him talk to one of his oldest friends.

~0~

Chriss watched with considerable amusement as Koira watched him. Sami was still making up new boots for the lot of them for next year, and in theory Koira was watching and learning the tricky art of putting a heavy leather sole on a boot. It was something only Sami and Jonne could do well and Jonne couldn't sew more than one sole down before his hands hurt too much to continue. Oh, all of them could sort of sew a boot sole on, but it wouldn't last nearly as well as if Sammy did it. Rather like how Janne made watertight baskets and Kris made the nicest wooden bowls and Jason made the best arrows. They all had developed odd little specialties over the years, Jonne becoming a gardener and potter and Jason doubling as a medic, each finding a place and the rest shifting around them.

It disturbed him a little that someone, somewhere had come up with the syllables for a name for him that sounded exactly like the Soumi word for 'dog' and that the kids first change form had been a wolf.

Coincidence could be creepy as hell.

But cuter was that Sami had finally found a changer that suited him and was being his usual noble idiot self.

Chriss knew about the weird attraction that could spring up between changer and vampire. He'd seen it in other Hunt groups of mixed vampire and changer. Alpha and Omega. Vampire and changer. Lovers and balance points, some of the Eastern Hunts didn't think a vampire could lead effectively if he didn't have a changer mate. Any vampire who tried tended to get ignored or ridiculed at best or killed at worst for being delusional enough to think they could lead alone.

Given that neither group could reproduce among themselves and he'd never seen or even heard even a hint of a rumor of a female becoming either vampire or changer it wasn't surprising that they'd find some kind of companionship among their own kind. Loving humans just hurt too much,
they grew old and died and you stayed as you had been when the change had come. He'd seen Jason try that, had tried it himself.

It didn't work. Half the time the human started to resent or even hate them for not changing and growing old with them.

And that hurt, to watch love break like that and know there wasn't anything he could do.

It hurt worse though, when they loved you right to the bitter end. There was a small area down one of their pocket valleys that held the ashes and remains of their few human friends and lovers. Another pocket valley held the remains of the silver poisoned kids who'd made it this far and Jason had tried to save before they had learned there was nothing they could do. The kids would either survive it on their own, or die. They'd learned the hard way how to identify the kids who were too sick to pull through, so they could end their suffering. And one and all the changers had methodically started building their resistance to silver, just in case. He resolutely shoved those memories aside.

Theon and Risto had Julian. Birdie had Bailey and Adam and he had been wrestling with the desire for Jason for years uncounted. Partly because Jason had always chased girls, even after the Fall it had been girls. Tumbles in the grass for relief had been girls, the guys he'd cuddle, but not have sex with. Even Sami, his best friend, he'd only snuggle with.

Now Jason wanted him back though, so it was finally settling out. Sharing furs had been rather nice, even if all they'd done so far was kiss and pet. The kissing alone was enough to make his toes curl, when they got to sex Chriss wasn't sure if he'd be able to keep from blacking out if things kept being this good.

But back to watching Sami's cute little thing.

And he was cute. He had delicate features that made him rival Jonne for prettiness; he also had fine straight pale hair that if he didn't tie it back would hang down past his slim shoulders. The big green eyes though, those were probably Koira's most striking feature, Chriss hadn't seen green eyes like that since there had been colored contact lenses. But they weren't emerald green, something more organic like green Baltic amber with flecks of grey and brown and darker greens. Adding to the complete picture, the kid was shorter even than Jonne was, so standing beside Sami he looked like a child.

He vaguely remembered Sami and Jason bringing a foundling back, but then he'd gone out with Jason, and after an argument on the way out to the tribe Jason wanted to do a check on he'd just kept going. Now he half wished he stayed. But he'd needed the thinking time, and wouldn't have found Birdie, Adam and Bailey if he'd stayed.

The kid was shy, but from what he'd learned about the kids background from Kris that wasn't surprising. A changer in a human tribe tended to be a bit of an outsider, even when they had very close friends to help keep them focused. Apparently it had taken months for the kid to stop flinching away from Jason and Sami after he'd been brought in. But then having your rescuers rip your former tribesmen apart wasn't exactly a comfortable thing, even when those former fellows had dropped you down a spirit well and were fully intent on leaving you there to pay for their crimes.

At least the kid hadn't watched Sami and Jason inflicting their unique form of major mayhem; clearly just listening to it had been traumatizing enough. Seeing the aftermath they might have had pure hell hanging onto the kid. According to Janne, Koira had bolted once and it had been pure hell to catch him and he had scared the bejesus out of them before they learned the kiddo was a true
changer and could take a flighted form.

Apparently it had been more Julian and Janne that convinced the kid he was safe with them. But he did see how Sami watched Koira, he knew that look. He'd seen it more times than he could count back before the fall, but he had Jason, so he wasn't going to mess with his old friend. Well, he was going to mess with his old friend, he just wasn't going to cock block him.

Chriss settled a bit deeper into the pile of fleeces and feather stuffed hide pillows that Jason used as a chair and just watched Koira while appearing to be watching Sami work. When Julian got up and stretched and said he was going down to one of the supply caves for a beer and did anyone else want one Koira quietly stood as well and offered to help. Chriss revised his opinion.

The boy's smile was more striking than his eyes. Sami had a good one here.

~0~

Jason quietly worked over his brew pot and watched Koira out of the corner of his eye. Julian had been helping malt and toast barley and wheat for another big batch of beer. Jonne had kept his yeast starter happily fed while he'd been gone and Chris had come home with a tightly packed and wrapped package that proved to be both the hops Jason liked and twisted roots and stalks that Jonne might be able to convince to grow into plants to produce more of the fragrant cone shaped flowers.

Having his own hops vines again would be nice. He'd missed them since a round of spring floods had swept his last lot downstream a few years before. But now they could put a planting bed and trellises up higher on the valley wall where it would both get better sun and be out of the way of flooding.

Koira was still being quiet and trying to be helpful.

It made his shoulders itch.

Not that Jason thought after these last few months that the kid was malicious in any way, but the habitual subservience bothered him. It had been nice having extra hands helping sterilize the bottles the new beer would be going into though, and having more help malting and toasting the grains, and running the stone grinder meant a bigger batch. When Sami had done a quick sweep of a few of his closer folk he had come home with pack sacks filled of pigweed and amaranth so Jason was trying an ale with it just to see if it would work. Jonne had already swiped a good bit of the amaranth and a handful of starter to try making a bit of bread. At least he was assuming Jonne was trying to make bread, he'd heard their excuse for a flour grinding wheel working a little while ago.

Made him grateful that whatever had made them change had also done something weird with their teeth. If they lost one now, within a few weeks a new one would come in, faster if they ate right. The vampires it took a month or two, but they still had replacements coming in, good thing or Risto wouldn't have any teeth left given he'd had a love affair with sugar before his conversion and had fillings in almost every tooth in his head.

Midwinter might already have been and gone, he'd seen Sami go down to make his annual mark on the wall, but a bit of ale would let them celebrate a little like they had before. And ale didn't need hops to act as preservative. Not that they ever let a pot of ale sit around long enough to go bad.

Jason stepped back and let Koira take over stirring the cooking mash, showing him the rowing action that worked best and took the least amount of muscle.
Maybe next summer he should see about trading for a wagon load or two of southern corn and see if he could set the still back up somehow. Worst case they had reeds and could just swap the things out as they got too soggy and mushy at the still end to hold fluids and steam in. It was a hassle and a half, but damn it he was missing having something with a bit more kick to it than beer.

~0~

Brian shivered and swore, but from the looks of things Levi wasn't doing any better. It didn't matter how long they were here, he hated winter. Hated ass deep snow and hated having to go out in it to forage for them and the horses.

They had to keep hauling dried grasses for the horses, without them they couldn't haul the wagon, couldn't keep their cover.

Squeaks had run a thin line out to a good sized field before the storm really went all to hell. Levi had it in his gloved hand and that was the only thing that was keeping them from getting lost in the ice, snow and fog.

He hated this weather but other than swearing a bit more he kept on dragging the light sled behind him that carried all the tarps and ropes to bundle up the cut grass and kept Levi in sight.

“I hate fucking snow.”

Levi just laughed at him.

“I lived in California because it was nice and warm; I could run all year and didn't have to deal with ass deep fucking frozen crap.”

“You weren't saying that a week ago when you were dumping Squeaks into the new drifts.”

“That was a week ago. We were still near a village and it wasn't still snowing a foot or more a night.”

Levi laughed and turned back to face him.

“Good points, and I have good news, I can feel grass under my feet now. And it looks like the winds are finally doing us a favor.”

Brian hurried to catch up the few feet between them and looked. The field looked to be mostly swept clear. At least enough was sticking up above the snow cover that they'd be able to use the scythe to clear enough grass to feed their horses for another night or two without half killing themselves.

Levi sniffed the air.

“I also smell rabbits.”

“Go for it, just don't go too far.”

Levi grinned and a bright golden fox was standing where his shorter lover had been. With an amused sounding yip the fox took off into the low drifts after a better dinner.

Brian sighed as he uncovered the scythe's cutting blade and went to work mowing down dried grasses. He hoped Levi had good hunting luck, he was heartily tired of dried whatever and mouse
soup. A bit of fresh roasted rabbit would be amazing right now.

“I hate fucking winter.”

~0~

Sami laughed at the way Koira's nose crinkled at the smell of the ale. It didn't smell like the usual stuff Jason made, but it didn't smell bad, just different. Sami had already drunk several bowls full and was pleasantly surprised at the low level buzz he had starting. Whatever was different with this batch it had more of a kick to it. It made for a nice change.

“Don't wrinkle your nose at it, drink it.”

Koira gave him a look that was as doubtful as he'd ever seen the kid look, even when Julian was telling him he could jump off the ridge above the waterfall and land in the pool below unharmed. It had taken several attempts before he'd been able to make the jump without changing into a bat long before he was close to the pool. That first time he'd attached himself to Jonne as a bat and they'd about died laughing. Koira-bat was huge compared to the fruit bats Sami remembered from zoos. Jonne had huffed and carried the kid off with his little bat face buried in his shirt and they'd come back later, with Koira human again, slightly high and giggly and very cuddly.

Koira took a cautious mouthful. Sami just sighed and rolled his eyes as he leaned forward to dip another bowlful out for himself.

Chriss was drunk enough to be talkative and was amusing all of them with tales of his travels. The current story involved him discovering who their hidden southern vampire was. It entailed him dangling by his ankles from a trip line and staring down at the canine forms of Bailey and Adam and was amusing enough that Kris and Jonne were laughing like lunatics. Theon had set aside his empty drinking bowl and was clinging to a giggling Julian as he tried to stay mostly upright as he laughed so hard they both shook. Risto had his 'no way' grin and in a moment Sami was sure he'd be collapsed against his mates laughing himself silly. Even Janne and Jason were shaking in laughter.

Sami blinked.

Apparently Koira had taken his words as a challenge; he was going for a second bowlful. Sami reached out to stop him after he'd filled and drained his bowl twice more. With three bowls worth in him, in the space of only a few minutes, he was getting awfully flushed and was starting to giggle. He'd never learned what Koira and Jonne had done that time they'd come back stoned and happy, and he wasn't sure he wanted a demonstration of his suspicions. Kris would just get horny watching Jonne make out with someone else. Sami was pretty sure he'd just get crabby and jealous.

To his surprise Koira came easily to his side and curled up readily into his arms. Sami had to stomp hard in his desire to just fall back in the piled furs and take the youngster with him. The temptation was strong though, especially given that Theon had gone from giggly to amorous and was currently striping Risto of his shirt with Julian's somewhat clumsy help.

Chriss didn't seem at all offended that he'd lost his audience and just reached over to cup a hand around the back of Jason's head and pull him over for a kiss that made Sami's heart thump in his chest. Janne smiled and leaned back just watching as a very drunk Jonne started a playful strip tease for Kris.

Sami closed his eyes when Janne reached for the laces of his trousers and slid a hand inside to start stroking himself. If he kept that up Jonne might be drunk enough to offer to 'help' and all that
would do was make Kris hornier. Koira squirmed in his lap and Sami's eyes snapped back open to stare blindly up at the dark, slightly smoke obscured ceiling of the cave. He was buzzed, and he was horny, and he had an armful of tempting stimulation squirming in a terribly distracting way in his arms.

He groaned and flopped backwards into the pile of furs as Koira started wriggling again. His cock ached and he wanted more. Hard not to want more when you could hear Kris panting and telling Jonne to 'suck it baby, just like that' and Risto moaning and whimpering 'please, oh god, please' as he got tag teamed by Theon and Julian. Risto had given in only a few months before things came crashing down to Theon's teasing pleas for him to get his nipples pierced. Now Risto's gold hoops were just as much temptation to his lovers as Theon's were. Sami couldn't hear Chriss and Jason, but he assumed that was a temporary thing as they kissed and stripped each other to the skin. He also assumed Janne would stay mostly silent as he masturbated to the sight of a near orgy.

Sami groaned. He felt fingers under his shirt. Clumsily he groped for Koira's hips and moaned again. The little imp was squirming around to straddle his lap as he tugged Sami's shirt up.

He caught those clever hands and rolled over, pinning Koira under him.

Those big green eyes stared up at him as Koira licked his lips nervously. That was too much temptation for Sami; he leaned down and caught those soft lips with his own. Gradually hesitant kisses grew bolder and Sami was able to coax Koira into opening his mouth to plunder it properly. His hands began stroking, pulling his own shirt open and off and working Koira's open as well so he could touch soft winter pale skin.

He rocked his hips down and felt an answering hard length in Koira's trousers and heard a low cry of pleasure. A cry that he heard echoed more loudly by Jason and again with a hint of pleading desperation by Risto.

Sami panted and looked down, Koira's hair was spread in a tangle across his bed furs and his lips were kiss swollen.

"Tell me to stop," he breathed as his thumbs rolled over Koira's nipples and made him arch up hard with a needy little cry. The kid was all but virgin, his reactions were too raw, too sweet and drunk or not, if he didn't tell Sami to stop Sami was going to have him.

Another little cry was his only answer, and the feel of two small, slim hands clutching at his shoulders.

But those hands pulled him closer instead of pushing him away.

"Koi, Enkeli, tell me to stop," Sami let out a low groan and kissed a trail down Koira's throat to suck and nip at his shoulder. He could taste blood just below the surface and ached to bite, but not yet. His hands were already shoving his own trousers down so he could kick them off. He stopped and stared down into widely dilated green eyes and reached for the laces of Koira's trousers. All Koira did was pant and watch him as he peeled the leather open to expose a long and slim cock rising from a nest of crisp pale curls.

Sami groaned, he could smell him, hot, musky and sweet with arousal. He leaned down and breathed over that hard length just to hear the gasp out of Koira. Then he looked up and locked their gazes as he moved close enough to feel Koira's pulse pounding and breathed over that length again.

"Tell me to stop.'
Koira whimpered, but the word he breathed wasn't 'stop.'

“Please,”

Sami stroked his cheek over Koira's cock and felt it jump at the contact. He could feel Koira's needy squirms under him; hear his breathing getting ever more ragged.

“Please,”

Poor kid probably didn't even know what he was begging for. Sami swallowed him down and held his hips firmly pinned as the little blond turned into a thrashing, bucking and screaming armful of pure need. A few swallows and a slow slide up and back down and Koira was coming with a pleading cry.

But he had one hand clutching Sami's arm and the other tangled in his hair, and his eyes weren't afraid.

Koira went limp and lay there panting like he'd just run down a deer, Sami reached up under the leather pillow he'd stuffed with feathers only a few days before and found the little jar of solid, scented oil Jason rendered out for personal uses. This batch Jason had scented with mint after Jonne had complained that the last batch had tasted bad, the tingle from the mint made things feel really good. Quickly he pulled it out and set it where he could find it easily. Then he reached down and peeled Koira the rest of the way free of his trousers. For as short as Koira was he had long slender limbs, gently Sami stroked his hands over those lean thighs and smiled at how they trembled under his touch.

He reached for the jar and slicked two fingers before reaching down to trace little circles between Koira's spread thighs. He expected the jump and cry he got when his fingertips brushed over that hidden entrance. What Sami hadn't expected was for Koira to spread his legs further and whimper. It made his breath catch as he slid a finger in and began to carefully work the smaller man open enough to take him.

The moans and whimpers Koira made while he was working made Sami crazy, he could hear hot sex noises all around him and it made it harder to hang onto his control. Jonne was moaning like an old style porn star, clearly being taken hard from behind and loving every thrust. Julian had just gasped 'oh god' like he did when Risto and Theon were starting to both slide inside him. They'd both be pampering the changer for the next few days, taking him like that took a lot of prep and wrung Julian out.

It was something he'd watched with pleasure many times, but right now he had a more engaging armful.

Three fingers into a squirming Koira and Sami couldn't take it any longer. His fingers had been ridden back on and Koira had started begging, just little cries of 'please' but still begging and he needed in. Sami slicked up and slowly pressed in, Koira turned into a squirming and gasping armful again, and clutched at his shoulders and hip as he pushed deeper, deeper, all the way in until his balls were pressed tight into Koira's ass. He stayed there for several long moments listening to Jonne moan and Julian beg as he felt that sweet tight heat fluttering tighter around him.

Finally Koira pushed up into him and he pulled back out. The little pleading cry shifted to a hot moan as he reversed and pushed back in. Sami could feel the little sticky tracks of Koira's renewed and leaking erection on his belly and moved a little faster, a little harder and he changed angles just a little until he felt Koira turn into a writhing mad thing under him. Then he held those slim hips in an iron grip and hammered at that angle until he felt the flood of wetness against his belly that told
him Koira had come again.

Then he slowed and turned Koira into a pleading and squirming armful until he hardened a third time. Only then as his thrusts sped again did he relax enough that when Koira clamped tight on him a second time that he came as well a few hard thrusts later. He still ached with wanting to bite, but wanted to hold off until Koira could properly enjoy the more pleasurable side effects of a vampires bite.

Then he rolled to his side and cuddled the trembling blond close to his chest and tucked that rumpled head of fine blond hair under his chin.

When he looked up he wanted to groan and throw something. Janne and Theon were watching avidly and Jason, Risto and Kris had the smug and sleepily contented smiles of men who had gotten off more than once.

“Perverts.”

A soft round of chuckles followed his accusation, and Sami was smiling as he curled around Koira and dropped off to sleep.

~0~

Koira woke with a headache and a very tender backside and it took him what felt like hours to wake up enough to figure out why. He also felt sticky in a way he hadn't felt since he, Bright eyes and Curly had snuck off together as boys to explore what their awakening bodies told them. He was also warm, and being held quite firmly in strong arms. Arms that tightened around him when he squirmed to try and see whose furs he'd ended up sharing last night. A faded gold star and black tracery on one biceps told him whose bed he'd warmed.

Sami.

But he needed to pee, so he squirmed and pushed those arms until they let him go enough that he could escape and scamper over to the low and wide ceramic bowl filled with powdered horse dung that they used for night soil. When he finished and rinsed some of the nasty taste out of his mouth with a few swallows of fresh water he slipped past Sami's bed to try and climb into his own.

Try.

Sami reached out, caught him around the hips and dragged him back into bed with him. Koira slapped his hands over his mouth, hoping that his little squeal of surprise hadn't awakened anyone else. Then he squirmed and shoved futilely at Sami's broad chest.

The great lump just purred at him and rolled over pinning him flat. His voice was rough with sleep and sounded supremely content with the world.

“Mmmm, you're warm.”

Koira barely restrained another squeak as Sami nuzzled down to suck at a tender spot on his shoulder. More squirming just got him securely snuggled in tight; his back to Sami's chest and his balls and cock gently cradled in one large hand, the other pressed flat against his chest right over his heart.

He was stuck.

But Sami was warm behind him so it didn't take long before Koira relaxed and fell back to sleep,
feeling obscurely safe and protected in the big man’s arms.

~0~

Jonne wriggled a little in Kris's arms, then snuggled down and pulled the fur lined blanket a bit closer around them both.

“They okay?”

“Mmm, yeah... They're being cute.”

Kris chuckled softly and cuddled Jonne a little closer.

“Good enough for me. Sleep Enkeli.”

Jonne sighed happily and settled back to sleep. It was winter, safe enough to just laze around in bed with his lover.

~0~

Brian quietly swore that next winter they wouldn't be traveling. After the hells of this winter and having the scramble of explanations to a smaller traveling group they had tripped over after the biggest storm they had dealt with so far he didn't think Squeaks or Levi would argue too much. Fortunately the folks they'd tripped over had only lost livestock and not people.

It had just been rather awkward to say the least, explaining what a trio of acrobats was doing out here all by themselves. The story of a storm, a flooded river and trying to get back to familiar ground at least helped get them through. A storm flooded river was no laughing matter, especially when you had no choice but to finish crossing as you were halfway across.

Terribly unfortunate that they'd never found their original group again.

He sighed and lay back on the top of their wagon and just soaked up the warming spring sun. Squeaks was driving and Levi was off chasing rabbits and any other rodent too caught up in spring fever to pay attention.

When Levi came back he'd jump down and go foraging for edible greens and shoots. He had a better eye for the plants for whatever reason. Mushrooms though he still left to the local experts and they traded for them dried when they weren't in season.

Later tonight when the troop had stopped for the night he'd have both his lovers in the grass somewhere. He hadn't had Levi groaning and swearing under him since last fall and he wanted to see if they could still make Squeaks black out from coming so hard.

~0~

Spring meant warmer weather, fresh spouted greens to add to their diet and flooding, their main storage and sleeping caves were safe enough but they had to find alternatives to their normal hot springs and waterfall for clean water for bathing, drinking and cooking. At least until the waters receded and they could clean out the springs and rebuild the seating and were reasonably sure the sediments had settled out of the river. Part of the rock shelf under the waterfall had fallen so now they had a stepped waterfall and had had to build a bit of a wall to divert the water back into the pit and not down their walkway. Theon was still less than thrilled about having to put up a wall of sandbags so Jason's concrete mix had the chance to dry properly before they let the water back through. At least they'd had the rough cloth sacks left over from Jason's last trading round that had
brought back corn. Otherwise they'd have had to sacrifice something to make bags to turn into sandbag to keep the water out.

They also had to shift a few fallen rocks around and out of the pool below, just to make it safe to jump in from a height again. Some of those chunks of rock had been turned into benches around the pool and to repair seating in the pool so it wasn't the disaster it could have been. The collapse had also brought down a section of the roof high above as well and that made for more light. Next winter it might also mean snow and ice on their walkway but they'd deal with that next winter.

Jason had brought up the idea of maybe trying to build a wall around part of the topmost step of the new fall, since the roof falling in had taken part of the old guardian wall with it. But they hadn't reached a consensus on that idea yet. Julian was all for having an upper level pool to collect drinking and cooking water from without having to get soaking wet or walking down to the deeper pool. Theon thought they'd just have to re-do it every year after it froze and broke. Jason was divided so in spite of it being his idea they hadn't moved on it.

That and his concrete mix for water needed a bit more work. It wasn't hardening the way he wanted it to right now and under pressure of running water it was washing away or breaking. So he'd keep playing with it as Julian worked on changing Theon's mind. The idea to build a small cistern was getting moved on. If things were left to dry and cure the water issue wasn't as much of a problem. They'd found a spot they'd walled off years ago, when they'd still had access to commercially made concrete mix, and built the cistern there, any water that seeped out would go back and down the deep hole that was behind that wall and they'd have at least some water when spring thaws came again next year.

Spring also meant doing a bit of cleaning, sweeping up wood ashes for Jason to drain water through for lye to make soap, and clearing out all the rubbish that accumulated over the cold months. It meant airing out furs and bedding and consolidating food stocks. It also meant Jason and Jonne carefully cleaning the glass and horn shields around the lamps and putting that fine black soot into jars. Koira hadn't understood that, nor had he understood why in the coldest months they had cut large numbers of huge blocks of ice to keep in the ice cave wrapped up in layers upon layers of clean dry straw. Running trap lines had made more sense to him, as had chopping holes in the ice on the lakes to fish, but Julian said it would make sense later so he held silent.

But spring also meant it was time for the vampires to go out and start the rounds of Rites, and he now knew the Dark Ones called themselves vampires and changers, even if he hadn't fully accepted that he was a Dark One himself, just yet. He'd also learned that there were Dark Ones like Sami's Hunt; that took care of people, and there were others who weren't, and they considered people food.

And they needed to go out and feed. The careful feeding they had done from the changers over the darkest parts of the winter, even with an unexpected windfall, wasn't going to be enough to get them far. Kris was going South with Jason on an early trading run, at least if they got caught by a group of humans it was a trading run, otherwise it was just a supply run. They were after salt mostly and Jason had a place he went to boil saltwater down into a coarse greenish salt for preserving meat and fish. He had a trick for making it whiter, but it took a lot of water, a huge pile of the green salt and a lot of work. It was easier to just trade silver and turquoise for good white salt, the hard cones of golden brown and good white sugar, lengths of hand woven cloth and bundles of linen, cotton and wool yarns, but the planned trip to do that wasn't for another month.

Chriss was taking up Kris's old territory for Rites, Theon and Risto had already left for their early sweeps. Julian and Janne were helping Jonne set up the gardens and Sami was readying the horses he'd take on his sweep of his northern territories.
Koira didn't want him to go. He knew Janne and Julian would be making the rounds again soon of the offering pits to see if anything interesting had survived this spring’s flooding. They'd all done a circuit just after the blizzard that followed their midwinter hunts, simply because there had been a lot of drumming racket echoing down some of the connecting tunnels. There had been some nice furs and textiles even bundles of dyed porcupine quills, and more of what Koira was learning were the usual offerings of food, pots, beads and ornaments. The pit furthest north had been disturbing though.

There had been three human's tied out in the frames above the pit and left to slowly freeze to death.

Watching those three men being carefully and quickly drained dry had given him the crawls. Even with Julian's sad explanation that two of the three were dangerous, in that they believed if they drank human blood they could become Dark Ones and the third was simply and quietly mad and unable to live with others, it had made him uncomfortable.

More disturbing was Chriss's calm explanation that other Hunts of vampires actively went hunting humans in the darkest part of winter. Seeking out and claiming isolated individuals or even small groups cut off from the rest of their groups. He felt disquieted and oddly relieved that Sami's people didn't hunt people like that. It meant they could be a bit weakened in the spring, but Sami seemed to think it was a fair trade off. Come summer they'd be able to feed regularly on willing, if ignorant, donors and drain those unfortunates who were about to become monsters.

Sami's Hunt protected people; they didn't hunt them for sport.

Sami turned and sighed. Koira wanted to know why he couldn't come and help.

“Koira, you can't come with me.”

“Not even...”

“Not even as an eagle. It causes to much stir.” Sami sighed again and came over to cup Koira's face in his hands.

“Three weeks, I'll be back at Satama in three weeks, a month at the worst. If you feel you have to get out and fly, go south and check on Kris and Jason, or sweep east for Risto, Theon and Chriss. Don't come north, the winds up there now are murder on birds.”

“But,” Koira moaned as Sami leaned in and silenced him with a slow kiss.

“Promise me,”

Reluctantly he did promise and watched from North Peak, the highest point over their home as Sami swiftly rode north.

“He'll come home.”

Koira didn't even ask how Jonne had known he was up here and known to come find him.

“How do you know?”

“He always comes home.”

Koira turned to look up at the only other person living here who was close to being as short as he was.
“Always?”

Jonne smiled down at him.

“How’s he doing? He’s been doing it for hundreds of years.”

~0~

Jason looked up and sighed.

“Is there a reason we have a green-eyed eagle perched over our camp?” Chriss asked as he looked over at the bird, which was looking terribly smug.

“Yeah. Get down here kid; you found us, there must be news.”

Chriss rolled over, off Jason and back to his belly and rested his chin on his forearms as the eagle hopped down and changed as he dropped from his branch perch from bird to slim and short man. He noticed that this time the kid didn’t trip and fall, but he still went to his knees.

“Okay kid, spill.”

Koirra crawled over and curled up beside them on the grass, then looked up at Jason in innocent confusion.

“Spill?”

Jason groaned. He kept forgetting Koira didn’t have all the slang they did. He tried again.

“Tell?”

“Oh, um. Sami and Jonne and Julian went into an ancients place. The one South and high on the hill.”

That got both their attention. Scavenging runs into cities and what was left of some towns could be dangerous as hell. And not just from the fact the buildings were falling apart and the bridges and roads couldn’t always be trusted. Zombies tended to get stuck in places there. And it took a really long time for a zombie to die of dehydration and starvation. Sometimes months if there was any kind of an excuse for a water supply. Worse, if there were insects or rats a trapped zombie could survive for years trapped in a city. He hoped what they’d found had been worth the risk. Even vampires weren’t immune to being swarmed under by zombies.

“And?”

“They found a place, a bun-ker Sami said, and it had things in it that made them happy. Many, many things. It took five horses and the big box on wheels two trips to bring everything back.”

“Ah?” prompted Chriss. Koira was clearly being careful of his words; he still called the wagon they’d scavenged from a lot of unfortunates killed by one of their own changing into a zombie a ‘box on wheels.’ The surviving children they had found a place for with another tribe. For irony Koira’s old tribe; and they’d been terribly happy to get those children given they still didn’t know what had happened to the ‘hunting party’ that had tried looting an offering pit. As far as they knew that group had vanished off the face of the earth, even the two survivors hadn’t come back home yet.

“They found a lot of coiled metal reeds and something Sami called smell-ter and a forge.”
Jason perked up.

“A smelter?”

Koira nodded, clearly relieved that Jason had understood the strange word and that it meant something good.

“A small one he said, it looked very big to me, and it took all three of them to get it up to the surface.” Koira cheerfully told them what else had been found, but he seemed puzzled as to why metal bits would make Sami happy. The lot of glass and stone beads he at least understood as potential trade goods. Jason perked up a little more when Koira mentioned the forge had all sorts of tools stored with it and lengths and sheets of things that Koira didn't know what were. From the sounds of it Jason thought Sami might have found a metal-smiths hidden workshop, complete with supplies. And apparently most of the supplies were in pretty good condition in spite of all the time that had passed. That alone told him that this bunker had probably been closed up pretty tightly and probably been hidden pretty well. More than likely they'd found the place completely by accident. Koira didn't say how much trouble they'd had getting into the place, but Jason had a suspicion it hadn't been a case of find the place and push the door open, not if they were lifting things up and out. Probably someone had fallen through a thin spot in the ceiling that hadn't been there when the place was built.

He and Chriss though knew what was going on in the big man's head.

“Think he found stuff where we can make our own arrow heads again?”

Jason shrugged, all they needed to do really to melt aluminum or even some iron was get Jonne to make them crucibles and build another set of bellows. Well, and a lot of hard work making charcoal and actually manning the bellows. Getting real coal was still possible, but he'd rather that Sami traded their scrap metals for finished goods that were easier to transport than heavy sacks of coal.

“If he found copper tubing we can get the still back up and running properly again. That'll be good.”

Koira was happy enough to spend the night curled up with them, and in the morning they sent him back to Satama with pouches full of plant cuttings and seeds for Jonne. Even if Chriss had almost laughed himself sick as they tried to rig a carry harness for a bird that didn't interfere with the movements of his wings. Balancing the load was a bit tricky, but once they had the harness and the load balanced it was nothing to toss Koira's eagle shape into the air to fly carefully home. Then they spent a day just enjoying each other's company before going back to trading duty and the late spring round of Rites.

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Brian had to laugh as Levi amused a group of kids at their latest stop. Never in his life would he have expected Levi to learn to juggle. But here he was juggling and telling truly terrible puns.

This was a damn sight better than the last stop where they'd had to leave in a hurry. Brian sobered a bit. Bad enough that a man had been abusing his step daughters, bad enough he'd beaten their mother to death and no one had stepped in to help.

Brian had caught him in the act of beating his eldest almost to death.

He hadn't survived Brian's irritation.
Then he'd registered the smell tainting the poor girl’s blood and wanted to scream to any gods listening. Hadn't the poor thing lived through enough?

The villagers had found him cradling her cooling body in his arms as he'd wept in dry wracking sobs. It helped in some ways that she'd been beaten so badly and there was so much blood on the ground around her. They'd assumed the bastard had just taken the fall badly and broken his neck and that Brian as an outsider had done something none of them had the balls to do.

But it had been too late.

He sighed and leaned into Squeaks arms as she cuddled into his side and tried to focus on happier things.

Like how Levi was grinning at them and making a complete fool of himself for a group of children and preteens.

~0~

Sami was glad to be headed toward home. Two of his tribes had been tangled up in a bit of a fuss over who got to keep the surviving children of a small transient group that had gotten slaughtered by a zombie. Both groups had rallied together to kill the thing, but now were fussing over who got to keep the five survivors. If they hadn't all been siblings Sami would have suggested they be split up and placed with willing families.

But they were all related, and the eldest was refusing to be parted from his younger brothers and sisters, so he'd had to suggest that one of the outlying widows from one group take a new husband from the other group and move the kids in with them.

That had provoked a bit of discussion, six days of discussion in fact, before the two headmen had been able to get their people to all agree to the solution. It had taken less than an hour for them to decide to jointly send out trackers to try and figure out where the zombie had come from in the first place. The trackers had been back with a resounding 'we don't know for sure, just not local', long before the survivors situation was settled.

They'd finally gone to the hut of one of the younger widows, a girl who had survived two husbands, one lost at sea, the other dead of old age, and let her know she was getting the children, and another chance at babies of her own. From the looks she and her new spouse were exchanging they'd been seeing one another on the sly for some time, and now had the chance to make a life together openly.

From the relief in her eyes the kids might be seeing a younger sibling of sorts a bit sooner than would be otherwise expected. But up here folks tended to not get too flustered if a child came a bit sooner than nine months after the wedding. Kids had a value in and of themselves, so as long as the mother could provide for her children there wasn't much fuss if a woman had little one's without a man sticking around.

Her cozy little hut had been expanded into a more proper house and several other brave souls had moved out into the space between the two tribes’ villages.

With luck in a few years the two tribes would be one rather more extended one.

He'd come away tired, full fed and then some from girls wanting to become women under his hands and a few young men being curious. He'd gotten a third mountain pony out of the surviving stock of the lost group, the rest of the horses and the horde of goats had gone to the couple who
had taken in the children. He had the new mare loaded just as heavily as his normal two with several types of preserved fish, oil, cheese and other bits and bobs including a small pot of something that he thought stank to high heaven but knew Jason would be happy to see, ambergris. He also had a nice lot of summer reindeer pelts that would make some nice winter gear for Koira and the rest of his people. He'd have to keep an eye on the mare, as he suspected she might be pregnant. If she was and birthed a colt it would be good for the home herd. They'd had to geld all the colts out of their last stallion as they hadn't been able to find good homes to trade them to before they'd started to become a problem wanting to fight and breed.

But that was for later, he wanted to be home.

Having Koira warm and willing in his bed the entire last half of winter and into spring had spoiled him. He wanted his little lover in his arms again. That first drunken tumble had turned into mutual exploration and growing affection. Sami hadn't gotten Koira to relax enough for some of the things he wanted to try, but the kid was still rather strangely body shy and the guys had no inhibitions about watching or being watched. But now every time he saw an eagle circling he half hoped that Koira had disobeyed him a little and come north to meet him.

So far though the birds were simply birds.

With a resigned sigh he tugged the horses back into motion, another four days and he'd be near enough to home that Jules or Janne might be out watching for him.
Janne smiled a little as Koira came circling down through the hole above the waterfall and shifted to man shape just as his eagle form was settling in to land on the low wall separating the path from the open space around the waterfall.

He'd gotten very good at that simple shift. He'd only slipped from the low wall and fallen into the pool below once. Koira still hadn't quite gotten the little flip to transfer a load from changing talons into his hands, he'd go to his knees on the landing then, but that skill would come with time.

Janne shifted his load of dry but un-fired pottery a little in his arms. Risto had gotten back a little ahead of schedule and he and Jonne had gone on a binge of pot, plate and bowl making.

“Any luck?” he asked as Koira came over to help him carry the unfinished crockery up to the cavern they fired things in.

“I saw a little dust but nothing else.”

Janne nodded, they often got little dust storms at this time of year, at least until the rains shifted a little and the rest of the plains greened up.

“Did you eat?”

Koira nodded.

“Caught a hare while I was out. Further west those cacti got rain and are setting fruit.”

That was something Jonne would be happy to hear, the things tasted like tart strawberries. A fruit they hadn't been able to cultivate for years, since blight had taken out their last lot. All of them kept their eyes open for the wild versions in the hopes of restarting the bed for Jonne. So far they hadn’t been able to keep the plants alive long enough for them to be transplanted and hadn’t had any luck planting rotting berries in the hopes of getting plants. Risto had quietly suggested trying to cultivate them where they found them and see if they couldn't get some good runners to transplant that way. So far they hadn't tried, at least none of them was admitting to having tried. All of them brought berries back when they found them though. And last summer they'd had enough of a bounty Jonne had been willing to dry some of them for later use.

If this year’s crop was as good Jason was all for trying to put some up as jam, he'd found and copied a recipe that used green apples for pectin and it had worked reasonably well the summer before last with pears and apricots. Most of the time they didn't have jars or sugar enough to try but last year they had, so late that summer they'd harvested almost every green apple off every tree they could find, and Jason had gone a bit wild making the jelling syrup from the less perfect green apples. They'd marked every tree, orchard and grove on their map so they could find it again and gone back last year to thin out the branches. They'd left about every fifth apple and that had given them some bigger, healthier fruit. What hadn't been eaten of the ripe apples had been sorted and the best were put in single layers in shallow baskets in the cold rooms, the rest had been carefully dried and packed away in pots with tight lids. The pectin goo had been packed away in carefully cleaned glass or pottery jars and sealed with a thick layer of clean beeswax. A jar of that in a pot of crushed fruit with a cone or two of sugar pounded to powder and they’d have preserves. Jason and Jonne were having fun experimenting with what fruits worked best while they had the supplies to
“We'll see if we can't beat the mice to some of them this year. Any signs of Chriss or Theon yet?”

Koira shook his head as he watched Janne carefully stack the crockery so they could get as much fired at once as possible. They might have dense forests to the north and east now, but they still were careful not to be wasteful.

Janne nodded as he worked, they weren't running late just yet, he was just hoping Theon would hurry up and get back to help him quell Risto and Jonne's spree before they had enough raw pots for three regular firings rather than one large one. And they still had to glaze what they had now if they wanted to be able to store more than salt, sugar, grains and dried fruits and vegetables in them. To sterilize them to store jam or pickles or anything wet they had to be glazed.

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Koira stretched his wings a little wider and circled a little lower on his thermal. Kris and Jason had come back from their sweep south loaded with salt, sugar and preserved fish and shellfish as well as a lot of red and black coral beads for trade further north. Theon he'd found two days before and had carried the message back that he had one more small group to track down and he'd be headed back in. He'd also carried in the explanation for why Theon was running behind.

There had been a complication with one set of Rites and he'd had to chase down two girls and drain one before she changed and ate her friend. That had been less than fun given the two had known the area much better than Theon did. Add to that that he could smell the one getting closer to changing and had to find her without having any of her fellow tribesmen with him when he did.

Yeah.

It had been a lot more challenging than it needed to be and had been a very close run thing. Another day and the tribe would have lost two girls and possibly had a zombie to worry about as they looked for their missing ones. Theon had managed to grab the sick girl and drain her without her friend actually seeing, the healthy one had been following her sick friend who had realized something was very wrong as was trying to put some distance between herself and her friend. So she'd caught up in time to see Theon cradling her dead friend in his arms looking sickened and saddened. Her grieving wails had brought the rest of the tribe to their location at a dead run. No one had questioned Theon's sad explanation of dark spirits trying to possess the girl and her courage in fighting them off long enough for him to come and free her spirit.

Of course everyone knew that to free a spirit where it couldn't be possessed and used meant the body had to die. They'd built a pyre for the girl on the spot she'd fallen just to make sure the spirit wouldn't try again to use her body.

The heartbroken survivor was a woman and now was back with her family and Theon was on to his last stop, and didn't foresee any further trouble. But he'd made sure the rest of them knew which tribe and which girl so they could keep a discrete eye on her, just in case. Theon thought things had been a lot to close for comfort, and had said he never wanted to do a full drain on an emergent that fast ever again. It made him a touch queasy, that had helped when dealing with the survivors, but if he'd actually gotten sick it would have been a huge mess.

Chriss he'd seen headed toward home early this morning. He stopped him long enough to tell him Jason was at Satama and then left him again so he could get home to his lover. Koira had managed to keep his smile at how fast Chriss had been running toward home hidden. Before he'd landed and let Chriss know Jason was home he'd been moving at a moderate trot, when he'd taken
off Chriss was moving a good bit faster.

Now he was circling more toward their northern territories. Sami was running late and the rest of the Hunt was getting restless because of it. A week either way wasn't significant, but they were past the two week point and they were starting to go out looking for him on his usual routes back in.

Koira and Janne were flying as they could cover more ground that way.

Janne had been doing sweeps in the late evening and early morning as a middling sized owl and letting Koira take the sweeps in the middle of the day in his eagle or falcon shapes. So far that had let them both patrol without disturbing the local birds enough that they'd get mobbed by the things trying to drive them off.

A flash of movement caught Koira's eye and he turned to get a better look.

One man and three horses dragging laden travois. Koira circled around again, lower this time. A single human out here was odd enough to be worth checking, even if it turned out to not be Sami.

The markings on the man's pack and two of the travois covers looked like the one Sami habitually used. A five pointed star centered in a circle centered in a larger square. The square and star were black, the circle red, but each of the Hunt had a symbol they used to mark their gear and distinct fletching and banding on their arrows. Jonne used a circle with a double hand of points sticking out of it at regular intervals in a grayish black, Risto a circled star in an orange-ish red, Jason used an irregular series of black lines that crossed in an odd tangle of X's. Chriss's was easy to see from above, a white circle with three white lines in it on black. He'd even seen a blanket made with a slightly distorted five pointed star in red, but he hadn't figured out who used it. He'd never seen anyone in that bed, but it was as carefully maintained and covered as the rest.

Another bed was set aside for any guests, but so far Koira hadn't seen anyone in that bed either.

He circled low enough that his shadow passed over the man and he stopped abruptly to look up.

Koira was diving for the ground a heartbeat later and changing to run up to Sami.
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Sami had noticed the eagle and hadn't really paid it much mind. He'd stopped getting his hopes up a few days before, but this time the eagle circled back around and low enough that it got his attention and made him look up. Barely a breath later and it was diving for the ground.

Sami felt his breath catch as the bird changed to man before it hit the ground and Koira was running toward him. He dropped the lead rope on Tampere's harness, she was smart enough to not wander off and the other two were tethered to her. Then he shed his pack and took the few running steps to get to Koira and sweep him up in his arms.

He was so skin hungry that he was devouring Koira's mouth with hungry kisses and tumbling them both to the ground. So hungry, that he was rough and clumsy getting both their trousers undone enough that he could reach in and fist their cocks together. His headscarf was an early casualty as Koira pulled it off in his urgent tugging on Sami's hair. But he was fighting to get closer, squirming up into every hard stroke of Sami's hand until he came with a little scream and went limp. It felt so good Sami came a few strokes later and braced himself above Koira and panted until he felt stable enough to drop to his side and curl around the smaller man.

He was content to lie there and breathe in the scent of his love, at least until he heard a dry chuckle
and the sounds of footsteps nearby.

Sami grumbled something rather rude under his breath and was answered with an equally rude snort.

“I'll remember you said that dick head. You're only three weeks late, sue us for being worried about your sorry carcass.”

“Two and a half.” Sami looked up at where Theon was standing over them with his hands on his hips. Chriss, Jason and Risto were close behind. Clearly they'd been watching Koira circle and come at a dead run when they saw him wing over and dive for the ground.

“Ooohhh. Smart ass.”

“Love you too, Torsti.”

Koira softly asked.

“What is Sue? And what does it have to do with you being late?”

Sami just buried his nose in Koira's hair and laughed.

It was so good to be home.

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Summer meant traveling, performing and a mix of hardships and good times. And it meant trying to pick up the trails that Dmitri and Christof left. With those being two different trails, both long gone cold, and it made life a bit more complicated than just tracking one cold trail would have been. Sometimes it looked like one was following the other, other times Levi couldn't tell which trail they were following or if they were even tracking either of the boys.

Summer also meant watching his lovers in less clothing out in public. That was a lot nicer than wondering if they were following a wild goose that had no sense of direction.

Levi smirked a bit and settled his chin on his crossed forearms and watched Brian as he helped Thomas get his show tent back up. He smirked a bit more when he noticed a few of the local girls ogling Brian's ass in the snug leather trousers Squeaks had made him last winter. Being fair Brian looked damn good without a shirt with soft brown leather hugging every curve and line of his ass and thighs.

He bit back a snicker we Brian stood and smiled, pausing to take a drink from the dipper of water Squeaks was walking around to everyone helping Thomas and the few other's whose show space had gotten flattened in last night’s sudden winds. In spite of themselves they'd ended up taking up with another group of players traveling mostly westwards.

At least this time they had an excuse to break off and keep going west if they needed one, looking for a pair of missing boys, never mind no ages were mentioned for either boy.

Speaking of looking edible; Squeaks looked damn good herself it a short tight top and loose low slung trousers. Both his lovers looked far too good in leather, even if Squeaks trousers were mostly made from tightly woven linen and not the soft greenish brown leather of her top.

When Brian's grin went impish Levi knew what to expect, but that didn't keep him from sniggering at the crestfallen looks on the girls’ faces.
That's right girls, he's taken!

He grinned and rose to vault down when Squeaks and Brian turned and cast challenging looks up at him for his laughter. He happily vaulted down and took his place in their arms and didn't notice that the girls looked even more disappointed.

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High summer meant a bit of a lull in terms of Rites, and Jonne had put up the idea of going west. And not just a little west, far west, past the line of desert and to the coastline there to do a bit of harvesting of the bays and coves that lined that coastline. There were dozens upon dozens of beaches guarded by steep cliffs that there was no way to get to for normal humans except by sea. That meant dozens of beaches they could get to fairly easily and harvest edible seaweeds and varying types of fish and shellfish from without having to worry too much about mucking with one of their tribes food supply. Given they didn't go that far west very often they could probably do some heavy harvesting without being too afraid of doing damage to the beaches they hit.

They'd taken the time to plan things out and brought the wagon in the best condition as well as the makings of a dozen travois and about half of the horses that were fit for the trip. Ten days was a good long time to be out, and that wasn't including six to eight days of travel each way, and unfortunately given the some of the terrain they were crossing it was six to eight days, not six to eight nights. They had a strip of desert to cross and a good chunk of open plains as well as a low mountain pass. At least the pass was still nice and clear thanks to the old highway system, at worst they'd have to clear some fallen rocks. Last time they'd even been able to take the tunnels and had lopped a good three or four days off the trip. But this time they were going the slightly longer route so they could check on a few orchards and see if the truffle bed Janne knew about was producing enough to be worth raiding.

Risto, Julian and Theon agreed to stay at Satama and keep things ticking over there as, even after all this time; Theon was still hellishly prone to sunburn. Risto promised Jonne he'd mind the gardens and Jason that he'd keep his yeast fed. Julian said he'd keep an eye out from North Peak in case any of their tribes put up smoke. That way in an emergency they could get someone out in two or three days at absolute worst.

Other than having to take some of their biggest jars filled with water for the horses and themselves and keeping as much exposed skin covered as possible, it wasn't really a bad trip. Janne and Koira kept them fed by nailing things from above in their raptor forms and Jason and Chriss knew what plant life was safe for them and the horses to eat. Janne filled one thick walled jar with truffles on the way out and Chriss shocked everyone by finding a previously unknown grove of oranges that they noted and marked to come back to later. They had some spectacular sunrises, and had to hide Jonne and Kris under shade in the hottest parts of the day, but they made the trip out with very little difficulty.

Once they were at the coastline they found a valley with hip high salt grass where the horses would be safe and began foraging.

Janne wove quick baskets of some of the sturdier sea grasses and a lot of broad cattail leaves that Koira found in the mashes for them to gather into. After a quick lesson in what was safe and what wasn't for Koira, who was unfamiliar with coastlines and the salt water and marsh edibles to be found there, they set about harvesting whatever came to hand.

Jason and Chriss spent a fair bit of time doing more eating than harvesting of the small abalone growing on the rocks, but Sami didn't fuss at them for it, he had been happily gorging on the small sweet shellfish and crisp seaweed pods as well. Kris had been indulging in the small but feisty
crabs and tiny lobster like creatures caught in the tide pools that he was sieving out with a coarse woven mesh of sea grass. Koira had gotten brave and was diving for sea urchins, anemone and starfish after he brought back one sea urchin in curiosity and had Sami show him how to get at the edible bits inside.

Travois poles made the bases of good drying racks for the seaweeds and after two days of gorging they finally were getting enough abalone, clams, small fish, crabs and other shellfish for it to be worthwhile to start smoking fires and set up the drying lines. Jason had built a rough raft of driftwood and bundled reeds, covered it with a hide and begun harvesting an early form of wild rice and had found fields of marsh wheat that were dropping full seed heads. So Janne's quick baskets were being filled faster than the grain was being threshed off the stalks for a few days.

Then Janne had gone off on an exploratory flight and come back in a huge hurry.

Koira had been puzzled as to why the others were excited, but had followed along.

Two coves over to the south he saw the biggest fish he'd ever seen in his life.

It was so large he had nothing to compare it to, and was left staring at, what to him, was a small hill of a fish. He cautiously paced the length and gulped when he realized this fish was more than ten times his height in length.

Sami picked up his longest spear with a small resigned sigh.

"Nothing for it then."

Koira watched in confusion as Sami walked up to the great beast knelt down and rested a hand over one of its small eyes. He didn't hear what Sami said to it, but did see the beast jerk and then still with a long mournful groan as Sami plunged the spear in deep. He boggled when he saw that the fish didn't have teeth, just some fibrous drape, how did it eat without teeth?

"Jason, we'll need the rendering pot out of the wagon, Jonne, we'll need to re-purpose some of the water jars and find a way to seal them tighter. We also need to get to boiling down saltwater for salt."

Chriss spoke up as Jason shifted and took off back toward their makeshift camp at a sprint.

"I saw a huge lot of driftwood well above the tide line going the other way, and I know there's a clay deposit near here, not as good as the one at home, but it would work for oil pots. And I think saw strings of tar a couple beaches the other side of the cove we're camped in."

Sami nodded.

"Better idea than mine, and once Jason gets back we can have him double check on the tar. We still need to hustle a little. Janne we may need you to fly back and get Risto and Theon, we'll see how processing goes."

Koira watched as Sami set out tasks for everyone and scrambled to help as Sami lifted him up onto the great beasts back with the longest bladed knife they had with them. He didn't understand the order to make long deep parallel cuts down the animals spine and then to slice a strip out of the hide that was half as wide as he was tall but he obeyed and found himself shocked at how thick a layer of creamy white fat there was under that thick gray skin. But Sami just shook his head and muttered about 'the poor thing being sick to be so lean.' If that was lean he wasn't sure he wanted to see one fat with good health. He'd never seen so much fat in his life.
Then he was too busy cutting more strips for Sami, Kris, and Jason to manhandle away. Janne was busy helping Chriss cutting and hauling driftwood and minding their camp until things were dried and could be packed down to move either up to where they were or back to the wagon. He'd been faintly revolted when Sami and Chriss had gutted the thing through a gap in its side near its tail rather than more properly through the belly, but there was no way they'd have been able to roll the thing over to gut it like they would do an elk. They worked as fast as they could to slice the organ meats into neat little pieces to hang to dry, the main flesh was cut into long thin strips to dry and smoke as well.

It was a bit of a shock to count up the days and realize they'd been working for three days. Three days and they hadn't really stripped the carcass clean, just pulled blocks of skin and fat off and piled them in the relative coldness of a seaside cavern to try and keep it sound until they could process it more properly. There was just so much on the animal.

But by then his hands hurt and he was only just starting to understand what they were doing. Jonne was heartily tired of making large pots as fast as he could. But they had a small cave blocked off and filled with large pots to fire, and Jonne had another lot drying in neat rows on the beach. Their empty water jars had been filled with the fine oil they'd refined from the fat and sealed tightly shut with tar and tar coated wooden stoppers and marked with odd marking in charcoal that made sense to everyone but Koira. Jason and Janne had a quick discussion with Sami while another slab of fat was being carefully rendered down.

Chriss and Janne had been dragging back blobs and strings of tar and they were being thrown in one of the new clay pots to melt and for the sand and stones stuck in them to fall to the pot's bottom. Koira thought he'd heard Jonne talking about decanting 'clean' tar off the top and dumping more of the sand coated lumps into the old pot to melt. Jason kept bringing in bucket after bucket of seawater to pour into two huge clay pots Jonne had made to boil down for coarse salt. Koira had been shocked at how much water it took to get even a thin layer of the greenish salt. And it took several large handfuls for each strip of whale skin, he couldn't calculate how much salt they'd need, it made his head hurt to even try.

Then he started paying attention to Sami and Jason's conversation as they worked.

“How fast?”

“Two or three days with an armload, four or five pulling a load. He won't have to keep down to the horses speed, and you know a man can take the fastest route.” Jason answered as he poured out the thick brine into a triple wide section of whale skin that lined pit in the sand. He was trying to get the wind and sun to help speed up the process as they needed a lot more salt than simple boiling would get them. The skin was holding the thick brine in place so the sun and wind could finish the process. Jason hoped that just holding the brine would salt the skin enough to preserve it until they could do a more proper tanning job.

Sami grimaced.

“If we do it'll make a huge difference this winter and next spring,” offered Janne mildly as he tried to scrub a smear of tar off one hand. He'd just finished skimming clean melted tar out of the melting pot.

“But we'll need to feed more,” Sami reminded.

“Mammal blood works.” Janne pointed out.

“Not as well.”
Jason snorted as he worked to refill the large pot with sea water from one of the larger tide pools.

“So we changers hunt more, and you feed from us.” And as far as he was concerned that was that.

Sami sighed, but agreed.

“Janne, go let Risto and Theon know we'll need the other wagon and as many large jars as we have empty in the store rooms. Risto knows the fastest route the horses can take. Tell him to use it, and to make sure Theon wears long sleeves this time.”

Janne nodded and after changing let Sami toss him into the air.

“Jason are you sure Chriss is up for this?”

“I am. And I can take one of the filled jars back. Jonne had the idea of putting it in a basket of those sea grasses and padding the hell out of it with dried seaweed. Two and a half days there and I'll catch back up to Risto and Theon on the way back. It's not like I don't know where the safe watering holes are, and once I'm clear of the sand I'll be able to gather food on the run.” Chriss smiled crookedly and bumped hips with Jason.

Sami nodded.

“Jonne knows the firing, so we'll have more pots soon since we aren't glazing the damn things. You, me and Koira can keep the rendering and drying of what meat there is going.”

Koira was confused, but didn't ask questions as he kept carefully cutting and peeling chunks of fat off the thick skin to drop into the rendering pot.

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Just under eight days later Koira looked up to see Risto dropping down the cliff face, and Theon following a breath later. Both had one of the huge jars that Jonne made for Jason to store grain in held in their arms.

They'd filled most of the first firing of Jonne's beach pots with the cleaned oil already and according to Risto they'd unloaded at the top of the cliff and let Chriss lead the two wagons off to where the first and the horses were. Koira heard Sami hiss the question of where the hells had they gotten a third wagon from and been shocked to see Risto shrug and mention it had been left as an offering by one of the northern clans.

“They left parts enough that our spare is now in full working order, so we're good, Sami, really.”

Koira watched as the three vampires scaled the tall cliffs in a few easy looking bounds and leapt back down carrying empty pots two at a time. He was even more surprised when Jason gently took the skinning knife Sami had lent him from his hands and told him to go eat and sleep. But he was too tired and sore to care, so he obeyed.

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Theon frowned faintly at how quickly the younger changer dropped off to sleep. And that the boy had only drunk a cupful of tea before curling up on his side in the shade of the lean-to. Seeing him stripped down to his clout to work only highlighted to Theon how small and thin Koira was, and how much work they still had to do to get the kid up to a decent weight. Flying might give the muscles in his arms and chest definition but Theon could still easily count ribs.
“He’s been working hard; we never expected to get a whale.” Jason defended softly as he worked at filling the pot that Sami had just brought down from the cliff top with chunks of smelly fat.

“When Janne told me what you’d found I laughed at him. Then Chriss showed up going in as we were a day and some going out. Then I was glad we’d packed every empty storage jar we had. Jules let him feed before he headed back out, so he caught back up to us pretty quickly.”

Jason shared a grin with Theon.

“You mean Julian insisted.”

Theon nodded as he rubbed at the reddened skin on his arms. Even with long sleeves and a huge straw hat Theon was burned. The desert wasn’t a forgiving place for their kind, and Theon was one of the most susceptible of the Hunt, even with as old as they were and the toughness age brought with it.

“More than likely, it would be like him.”

Theon surveyed the mess on the beach. One kettle and two huge clay pots were boiling saltwater down to a rough greenish salt that they crushed between two stones to finer texture to preserve the wide strips of whale skin until they could be dealt with properly. There was a pit lined with a hide of some sort that Jason kept pouring mostly boiled brine into to finish evaporating so he could keep the other pots working boiling seawater down. The other large pot that had come with Sami’s group was filled with melted fat that Jonne was carefully skimming to get the clean oil off and into pots. Another clay pot was filled with slowly burbling black tar to seal the jars closed with, and a coarse basket had more tar balls and strings piled on it for when they had to feed the tar pot. There were lines upon lines of drying tongue shaped pieces of meat and one smallish smoking tent that was sending little puffs of fragrant gray smoke up. Sami, Risto and Chriss were hanging lengths of edible seaweeds over racks to dry, far more than they normally ever harvested.

“What’s with all the seaweed?”

Jason didn’t look up as he piled handfuls of the coarse salt onto a wide strip of whale skin to roll up tightly, tied it with a bit of sea grass cordage and set aside in a shaded spot until they could be piled with others like them in the cave they were using as cool storage. Theon blinked when he realized there was a pile of the quick baskets Janne made for gathering stacked there, and it looked like Janne had gone back and woven the things tightly closed. A quick look at the jars piled in the cavern and he realized those had to hold dried meat, shellfish and grain as all the jars where marked with rough scratched charcoal letters as holding oil.

“Chriss had the idea to pack the jar he carried home in edible seaweed. It makes sense. It’s not like we won’t find a use for the stuff even if it is just tossing a handful in the soup pot. And it keeps forever dried. We just have to remember to put it in pots to keep the mice out when we get back home.”

“Point.”

Theon took the ladle away from Jonne and gave him a gentle shove toward the shaded lean-to Koira was crashed out under. He could do this job for a while. Jonne looked like he was going to fall over, but from the looks of things he’d been going full out making and firing pots to store all the skimmed whale oil in. Theon stirred the melting fat and meditatively contemplated the beach pots sitting in neat rows on the sand. Almost all of them had an irregular greenish glassy coating on the bottom third of the pot, probably from Jonne not being able to keep sand off the drying pots.
It was kind of pretty; maybe they could try doing that deliberately sometime.

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By the time they were done they'd filled all three wagons with a layer of jars of oil and packed dried seaweeds and sea grasses securely around each one. On top they'd piled baskets of dried and smoked fish and shellfish, the salted and dried strips of whale skin tied into neat bundles and dozens of soft leather sacks and tightly woven baskets filled with the fine seeds from the coastal wheat and the early wild rice that Jason had found. Kris had been happy to help Jonne harvesting the sea life they'd originally been after, but Sami had been stubborn and hauled three loads home by himself. But he was the fastest of them and could make the trip home in just over a day, but he'd need to feed, and feed well, when this was all over. Kris had even gotten lucky and found a several small octopus that would make for a nice change. He'd seen one really huge one, but it had gotten away before he'd quite registered it was there. After he'd come up spluttering because of the ink cloud he'd taken to the face as the huge animal had fled. They'd even learned that the heavy salt brine would bring the fast moving razor clams up to the surface where they could be caught and had used that accidental discovery to harvest as many of the slender sweet clams as they could catch.

They even had carefully packed a jar full of brine and live de-spined sea urchins for Julian, but weren't sure if the brine would be enough to get the treat home safely. Jason had also gone hunting among the cacti above the cliffs to see if he couldn't find something for Theon's sunburn. He found a surprising number of very out of place but healthy Aloe plants and filled a couple of their few remaining empty pots with the thick gel and carefully dug up over a dozen of the smaller plants in the hopes of getting a few home healthy enough to plant.

They'd waited until Sami got back from load number three before they'd loaded up the small fleet of travois and filled the water jars for the trip across the sands and desert to get back home. Janne had used the time to teach Koira how to weave simple mats out of the salt grass and the broad leaves of the cattails. They could use them for shade, and maybe keep Theon's burns from getting worse.

Koira, Sami set to flying overhead to make sure the path was clear. Janne had to stay human for the trip back except for a few quick hunting flights. Heavily loaded horses tended to not want to cooperate when it was time to load up in the morning. And the sun was taking its toll on Theon and the rest of the vampire contingent even with broad hats woven of cattail leaves and every bit of skin covered. Even Sami looked a bit wilted under the unrelenting sun.

Julian was watching for them, so when they made it home they had cold beer and the horses had a good rub waiting for them. But his blue eyes went wide when he saw how heavily laden they were.

“Wow. Janne said you found a whale, but wow.”

His eyes lingered on the arch of bleaching rib bones holding rough woven mats over each of the wagons for shade.

They unloaded into rough piles. Oil jars in one, the rolled salted skins in another in a cool cavern. Edible seaweed went into another large pile on a hide on the floor and not all the sea grass made it out into another beside it. The baskets of smoked, salted and dried seafood had gotten rather carelessly piled in another cool cavern to be dealt with later. But the jar of sea urchins and brine was carefully checked and the contents found to be surprisingly sound given they’d taken almost nine days to get home, so it got hauled in for Julian to squeal over. The plants were carefully set in the cool space near the waterfall and water was dumped over their roots, Jonne would deal with them later.
Right now all the travelers really wanted was a cool bath and a long nap out of the hot sun.

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After a few days rest they all felt more up to dealing with their windfall and carefully moved the full oil jars to the very back of the ice cavern. They'd been careful enough in their initial packing and moving and unloading that they had only had one jar crack, but as the oil in it had solidified in the chill if the ice cavern there had been minimal leakage. That alone had been a testament to Jonne's skill as a potter to be able to manage that with what raw materials he'd had to hand.

Jason was already muttering about having to check the jars of lye solution he'd made that spring to see if they were still usable, though he seemed sure they were it was a question of how strong they'd gotten in the intervening months.

The rolled sections of hide they stacked against one wall, in a low spot well away from the straw covered ice blocks. Gradually they would get that hide preserved in a more permanent fashion, and several sections were slated to cut into sturdy cording. The other foodstuffs where shifted around, with the last of the sea grass being separated from the seaweeds with the edible seaweed and other dried, smoked and salted seafood’s getting more properly stored in the squat round pots Jonne had made earlier in the spring and sealed with wooden stoppers and either wax or some of the mostly clean tar they'd brought home rather than toss and labeled with charcoal marks.

Jonne transplanted their dozen aloe plants into the topmost of Jonne's planting beds and most looked to be doing well, Jason would be happy if just one or two survived to be used, more than that was windfall. They'd have to cover them in winter, but it was still worth the effort. Theon was just glad the jars of the gel had made it home, and that both his lovers were willing to help him coat the red spots on his back he just couldn't reach. That they used dosing his burns as a form of foreplay and the aloe gel as lube only provoked a few sighs and eye rolls from Jason.

Then Sami reluctantly headed north for another circuit of his territory.

Chriss, Theon and Risto also headed out for a late summer turn about their territories. Jason and Janne went on a quick jaunt south and carried a few jars of oil and rolls of finished whale skin leather with them to gift Birdie, Adam and Bailey. Birdie had still been making do with cut up sections of absolutely ancient tires for footwear or whatever he could trade for. Bailey and Adam tended to not worry about shoes, but they were far enough south that winters weren't horrible. Then again compared to what they'd been used to before the Fall the winters here weren't too bad either.

That left Julian, Kris and Jonne to watch over Koira.

And Jonne had to admit, Koira needed a bit of watching over.

If left to his own devices the youngster would find work to do, he'd already taken an offhand comment as gospel and pieced together a serviceable pair of boots for himself and begun going out and gathering summer ripening grains, legumes and vegetables. After he'd brought back a mix of early wheat and barley Julian and Kris had gone out with him for several days of gathering and come home with pack loads and baskets of grains, field peas and assorted root vegetables just in time to greet Jason and Janne as they came in with the smaller wagon piled high with coarse woven sacks filled with summer corn and travois loads of rice, sugar, salt, fabrics, fiber and yarns from trading further south. To Jonne's delight Jason had been able to track down a supplier of the bricks of real tea this time, and had acquired several of solid blocks of compressed leaves. Apparently the purple shell beads they'd picked up from some of Sami's northern tribes had also been a major hit with one of the salt traders. Lining the bottom of his wagon were thin rectangular blocks of the
best white salt. Jason had been careful to line the bottom of the wagon with a layer of canvas so all the salt that was ground to powder by the slight shifts of the load on the way home could be carefully poured and swept off the canvas into jars to be used.

They'd come with a lot of other small stuff, but nothing else quite as interesting as the grain. Jason had just sighed when he saw what Koira and Jonne had and taught Koira how to use the threshing machine they had hidden in an upper level cavern on their loads of early wheat and mixed spring grains. It wasn't often they brought home enough to bother with the machine, but with Koira being helpful and knowing where fields were made it worthwhile. The straw left from the threshing they'd use next winter to insulate harvested ice blocks, and the smaller chaff and bits would be compressed with a bit of wax or tar to make tinder blocks, so it wasn't like what he was hauling in would be wasted.

To Julian a load of field corn meant Jason was intending on running the still. Even better he had small sacks of seed for the sweeter eating corn and the tiny hard black kernel type that made popcorn for Jonne to plant next spring. With a little care they'd get all the seed they needed from future plantings. But they'd need to either shift the sacks of field corn into pots for storage or run the still or they'd have rats and mice trying to move in to take advantage of the windfall of grains. Julian didn't think Theon or Jonne would cope well with rats. Both had some nasty childhood memories of rats.

Unfortunately all the grains coming in meant that meant Jonne needed to make more of the larger sized jars as many of the last batch had been re-purposed for oil and couldn't be used for grain again without being run through a firing again to burn the residue away. Jonne had sighed and with help from Janne, Kris and Koira had made and fired two lots of the huge grain jars and a good number of the squatter general storage ones. And he'd tested a theory, re-firing the beach pots burned all the oil residue out so they could be re-used for general storage. It also re-melted the glassy coating from the beach sand and made it drip oddly up the jars as they'd all been planted upside down for the experimental second firing. He wasn't sure yet if he wanted to try glazing any of the beach pots, for now they'd work for dry storage just fine.

Jonne had to explain the concept of getting seed from your own plantings to Koira, even as he tried to keep the kid distracted and not making himself tired with needless busywork. It was useful and helpful busywork, but even Jonne was getting twitchy when he saw Koira go out with an empty pack and gathering sacks. Through he was getting a pretty good garden and pantry of the medicinal plants Jason liked having on hand for emergencies. Jason had taught Koira how to preserve some of his medicinal plants so he wouldn't come in with a lot of something that would have been useful, if it had been dried properly, but was now so much soggy mulch.

When Chriss came back Julian had to admit he was only having marginal success with distracting Koira. By the time Risto and Theon came back he was half tempted to send Janne off to get Sami back a little faster.

Jonne was also sorely tempted to go find that tribe of humans and scare the ever loving hell out of them for making Koira think he had to always be busy with some task or be punished. Rationally he knew it was likely that it had only been a few of the humans, and by now those guilty parties might well be dead, but the results of their actions were still driving him a bit crazy.

By the time Sami made it back, only a week late this time, Julian was pretty sure he'd have help scaring a tribe of humans half stupid if he even hinted he wanted it. Chriss and Kris had their heads together and Julian wasn't sure he wanted to know what those two were plotting, but he suspected a few new morality tales might be making their way out onto the world very soon. Probably tales that
featured a kind-hearted hunter and a changer child and highlighted the benefits of treating people with kindness and respect.

But then Sami was back and even as tired as he was he noticed right off that things weren't quite right.

That night after he'd loved Koira into a limp and contented mess and left him to sleep in the bed that had become theirs rather than just his, he'd quietly asked opinions.

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“I really think he's been hit or yelled at if he was idle for any length of time. Possibly worse.” Julian said softly so he wouldn't disturb the hunt members who were curled up asleep. He didn't whisper, that would wake most of them very quickly, but he did keep his voice down.

Sami grimaced as he listened. Julian's concerns echoed in his heart and with what he'd seen. Koira had needed new foot gear, he had a bad habit of wearing his completely to tatters, and when they'd made their trip back from the coast one reason Sami had had him airborne so much was he'd worn his single pair of shoes through before they'd even found the whale. When Jason had noticed and asked he'd shrugged it off, something that hadn't set well with the older changer. So he'd started watching and noticed that none of the kids' personal gear was in all that good of shape. It wasn't that he didn't take care of his things, he did as much as he knew how to. It was just what he had when they found him wasn't really new, the newest things he had were things they had given him and the pair of boots he'd made himself. It was like he didn't know how to say he needed things, and there were some glaring gaps in his knowledge of how to make things. For hunting and harvesting he knew his business, for mending and making, not so much. They were slowly filling in those gaps as they found them, but given Koira didn't know how to articulate what he did and didn't know, and none of them quite knew how to ask without making the kid feel stupid, they were doing things as they came up rather than any more structured teaching.

On the good side Koira didn't have the scars to make Sami think he'd been severely beaten. He got wary if there was any yelling, but Sami had only seen him actually go hide once and that had been pretty easy to settle out just by talking to him. So that made him think that any abuse was relatively recent and might have only been at a low level for a year or two, not long enough or bad enough for them to notice it when they stopped in for a round of Rites. That would make Kris feel a little better at least.

They never left abused kids where they were if they found them. It might take a month or more of careful planning, but abused kids would vanish from their home tribes and get relocated with people who would love and care for them properly. Half the time the child going 'missing' was used as proof that there were evil spirits out there, and then used by frustrated parents to get misbehaving little ones to settle down a little.

He'd have to have a talk with the kid about his gear. Not that the pair of boots he made wasn't workable, they were very well done for a first attempt, just that he shouldn't have felt that he had to make the attempt alone. He had people around him now. People like him, who would care for him and help him if he needed it.

Just getting him to admit that, to get him to ask for help would be hard. Sami had a bad feeling about that, and what it had taken to get the kid to the point where he was so stubbornly self-reliant.

It reminded him of some idiot Finn's he'd known way back when. Joonas in particular.

But that wasn't helping with his little bird.
After a bit of discussion Sami decided to take Koira with him for a short hop to his northwesternmost group, in what had been Brittany once upon a time. He normally hit them very late and was almost never gone for more than ten or twelve days. It would be perfect.

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“I can go with you?”

Sami barely managed to keep his wince inside. Koira sounded so surprised, like he'd never been told he could do things well. And he knew damn well Theon and Jason were both being supportive of Koira's efforts to be useful to the team. Theon vocally and rather loudly and Jason less so, so he knew Koira's efforts weren't going unnoticed. Jonne was thrilled to have help setting up his latest irrigation experiment and having help to haul water up to the terraces.

With help Jonne had set up another series of stepped basins and hand cranked winches with buckets on the ends of the ropes. Anyone could fill the bucket and crank the hand crank to lift the bucket, and then empty the bucket in a basin higher up the cliff walls. Jason had rigged the winch so that if you lost your grip on the handle it would catch and not unwind sending a full bucket of water crashing down on the head of the person filling the bucket down below. You had to disengage it to reel the empty bucket back down, but that was minor. With two or three people working together, one on each level, filling the uppermost basin was the work of a morning, and that filled basin would provide enough water for two or three days of watering at least. That beat the all-day haul that it had been to water the top terrace once hands down. Jason had found a concrete mix he liked to make the basins with while playing with their interior cistern, so they were of a respectable size and made watering Jonne's gardens much easier. They'd had to set ramps in the pools though, to keep some of the stupid birds in the area from jumping in to bathe and drowning when they couldn't get back out. Jason was debating building a larger, deeper pool on a terrace on the other side of the valley from the main gardens and filling it with edible water lilies so they could net them off and actually get some of the tasty seeds before the birds did.

Even better according to Jonne, Koira had found an old bed of tiny but incredibly sweet beets, possibly the holdover from a very old field of sugar beets. Even small they would serve as seed starters for a field closer to home. Jonne had a test field already set up to see if his idea would work. If it did they'd have to build another stone mortar to crush the beets for juice, but that was for later if the field idea worked.

“Yes, you can come with me. Just be careful of changing.”

Sami had to hide a small smile as Koira began sorting what he needed to take from his still pitifully small collection of belongings. He'd already noticed that a change of clothing had crept into the pile; Theon had reinforced Sami's own comments on the subject by rummaging out some things he'd been gifted with by his tribes but that didn't fit well simply by being too small. Some of it was too big for Koira's slender frame, but some of it fit fairly well. So they'd all gone rummaging the storage caverns for things they'd been gifted or pulled out of an offering pit to see if it could be made to fit their smallest hunt brother. They hadn't really made a concerted effort to sift through all the bits they had stored away, but come winter they probably would. The casual search had shown them that they had a lot of random things stashed away in some of the storage caverns. It would be good to sort through and get some of the excess dreck out of the way. Some would only be fit to dress a crow scare in as mice had spoiled some things, but some was bound to still be useful.

Sami also noted that the bow and arrows Jason had been teaching Koira how to use made it into the pile, as did the short hunting knife Julian had given him. Otherwise he kept to bare minimums, only putting a wooden comb and leather ties for his hair into the pile after he'd seen Sami making a
point of packing his own. He didn't understand the cup with its sliver of soap and soft boar bristle brush or the folded straight razor, soft leather hone and polished bit of steel that served as a mirror, but for whatever reason he didn't grow facial hair of any sort. Sami had noted that Koira had almost no body hair other than a bit under his arms, at his groin and what grew on his head. Not that Sami minded that in the slightest, it just sometimes made for interesting mornings when he needed to shave and had a curious Koira perched nearby watching.

There were days when it really made him feel like a pervert of the worst sort. Mostly he was able to console himself with the fact that Koira was adult, regardless of how young he looked, he was adult.

Some quirk of his change meant that Chriss also couldn't grow facial hair anymore, and Jason ribbed him about it on a regular basis. Usually he'd stop about the time he needed help neatening his goatee but once this spring he'd kept it up and in retaliation Chriss had shaved Jason completely clean, and then gone on to shave him completely bald. His wolf shape had looked a bit odd until it grew back and Chriss had walked funny for almost a week when Jason was through with his own, more pleasant, retaliation.

Sami had stopped wondering at the quirk that left Kris permanently with badger hair and Jonne pale blond when he'd been darkening toward brown before. That same bit of oddness left Janne with dark auburn hair and Risto and Julian with black when they'd all naturally had varying shades of brown hair before. In fact Risto and Julian's hair was so black it showed blue highlights in the sun, something that girls seemed to find enthralling.

The fact that it had set his own hair color at a warm honey blond wasn't relevant, he tucked the fine strands under a headscarf like he always had and tended to ignore it other than keeping it clean and neat and the occasional trim from Chriss.

Koira had been puzzled when he'd seen Jonne and Kris doing their regular little ritual of shaving every scrap of body hair off of each other, and turned a charming pink when the pair had gone from shaving to rinsing and then to foreplay and fucking in one of the smaller bathing pools they'd diverted off the river down at the bottom of the horses valley. Sami had thought it was cute, and pulled Koira off to one side to teach him the pleasures of bathing with a lover.

For this trip Sami had decided against the smaller wagon, and gone with three horses and travois as they were more mobile and a little bit faster. And three horses with travois and packs could haul a bit more than two and the smaller cart, so it was a good trade. He'd made sure to pack more than his usual single sleeping fur with its almost waterproof felted backing and the lighter tent because he didn't want to risk looking to odd with two of them traveling. Alone things were different and he normally would brace the travois poles together and spread a leather or canvas tarp over them if the weather looked chancy. If it was clear he'd sleep under the stars.

With Koira coming along he made sure they had the tent, but if it stayed clear they'd likely still sleep under the stars. Sami was rather looking forward to snuggling his bashful little lover out in the open. For one thing he hadn't been able to get Koira to get brave enough in company to try letting Sami rim him, and as responsive as he was to other stimulation Sami was sure Koira would go crazy under him if he could just get him to relax and forget about potential watchers.

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Four days of predawn to sunset traveling and they were at the ridge above the tribes’ territory. Sami looked down shielding his eyes from the weak afternoon sun and saw a number of moving shapes down in the wheat fields. He nodded to himself. The harvest looked like it was well underway.
Sami squinted and looked further out, past the clusters of small neat houses. The boats were mostly in, but a few of the smaller ones were out, probably fishing for a bit of extra for a feast to celebrate. The harvest was looking very good this year. That boded pretty well for this trip. But Sami had noticed in the past that this group had very few turn up with the genes for the zombie change. The few he suspected of being potential changers tended to have 'fishing accidents' before he could confirm anything. But that left him wondering if there were aquatic changers, there were stories of helpful orca driving fish into men's nets around here. And he'd gone out once and actually seen one of the helpful orca, and that particular whale had been a distinct shade of dark red rather than the normal black.

He looked down at Koira and had to smile at how puzzled Koira looked.

“They grow things like Jonne does?”

“They fish and farm. And they do very well between the two.” Sami pointed to a spot on the far side of the fields surrounded by a berm of discarded oyster and clam shells. “The refuse from fishing they compost to use in their fields and gardens, it helps keep the fields fertile.”

Koiranodded, having gotten the explanation from Jonne about why they dumped the used dried horse dung from their night soil pots and baskets in one spot and mixed in the refuse from their meals and projects and random bits of grass and leaves and let it rot down to a dark rich dirt mix. He’d seen for himself the planting beds that were fertilized with that mix did better than the newer unfertilized beds did. This was just a bigger version of that as far as he could see.

Sami smiled again when he heard the call go up from below that told him someone had seen them, and he lifted an arm and waved down at the people in his usual manner. Koira shifted a little closer as several small figures began to run toward them.

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Amie smiled a little as she made the rounds refilling tankards and mugs with the light ale Juli had made just for today. The Old Soul smiled and nodded his thanks as she refilled his mug but the boy beside him ducked his head shyly.

Like her mother, Amie knew this Old Soul's name, but she would never call Sami by it in public. It lessened the impact of what he did. This fall they'd had six young people in line for Rites, but only one of them was a girl. To Otti's relief all six had been passed on and were now sitting with the rest of the adults celebrating and getting used to having their adult names.

What Amie wondered at was why this year Sami had brought someone with him who wasn't an Old Soul or a very small child. The boy's green eyes were old for his young and pretty face, but they didn't have the weight of ages behind them like Sami's blue ones. Once before in her memory he'd come with another Old Soul, but that year they'd had a lot of youngsters making the turn to adulthood. Twenty was rather more than one man, no matter how far seeing and wise he was, to handle alone. According to her mother sometimes he came with another Old Soul, even two, but always when there was a clear reason. She'd never gotten the name of that feisty blond man, just been quietly amused at how his hyper behavior had gotten Otti to comment in wry exasperation that he was like a spring rabbit high on clover. Several times he'd brought very small children with him to leave in their care. Otti himself had been one of Sami's gift children many years ago. But it was always another Old Soul, or a child, this boy was something new.

She went back to the brew pot and ladled out another pitcher of ale as she pondered why the shy little blond who was Sami's companion this trip made her instincts sit up and take notice.
Her next pass around the hall she watched him a bit more closely. The boy had a hint of wilderness to him, it was how he watched everyone with such wide, wary eyes and how he shifted a little behind Sami if he was approached, it made her think of a wild creature. She stopped for a moment and thought of her Ty. Ty who had gone to sea one last time before his Rites and never come home. He'd been swept over the side in a squall and never been found. Even now the ship-men spoke of a strange red whale that drove fish into their nets and seals onto shore for the hunters. Amie had a strong suspicion that red whale was her lost son, changed by some spirit into the shape of one of the black and white seal hunters that congregated along the coastline this time of year.

She had no proof the whale was her son, she just felt it in her bones when he’d been born that she’d never see him walk out of the spirit lodge a man.

Now this boy gave her that same feeling of wildness contained in human form.

Had Sami found a spirit that could shift between the seeming of a man and some other creature? She wondered as she watched how shyly the boy reacted to the villages young women flirting. She also wondered at why the spirit child would follow Sami into places where his own folk never went. Spirit people and humans rarely interacted, and mostly the humans came out the worse for it when they did, so people tended to be wary.

This boy though looked faintly hurt and lost when they flirted with Sami and confused when they flirted with him. Amie nodded to herself. Spirit changer or not the boy was clearly like Ekka and Atam, both lovers of men. Both had been dutiful and gotten women pregnant but neither had put forth a bride price for a wife of their own. They’d built a small house and seemed content to hunt and fish and work their small plot of land together. Amie remembered another lover of men, but Tommi hadn’t been able to function with a woman. He’d stayed with her in her house for several years before he just wandered off alone and vanished one winter.

She hoped his spirit was happy, wherever it was.

Amie watched as the younger folks began to get sleepy from all the stress of their rites, from full bellies from all the feasting and drinking and smiled when she watched Sami’s companion curl up by his feet and rest his head on his knee. It warmed her old heart even more to see Sami's hand reach down to stroke the boy's fine pale hair. She also had to wonder at why so shy a boy had so many fine ornaments of gold, feathers and stone woven into a few thin braids in his hair. The quality of the work hinted that someone valued this child-man very highly to have traveled or traded for such beautifully made bird shapes. She hid a smile when she heard some of the younger women whisper to each other about how cute the boy was and how sweet it was that the Old Soul was being so caring.

Then again almost all of the women here had personal experience from their womanhood Rite to remind them of how gentle and considerate the big man was. Amie had her own fond memories of her Rites. She’d been half terrified at first, the big man made all the men of her village uncomfortable and not just because he was taller than even the tallest man. His eyes saw right through you and he was direct enough that it was all but impossible to lie to him. But then he’d smiled at her, and that smile had lit his eyes even before his lips had curled up at the corners.

Of course at the time she'd been threatening him with half of a smoked salmon, the very memory of which was absurd now.

He’d talked to her, after he’d stopped giggling like a boy, and once he’d calmed her fears he’d shown her they ways of man and woman. Only after he’d left did she learn he’d been as gentle with her friends and shown Ekka’s older brother Aipo how men loved together.
Watching him over the years she was convinced her Mother was right, Sami might be an Old Soul, but at heart he was a gentle and kind man. Perhaps that was what kept this Spirit child nearby.

That impression was reinforced when he rose and gathered the boy up in his arms and with a few words to Otti carried the half asleep boy of to the lodge they were guesting in. It was tradition to make an empty lodge ready for him to stay in, and if there wasn't one empty he would stay one night at each of the lodges in turn. He always remembered who he had stayed with before somehow and his never staying with just the headman spread out the prestige of having him sleep in your house for a night. It also spread out the burden of hosting, and thus feeding, another mouth, which was a good practical reason. Amie didn't remember when he'd started doing that; her Mother said he'd always done so. It was just the way things were done.

This visit though, there was a lodge empty, and that had some of the young women disappointed. Amie had to stop her snort of amusement, sharing a bed with the Old Soul might get them points in the young women's games, but no Old Soul had ever left a child in a woman's belly. The Spirit child was more likely to leave a girl pregnant, and he didn't seem at all inclined to try.

Tolli had built a new and bigger house when Eva had delivered twins early this spring, so his old house would stand empty until a new couple decided to wed and would need it. Assuming of course that Davii didn't just build a house of his own for Elsa. The winds knew the boy had been hauling cedar timbers all summer and had been the last three summers running. He'd cut and seasoned enough support timbers for two good houses, and Amie had to wonder if Davii didn't have some other plan in his head for impressing Elsa's father and brothers. Her mother and sisters had already been impressed with the lengths he'd gone to last summer to bring her back pretty ornaments and a comb for her hair.

Amie shook her head and went back to pouring.

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Sami sighed and nudged the heavy wooden door closed behind him. There had been only a minor dispute over damaged fishing nets for him to settle before he'd gotten to dealing with Rites. Only six youngsters had been at that turning point, and only one of those was a girl. The boys had been easy, do a quick talk over what was and wasn't okay when approaching a woman or girl, that was mostly for forms sake. Up here the tribes did a very good job of covering the basics of hygiene and appropriate sexual advances. Then all he had to do was lock them up in a sweat lodge, put a bit of Kesh into the fire heating the stones for sauna and drop a little dream cactus into the water they were all drinking. That got everyone nice and stoned so he could bite each young man in turn and be absolutely sure they didn't have the gene that would make them change into a zombie. None of them did this time around, he got a decent feeding and all five men had one hell of an orgasm to add to their hallucinations and it was an all-around wild experience for all of them. When dawn rolled around he'd herded the hung-over and dazed young men out for a quick dip in the icy cold surf then back into the central lodge to name them. He'd talked with the nervous parents before they piled into the lodge and had found suitable family names that wouldn't cause too much confusion. Lauri, Timo, Artus, Pieter and Jon.

Then he'd dealt with a jittery Koira who wasn't sure of what his place in this whole mess was. The men thought he was a foundling and younger than he was by several years, but they hadn't disputed his 'right' to guard the main door of the lodge. Sami had pulled Otti aside and had a quick word afterwards; Otti had been surprised at Koira's age given his small size and fragile appearance. But then he'd let the boy help out with the harvesting, haying and a round of net hauling and been startled at how strong that small body was.
Sami had had to stomp hard on his jealousy when he saw how the girls and young women looked at Koira when he was hauling nets shirtless. The view was a nice one, with sleek and smooth muscle moving easily under soft tanned skin, but the whispers made it hard for him to keep down the urge to scoop Koira up and demonstrate rather publicly who he belonged to.

And if sex just in from of the rest of the Hunt made Koira blush when he realized they were watching, sex in front of strangers would be mortifying.

If there was a next time Sami would have to make sure Koira was inside the lodge with him. If nothing else it would keep him from getting hit on by the girls and young women and piquing their curiosity by being so bashful. He'd already heard a few of the young women whispering among themselves about how pretty Koira was and the fine clothing and ornaments he wore. That told him that Theon had been a sneaky bastard and had snuck a couple nicer changes of clothing in with Koira's other gear. Sami smiled to himself; he'd already done a bit of trading for a few carved pieces of amber in the shape of birds. And he'd seen Davii's eyes go round when he recognized one of the thumbnail sized beads when he saw it again woven into one of Koira's small braids.

But other than that initial wide eyed stare the young man had kept his mouth shut, the good steel knife he'd gotten in trade for that handful of shell, stone and amber birds had already gotten the attention of the father of the girl he wanted to marry. He needed to have the old man's favor to get his lady love into a house of their own.

Sami hadn't been sure if he was looking forward to doing a single round of Women's Rites, but there had only been one girl of the right age so he'd had to. Just to complicate things the girl was the oldest of Amie's great-granddaughters. He was doomed to always have to deal with at least three generations of women from that bloodline, and probably be menaced, thumped or clubbed by every last one on the night of her Rites.

He'd been amused to find that this girl was just like Amie, but she'd found something better than a bit of smoked fish to threaten him with. Not that a bit of kindling was really going to do him much damage, not when he was quick enough to duck the initial blow. The girl had been indignant that his first reaction to her swatting at him with that bit of wood was to sit down and laugh until he cried. Once he'd explained she'd relaxed enough to giggle. But he was going to make sure that if any more girls of Amie's bloodline were set to become women that he brought Theon along.

If nothing else telling the tale of Theon being chased out of a ceremonial lodge by an indignant girl swinging half a fish would make the rest of his Hunt die laughing. And it would save him from more bruises.

Now though, now he had four walls, a bed and a cuddly, sleepy Koira. He had a few plans to remind Koira that no matter how pretty the girls were, they weren't who he came home to.

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Sulee peeked out from under the drape laid over the storage chests she was hidden between. Toma had chickened out of her own dare and now she was watching the Old Soul by herself.

She hunkered down into a smaller ball and watched as the big blond gently laid his smaller companion down in the bed and stripped down to bare skin. Her breath caught a little, she wasn't quite of an age for womanhood but the sight off all that sleek bare skin did something strange to her insides. She could see the faint lines on his skin from him wearing nothing but a very small breech clout all summer. Only a very small portion of skin was still pale. She'd expected him to simply lie down by his small friend and sleep, but instead he gently roused the littler man and helped him strip down to bare skin as well.
Sulee felt her eyes go round when she saw the Old Soul lean down and kiss the smaller man; she thought Elder Otti had said his name was Koira. The little moan from him made her insides shiver and she had to stuff her fist in her mouth to keep from making any sound as she watched both men's male parts rise and stiffen.

She sat there and watched as they touched each other like her papa touched mama when they were trying to make another baby. Sulee didn't understand what the little pot was for, but whatever was in it made Koira moan when the Old Soul pushed his fingers up inside him. She was breathless watching as the Old Soul lay down on his back and encouraged Koira to straddle his hips and slide down his man parts and rock on them. She hadn't known a man could fit up inside another man that way. All she could do was watch as Koira whimpered and squirmed until his own man parts squirted white stuff all over the Old Soul's belly.

Then she expected they'd do like her older brother did after he made his man parts squirt white, that they would sleep. But the Old Soul rolled them over gently and started thrusting slowly. Koira clung to his shoulders, tried to wrap his legs around the Old Souls hips and made little whimpering noises, but not like he was in pain, more like mama did under papa. His cries got louder until the Old Soul sealed their mouths together.

When they shuddered a second time Sulee thought they were done, but the Old Soul just settled Koira in and got up to moisten a cloth in the wash basin and clean them both up. Then he gently tucked Koira under the eiderdown and blankets and turned to walk on light feet over to her hiding spot.

She wanted to die when he flipped the drape back and exposed her. But all he did was offer his hand.

Shaking Sulee took it and let the big man pull her to her feet. His voice was mild.

“Get a nice eyeful?”

Sulee was sure her face was glowing in the dimness of the firelight; it certainly felt like it was on fire.

There was a soft sigh and she couldn't bring herself to look up at him. But she also didn't dare keep her eyes down because there were his man parts, soft and just dangling there begging her eyes to stare at them. So she kept fidgeting and looking at everything but those soft parts.

“Let me guess, a dare?”

Sulee nodded.

The wry chuckle just confused her, but the Old Soul just led her to the door.

“Shoo little one, you'll get to learn those things from me firsthand in spring or summer next year.”

Sulee took that as her chance and darted out the door as the Old Soul opened it.

There was a soft sigh and the sound of a closing door behind her.

And there was no way she was ever telling Toma what she'd seen. But it did give her a little thrill to know something none of the other girls did, that the Old Soul had someone like her papa did in her mama.

~0~
Sami shook his head and went back to the bed to curl up around his sleeping lover. Koira would be mortified to learn they'd had a young girl watch him ride Sami for the first time.

He smiled and stroked a bit of fair hair away from Koira's face.

They had a bed; he'd have to see about waking Koira up with pleasure.

He still wanted to show him the joys of rimming.

~0~

Theon squinted up into the sun and grumbled to himself.

The fucking bastard was late again.

If Sami kept this up they'd have to see about shifting him to one of the more southerly territories where Janne could keep track of him better. This was getting ten steps beyond silly.

“Still no sign of them?”

Theon yelped and jumped, then turned and pouted up into Risto's grinning face.

“Gotcha.”

“I was lost in thought,” Theon defended, but knew it hadn't worked when Risto chuckled at him and teased him about needing a guide rope to get back. But then he changed the subject, back to what Theon had been pondering.

“Has Janne come back in yet?”

Theon's shoulders drooped; Janne had been going out on flights to see if he could spot their wayward Hunt leader.

“Not yet, he was going further west and less north today.” Theon had picked his thinking spot because it directly overlooked one of the main paths in and gave him a good view of the plains around their home. Not that he'd seen much, just Jason going out for a quick run and the usual assortment of scavenger birds riding the thermals.

“They'll turn up. You know Sami; he doesn't trust us to take care of ourselves if he isn't around to fuss.”

Theon smiled wryly.

“Maybe he doesn't trust you. You were the one who set the kitchen on fire.”

“That was one time.” Risto protested.

“At each apartment,” Theon shot back. “Who almost fell into the fire our first night here? More importantly who about fell down the chimney putting the rain guard up? Who learned the hard way how deep the water was under the waterfall by going in headfirst?”

Risto growled and playfully pounced. Theon laughed and darted off down the walkway to their little private trysting spot. More than likely Julian was already there, it was Risto's turn to be tied up and made to beg.

~0~
Sami sighed and squinted into the wind. They'd taken a slightly different route back when they had found the normal way up to the plains north of the caverns was blocked by a landslide. Yes, he could have cleared it, but that would take a lot longer and the guys were likely already fretting. Going this way would add four or five days to the trip, clearing the path up would take at least a week, and two or even three was more likely. Later in the winter they could come as a group and clear the path again if one of the local tribes hadn't found it and dealt with it, right now he just wanted to get home.

For one thing he'd come away from this last visit with a nice surprise, a small lot of seal skins and a few fur seal pelts. He'd also come away with a fist sized piece of amber the same eerie deep green as Koira's eyes. Sami wanted to see if Jonne was willing to try carving it. He'd already made a fair bit of headway in replacing their battered wooden chessmen with ones carved from whalebone, and Jason had already replaced the rough drawn board with one made from carefully cut tiles of the whalebone some left white and the rest carefully tinted dark by being soaked in a solution of oak galls then fitted tightly together in a wooden frame.

Koira dropped back to the ground with a lean rabbit in his talons and shifted back to man shape to walk up and offer it. He still hadn't gotten the little flip that Janne did in shifting from bird to man down yet.

“Not good hunting?”

The younger man shook his head.

“T've only seen a few rabbits, and this was the only one I caught. I miss those fat marmot things.”

Sami smiled, he missed the fat things too, and not just because they were tasty to eat. The things were amusing to watch as they went about their business. They had several pelts rubbed in salt and stacked flesh to flesh and fur to fur to keep them until they could do a better job of tanning them. They made a good furry lining for all sorts of small articles, and they would all need good mittens and boot liners for the winter soon. There had been frost on the ground every morning of their trip back. Jason could knit warm gloves, but in the worst of the cold they wouldn't be enough, that and furry liners were faster to make than Jason's knitted ones.

“We'll make the turn toward home tomorrow, as long as the winds are blowing in our faces we're okay.”

Koira cocked his head in curiosity; he didn't have decades of experience with the local weather patterns to guide him. They were far enough from the range he'd grown up in for him to be very ignorant of some of the warning signs locals paid close attention to.

“What happens if it turns?”

“We find one of the outlying cashes and hunker down. If the winds turn, that means snow.”

Koira blanched and nodded. But he knew well enough what could happen to a small hunting party trapped away from the tribe in a snowstorm. Some terrible campfire tales told of small groups isolated by weather dealing with one of their number changing and the group having to deal with changer or zombie on top of their other troubles. It wasn't uncommon for a group caught out in bad weather to be found as weathered remains the next spring or summer, and there to be no-one left alive to tell what had happened. Sami smiled a little when he distracted himself by starting to gut and skin their rabbit.

“I'm surprised we haven't had Janne pounce us. This is in his flight range.”
Koira didn't look up from where he was working at making his small catch spit ready; he'd already peeled the unlucky bunny right out of its furry hide.

“It's west of your usual route, you said, so maybe he hasn't realized we had to change paths in?” Proof that Koira had been paying careful attention to how far Janne could fly on a regular sweep, and was learning their normal travel paths in and out of Satama. That was a good thing, something that could be useful if they had an emergency with one of their tribes. Having another person who knew the fastest routes was always a good thing.

“Probably.” Sami agreed as he squinted up at the sky once more then settled down to tend their tiny excuse for a cooking fire. The last thing they needed was for it to escape and turn into a grass-fire.

~0~

“Still nothing?”

Janne shook his head as he accepted the steaming bowl of hot tea from Jonne. Jason spoke up from where he was curled under a warm fur and Chriss's sheltering arms.

“I ran the route and found a rock slide on the main path down. They weren't under it though. So Sami must have seen it was blocked and gone the more seaward route.” The grimace on Jason's face was speaking, he'd probably done a frantic scramble over fallen rock to make sure there wasn't anyone under the rubble.

Janne swallowed his mouthful of tea and wrapped both hands more carefully around the thick ceramic to warm his cold fingers.

“I was going to fly that route next; the one due west was a wash today.”

Jonne shared a look with Kris. Then Julian piped up.

“At least the wind is still out of the east. We don't have to worry about snow yet.”

“Yeah, small favors.” Janne sighed as he sipped the sweet dark liquid.

~0~

Once they made the long climb up to the plains Koira's hunting got better. There were fat prairie voles growing in their thick winter coats that were more focused on getting food and bedding stored in their burrows than on potential predators. Most of the ones Koira brought back to Sami to gut and skin fell in the category of too stupid to live, and Sami didn't feel any remorse over thinning the populations of this past spring's birthing of voles. For one thing, right now the things had nice thick coats of soft fur, perfect for mittens and boot liners. And Koira had found and raided a few burrows for ground nuts and other edibles to add to their meals.

Sami jumped when he heard a raptor scream right overhead.

That wasn't Koira in either his falcon or eagle shapes, he looked up in time to see a huge red tailed hawk plummet for the ground. Half a breath later and he was flat on his back with an angry Janne sitting on his chest. Bad enough he'd gotten the wind knocked out of him, but now he had Janne's solid weight right on top of his diaphragm.

“Do you have any idea how worried we've all been about you?”
Sami didn't get the chance to catch his breath or even to open his mouth to try and defend himself before Janne was scolding him again.

“Theon went white when he heard Jason say he'd made the run out and found the path down under a rock fall. And Jonne was looking like he might cry until Jason said you weren't under it.”

“Janne.”

Janne rolled right over him.

“I've been flying my feathers off looking for you. Jason and Jules have run their paws raw searching and Jonne is fretting himself sick.”

“Janne.”

Janne glared down at him.

“What have you got to say for yourself?”

“If you let me get a word in. I'm sorry. We were early heading out from Dinan; I thought we were still doing reasonably on time even with the change in plans. It takes a day or two to backtrack seaward.”

Janne huffed and glared some more, so Sami continued.

“I didn't want to send Koira ahead, it would take two or three days for him to get home in this headwind and tire him out. He doesn't know all the way points like we do, I didn't think he could fly straight in like you do, your flight range is still further than his is.”

Janne sighed, but his grimace told Sami his points had been heard even if Janne didn't agree with them completely.

“And you didn't want to sleep alone.”

Sami smiled.

“That too. Janne, he's not as old as we are. If I can avoid it I don't want to stress him. We don't have the meds we did when you and Jason and Jules got stress sick.”

Janne winced. In their first year after the Fall, six years after the bombs fell a lot of changers had gotten sick from the stress of having to change all the time to hunt and survive. Sami, Theon and Risto had been carefully stockpiling medical supplies; hell, all of them had been stockpiling drugs and things. And they'd needed them, needed every bit of the antibiotics to get their two changers through repeated rounds of stress induced infection. Jason still wore a scar on his left leg from an abscess they'd been terrified would never drain and close up properly.

Several changers they knew of hadn't been so lucky. It wasn't anyone they'd known well, but it had still been sobering to find the emaciated remains of someone you'd known and know there wasn't anything you could have done to help them. They'd fled the city shortly after getting their changers back on their feet, mostly because the civil patrol was starting to get nasty with their 'random' spot checks, raids and door to door searches and they wanted to get out while all of them could get out and live through it.

He'd been a bit luckier, but he'd been with three vampires. Their smaller group had been able to hide a bit better from the civil patrols, but had still been big enough that if one of them was ill or
had a bad day scavenging the others could mostly make up for it.

“Okay, I think he's stronger than that, but I see your point.”

They both looked up at the familiar eagle cry as Koira dove for the ground his talons full of vole.

A breath later and Koira was flinging himself at Janne for a joyful hug.

Janne just gave Sami a speaking look and hugged the smaller changer back.

Sami sighed. At least they had enough fresh meat from all of today's hunting to feed three.

~0~

Janne waited until the winds died down, like they always did at dusk, before he headed back toward Satama. He shifted into his larger owl shape and carefully took a small bundle of tightly rolled marmot and vole skins in his talons and with a great heave of a boost from Sami, was airborne. He circled once and headed almost due east toward home.

He didn't like this bigger eagle owl shape; it was too bulky for his comfort. But it could do things that his hawk shape had trouble with and fly higher in the slowly darkening sky, over some of the winds and that made up for the increased energy he had to put into getting into the air and that was with having Sami heft him up as hard as he could. And it let him see better in the twilight and thickening dark than his hawk shape did. At this time of day his hawk wanted to be safely roosted somewhere and settling down to sleep.

Janne's sharp owl eyes saw the signal fire on North Peak long before he was close enough for Jason or Julian to pick his dark bulk out against the stars. But having that spot of warmth to home in on made him feel better as he flapped harder for home.

Kris and Chriss were minding the sheltered fire when he finally circled in to land. Mere moments after he landed and changed Jonne and Jason were at his side, one with a warmed fur and the other a bowl of hot broth. The first Jason wrapped securely around him, the second Jonne carefully fed him sips of until he was warm enough to hold the bowl himself.

Theon waited impatiently in front of him until he was done draining the bowl.

“You found them.” It wasn't a question, Theon had the bundle of raw furs in his hands, but Janne nodded anyway.

“They made the seaward turn because of that landslide, and are about two days out if the weather holds.”

Risto chewed his lip.

“That direction there aren't any real caves until they get really close... just the caches in those rock piles. How loaded were they?”

Janne thought back to what he'd seen from the air and again on the ground as he shivered while warming back up. He let Jason take the broth bowl from his hands and replace it with a bowl of mixed herbal tea heavily laden with mare's milk and sugar. The rich sweet mix would help warm him up from the inside.

“Middling heavy, they had all three horses loaded pretty solidly. And it looked like Sami had Koira doing a bit of hunting. He had the mobile drying rack up on Tampere's harness.”
Theon looked down at where his hands were buried in soft marmot fur, and then looked up again with a wry smile.

“Marmot and voles?”

Janne smiled back.

“Yeah. Marmot and voles. At least that means we can make new mitten and boot liners _before we need them this year._”

Jason shared a look with Chriss, then asked the question Risto had clearly been considering.

“You think they’re loaded enough that if we ran out and took a pack load each it would let them speed up and get them home quicker?”

Janne thought hard about that and about what the winds had hinted at.

“It might be worth it. Koira seemed happy to see me at any rate.”

That provoked a round of chuckles.

“To much undiluted Sami time?” Theon grinned and stood to cautiously fish a bit of charcoal out of the fire. “So, from here and the coast,” He quickly sketched the northern coastline, the ridge up to the plains, the rivers a few major landmarks and a small circle that was North Peak with little star shapes for entrances into their caverns. He'd worked the area before, so his scale was fairly good. “So, where are they roughly?”

Janne took the bit of charcoal and marked a spot, just to the south of where one of the rivers forked a good day and a bit away at the vampires’ best general traveling speed with animals. Not their best going someplace in an emergency speed, that would be significantly faster, the fastest of them could cover that distance in two or three hours, but they couldn't really carry more than a very light pack at that pace. But if it was just them and empty packs, and no horses they could go fairly quickly, and be in the area in four or six hours if they wanted to.

“About there when I started flying in.”

Jason squinted east, at where the sky was gradually lightening.

“Not long until dawn, if I know Sami they'll be moving soon.”

Chriss nodded and offered Jason his hand. Risto moved to stand with them.

“So four of us?”

“Julian will be ticked you've left him behind again.” Janne warned.

Theon snorted rudely.

“All the changers need to stay put. You guys did your share of running just finding the idiot.”

Janne grimaced, but he noticed that Jason wasn't arguing.

“And five, I'll go out to, I've been here a bit much.”

Chriss smiled wryly at Jonne.
“The beach run wasn't enough?”

“That was last summer. This is now.” Jonne answered with a shurg.

Theon sighed and shared a look speaking look with Jonne, but shrugged and nodded when the shorter blond pouted and lifted his chin, but didn't back down.

“Okay then, Me, Risto, Chriss, you and Kristian.”

Jonne smiled and bounced in place for a moment before he headed for the path down.

“I'll go grab our backpacks.”

~0~

Sami sighed when he saw the group trotting out to meet them. He should have known when Janne had flattened him to the ground that the rest of the guys would be worried. That didn't make it any easier to hide his wince from Koira when he saw the frames that told him Risto, Theon and Chriss at least had brought their heavy hauling packs. Sami couldn't stop the groan that escaped when he saw Jonne and Kris also had their heavier packs ready to fill.

“Sami?”

Koira was looking at him like he was confused as to why seeing half their Hunt brothers was a thing to groan over.

“Nothing, Janne just snitched on us.”

Koira blinked and mouthed the word 'snitched' in confusion.

“Told on us.”

The confusion cleared, even if he clearly didn't quite understand why being told on was a bad thing.

“Oh.”

Sami waved and let the horses stop as the vampire section of the Hunt slowed to a walk for the last few dozen meters between them.

“Are we going to have to devise a portable sundial or something for you?” Theon's tone was joking but the look on his face wasn't. “You're making being late an art form.”

“Ah, no. And this time it was a rock slide, not my fault.”

Jonne let out a rude noise, and then pointedly reminded Sami.

“Last time it was a zombie rampaging and dealing with getting survivors settled.”

“And before that it was weather and getting snowed in for a week.” Risto chimed in after Jonne was done. Theon was just opening his mouth when Sami held up his hands in surrender.

“Alright, alright, I've been late a lot lately. Rub it in.”

“We plan to,” was Chriss's droll remark. “Now hand over some of the loots. We want to see if we can't get you home by noon tomorrow. Janne wasn't liking what the winds were doing.”
Sami grimaced and with a small shrug for a very confused Koira started shifting things from the horses loads into the large packs that each of the guys laid out. As usual he started with the things that weren't edible. If they got caught somehow in a storm they might need every last bit of food, even if they were only a few hundred meters from safety. Sometimes it paid to be paranoid.

Jonne saw the amber and let out a low whistle of appreciation.

“That's a nice piece.”

Sami smiled.

“I got a bit of walrus ivory too, and some seal skins.”

Theon perked up at that.

“For waterproof boots again? That'll be nice. Holy Christ, Sami, how many marmots did you nail?” He was busily retying a bundle of dried raw skins so he could tie it to his filled pack.

“A few? Koira was hitting them from above, a lot of this spring and summers youngsters didn't run quick enough to get out of the way. Some of them were so freaked out by him they didn't pay attention to me so I got a few with the sling.”

Theon gave Sami a look.

“A few. Sami you still are the grand master of understatement.”

Chriss gave Theon a gentle nudge.

“Look at it this way; that means we don't have to wear wet liners if we are close to home. There will be dry spares at Satama. Or that we can carry spares.” Chriss wasn't about to rib Theon more than that about the painful experience he'd had learning that vampires could heal severely frostbitten fingers and toes, it just took some time.

Theon still winced and sighed as he finished tying his load.

“Good point.”

Kris hefted Jonne's pack up so he could get into it and tie the chest strap closed, then shrugged into his own as Sami held it for him. Risto and Theon finished tying the last few things onto their packs and helped each other into them as Chriss tied his shut and began helping Sami and Koira redistribute what was left between the three horses. Between them the five had lightened the load by almost a third.

“We'll make the run home and hand this over to Jason, Janne and Jules and head back out again if the weather looks dodgy. That way we can get you at least to the outer caverns.”

Koira nodded, and then looked over at Sami.

“Is it likely to go bad?”

“I don't know. But if Janne is getting twitchy I'd rather assume he's right and hurry. You know how good his instincts are.” Sami let out a low grunt as he hefted Chriss's pack up so the slimmer man could get into it. “We've got most of a full moon tonight, so we can go a bit later. And will.”

Chriss nodded, and then looked over at where Theon was fidgeting in place.
“If Janne thinks it’s turning worse we’ll come and find you, Jason can find the way back to home and dinner through a blinding blizzard.”

Sami laughed at that, but then was pensive as he watched the five men head out and pick up speed in the way only vampires and changers could maintain. At that pace they’d be home around dusk. They’d probably all need to feed a bit from the changers and would probably be a touch cranky for a few days. They weren’t sprinting, but they weren’t going at the more usual traveling pace. Sami sighed as he reached out and tugged Koira closer and buried his nose in the shorter man’s hair.

“We’ll be alright?”

“Yeah, but we better get moving.”

Reluctantly he let Koira go so he could grab Tampere’s lead rope and start them all moving at a faster pace than before. If the rest of them had taken the trouble to run out here to take a load and run back Janne must be getting really twitchy about the weather.

~0~

Brian sighed, and wished they hadn’t agreed to winter over in a town.

Not that being around people was in any way a bad thing, just being around people meant there were men ogling Squeaks and girls drooling over Levi.

He huffed and tried not to scowl as he watched a particularly pretty girl flutter at Levi while refilling his mug for him. He crossed his arms and slumped a little lower in his seat when he saw the pretty girl’s handsome older brother flirting with Squeaks.

Brian was so busy not looking at where his partners were getting hit on he didn’t notice Squeaks until she was in his lap.

“You are an idiot.”

He blinked in confusion. Squeaks was using English, like they’d used way back before.

No one would understand exactly what she said, just infer from the tone.

“Uh? Okay? How am I an idiot this time?”

The serious look stopped his feeble attempt at joking dead.

“We’ll never leave you willingly. Either of us.”

“Uh,” Brian floundered.

“And you’ve been so focused on who’s been flirting with us you completely missed all the girls flirting with you.”

Brian jolted straighter in his seat and grabbed for Squeaks hips to keep her steady even as his eyes went round and his jaw dropped.

“They haven’t been flirting with me?” A pause and he looked around at almost an even dozen young and pretty faces looking at him with mixed exasperation and annoyance. Levi was laughing at him, as were several other men, not he noted, any of the younger ones. They looked relieved that he wasn’t interested.
He winced. He'd been speaking in Trade and any guesses anyone had about what Squeaks had been saying was neatly confirmed.

A soft chuckle had him groaning and burying his burning face in Squeak's shoulder.

“They were flirting with me?” He knew it sounded plaintive, but he really hadn't been paying attention.

“Silly,” Gentle fingers combed through his hair and he felt Squeaks hug him and rest her cheek on the top of his head.

Brian just buried his face in her shoulder and breathed deeply of her familiar scent and ignored the laughter around him as best he could.

He wondered if it was too early to escape to their shared bed.

~0~

Julian wrinkled his nose as he dropped another load of wood by the signal fire. The wind was turning and it smelled heavy and wet with snow. Their vampire contingent had come back laden like pack mules and Chriss, Theon and Risto had picked up empty packs and turned right back around again, this time Jason had gone along in spite of the earlier comments about the changers having already done their part. Chriss had marked Sami's last known location on the rough map he and Sami had sketched on the wall of one of their caves ages ago when they were figuring out zombie patrol territories. Everything was in charcoal and carefully colored chalk so the small stark white mark was easy to pick out. Every spring Sami and Chriss would update the map, section by section after everyone had gone out on their first circuits and laid eyes on things.

Blue was water: rivers, streams, wells and lakes, black: hills and mountains. Red marks were traditional places their people camped, with different marks for winter and summer grounds, or permanent lodging sites and thin yellow lines traveling routes between them. Specific resources, like fruit trees and naturally occurring fields of grains, were picked out with tiny glyphs in pale green chalk. White was just for emergencies on this map. And for notes on other walls.

If the weather held just a little longer they might reach the outermost caverns. They weren't wide enough, tall enough or level enough for the horses to navigate all the way home in, but even Sami wrapped up in all his winter layers with his heaviest pack could get through those passages. With that they could shelter the horses in whichever cavern they reached until the weather broke and then bring them in with all of them safe.

But Chriss estimated with the loads they still had it would take Sami and Koira ten or twelve hours from the point they'd left them at to reach the outermost caverns and another four or five after that to get up to the main cavern going the most direct, and most dangerous route. At Jonne's full traveling speed it had taken them over five hours to get home. With laden horses it was a lot slower. Faster than a pair of regular humans could go yes, but still not as fast as Sami had proven he could go in the past.

He hoped the weather would hold. Just let it hold a little while longer.

~0~

Koira leaned into the Oulu’s side and kept moving. The wind was twisting and gusting hard enough that he wasn't sure if he could get off the ground safely. Sami had asked when it first turned but even then he hadn't been sure and now things were worse.
He also hadn't wanted to leave Sami out here alone, even though he knew it was irrational. Sami knew the area far better than he did, and had far more experience.

They'd kept moving past sunset, much to the disgruntlement of the horses, and kept going more slowly under moonlight until clouds had made it impossible to see. Unlike every other time they'd stopped this time Sami had loosely tied the horses so they couldn't wander far and had Koira cut dried grasses for them so they could eat.

Sami had them up and moving as soon as things had lightened up enough to see more or less where they were putting their feet. He said they were getting close to the outer caverns, and if they got that far they could shelter the horses and walk through the cave system to get back home. Apparently the animals could smell the bad weather coming, because this time they didn't fuss when Sami urged them to go as fast as they could with their loads. With the weather getting dramatically worse as the day went on Koira wanted to get to those caverns rather badly.

But Koira didn't know the route through the caves and was scared Sami would want him to go alone and terrified he'd want him to stay behind. It didn't help that he hated storms.

Then the snow had started to come down and now it swirled around them in ways that made it difficult to see anything clearly past his nose. He could just make out the dark bulk of Sami and Tampere ahead of him. He could feel Paris tugging on the lead rope under his hand, and that was tied to Oulu’s harness. Sami had told him to hang on tight and not let go. If he fell it could be very hard to find him again in the shifting snow if they got separated.

Koira had been so focused on putting one foot in front of the other that he missed seeing the dark shadows moving up quickly on their left until one was right on top of him.

His reaction to Jason's massive wolf shape bumping into his hip was to jump and shriek, which made Oulu startle sideways and snort. Not even a heartbeat later and Sami was right in front of him.

"Koira? You okay Rakkaus?"

A rude noise came from behind Koira.

"Jason just scared him out of a year’s growth is all. Theon and Risto have a fire built inside the closest cavern. You bypassed the one we thought you were going for.” Chriss sounded faintly winded, but not as tired as Koira felt.

"Not on purpose.” protested Sami as he cuddled Koira a little more to be sure he was alright.

"Wind?” Chriss asked and grimaced when Sami nodded. “We aren't far. Hang on to Jason, Koira. We'll follow his nose.”

Jason's wolf shape shook and let out a low whuf as Koira tentatively fistd his hand into his heavy black neck ruff. His hands hurt from the cold, even wrapped up in a too long sleeve and crudely made mittens of vole fur, but the one in Jason's fur immediately began to warm from all the heat the bigger changer was putting out. Sami stroked a hand over his cheek then went back to Tampere's side as they moved out again, this time with Oulu taking the lead position.

It felt like they slogged through the wind and snow for hours. When Oulu stepped out of the wind and Jason stepped away Koira wasn't prepared for it and he fell over bracing against a wind that wasn't there anymore. He blushed when Theon hauled him to his feet and over to their sheltered fire. Between them Theon and Risto got everyone stripped out of their snow covered coats, gloves
and scarves and wrapped in warmed furs by the fire, then went on to unload the horses, give them a
good brushing to get all the ice and snow off their coats and cover them with blankets of their own.
Theon even gave each animal sections of dried apple and a double portion of cooked grain mash to
go with their hay to help them warm up inside.

Sami pulled Koira under his fur and cuddled him close as he warmed up enough to shiver and just
held him until was warmed all the way through and stopped shaking. Koira was so tired from
fighting the wind and cold that he went from warming up to asleep without a fuss.

Theon offered Sami a bowl of hot broth and frowned at Koira being asleep.

“He out already?”

Sami nodded and rubbed one cheek over Koira's hair.

“Yeah, I keep forgetting he’s so much smaller than us.” He smiled and accepted the offered bowl
and drank carefully. A burned mouth still was no fun, no matter how quickly one healed.

“He kept up then?”

“Yeah, no problems at all in getting to Dinan in under four days. We were back at Blue Pass two
days after we left, but it's buried under a shit ton of fallen rock. So we backtracked but that was
another two and some odd days. Was a lot of rock and slate that shifted so we had to be a little
careful with the horses loaded like they were.”

Risto settled beside Theon and warmed his hands on his own bowl of hot broth.

“You didn't send the kid ahead, headwinds bad?”

Sami drained his bowl and set it aside and then nodded.

“If we still flew kites I'd have questioned it being safe to fly them, was a really stiff wind in our
faces until dusk yesterday, then it was all over the place, behind and to the left, behind and to the
right, then pushing straight at our backs. I asked if he felt safe trying to fly then, but he said he
didn't, so I didn't push him.”

There were grimaces, but then nods of understanding.

“We keep forgetting he's a baby compared to us. He never stops moving when he's awake.” Chriss
helped Sami lie down and wrap Koira a bit more securely in the furs.

“We need to teach him something he can do this winter, so he doesn't get so twitchy thinking he's
not helping,” observed Jason as he dipped another bowl of broth out of the pot hanging over the
fire. He took a swallow and sighed before continuing. “I don't think he's going to be able to go out
plant hunting in winter.”

“Plant hunting?” asked Sami looking up in confusion.

“Plant hunting,” Confirmed Jason with a quelling look at Theon. “He added two beds worth of the
medicinal plants Jonne has been trying to cultivate for me after I made the mistake of grumbling
that we’d run out of mint where he could hear me. And he found a ton more for me to preserve.
And that's not including the edibles he kept bringing home. He found enough grain for it to be
worthwhile to run the thresher and enough peas, beans and lentils that Jonne was dreading having
to hull them all.” He shrugged at Sami. “You were out doing summer Rites, he got fidgety. I
wouldn't be surprised if that spot where the springs spill over into the river isn't buried in mint next
spring, he was so busy finding plants gone to seed.”

“I still say he shouldn't be out there scavenging on his own.” Theon stated as he settled a bit more comfortably into Risto's side.

Sami felt a sinking feeling in his gut. He knew Koira had made Julian unhappy enough to come and talk to him about it, just from leaving everyone with the feeling that he had to be busy or else, when that was far from the case. And to learn he'd been harvesting summer grains and bringing back enough to be worth the bother of setting up the pulleys and pedals to run the thresher they'd cobbled together from pieces of an old harvester and bicycles parts, he must have been pulling home travois loads at a time. Sami also knew it bothered them all a great deal that Koira was being self-reliant when it wasn't necessary, but he thought he'd talked this out already with Koira.

“You talked to him Sami, we'll just have to see if he really understands or not. It just scared the crap out of Thee when he came home with two fresh viper skins tied to his pack.”

Sami flinched, he hadn't heard about that. But Jason was continuing.

“He didn't seem too bothered, said they hadn't bitten him and that he'd been bitten by one before when he was little and other than getting sick and changing shapes he was fine.”

“Wait, you think he might have hit his Full Shift already?” Sami questioned as his mind latched onto the critical tidbit in that explanation. That would explain so many things, why Koira was so small, why he didn't grow facial hair. Changers continued to grow after the trauma of their Full Shift, just like vampire could after their First Change, but it was slow, so slow it could take years for the changes to be noticeable. If the First Shift happened young enough there were some changes that even puberty couldn't override.

Jason, blinked as did everyone else as the full impact of that thought hit. Unlike vampires a changer sometimes could shape shift before having the traumatic event that trigged a Full Shift. Vampires tended to look and act human until they went through their First Change. But First Change in a vampire tended to be nearly fatal and after First Change most vampires couldn't cope with even indirect sunlight for many years.

“Now that you mention it, he may have, I didn't even think about it.”

“It would explain a lot. But how long ago, did he give you any hints Jase?” Theon asked as Chriss got his pensive 'thinking face' on.

“Best guess on his age now is what? Nineteen, twenty?”

“Something like that,” Sami agreed.

“Little implies before puberty.”

Jason nodded as he thought.

“My best guess then would be six or seven; he said it was before his foster mother died of winter fever. And Jonne was still doing the rounds of that territory when they got hit with that really bad round of flu, when he sent up the smoke to get help from us.”

There was a round of winces. That had been a particularly bad year for several tribes. Changers and vampires were completely immune to human illnesses, even blood and water borne pathogens skipped right over them. They had a few illnesses and a tiny number of possible parasites of their own, and if you were alone without food, water and shelter any of them could kill, but nothing
human impacted them anymore. It had been a source of intense scientific curiosity in the years between the Bombs and the Fall that a few folks who had survived a ground zero hit who had before been positive for incurable illnesses like herpes, Hepatitis C and AIDS had suddenly thrown them off like they were nothing. So when a nasty Flu had started sweeping through they had tried to help those they could even if it was just keeping them warm, dry and hydrated. Some it helped. But some had been beyond help. They all remembered, things like that were hard to forget.

“So he's a full shifter, and has been,” Sami did a bit of quick counting in his head. “For probably ten years or so. We really need to watch him then.”

Theon winced, but Chriss nodded.

“This may have been enough of a chill and strain for him to get sick. According to Lauri, Adam and Bailey got sick pretty regularly for the first twenty years after things went to hell. And every young changer he's ever seen has been relatively fragile for the first thirty years after Full Shift. But they were always around humans. Koira may have been pretty protected after the stress of being abandoned because last winter he was only around us, and we don't get sick anymore.”

“If he does get sick we can keep him hydrated, that's the biggie anymore. Don't worry Sami; he's a lot tougher than he looks,” Jason added, and he was the one who done what research there was to do in case one of them did get sick, even if most of the practical knowledge had come the hard way. He had the experience in getting them all well again on those rare times they got sick. He was the one to figure out the dietary way to keep the few parasites that preyed on vampire and changer at bay and made sure to pass the information on to any that came passing through their area as friendlies. Some had already known, but some hadn't and it made them all feel a little better to get the word out any way they could.

It wasn't like they all didn't like garlic and onions, and the things were easy enough to grow.

Sami cuddled Koira a little closer and stared into the fire.

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The weather refused to break, so after getting a bit of sleep, Sami woke Koira and with help from Chriss and Jason loaded up packs to carry through the tunnels back to their home cavern.

Jason made up a few torches, but that was more for Koira's benefit as he'd never walked this route before. For now Theon and Risto would sit tight and mind the horses. More than likely, given it was usually only a three hour hike though the tunnels, they would swap off who minded the animals until the weather broke and they could get them down into their valley with the rest of the small herd. Anyone who knew the tunnels could turn that three hour hike into a much shorter trot if they wanted to. The only times they needed to be really careful was in spring when the thaws sometimes flooded the lowest sections of the caverns and tunnels. And given the acoustics of the tunnels you could sometimes hear the water long before you got to it, or not hear it at all until you were right on top of it, or worse in it. There was a reason the rope rails got checked every year or so and replaced if they looked even the tiniest bit chancy.

Jason hefted a pack up for Chriss, and then turned so Chriss could help him into his own. Risto had helped Sami into his heavy pack as Theon helped Koira into his lighter one. Only then did Jason light the first torch and head into the tunnels. Sami gave Koira a gentle nudge to get him moving and then let Chriss follow him.

“I'll make sure we bring fodder for the horses back, and anything you think you'll need.”
Risto grinned, that wicked little boy grin that always meant trouble.

“Oh I'm sure we'll find ways to amuse ourselves until our relief get here.”

Theon blinked and then grinned his own wicked, lecherous grin.

Sami just rolled his eyes and headed out before the pair's banter got any worse.

~0~

Jason let out a low whistle, the glow in the dark fungi he'd planted down these passages ages ago had really taken off. Once they got clear of the section where outside air did its dehydrating thing and the humidity was higher the walls and ceiling were just covered in the stuff. Koira had made the mistake of touching it and grossed out at the sticky, slimy feel, Sami had to duck his head and grin at how Chriss had teased Koira then grossed out when in retaliation the short man had wiped his be-slimed hand on Chriss's coat. The glowing streaks would fade as the fungi dried out, and probably wouldn’t even leave a stain in the leather after a bit of washing.

Jason had just sniggered and kept going.

At least the path was easy enough to follow, even with the spreading fungus growing down passages that were too small for any of them but Koira to get down; the few that were big enough for any of the rest of them that led nowhere they'd partly blocked off years ago. They might not travel this way much, but they'd still taken the time to build steps and ramps in the roughest areas, and tie guide ropes where the path went along a drop off. He grimaced at the memory of having to chip holes to tie ropes into the rock with nothing but a hammer and chisel, by the time they’d gotten down these tunnels they’d been out of fuel for the air hammer for decades. Not that they'd ever let those ropes fall away from rot. Not after one spring when only those ropes had kept them from losing Julian to raging flood waters.

It was still creepy as hell when Jason let the torch burn out to walk down rough hallways only lit with the greenish or bluish glow from the fungus. In summer he didn't think it had been nearly as bright, he'd have to remember that winter was the best time to be down here without other light.

Then they came to the turn that could take then down to the horses’ valley, up to one of Jonne's terrace gardens or back toward their main sleeping cavern. It also could lead down a twisted path to the base of their main waterfall and back and further down to another cavern they didn't use except for when Jason got into an experimental mood and tried to grow edible mushrooms. The thing was to low to stand in and awkward to clear out when it flooded, which was every spring.

The last attempt at mushroom cultivation had gotten them a huge load of the red one with white spots, great for hallucinations, not so good for eating. And not nearly as consistent as the Dream cactus on the hallucinations side of things, so not really all that useful unless they were trying to scare the bejessus out of someone and had the ability to contaminate their food.

To Jason's surprise the intersection was lit with one of the bigger clay lamps, clearly Julian or Jonne was eager to have everyone home safe. He still took care to tell Koira which passage went where and to show him the marks that distinguished them from each other from this direction.

“Words? Those marks are words?” He pointed at the word 'puutarha' written on the wall in Sami's
neat print and asked. “That means garden?”

Chriss shot Sami a look over his shoulder and shrugged.

“That means garden.” Jason confirmed as he shared a helpless look with Sami.

“So, the other marks on the walls, the ones on the storage jars, those are words too?”

“Some of them.” confirmed Jason again. “Some are numbers.”

“We'll have to teach you.” Chriss offered with a wicked grin at Sami.

Sami winced, and then smiled down into Koira's eager face before promising.

“We have all winter, we'll teach you Rakkaus.”

So much for getting Koira to slow down and rest.

~0~

The pointed reminder that Koira didn't know how to read brought it sharply to their attention that when in Satama they tended to speak Finnish, not the mix of modern tribal languages or the English based polyglot known as trade speak that their respective tribes used and they'd picked up over the years. They'd never even thought about it as Koira could count and do some simple figuring. If Jason asked for three stems or a dozen leaves of something Koira never had problems giving him the requested amount. It suddenly explained why sometimes they be chattering along and Koira would look lost or confused. Then they'd shift languages, and not even think about it, Koira would understand and life would go on.

But it boded very well really, because he'd clearly been picking up the language on his own for the last year and a half, and doing it well enough that they hadn't noticed other than thinking he didn't understand their slang. He didn't understand the slang, but that wasn't the whole story, and now they were taking more care to be sure Koira understood.

When Kris and Jonne swapped out for Theon and Risto, the first thing Julian did was snitch on Sami for not teaching Koira Finnish properly. Predictably, Theon flipped and dragged Sami off for a nice cathartic yell.

That had a whole other set of consequences they didn't expect.

For one Koira seemed to think it was his fault that they hadn't paid attention to what was under their noses the whole time. One result of that was him focusing so hard on memorizing new words and using them correctly that he was giving himself headaches. Lessons in reading meant that each of them at some point, after the weather broke and they were able to get the horses back, found Koira curled up under a vent or skylight or out on a ledge practicing reading or writing with charcoal and a broken slate platter. And that gave him more headaches and got him chilled because half the time he was just in his thin indoor tunic and not in his fur lined coat or even the thick sweater Jason had made for him.

Chriss and Jason tried to distract him, but frequently found their attempts backfiring. Jason especially, as he was the one with the collection of carefully preserved books on medical treatments and edible and medicinal plants as well as all the books they'd collected to help them learn other survival methods fast. Chriss had pages of carefully hand printed notes on the habits and customs of the varying tribes their territories held. For each tribe he'd carefully hand sewn his notes into books full of things they needed when they changed territories to keep from unsettling
their folk more than just the changeover did. Those little booklets chronicled the changes in customs of each tribe as time marched on, and sometimes Theon would read them just for distraction, mostly they just made him somewhat sad.

Jason settling down to use some of the whale oil to make a large batch of soap helped a little. Koira hadn't understood what they were doing for the first of the five batches, but he'd picked thing up pretty fast after that initial round. They'd all dressed in their oldest trousers and used hide aprons for protect their skin as much as possible from the effects of the lye. Jason had been amused by Koira's questions on why they were putting the flowers and crumbled dried herbs in at the very end of the process. They'd all been amused at how carefully Koira had cut the finished blocks into smaller, more useable portions. But they all had been careful to pick up the crumbs and small bits as no matter how small the soap still did its job.

They tried to keep busy with non-stressing things but Koira was determined to catch up on a lifetimes worth of learning in a few weeks. A winter bison hunt just added insult on top of strain.

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This time they hadn't run into human hunters, so Sami had all his manpower. This time Janne had elected to stay and mind their home fires so they had everyone else. After considerable discussion they'd elected to do a rotating hunt, with each of the vampires taking it in turn to run a full horse load or two back to Satama. High value portions went first, as did the hides and things went reasonably well for the first half dozen trips as the hunters thinned the mixed bovine herd of stragglers, sick and plain stupid animals.

Koira had been spotting from above, just like he had last year, and they had brought down their sixth and seventh kills when he came down just like he had for the first five to help.

Only this time when he changed as he landed he went to his knees. Unless he was doing a transfer flip stumbling that badly was something he hadn't done it quite some time. Then he dropped his hands down and didn't rise, just knelt there on hands and knees and panted.

“Koira?”

Risto was closest and bolted for the young changers side even as the rest of them realized there was a problem. He skidded to his knees beside Koira even as the small man slumped over sideways to lie panting in the snow.

Risto pulled his mitten off and brushed Koira's hair out of his face with bare fingers and hissed at how hot his skin was and how glazed his eyes looked.

Sami was by his side a breath later and helped him get Koira up out of the snow. Jason was there and peeled off his mittens and gloves to do his own quick checks.

“He's too hot; Sami help me open his coat.”

“But.” Sami started to protest.

“Sami just do it,” Jason was working on opening the ties that held everything tightly closed.

Sami let out a little sound of worry but then helped.

“Do we need to run him back to Satama?” asked Chriss as he rested a hand on Jason's shoulder. Kris and Jonne looked like they felt helpless as they huddled into each other’s arms nearby and Sami wasn't sure if he was grateful or not that Theon and Julian had left on a double run home with
five fully loaded horses that morning.

“Let’s get him back to camp. And deal with those two bison; I’ll give him a better look over in the tent. Sami, go butcher, you’ll feel better doing something.” Then he rose with Koira hanging limp in his arms and trotted off, Sami could see the smoke from their fire and the tent easily from here, they’d been able to find a spot on a rise almost on top of the herd's usual travel path this year.

Sami closed his eyes and nodded. He let Jason carry Koira back to camp as he pulled his knife and walked toward the two fallen animals. After a long moment of hesitation Chriss, Risto and Kris followed him. Jonne trotted off after Jason to be an extra set of hands if they were needed.

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Back at the tent Jonne built up the fire and set their soup pot back over it. Jason laid Koira on the pile of felt backed furs he’d been sharing with Sami and peeled his clothing off.

“He's really hot.” Jonne observed as he offered Jason a scarf that had been left behind that morning and was now filled with snow.

“Yeah, thanks.” Jason carefully began using the improvised cold pack to try and bring the fever down. That Koira didn't even twitch when he planted the half frozen thing on the pulse point between his thighs made him frown in worry. He yanked his own scarf off and handed it to Jonne.

“Fill that with snow too, I need to cool him down.”

Jonne nodded and scrambled to fill not only Jason's scarf with snow, but his own. Then he brought both back for Jason to plant under Koira's armpits. Then he rummaged in his pack for the pouch he called his 'oh shit kit' and pulled several bundles out of it. He checked on Koira's temperature and wished for a thermometer. They still had three working mercury filled glass ones at Satama, but they were very careful with them and never brought them out on a hunting trip. On the last scavenging run into a city they'd sifted through the remains of a chemists storefront to see if they could find others, but had come up empty handed other than finding a good, large granite mortar and pestle.

He swore softly under his breath at how warm Koira stayed. He might as well wish for a clinic and antibiotics right now.

“Jonne I need you to boil some water.”

Jonne moved to fill their smaller pot with clean snow and weakly tried to joke.

“I thought boiling water was for when a woman was in labor. To keep people busy and out of the way.”

Jason gave him a crooked smile.

“It is. I just need to boil up a fever reducer.”

Jonne nodded and poked the pot in the vain hope that that would make the snow melt and boil water faster.

~0~

Julian frowned when he saw that the guys had pulled down two more bison, but had only skinned them and roughly chunked the meat up. Normally they did a lot better job of things than that
unless...

He didn't see Koira in the group around the campfire, and Sami was pacing the way he did when he was worried about something and couldn't do anything constructive about it.

Theon's soft uh-oh really didn't help.

They exchanged a look and picked up speed to get to the fire quicker.

“What happened?”

Risto answered.

“Koira collapsed. Jason's been getting that awful tea into him to try and get it down.”

Julian shuddered and Theon made a face. They all had experience with the tea Jason mixed for fevers, and knew it tasted vile without sugar or honey to cut the bitterness. But it did do the job and it worked on humans, changers and vampires alike. They settled in to warm up a little.

“How bad?” Theon asked as he watched Sami pace, they all jumped when Jason pulled back the tent flap and answered.

“Bad enough. He's drinking anything I give him, which is good, it's let me stabilize his fever for now.” He scrubbed the back of his neck. “I want to move him back before he cycles back up.”

Sami nodded

“I'll take him.”

Jason nodded, he'd expected that. Even if Koira hadn't been Sami's lover Sami was still the fastest of them, and he'd have volunteered to get any of the Hunt if they were sick or injured back to the safety of Satama. And given Koira was his lover Julian expected Sami would break his own land speed records getting them back home.

“I don't run as fast as you, but I'll be right behind you. Get him there and keep feeding him as much of the fever tea mix I made up for your miners as he'll take.”

Sami blanched, but nodded as he watched Jason carefully wrap Koira up in some of their bed furs. Koira was limp and not fighting being wrapped up like he had been earlier.

“It's in the pot in your workroom with the red and black birds on it?”

Jason carefully lifted the limp bundle and handed it over to Sami.

“That's the one; mix it half and half with the stuff in the black and white squid pot on the next shelf up. I shouldn't be more than a couple hours behind you.”

Theon spoke up then.

“We'll load up what we can and do trips until we have this all cleared.”

Sami nodded and settled Koira a bit more securely. Theon caught his arm before he took off.

“Be a little careful, the south path up is slick as hell.”

“I will.”
Theon let him go and turned to help the others in their controlled scramble to get things packed up. They'd leave the tent until last. This might take several runs.

~0~

Marik hesitated over the frozen red slick of ice. Something had been killed here, fairly recently if the light dusting of snow over the blood slick was anything to go by. He knew his tribe wasn't the only one who made the trek here to thin the herds of large cattle, bison and sheep, but normally people were a lot more careful when they bled out an animal. At this time of year blood cooked in soup could make the difference between life and death.

Something must have happened here for a group of hunters to waste blood like this.

He began a more careful sweep of the area. He quickly found a second large blood slick frozen on the ground and frowned down at it. A double kill. Only a few times had his own people been able to pull off a double kill out here. He widened his search area and found much smaller red spots that told of other, more carefully tended kills. It had to be a good sized group to be pulling down five and six animals on a single hunt.

Then he found the camp site and had to stare at it for a while.

One middling size shelter, something with a floor he thought as the snow was tightly and uniformly packed down. He could see the pine branches they'd used to keep themselves up off the frozen ground and could see the bare patches where they'd had cooking and drying fires going. Marik could even see how they'd set up drying lines and was mildly impressed with how much this group appeared to have accomplished.

But he couldn't make sense of the tracks.

He thought he had seven or eight humans, but he found tracks of dogs appearing from nowhere. He also saw a few places where it looked like a small man or a boy who was almost a man had just appeared out of the air. He didn't think it was a woman, the stride pattern didn't seem quite right. Something had happened to the boy he thought. There was a cluster of tracks around a place where his prints appeared out of nowhere. But then the boy fell, Marik didn't understand why.

What he did understand was that there had been no more hunting after the boy fell. His people had packed up and moved west in a fairly big hurry.

Had the boy been their seer? Or was he finding the tracks of a group of spirit men? There were tales of a tribe of men who took eagle spirit maiden as wives out this direction.

Marik wasn't sure and he stared into the west for a long time before he ran back to where his own people were hunting.

All he told Orik was that there was a bad smell on the winds and that they should be wary of anything coming from the west.

He was their best tracker, so for the rest of the hunt they were wary in case anything came at them from the west.

It was a profound relief when they were able to run for home laden with slain bison without having anything spirit related happening.

~0~
Sami slowed down on the last part of the south path up to the lower entrance to Satama. Theon was right, it was slick as all hell, but he didn't want to go back and come up the more sheltered northern path, it would waste time and Koira had been squirming fretfully for the past hour or so. He was carefully navigating the iced over path down past the waterfall when Koira let out a pitiful little cry that brought Janne up and out of the main cavern in a very big hurry.

“Theon? Sami? What happened?” He was by Sami’s side and helping him keep Koira from wriggling away enough for Sami to drop him.

“Don't know, he just dropped and he's got a killer fever. Jason should be right behind me.”

Janne frowned and helped Sami get Koira stripped and settled in Sami's bed.

“I'll get some water boiling. Did Jason say what to give him?”

Sami nodded and turned to run down to Jason's workroom.

“The stuff he mixed for my miners last winter and the stuff in the squid jar.” Then he turned and sprinted down the passage way down to Jason's work room.

Janne hissed as Sami hit the corner hard with his shoulder as he ran but then he was busy pouncing Koira and holding him down in the bed.

“Shh, Nuori, still, stay still.” He winced when Koira let out a little wail and struggled under his hands. “Hurry up Jason, I suck at this.”

~0~

Jason was glad he had four paws. The south path was almost as slick as an ice rink and was clearly getting worse as the day wore on. Idly he made a mental note to bring in a load or two of sand as soon as they could so at least they could sand the damn path and not break their necks. Theon and Julian had clearly tried salting it, and that was proving to be less than helpful. There were tiny clean spots, and rippling circles of ice, at least they had the green salt to spare right now. Next time he went out he promised himself if they couldn't sand the path he'd wear an oversized pair of knit socks over his boots, at least then he's have a little traction. He'd been teaching Theon, again, how to knit socks. So they had misshapen and oversized ones around. Carefully he placed his paws and inched his way up to the main entrance. Then he did a controlled, well, sort of controlled slide down past the waterfall, only his dignity took any damage anyway. He could hear Janne and Sami both swearing and cajoling and under their voices a faint whimpering. He could also smell the pungent and faintly bitter mix that told him Sami had gotten the tea mixture pretty close, and then had brewed it a bit strong. But that could just be it sitting because they were having fits with Koira.

He bolted in under the airlock hides, shifted and blanched at what he saw.

Koira was stripped to the skin, sweating and struggling in Sami’s arms as Janne tried to get him to drink more of the tea. What they got into his mouth he was swallowing at least, but his squirming meant they were spilling as much on him as they were getting in him. Jason didn't think it would work as well topically.

He reached out and felt Koira's face, he was burning up again. From the looks of things Sami had tried the snow packs at the pulse point trick and this time it wasn't working as well. Part of the waterfall had frozen solid, but under and behind it there was still running water. His own skin shuddered at the idea, but they had to get the kids temperature down.

“Sami, we need to get him into the pool.”
Janne yelped and looked at him like he was out of his mind.

“That water will be freezing.”

Sami had already swept Koira up in his arms and headed for the path down, Jason followed.

“That's kind of the point.”

~0~

Sami on a mission was damn fast, and Jason was just clearing the bottom archway when he heard Sami yelp. He was at the water’s edge and grabbing Sami by the collar and getting ready to yell when he saw how still Koira had gone and changed targets.

Janne was right; the water was cold as hell. But at least down here there wasn't more than a thin rim of ice around the edges of the pool.

Koira was limp. But he was breathing and his temperature was dropping.

“I meant for him to go in, not you to freeze your nuts off too.” Jason kept a careful hand on Koira's pulse in his neck. It was steady still and he was finally cooling down.

“I slipped.” Sami was trying not to stutter as he shivered. But he kept a good hold on Koira and his eyes never left the smaller man's face.

“Sure you did. I think you've both been in there long enough; hand him to me and drag your ass out of there.”

Sami reluctantly handed over Koira and dragged his shivering body up out of the cold water. At least Sami had just been wearing the wooly socks his fisher folk insisted on knitting for him and not his boots, they were thicker than anything Jason could make, four strand double knit and heavily thrummed on the bottoms, making them almost boots themselves. His boots would take forever to dry back out. Jason refused to hand the kid back, just herded Sami back up into the warm. Janne helped dry Koira off and tuck him back into the bed as Sami dried off and changed into dry clothes. Jason checked the tea mixture, grimaced and thinned out the stuff in the pot with a bit more water and sweetened it with a couple generous dollops of honey. Then he measured out a bowlful and with a little help began feeding it to Koira in tiny sips. He wasn't fighting the thinner and sweeter concoction nearly as much, but Jason wasn't sure if that was because he'd just been half frozen or because the honey cut the bitterness of the tea.

Once one dose was down he went down and got his bigger sand timer from his workroom and carefully set it up on the shelf they kept the bigger lamps on. Every time it ran out Jason fed Koira another bowlful of the mixture and reset the timer. Over and over again, with bowls full of broth and the honey and salt water hydration mix in between. They had to repeat the cold water bath twice more, this time with Sami a bit better prepared for the dip, before Kris and Jonne came in leading the first load of pack horses.

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It took three trips before the guys had hauled all the fruits of their bison hunt in. And even after they figured out how to thaw the large frozen chunks of the last two kills to process them a bit better (by simple expedient of roasting the joints whole and then dealing with the cooked meat) Koira still hadn't shaken off his fever. He no longer had to be dunked in icy cold water six and eight times a day and Jason had reduced how often they were feeding him the bitter tea, but when his eyes opened there were no signs of sense or awareness in them. He was focusing on them and
tracking their movements, which was good, but there was no hint of recognition in those blank green eyes.

Jason reminded Sami that it had taken weeks for he, and Julian to really shake off their round of illness and Jonne quietly confirmed that they’d been terrified they were going to lose Janne several times when he’d undergone his own bout of changer sickness. But the Negative survivors had been relatively safe at a place in central Germany, well, what had been Germany anyway.

They had found the abandoned hulk of a large, and formerly rather upscale, clinic in what had been central Berlin on the east side. For whatever reason most of the supplies had been left untouched, some were spoiled, damaged or expired, but there was enough to get them through. Chriss said they’d had hell clearing a space and Jonne just shuddered and refused to talk about it. That hinted to Jason that they’d had to clear some things that had been human at one point. But after the Fall humans tended to avoid what was left of major cities, only a very few brave or desperate souls ventured back in for supplies. Jason suspected that had more to do with how nasty the so called Civil Patrols were in the interim years between the Bombs and things falling the rest of the way apart than anything else, though failing infrastructure played a role as well.

Hard to raid places if you couldn't navigate to them or through them with any degree of safety.

But with supplies readily to hand they’d been able to get Janne back on his feet in about a month, not the recurring year long ordeal that he and Julian had had.

Jason was mixing a more diluted version of the tea when he heard Koira whimper again. He swore under his breath, whimpers meant the kid was having fever dreams, clearly rather nasty ones if the way he struggled and cried was any indication. The broken bits of Koira's rambling's that they'd been able to understand had made Jason want to cry. 'Don't leave me' and 'come back, please come back' were the most common pleas, and they broke Sami's heart to hear, and that hurt to watch.

He was just moving to help Sami restrain Koira when he saw something that made him think the worst might just be over.

Koira cuddled into Sami's arms, turned right over and buried his face in Sami's chest and cuddled in tight. They'd been lucky in the small fact that no matter how bad the fevers got Koira would drink anything they gave him, and that no matter how much he would struggle he would always calm, at least a little, if Sami was the one holding him. But this was better than calming; this was actually reaching for comfort.

Sami blinked but wrapped his arms tight around Koira's small frame and whispered soft inanities in his tribe's tongue. They'd learned fast that he'd lost what Finnish he had in the grip of the fever. But they'd learned early that none of them held on to anything other than their mother tongue when fevered, so it wasn't all that surprising. At least this time they didn’t have to dodge civil patrols and hide from the authorities.

Jonne was frozen in the entrance when Jason turned back around, a pot of the dried seaweed from last summer tucked under one arm and a pair of fresh ptarmigan in their white winter feathers in his other hand. All of them getting rather tired of bison after several days of roasting huge chunks so they could slice it and store it in jars in the ice and cold rooms.

"Is that, does that mean," Jonne swallowed hard. "Is he getting better now?"

"Yeah, I think so."

He heard sighs and murmurs of relief from all around the room.
It still took another two weeks before Koira was coherent for more than a few moments at a time, and almost a month before he could stand unaided for long enough to use a chamber pot. And they quickly realized how accustomed they had become to having Koira around and helping. They missed the regular additions of fresh meat in the form of winter hare and ptarmigan until Janne started hunting as a hawk with Julian's help. After a bit of practice Julian got rather good at flushing game for Janne to hit from above. And they all noticed that if they'd forgotten something for a project Koira wasn't right there with it like he had been last winter.

Koira still tried to be useful, but he had trouble staying awake for more than an hour or so at a time. To help make him feel less isolated Sami wrapped an old fur tightly around a double armful of clean straw to make a pallet like they sometimes laid out by the river in summer. That got covered with a bed fur and one of the blankets they'd stuffed with goose down, and then he curled up between it and the fire as he worked on replacing boots and boot soles again. If they'd had clean cotton to stuff another mattress he'd probably have done that over the straw, but they didn't. Koira had resisted curling up on the pallet until he'd fallen asleep leaning against Kris and he and Jonne had carefully moved him there. When he started to wake Sami had just leaned back into the padding and stroked a hand over Koira's hair until he woke more completely and knew where he was. After that and Sami curling up around him for a nap he was willing to stay there.

But every night Sami helped him back into their bed and cuddled him close.

Jason watched from the bed he and Chriss shared and wondered when Koira would object to being treated like he was made of spun glass.

Theon came back from an ice fishing trip just in time to hear Koira objecting to being kept in bed. He froze where he was and held up a hand to keep Julian and Risto from making any noise that would alert Sami that he had an audience.

Then he listened.

"I'm not a dried up old reed, I won't crumble and blow away."

The protest made them share a grin.

"Rakkaus you were sick for weeks, it's still cold as hell out, we've got more than half the winter yet to go and I don't want to risk you getting sick again."

The sigh told Theon that Koira was really reaching the end of his rope. In the past that sigh meant he'd heard and understood but he was still going to disobey. This could get interesting. Meek as Koira sometimes acted there was a solid core underneath it, and Koira was almost as stubborn as Sami in a mother hen mood.

"I need to get out. I smell bad and I'm going crazy. Please?"

Risto covered his eyes with his hand and bit his lip hard to keep from snorting in amusement. A moment later and Julian had clamped one of his hands over his mouth to stop the giggles.

They all had heard the classic 'I think you should be in bed, but okay' defeated sigh out of Sami. That meant Koira had pulled out the begging eyes. Only Jonne did better begging eyes, and he had a lot more practice and had long ago mastered the little lip quiver that made Kris give in to even Jonne's most insane schemes.
“I'll take you down to the hot spring then.” Theon grinned a bit and knew that before too long Sami would find a way to rig up a sauna down by the hot springs over their normal tent sauna on the ice. He'd probably be arguing for them to rebuild their wooden smoke sauna again in spring.

“I can walk myself.”

“Koira,” Risto let out a tiny strangled snort at the undertones of warning in Sami's voice. Theon let out a tiny squeak and Julian went red faced as he tried not to laugh out loud.

“What? I can walk myself now. I haven't fallen trying to go pee in days.”

“I know, just, let me walk with you?”

There was a low huff, but a few moments later Sami was pushing aside the airlock hides they had ended up needing for more than simple drafts after the roof over the falls had caved in and coming out the archway and blinking to see all three of them standing there. Sami carefully wrapped a heavy knit wrap around Koira's thin shoulders as he smiled wanly at them.

“Uh, hei. Back already?”

Koira gave Sami a bit of a shove to get him moving again and perked up a little to see them standing there. He peeked into the basket Theon had braced against his hip. It was filled with assorted gutted and frozen solid lake fish from their favorite winter fishing spot. The same lake they cut ice from, and soon they'd have to do that or risk not getting enough ice to last through the summer months. They'd cut a few, but not in any kind of serious concerted effort. But if Koira was safe to leave alone for a few hours they could get started and rebuild their stocks of ice for next summer. Last fall Koira had pulled in enough wild grains that they had plenty of straw to bury the blocks in to keep them insulated.

“We had good luck today.” Theon boasted happily. “Risto and Jules have bucket loads too, and Chriss and Kristian were still catching and gutting when we left. Janne got bored and was going after some quail and ptarmigan.”

Sami blinked, then sighed and let Koira shove him again so he could get past.

“I'll get a bit of soap and towels and I'll be right down, don't get in the pool without me.”

Theon sniggered at the way Koira looked at Sami before the small man shrugged and carefully walked down the path toward their hot springs. At least he kept the wrap securely wound around himself as he picked his way down the path.

“Laugh it up,” Sami growled as he ducked back into their living area to grab changes, two soft old hides to act as towels and the pouch that held the shavings of the ceanothus soap experiment that Jason said he was going to repeat, and in a larger quantity, next spring when they got more blossoms. They had decided that the whale oil was better used for the lamps or soap, as it had an odd under taste to it. If they needed to eat it they still would, but the hunting and fishing were good enough they weren't terribly concerned. Then Sami took off down the path after Koira at a trot.

“Whipped.” was Risto's wry comment as they moved on toward the ice cave to store their booty of tasty fishes.

“Like we're any better?” asked Julian as he found the partially filled jars they'd been storing their catch in.

Risto winced and exchanged a look with Theon. Jules was right, but he had no idea that he was the
one who had Risto and Theon by the balls. Thank god he wasn't the sort to abuse his lovers, he might tease the crap out of them, but he'd always come to bed in the end. Quickly they sorted the contents of their baskets into the respective jars by type of fish then the put the heavy lids back on and headed back up to the main cavern to warm up, eat something and change into dry clothes.

If the gleam in Risto's eyes was anything to judge by, Theon thought he'd have help pouncing their bebe drummer and doing some molesting.

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Sami sighed in frustration when he got down to the springs.

Koira hadn't gotten into one of the deeper pools at least. He was in one of the shallow overflow puddles with the misshaped bit of knit fabric that was his first attempt at learning the skill, kneeling there scrubbing at his skin.

Sami set his armload down on one of the benches they'd built and set down here for that purpose and stripped to the skin. Then he took the bag of soap crumbles over and set it on a dry rock before he knelt behind Koira.

“Let me help?”

Koira shot him a look over one shoulder.

“I'm not a baby.”

Sami winced.

“I know, but, let me wash your back?”

Koira thought about that for a moment, but eventually nodded and handed Sami his scrap of wet cloth. Sami dumped a few crumbs of the soap into the rag and lathered it up. Then he gently began scrubbing Koira's skin.

He didn't stop at the back, he smoothed the bit of soapy fabric over Koira's hips, pert little bottom and around to caress his lean chest. Koira was leaner than he had been due to his illness, but he was starting to put the lost weight back on. Sami felt his cock twitch eagerly, but did his best to stomp on that desire.

Koira shifted around on his knees so he could look up at him, face to face, Sami took advantage and soaped slim arms then reached down to lovingly fondle Koira's cock and balls.

“That's not my back.”

Sami felt his breath catch as Koira shifted a little closer.

“Have to get all of you clean.” Sami let out a low moan as Koira reached up to stroke his face with one slim fingertip.

“Then what?”

Sami groaned as Koira took the scrap of cloth from him and reached down to slide it over his aching erection. The imp was teasing him.

“Then I get to rinse you.” Sami knew his voice was husky, and couldn't stop the moan that escaped as Koira shifted closer, close enough he could feel their cocks bumping together.
“Is that all?”

Sami broke, and dragged Koira up where he could ravage his mouth. A moment later and he was on his back with Koira sprawled over his chest kissing him like he'd die if he stopped. His cock ached, hell; his whole body ached with wanting his lover. He almost screamed when Koira reached back and took him in hand enough to line up.

“Rakas, no, I could hu, oh god...” Sami couldn't keep his eyes open as that sweet, tight heat slid down over his cock. “Don’t; don’t want to hu-ohh.” He clutched those slim sharp hips and did his best to hang on as Koira rocked over him. The little minx kept clamping tight around him as he slid down, and from the moans coming out of his throat Koira knew damn well what he was doing. All he could do was moan and hang on until Koira arched and came all over his belly and chest. Then he just lay there panting and still hard as Koira slid up and off him with a low whimper.

Sami groaned and reached for Koira, even wanting to bend him over and fuck him until he screamed he had to make sure his little love hadn't hurt himself. All he got when he pushed two careful fingers up Koira's backside to check him for damage was a low and wanton sounding moan and the feel of something slick. More than just the slickness of his own come coating Koira's insides.

“You prepped.” Sami dragged Koira back with him and tipped them both onto the deeper and warmer pool with a splash. When they came up again Sami had Koira's back pressed tight to his chest. “You prepped,” he repeated as his hips rocked his still hard prick into Koira's ass.

“Want, ohh wanted you.”

“Brace yourself Rakas, you're getting me.” Sami warned as he let Koira brace against the side of the pool. Then he pressed in again and began thrusting hard. He made sure to hold tight to Koira's hips as the smaller man moaned, whimpered and squirmed back into him. He was leaving marks but was hard pressed to care very much right now. Sami found that perfect spot and began to hammer it as Koira begged him to let him come.

Just hearing Koira beg for him was enough.

“Come for me Rakas, come, ungh.” Sami grunted as Koira's ass wrung him dry. Then he slowly pulled out, checked again for damage with gentle fingers and curled up on a ledge they'd worn into the side of the pool to pull Koira into his lap and just cuddle.

Koira curled up and rested his head against Sami's shoulder.

“You could have just asked.”

“You weren't listening.”

“You've been sick,” Sami tried to defend himself.

“I'm not a fragile reed.”

Sami held Koira tighter.

“You could have died.” There had been times when Jason despaired of ever getting his fever to go down and stay down. Times Sami had held him close and been afraid he wouldn't open his eyes and recognize them again because the fever had destroyed his mind. It had taken Julian almost three years to fully heal from a head injury. He knew Risto and Theon had agonized over what to do in the initial months when they weren't sure if he'd even wake. And he'd listed to the unhappy
conversations over what to do if Julian never regained his mind after he did finally wake. Sami couldn't cope with the idea of having to kill Koira rather than leave him a mindless husk.

“I didn't.”

Sami sighed and rubbed his cheek over Koira's wet hair.

“But you could have, and it scared me.” Sami pressed a kiss into the Koira's hair. “I don't want to lose you.”

Koira looked up at him and snuggled a tiny bit closer.

“I'm like Jason; my nose will lead me back to you.”

Sami forced a smile.

“Are you saying I need a bath?”

Koira giggled at him, and then squealed when Sami playfully ducked him. A bit of splashing, a bit of hair washing and they settled again in each other’s arms.

“Pretty good for the nickel showing,” came an amused voice he hadn't heard in far too long.

Sami's head jerked up and around to find a pair of amused green eyes under a head of wildly disordered black hair grinning at him.

“Hello?” Lauri grinned at him and slipped out of the middle pool and down into the slightly cooler one Sami and Koira were in. Koira pinked up and shyly slid behind Sami as the bigger man reached for the short brunet and hugged him hard. There was knowing someone was alive and seeing it with his own eyes. And if Birdie was here, that might mean...

“Adam and Bailey are making nuisances of themselves above. Theon said you were down here.” Lauri answered Sami's unspoken thought as he smiled at Koira and winked, which made the little blond blush harder. “You've made yourselves a nice set up here.”

“Years of work. Lauri, I need you to meet someone.” Sami reached back and tugged Koira forward and tucked him safely under his arm against his side.

Lauri grinned.

“This is Koira. Koira this is Lauri, we knew him from before the Fall. When we talk about Birdie, he's who we mean.”

Koira's eyes went round, his shyness forgotten for the moment as his curiosity came out.

“But, you're as short as me.” Koira had gotten used to most of them being rather taller than was average now.

Lauri's grin went devilish.

“Hasn't Sami told you?”

Sami groaned; Lauri had been pure hell on people who teased him about his height before. But the other man was continuing.
“Good things come in small packages.” Lauri waggled his eyebrows. “And from the looks of things,” Lauri's eyes went down, looking at a spot under the waterline. “You aren't any smaller than me.”

Koira caught the implications and squeaked, going bright red.

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Sami hugged Adam and then Bailey hard, and felt the relief in the solid embraces he got in return. Koira, bless him; asked if he needed to fly out and tell the rest of the Hunt they had visitors. Not that he was letting Koira fly anywhere just now, even if he had to use the excuse that Koira's hair was still wet and it was freezing cold outside.

Theon let out a bark of laughter as he came back in with an armload of familiar bottles.

“Nah, Jules was headed out at full sprint, I don't think you could beat him out there now with the head start he's got. Risto's rummaging for something for dinner other than our usual.” He offered bottles to the startled men.

“Beer? You guys have a good set up then.” Bailey pulled the stopper and took a long drink before settling back against the pallet with a contented sigh. Adam thumped his shoulder then accepted a bottle himself.

Lauri took a swig and sighed happily.

“Much better than what we get down south. And given we've been foraging on our way up, your usual is going to be a feast.”

Sami settled onto one of the larger straw padded cushions they'd started using after they learned how comfortable the pallet on the floor was to sit on, especially with a hide covered cushion or two to act as a backrest. If they could find enough wild cotton next summer they'd stuff a more proper one for more permanent use. They were a lot more comfortable than the frame chairs that Jason spent so much time building. He was considering building a sort of backrest so they could have a couch of sorts near the fire pit.

“So, what brings you three this far north?” Sami reached over and pulled Koira down beside him. “According to Chriss you guys were doing pretty well for yourselves.”

Lauri grimaced.

“Nothing as good as just visiting old friends I'm afraid.” Lauri looked down at the bottle he was turning in his hands. “We don't have many zombies down there, one or two a year normally. We get more changers than anything and most of those well,” Lauri looked faintly sad and slightly sick. “They flip out and kill themselves before we ever hear about things. We made our living carrying news from place to place mostly.”

Sami nodded and Theon frowned in worry at how Lauri said they 'had' made their living.

“So what's the issue?” asked Risto from the archway as he came in with a good sized bison roast to thaw and skewer over the fire.

“Plague,” was Lauri's short answer. “Something's making folks sick, Adam says he smelled something bad on the tides so I'm guessing it's an algae bloom like we had, you know, before.” A little shrug and flip of a hand told Sami how helpless Lauri felt. “You know how bad they were before.”
“They're blaming you aren't they?”

Adam winced and Bailey ducked his head, and stared down at his beer like it was the most fascinating thing on the planet. Lauri shrugged.

“Not so much blaming us for causing it, more getting nasty because we can't make it just go away. We don't have any mystic potions to make the sick well and they really don't like that we don't know if the sick will get well. They make their living by the seas; anything that impacts that really hurts them. The only things we have to offer are telling them to not eat the clams and things they've always eaten until whatever this is wears itself out and goes away on its own.”

“Not what they want to hear,” was Koira's soft observation.

Lauri look up and nodded.

“Pretty much. Not really practical for most of them either. If we could offer a treatment for the illness other than just telling folks to make the sick comfortable and keep them hydrated.” Lauri's helpless shrug spoke volumes. “We just need a place to hide out for maybe ten or twelve years. If you can think of a place.”

Sami looked over at Theon and Risto. They both nodded back. So Sami looked back at two of his much missed friends.

“When the rest of the Hunt gets back, I'll bring it up to them. But I think we can work things out where you can stay with us.”

Lauri looked startled and more than a little relieved. It made Sami wonder how nasty things had gotten before they'd said 'hell with it' and come north. From the relieved looks on Bailey and Adam's faces he had a hunch things had gotten pretty ugly and they'd left to keep from being murdered for not being able to provide a miracle cure.

“You can afford that? Not that I'm complaining or anything.”

Sami smiled and pitched a smaller feather filled cushion at Theon's head as his friend broke up laughing and all but shoved Risto off their bed in the process.

“We have a pretty good set of territories, we'll figure something out.”

A delighted yip from the archway interrupted Sami. He just smiled and cuddled Koira a bit closer as Jonne flung himself into the cavern and at Birdie for a hug. The rest of the Hunt wasn't far behind.

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It took a little while to get everyone settled. Chriss had shaken his head at Risto's attempt at a roast for dinner and gotten a bit of help from Koira to fill one of the bigger cooking pots with water. Mostly by just having Koira hold the pot steady as he poured buckets of clean cold water into it. After sending Jason after a basket load of assorted dried and fresh root vegetables he set about turning some of their fresh caught and partly frozen catch into a fish stew. The roast was big enough and had a thick enough rimming of fat that it could self-baste all night once they put up the little clockwork gadget to keep it turning, so for now they just left it on a big plate on one of the flat rocks they used as warming rests near the edge of the fire.

Koiria slipped away from Sami's side and just as the big man was starting to look around in worry he came back in with a small armload of crockery from one of their storage caverns. Drinking and
eating bowls, clearly freshly rinsed and ready for use. Some distinctly marked as personal, others the plainer ones Jonne and Risto had made in their last potting spree last spring. More than enough for everyone. Sami helped Koira set them down and cuddled the smaller man close so he could rest again.

Talk kept everyone occupied; exchanging stories about various tribes, Sami had everyone laughing with the tale of how one of his Rites girls tried to bash his head in with a bit of kindling. Then he topped it by claiming it was in the bloodline and telling of the girls’ great grandmothers Rites, where she had tried to bash his head in with half a smoked salmon before he got two steps into the ritual lodge.

Lauri countered with a tale of how he had been talked into initiating a chief’s daughter into womanhood in front of the entire tribe and the girls intended spouse. Adam kept adding little asides about things, including how Lauri had squeaked when the husband to be got excited and joined the festivities. Bailey's crack about Adam just wanting a hard ride that night had the whole room falling over laughing. Lauri countered that he had just been grateful the girl wasn't one of the few who was doomed to change into zombies. Bad enough he'd had to fuck her in front of everyone.

Theon managed to get a comment out through his giggles that he'd always known Lauri was an exhibitionist.

All Lauri did was toast Theon with his drinking bowl and tease back that he was nothing like Theon. Then he followed that up by telling Koira a story about a show they'd played before the Fall. One that Sami half expected he was going to have to explain parts of later to his very much younger than them lover. The one where Risto had had the back seam of his leathers fail on stage and he'd been so lost in the music he hadn't noticed at first. He noticed in a very big hurry when Theon had come up behind him and playfully done several hard grinds into his ass that widened the rip and spread things open to expose his very pale buttocks to the stage. To his mortification his squeal of surprise had been right beside his own, very live microphone and the speakers had blasted it to a crowd of thousands. Adding insult to injury when he's spun around to yell at Theon the camera crew had gotten a good square on shot of his ass, without underwear thanks, and sent it up to the enormous monitors sending their picture out to the crowd.

The fan girls had gone insane.

Elsa had almost died laughing and little Sofia had wanted to know why her daddy was trying to make babies with uncle Theon.

Risto groaned and buried his burning face in Julian's shoulder as Theon's face went meditative.

“I hadn't thought about Elsa is a long time.”

Risto's voice was somewhat muffled as it came half mumbled through Julian's shirt.

“I sometimes name girls after her and Sofia.”

Lauri's face went sad.

“I do that, name people after the folks we lost, especially if they remind me of them.” the small man offered softly

“I think we all do,” said Chriss. “It helps to think they're still out there, somehow, somewhere.”

They ate after that, but none of them had the heart for more conversation.
Sami picked up his guitar and quietly played as everyone settled into their beds, Lauri, Adam and Bailey cuddled together in the bed they'd made for Koira and gradually they settled in to sleep.

Sami blinked when he heard Lauri comment softly from the gloom.

“It's good you still can play. I miss it.”

Sami smiled sadly.

“We'll find you a guitar again Birdie.”

~0~

Squeaks swore and moved when Chai told her to.

Sulee was weeks overdue and had been in labor for the better part of three days.

And the baby wasn't coming.

Chai looked grim and from the silent agony in Brian's face the last time he'd come in with more hot water and clean cloths he couldn't hear the baby's heartbeat anymore.

It was going to be all Chai could do to keep Sulee from dying too. Thomas was going to be heartbroken; he'd been so looking forward to his sister having a child. That none of them were quite sure who was the father, or if it was even a member of the troop was beside the point.

Squeaks' held Sulee as still as she could while Chai did his last ditch knife work trying to save her.

She just hoped to god it worked.

~0~

Levi held Thomas tightly as the whole troop waited. He knew if he let go the stricken man would run to his sisters’ side and that it could be devastating.

Brian had answered his unspoken question with a stricken look and a negative head shake.

Sulee's cries went silent.

It took a long, long time before Squeaks came out with a wrapped bundle. She came directly to Thomas but her eyes were saddened and her face streaked with sweat and tears.

Thomas sobbed as he reached for the bundle and opened it just enough to show the still face of the child he'd so looked forward to meeting in person.

He held the still form and wept as the rest of the camp mourned with him.

For all Chai's desperate efforts they were burning two at dawn.

By midwinter they were mourning three. Thomas caught a fever and in his delirium walked out into a storm searching for his sister and never came back.

Quietly Brian, Levi and Squeaks resolved to move on in spring.

~0~

Winter with three more people was interesting. Not bad, just interesting.
They'd laid in food stocks enough that feeding everyone wasn't going to be a problem. And having more hands to drag ice blocks up into the ice cave was kind of nice. It had taken a quick explanation as to why they were cutting and hauling ice blocks up into their caves, but Lauri had shrugged and nodded after he'd heard. Bailey was all for anything that meant he might get cold beer in summer. All of them had missed beer, the ales that their southern tribes had made were too light for their tastes, even as changed as they were.

On impulse they'd set up a tent to do sauna in on the lake, rather than on shore. Then when they got too hot they jumped in the hole their work had cut in the thick ice. A couple ropes and a few sturdy branches made a ladder of sorts to climb back out and pine boughs kept wet bare feet from freezing to the ice. Jumping in the middle of the lake was less muddy than going in at the lakes edge, but they had to be careful to keep a load of green branches to go under their fire to keep it from melting the ice and putting itself out. As it was the fire pot was steadily going just a little bit deeper into the ice every day.

Koira had thought it was crazy, and had screamed as Sami pulled him in. But he hadn't minded the warming up afterwards.

As things warmed up a little Koira took to hunting from the air again over Sami's vocal protests.

In retaliation Koira left half a dozen ermine, still in their winter white coats, by Sami's pillow for him to wake up to.

His reaction, a yelp and all but levitating out of his own bed, had set Bailey to laughing so hard he fell over.

Sami grumbled and after a bit of thought used the tanned furs as trim for a new tunic for Koira.

The tails though, those got swiped as soon as they were cured for other sorts of play.

Koira had been mortified to wake one night to find Sami had tied his wrists to their bed. What had awakened him was the soft drag of silky fur up and down his cock. A frantic look out into the cavern and he realized Julian was being tormented the same way, only his wrists were being held down by a turned on Risto. A needy plea dragged his eyes over to where Kris was teasing a bound Jonne by dragging just the black tail tip over his lover's chest.

He whimpered and softly begged for Sami to drop the drape, but Sami just smiled down at him.

“Why? You're beautiful when you come, if they decide to watch I want them to see that.” From the heat darkening Sami's eyes Koira knew no amount of begging was going to change Sami's mind.

But he couldn't help pleading, even as warm lips replaced soft fur. He begged as Sami teased him with little licks to the tip, slow sweet suction and delicate nips. Koira writhed, and Sami teased him, slowly dragged out the pleasure until Koira sobbed in need and struggled against the soft leather binding his wrists.

“Come for me Rakas.” Sami whispered then swallowed him all the way down.

Koira let out a needy wail and came.

Then Sami started the torture again, this time licking and nuzzling lower, then lower still until the tip of his tongue was circling Koira's entrance. At first just circling and then lapping over that tender hole, then probing deeper.

Koira thrashed, he'd resisted letting Sami do this before, just on the idea of putting his mouth near
where his body expelled waste. Now though, now he couldn't stop squirming. Now he had a suspicion as to why Sami had been so diligent in their shared bath earlier.

Then Sami hummed.

Koira arched up with a shriek and came again, so hard he briefly lost touch with reality.

He came to with Sami just pushing in and whimpered. He was so sensitive all he could do was shiver and beg. So he begged, begged for Sami to come in him. When Sami hit that one spot that made sparks dance behind Koira's eyes he begged for more and harder. He begged to be untied so he could touch, and when Sami tugged the ties loose he clung to Sami's shoulders and begged for him until the world went white again.

~0~

Lauri shivered, hearing Sami's little lover begging made him horny. Being able to watch Theon and Risto tag teaming a needy Julian made it worse. And that was without being able to see what Kris was doing to Jonne to make him moan like that and hearing Jason's low grunts and growls as he made Chriss gasp and swear.

Sometimes having and active and vivid imagination sucked.

He barely held back a yelp when he felt warm hands on his skin.

“Having trouble?” teased Bailey with a hint of a grin coloring his voice.

Lauri gulped when he felt a whisper of breath on his belly.

“Oh yeah, lots of trouble.” Adam shifted lower and breathed again, directly on Lauri’s aching cock.

Adam had already found the little jar of mint scented oily stuff hidden under the pillow of their borrowed bed. Now Lauri could smell it as Adam and Bailey started touching him, sliding down the loose and worn bark cloth shorts he'd worn to bed and pinching hard at already tight nipples.

Lauri just moaned and let his lovers play. They had been under too much stress for even hurried sex for weeks and now he was more than happy to just let them do whatever they wanted to him. He did grope a hand back to stroke over Bailey's hip and stroke his free hand over Adam's soft dark hair in silent encouragement.

He moaned again when he felt slick fingers teasing his hole, whimpered at the tingle of the oily stuff and panted as Adam slowly teased him open.

The sound of Bailey groaning told him Adam wasn't neglecting him.

Then Lauri bit his lip on a scream, muting it down to needy whimper, as Bailey pushed in and Adam swallowed him down. This made him crazy, even after all these years he didn't know if he should push back or thrust forward. Like always his hips jerked in frantic and needy gyrations as his body tried to get more of both sweet sensations now.

“Open your eyes babe,” whispered Bailey's husky voice in his ear.

Lauri moaned and obeyed, and looked down at when Adam was sucking him just as Adam looked up at him. The look in those warm brown eyes killed him, just as it always did.

Bailey rolled his hips hard, once, twice, and then he swore as his body shuddered.
But Lauri was already there, arching up into Adam's touch with a low cry.

He shivered and reached for Adam as the other man crawled up to snuggle in.

Adam let out a little squeak as Lauri's hand brushed over his spent dick.

“You know I can never hold on when you two go, you look to hot.”

“Mmm,” Lauri agreed as he shifted so they could all snuggle in side by side. Bailey spooned up tight behind him and Adam snuggled up chest to chest and reaching around to touch Bailey.

They were together, warm and fed and sated. They were safe and together.

That was all that mattered.

~0~

When Rites season came around Jonne was glad they had three more warm bodies handy.

Adam liked green and growing things just as much as he did, and while Bailey didn't know plants from weeds he'd happily help haul water for the gardens just like Koira would. Extra hands meant he could plant and tend more beds. More planted beds meant more fresh food and more vegetables dry or pickle to store for later use.

They'd had to do a run to a spot Janne knew in the desert for a load of fine sand to keep whole root vegetable in, but if it worked half as well as Adam said it would they'd have some fresh veggies in the middle of winter over the dried ones or the ones they'd kept in loose woven baskets hung from the ceiling of their cold cavern. That alone made it worth the trip, and they'd continued on to the coast to harvest more seafood again while Bailey and Adam had filled packsacks with clean dry sand from the pit of fine white powder just inland. Jason was all for having a stock of plain beach sand to put on their walkways in winter. The ice this last winter had made navigating the walk under the waterfall far more interesting than he felt it needed to be. Whatever had hit Lauri's fisher folk hadn't wrapped around the coastline to hit up here. Adam hadn't smelled anything like whatever it had been further south and east.

It had taken a fair bit of effort, and two separate trips but they were able to fill a rough enclosure with the fine white sand to bury root vegetables in and another larger and less spread out enclosure with the coarser beach sand. On the way back both times Janne had gone hunting edible fungi and they had stopped to cull through the orchards they found. Jason had sworn at them when they went back a third time and filled both smaller wagons with oranges. Then they did a mad scramble to preserve what they could in a rough marmalade and a thick gelled paste that dried to a leather-like consistency and was so tart it was hard to eat more than a few bites at a time. For keeping winter sickness at bay Jason thought it would be one of the best possible things, especially if they melted a bit of the stuff in Echinacea and pine needle tea.

Bailey spent the time he wasn't helping with the gardens fishing, and even the big, smelly and ugly catfish he brought home were put to use in the compost piles. The smaller ones were put, still alive, in the water lily and irrigation ponds to eat mosquitoes. If they grain fed them as well they'd be edible later, once they'd gotten a bit bigger. The other, more edible fish he brought home got handed over to Birdie to stuff with herbs and bake in clay.

Birdie loved to cook, and once he knew they had a yeast starter going he happily fed it and ground grain in their small stone hand mill to make flour. Flour and starter and honey or sugar meant bread, and better bread than they'd bothered much with before. After a few repeats of proper loaves
over flat pan bread Sami promised to bring home a better set of grindstones to make better, finer flour with.

After a little experimentation and a look through some of the other precious books Jason had carefully stored away they built an oven to do proper baking in.

It wasn’t a quick project. First they made hundreds of clay bricks and fired them the same way Jonne and Risto fired their crockery and storage pots. Then they had to figure out a way to build a shelf to set loaves on to bake. A few large pieces of smooth slate fixed that problem without having to use any of their precious stores of metal rods to hold up the shelf. The first attempt smoked them all out of the cavern and took several days to clear the smell of burned bread out, but three revisions later and they had a real bread oven in the small cave the backed up to the living cavern. In winter having another warm wall would be a nice side benefit. All they had to do was remember to bring in the wood to fuel it. Jonne already had built a set of simple tongs to peel the flatbread off the walls and a rough paddle to pull loaves out.

The little side cavern had been too small for much of anything and had a natural vent to the sky that they had covered over with stone before just to keep the worst of the rain and snow out. Now they built the same sort of raised lid that their chimney had and built the oven into it. The vent was just large enough that Koira or Jonne could get into it to scrub it clean of soot if they needed to.

They’d had to do a bit of late hunting to make sure they had hides enough to make the new additions clothing suited to the winters. The wild cattle they’d found had been a bit lean, in late spring it was to be expected, but had helped provide some hides and the horn to finally make a good lot of spoons and the new ladles like Jonne had been wanting. The meat they either dried to use as traveling food later or made into rough sausage that was then smoked. Only a little got eaten fresh, like the liver and heart. They didn’t have enough reindeer hides for everyone to get more than one good change, but Sami had a plan and when he went north for his rounds he took Kris and Birdie with him.

When they came back all three were full fed and their horses were heavily laden. Jonne had asked and that night after they ate Sami told the changers what he’d done.

Koira and Jonne had helped Sami pack up some of the more interesting trade goods they’d been collecting and some of the odd and ends that had been collecting dust in their storage caverns, and he’d taken the gear to do a bit of hunting. Between the trade with his people and a few tribes even further north and hunting they’d managed to collect a respectable lot of summer reindeer pelts. Even better Sami had been able to trade tanned skins for green ones and some of the smoked and dried meat from both the reindeer they’d killed and the jerky from the cattle hunt that spring. And he’d gotten more than just summer reindeer hides in trade; he’d gotten winter sheep fleeces as well.

The coral and glass they’d collected from further south had traded very well in the cold northlands and they’d come home with more than travois loads of meat and fur. They came home with two small pull carts, one filled with jars of distilled oil for the lamps padded between folds of soft woolen cloth and the other filled with heavy waxed and wrapped rounds of cheese buried in layers of tough canvas.

Going east they’d been able to trade for worked steel from one from the few groups that still could make it. Jonne had been happy to see a large grass scythe and smaller hand scythes in the mix of assorted tools Sami had managed to get. That would make harvesting the grain fields Koira had shown them much easier come late summer and early fall. Koira had been working with a piece of flint held in his hand last summer. Then Jonne had almost cried to see packets of good steel sewing needles and awls in the small pile of tools. Birdie was speechless when he found the set of steel
mill wheels hidden in the bottom of one of the wagons; he hadn't known Sami was trying to get a
set of those. He'd seen them and been wistful, but thought they were beyond their reach.

They'd celebrated with a round of Jason's beer and some cheese toast made on the first batch of
bread from flour ground in their new mill.

Then Sami had curled up with Koira and celebrated in a bit more personal of a fashion down by
one of their swimming holes.

Sami had plans for later that summer. He hoped to get all of his Hunt full fed at one of the humans
irregular summer gatherings. The changers would have to either stay in wolf shape or lurk on the
outskirts of things, but with a little care they might be able to get full fed, do a bit of trade and
maybe learn why there were so many groups moving in from the eastern part of the continent.

He sighed and nuzzled Koira's hair as he lay back on their pad of an old hide wrapped around
summer grasses and watched the stars as his lover slept.

He'd have all his family together again soon, so life was good.

~0~

Lauri wished for the tenth time that day that his brother hadn't wedded him to a River Woman and
then handed him over to her tribe.

It wasn't living on boats that got to him; they still put in almost every night and slept in lean-to type
tents. Only occasionally, if it was particularly calm and clear or there was some danger on shore
would they sleep on the boats. Even in winter they tended to sleep on land, but then it was in a
small collection of caves that they had used for generations. It wasn't the diet of fish; he'd gotten
used to that, and to fishing and harvesting water plants and things that grew close to the shoreline.
He'd even gotten rather partial to fish in the wild rice that grew in almost every marsh they passed.
He'd adjusted just as Janne had to the different types of labor. Janne even had adjusted to being
called Jay as the River folk couldn't seem to pronounce the other correctly. Half the time he
answered to Larry without thinking, because his new tribe had problems with Lauri.

Aipo hadn't done so well and one trip down the river he'd gone over the side and not come back up
again.

His wife hadn't seemed too bothered, but she had set of twin girls off him and the elders couldn't
say anything if she took them and married again, to a proper River man this time.

And that was what bothered him.

Lauri hadn't been able to get his river wife pregnant, and it wasn't from lack of trying. The lack of a
baby a year after she'd had to marry him made Esa a vicious and sharp tongued shrew. After two
she'd refused to have him in her bed at all, so now his only relief came when he touched himself or
the rare times he and Jay were off alone and both horny.

Jay's wife was in a similar state, but Jay was her second spouse and she'd had three children from
her first in very close succession. So she was glad of the break and the fact that Jay was willing to
help with the three little boys. Lauri sometimes envied the man simply because he still could get
laid when the boys were all asleep, even if the youngest still wanted to sleep with them even
though he'd finally been weaned.

They had just made the trip upriver and were making the turn back down when Lauri realized they
were going through his old tribes territory. Ty had been talking about them stopping at some
gathering of land folk in a few days so they'd been doing a bit more fishing than usual. But his mind wasn't on the line in his hands.

Lauri blinked in shock when he saw a red brown wolf staring at him from the riverbank. When he looked again the beast was still there, almost grinning at him in the same way Koira used to do.

Just thinking about his old friend made his eyes sting.

The last time he'd crossed paths with his old tribe they'd been under the leadership of Urtho. And the story he had to tell of how he'd come into that responsibility was one that made Lauri sick to hear it. Aele apparently had been possessed of some evil spirit and had gone to rob a spirit well of its offerings. Every man, horse and dog he'd taken on his mad escapade had been slaughtered by angry dark spirits and for some mad reason Aele had taken Koira.

It hurt to think of Koira taken by the Dark. Urtho had been fairly certain at least some of the men had been dragged down to the Underworld by the spirits, there hadn't been anything left that could be identified as having been them when the tribe had found the aftermath and gathered up what was left of the bones to burn. He and Janne had huddled together and cried a little at the thought of their friend suffering such a horrible fate.

Then his throat closed over, there on the bank beside a huge bear-like black wolf, was a slender white gold shape, sharply highlighted against the larger animals' dark bulk.

He closed his eyes just as Esa decided to start in on him again. He felt the blow to his shoulder and wasn't set to take it. He heard Jay yell as he tumbled over the side of the boat and landed in the water with a splash.

At least his line had been tied to the boat and he'd managed to not tangle up in it. Jay would be able to reel it in and rescue the valuable hook. Metal hooks were hard to come by, and losing one would be very bad. Bad enough that fish sometimes stole the hooks, to lose one thanks to carelessness, well he was already getting looks of pity from his fellow tribesmen, he didn't need any more added on to it.

A breath later and he was spluttering to the surface from the looks of things Ty had had enough of Esa's antics for one day and was turning the boats in to shore. So he just started swimming to shore as well rather than back to a boat to climb back aboard.

When he got there none of the wolves was still there.

He wasn't sure if he should be happy or not that they were just wolves.

~0~

"Esa, you know the law, three years without children before a divorcement. La-ry has been dutiful to you, coming to your bed alone and sleeping alone when you turn him away, which has been often and often of late. You have broken the pact you made with him over and over dallying with others without his consent and I think the spirits chose to punish you."

There was a rumble around the central fire as the others murmured agreement. Esa had taken lovers at any stop that crossed the path of another tribe. Not that that was something that was strictly forbidden, just that it was normally a tactic undertaken with the understanding of both spouses. And it was always done with the full intent of diversifying their gene pool. Quite often there was a mutual understanding with a set of land bound spouses where for one or two nights they just swapped wives. Any children that resulted were treasured, but made aware of their origins; just in
case they ran across the tribe their gift parent came from. There were some horror stories of siblings marrying not knowing that their new spouse was so closely related and of how the resulting children tended to get taken over by the most evil of dark spirits.

Esa wasn't consulting anyone, and didn't care what Lauri thought or felt. She was just baby hungry and didn't much care what it took to get one. Lauri was just relieved they hadn't come across a tribe where there had been a baby lying unattended, she might have tried stealing it.

Jay settled beside Lauri and gave him a gentle nudge as he offered of a bit of fresh baked fish wrapped in a round of flat bread.

“What rattled you that she was able to push you over?” he asked under Esa's strident shrilling protests of innocence and attempts to lay blame elsewhere. She wasn't blaming Lauri this time, at least not yet.

“I thought I saw a wolf like Koira.”

Jay's eyes closed in memory of their friend.

“That would have gotten me too,” he said softly.

Only the dogs starting to bark got everyone's attention away from Esa's histrionics and back toward the shadowy figure standing at the edge of the circle of firelight.

A soft cough, the polite sort used to gain a person’s attention, came from the figure as he stepped into the light.

There was a rippling gasp and silence.

Lauri couldn't stop the shocked question that flooded past his lips.

“Christus?”

~0~

They were going to stay camped for a while, long enough to do Rites for all the boys and girls who were approaching adulthood. Being passed into adulthood a little early meant they might find spouses at this gathering, at the very least they'd be able to find lovers and maybe a few of the girls would come back pregnant. That was the hope anyway.

Lauri was just mind boggled that the same Old Soul who had watched over his wedding rite had somehow found him when his wife was ready to tear him apart. And given the last time he’d crossed paths with his birth tribe, they’d told him of another Old Soul that had been doing Rites so it left him feeling oddly off balance that Christus had come back from wherever Old Souls went when they were tired just in time to find him.

He'd dreamed of this man, many times since his manhood ceremony. He’d dreamed impossible things, of music the likes of which he'd never heard before and bright lights that weren't stars and of crowds larger than he'd imagined possible. He’d dreamed of happy crowds, screaming for them, reaching up to touch him and Christus and two other men, a red head with snake hair and a tiny blond. Men he didn't know, but his dream self knew like brothers. Seeing him brought all the good dreams to the front of his mind where he couldn't just ignore them.

So he'd gone walking to clear his head.
To his surprise womanhood Rites were individual, and he found himself watching Mara's by accident. It had left him a bit flustered watching Christus turn a girl into a gasping mess of feminine pleasure. It wasn't that he hadn't done similar things to women of his own tribe playing around and even to his wife in the first few months of their marriage. But it was something else to watch another man loving a woman until she was so wrung out all she could do was sleep.

Watching was bad enough, but the very candid discussion of what was and was not okay and of how to help prevent an unwanted pregnancy and how to make sure a wanted one had the best chance of a healthy baby made him squirm in place. The talk he remembered getting hadn't seemed nearly so embarrassing and he remembered blushing red in the ritual tent and being glad the firelight would hide it.

Once Mara had been tucked into her furs of passage Lauri found himself face to face with a very amused Old Soul. Why was that smile so familiar?

“Walk with me.”

Lauri gulped, that didn't sound like a request, so he walked with the slender man with his odd bi-colored hair and chiming shell and silver earrings.

“Someone has been missing you terribly in the last year.”

Lauri blinked in confusion. Then he spun in place when he heard a voice he hadn't heard since the day before his wedding. His name, his name pronounced correctly by someone other than Jay.

“Lauri?”

He blinked in shock, if the pale golden wolf had shaken him, seeing the white blond hair and green eyes and those familiar sharp but delicate features had him breathless. He reached a shaking hand to touch that familiar fine pale hair.

“K, Koira? Are you a spirit?”

The blond stepped closer and reached up to cup Lauri's hand against his own face.

Warm, solid, real. Lauri could even feel the faint tickle of Koira's fine hair over the back of his hand. Hair that was longer than he remembered and neatly combed and decorated with small feathers and tiny bird shaped amber, shell, stone and gold ornaments.

Ornaments Aele would never have allowed Koira to keep, but somehow they reassured Lauri that whoever had had his friend these last years treasured him.

Sami sighed and shuffled a little in place as he watched the reunion. It was all he could do to just nod at Kris when he came skipping around to where he, Janne, and Jonne were hiding.

“So, what do you think?”

Jonne's voice was thick with remembered emotion.

“He looks like Larry, he, he moves like Larry. He even sounds like him.”

Kris nodded.

“He and Janne both have the vampire gene.”
“And you let them live?” hissed Sami in shock.

Kris jabbed Sami hard in the ribs with a pointy elbow.

“Yes. I think Jonne has a point to his reincarnation theory. We found Christian thirty years ago.”

Sami’s voice was thick with pain.

“And he was still human, an old human wandering off alone to die when we found him.”

“But he knew Theon when he saw him, called him Torsti and smiled.”

“And Thee had to hold him as he died a second time. Had to bury his best friend a second time. How do you know these are the right people and we aren't seeing what we want to see?”

Jonne’s voice was thick.

“Jay and Larry had the gene the first time around. Jay just took a building down to save us. Even we can't survive a burning building landing on top of our heads.”

Sami winced, and then winced again at Janne's soft voice.

“Larry was on the other side of a falling bridge. He got us across but then the center dropped out and we couldn't go back for him. And the river was on fire, he went in the water but we never saw him come out.” Janne swallowed hard and was clearly blinking back tears. “We never even saw him come up, we’d have found a way to get him if he'd come up.”

“What was on the other side?” Sami looked like he'd rather die than ask, but the question was out.

“Zombies.” Janne turned and looked at the pair getting reacquainted in the starlit clearing. “He smells the same. Under all the fish anyway.” He turned and looked behind him and jumped.

“Nakki?”

Sami knew that voice, even though he hadn't heard it in more years than he'd bothered to really count.

And no-one called Janne 'Nakki' anymore, not even Jonne and Kris. Then again no one called Kris 'Jukka' anymore either. Well unless they wanted Kris to pout and hit them anyway.

A head of dark hair bleached white on top by constant exposure to the sun peered into their hiding place.

“Nakki?” The voice repeated and Sami turned in time to seen Janne lurch into motion just in time to catch the other, taller man as his knees came undone.

“I wasn't dreaming.”

Sami groaned as Janne staggered under the other man's weight as he passed out.

“What the hell was that supposed to mean?”

Janne was too busy getting Jay to the ground safely to bother answering him.

~0~
It was a little disquieting to learn that Larry and Jay had been having strange dreams ever since they could remember. Dreams of violence and fear and trying to get people they cared about away from some terrible, unseen threat. Jay remembered fire, and had been unreasonably wary of the fire pits as a small child. Even now he treated fire with an extraordinary caution. But given Jonne's firm belief that he'd died by fire; that was understandable.

They also had more pleasant dreams. Dreams of the band, of playing for screaming and happy crowds. Dreams of just traveling together on the bus, or recording and just screwing around together. Dreams of love and friendship.

Larry had seen a guitar for the first time on one of the boats, but only one man knew how to play it, and even he wasn't very good. Larry hands had itched to hold it right from the first. And when he finally got the chance it was like his hands knew what to do. At first he couldn't play for very long, or very well, but it came back very quickly and once Esa had started refusing him access to their marital bed he'd taken comfort in playing tunes he remembered from his dreams.

But they'd sounded different from the songs in the dreams of lights and screaming crowds, and it wasn't just because the strings weren't the metal his fingers said they should be. They sounded more like the songs in the dreams where it was he, Christus and the blond working together.

He remembered a voice singing, a voice that was deeper than the blonds' small size and frail appearance implied.

Jonne decided it was safer for now if he stayed hidden. But he had been able to duck away and hide when Jay had found Janne, Sami and Janne hadn't.

Jay had already seen Janne, and for some reason they had clicked together. Clicked so well that even when Janne was in wolf form Jay was comfortable just sitting there and stroking Janne's head as he and Lauri talked to Sami and Koira.

Sami had bitten both of them and confirmed they had the vampire gene. But only after Lauri had confronted him about how cuddly Koira was being. Janne had been terribly amused, as had Jonne in his hiding spot, when they heard Lauri pointedly threaten to geld Sami if he hurt Koira. Sami had been annoyed enough he'd pounced, growled and bitten Lauri. After Lauri had gone boneless and come hard from the effects of the bite, Sami had growled at Jay where he'd been sitting snickering. Jay had just offered his wrist without any other comment, but he'd come in his trousers just as hard and fast as Lauri had.

They might both carry the gene, but neither was going to make their Final Change any time soon.

So they talked, Sami somewhat reluctantly deciding at this point they had a pass as far as being vampires in waiting was concerned. Killing them now would just cause problems, and stir up trouble he didn't need.
In the end when they left, Jay and Lauri stayed with the River People. But both knew they had another place to go if things got too unpleasant to abide by.

Sami watched from a hiding place under the sheltering arms of a willow and made sure that if Koira needed to be held back he'd be right there to do so.

But Koira just bit his lip and watched as the boats slipped downstream toward the summer gathering for humans and away from him.

The boats were out of sight when Theon slipped up panting slightly from having run to find them.

“We may have a bit of a problem.”

~0~

Sami was snarling and ready to hurt something.

Another small group of vampires was trying to move into their territory. There were only three according to Theon, and they were young enough that they couldn't move freely in daylight, but they were still trying to move in and set up shop. Worse they weren't trying to do it as Old Souls and protectors; they were trying to do it as Dark Ones, predators and killers.

From the accents they'd come from north and east, probably what had been Russia proper way back before the world had fallen apart. Clearly they were a group that had escaped their people's versions of the Rites, from the sounds of things by simply realizing they were different and running away before anyone realized what they were up to. One it sounded like he'd undergone Final Change and fled when he woke up tied in his own funerary rack with the vultures circling in to land. He talked about the horrors of waking up and burning, something that kept the other two vampires rather jumpy about sunlight. The others it was less clear.

More than likely they'd just been let go, their tribes probably had enough folks vanishing through simple accidents that not being able to find a body wasn't unusual. And most Hunting packs like their's tended to leave loners be as long as they kept on moving out of their territories and didn't cause to much trouble on the way.

Well unlike Sami. He watched and if a loner proved to have bad habits they tended to have accidents of their own.

Their few somewhat friendly visitors assumed Theon was Hunt leader; he was the one with a changer lover, an Omega to his Alpha. At least until very recently anyway, but two or three or even ten years was nothing to their kind now. And none of them was quite sure why they all deferred to Sami anyway, he always asked for opinions before they made any important decision. But other vampires looked at Theon and jumped to conclusions based on his still rather flamboyant personality.

It was a safe, sensible and completely erroneous assumption.

One that was going to get these three little idiots just as permanently dead as it had dozens upon dozens of their predatory predecessors. In a crisis Sami took charge and they all followed his lead and the Sami of now was a good bit more brutally practical than the Sammy of 2012 or even 2014 had been.
Sami wasn't inclined to let rogue elements stay alive to cause problems later. He took a rather more active view on how their kind was supposed to protect what was left of humanity. He wasn't about to let a group of idiots hunt the humans in his territory. They were people, not mindless meat. Even if they had to drain a few before they became zombies, they were still people. They were still his people.

Other Hunts just killed off pre-emergent zombies. Letting vampires and changers shift or not when their time came. Given that over a thousand zombies would pop up before there was one changer or vampire helped a little. Just because a person was both with the genes to be a vampire or changer didn't mean that they'd ever shift over, more than half that Sami knew about never had the traumatic event that caused the change and liked and died as normal, if childless humans. The fact that young vampires were notoriously fragile when it came to sunlight and changers were delicate with silver and Shift Sickness also kept the populations down to manageable levels.

Crushing falls, bleeding out and even drowning could and did take out a fair section of newborn vampires and changers. Most died by actively trying to kill themselves, but some died of simple stupidity. Stupidity killed, even the non-humans. Just having the right genetics didn't mean the person carrying them wasn’t still an idiot.

But Sami wasn't about to take the risk that a group of young stupid vampires couldn't make it simply because there were enough of them to counter idiocy with numbers.

Janne had pithily called it the 'never underestimate stupid people in large groups' principle of extermination. Even idiots sometimes had good ideas, and if the group was big enough one would be thinking clearly enough to keep the whole group alive.

Three wasn't a large group exactly, but they'd managed so far. And they had managed to freak Theon's territory of humans out badly enough that they were dropping some unseasonably large propitiating offerings down the pits. They were scared enough they were leaving offerings that might leave them hungry or even starving come the darker half of winter.

And scared, starving humans in large groups were at least as dangerous as stupid people, sometimes more. Even being scared half stupid didn't mean that the group didn't still have the habits of teamwork still on their side.

They'd have to keep an eye on things, and maybe play benevolent spirits and lead hunters to caches of food if it was needed. God knew they had been building up a careful surplus and Koiras was a huge help on the knowing where to gather things end of the deal. That and Jason knew about how to keep food related illnesses at bay, sprouts in winter and pine needle tea being only the two most frequent tricks he used to keep them all healthy. Now they had enough manpower that they could regularly do concerted harvests from the fruit trees and vines they knew about, dried fruit, jam and fruit preserved in honey were all ways they would use to stay healthy come winter. Though they have to make sure to pass out some of the damned orange fruit leather stuff, it was horrendously tart and would be good to keep winter sickness at bay.

Risto was keeping an eye on the young idiots with Julian's help, so at least they knew where they were and that they mostly staying where they could be easily followed. Julian's wolf shape was fairly inconspicuous and he could move really damned fast if he was motivated to. His tribes being threatened was more than enough motivation.

That was the good news.

The bad news was the trio was also moving fast and they had a collection of humans that appeared to be helping them. Young humans, most barely old enough for Rites.
Worse they had a zombie chained up in a rough cage and appeared to be using it to terrorize people.

If they kept up like they were, Larry and Jay might just find themselves changing over before their time in the middle of a bloody massacre. Because the idiot vampire-lings were easily in range of the summer gathering, and from an overheard comment were planning on settling in and hunting from it. And the one sure-fire way of forcing a vampire’s change was blood loss.

If there were two potentials from just the one tribe odds were high that there were others from the tribes that Sami’s group didn’t watch over.

A terrified newborn would only make the chaos worse. A panicked baby changer would cause a riot. And more than likely either one would end up ripped to bits or burned alive by their families.

~0~

Sami swore softly under his breath as he stared down at the clutch of vampires and vampire wanna-be's around the badly built and smoking bonfire below their ridge top perch.

This had just gotten a lot more complicated.

For one thing there were more than three vampires, there were six. They were all very young, Sami guessed the oldest might be twenty or thirty and might have been a vampire at most ten or fifteen years, and they had been transported in enclosed wooden wagons by their human minions. It looked like each vampire had his own personal wagon. Add to that there were almost twenty young humans and the rough cage that held the zombie. Sami swallowed hard when he noticed it was a rather well fed, almost fat looking zombie, not that that little detail kept the thing from reaching though the bars of its cage and shrieking every time someone walked remotely nearby.

He really didn't want to think about how many people had died to make the thing so plump.

There weren't any changers, and that was so odd that it screamed at Sami.

It looked like they were preparing for something; they'd been camped here at least a few days from the pile of refuse just outside the camp. The little idiots were going to have issues with scavengers if they didn't pull their heads out of their collective asses and bury or burn their waste, or at the very least dump it further away from their camp.

It also looked like none of them was particularly good at routine tasks like cooking or hunting. None of their clothing fit terribly well, as if it had been picked up from someone much larger or smaller and inexpertly resized. The fire smoked rather badly and even the wagons looked to be in rather poor repair. The wheels looked good at this distance but everything else looked rather scary, the cart with the zombie in it had an unhealthy list to one side that made Sami think the axle had broken and been jerry-rigged. The horses looked to be well fed, but that could just mean they didn't move much once they found a good hunting territory and the animals had plenty of time to browse and graze. But adding to the general feel of ineptness Sami could see at least one animal had open sores from where his harness didn't fit properly.

Rather ominously though, their weapons were in excellent shape. And they had very good quality steel boar spears and long knives, shorter daggers and a few things that made Sami think of ceremonial swords they were so heavy and overly decorated. Being over-decorated wasn't going to keep them from being effective chopping weapons though.

But there weren't any bows, no arrows, no slings, no ranged weapons of any kind, not even simple
hunting spears. From what he could see there weren't any simple single edged cooking or skinning
knives, only the larger double edged varieties. When the humans weren't foraging there wasn't any
other work getting done. No baskets got woven to gather in, nothing was made, and even the
cooking was inexpertly done with everything seeming to go into one pot to make a meal.

“That troop has got to go.”

“Yeah,” Sami agreed wholeheartedly with Jason's dry comment.

“What are they?” asked Koira in confusion as he watched one of the vampires walk through the
humans and get fawned over by two of the girls.

“Vampires.”

“They don't act like you do.”

Theon snorted.

“Okay, baby vampires with delusions of grandeur.”

Sami had to snicker as Koira puzzled that out.

“And the others?”

“Vampire groupies, idiots who want to be like us.”

Koira blinked.

“Being like you isn't bad. But they aren't doing it right.”

Sami grimaced as the vampire took one of the girls by the hair and pulled her head back so he
could bite. The other girl crumpled to her knees and appeared to be watching avidly. In fact several
of the humans looked to be watching with a mix of desire and envy.

Not a good mix.

It was possible for humans to get addicted to a vampires bite, it had been discovered pretty quickly
after the bombs dropped that the sexual high made some humans do some very stupid things. It
was something a few predatory vampires had taken ruthless advantage of, at least until the civil
patrols caught up to them.

Worse Sami could see marks at both girls’ throats and wrists that said they were being fed from
frequently. Marks that any vampire with sense would lick closed so they healed quickly, cleanly
and didn't scar. It was a trick they used all the time to stay undetected once they'd learned they
could do it. Sami had figured out the trick, by accident, within a few weeks of his change. He'd had
a lone Civil patrol idiot get obnoxious to him and he'd lost his temper and bitten him, then he'd
lapped at the punctures as his brain frantically tried to think of a way to cover up his mistake. To
his surprise and faint relief the wounds had closed over, he'd then dragged the twit out into a public
spot yelling his head off and left him to the less than tender mercies of his fellows as he'd slipped
away in the confusion. But he'd learned something and made sure the rest of his people knew it as
well. This lot clearly either didn't know you could lick a wound closed or just didn't much care.
That implied a number of things that Sami was profoundly unhappy with.

He was thinking it was the second option as he watched the vampire just toss the girl away from
him and kick the second fawning girl away as he stalked off.
“We need to thin their numbers.”

Sami grimaced again. And after resting a hand on Jason's shoulder Sami left he and Chriss to watch over the camp as he scooted back and headed back to their own camp.

“Okay, ideas?”

“Pick off the humans as they go foraging in daylight. The vampires don't seem to be out in sunlight at all.” Julian offered immediately.

“Why? Not why pick people off, but, why are they not all out in daylight?” Koira's question made Sami blink, they never really had mentioned the weaknesses of their species to Koira. Oh, he knew they needed blood; Sami had fed off him the winter before, and had demonstrated the pleasure it could bring if he was buried inside Koira when he bit. But all of them were old enough that sunlight wasn't a huge issue as long as it wasn't the concentrated light of a desert in summer. They might not always like it, but they all could be out in full sun. They might still burn, but it wasn't likely to blister or kill.

Theon spoke up.

“We don't do sunlight very well, especially if we're young. You remember how we burned when we were out the summer before last?”

“For the trip west?” Koira asked then nodded his understanding when Theon nodded yes.

“Young vampires it's worse, a lot worse. It can kill very easily, so they tend to avoid sunlight even after they'd gotten tough enough for it to not hurt so much.” Theon twitched a little in memory. We're just like humans, something nasty happening when we're young tends to make deep marks in the memory.”

Koira grimaced but nodded his understanding and then asked, “But you only got red. How can that kill?”

Risto winced.

“We can burn until our skin blackens and peels back, Koira. And we keep burning until even our bones go up. Us old farts it just takes a long time.” Memory made his voice tight with old pain. But Risto had spent several weeks in a quarantine camp in Helsinki before he'd been able to escape and meet back up with the rest of them. Not even Theon knew everything he'd seen in those few weeks. Just now he had an unpleasant suspicion as to the source of some of Risto's nightmares.

Koira went white and burrowed tightly into Sami's side with a little whimper.

Sami just tucked Koira close as he listened to other ideas and the Hunt formed its plans.

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Jason hated hunting humans, but in this case they really didn't have much choice. After three days of watching it was pretty well understood that the youngsters wanted to be here, however bad here was. It made him more than a little sick, mostly because it implied that here was better than where they'd come from. He hunkered down and slowly belly stalked a boy who was clumsily digging for edible roots. For all their fancy weapons none of them had a decent hoe or even a good sharpened and fire hardened stick, the kid was using a broken branch that he'd clearly picked up off the ground.
Worst part what he was digging up wasn't really very edible this early in the summer. The leaves would be better at this time of year; only in the fall would the roots be fat enough to be worth the trouble of digging. If he wanted edible roots the clover he was discarding would have more value right now, and even those were thin.

He closed his eyes for a moment then opened them again and lunged forward.

The poor kid didn't even have the time to scream before Jason had his slender neck in his jaws and was clamping down.

A single wet crunch and it was over.

Jason shifted and held the kid cradled in his arms as he died. It was all he could do as the light died behind those frightened brown eyes. He wished with all his heart they could have found a way to convince the followers to leave, could have found them homes somewhere else, with some other group. The kid didn't taste of vampire or changer and was old enough that if he'd had the zombie gene it would most likely have changed him already. But Jason had seen the fanatical looks in their eyes when one of the vampires talked to them. They were indoctrinated and would stay until they died.

Gently he closed the poor kids’ eyes, dropped a sorrowful kiss on his forehead and laid his too thin and heavily scarred body back down in the grasses and shifted back to wolf form to stalk another helpless child. Other than the crushed throat and broken neck the poor kid looked like he'd just laid down for a nap.

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Sami winced as a shrill shriek sounded far too close for comfort.

One of the poor kids had gone looking for her friend and found her dead, her throat crushed by massive jaws. He knew Jason was the most effective, simply because he was so damn big in wolf form.

They'd thinned the humans down pretty sharply, by almost half if Sami's count was correct, but they didn't seem to notice if one of their number was missing. It was like each kid had one person or one vampire they associated with and otherwise the rest of the group could go hang.

How the hell had they gotten this far?

It was just getting dark enough that the vampires were starting to be active enough to be a hazard, so Sami watched as one of them came out to see what the fuss was about.

He hissed upon seeing the damage and cuffed the girl before dragging her away from her dead friend by her hair.

Janne cocked his head and pricked his ears and listened intently as the vampire hissed something to one of the others, the one Sami suspected was the eldest and default hunt leader. Janne didn't understand everything they said, but he was able to get enough that they could make general plans.

When the older vampire hissed and stood to stalk out of camp towards the fallen girl, Janne started scooting backwards. After a moment Sami followed.

Once they were back on the ridge Janne changed and looked down at the disordered camp with a pensive look on his face.
“Bad?”

“I know why they don't keep changers now.”

Sami suddenly had a very bad feeling about this. Janne's eyes when he looked up and continued just confirmed that feeling. He knew that sick and unhappy look, he'd worn it himself back when they'd first been setting up, mostly he'd worn it when he was dealing with something he hated but couldn't fix. Silver poisoned cubs for one, and starving and abandoned kids for another. Starving, abused or abandoned kids they could do something productive about now. Sometimes before all they had been able to do was limit their suffering, there simply hadn't been the resources to nurse kids who'd been starved or beaten literally half to death back to health.

“Our leader thinks changers are vermin, abominations, and need to die. He sounds pretty sure a changer has been doing the killing, just from how they are finding the bodies.”

“Ouch.” Jonne winced.

“Joy.” Sami belly crawled back out to the edge of the ridge and looked down at the small clutch of vampires sweeping the area around their camp and finding some of Jason's other unfortunate victims. Sami had to swallow hard when he saw all that was done to the poor kids remains was that they were stripped of everything useful and dumped into the central fire pit. No ceremony or anything, and the one girl who was still crying over her friend was sharply cuffed and then roughly fed from before being left in a limp heap beside the fire. Given she was still bleeding and Sami had seen her being fed from before, she might not survive the night.

He was going to have to warn Julian, Jason and Koira to be very careful.

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Theon had taken out one of the weaker vampires a bit after midnight, and before Sami could warn everyone to be very careful of the other Hunts leader. His method was painfully straightforward; he had snuck up behind the poor sap and drained him dry, then removed his head to be sure he wouldn't recover. Even bled out it could take hours for a vampire to actually die. Theon knew that if a bled out vampire was found quickly and fed he could recover. They'd learned the hard way one winter when Kris had been swept off a ledge and had bled almost out before they'd gotten down to his side. Jonne had been insistent that they try and feed him; his actions had taught them it was possible for one of them to live through that kind of blood loss. If they wanted to be sure of a vampire’s death other methods would have to be employed.

If losing his humans pissed the other Hunt's de facto leader off losing one of his vampire minions enraged him. And he sent the surviving vampires off on an errand. The remaining humans were either too used to obeying or too scared to try and run away.

Sami felt sick as he watched the Hunt drag four very scared humans back into the light of the fire. He reached for his bow when he saw a familiar face in the reflected light and how Jay recoiled in horror from the fire's gruesome contents. The three girls just clung to each other and cried as they were shoved in front of the hunt leader.

Risto swore under his breath and reached for his own weapons. Those girls weren't going to be turned into good little Hunt followers; they were too old, they were tonight's main course.

Two of those girls had only just been made women, he remembered the little blond.

“This has to stop.”
Thank god Birdie, Adam and Bailey were minding Satama; it was bad enough that Koirä and Julian were involved.

Sami stood and set one of his heaviest arrows to the string just as the other Hunt leader grabbed one of the girls and dragged her to her feet. He swore, his best disabling shot was blocked. Sami changed targets and took one of the other vampires down with a shot to the base of the skull.

It wouldn't kill one of them, not immediately anyway. From the looks of things and the other two arrows that sprouted from a pair of the Hunt's surviving humans, Theon and Risto had been watching, waiting for any kind of a signal. Well, waiting or had been about to do what Sami just had.

Janne shifted and was heading down the ridge as fast as his paws would take him. And Sami could see Jason's massive bulk taking down another of the rapidly declining number of Hunt humans. He needed to get down there, and even his speed made the short trip feel like it took forever.

The group was disorganized, and only just getting themselves armed when he got there and Jason had taken down another of the kids. Julian was standing between one of the vampires and the kidnapped girls with his hackles up, and Jay had gathered his wits enough to grab a burning branch from the charnel pit to use as a weapon. It was up to him and Julian to keep the three hysterical girls safe, at least until the rest of the Hunt got into a position to help.

He didn't think Risto or Theon would be able to get a clean shot now; there were too many friends down in the mix and the firelight wasn't steady enough for good visibility.

There was a brief moment of stillness as the other Hunt leader sized him up. Then an order and Sami realized that maybe his first target should have been that damned zombie.

The other Hunt leader laughed at him, and clearly didn't much care that the zombie would rip apart his own people just as readily as it would tear apart Sami's.

But then he had his hands full trying to keep the zombie away from the girls. Arrows to the joints only slowed the thing down, but he'd blinded it with a lucky shot across the eyes and nose so now it was hunting by scent and sound, which were both muddled by its own blood and from how many people were around.

Jay had figured out quickly that the zombie didn't like fire. But that only kept the zombie at bay, not the dwindling number of humans or the vampires. They were winning right now, but Sami wasn't happy with how messy things were getting.

Then things really went pear shaped as far as Sami was concerned.

Koirä dive bombed a vampire that was going for Julian and Jay's backs.

His strategy was good, he shifted a bare instant before he hit the larger vampire and there was a sickening crunch of breaking bones. Koirä was even able to grab the boar spear the other poor bastard had been using and use it to give the vampire a killer headache on top of his broken bones.

Sami kicked himself for not telling Koirä that to kill a vampire you needed to remove his head or heart and to really disable him you needed to take out his spine as high up as it was possible.

In taking down the one vampire Koirä had left himself open to the Hunt leader.

Julian and Jason had stayed in wolf shape and thus not really gotten his attention.
But Koira just had, in a major way.

And now the Hunt leader wanted him, and didn't care who he had to kill to get him. He shoved one of his own people out as a shield so he could wrap his hand around Koira's shoulder and yank him backwards.

Sami couldn't stop the scream of Koira's name.

In that instant of distraction the zombie pounced on him, but he was enraged enough that he dropped his bow, grabbed the thing by the head and twisted as hard as he could.

The zombie shrieked once then went silent as Sami tore its head messily off its body. It hadn't even had the time to try and claw him before he dropped its twitching remains to the ground.

There was a moment of deathly silence as the other Hunt leader assessed things. Then he smiled thinly and shook Koira to make it plain to Sami that he knew he had something of value in his hands. Koira was struggling, but his smaller size had him at a significant disadvantage and he couldn't keep his feet through the shaking.

“Is this vermin yours then?”

Sami growled and let his eyes glow gold, badly accented or not the words in Trade were understandable.

The other Hunt leader sneered at him and dragged Koira back further and tucked a knife under his chin to make his point very clear. Koira froze and his terrified eyes scanned until they locked on Sami.

“Don't you know what you are? What your place is in the order of things? How can you sully yourself with this creature? We are the Dark; it is our place to prey on the human herd. To thin the ranks of the sinners, not to cavort with vermin.”

Sami swallowed and kept his eyes locked on Koira's frightened ones. If he could keep the bastard talking Theon or Risto might be able to get where they could take a shot. For now he ignored the terrified weeping of the girls and the restless movements of the other Hunts few survivors and his own people shifting in answer.

“They're people, just people who deserve to live their lives.” He knew his voice was calmer than he felt, but he hoped that calm would unnerve the other vampire.

From the face he made it just annoyed him further.

“People? They are beasts, unless they can become as we, they are useful only for food.” He shifted his face closer to Koira's. “What is this vermin to you humm?” He sniffled and breathed in Koira's ear, it made the smaller man shudder and tug at the arm around him futilely with both hands. With the knife a hairs breadth from his throat he didn't dare change. But if that blade shifted Sami was sure Koira would become a very dangerous armful.

Sami took a step, and then froze as the knife shifted threateningly.

“He looks like no blood kin of yours, and if he weren't changer vermin he'd be pretty. Do you take him? Have you sullied your blood and taken him under you? Or do you just watch; humm? Do you watch as others fuck him? Does he scream and bleed for you?”

Sami watched as the other vampire moved backwards, slowly getting himself into a more
defensible spot. It was killing him inside that all he could do was watch as the remains of the other hunt began slowly to collect around their leader.

Two other vampires took up positions, but both were injured. Three humans, again injured and one Sami was surprised could stay standing he was bleeding so much.

The order Sami heard next sickened him.

“Feed brothers.”

One of the humans let out a little cry of protest at that betrayal. Sami didn't understand what the vampire who seized him said, but had a very bad feeling with the human sobbed and repeated the words before he tipped his head back.

Koira let out a sob as, right before his eyes, a boy younger than himself was drained dry, drained without lifting a hand to defend himself and dropped to lie where he fell.

“So,” the other vampire licked up Koira's neck. “Do you feed from this one? Do you bite as you fuck him?”

Sami shifted as the trio moved back to where they had the shelter of their wagon. He didn't think he could rush them and get all three down before the leader cut Koira's throat.

And Koira couldn't survive that, it was questionable if any of the changers could.

Sami gritted his teeth at the lunatic played with the knife and just nicked Koira's throat and tipped the knife to let a single drop of blood run down the edge. This bastard knew how to taunt him, and was terrifying Koira just for the thrill of it.

Not that Sami needed confirmation that he was a sick, sadistic fuck.

“You know their blood is poison, sweet and addicting. It weakens us. And they can't be trusted, so sweet and pliant until we think we're safe. I hope you tie him when you fuck him. Betrayal is in their blood, and it cannot be washed away.” The tone was mild, almost conversational, but Sami had seen the gleam of madness in the other vampires’ eyes.

Sami wished he hadn't dropped his bow, he could hear the low creak of one being drawn but wasn't sure who held it. He didn't dare take his eyes away from the other Hunt leader to look for it either. Any hint of his attention wavering and the bastard might well cut Koira's throat just for spite.

He wanted to wring this bastard’s neck, wanted to tear Koira from his hands and rip this monster apart with his bare hands.

But he held a knife to Koira's throat, and had two living shields in front of him.

Stalemate.

How long until dawn? It had been close to midnight when the other Hunt had come back with their captives.

Could Koira hang on that long? Would the vampires retreat into a wagon and make things more complicated to pry them out?

There was a snap and a loud thunk, followed by the sounds of two bowstrings being released.

Sami jolted forward just as the hand holding the knife started to drop. Koira shifted in that same
instant, shifting to a slim and sleek cat, a form more dangerous at close range than his usual wolf
shape, his jaws clamping down on the wrist holding the knife and twisting to shear the hand and
knife away from the man holding it. A flurry of pale spotted fur and claws and Sami had Koira
huddled into his side, his face covered in blood. The severed hand still holding the knife at their
feet.

Silence.

Heavy echoing silence only broken by the girl’s sobs, his own pants for breath and the crackling of
the fire as it caught hold of more fuel and slowly crept out of its pit.

Sami stared in shock at the other Hunt's leader, pinned to his wagon by a heavy crossbow bolt
taken square to the center of his forehead. Whoever had taken that shot had been up high. His
minions had been taken down by familiar arrows to the eye. Something that would have to be
followed up by something more permanent if they didn't want the trio to come back with an even
bigger grudge.

“I told you I'd get you for what you did to Grisha you fucking bastard.”

~0~

Theon's head snapped up from where he and Julian were trying to stop the bleeding from Jay's
thigh. He'd seen his shot, he'd taken it and he'd bolted to try and help Jules keep Jay from bleeding
to death from a wild spear blow that looked to be wickedly deep even if it wasn't spurting
everywhere.

He knew that voice, had grown up with it, had loved the owner like his own blood and had cried
when he'd held him in his arms for the last time.

His eyes tracked up and around and finally settled as the owner came to the edge of the wagon he'd
been standing on and jumped down.

All in black leather, absolutely covered in weapons and looking as calm and confident as Theon
had ever seen him was a face he'd seen old and dying twice, but never young again, no matter how
they'd searched. Now that face looked very much as it had when they'd been touring as a band, just
with longer hair tailed neatly back.

Christian pulled a heavy looking axe out of the loops that held it on his back and pulled the
protective cover off the blade with steady hands. He talked as he walked forward.

“Grisha didn't deserve what you did you him. Nor did Sergey. They took us in. They raised us,
loved us like we were their own children. They held you and sang to you and shared blood when
the change sickness took you.” The words were spoken calmly, and in a level tone, but there was so
much pain and rage mixed under those words it tore at everyone who could hear and understand
him.

Theon winced as Christian lopped the head off one of the fallen vampires and moved on.

Two more solid chops and both minions were permanently dead. It was both disturbing and
comforting to see that Christian still was far stronger than he looked.

Christian stood in front of the other Hunt leader.

“But you couldn't deal with it. Couldn't understand how much they loved each other, how long
they'd been together. You clung to that stupid, ancient old prejudice. Even though the people who
taught it to you abandoned you when they saw your eyes glow in firelight. Because glowing eyes might mean you were a vampire. You couldn't just leave it alone,” there was a small catch of a sob.

Theon swallowed hard, he could see tears shimmering on Christians cheeks.

“You couldn't leave people alone, you scared them, chased them away even when they had tried to be your friends, so you decided fear was better than love. Did you know how happy I was when I finally changed? I thought I could finally go where you did. I thought if I loved you enough you could let it go.”

Theon felt his heart jump, last time Christian had found them he'd still just been a human, this time it sounded like he was something more.

One hand tenderly stroked that pale cheek as the other set the axe down by Christian's feet, then reached up and yanked the crossbow bolt out, only getting the shaft and leaving the point still buried somewhere in the skull and gently set the limp body on the ground.

“I thought I could be Omega to your Alpha; that we could be together forever. But that wasn't what you wanted. You can't keep doing this Dmitri. I couldn't stop you when you killed Grisha and Sergey, but I can stop you now. I'm not the little boy who used to follow you anymore.”

Theon gulped and felt tears stinging his eyes as he watched Christian lean in, close those glazed eyes and gently kiss the lids.

He winced and heard Koira's cry when Christian rose and with one smooth stroke took the vampires head off.

~0~

In the clear light of day, the aftermath was worse than Theon had expected. He wasn't sure what he'd thought was going to happen but having nothing happen sure wasn't anywhere in the top ten. He'd expected a troop of humans from the gathering to come after their stolen members, someone, some sort of a hue and cry. A scout or a determined friend or lover trying to find their dear one, even a stereotypical mob with torches and pitchforks.

Hell, just something.

There was nothing.

And that, quite frankly, was disturbing as hell.

Jason had pulled out his first aid kit, and after getting Sami to build another fire so Koira could boil up a carefully measured batch of a mild sedative to calm the hysterical girls. The stuff he used at home was far too strong and Jason grimaced when he tested the bit Koira boiled under his instruction before having Koira thin it and feed small cups full of the thinned mix to the girls. Then he'd taken a look at Jay's leg wound. Theon had taken the grimace and head shake as a very bad sign. But then Jason had carefully cleaned the wound and with Julian and Risto holding torches for better light had put a few very careful stitches in.

He'd known in his heart what the faint gold reflections in Jay's eyes meant, but Theon still hoped they'd be able to save Jay.

In the clear light of day Jason had gone back and cleaned the wound again and put in more careful sutures, but he still didn't look happy. The bleeding had slowed down, but it hadn't stopped.
Chriss, Kris and Sami had carefully cleaned up what they could of the mess, getting wood piled up for a more proper funeral pyre and piling it around the remains of last night's main fire. They'd picked up the bodies and laid them out as best they could and for now were leaving things be.

Jonne had gathered up weapons and tools and with help from a still shaky Koira was going through the wagons for anything useful.

Christian had quietly helped, and laid the body and head of the man he'd called Dmitri between one of his fallen human minions and the tattered and slightly trampled remains of the zombie.

Janne and Julian had been busy trying to get the girls to drink some tea this morning, and to try and eat something. Not that there was terribly much to offer, none of them had wanted to leave to hunt anything. What supplies there had been stored in the wagons hadn't been very good or very plentiful, and they'd been using locally foraged bits for their own small meals. The best Jonne had been able to cobble together was a poor sort of oat porridge. With no honey or sugar and no dried fruit to make it more palatable none of them managed more than a mouthful or two.

Theon just sat by Jay, in case Jason needed help, and filled his eyes with the face and form of his long lost best friend.

In the clear light of day Christian didn't look all that different than he had when they'd been young. His hair was longer, still a soft dark brown, and was tailed back somewhat neatly, though he still had that one stubborn curl that crept toward his left eyebrow that no amount of styling gel had ever been able to completely tame. His face was clean shaven except for a neat tuft of a goatee on his chin, just like he'd worn before. He was more muscular, at least Theon thought so, but it was a little hard to tell under the dark leathers Christian wore.

His eyes were still the bright teal blue Theon remembered and he smiled the same way.

Theon had to look down as Christian walked by leading two of the horses.

"If you keep that up Torsti, your face will freeze that way."

Theon sobbed before he could stop it, and not even a heartbeat later he was leaning into Christian's chest as the other man dropped to his knees to gather him in close and he was sobbing out all the pain of losing everything all over again.

~0~

I didn't expect him to just break down and cry. He reminded me of a man in my dreams; a man Grisha said had been my brother in all but blood back before the Fall. My memories of that time are vague, blunted and distant, but I knew the faces of the men who faced Dmitri last night. Seeing that agony on Sammy's face again had me moving even though I didn't know who the little blond was. Just seeing how badly it hurt Sammy to see him frightened was enough for me.

I remembered seeing that look on his face before, I don't remember the circumstances, but I remember that pain, and I remembered him holding me after something awful. Something to do with my sister. Then I'm sure the hurt he felt was for me.

Grisha had told me not to try too hard to remember, things would come if they came and if not I still had two hands and two feet to go forward. I still fought to remember though, like the people I met in fever dreams, I fought to remember them, but often I failed to catch more than faint hints.

I know my star was put back on my arm by a woman from my dreams, but she can't be entirely real as I've never met another woman changer and she does, did, I don't know if what I remember was
real anymore.

I remembered this man clearly though, I remembered a hyperactive blond boy in the schoolyard who wouldn't leave me alone and insisted I needed a friend. I remembered a fight, and him getting between me and someone larger than both of us were put together and getting hit.

I also remembered that just because he wasn't big and bulky and massively tall didn't mean he wasn't fierce and determined enough to take on bullies twice his size.

I remembered that just like I can remember how gentle and protective Sammy is, Vivian's goofy little boy smile and Julian's happy grin. I can remember Jason's slow smile and hearing our laughter blending.

I remember Chriss, and his dry sense of humor and Jukka and the face he'd make if you called him anything other than Sir Christus or Kris and I remember Jonne's giggles when I made Jukka make that face.

I know these people. Being here with them is pulling everything back up where I can finally grab it.

I even know the poor kid who is slowly bleeding out beside Torstig even with all Jason can do. Jonne is going to be a mess when Jay finally slips away. I've seen how fast he and Kris and Snack came shooting over if he moves, so at least he knows people are worried about him.

He won't die alone at least. Sergey did, bleeding out from a crushed throat as he tried to get to Grisha. I found him, one hand just touching Grisha's hand. They'd died reaching for each other. Dmitri hadn't even let them hold each other at the end, I'd thought maybe they would still recover.

They didn't, no matter how I tried they didn't open their eyes again. Do I'd put them in the hidden room they thought I didn't know about and ransacked the homestead to chase after the man I'd called brother.

I just feel like someone is missing here. Several someone's missing, and in my heart I know some I will never see again and that knowledge hurts.

I close my eyes and push that faintly hollow feeling away and hug Torsti tight and stroke his hair.

I found part of my past, now I just have to wait and see how much more comes back to me.

I just wish I hadn't had to lose Sergey and Grisha and Dmitri to find it.

~0~

Lauri wanted to scream. Dark Ones had come last night, they'd come into camp swift and silent and then had caused a huge bang and flash of sparks by throwing something into the fires. No one could remember actually seeing the Dark Ones just after the fuss and the screaming had died down they had counted and come up short.

He didn't know any of the three girls, they hadn't come from either his birth tribe or the River people, but he knew the forth.

The demons had taken Janne.

They'd taken him and no one was doing anything about it.
He'd wanted to go after them, try and get Janne back, but he'd been tackled and tied up and drugged with a bit of Kesh tea before he could do more than go for a spear. If he and Jay hadn't smoked Kesh regularly he'd have been too stoned to care until long after the sun rose. But they did, just like all the men of the River People, so he'd barely been buzzed by the weak tea. That buzz hadn't been enough to do anything to really blunt his fear and rage and make him actually think.

He'd managed to get out of the thongs binding his wrists together and creep out of the encampment, but now he wasn't sure what to do or where to go. He'd heard his old tribe’s shaman blathering about protective ceremonies and being resigned to the evil ones having stolen people as clearly some tribes had been neglecting certain ceremonies and sacrifices. Typical for the old fraud, but the other shaman weren't agreeing with him on everything. It was going to take a while for them to argue out everything enough to do anything, so he just ran west, he walked when he couldn't run anymore and once he had his wind back he ran again.

He had to get Jay back.

The sun rose and climbed higher and still he kept going, west, always west, following the faint and fading signs that something had gone this way..

Then he saw it.

A rising pillar of black smoke a bit south of the line he was running.

Only funeral pyres made smoke that color, it came from the oily liquid the shamans poured over the bodies to be sure they would burn properly and release the trapped spirits of the people inside them.

And you only burned people if you thought evil spirits might take over the body and use it.

In spite of how his lungs burned and his chest and legs hurt he turned his steps and ran toward the smoke as fast as he could go.

~0~

Levi frowned. The further west they went the more people seemed to follow a hunter gatherer lifestyle over the farming, herding and trading one they knew how to move in. Worse the common language shifted. Trade speak was still used, but it wasn't quite the same as what they'd gotten used to over the years so there were mis-communications. Mostly it was things that with later understanding made them laugh.

This though, this felt different.

They'd found a massive gathering, made up of several middling and larger groups all gathered together for trade, some ceremonial coming of age stuff and apparently to find spouses.

Well, that had gotten thrown all to hell when several of the young people got snatched by 'dark ones’ Brian had shifted uncomfortably and shared uneasy looks with him and they both had taken more care in watching over Squeaks. She just had rolled her eyes at them, but Levi noted she didn't fuss about them being overprotective like she normally would. In fact she took care to make sure they knew where she was going and to stay in their line of sight around the wagon.

It got stranger when the snatched girls got returned with a wagonload of overly fancy weapons. One cleaver in the pile had grabbed their attention.

It had been kept by Sergey after some demon hunter had tried to kill him with it. Later he'd used it
to behead a hunter who had been trying to torture Squeaks into telling him where Brian was hiding
with Sergey and Grisha's very sick foundlings, at the time there had been five children, including a
changer child who hadn't recovered from the dose of silver his own parents had fed him.

The sight of that particular weapon left them with a set of very uncomfortable realizations.

One; Dmitri or Christof or both were with the so called 'dark ones' and had stolen the girls for
whatever reason. None of the reasons that came to mind were terribly nice, so it was good that all
three had been returned mostly unharmed.

According to Squeaks the girls weren't terribly coherent. But she said they smelled like they'd been
drugged so their accounts of a battle with two warring groups of spirit men could be taken with a
cask of salt. They might be telling the plain truth, but they also might be still stoned out of their
pretty little minds. Whatever had happened they were basically undamaged physically if seriously
traumatized emotionally.

Levi didn't envy the people who had to help get the girls settled back into their lives. The poor
things might never have normal lives now depending on how superstitious the locals were. Levi
had seen girls burned to death after surviving an ordeal like these had just on the grounds that if
they'd attracted Dark One's once before they might do so again.

As if the poor things had asked to be kidnapped. But Squeaks said the majority of the shaman were
pushing for smoke purifications over the one bloody minded old coot who was pushing for
burning. Given that one of the girls was supposed to be marrying a shaman Levi suspected the
more moderate reaction would hold at least for a while.

Two; there were other groups of people like he, Brian and Squeaks roaming around.

That could be good, if they were like Grisha and Sergey and a few other small stationary clusters
they'd met who only wanted to live in peace and help the normal humans around them live as
normal lives as possible. That could be very bad, if they were like whoever had taken out Grisha
and Sergey or like a few groups they'd run into that preyed on normal people. Levi knew it
tsicken Brian just as much as it sickened him, and knew they both were disturbed a bit by how
easily Squeaks could shift to pure ruthless killer if she was pushed hard enough.

Three; they had no idea who these other folks were, how they functioned in the local society or
even how to find them.

Society had shifted a lot as they moved westwards; Levi felt a lot like a stranger here and knew
without asking that Brian and Squeaks felt just as out of place. They were the only group with a big
travel wagon, the next best thing was a two wheeled cart pulled by a single horse that some
intrepid traders from further south had knocked together to carry their trade goods. Their four horse
rig had collected them some serious stares coming in and still had a few brave and curious folks
coming up to take a closer look.

This could get interesting if the shaman got a nasty attitude about strangers.

~0~

“They had one run off.”

Brian blinked at Squeaks; a glance at Levi showed he was just as confused. Squeaks just sighed.

“The girls who came back weren't all the ones taken. There was a guy snatched as well, he didn't
come back. The girls seem to think he's dead, and if the wound they describe is accurate he's at
least really fucked up, but one of his friends bailed out and went after him.”

“Okay?” Brian wasn't sure what this had to do with them.

“Normally they turn back up fairly quickly, usually within a few hours. This kid hasn't shown back up. There's some whispers that the ‘dark ones' took him.” Squeaks rolled her eyes and Levi could see the little quote marks around the dark ones comment.

“Okay?” echoed Levi. “So he's more persistent?”

“Or stupid.” Brian yelped when Squeaks swatted at his head. She missed, but if she'd meant to connect she'd have been aiming for a shoulder, not his head.

“Why do I put up with you two again?”

Levi grinned and chirped, “You love us?”

“And we're good in bed.” Brian grinned and high fived Levi when Squeaks sighed in defeat. Then he grabbed her and dragged her down between them and snuggled in.

“Seriously though, why the worry about some random kid running off?”

“You remember the mess in Minsk?”

Brian stilled. How could any of them forget? That had been pure hell, trying to find a group of missing children and not get caught by the Civil Patrol or get eaten by a pack of hungry zombies all while the city was coming down around their collective ears.

They'd found the kids. But the Civil Patrol gunned them down trying to take out the zombies. Squeaks and Levi had barely made it out and both had been badly hurt. After that they had been a lot more cautious about attempting to help fix other people’s problems, especially when it involved kids or zombies or both.

Levi was hugging them both tight.

“No more guns Squeaky girl.”

The shudder made Brian shiver in sympathy.

No more guns didn't mean no more friendly fire.

~0~

Sami sighed in resignation as he watched the fire burn higher.

Now they knew why Theon's tribes had been so jumpy. Dmitri's Hunt had been using a rough black powder mix packed tightly into reeds as distractions. Toss a few into a fire and watch the mayhem and steal a few folks away in the fuss. It was an astonishingly simple and effective way to hunt.

It also made him sick that god knew how many innocent people had died to those tactics. Having to drain pre-emergent zombies wasn't fun, and his heart hurt for the people they killed. But that was an unfortunate necessity and a bitter mercy. Zombies when they turned weren't human; they didn't remember who they were, or their families. All a zombie knew was hunger. If there was prey a zombie would kill and kill and kill some more until there was nothing left standing, only then would they feed, and feed and feed. If they filled they'd sleep where they were then wake and feed
again until there was nothing left then they would hunt again. They didn't care what they killed as
long as it was meat, didn't care where they slept as long as there was food when they woke. How
this Hunt had managed to actually keep a zombie caged left him more than a bit boggled, and
distinctly sickened.

This Hunt hadn't cared, any human was fair game. If they got a pre-emergent vampire, that was
good too and they'd add that unfortunate to their numbers after a bit of concentrated mind fuckery.
The human followers were used for transport, brainwashed into thinking if they were good enough,
obedient enough, they could be vampires too. According to Christian they had been lied to and told
they'd been rescued from being burned alive for being different. Given how secretive some tribes
were about Rites and the fact that the dead were almost always burned afterwards it made a sick
sense. Worse according to Christian sometimes survivors of their attacks were burned alive to keep
them from inciting another attack. Something that made all of them rather ill and made them worry
a little for the girls they'd sent back, not that Sami thought they were in any danger. The normal
humans were also a handy food supply if hunting was poor and given how people treated survivors
the chance of them trying to escape was nill.

It made him heartsick to think about, especially given the ages of the one's they'd had to kill.

At least they'd gotten rid of the last of the black powder; it had made a good accelerant for the pyre
at least, as had whatever the vampires had painted their wagons with. Jason said the theory for
making black powder was pretty simple, but for them to have gotten a mix that was as vigorous as
this batch had been implied a lot of trial and error and lots of the base materials.

Then again they could get saltpeter, sulfur and charcoal pretty easily. He just was glad no one had
suggested trying to make black powder themselves; they really didn't have much use for the stuff.
It was easier to just shoot things with a bow.

Kris and Chriss had loaded the girls, still groggy from the stuff Jason had fed them to calm their
hysterics, into one of the wagons in better repair, and headed back toward the gathering. They'd put
an assortment of the more unusual weapons in there as well and taken some of the horses. By the
time they got there the girls would be coherent and hopefully calm enough that they could be
handed back to their families without too much fuss. Theon just hoped Sami's belief that their tribes
would be more rational than Eastern farmers was well founded. Worst case Kris and Chriss would
hang around and keep an eye on things and if it looked like the girls weren't going to be accepted
back they'd have an 'accident' and vanish and they'd move them somewhere else. Somewhere
where they'd be accepted without too much question.

Julian and Jason had carefully loaded Jay into the other wagon they'd decided was salvageable and
built a couple travois to carry the rest of the metal weapons and useful bits back home with them.
Then after a brief argument they'd taken the wagon and headed toward home. The rest of them
could catch up pretty easily with Jason being careful of the terrain and the wagons wheels. Both
men acknowledged that Jay needed better care than they could give in the field, but neither liked
leaving the rest of the Hunt behind.

Christian had vanished for a few hours after Theon had had his breakdown and come back with a
largish caravan type wagon of his own pulled by four huge horses and a small string of five
packhorses of similar gargantuan size. Once he had his gear settled and helped shift some of what
they were keeping to packs for his animals he'd stripped down to just boots and trousers and
helped to mind the pyre for the few hours they needed to be sure the bodies would be consumed.
He turned his monster horses loose to graze with the ones that they were keeping.

That had just made their size all the more apparent, but they seemed calm and weren't inclined to
wander very far and even tended to herd the other animals back closer if they wandered.

Theon had almost broken down again when he'd seen that somehow Christian had his star inked on his shoulder, just as he'd had before. Somehow he'd found a scarlet ink and whoever had done the work had done the black scrollwork around the star almost exactly as the Christian of 2013 had worn it. The only real difference was this bit of ink wasn't as faded as the originals had been.

Then Koira had asked why they didn't send Jay home with the girls.

Christian had surprised them all by answering.

“That wouldn't be fair to him, or them. He'll be making his change before too long.”

Koira had been confused, but given no one had explained to him how a vampire was made that wasn't too surprising. Living with them gave him a bit of a skewed viewpoint given how old they were.

“He'll be one of us,” Jonne said softly as he folded up one of the better furs and set it on top of a travois load. “The only way we could stop it is to kill him permanently.”

Koira had blinked, and then blanched when Christian quietly said he'd rather not lend them his axe for that. Things were very clear then.

Sami sighed and cuddled Koira close, tried to comfort his trembling lover and felt helpless when all he could do was hold him as he cried. He expected Koira would have several nights of nightmares at the least. He'd had pure hell finding enough marginally clean water to help Koira wash the blood off his face and rinse his mouth with after he really realized what he'd done and gotten violently sick. His little one was a hunter, not a man killer.

Jonne had carefully cleaned the knife and tucked it away for later. Koira deserved to at least have that after being threatened with it. His usual flint knife hadn't survived the fight intact.

All they could do now was to wait for the fire to finish its work.

Sami was pretty sure Jay would still be breathing like a normal human when they reached Satama. He might not be doing much more than that, but he'd be breathing in two days. If the humans hadn't come looking for their stolen members by now he was pretty sure they wouldn't until well after Chriss and Kris had returned the survivors and slipped away to either return home or to watch from a safer distance. By then the faint tracks of the wagon's wheels would be lost in the waving grass unless a very skilled tracker really wanted to follow them. Most of their tribe’s best trackers really wouldn't want to follow faint traces away from a terrible place, they wouldn't want to find anything else potentially nasty.

Sami just hated waiting like this.

Janne wheeled down and changed with the little flip that Koira still hadn't quite mastered and grimaced at the smell of the pyre. The wind would carry the stink after them when they left to follow in Jason's tracks.

Somehow Sami thought none of them would really want roasted meat for a few days.

“Good news is Jason is making good time, so our horses can probably move that huge lunk of a wagon if we decide to keep it, and Chriss and Kris were making pretty good time going the other way.” then he stopped and sucked on his teeth in a way that made Sami nervous. If Jason was making good time that meant that they would be well clear of the area by the time any people from
the gathering got brave enough to come this way. And from the way the grass was springing back after the wagon wheels had gone over it there might not be much of a trail left to follow.

“And?”

Janne looked up.

“And I saw a solitary hunter coming this way.” He stopped again. “It looked like it might be Lauri.”

Sami groaned, he had thought he was hearing something thrashing about in the tall grass.

“How far out?”

Janne gulped and shot a wary look in the general direction of the thrashing noises.

“Um, at the pace he was going, he should be here about,” Lauri flailed through the tall grass and collapsed on his hands and knees breathing hard. “Ah, now.”

~0~

Lauri wanted to scream, wanted to rage and fight but there was nothing to fight against, nothing he could do.

He leaned into Koira and sobbed out his fear and frustration as Sami and Janne carefully tended the pyre behind them as it slowly burned down to ashes.

It wasn't fair, he's lost his mother, his father and even his messed up excuse for an older brother. He'd lost one of his best friends, and then gotten him back but only after he'd lost his whole tribe.

It wasn't fair; all he wanted was his family back.

Koira was trembling, but just held him tight and stroked his curls.

It wasn't fair. Life wasn't fair, he knew that, but he wished with a childish intensity that just this once it could be.

He'd stayed quiet as part of the group had loaded up and headed south west. Once the fire was down to coals really only one person was needed tend it and keep it from jumping to the grass. They'd left Janne, Sami and Koira, probably hoping to convince him to turn around and go back home. Sami and Janne watched the coals and stirred them as Koira cuddled close to Lauri and told him about the terrible things that had happened here last night.

But that boat wasn't home without Jay. He wanted to see Jay once more, and nothing was going to stop him.

~0~

It had taken an idiotic amount of time, and repetitive arguments, before a group was selected out of the large gathering of tribes to go and investigate the pillar of smoke seen rising to the west.

It took long enough that the smoke was long gone before they even set out.

While Brian was glad he and Levi had been picked to go, even if he hadn't figured out why they'd been picked, he was aggravated that they wouldn't let Squeaks come as well.
Some idiotic mumbo jumbo about not letting any woman who could carry a child near a place where her womb might get contaminated by evil spirits. He'd seen the huge rigmarole the three surviving girls were going through to 'purify' them and make them fit for regular company again. Ridiculous amounts of smelly smoke, potions that looked horrific and probably tasted worse and large amounts of drumming and chanting. It beat burning the poor things alive at least; and two of the girls had young men lurking outside the ritual tent waiting, one of which was a young shaman.

The whole business made Brian want to tell the poor idiot that Squeaks had been barren long before his grandfather’s grandfather had ever been born, but that would have required a lot more explanation that he felt was wise.

Just to complicate things even worse it had rained, and rained hard, the night before they finally left.

With only a general direction as a guide they had to spread out which slowed an already slow process down.

It took almost two days to travel a distance Brian could have walked in less than one.

What they found made the girls claims of a battle a bit more plausible. A large trampled area, the ravaged remains of four medium sized travel wagons a cart that was utterly destroyed and a large soggy pile of ash.

When stirred it turned out to have bits of bone and teeth in it, so it was the remains of a large funerary pit.

The acting leader ordered the ashes be sifted and that messy process took most of another day and turned up more bone fragments than just one person could have left behind. It turned up bits that could be as many as two dozen people just going by the upper canine teeth, Brian just wasn't sure enough of things to say anything.

It also turned up melted metal blobs about the right size to have been arrowheads and one heavy blackened barbed head made of iron or steel.

That find had left everyone shaken. You didn't use a point like that when hunting for meat.

When they turned to head back Levi gave Brian a nod and jerked his chin further west, where off in the distance were the blue smudgy foothills of an old worn to almost nothing set of mountains.

He nodded his understanding.

It took less than a day to get back to the gathering, even with the shaman mumbling and waving his bundle of burning herbs everywhere.

~0~

“The rain had washed most of the scents away, but I did find piles of horse dung that didn't smell like the ones that come from animals around here.” Levi said as he settled on the bed and carefully peeled his boots off to check his tired feet for blisters.

“Grain fed? Like ours sometimes are?” asked Squeaks as she heated a pot of water for tea on the tiny stove in their travel wagon. She’d been surprised to see a trader here from the far south that had hard compressed blocks of black tea and had traded several lengths of intricately carved wooden chain to get two blocks to replace their dwindling supply. Brian had grimaced when she’d told him but knew he could carve new lengths over the winter months, and he needed the tea to
function some mornings.

“More like ours, but not exactly the same. The grass had recovered pretty well but I could still find traces where wagons had passed.” Levi shrugged. “I still think we need to follow whoever left and see what happened. That arrowhead looked a lot like the ones Sergey used to use to hunt rogue vampires with.”

Brian hissed a little, but not in disagreement.

“I just wish I knew who took all Sergey’s stock, Dmitri or Christof. The more I see the more I think something happened and Dmitri snapped.” Brian raked his hands through his hair in a well-worn gesture of frustration.

“But was Dmitri hunting Grisha and Sergey's killers or was he party to it? You know he wasn't well wrapped when Sergey found him. Not like when we found Christof. And what's Christof been doing in all this?”

Brian looked up and shared long looks with Squeaks and Levi.

“Keep going west?”

The two nods were all the answer he needed.

They would keep going west when this mass of humanity broke up and see what answers they could find.

~0~

Jason breathed a small sigh of relief as the wagon cleared the archway leading into the horses’ valley. They were home, and almost had Jay where he could finish his change in peace.

“Jason?”

Jason’s head snapped up and he waved up at Adam as the dark haired changer came charging down the path up to the lower terraces. A few moments later and Adam was skidding to a stop by the foot rest of the wagon and looking up at him.

“What happened?”

“We, ah, had a bit of trouble.” Jason smiled wryly at the look Adam gave him in reaction to that bit of understatement,

“Looks like more than a bit.” Birdie's tone was dry as he came up on the other side. He eyed the string of horses and the few laden ones with weighing eyes then blinked at the sight of Christian's heavier wagon and larger animals as he rolled in as well. The big animals had had no trouble in catching up to Jason's slower team. Then he looked up at Jason. “How bad?”

“Bad. We have an emergent in the back. It's Jay.”

Adam's breath hissed in shock and Birdie winced.

“Jonne and Kris' Jay?”

Jason nodded. Birdie winced and sighed as he reached up to pull the side door of the wagon open.

“Then let’s get him comfortable.”
Adam unhitched the horses with only a little fumbling as Theon and Risto scrambled to get a space put together upstairs for Jay to lie in, until he changed over it wasn’t wise to just plant him in the spare bed. Christian just quietly turned the horses they’d had in a string loose and released the few they’d had pulling loads. His own animals he’d been able to unhitch with the ease of long practice in only a few moments. Adam had gaped a bit as the big mares bowed their heads to duck and daintily step out of the harnesses that had let them pull Christian's big wagon. But after he closed the gate on the enclosure he wasn't quite sure of what else to do as Jonne, Birdie and Jason carefully moved Jay out of the wagon and up the path to their living space. The big stallion had to be kept in the smaller side enclosure to keep the herd stallion from coming completely unglued. Adam had no doubts that in a fight between the two Christian's monster would win, and that it would be a nastily one sided fight.

Bailey gave Christian a little nudge.

“Hey man, long time no see.”

~0~

The nudge was familiar, as was the lopsided smile.

Christian blinked, and then slowly smiled back. He knew this man, the name drifted up to the surface where he could grab it.

“Bailey?”

Bailey grinned.

“Yeah man, come on, let’s head up. Jase might need extra hands to build another bed.”

Christian followed as Bailey began trotting up a well-worn path. The caverns here were huge and clearly very extensive. He could hear rushing water and smell something with a faint tang of metal. As they moved upwards he saw a small plume of steam coming from a vent high on the wall and a trickle of water coming down. Then they entered the cave and the temperature dropped, Christian noticed that the arch had been widened and smoothed by human hands and blinked as his eyes adjusted to the dimness. He could see places where a tarp or set of hides could be tied in place to act as a door of sorts, but there wasn't one in place now.

Bailey had stopped and waited for him further up the path so he hurried to catch up. He was glad Bailey had waited, the path forked and went in three directions, one heading back down, one almost level and off to the right and a third that climbed up and to the left. This place had an eerie familiarity, but at the same time was strange, like he'd been here before, but things had changed since.

They went left, and Christian quickly became twisted as the path almost spiraled upwards. Then they came out and the path split again, one leg going down and right, the other up and left.

“If you go that way, it leads back down to the hot springs.” Bailey gestured right as he turned and headed left.

The sound of rushing water was a lot louder here and Christian hurried to follow. He blinked in shock when he realized the water sound was from an underground waterfall and boggled a little at the rough hole open to the sky overhead. Why did he feel like it shouldn't be there? Why did he think the step in the waterfall shouldn't be there? When had the wall changed, why had it changed? How had Jason managed to get concrete to set when there was running water on the other side of
the wall? How had he managed to build the walled pool where the splash of the waterfall would keep it filled?

“How did you find this place?” he asked to try and buy some time for his confused mind to settle.

Bailey grinned and paused before turning under another carefully smoothed arch, one that had odd holes cut in the stone near the top and bottom of the arch. Why did he remember cutting those holes? Why did he know the hides and bit of framework just to the left of the door were part of the airlock doors for this archway? It looked like an older door, especially compared to the newer hides on the airlock that was in place on the end of the bricked tunnel. He didn't remember a bricked in tunnel, and this looked to be incomplete, just arches right now about his height apart. Each pair looked like a hide could be tied over them to make the airlock doors actually useful and shield five or six meters of either side of the stone arch.

“We didn't, Sami and his crew did. Way, way back when. They've made it a really nice set up.” Bailey flapped a hand indicating 'way, way back' meant a very long time.

Christian had to smile a little as he cleared the stone archway. He knew that arch; he'd walked through it countless times in his dreams. His fingers automatically reached for the little notch in the wall for balance as he turned to catch the airlock door before it slammed closed.

There were frame beds with canopies covered in some loosely woven stuff with what looked like real mattresses and soft bed furs and pillows. He saw a well-built hearth a good sized central fire pit and what looked like a carefully made chimney. Why did he remember Vivian almost falling down that chimney? He remembered almost breaking the other man’s wrist grabbing him to keep him from falling. There were good glass and simpler clay and stone lamps all over the place and bowls and baskets and what looked like incomplete craft projects.

Jason still knit, and had what looked like half a dozen unpaired socks in progress. At least these didn't look to be insanely oversized things that could double as a stocking cap or pillowcase. Not that he had room to talk his first attempts at knitting in this lifetime had been, well, unfortunate. But Sergey had worn the mutant excuse for a scarf every winter without fail.

It looked lived in. Familiar again, but still strange. The familiarity made the strange sometimes a bit surreal. There were shelves carved into the walls he didn't remember, things were laid out in a way his mind said was different. There was a small bread oven he didn’t remember on the path up, and a water cistern inside as well as ones outside on every terrace with a bucket and pulley system to make filling them easier. Needed things he knew, but he had no idea why his mind said that or when they’d been put in place, his mind said they didn’t belong, that they were new.

Then he saw Jay, and how pale he was, and how limply he was resting on the pallet by the fire. If Jason hadn't been holding him propped up he'd have been helpless to move himself in any direction.

His eyes were open, and he was trying to cooperate as Jason and Jonne tried to feed him sips of something from a small bowl, but he was clearly in very bad shape. Jay couldn't even lift his hands to help hold the cup they held to his lips.

Theon and Vivian were whispering softly together with Julian by one of the beds. All three were cuddling together and taking comfort in the others closeness.

Christian felt his throat close over for a moment.

Vivi still used a circled star.
Vivian was still going by Risto; he hadn’t recovered enough to turn back to his old stage name.

He blinked away tears and looked around the room. He found a bed that had Essentia's old band mark and the tangle of X's Jason used to use marking things on, in and under it, then his eyes skipped again and found Sammy's star in a circle in a square and a stylized bird in flight. The bird had to belong to Sammy's little lover. Sammy had been using the other mark for as long as he’d known him.

His eyes skipped again and froze when he saw something familiar.

A slightly distorted five pointed star colored a vivid red on the leather coverlet.

His star.

There weren't any other items indicating this bed was in use, no baskets of neatly folded clothing under it, no packs or tunics hanging off the canopy supports. Even the canopy itself was different, a simple drape of leather, more suited for keeping a winter draft at bay. The current drapes on the other beds were of some thin and loosely woven stuff, more suited to keeping bugs away from a sleeper than keeping cold drafts out. The heavier leather drapes had been tied out of the way and from the thin layer of dust on the folds had been for a while.

This was his bed, but he'd never seen it before. He had set the pegs himself, but his hands had never touched the wooden frame or tightened the ropes he knew lay under the mattress.

He'd died in this bed. He remembered feeling so cold and having someone clinging to him tightly and weeping brokenly.

He'd died twice in this bed.

Bailey barely caught him as his knees came unstrung.

Christian blinked dazedly at everyone then the world slid sideways into darkness.

~0~

Jason sighed as he wiped Jay's forehead one last time. It wouldn't be long now.

Jay was bled almost white, and his eyes had started reflecting steadily and strongly golden in the firelight.

Sami, Koira and Janne were due back at any time and Jason hoped they'd hurry up.

All the vampires, other than Birdie, had been full fed and a little at the humans gathering, good for when they had to feed Jay.

An emergent vampire took a lot of feeding for the first few days, and Jason wasn't sure Jay would have the control needed to feed from a changer safely. A vampire could survive being almost bled out, they'd just be crabby about it, but for a changer it was chancy if they'd survive it or not. It was just safer to not risk them.

His eyes drifted over to where Christian lay asleep in his own bed.

Not that Jason was about to let Jay even try and feed from Christian. The idiot had seen the space they'd only had him in for a few short days before he'd died the last time and promptly passed out.

Good thing Bailey had caught him. Jason didn't think even Christian's hard head would forgive a
bounce off the stone floor no matter how thickly they had it padded with rush mats and reeds.

That reminded him they’d need to change out the matting and reeds soon and burn the old. Janne had been busy this spring and summer gathering new reeds and rushes and weaving up new mats and teaching Koira some of the tricks to the skill.

Christian had been breathing just fine when Jason had last checked him, his pulse was a bit fast and his eyes had been moving really quickly behind closed eyelids. But Jason figured that might just be from the stress of realizing he really had been here before, that it wasn’t just dreams. At least Jay wouldn’t have that problem.

Theon was sitting with him right now; Risto and Julian had curled up together in their shared bed and were dozing. If Theon got too sleepy he’d wake someone to take over Christian watching. But right now he was content to just sit by his restored best friend and stroke light fingers over familiar features and pet soft dark hair.

There was a bit of a scuffle at the archway, Jason looked over sharply.

That didn't sound like Sami, Janne or Koira. All three knew this place well enough to walk silently, and Janne and Sami could practically navigate in their sleep.

His eyes widened when Lauri, Larry-Lauri, not Birdie-Lauri came bolting in and slid to his knees by Jay's side.

“So much for quietly,” came Janne's wry comment as he rubbed his ribs where Larry had clearly elbowed him.

Sami sighed and gently shoved Janne further in.

“You knew him better than I did. So you knew he could get a little weird.” Sami sighed again and reached back to tug Koira in after him.

“We had a bit of a complication.”

Jason coughed to try and keep from laughing as he watched Larry stroking Jay's hair and whispering softly.

“So I see.”

Then his blood went cold at what Jay whispered.

“Thirsty.”

Jason couldn't move fast enough, even only a few feet away and there was no way he could stop what was coming. The initial feeding impulse was almost always insanely fast.

Larry was bent, his ear almost at Jay's lips to hear him, so when Jay moved, they were already too late.

Larry yelped, and then went limp over Jay's chest as Jay wrapped his arms around him and latched onto Larry's throat, bit and drank.

And drank, and kept going until it was Larry looking unnaturally pale under the warm olive of his tan and his breathing was labored as he fought to take another breath, just one more breath...

When Jay let go he was cradling his friend in his arms and after a moment of dazed confusion the
horror set in.

“Lauri?”

Jay shook Larry, and his head lolled limply, his breathing rattling ominously.

“Lauri?”

Panic now, but Jason was able to get Jay in a headlock as Sami pulled a limp Larry away. This was something Sami could assess just as well as Jason; he'd seen enough newborn vampires. That he was trying to keep this particular newborn alive where mostly before he'd been finding merciful ways to kill them wasn't really relevant right now.

Sami peeled an eyelid back on Larry as Jay began hysterically calling for his friend. Janne pounced and Jason was glad of the help, without it he might not have been able to keep the hysterical newborn vampire still.

Jonne was on his knees by Sami and helping check Larry's eyes and pulse.

After a moment Jonne leaned in and gently licked the wound closed. Then he gently kissed Larry's lips as Kris came in and knelt on Larry's other side.

“When his eyes open prepare to have him go for your neck,” warned Sami as Larry moaned and moved weakly.

“We're ready.” Kris settled a bit more comfortably as Jonne nodded and tangled his fingers with Larry's limp ones.

“No, Lauri.”

Jason grunted as Jay tried again to get away.

“Janne,”

“What?”

“Do something.”

If they didn't either distract or calm Jay down he was going to get loose. And a hysterical vampire was a bit much to keep under control at the best of times.

“What do you want me to do? Kiss him?” snarled Janne as he tried to keep Jay from dragging Jason's dead weight upright.

“Whatever, as long as it works!”

Jay abruptly stopped fighting them as Janne quit leaning all his weight on Jay's shoulders and grabbed his ears and sealed their mouths together.

Jason let out a low sigh of relief as all of Jay's newly awakened vampire instincts went from blood and fear to sex. It wouldn't divert Jay for long, but they didn't really need for him to be diverted for long. All they needed was for him to calm down, even if it was only a little. Jason carefully disentangled himself and looked over to where Sami was restraining Larry.

It actually didn't look like Larry was being as aggressive as Jay had been, as Jason watched Jonne gently encouraged Larry to stop drinking from his wrist. Kris stroked Larry's face and set his wrist
right under Larry's lips and with a bit of encouragement the other newborn latched on and drank.

Jason blinked in surprise as Larry let go of Kris on his own and plaintively asked if Jay was okay and could he sleep now?

“What do you know? He pulled a Sami.”

Sami just groaned and growled something rude.

~0~

Squeaks sucked at her teeth a bit as she looked over the area. Even a week after the fact the place looked a bit like a battle ground. Maybe the three girls’ accounts hadn't been all hysteria and drugs.

“The traces went which way from here?”

“West and a little south from here.” Levi pointed. “I didn't want to change and really track, to many humans around but I went far enough that I was reasonably sure of directions.”

Squeaks sighed and looked up the low ridge then jumped down off the top of the wagon to land beside Levi and Brian.

“And we have no clue who died here.”

“Nope. Just someone clearly did by one of Sergey's man-killers.”

“Some days this habit of burning bodies is really annoying.”

Levi snorted as Brian gave Squeaks a dubious look.

“I'd rather not smell them after they've been dead over a week thanks.” Brian remarked rather tartly, but he still was the one who got squeamish when things were dead and rotting.

“True. I just wish we had some idea who died out here.”

“That would make our lives too easy.” Levi shot back flippantly.

“Smart alec. So,” she climbed up enough to grab the reins for the horses. “We keep going up into the hills and see what happens?”

“Yeah. I'll take point for a bit. Brian you wanna see if there's anything edible handy? I don't want to camp anywhere near here if we can help it.”

“Yeah... let me see what I can find, even a bit of clover root will be good if you can catch a rabbit.”

“I'll do what I can.”

Squeaks just rolled her eyes at their antics, but didn't argue. This place gave her creepy feelings and she wanted to be gone.

~0~

Having two newborns complicated things a little. Feeding one would have been a bit of a challenge, feeding two was rather more than that.

Fortunately Larry didn't have issues with sunlight. By a lucky fluke of genetics he was like Sami in
that regard. He also had reasonably good control of his hunger and could feed from the changers without too much fear of him slipping and bleeding one of them half to death. Or course he was feeding at least a little almost daily, so his hunger never really had the time to get severe.

Jay though, he reacted badly to sunlight, not as badly as he could have, but badly enough that they couldn't just take him out on a circuit of Rites as an assistant and get him full fed that way.

Larry went out on short trips with Theon and Risto and quickly got the hang of feeding in little nips from eager girls. All they really had to do was remember to keep him away from the territories of his birth tribe and the range of the tribe he'd married into. Rather hard to explain how he was a young Wise One now, when they'd last seen him as a regular human man driven half mad with fear for his lost friend. It wasn't likely that Jay would be able to be out and about in full summer's sunlight in the lifetimes of anyone who would remember him.

Jay stayed curled up at Satama, mostly sleeping the days away and feeding from the other vampires in residence as his control wasn't as solid as Larry's was yet. He was slipping and feeding to heavily fairly often and the lack of control was upsetting him a great deal.

Ironically having Jay around made Koira slow down. He still went out, and with help from Christian, Adam and Bailey harvested large amounts of grain as it ripened and collected other edibles to store away for winter. But with Jay stuck mostly indoors he stayed closer to home and tried to find things to amuse his friend with while Sami and the others were out minding their tribes.

A battered and rather fragile book on astronomy sparked things. Jay and Larry, like Koira, hadn't known how to read when they arrived. But Koira had been willing to sit down with the precious books and read what he could to his friend as he helped him get that skill. Jay picked it up fairly quickly as he could remember being able to read in his dreams, something that had Koira sighing wistfully.

Jonne had watched one night as Jay had looked up at the stars and compared what had been in the book with what he could see.

"We don't have a telescope do we." That wasn't really a question from Jay's tone but Jonne answered anyway.

"Not big ones that I've ever seen. Sami trades for sextants but those aren't the same thing." He swallowed hard again, Jay from the era of the band had been a quiet astronomy nut, something very few of their old fans had known and seeing him looking up at the sky again brought back memories of happier times.

"Aele had a small one after Bouno died. I'm not sure what happened to it. But it was a little thing, not like what's in the book." Unspoken but not unheard was the 'not like the one I had before.'

"I think every tribe has one of the little ones; and several people who can use it. With it and a sextant to get a good heading navigation even in the plains of grass to the east are pretty easy."

Jonne shrugged. "I know all of Sami's fishing tribes use them all the time."

Jay smiled.

"Navigation is navigation. I remember thinking it was stupid to have to memorize all the reckonings for places in our territory. Now I look at Jason's charts and laugh at how sloppy the numbers have gotten."
And the numbers had gotten sloppy, but when you were going from a known area to a known area you didn't need accuracy to the nearest five decimal points. Two would get you near enough to find hidden wells and seeps for clean water. For grazing areas or known hunting spots you didn't even need that much accuracy, you just needed a heading and a general feel for time. By the time a child had gotten old enough for Rites the feel for their home territory was ingrained in them simply by the years of moving from place to place.

For now Jay was using a bit of straight reed to sight on stars, with that and a sextant he was getting a feel for the math to calculate times.

When Jason went south he went with more than trade for sugar, salt and textiles in mind. But he'd come home with a good load of corn, the expected salt, sugar and trade goods but not the lenses he'd hoped for. The ground lenses for the smaller telescopes the plains tribes used for navigation mostly came up from the south or from the very Far East. Their only other options were to go hunting in a set of ruins.

They still had a mostly unexplored pair of city ruins within a few days travel. The tribes avoided the places and even the boldest young man didn't go farther in than the very outer suburbs. Even of those few more than half didn't come back out.

Sami had to sit down and discuss the idea in detail with his people.

Then he went on a long run to settle his thoughts.

~0~

Cities were dangerous at the best of times now. Zombies that wandered in and had gotten stuck were only one worry, the bigger one was the failing infrastructure of the cities themselves. Most of the bridges had long since failed due to lack of maintenance. Buildings were still in the process of collapsing and underground sewer and subway lines were still failing from old age and neglect. There were a few places where gas lines had failed and blown huge holes in the ground, some places where there had been fires that made the remains left behind even more fragile. All that alone made it easy for rain, wind and snow to tear down what was left.

At least a blown gas main wasn't an issue anymore, those had all long ago gone boom if they were going to. Falling into an old petrol storage tank and drowning in the contaminated water was more of a danger, or having a building or wall fall on top of you.

Jonne hated seeing the shattered remains of a city, so he'd volunteered to stay behind and keep Jay company as they kept Satama ticking over. Christian was jittery and let Theon mind the reins of the horses as he watched the ruins from his perch on the roof of his wagon with his hands steady on his crossbow.

In broad daylight they weren't in too much danger. Zombie's avoided sunlight if they could, but they didn't burn as quickly or as badly as a vampire would.

They'd still need to find a sheltered place to camp at night, someplace where they could be protected on three sides would be best. A place with a roof would be ideal, but not something to be counted on.

It was a little surprising how well some of the buildings had held up. Windows were long gone but some buildings looked almost habitable in spite of that and the overgrowth of plants, while others were so much unidentifiable rubble.
Sami winced a little when Koira went rummaging in the shell of one shop in a little row of them, his eye attracted by the glint of sunlight off a bit of broken glass more than likely. He sighed when the small man let out a little yip and began gathering something up in his hands to pile them in the front of his shirt, but Sami moved along with the group when Risto and Adam went to investigate.

Koira had found an old craft shop, and was sifting stone and glass beads out of the dust and rubble with his fingers. It might not have been what they were specifically looking for, but some of the cut glass would trade well so it was worth it to quickly sift the contents of the shop and pile what they found into a pair of sacks to sort out later. Christian had let out a soft huff of surprise when Larry had carefully lifted fragile but still intact hanks of tiny seed beads up to place them in small makeshift sacks made of scraps of hide or cloth. Those would trade really well; such small things couldn't be made now in any real quantity.

The next shop over also proved to be worth sifting through, Jason had let out a happy whoop when Theon had found the first thermometer, when they were done they'd found three that were intact and, miracle of miracles, a pair of intact sand timers hidden in the rusted out remains of a steel locker in what once had been the pharmacy area of the chemists shop. The brass was tarnished, but the glass, or poly-carbonate or whatever, it didn't feel right to be glass, was intact. A few stainless steel instruments had survived mostly intact and Jason gleefully and carefully had packed them up. The scale was a lost cause though other than the brass weights. But a balance scale was easy to build, and it looked like there were three complete sets of bass weights and several extra strewn in the debris. One set was even still shiny, its protective lacquer coating not worn away by time and use.

Christian kept careful watch from his perch on the roof of his wagon and kept his crossbow ready as the rest of the Hunt did a quick search of the rest of the small strip mall.

They didn't find anything else of note, or of much use, so they moved on.

The shell of a petrol station was searched, mostly in case there was anything useful left of the mechanics shop that was attached. A number of chromed tools, wrenches mostly had survived even if the toolboxes they'd been stored in mostly hadn't, and those tools were taken as they could be traded as high value scrap to Sami's miners. If they got a good enough pile they might be good for another set of steel mill wheels, maybe a coarser set than the fine flour set they had now, so Birdie could make his much missed oat porridge. Birdie had already proved that it was possible to churn butter from the milk of their horses and the goats that hung around, so Jason at least would be helping to eat the porridge.

They set up camp in the mechanics shop, it had part of its roof still and three good walls, the forth could be blocked with the wagons. The concrete floor was still unbroken and mostly level after all the debris was swept aside to make sleeping spaces and a spot for a fire.

Sami slept lightly and took his turn at watch just before dawn, but the only things he saw or identified by sound were a few small animals, rats and other nocturnal rodents, nothing large enough to be a threat to them. Just as dawn broke he head the hoot of an owl hunting breakfast, it had startled him by pouncing something just at the edges of camp but it was still no threat.

So they ate, broke camp and kept scavenging.

Koira was a little magpie, and found several other interesting finds just by being attracted to shiny things in the dirt. Even Christian had laughed when he'd come up with a cut crystal bowl, somehow still unbroken amidst the shattered remains of its fellows after all this time.

God only knew what they'd use the thing for. Right now it was being used to pile crystal beads and
a few unbroken prisms in. Most of what they found was too big for birds or hoarding rodents to carry off, but some of the beads he found had still been threaded on wires that were now very fragile. Between that and the fact they were utterly filthy with dirt meant they'd survived mostly where they fell. A bit of cleaning and they'd be valuable for trade, the prisms might be useful as a sort of magic trick to amuse the children of their tribes.

Kris kept closing his eyes and thinking hard, as if he was trying to remember what had been where long ago when this place had been a thriving population center. He vaguely remembered the locations of bars, but those weren't what they were looking for.

Jason found the first large hardware center, and to their surprise in a section of the building that still had a roof they found a storage room that had been stocked full of sheet metals, coils of wire and copper and brass tubing and metal pipes and rods. Most likely put there by some other survivor of the disaster squirreling away things that would be useful and then never returning for them. Most of the thinner steel sheet and finer wire was so much colored powder now, at least that's what they suspected. But Sami still swept up the flaking red and green dust. They could be used to color leather and chalk. A few fragile metal drums held nothing but residue of whatever had been stored in them, and Jason quietly explained to Koira why using the still intact ones as water storage wasn't a good idea. Some of the chemicals could still be dangerous after all this time. With the labels long gone to dust or faded beyond any hope of legibility they couldn't tell what was benign and what was potentially lethal. It was safer just to leave them.

It was still a huge windfall, and some of the coated metals had had their coatings actually do their jobs, so there was only a small amount of corrosion around the very edges of sheets and very ends of wires leaving the bulk untouched and still usable. Some of that had no doubt been helped along by the cache being sheltered from the worst of the weather. Not that any of them were complaining, the find let them finish loading Christian's wagon and lay a layer of heavy but useful steel sheets in the bottoms of both the other wagons and the open cart.

This would have been a good haul all by itself, and made the trip worth the risk, but they kept searching.

~0~

Brian grumbled. They'd lost any hint of the trail as soon as they'd hit rock. And that was frustrating as all hell.

It was clear there were well traveled paths in the area just from the slight dip worn into the stone and earth, but which one of the collection they'd stumbled into was the one they wanted?

He had a feeling the direction they'd picked was wrong as soon as they started heading downhill. But by then they could see the ruins of a city in the distance and curiosity had them continuing. Given how people avoided the remains of big cities now there might be some good scavenging to be had. At the very least a bit of hunting and the chance to run and test their skills in the urban environment they'd been designed for.

Then they could backtrack and see if one of the more uphill options led to the answers they were looking for.

~0~

Kris’s yell and Koira's scream had the rest of the Hunt converging at a near sprint. Sami swore when he heard the heavy snap of Christian's crossbow firing and the eerie shriek of a zombie, and kept moving until he found where Christian was reloading his crossbow and standing beside Chriss...
and Jason as they looked down into the pit Kris and Koira had fallen into. Adam and Birdie were reaching down to pull Kris back out of the hole.

“How bad?”

“Just one, I got it in the neck and shoulder and it was bleeding pretty badly so I don't think it'll survive long. It looked pretty bad anyway and ran after I hit it.” Christian focused on reloading the heavy weapon and soon had a new blot locked into place and ready. The thing had to be three quarters dead to just run when their prospective meal fought back, normally the damn things could lose and arm and still would keep coming.

Sami let out a low sigh of relief, and then had to smile as Christian continued.

“Koira didn't get bitten; he kicked the thing in the teeth when it tried.”

Koira looked up as Sami reached down to pull him out.

“There's a lot of stuff down here. Sheets of the stuff like our skylights but clearer and bags and boxes of things.” Sami let out a low groan as Koira poked into one, folding the brittle plastic lid back after a little trial and error that mostly broke it.

“He's a magpie,” offered Bailey wryly as he carefully slid down into the hole to look.

“So you have to go after him?” Birdie sighed and handed down a couple of the spears they’d been using to check the ground under their feet. Christian shared a long look with Sami then sighed and pulled the length of rope that had knots tied at regular intervals out to drop into the hole before he slid down in as well. Theon took his crossbow first, then carefully lowered it down to him once he was stable. The rope would let them get back out a bit more easily. Sami had given in and tied knots in the one length just because it made it easier and faster to climb than a plain length of rope.

The low whistle Christian let out had Risto and Theon both almost falling in as they leaned over to try and see more clearly, Julian had to grab both of them by the belt to keep them from tumbling in head first as the lip of the hole crumbled a bit more.

“Lots of windshields, looks like whatever was in the boxes though mostly didn't make it. Oh wait, this one looks like it had medical stuff.” Bailey called up as he took a quick look around before focusing back on the pile Koira was rummaging through.

“Be careful, we don't want you to get stuck with a rusty old needle,” warned Jason as Bailey began rummaging the fragile boxes. Bailey didn't stop rummaging, but he did slow down and search more carefully. Sami had to laugh when he came up with a handful of slender glass wands, fragile pipettes, glass stirring wands and more of the thermometers he'd been wishing for last winter. In another box there was carefully stacked Pyrex, more than enough to stock a good chemistry lab. Beakers and flasks and even a few of the relatively more fragile distillation spirals all in the crumbling remains of the packing material it had been stored in. If they survived the trip home they'd be useful in Jason's workshop.

Theon scrambled for more ropes and one of the baskets Janne had packed with food for the trip. Emptied out and tied into a rope sling they could carefully lift the glassware up a basket load at a time to pack it away in the cart. The ropes alone let them haul the windshield up and out one at a time.

Theon chewed his lip as he stepped back from laying a windshield on top of the stack and looked at the pile they were accumulating.
“We may need to make a run for home. This is proving to be a pretty good run, and we haven't even gotten into the manufacturing centers.”

Sami nodded and watched as Adam carefully cut a deep mark into the wall by the above ground shop they'd been looting when Kris and Koira had made their fall into their treasure pit. The marks would ensure they didn't waste time later researching places they'd already gutted of anything useful, but would also make finding places they hadn't looted out easier to find.

“Christian?” Sami called down into the hole

Christian grunted then called back.

“Yeah?”

“Will your horses let another person run them if you aren't there?”

“Possibly, probably, why?” The other man came back to the hole and looked up.

“Theon brought up the point we may need to take a load for home. And yours has the heaviest load with all the metals.” He didn't mention that the reason they'd put the metals in Christian's wagon was it was the best built of the ones they had and his team of four was bigger than any horse they had brought with them.

Of course that was because Christian's horses were bigger than anything else they had.

“Theon and Juke drove them out, I think they'd let them drive them back.” Christian was distracted for a moment when Koira came up to him with something. “That's a gravy boat Koira,” the wry smile made Sami smile as well when Christian looked back up. “This must have been an underground mall. Koira found a Corningware place.”

Sami had to laugh when Jason's first question was if the place had the shot glasses with measurement marks on the sides. After this long the volumes probably weren't entirely accurate anymore, but they'd still let Jason be a bit more precise in measuring his medications for their tribes. And if there were enough of them he could leave one with each of their tribes so his measurement doses could be continued correctly rather than guesstimated.

~0~

Jonne blinked in confusion when he saw Janne flying in. He knew it was Janne because no other hawk would be making a beeline for him with a bundle of something in his talons. The dive and flip that followed confirmed it for him as Janne flipped from bird carrying load to a man with a bundle in his hands.

The wide smile was reassuring though as was the warm hug he got.

“We're having amazingly good luck.” He carefully unwrapped the bundle and Jonne gasped when he saw half a dozen thermometers, from the little medical ones Jason had been wishing they had enough of to risk taking one on hunting trips to the bigger ones for cooking. “Koira found an underground mall area that's in excellent shape. We had to take out a zombie, but it's been worth it. Theon, Risto and Juke are a day or two behind me with the wagons loaded up full. The rest of the guys are still scavenging and piling things in a safe location for us to go back and reload.”

Jonne blinked and nodded silently, still wrapping his mind around the fact that so much had survived so long as he cradled a thermometer in his hands.
Risto grumbled a little but knew the faster they got unloaded and turned back around to get back the better off they'd be. It would be three days at least before they could get back to the mechanics shop the Hunt had decided to use as a staging area. Birdie had found the old train station, and had to be rescued from a pair of trapped and very hungry zombie’s right before they'd left to bring this first load home. Christian had hopes that some of the wheels and axles of the train cars might still be useful. If just two axles, even just four wheels, were still good they could rebuild a train car and pile all their metal scrap into it and drag loads north to Sami’s miners in smaller cart loads on the track that still remained. It was still an enormous amount of work, and they'd be checking and possibly repairing track as they went, but the potential trade value of the scrap they'd found so far was huge.

Jonne's eyes had gone wide at the cut crystal bowl, and he'd laughed at the prisms. He'd gone searching for strong light line to string some of the smaller ones up under their skylights to throw rainbows around their home in that brief bits of time when the sun was directly overhead. He'd been playing with pulling the long fibers out of some of the blue hemp plants that grew wild on the plains around their home. Jason's library had helped him find the information but he was still going through a bit of trial and error. Jason's fondness for knitting had gotten all of them at least moderately skilled in spinning wool, cotton and the long hair of the goats that lurked nearby, so Jonne was able to do some test runs spinning the long fibers before handing over the resulting yarns for further experimentation. He just kept having fits getting the long Blue hemp fibers to actually hang together. He'd have to remember to ask Sami to see if any of the tribes that used the plant for cordage were willing to share how they processed the plants. All this work and him not being able to get lengths longer than five meters was frustrating.

Jay had smiled at the magnifying half globes that were in the mix of jumbled crystal and glass beads and had carefully carried the sand timers and some of the Pyrex down to Jason's workshop. He'd offered to try and sharpen some of the metal cutting tools and see if they could be salvaged. At worst they'd be more scrap to trade north. At best they'd have some saws, chisels and knives of good chrome steel like they couldn't make anymore.

Risto fell into the bed he shared with his lovers with some relief. They'd get a good night’s sleep in a real bed then make the trip back and load up again.

Janne flew point, and gave the rest of the Hunt a bit of warning, so Theon wasn't surprised when he saw the other wagon and a trio of rough carts going the other direction with a set of pack horses pulling travois poles. Birdie grinned and waved and the two groups stopped to exchange a bit of news.

A few more zombies had been found and dealt with, and a few cattle had been found in a park area, cornered and slaughtered. The train station had proved to be a good source of scrap metals, but they’d only found the makings of a flatbed train car, not a real enclosed car to haul things in. But a trip north to Sami’s miners was being discussed as it was about a seven day trip from the city if they could mostly still use the rails and the weather stayed clear, twelve or so if they couldn’t or the weather turned and a few travois loads of scrap might go over well.

They shared a meal and at dawn both groups went in opposite directions.

Larry blinked up at the sun and counted days in his head. The days were getting shorter and they
had made four trips home. Strange to think of Satama as home now, but it felt more like home than
the boat ever had. And now Sami and Christian were sorting through a pile of what looked like
junk to him with an eye to taking a large load north, to a group he'd never seen before. But he'd be
meeting very soon; Sami had already settled who was going north and who was going home.

He was going north, with Sami, Christian, Koira, Birdie, Bailey and Adam. They'd be taking four
carts and six travois loads of scrap and carrying their supplies on their backs. He had no idea why
Sami was being so fussy on the junk he sorted out to take up there; it all looked pretty useless to
him. But he had no means to turn the twisted metal into useful things. Larry sighed and stared
wistfully at the pile. How many fishhooks would that make? How many arrowheads and spear
points?

Larry gave himself a shake and carefully began helping shift the approved pile into the carts, trying
to make each one weigh about the same.

~0~

Jonne was thrilled. In their scavenging Kris had found a sporting goods store. Almost everything in
the place was gone to dust and ruin but under a heap of debris in what had been the center of the
store there had been a pile of the best kind of treasure.

Cast iron pots and pans.

Everything from a pot big enough to serve Jonne as a bathtub to tiny pans only large enough to fry
a single egg, there were Dutch ovens and the funny little mold pans for baking bread in. More than
half of the pans had been ruined with holes rusted all the way through them, but many had
somehow survived thanks to the funny coating they'd been dipped in at the factory.

Even better Koira and Janne had been able to spot and help corner a double handful of wild
chickens. With their wings clipped and a shelter built just for them just inside one of the lower
storage caverns they'd provide eggs next year. Even better, now that they knew where a population
was they could go back and collect more hens and chicks in spring. Once they got the silly things
home and established they would help keep the horses enclosure free of things like ticks.

The hard part was getting them home, Janne had said he'd tried before and only managed with a
few ducks, never with chickens. The ducks provided some eggs and the occasional bird, but
chickens would be a nice change. So they went to the trouble of catching the blasted things alive.
Then Janne taught Koira how to weave the cage like baskets from sticks and braided grass to keep
the birds in for the trip. After that it was getting food and water to them, which they were sure they
could manage for a while. If not, well, they were no worse off than before and now knew a good
location to try again. Sooner or later they'd collect enough chicks to have some make it home alive.

The only down side was that Larry had been part of the group to go north to trade with Sami’s
miners. Kris had snuggled him close and whispered that they could plan a nice welcome home for
when the rest of the Hunt returned.

At least the route back from that particular settlement was mostly open and flat, and Janne knew
where it was so in a week or so he could start flying out to see where everyone was. He could fly
out far enough that it would take laden animals three or even four days to get home, so it wasn't as
if he couldn't make it worth the effort, and in an emergency he could fly light supplies out faster
than any of them but Sami could run in.

~0~
Brian had gotten fidgety and after making sure Squeaks and Levi had a good secure place to hole up had run back to the crossroads and gone uphill rather than down.

That had left him even more confused.

There were signs of people, lots of signs of people in fact. The paths were clearly actively in use, he could see the scuff marks in the dust on the paths, and unsafe areas were marked with a crude fence or a bit of rope, but there were no people.

So after almost a week of exploring he turned and ran back to see what his lovers had learned in the little suburb they'd been exploring. If things were really as free of zombie's as they had appeared it might be a good place to hole up for the winter.

~0~

Sami scrubbed his eyes and considered what the village headman was telling him. He was a little shocked at the value they were getting for the scrap they'd brought. Sure he'd been careful to try and get only steel and iron based scrap and to get pieces that had as little rust as he could, but he'd still expected at best half the weight in finished goods as he offered in scrap.

They weren't getting weight for weight, but it was a lot better than the half he'd expected. The chromed tools were more valuable than he'd expected and helped more than he'd realized they could. Something to consider for future trips.

Sami nodded, and they spat and shook on the deal.

Part of it might well be that Sami was well known here, and several times in winters past had brought them medicines that kept winter cough from killing as many people as it could have. And he'd done that without expectation of trade in return.

Birdie, Adam and Bailey they knew from the hunting trip the summer before last. Larry was a new face and had made himself quietly popular by being willing to haul coal and wood and by being a warm and considerate lover.

Koira had gotten a few sideways looks, but he still looked far younger than his years and could still have sudden bouts of shyness. Gunter's daughter Cheri had playfully teased Koira until he blushed and buried his face in Sami's shoulder before she'd gone on to playfully tease Birdie.

It was rather a good thing none of them could get a woman pregnant, because in the past six days she'd taken great glee in pouncing Birdie flat at every opportunity.

If they'd still have been human she'd have been a good match for Birdie; and from the sometimes sad smiles he gave her he knew that. And he knew he would outlive her a hundred times over.

All Sami could do was give Birdie's shoulder a squeeze as he walked past on the way to the cavern where they'd sort out what they would be taking home with them. Adam and Bailey would have to be the support as Birdie explained to the girl he couldn't stay and be her husband.

~0~

Gunter sighed and shook his head. Maybe now his girl would settle on one of her suitors. She'd set her cap at an Old Soul, and clearly the man regretted that he couldn't make her a good husband.

Well, in all ways but children and growing old together he probably would make a woman an excellent husband. From what he'd seen of the Old Souls any of them would make an excellent
spouse. But they didn't age like a normal man would, Sami had been tending their people for as long as Gunter could remember and his grandfather said he'd been minding them for as long as he could recall. Two legs that would no longer carry him had no effect on the old man's mind. He was still sharp as ever and taught the children their figures and some of the things to be careful of in the mines. His stumps were a pointed reason to listen, and his care had helped prevent some accidents.

Nothing could prevent them all.

He smiled faintly as he listened to the big man, Sami, as he explained what they were looking for in the way of trade goods to the little shy one. That one might not do so well for a woman, he didn't seem to know quite what to do when the girls teased him. But he seemed to do quite well with a man; Gunter sighed and looked over at his second son and his husband. Henri had done his best to be a good husband to a woman, but had been miserably unhappy. When she'd left one night after the accident and left their children it had been both a blow and a relief. Artur had stepped in and now five years later you'd never have known they hadn't been together from the very start. And both men were more than willing to minder babies so their mothers could work. The loss of a leg only shifted the work Henri did, what he did now was still important to the survival of the mine.

A question from the little one made Gunter wonder yet again if the Old Souls had wives and husbands somewhere, not that he'd ever seen a female Old Soul.

The smile from Sami and the hug made him stop.

They might have husbands.

The look Sami had just given the small one, and the smile and gentle caress made him think of the looks and touches he exchanged with his wife on a daily basis.

But then he shook himself and watched as his Aitta haggled with the one with all the curls, La-ry, over several small rounds of her excellent cheese.

~0~

Going home was considerably faster than coming had been. For one they didn't have four carts and six travois loads of heavy metal junk to haul back and they were able to ride the horses that had been hauling before if they weren't driving. Koira was dive bombing prairie voles, rabbits and anything else small, edible and too stupid or slow to get away. That meant they were eating fairly well, even if they had re-purposed some of the travois poles into drying racks on two of the carts to preserve some of what Koira was bringing down. They'd already stopped to do a quick tan on the skins so they wouldn't rot before they got home.

Christian snorted; Larry wasn't fond of driving, though he was doing better than he had on the trip up. He also really wasn't fond of riding and the only things that kept him from being stubborn and walking was that they were making excellent time home and that if Koira wasn't in the air he was perched on horseback improving his own skills.

A cloud of dust pulled his attention off the less than happy vampire and back onto the task at hand.

Koira and Sami saw the dust cloud as well and within a few moments Koira was back aloft and winging his way over to check.

The cloud didn't look to be moving closer so Christian kept the carts moving more or less toward home as the spot that was Koira diminished in the sky, circled for a few passes and then came winging back.
The kid landed on a cart this time and changed, this time he didn't wobble and nearly fall though.

“Looks like a mixed herd of cattle, the big ones with the yellow crest down their backs and the smaller fluffy ones that you said were called sheep.”

Sami's eyes lit.

After a moment Christian caught his train of thought and grinned.

“Do we have a water supply handy?”

Christian grinned when Koira nodded and pointed off to the right of their travel path and said they were almost to the river they'd followed part of the way out toward the miner’s camp.

Sami nodded to himself and they slowed to a halt to make plans.

If they'd been closer he'd have sent Koira off to get the rest of the Hunt, but four days out it was a bit far still. But he might still change his mind.

~0~

They'd set up camp in a bend of the river and Christian, Adam and Bailey shifted to serve as herd dogs. Koira spotted from above and when he had a good target he'd dive and shift to his wolf shape to help the others cut the animal from the mixed herd. With practice he was learning to use the animals’ startled reaction to his shape changing to get them running more or less the right direction. Larry managed fairly well with Christian's crossbow, and when he hit with it, the animal he targeted went down. They were targeting at most two animals a day. The herd wasn't shifting very fast so they figured on having three days of hunting before they needed to move to a new location.

The sheep were the primary targets, with their wooly coats growing in thick for the coming winter. It was getting cold enough to freeze at night now, so Adam and Bailey suggested digging a pit to freeze some of the meat in. Later when they dug the pit they grumbled a bit about no good deed going unpunished, but the pit would let them keep a bit more meat in good condition for later preservation by other means. They just had to be a bit more careful in initial butchery to keep the best portions where they would freeze solid enough to transport.

Sami was laughing at Larry, he'd missed the sheep he'd been aiming for and managed to take out one of the large cattle in an astonishingly lucky shot; he'd missed and the bull behind the sheep had let out a single astonished bellow and fallen over almost instantly dead, when a soft cough made them both jump.

Theon was standing there with a look on his face that was both exasperated and amused.

“Do we need to have the chat about lateness again?”

Sami blinked as he released tension on his bowstring and lowered the weapon.

“Uh? No?”

Theon snorted as the rest of the Hunt, with the exception of Jay and Jonne, turned out to help process the huge bull.

“Good, because I'm getting tired of repeating myself. Janne found you yesterday and we hustled a bit to come out and help.” Theon's face went a bit serious. “We also had a windstorm take out the
main airlocks. It scared the crap out of us, but there wasn't a lot of damage. Jason suggested we build a complete brick enclosure on that section of the path. The arches clearly aren't going to be enough to keep a hide enclosure up if we get another bad blow.” He squatted down and with and arrow sketched out the idea in the dirt at their feet. “He wants to use some of that cinder block we found in the city and do an arched enclosure covering six meters on either side of our door. He, Chriss, Juke and Risto did several runs back and pulled three sledge loads of the blocks back each time, so he thinks we have enough block and he's been collecting the stuff for the concrete mix he likes. He thinks the arches we have up will help him get things stable.”

Sami nodded, last winter they'd had issues with the airlocks moving if the wind was right and with a bit of icing even with tarps over the archways they'd built to try and keep that problem from happening. Something they'd never had issue with when the dome over their waterfall had been intact.

“He thinking airlock both ends in winter? In addition to the main one we already have?”

Theon nodded with a slight wince, but Sami knew one thing Jason needed for his concrete mix was crushed limestone and for mortar he'd need lime. Burning limestone was not one of Theon's favorite things, given the choice he'd rather be bashing big rocks to dust. At least they still had the big granite rollers to crush limestone with, even if moving the damn things had been an enormous pain.

“The airlock now is kind of beat up. We did a patch job, but the hides aren't one hundred percent like they were, and Jonne is really reluctant to cut down the one big canvas tarp.”

That provoked several grimaces. That oversized tarp had been a pain in the ass to get, but had been the best thing to cover the archways last winter.

Sami thought carefully, and then looked up.

“Who's left at Satama? Just Jay and Jonne?”

Theon shook his head.

“Janne is there as well. He wanted to be sure if something else went bad he could get to us in a hurry.”

“Good plan. We'll sort things completely once we have this bull dealt with.” Then he stood and walked over to help haul neatly carved chunks of beef away from the carcass.

~0~

“I think it would be better if we rough tanned all the hides at least while we are out here,” said Christian when Sami brought it up for discussion. “We have the canvas your miners traded us, we can use that to wrap and cover the meat we have that's frozen. We dug that pit, we may as well get full use out of it.” he took a bite and thought as he chewed. “Thee, how long did it take you guys to run out here?”

Theon swallowed quickly and answered.

“A bit under a day at our changers best traveling speed, and with us stopping to sleep a few hours. We left early afternoon yesterday, and were here noonish today.”

“How long would that trip take with a horse?”
This time it was Risto who answered, he knew how fast their animals would move.

“With carts, four days, loaded travois a little under three, if we did packs and rode could probably do it in a bit under two, but the horses wouldn't like it. If it helps it looks like this herd was moving the same way the bison herd did last winter.”

Sami and Christian exchanged a look as Theon thought aloud, letting Christian know what he was planning.

“So we could dig another freezing pit by the site we camped at last year. We could take a load in and be back there following afternoon or evening. That's not more than half a day at human speed from one of our outer caches.”

“Sounds workable. Chriss? You, me and Christian will head out to last year’s bison camp and dig a pit there, and come back. Theon, you, Adam and Bailey take the carts in; we'll load them up, but keep the travois poles here for the next runs. Tampere can be trusted to follow Christian's lot if we give her a long lead rope. We'll finish tanning the hides at the bison camp for whatever animals we take down here over the next four days. By then most of them will have moved on and we can move ourselves. Leave four horses here at all times until we make the final move, but load up what you can of the frozen meat from the earlier days hunting to haul toward home. Janne and Jonne can teach Jay how we process meat for storage and get drying lines set up and if needed he can help Jonne make more storage pots.”

Sami then finished his dinner and went to check the perimeter, sooner or later they were going to have scavengers getting bold.

~0~

Bailey asked the question two nights later after Larry and Birdie passed them with six horses pulling middling light travois loads.

“Why did he have us head for home and not help dig the pit at the next camp?”

Theon smiled as the nudged one of the animals back in line.

“You and Adam already dug one pit. Sami's pretty careful that the heavy or messy chores get shared around. Keeps resentment down. Notice that we'll get home and Larry and Birdie will be there to help unload as will Jonne, Jay and Janne, then we'll all get a good night’s sleep in our own beds and head back.” Theon's smile went soft. “I bet he'll have the rotation set so Jonne doesn't have to go more than a night without Kris or Larry to keep him warm.”

Bailey had to smile at that. Since the two newborn vampires had changed over Kris and Jonne had taken to cuddling Larry very close and Larry seemed to enjoy the affection. Jay and Janne had settled into an arrangement of their own, but there was a bit more contention in that pair, mostly because when Jay needed to feed he'd get crabby and snappish. Part of the snap was simple hunger, part of it was he still didn't trust his control when feeding from one of the changers and he didn't want to risk hurting Janne, no matter how hungry he was.

Feeding two newborns was going to complicate things this winter, especially as Jay couldn't stand even the weak sunlight at dusk and dawn yet. Larry at least could help with midwinter sweeps and get full fed that way, Jay was fully dependent on the others and could be for several years if what Bailey remembered with Birdie held true.

No wonder Sami was taking the small risk of having them all out to potentially pad out their larder
with a large amount of mutton and beef. If the changers ate well they could feed the vampires, and the elder vampires could feed the younger with less fear of something catastrophic happening. New sheepskins for their beds and hides for airlocks would help keep everyone warm, and not have them spending resources on getting warm and staying warm that could be spent elsewhere. Like building a sheltered walkway and feeding those fledglings.

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With the need for several hides to make new airlocks with, Jason and Risto set about taking down several animals at a go and dealing with them all at once. By the time Sami, Chriss and Christian got back from digging a freezing pit at the bison camp they'd pulled down four of the bigger cattle and half a dozen sheep.

They'd dealt with all the brains at once and had mashed up the slurry of brains, urine and water to smear into the cleaned hides. Kris, Julian and Koira did that messy job while Risto and Jason did the heavier work of breaking down the carcasses to freeze into solid blocks for transport. He'd been happy to see that when Birdie, Theon and the rest came back they'd brought back the new meat grinder, salt, herbs and extra wooden poles. It had confused Koira to no end when they'd taken several of the larger not quite finished hides and carefully laced them into a boxy shed like shape. But he'd quickly caught on when they began grinding and filling sausages to hang inside. The smoke that cured the sausages would also help cure the hides. The first one was a bit lopsided, but each one after that was better at both holding in the smoke and at exposing as much of the hide as possible to that smoke.

They quickly set up smaller sheds with the smaller hides and began to smoke cure other choice cuts of meat as well as the links of sausage. Uncured links went into the freezing pits to wait their turn in the smoking sheds and they loaded up another lot to get carried back toward home. When the herds moved on they shifted to the bison camp, leaving four of their number to finish out the processing of what they'd killed and move it toward home as it was smoked or frozen.

Once they'd moved to the bison camp Janne and Jonne rotated out to help. And Janne took over spotting from above as Koira flew back to the other camp to help Theon, Risto, Julian and Kris finish clearing that camp of anything useful.

It still took them three trips to clear everything.

By the time they caught up to the rest of the Hunt at the bison camp Sami's group had taken down another dozen animals and dug two more freezing pits. The next summer they'd come back and dig the pits deeper and cover then with better lids to help keep scavengers out. As it was they'd taken out several ermine and a very determined mink as well as several coyotes and wild dogs.

Jonne was the one who found the den of out of season, and painfully thin, puppies. They looked to almost be old enough to wean and after a bit of fearful snapping the two pups had gotten hungry enough to let the Hunt handle and feed them. With a little work Jason and Christian thought they could be tamed and put to work. At worst case they'd be good company for Jonne and Jay and anyone else stuck at Satama over the summers.

They kept taking down three or four animals a day until the herds moved on. This time though, they stayed put and didn't follow the herd.

Jonne, Koira and Christian hunted up more wild garlic and onion to season the next batches of sausage and as the smoking sheds were tended and the freezing pits slowly emptied the Hunt took it in turns to go harvest what fields of wild grain they could find. Most of the fields they'd swept
through earlier in the summer, but a second sweep for later ripening grains let them add a bit more variety to their meals. They were doing fairly well in their gleaning and gathering.

Then it started snowing.

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“Blegh,” Birdie grumbled as he helped sweep a path clear between the smoking sheds. “When are we done?”

Risto laughed and carefully fed the small fires that were feeding smoke into each of the sheds. He'd been doing his share of grumbling when he'd gone hunting hardwoods to use in the smoking sheds. And he and Jonne both had grumbled when they'd been breaking what he found up into smaller, useable bits. But everyone had been helping with that, so his grumbles had been mostly good natured.

“We should have expected it. It is that time of year. In a few more weeks we'll be ice fishing and cutting ice blocks.”

Kris let out a snort of laughter as he brought up an armload of wood.

“At least we learned something useful, a hide smoking shed works almost as well as a wooden one. Next fall we'll be able to use it when the salmon run and preserve that much more fish. Oh, Jay saw an elk in the horses’ valley and said he accidentally killed it.”

Risto stopped and Birdie blinked.

“How do you accidentally kill an elk?” Birdie asked cautiously.

“Apparently he was hungry and bled it pretty far down.”

Risto just sat down and laughed until he cried and Birdie shook his head and muttered about fools and idiots.

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Brian shivered a little.

They hadn't found a place they wanted to spend the effort to make weather tight in the suburb, so they'd moved back toward the crossroads and taken another route.

It had led to what was left of a small town and Levi had found a small block and stone tower like building that by some miracle still had its tiered stone roof intact. A bit of hard work stopping up gaps with a mix of mud and dry grass and settling sections of small trees in layers for a floor where there were holes in the walls that looked to have held floor supports before, and they had it ready for winter with space below for the horses and a kind of loft above for themselves. Not perfect, but better than out in the open. There was a whole section of space they couldn't span with the slender tree trunks they could find and they all were still working to make their rather fragile loft feel more secure underfoot.

Brian found himself wishing for a good hand saw and a half dozen seasoned tree trucks. He was finding ways of making do with a woodcutting axe and determination. It wasn’t making for the best split wood flooring, but they were slowly getting a less scary floor put in place. And they were getting the open holes they couldn't bridge closed off so the wind couldn't blast through.
Levi had been doing sweeps for small game and Squeaks had been scouting for other signs of life in the area and running trap lines in case Levi's hunting wasn't as good as he wanted it to be. Brian had been sweeping for fields of wild grains and streams with cattails water lily and other edibles.

While he'd found fields he'd also found signs that they were being harvested by humans. He'd taken grain and hay that he could find from the smaller areas that had been left untouched and told Levi and Squeaks what he'd found.

None of them were quite sure what to think. And from the looks of things unless they tripped over this other group this winter it would have to wait until spring for them to figure out who they were seeing signs of.

~0~

Sami laughed himself half sick when he heard about Jay and the 'accidental' elk. But he sent Jonne, Kris and Janne to help deal with it. A big elk was more than one man could hope to cope with. To get the pups out from underfoot Jonne took them both back home with him. They were adjusting to humans better than Sami had expected and were plumping up nicely into more proper puppy shapes with all the tidbits and scraps Jonne snuck them.

When Jason and Julian came back after running a load in they were able to fill in more details.

"He's been getting hungry, so rather than bother us," Jason rolled his eyes at the idea of feeding a Hunt brother as being a 'bother.' "He's been going out to hunt as soon as the suns gone down. Mostly he's been getting small game if he's gotten anything. This time he snuck up on the stupid thing while it was sleeping and bled it half to death. Now he's grumpy because he's feeling bloated from feeding too much." Jason shrugged as he helped load another lot of uncured sausages into one of the smoking sheds, in a few more days they'd call it good and pack up for home. "It looks like it was a youngster, just out on his own for the first time, so not as wary as he should have been. It was a touch on the lean side but it's another hide and more meat." What Jason meant, but didn't say was the silly thing was too stupid to live and they'd gotten to it before any of the other local predators had. Just as well, they could always use another large hide.

"Not something to complain about," agreed Birdie as he helped Adam settle down in their furs.

Sami just snorted and shook his head. Then he looked over at Janne and Koira.

"Where's the herd?"

"It made the turn south and I saw what looked like a human hunting party going after it. It's between the city we hit this fall and that mixed mess of plains and sand from the coastline."

Sami nodded.

"So one of Theon's tribes? Or one of Risto's? They both try and hunt that area this time of year."

Janne shrugged and finished swallowing before he answered.

"I couldn't tell; I didn't want to circle to low and have one of them notice that I was bigger than a normal hawk. I also didn't want to shift shape to a local species on the fly. That really freaks them out if they see it."

Sami sighed and reached over to pull Koira closer before he asked his next question.

"How do the winds feel?"
Janne made a so-so motion with his hand.

“Cold and dry, but I keep feeling like we're going to get a blow soon. I'd feel better if we were home and not out here in the open.”

Sami looked over at Risto, Jason and Julian.

“How about this. We send you home Jason, and send Chriss, Birdie, Adam, Bailey and Larry with as full a load as we can manage back. For now keep everyone home who is already home and let them work on the new doorway and airlocks.” He stopped then continued more slowly. “Do you think we could set in some of the windshield we scavenged to keep it from being dark as all hell?”

Jason sat up and blinked.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think I can work that. We have enough I might be able to lay them where there's an inner and an outer. Have to see what I can make work.”

“Even single would work,” offered Birdie. We'd still have the old main airlock to help keep the cold out.”

Jason nodded, but was clearly lost in thought as he leaned back against Chriss.

~0~

Koira squinted up at the sky, it was hazy and the snow was coming down in a steady fall. So far it was light and the wind wasn't blowing. Janne had come out once to let them know that Jason had
managed to block in a large section of the walkway, and that he'd lost one windscreen when it had slid from where he was cementing it into place and down into the pool below the waterfall.

Jay had gone diving for it and said it didn't look like it had broken, but they hadn't fished it out yet as the water was already very cold. No one else had wanted to go after it as Jay had been blue and shivering when he was hauled out of the pool. One of them would have to though, and fairly soon, or it might not survive the spring floods.

So it looked like his double paneled skylight idea wasn't going to work on their new entryway.

In other news they'd had one of the few known and trusted vampire runners also come through. He'd brought news that whatever the sea born plague was that had made life unpleasant for Birdie's crew had finally burned itself out and that the populations were recovering. To Sami's amusement apparently those groups were missing Birdie now, as there had been a small flurry of zombie conversions since he'd been gone. From what Janne had gathered from Birdie's comments it was only five or six, but still more than was usual for a year down on the coastline.

January also said the runner had hinted at Theon rather strongly that his Hunt might want to expand their territory to cover the area. And that he hadn't understood why Theon had laughed himself silly.

So they should expect to see the runner when he left Satama and started the rest of his sweep north.

Sami sighed and shrugged. He'd deal with the politics when he had to and ignore it as much as he could until then.

“Let's break things down and head for home. Janne go on back and if the runner asks let him know we'll be in before full dark tomorrow.” That would let the runner make up his own mind if he really wanted to talk to Sami or not, more than likely he would hang around for a day or two, this one had before.

Janne smiled and nodded before shifting back and letting Sami give him a boost up into the air.

~0~

This Hunt confused Gregor, they confused him terribly. The vampire he'd thought was Hunt leader had giggled himself silly when he'd hinted that they might want to expand their territory south a bit to cover the area that he had thought had its guardian die. Clearly not from the dry comments from one vampire and his two changer mates. Why they'd come here rather than stayed there where they belonged confused him almost as much. But they all seemed to know one another and all but two had that strange vibe that only very, very old vampires gave off.

The two youngsters seemed to be well known to the group as well though, and that was very strange. And the older of the new changers to the group gave him a positive case of the willies. He'd never run into anyone at this end of the continent who spoke Ruski, and this changer did, with a crisp Musca accent no less. He smelled young but his eyes, his eyes had that same strange weight of age behind them that the other changers here did.

It was eerie, and something he really didn't like having at his back when he didn't know them at all well.

Then he'd learned one of the changers he'd always known as a common wolf shifter proved to have a flighted shape as well. And he'd softly offered to go tell the Hunt leader he was there.

He'd never known Hunt leaders to divide their Hunt without a very pressing reason. Most Hunt
leaders had to watch their members for revolt and politicking, dividing just made for problems. And having the leadership out when the Hunt was home was just inviting a revolt.

Gregor never considered hunting to be a pressing reason. He never was away from some sort of settlement for long enough to get truly hungry, and feeding was fairly easy.

But he'd also never been in a position where he had been forced to feed from animals, and he wasn't really old enough to have found a changer mate.

In spite of how strange this group made him feel he felt somewhat obligated to accept hospitality (and it was very generous hospitality) and remain for a few days while the bad weather he'd been smelling on the wind blew over.

He didn't quite understand why the one shifter had been busy with his nasty grey mud and the odd sheets of transparent sky stone. But he had to admit that putting those sheets up in the large holes in the newly made arcing wall did mean there was less cold wind coming down through the hole in the ceiling over the waterfall and at least some light in the sheltered hallway. He just wasn't quite sure why they needed the sheltered hallway.

It was like how they'd taken in two wolf cubs. Horses he could understand, horses were burden beasts and could serve as a meal in times of emergency. Not that he'd even been in such a situation, but puppies? Even ones as engaging as this pair was. What purpose could they possibly serve? Wolves were never as predictable as a good borzoi.

But this group had always struck him as rather eccentric.

~0~

“"I hate fucking winter.""

Squeaks laughed at him from where she was dressing out a handful of rabbits. Levi was having a grand time pouncing on the things where they gathered around the hay they'd brought in to feed the horses. Half the time they were dead of a broken neck before they had time to scream and warn the others there was trouble.

“It's cold? Like I need a reason.” Brian grumbled as he shoved his mitten covered hands under his armpits to try and thaw them out. He was profoundly grateful that Squeaks had learned how to knit in a thick fleecy layer inside them, otherwise he'd never had gotten his hands warm again. He'd just been stupid and gotten them soaked through.

“You were the one who went out after more wood.”

“We might need it if we get a bad blow.”

“Yes,” Squeaks agreed, “But you still dragged in four sledge loads and two of cut and dry grass, so it's your own fault your hands are cold.” She let out a shriek when Brian growled and shoved a double handful of snow down the back of her coat.

Levi came running back just in time to see Brian heft her up and into a snowdrift and after a moment’s hesitation joined in the mock battle. He'd have fun warming up with them later.

~0~

Gregor's assessment of eccentricity was reinforced when Sami brought the rest of the Hunt home the following afternoon.
For one thing the vampire everyone said was Hunt leader was a quiet man. Big, yes, he was quite imposing in terms of simple physical presence, but quiet and soft spoken. Not the sort of man Gregor would have ever considered as even a potential Hunt leader.

He did at least have a changer mate, but said mate was barely more than a child. A very shy and gentle child who tended to half hide behind his mate when Gregor was around. He'd been flabbergasted to learn this child was a true changer with several forms to call on.

But as Gregor watched he realized with a bit of a jolt that there were no un-partnered vampires. Some of the relationships were strange to his eyes. For one the vampire they called Birdie appeared attached to two changers, while the one he had thought was Hunt leader shared his changer mate with another vampire and the three seemed to be quite content with the arrangement. More unsettling was the pair of vampires he'd known from before appeared to be taking on a third vampire, one of the two youngsters. At least the other younger had more properly settled with a changer. But even that was a little unsettling as Gregor had never seen a vampire younger than fifty with a changer mate. And the norm was for the changer to be younger than the vampire was, and this one was considerably older.

He'd gotten his questions answered, mostly anyway, and had a reasonable picture of the zombie issue in this territory. His suggestion to take over the southern coastal territory got him pinned with a level blue eyed stare and told by the big man that it would be 'taken under advisement' which sounded like he was politely telling Gregor it was being dealt with and to fuck himself on the subject.

But later that night as the sky was beginning to lighten toward dawn, while he pretended to doze the Hunt leader sat down and talked with the vampire with two changer mates. To his surprise the changers opinions were given what seemed to be a great deal of weight and then the big man asked opinions of the rest of the Hunt.

It made no sense to do things by consensus; it made chaos in the Hunts back home.

But here, here it worked. And that made no sense.

Then they talked of other things, of quick midwinter check-ins with their tribes, and this group was very proprietary of the humans who ranged in their territory. The eastern hunts had no call for complaints about zombies coming out of these territories and ranging into theirs. The group discussed fortifying places for them to stay in the coastal region, and it sounded like a continuing discussion to Gregor. They even discussed hunting trips for later in the winter and for the spring and how many blocks of ice they should cut that winter. Why in the name of sanity would they need ice blocks in winter? There was snow and ice aplenty in winter.

But they talked, even if no clear decisions were made from Gregor's point of view and then the cavern settled.

Gregor felt his ears burn when he heard the distinct sounds of men in the grip of intense sexual pleasure, and when he tried to think of other things it only made things worse. His traitorous mind filtered out extraneous sounds and managed to identify each Hunt member.

That breathy moan and soft high cry was the strange trio of vampires, the small blonde was being taken from behind and was orally pleasuring the younger one with all the curls. The blondes’ moans of pleasure made the younger one gasp and writhe as he pleaded and reached for his lovers.

The low growl and soft grunt was the one they called Jason, their healer, but Gregor couldn't tell if he was being taken by his mate or if he was doing the taking. His mates silence didn't help clarify
things.

The vampire with two changers he could hear moaning, and when he'd risked looking he caught a
glimpse of the man caught between his two changers. It made the blood rush in his ears and had
him burrowing under his borrowed bedding trying to burn the image out of his mind.

In the bed nearer to him he could hear the soft rustling and faint whispers of the other youngster
being cradled between two changers. The one that gave Gregor the crawls seemed to shift between
the trio that was two vampires and a changer and the youngster and his changer mate. It gave him a
headache. He was used to one vampire and one changer in partnership. Two vampires might ease
their bodies’ needs with each other but once one had found a compatible changer those
relationships tended to fall to the sidelines. This lot was like an orgy by comparison.

He wasn't sure if he was grateful or not that he hadn't been able to identify the Hunt leaders’ sex
sounds in the mix or not, hearing the big man taking his tiny mate would likely have made it
impossible for him to sleep here.

~0~

Fortunately for Gregor's sanity the weather cleared and he was able to tie on the ski's he carried
when he knew he was making a run through snow, shrug on his pack and go.

He was glad of the map this Hunt kept updated on a section of their cavern wall; it had let him see
how the rivers had shifted and allowed him adjust his route to accommodate. But he was still
profoundly glad to leave the unsettling group behind him.

~0~

Christian snorted as the speck of the runner faded into the distance.

“I think we made him uncomfortable,” observed Birdie mildly as he headed back inside.

Sami sighed and swatted at Theon's head when the blond broke up in giggles and teased that the
poor kid clearly hadn't gotten laid in a while.

“More likely we don't function like a Ruski Hunt does.”

Sami turned a focused hard stare on Christian then.

“We don't? How do you mean?”

Christian shrugged and looked over his shoulder at Sami.

“The strongest vampire with a changer mate leads. Strongest, smartest, best able to keep the rest in
line. Sometimes it's the oldest, but not always, it's a politics game. You lead, but you always have a
general feel for what we want before you say 'we're doing this' and I've never seen you just make
an arbitrary decision.” Christian paused. “I can't remember one anyway, even as fuzzy as my
memories are.”

Sami smiled wryly.

“I make stupid decisions too, just ask Theon.” Sami reached out and slapped a hand over Theon's
mouth before he could start on his litany. “Just don't get him started on me being late. Yew!
Torstig!” Sami wiped his hand on Theon's coat. “Save the slobbering for Risto and Juke. They like
kissing you.”
Theon laughed and hugged Sami, making sure to flutter his eye's in an exaggerated manner.

“You still love me.”

Christian snorted again when Sami's shoulders slumped a little as he sighed.

“Yeah, yeah, rub it in.” Sami turned back toward the cavern and back toward business. “How much do we need to still run through the smoker? And is Jason going to have to clean some of our green salt?”

~0~

Jason set up the trays to clean some of the impurities from the rough sea salt he'd boiled down over the summer. His reasoning was if he did so they wouldn't need it to preserve meat, but that if he didn't they'd run out halfway through doing something.

Lauri and Adam helped Sami update their territory map to include the sliver of coastline they had patrolled before the algae bloom. Adam pointed out a few places they'd used for shelter along the way. A few were high enough in the cliffs and hills above the coastline that none of the tribes bothered to use them. One of their wintering over places was pretty close to where Sami's crew traditionally went in late summer or early fall when the fish ran and had already been improved somewhat so it wouldn't be hard to make into a real waypoint.

Adam also pointed out swamps that held concentrations of wild rice, and places waterfowl liked to congregate. Bailey pointed out groves of olive and fig trees that weren't consistently harvested by any of the local tribes and mentioned that he knew a few ways of curing olives so the fruit would be edible.

Koira and Janne went out to thin the last few flocks of migrating waterfowl as they stopped in their ice lake on their way further south. Before long the lake would be completely frozen over and the late birds would just keep going.

Christian, Jason and Julian went out, ostensibly to help, mostly just to run off excess energy and for Jason to start getting Christian fully familiar with the area.

So it was Janne who realized what was going on when he saw a cluster of humans headed for Valkoinen Kuoppa. He did a quick wing over flip to get Koira's attention and headed for the ground. A heartbeat later and the smaller man was beside him as Christian turned to stare at them in confusion.

“We have an offering party headed for Valkoinen Kuoppa. They had four men tied. Two of them I think Jason and Sami will recognize.”

Christian blinked and Julian grimaced.

“The two who got away when they dumped Koira?”

“Yeah.”

Christian held up a hand in confusion.

“Your tribes offer their own members up?”

Janne grimaced.
“We get criminals and the mad staked out by the offering pits normally. Sami just has no sense of humor when they drop living things in the pits.” Janne hugged Koira tightly for a moment. “And those two were part of a group that was looting.”

Christian blinked again as he processed what Janne hadn't said.

“Yes, this would be a good time to let Jay try feeding from a human. Where the object isn't to leave them alive?”

Janne nodded and stroked Koira's hair as the smaller man began to shake in reaction. A gentle nudge and he got Koira to look up at him.

“Head back, let Sami know and they can be down in the pit with Jay when night falls.”

Koira gulped and nodded shakily then shifted and headed for home as fast as his falcon wings would take him.

Christian watched him go.

“His former tribe?”

“Yeah. Most of them are good people, a few, well; you get a few in any group.”

Christian turned steady eyes on Janne.

“How long has he been here, with the Hunt?”

Janne sucked on his teeth for a moment and counted in his head.

“Three years? Four? Not more than four I think.” He shrugged. “Things run together. He was dumped in the middle of summer, had a winter safe then got sick the next,” he kept counting seasons aloud. “Last winter he was okay. This is four, so yeah, a bit over four years.”

“So not long enough for memories to have fully faded.”

“No. Christian? What are you plotting?” Julian knew what Janne didn't, he knew that plotting expression.

“I think his former tribe needs to see a spirit.”

~0~

Urtho hated this place; it gave him the creepy crawlies to see the weathered frames where the mad were chained up for the spirits to judge and to claim. Aele and his ill-fated hunting party had been ripped to pieces after stealing from this offering place. If it wasn't traditional to leave an offering here after a good year he would have been more than happy to just stake out their captives on the high hill before a lightning storm and let the spirits judge them that way. But the Shaman had thrown the bones and decreed the two survivors of that hunting party needed to be brought back here, to the scene of their crime to make amends to the spirits they had wronged.

The two wandering madmen would stay here as well; it was simpler to keep all of them together.

One of the women, Singer's new wife, let out a startled cry and pointed off into the lightly swirling snow.

“I saw a boy, that way.” She took a few steps in the direction she'd pointed before Singer caught
her arm and warned her that more than likely she was seeing a spirit.

It made everyone uneasy, normally the spirits kept to animal form here.

Urtho hurried everyone onward. The sooner they got this settled the happier he would be.

The Shaman huffed in annoyance and began drumming as they made the final approach to the spirit well. Olli let out a strangled yell and struggled in his bindings as they began to drag him, Itch and the two madmen over to the offering racks.

All his struggling did was mean that it took four men to hold and tie him rather than one. Itch screamed where he was being held and began babbling in terror, but when Urtho turned to see what Itch was staring at there was nothing there.

Oh, how he wanted this over with.

Then the Shaman sniffed the air and grumbled as he went to his knees to sweep the snow away and expose bare earth. He sniffed the air again and reached into his medicine bag and pulled out the pouch that held his divining bones. Urtho let out a low groan as the man chanted and threw the handful onto the bare patch he'd cleared.

He let out another low groan when the man shook his head and swept the bones back up and put them away.

"The spirits wish us to stay."

“All of us? For how long?” They didn't have the supplies for an extended stay, not that Urtho wanted any kind of a stay here. Given the choice he'd have dropped the small bundles filled with the offerings and high tailed it for safer territory. And he'd have only brought a few men, not almost all the tribe that was mobile.

The Shaman sighed again and accepted Urtho's hand to get back to his feet.

“Just until the dawning. There is unfinished business to be settled.”

That wasn't what he wanted to hear.

Settling spirit business generally left people dead.

~0~

Sami was in a vindictive enough mood to agree with Christian's plan.

They'd dressed Koira in the palest set of furs they had and let him wander around the group of humans. One had seen him almost right off and she'd reacted with a startled cry. But she'd seemed more concerned that a child was out here alone. Koira hadn't recognized her, so clearly she'd been a wife brought in from another tribe.

The next one was one of the survivors of the party that had left Koira behind, and he'd began babbling and pleading in a way that had Koira running back to Sami to be held.

The group settled in, and lit torches as they sorted out their offerings and at set times that only the Shaman seemed to know lowered a small portion of them into the pit.

Then they settled in around the pit and waited.
It wasn't exactly a camp, but people ate and socialized, well, other than the four men tied to the racks on one side of the pit. One seemed resigned, the two madmen seemed utterly oblivious and the last went from panic to apathy and back. The Shaman paced and chanted and drummed and after the moon rose he waved the men forward to lower another small set of offerings down.

Julian said that it looked like they had been broken up into smaller bundles; the first lot had been the expected baskets of preserved foodstuffs.

Then the Shaman jumped and stared wild eyed at where Koira was standing only a few feet away from him.

Sami had to grin. Koira was much better at sneaking up on people now than he had been.

Several of the other folk gathered flinched and stared at Koira as the Shaman did his little chant, dance and drum act to determine if he was 'safe' or not. But Koira just stood there silently and let him do his thing. When the Shaman pointed the beater for his drum at Koira and demanded he speak Koira did.

He just had wanted to say good bye to the people who had genuinely been kind to him and let Jay's mother and Larry's aunt know some of what had happened to their son and nephew. He phrased things where anyone who gave it any thought might figure out that Jay and Larry might be coming back as Old Souls.

Sami had mixed feelings about that. But he had been willing to agree as long as Jay and Larry stayed hidden until the humans left their criminals behind.

It left the humans clearly very unsettled, and it didn't help that Koira didn't let anyone touch him. Sami couldn't hear what he said but after the first one they went wide eyed and left him be when he set the tokens at the feet of Jay mother and Larry's aunt. Both women looked to be only barely holding back tears and didn't hesitate to gather up the small tokens to cradle them in their hands.

Then there was a hard gust of wind, and it couldn't have been timed better. As the humans were shielding their eyes from the wind and the blown snow Koira skipped back and dropped back down the pit, from their perspective he'd simply vanished into thin air.

The Shaman frantically dug for his pouch of bones and threw them with shaking hands. He gulped and swept them back up and hastily ordered the rest to drop the rest of their offerings. Then they fled.

There was no other way to describe it.

As quickly as they could the group gathered themselves up and left as quickly as their feet could carry them without actually running.

Sami still waited until Janne came back and told him the group was back on the path that would lead them back to the rest of the tribe and into more normal territory for them before he had Larry and Jay come up to feed.

Larry took a turn with the rest of the hunt as they drained the two madmen as quickly and painlessly as they could.

Jay had to sit there and stare at Itch for a long time before he moved. He wasn't really practiced yet, and he was very hungry, so Itch's draining wasn't quite as painless at the beginning as it could have been. But the man still died in ecstasy as Jay still didn't have any real control over the power of his
bite. Jay was shaking in reaction and had to be cuddled and talked to until he calmed enough to try biting Olli.

Olli was panicked and struggled, screaming as Jay bit. Then he went limp and shuddered as Jay let his powers loose again. This time Jay stopped and when prompted by Jonne, licked the bite closed. Then Sami wrapped him up in his arms and pulled him away as the rest of the Hunt vampires finished draining the unfortunate thief.

~0~

Jonne curled up between Larry and Kris and idly watched the flames of their central fire dance. Jay was adjusting to having learned the hard fact that for them to live sometimes it meant killing people. It was something he sometimes wasn't very happy with, especially when he learned he would have to drain young people whose only 'crime' was having the taint of a zombie in their blood and then learning after he'd have to face their parents.

But at least they didn't have to make those poor kids die in fear and pain, the only things they had waiting for them if they changed. Mostly other's fear, other's pain and other's death as they lost their minds and changed into monsters.

Koira had had a few nightmares after they'd dealt with the last two men who had been party to his abandonment, but he seemed to be coping. Having two puppies learning to play underfoot helped.

Jonne smiled. Given how Sami was hovering Koira would cope just to get the big man to quit trying to wrap him in fleece to protect him.

Jay was making tentative trips outside in the weak daylight of midwinter. Birdie warned him that it was likely he'd be vulnerable to serious burns for several years, but he still wanted to try while the sun was at its weakest. He could manage half an hour to an hour right now, more if the cloud cover was heavy. That meant when they had built the Sauna hut out of the ice he'd been able to join in, and had screamed just as loudly as Koira did when Janne shoved him into the cold water. But he'd been quickly hustled back into the tent, and when they went home he was made to dress in the tent after they'd let out most of the steam. Even then his skin had been pinker than Jason was happy with and he'd gotten slathered with aloe from one of Jason's carefully prepared jars as soon as they were back in the safety and warmth of their sleeping area.

They were going to do another bison hunt soon as the animals made their annual trip south. Sami had gone out and with help from Christian and Jason had cleared the freezing pits from earlier in the winter of their covering of snow and had built sturdy wooden lids to keep more snow out. They'd also taken extra tall poles out with bits of scrap hide tied to them to use as markers for if the snow got deep later and to make them easier to find next year. Janne had gone flying and warned them that they might have human hunters to deal with again. There was at least one group trailing the herd.

Sami had grumbled and had the changers draw lots to see who would be going as a wolf and who was going as a man. Koira had pouted when Janne had drawn the lot to be their aerial spotter this time. Theon had grumbled a bit when Julian had also drawn a short straw. Bailey had shrugged and Christian had half-jokingly threatened to bury him in snow if he kept acting like an idiot. When Jason had drawn a short straw Adam offered to trade on the grounds they might need a healer. Birdie had sighed but acknowledged the logic even if it might leave him sleeping alone for the duration of the hunt.

But they had plans in place if they needed them. If they didn't have humans around they could go right back to how they'd hunted before. Shifting might take a lot of energy but the advantages of
having four footed help on the ground and eyes in the sky outweighed any potential cost. And getting a changer to not change was like getting a bird to not fly, practically impossible

Jonne snuggled his cheek into Larry's chest and hummed contentedly as Kris snuggled him a bit tighter in his sleep. Later in the winter they could make a trip up into the mountains and check on Antti and make sure that the man who reminded them so much of their lost bassist was happy.

~0~

Levi swore under his breath.

Just what they needed; a large group of humans that looked to be refugees not a more proper hunting party.

He needed to run and warn Brian and Squeaks to stay hidden.

At least they had some food stocks stored away now; between his good luck hunting and Brian's better luck ice fishing, so they could afford to stay hidden for a few days while this group passed them by.

He just had to make sure he didn't get caught in the process of going to warn his team. He wished that his golden coat changed more completely in the winter, as it was he wasn't completely white, just a very pale gold.

So he stuck out to anyone who was scanning the area, luckily most of this troop seemed more focused on putting one foot in front of the other, and by the time they'd found his tracks it wasn't worth the trouble to try and track him down.

~0~

Sami set his jaw and sighed. At least Janne had seen this lot before they did something unexplainable where they could see it. The bad news was that they only had Julian, Christian and Bailey in wolf form to help cut animals from the herd, but that was better than them losing Jason and Koira's hands was well. If the group had cleared the hill only a few minutes earlier and they would have lost both.

Well, they'd figure it out. He took a deep breath and managed a smile for the other group as they cautiously came down into the low area they had been hunting in.

Sami blinked in surprise, this wasn't any group they knew about, and it wasn't the small group Janne had seen following the herd when they'd planned this trip. They were dressed reasonably well, even if their clothing was a bit mismatched and oddly worn. They had horses that were being used to haul their gear and some tall, sleek, if somewhat lean looking dogs than appeared to be just allowed to run loose. That alone was normal enough, but more ominously there were also pregnant women, and women with very small children in the group. Not something you normally saw on a winter hunt. Something else that set internal alarms ringing was that there were a few elderly members, not many, but a few. Other than the very young, pregnant and very old the group was young and healthy with a slight skew towards young men. Not to out of the ordinary for a hunting party, but he didn't think this was a hunting party now.

You really didn't want small children and pregnant women along on a hunt. Labor and delivery were chancy enough without having them happen on the move. Small children really didn't understand that they had to stay absolutely still and silent or they might spook away any chance of getting dinner. Hungry and unhappy children in Sami's experience were notoriously whiny and
Most of the group had fair hair, some with the same white gold hair Koira had, and all of them had variations on the same translucently pale skin. Most had blue eyes, but a few of the children had green eyes very similar to Koira's. It made Sami wonder if Koira's mother hadn't come from the same are these folk hailed from.

The head man cautiously approached and spoke and Sami did his best to answer. They verbally circled back and forth several times, each time shifting languages a little before they finally found a language they both understood. It was the same version of Trade that his miners used when they had folk from further north and east come calling.

This was going to get interesting. Especially if the way Christian's wolf shape narrowed his eyes, pricked his ears and cocked his head was an indication that he could understand this lot perfectly well. Something to ask about later, it could be very useful to know what they said among themselves.

What disturbed Sami more was that there were clear signs of hunger on many of the faces. The horses and dogs looked to be in pretty good shape, lean, but not starving, but there were no other animals, no sheep or goats being herded along. The horses’ relative health could be explained by the fact that they began nosing aside the snow to get at the dried grasses underneath the moment the group stopped moving. And Sami saw one of the dogs hesitate then abruptly go flying off after a rabbit, so clearly they were managing to feed themselves fairly well.

He looked over at Jason and got a grim nod. He wasn't imagining it. The people hadn't been eating well at all.

Well then, this was going to be so much fun.

~0~

Sasha watched the other group warily. He needed to find a safe place for his people and so far had kept finding places where other people already were, and they really weren't interested in permanent neighbors moving in. Most were sympathetic, but very firm. Their territory couldn't sustain the addition of a group their size. So they moved on, sometimes they were moving on with new supplies, most of the time they weren't. If he didn't find somewhere safe soon he was going to be watching everyone he loved die in front of him. He had women who were due to deliver, he couldn't bear the thought of losing another mother and child because they couldn't stop and let her recover enough to move on, to lose another child because the few that were still able to nurse a child barely had anything for their own.

These men were strong, well fed and their skin was clear of any mark of disease. What puzzled him was that they were all men; even the youngest was a man by his strength even if his stature was little more than a child's. Did this tribe not allow their women to hunt? That seemed foolish, but from the number of carcasses they clearly had a method that worked well.

He wished their Nightwalker hadn't been killed in the fight with the monsters, Petr would have known what to do, known what to say.

Sasha had tried to ask if this group had a Nightwalker, but had gotten a puzzled blink and a long second look from the leader. The other tribes they'd come across had looked at them strangely until he'd managed to make it clear he was asking about their speaker to spirits. But in each place the Speaker was just a man, not like Petr had been. Maybe in this western place they no longer had Nightwalkers.
The very idea frightened him. To have no-one who could taste hidden death in a person's blood and be able to free their soul before the monster within took over. This wasn't like testing pigs, men were different. Mixing the blood of mother and child on a white glazed plate and watching to see if it clumped didn't work on men.

But these men had been generous, more so than any of the other groups they'd come across, they'd built up their fire, sent some of their hunters out after more wood and begun roasting meat from their latest kills to go with the rich broths they already had simmering lowly over their fires.

They had a Wise One, and he'd checked over their sickest with knowledgeable eyes and gentle hands. He'd sent the youngest hunter, a little blond called Koira off on a horse toward a distant line of trees. When he came back it was with freshly cut branches of pine and a few unidentifiable handfuls of plant material carefully sorted into little pouches marked with brightly colored cords. The pine needles and some of the handfuls of dark vegetation went into a pot filled with snow to melt and boil into a tea of sorts. One of the men then added a block of something that was a dark orange that he'd chopped up finely and stirred it in until he was satisfied with the color and smell. To Sasha it smelt vaguely like the winter tea Petr had always brewed when the nights were the longest and coldest, to keep the gums from bleeding he always said. It tasted a little like it, but not quite the same, but that could simply have been that they had no honey or beet syrup to sweeten the brew. The aftertaste was more acidic and strangely fruity, and he had no explanation for it.

But he'd drunk his portion to help make it easier for Danja to get the little ones to drink theirs. Then he'd set about trying to make their camp as best he could. The wagons they had helped with blocking the wind, and a few had been traveling wagons before they'd had to flee and would provide spaces for the pregnant women, the ones with infants and the very old a place up off the ground to sleep. Sasha didn't expect that the others would help, but they did, carefully shifting them away from an area where there were three doors in the ground.

Those had surprised him until one of the hunters lifted one door open to pull out another joint of meat, and then they made sense. They were cellars of a sort. Though why they'd have cellars out here when they slept in hide tents he had no idea. Then he boggled as they shifted clearly frozen portions from one cellar to another and began filling the emptied cellar with portions from their most recent kills.

If he could have understood what they said when they talked among themselves it would have helped, but they spoke in a musical language that wouldn't resolve into words in his mind. Just trying to use Trade made his head ache. All he could do was take comfort in how open their faces were and that they were smiling and even laughing when one of their number stumbled and all but fell into one of the pits. He would have fallen in if one of the others hadn't moved quickly to catch an arm and stop him. There was some laughter and from the faint flush on the dark haired man's face probably teasing, but there didn't appear to be anger or hurt feelings.

Sasha was sure they had a good reason for putting carefully trimmed portions into what essentially was a hole in the ground, but he couldn't make sense of it. He was seeing some portions being ground up finely in a hand mill that was carefully cleaned before use and some of that meat was being browned in a pan before being added to one of the pots of broth. The rest was being seasoned and stuffed into cleaned sections of intestine for sausage. But he was puzzled as to why only a small portion was being dealt with that way.

He'd try and ask his questions again in the morning.

~0~

“They are looking for a place to settle.” Sami jumped and scowled at Christian. The other man
held up his hands and continued. “They are all asleep, I made sure before I shifted back. Tonight was the first decent meal they've had in a while.”

Sami reigned in his temper and focused on the task at hand.

“You can understand them?”

“They have an accent, but yes, it's still Ruski. From the sounds of things they had a settlement back home, and something happened.”

Koira settled into Sami's side as the other's gathered.

“What? And how long ago? They seem to have been traveling a long time.”

“I'm not sure there, I just think zombies were involved, one of the children asked if the monsters were still following them. I know Sergey and Grisha helped set up tar lines around a few settlements to help keep zombie packs and wolves out while hunters dealt with the problem, and it sounds like they may not have had that defense set up for whatever reason. Or if it was set no one lit it.” Christian shrugged, but clearly he felt that precaution was one that should have been set up as soon as a group had a permanent place.

Sami winced and saw similar expressions on the faces across the fire from him.

From the pensive looks on Birdie, Jason and Theon's faces he had a feeling they were going to want him to think of something.

Well, hell.

This was going to take some thought. Where the hell could he plant sixty odd people and not have it hurt one of their tribes.

~0~

Sasha was going to fret himself to death if he wasn't careful. Danja quietly stirred the pot over their fire and carefully dipped out cupful’s of the broth that was inside. At least now it was real broth, good and rich with meat juices even if it was thin on vegetables. It was winter; it was rather to be expected.

She'd stared wistfully at a bend in the river in the near distance, the banks thickly lined with winter dead cattails. The roots would be woody, but she didn't have a mattock to break up even a little of the frozen ground to try and get at them.

At least the food was helping restore their energy. Most of the men and women without children were out with their benefactors hunting. Several of the men had taken their horses and headed off south and east in a very big hurry this morning and she had to wonder if they were headed home. She tried not to hope to hard that they were going after other supplies, they'd gotten a great deal already and had nothing to trade for it. They had a few horses, but no other livestock left, it had all already been traded or eaten. The borzoi had eyed the local dogs warily and the few that had been bold enough to start a fight ended up losing with a frightening speed. More telling, none of the dogs had acted the slightest bit interested in any of the borzoi bitches. Training like that made her think that they had nothing at all to offer other than themselves.

She wondered if she'd ever be able to set up her looms again.

Danja jumped a little when one of the other groups’ hunters came over with a load of wood on a strange drag rig behind a horse. It was nothing like the sledges they'd used in winter at home; it was just two long poles crossed over the animals back and a bit of hide. But it hauled more than
the small man could carry.

His words in trade were stilted, but his smile was warm if a little shy. He also proved to be an excellent distraction for the smaller children, he let them pile over him, check the ornaments braided into his fair hair and ask questions he couldn't hope to understand as she finished feeding the older ones and making sure the mothers had actually eaten rather than slipping their portions to their children. While they had food enough it was foolish to make an unneeded sacrifice, and if one of them little ones got sick, well, that was just wasteful.

Danja was just afraid they would lose some of the babies, Sasha had been insistent that nursing and bearing women get a full measure of their meager food supplies. But a full measure sometimes wasn't all that much. Most of the nursing women were having to supplement their children's food with whatever else they could find and cook until it was soft enough for them to eat.

She froze when a great bird came down out of the sky to land nearby. The bird looked at her and chirped then shuffled over in the ungainly walk of a raptor on the ground over to the young hunter. He sighed and offered the great bird his arm with no fear at all and talked to it while stroking his fingers over its breast feathers. The children, rather predictably, watched in awe.

Petr had flown a hawk, for as long as he lived the bird had been his constant companion, but the night he'd died the bird had gone mad and attacked the monsters that had dragged him down until it too was dragged under and killed.

It had let them kill four of the horrible things, and set fire to the ring of earth oil they'd poured around their homes. With the monsters inside and them outside it had let them escape. But Sasha lived in dread of one of the surviving creatures trailing them and attacking again.

All of them lived in fear of the things finding them again.

The sound of hoof beats distracted her away from staring at the young man and the bird.

One of the one's who had gone out hunting was coming back dragging a load of meat so fresh it was still steaming in the cold air.

The short man smiled and hopped down to help Danja and two of the other women unload the portions. Choice portions, rich in fat, she noticed.

His trade was a bit better than the little blonde’s was and he introduced himself to her as 'Birdie' as he helped unload. He said they'd been having good luck with pulling down animals but that Sasha and someone called Sami had wanted to be sure they got good portions as well. Then he cut and offered a strip of the meat to the bird, and called it Janne with clear affection.

Petr had always said raptors had no room in their feathered heads for affection. That his own bird, Geni, was not to be taken as typical. Geni had always huffed at him until Petr apologized to him and offered scratches and choice tidbits. Was this a Nightwalkers bird? He'd accepted the offered bite with a delicacy and dignity she wouldn't have expected from any bird.

She would have to try and stay awake tonight to see if any of these men had the telltale golden eye-shine of a nightwalker.

~0~

They pulled down so many animals Sasha wasn't sure what they were thinking. But there was a practiced motion to them breaking the newly killed beasts into useable and transportable portions. He winced a little when the intestines were taken down and rinsed clean in a hole chopped in the
frozen river. There was an unfrozen section of the river, but not even the smallest of the hunters was willing to risk the ice to get out to it when it was safer to just cut a hole.

The cleaned intestines were sectioned and blown up and left to freeze dry. Once they were done dealing with the half dozen animals they'd brought down they brought in the horses and dragged the partly frozen chunks of meat back to the camp. Some was immediately put in the cellars to freeze the rest of the way solid. The brains were put in a pot and not quite cooked into a mash, but they didn't eat the mash, they just cleaned the hides and rubbed the mess in. Ivan nodded and helped, explaining to the younger men who had no idea of what he was doing that this was the start of tanning the hides.

Sasha just gulped and tried not to be ill at the idea as he helped scrape hides down. He'd been the tsar's younger son, and rather sheltered, but now he had to do things for the sake of his people.

They repeated the same thing twice more, each time having to go further to catch up to the herd and come further back with the results.

They were eating quite a bit better, but when they were done Sasha's people were still exhausted. He wished they had beets or potatoes to go with all the rich meats. He knew Danja had hidden away a tiny portion of seed stock for both, but he'd been afraid every time he saw bits in their thin soup that that meant they'd have no hope of growing more.

But Danja seemed to have something she needed to tell him.

He just had to get up the energy to pay attention.

~0~

Watching the other group set up the tanning hides as the walls of a shed like structure confused almost all of them. But when they began working the meat grinder in earnest and filling cleaned and soaked sections of intestine things made a lot more sense. Then Ivan laughed and chattered about how clever the idea was. They'd smoke some of the meats and finish the curing of the hides all at once.

But Sasha wondered about the weather. Every day they sent up the large hawk that seemed to always be on the arm or shoulder of one of the men and every day the bird would come down chirp a bit and shrug. Whatever the bird was saying made no sense to him, but so far the other hunters seemed to not be worried about the weather shifting.

He was understandably rather startled when Sami essentially handed him the answer to the question he'd been trying to ask for the past week.

“You need to go south. About a weeks’ worth of running south there are plains and hills, a good limestone cliff and places you could rebuild. The river goes right to the ocean, we fish it and other's every spring and fall when the fish run.”

Sasha blinked and stared at him in confusion.

Sami just smiled at him and used a bit of leg bone cracked and cleaned of marrow already to draw a quick map in the snow. At first the map made no sense, but as he pointed out landmarks in the distance things began to resolve into a clear picture.

He asked about other people. The answer he got made him swallow hard. There had been a sickness on the coastline, one borne in on the tides and the people who refused to change what they ate had died of it. There were a few settlements inland, but none this far west. Most were much
further north and east and tended to be on the coastline. Mostly they farmed corn, wheat, barley and oats; they herded sheep, goats and cattle. The vast majority of the people in the area were semi nomadic, having a summer range and a winter camp to settle into and wait out the cold. They all put their faith in Old Souls who could keep monsters from coming out of the bodies of the people.

It sounded like a Nightwalker who could smell or taste the sickness before it began and ensure the infected person never changed.

Suddenly Danja insisting all the men had Nightwalker eyes made more sense.

Sasha blinked, and then slumped over in a dead faint.

~0~

Jason sighed and sat back, tugging the fur back up to cover the poor man.

“He’ll be fine. Just too much stress and not enough food or sleep. Did you manage to tell him about the spot Theon thinks would suit them?”

“Mostly, he was asking about other settlements down there and why the area was open territory, then his eyes went huge and he just stared at me then fell over.”

“Wonder if it has to do with their versions of Wise Ones. From what I can understand their monsters really just sound like zombies in middling size packs. They seem to make a distinction between vampires who are friendly and ones who aren't.”

Sami's eyes narrowed and he glared.

“What?”

“Theon and Risto got caught.”

Sami dropped his head in his hands.

“Caught doing what?” His tone was a bit strangled, and Jason had to smile.

“They were screwing around and one of the teenage girls caught Theon biting Risto. She kind of went all starry eyed and went running back to the rest before they could grab her and mess with her memories. They seemed hugely relieved about something and several who are about the point for Rites started hitting on Theon. And that's got Risto giggling like a lunatic.”

“At least he's keeping his sense of humor.” Sami sighed and scrubbed at the back of his neck. “When did this get so complicated?”

Jason just chuckled.

~0~

When Sasha woke Danja was beside him and before he could even start to sit up she was helping him, settling him securely and bringing him a mug of broth that was laden with bits of meat and unidentifiable vegetables.

“They have a place for us. South of here,” he started but stopped when Danja just nodded.

“Ivan has been speaking to them; you have been out several days.”
Sasha blinked and stared at her in confusion. Danja just sighed.

“You collapsed, and the Nightwalkers healer checked you. Jason said it was too much worry, not enough sleep and not enough food. It's all right. Ivan has been speaking for us, we know about the valley they think will suit us.” Her hands were gentle as she brushed his hair back from his face. “We know. They have said they can guide us there, just as soon as you woke.”

Sasha blinked again, but when he tried to get up Danja wouldn't let his rise.

“Rest a little longer. There is no way we could be ready before tomorrow anyway.”

That wasn't much comfort. What had Ivan agreed to? To get them a place? Sasha's grandfather had told some frightening stories of Nightwalker clans demanding a price for services, and how sometimes that price was in living young people. His holding was small enough that he didn't want to have to hand over any over his people.

~0~

When he stepped out of the tent the next morning Sasha was surprised to see all the smoking huts had been taken down but one. That the other hunters had pulled down all their tents but the smallest and were busily loading the odd drag poles behind their horses.

To his surprise the bird and the dogs were all gone and it left only the men. He turned and blinked. There were men he hadn't seen before. The rangy one with the red brown hair in particular was new.

His own people were busily pulling down their own more modest shelters and packing their meager belongings. But there was more energy in their movements and in spite of the fact he was sure in a day he'd want to throttle them for their antics, he had to smile at the children acting like children again.

What shocked him silent was the sight of a Nighthunters horse. The big beasts were easily identifiable by their massive builds and the red markings on their dark hides. He'd never in all his life heard of a Nighthunter away from the area around Musca. But his eyes didn't deceive him. The horse watched him and stayed steady.

“I wouldn't try and get too close. He's been showing a desire to bite lately.” The words were Ruski, complete with Musca accent.

Sasha blinked and stared at the square young man dressed in leathers than made his heart hurt with their familiarity. The leathers alone would have just caused a pang, but he was also armed exactly like the Nighthunters were. The heavy bladed axe slung over his shoulders showed the signs of hard use and of scrupulous care.

“What? How?”

“I came here trailing a monster that wore a familiar face.”

Sasha gulped. He'd heard stories about two very old Nightwalkers being burned out of their own home by monsters. Monsters often wore familiar and well-loved faces. All he could do was nod, he wasn't sure if he wanted to know more details. Details he was sure were tragic.

He had to focus carefully on the other man's words as he described the route they'd be taking south. The landmarks he described weren't familiar and the other man warned it would take at least a week for them to reach their destination. But Sasha suspected a good bit of that was based on them
expecting his people to be somewhat slow in traveling. So they might well make better time than was expected.

But then he lost track of the conversation completely.

The small hunter he'd seen playing with the children only a few days before had just done something only heard of in tales.

He'd changed from the shape of a man to the shape of a bird.

~0~

Christian knew he'd lost Sasha's attention when his face went gray. A glance over to where the rest of the Hunt was working and he thought he knew why. Koira was in his eagle shape on Sammy's fist.

This may have just gotten a lot more complicated.

~0~

Sami sighed and sat down with a still very rattled Sasha.

“He changed his shape, to a bird.”

“He does that; it's the nature of his gift.”

“We have legends of men who when they wear the skin of a wolf become a wolf, but nothing of a man wearing the skin of an eagle.”

At least he wasn't having hysterics. Then Sasha's head snapped up again.

“Petr! Petr had a bird, was his bird like yours?”

Sami blinked and shot Christian a blank look. Fortunately Christian seemed to know what Sasha was talking about.

“Petr was their Nightwalker, their Old Soul.”

“Oh.” Sami thought hard. “I don't know, Koira is himself, not many men with the shape changers gift can become birds.” He kept that he only knew of two behind his teeth, and the little fact that Koira could shift into a lot more forms than just that of a small eagle.

Sasha's voice was small, like a child asking for a story but who was afraid it would be frightening.

“Not all men who can become wolves are monsters?”

“No. No more than all men are monsters. All it takes are a few and the stories spread.” Sami managed to keep from grimacing, nothing traveled as fast as bad news; and an incident that was a simple misunderstanding with no injuries or deaths would become a horrific massacre in the retelling. Even now horrible stories traveled must further than any bit of good news ever could hope to.

Sasha nodded numbly, clearly lost in his own thoughts.

Sami just sighed and wished he'd thought before asking Koira to scout their route, or that Koira had hesitated before changing to comply with the request. This could make things immensely more
complicated.

~0~

“So he can take the shape of a bird. Petr had a bird. And he never laid a talon on any of us. Ever. Not for as far back as there are stories of Petr protecting us.”

Sasha grimaced; Danja was being a voice of reason. He wanted to believe her, wanted to trust that the small hunter would never turn into a monster but he was terrified.

These were his people. All that was left of his people, less than a quarter of his father's holding was here. He knew his father and at least two of his brothers had gone down fighting with Petr to buy them time to escape.

What if he was wrong?

“I need to think.”

Danja just sighed and let Sasha walk. He'd have his think and maybe he'd be smart and settle on not worrying about things that would never be. Her uncle had once told her a tale of how he'd been rescued from a landslide by a wolf who could take the shape of a man. That wolf had been kind hearted and gentle, a good man, not a ravening beast. So it seemed reasonable to her that wolves who could become men were rather like normal men. Some were good; some were bad and most just wanted to be left to live their lives as they chose. Why would this bird child, who had already shown he was gentle and kind, be any different? She watched Sasha pacing and wished Uncle Gregor was alive to offer his advice, but he'd been dust and ash long before the monsters had destroyed the holding.

~0~

Once the cat was well and truly out of the bag Koira didn't worry so much about who might be watching before shifting. Strangely that seemed to help some of the group adjust better to the idea that men could sometimes change their shape.

Sasha still looked at him with wide and wary eyes and Koira was finally tired of it, and heartily tired of how stressed it was making Sami. He'd gotten used to an attentive and affectionate Sami sharing his bed furs and was selfish enough to want that back. He knew that as long as Sami was stressed he'd only be getting cuddles, so when Koira saw Sasha going for a walk alone he took action and waited until the man was out of easy yelling distance of the main group before landing beside him and changing.

Sasha yelped and tripped, flailing backwards into the snow in his shock.

~0~

“I don't bite.”

“B, but you spirit shift.”

“I have since I was tiny; my foster mother thought I might have been born of a woman who loved a spirit man. But since they only found me and my mother no one knows.”

Sasha blinked and the clever mind under his hat took over. It had been something his mother had always teased him about, that his curiosity would overcome even sensible fears.
“They couldn't ask your mother?”

“She was dead when they found us. I was taken up by a tribe of men and raised with them, with their children.” Koira shrugged, he had no memories of his birth mother and only fond ones of his foster mother.

“You wouldn't hurt the children?” That sounded more like a plea for reassurances than he was comfortable with.

“Not even Aele's child would have a reason to fear me.”

Sasha blinked. Aele? His curiosity must have shown on his face.

“He was Larry's birth brother by the same father and always hated me for some reason. He went mad and dropped me down a spirit well to steal offerings for him. Sami wasn't happy about that.” Koira shrugged a little, he still wasn't comfortable talking about how he'd come to be with Sami's people.

Sasha gulped and wondered if spirit wells and Nightwalker sanctuaries were the same sort of thing. Old Souls were Nightwalkers here, so it was possible things were more like home than he'd imagined.

And if a spirit well and a sanctuary were the same, well, he could imagine how irritated the Nightwalkers who lived in and guarded that sanctuary would be to have their home place riffling through by thieves. And how furious they would be that a child had been forced to do the riffling, Koira was small, he had to have been barely more than a child when he'd been forced to try and steal.

“The spirits? They never hurt you?”

Koira smiled and Sasha found himself smiling back

“No. So you don't need to be afraid. Sami takes very good care of his people.”

Strangely that was reassuring. Sami had the same general feel Petr had. Old, calm and confident. And everything he'd seen showed that he listened to his people's opinions before making decisions that impacted all. None of the men showed any hesitation at stopping their leader and talking to him. He couldn't understand anything they said, but the body language told him they were offering ideas, collecting council and had no fear of ridicule. Laughter was free, easy and there was affectionate teasing, but if one needed aid for anything the others stepped in, even if it was just because one of their number had slipped and skidded down a hill and become stuck in a snowdrift at the bottom.

“Are you two done with confidences?”

Sasha jumped and was somewhat relieved to hear Koira's startled squeak. If he could be sneak up upon he wasn't that much different than any of his hunters. He might have powers, but he still had limits to his senses like any other man.

Christian snorted at them in clear amusement and stood from where he'd been leaning against a tree, how long he'd been leaning there Sasha couldn't guess, but his shoulders still had a light dusting of snow knocked from the tree's branches.

“Come on, Sami's got some concerns about the weather, and Risto saw the tracks of a good sized leopard, we don't want to tempt it if it's desperate.”
Sasha gulped and nodded as Koira shifted, still an unnerving sight, and took to the air with a helpful boost from Christian.

~0~

Huddled in a hollow under a snow covered brush Squeaks shivered and pulled her tail in close around her muzzle.

That had been far to close.

She'd have to warn Levi and Brian that they needed to stay inside longer until this group had passed. She thought they'd managed to avoid the humans, but clearly they were still lingering.

It was a very long time before she could unlock her limbs enough to run for home with the half frozen rabbit she'd caught.

~0~

They saw signs of leopard and fox in the snow as they moved west, but after another two days the tracks stopped. So gleaners began going out in smaller groups but they still kept the children under close watch, just in case.

With the group moving slowly it took another week to get them down into the area Sami had thought of and another few days for them to find a good sized hole in the limestone cliff that opened up into a cave big enough for them to shelter in for the winter. Risto and Janne had been sure there was a cavern large enough for them to live in; they just weren't sure exactly where to find it. The caverns they knew about were marked by trees that were bare skeletons at this time of year and not covered with blossoms and fruit like they were when these men normally came this way.

Sasha mostly listened as Ivan waxed lyrical about the area. Enough forest for wood, caves for seasoning timbers, wild grape wines even withered to dry skeletons and open space for fields. There were small groves of fruit and nut trees, but Sasha only recognized a few wizened and twisted apple trees. All left to the wilds and not pruned and carefully tended as his father’s orchards had been.

It was a good location to settle.

The Nightwalker healer was giving the pregnant women a better check over, but he admitted he only had limited experience in childbirth so he was acting more as an assistant to Olma. Olma had birthed a large number of babies and if her former apprentice hadn't been killed by the monsters she'd have been retired by now. They just couldn't afford to not use her experience. Not if they wanted the four pregnant women left to deliver safely.

While Jason wasn't wise to the mysteries of childbirth he did know the local pharmacopoeia, intimately. Olma had lost most of her supplies, so with Christian acting as translator Jason helped replenish what he could. Some things would have to wait until, spring, summer or even fall but some things he had on hand and in enough quantity to share without fear of leaving their own tribes short if something happened.

There was discussion on planting, and on how to capture enough wild sheep and goats to start a herd to replace the one they’d lost. And they asked if pigs were to be found in the area.

Sami sighed and scrubbed at his eyes. Sometimes he wondered if this was as good an idea as it had seemed to start with. He'd been sending his own people back home one and two at a time and
trying to get to where they could let this troop of Ruski settle in and do things for themselves.

They still had work of their own to do this winter.

~0~

“I'm still seeing leopard sign here.” Janne pointed to an area on the rough map he'd sketched in the dirt by the North Peak fire pit. “And I'm seeing signs of a fox in very close proximity along with several sets of human tracks.”

“That's a pretty small area. Don't leopards eat fox?”

Sami smiled a bit at Koira's question. The small changer was familiar with fox, big cats not so much, in spite of the fact he could take the shape of one. Most of the surviving big cats avoided humans wherever it was at all possible. Even the one pride of lions Sami knew about in their southern territory avoided people, to the point where they were picking up cubs and moving on as soon as humans turned up.

“They used to.” answered Janne. “But mostly they don't have the same territories, so it's not an issue. I'm wondering if we don't have a pair of changers that got stuck moving through. I was seeing leopard and fox tracks over and under the human ones, like I see wolf tracks tangling up with our footprints.”

“Goodie.” Sami sighed and stared down at the sketch. “There used to be a settlement down in there, think they're holed up there?”

Janne nodded.

“There are a few buildings still standing that would serve, one of the granaries even still had its roof and the last time I flew over I thought I saw smoke. I just didn't want to check on my own.”

Sami considered for a long moment. But Theon spoke up before he'd finished gathering his thoughts.

“Are they causing our Ruski transplants any problems?”

“No, they seem to be going out of their way to avoid them. Tolov said they'd gotten a wounded sheep last week that whatever had wounded it just gave up and fled when they turned up. Just said whatever it was had a very long tail and spots. So if our leopard isn't a changer it's being timid of humans.”

“If they are being that determined about avoiding contact I say let's just leave them alone. We have enough issues getting the Ruski settled. Bring it up tonight at dinner though if I forget.”

There were smiles at the idea of Sami forgetting anything so important now. But they all turned to other things.

“How many blocks of ice did we get yesterday?”

~0~

“If we keep having near misses I think we need to move.”

“How? We can't really hide the wagon, and I'd rather not leave it and the horses.”

Brian winced. Squeaks was right, but this was the second near miss in as many days. This group
wasn't the one they'd been following, and they really needed to be careful of being caught with Squeaks or Levi in their animal shapes. If they were lucky people would just try and drive them away. If they weren't one of them might become a fine pelt to some lucky hunter.

“And don't even think about suggesting I leave all the hunting to Levi. I'm part of this team too, I pull weight.”

Brian tried a pleading look but folded almost instantly under the weight of her glare and settled for staring into their small fire and raking both hands through his hair.

Levi shook his head and went back to spitting the rabbits he and Squeaks had brought back.

“It's only another couple months and we can try backtracking and seeing what another route gets us,” he offered as he set both spitted rabbits over the fire. “Sooner or later we've got to find another group of humans who are local, not refugees from central Rus.” Levi looked back at where Squeaks was still glaring at Brian. “We could also stay human and just try talking to these folks. They probably understand the idea of hunting for lost family pretty well. We might be surpr... uh... never-mind.” He ducked his head when Squeaks glare shifted to him and Brian looked at him with his trademarked 'are you serious?' look.

Some days it was safer to just shut up and go with it.

~0~

Sasha cocked his head and blinked at the group of Nightwalkers. Cutting ice blocks he could understand. They'd cut ice every winter from the lake by their old holding, it was nice in summer and having an ice cave made it easier to keep meats fresh. That made perfect sense. The tent on the lake though, it wasn't being used for fishing.

Then the group in the tent boiled out and jumped in the large hole cut in the ice, the blast of steam that escaped the tent finally clued him in.

They were using the tent as a banya. His skin itched at the idea of a long steam bath, but they'd had a few other priorities. He'd have to ask if they'd found a good place to put up a banya, even if it was just in a pocket cave somewhere. It would be good for morale and their health to be able to get really clean again.

After a few moments of playing around in the freezing cold waters the men clambered out and scampered back into the tent and pulled the flap tight closed behind them.

Ivan let out a low 'hunh' and shrugged as he went back to checking their trap lines.

Strange how no matter how far you got from home some things stayed the same.

That didn't keep both of them from jumping in surprise when someone spoke behind them.

“You might want to hurry a little, Koira says the weather west is looking a bit chaney,” Christian smiled wryly at them when they both turned to face him. To their surprise he had the reins of two horses in one hand, both of which had pack baskets behind the saddle pads.

Sasha was still trying to find his voice when he realized the men who had been on the lake were taking down the tent and packing it away in a quick and efficient manner and that the small blond form looking back at them was the spirit changer.

“But,” Ivan started when Christian handed him the reins.
“Sami said Jason will pick them up when he comes to help Olma. He'd rather you two go back safe.” The square man grimaced at the way the wind began to pick up. “You better hurry.”

Ivan shared a look with Sasha then they both dropped the hare and other small game they had caught into the pack baskets and tied the covers down tight, mounted and rode for home.

They could argue about it later. With horses they were only a couple hours from their new home cavern. And they could check and see what else the young Nighthunter had stashed in the pack baskets, as they had been far from empty before they piled their game into them.

Christian squinted after them, then turned and quickly finished running the line. There was one ptarmigan but otherwise the line was empty. After a quick check of their sauna and fishing camp area he changed and took off and a run toward home, the bird in his mouth. If the blow wasn't too bad they'd run a check on the settlers and maybe run an elk their direction. Julian had seen a few near their caverns the last time he'd checked the area.

~0~

Brian swore when the wind picked up and straightened to turn his face into the wind.

Snow.

The scent on the wind was snow. He swore again and hurried to get the last few armloads of dry grasses loaded on the sled. At least he wasn't too far out, only thirty minutes or so, if he hurried he might beat it in. It looked like Levi had taken the horses back already with what deadfall they'd found.

Brian just hoped Squeaks was all right where she was running trap lines.

God but he hated winter.

~0~

Levi winced as the wind gusted hard but he kept on moving trying to get as much fodder and wood into the building as possible. What he couldn't get inside he used to try and shelter their doorway so they could get back out after the snow stopped. The horses were already safe inside and he could see a dark speck approaching quickly that had to be Brian. He just wished when he paused and squinted the other direction that he saw Squeaks coming home as well. This smelled like a hard blow.

He got another load in and the dark speck was recognizably Brian. Another load and Brian was helping him.

He was about to say they needed to go look for Squeaks when she appeared out of the swirling snow dragging something heavy behind her.

Brian pounced and Levi held the door as they dragged her burden inside. Then he shut and barred it as best he could against the gusting wind. Even closed he could feel the icy chill of the wind as it came in the gaps of their frail excuse for a door.

Squeaks had scavenged what looked like the back half of an elk.

“Wolves?”

“I don't know; something. I don't think a wolf pack; there was nothing on it when I found it. Maybe
cold or old age or something.” She winced and shrugged off her pack. Brian carefully teased the frozen ties open with his chilled hands. In it were choice organ meats, what looked like a tongue and a few frozen fish. The line and pegs for the traps were coiled up on top.

“The trap lines were empty, so I just grabbed everything. Didn't want to lose it all in the snow.”

Levi nodded, the wires had value and would be pure hell to replace out here, and with Brian's help they hauled the frozen half carcass up to their storage area. Brian had managed to drive a section of tree trunk as big as his wrist into a crack in the wall and they'd learned it would hold a lot of weight. They'd been using it as a place to hang anything they caught that they didn't want to eat right away. Half an elk looked a lot better to Levi's eyes than the ptarmigan and handful of skinny rabbits that had been there before. Squeaks wearily dragged herself and her pack up to the space they'd set up as living space.

“Don't go to sleep yet Squeaky girl,” warned Brian when he caught up to her and took the pack from her numb hands. When all he got was a tired nod Levi moved to help her strip off her coat and boots.

Brian carefully repaired the fire they'd built on a wide stone ledge jutting out from the wall and put their pot over it to reheat the water they had been trying to keep hot for tea.

“Hand me the knife will you Levi?”

Levi picked up the blade they'd left up here to prep their meals and handed it over.

“Stew?”

“Yeah.” He began carefully slivering bits of half frozen tongue into the pot while Levi rummaged out their dwindling supply of dried vegetables.

They all winced when the wind howled outside.

“I'm glad I'm in here and not out there,” murmured Squeaks as she shivered and reached cold hands toward the fire.

“Yeah, it sounds like it's going to get nasty. Levi? We still have a way to get snow? I think we'd better start all the pots melting water just in case.”

“Yeah. I think the little enclosure in back is sheltered enough I can get out for snow.” He stood to grab a bucket and paused when Brian caught his sleeve.

“Be careful.”

Levi grinned crookedly.

“Not going all the way out the hole boss. Not in this shit.”

Brian smiled wanly back and let him go.

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Sami squinted up at the sky and waited for Koira and Janne to come back down. The storm had blown over, fairly quickly all things considered and now the fliers were out checking the air. Janne had gone directly west toward their settlers and Koira was circling the area where they thought there might be a pair of changers holed up for the winter.
A small gray speck circled down. After a few moments Koira landed and changed.

“I didn't see smoke, but I landed and could just barely smell it. So I think whoever they are they made it.”

Sami cuddled the smaller man close under his coat before asking.

“Anything else moving out there?”

He felt Koira's negative headshake.

“Nothing really, a few birds, a hare but nothing bigger.”

“Good I suppose. Come on, let’s get you back inside. It's going to take Janne a bit to get west and back.”

Koira nodded and headed down. Sami looked back the direction he'd flown in from and frowned faintly. He wished he knew who those changers were.

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Janne locked his wings and glided in lazy circles as he scanned the ground below. Very little was out and moving; a hare here or there, small birds, a pair of ptarmigan, nothing of any size. Then he crossed over into the area the settlers were in.

There were people out, a crude fence was being either put up or repaired and the horses were being brought out. It looked like for exercise while the older children cleared the stable area of manure.

It also looked like things were being brought out to be aired. He watched idly as several small groups of heavily bundled figures broke off and headed in different directions. He assumed checking trap lines left before the storm on the off chance anything was still in the snares. One group headed right for the lake, probably to do a bit of ice fishing.

They looked to be doing well enough, so he turned his wings toward home.

Jay would be waiting for him he was sure. And by now was probably tired of playing with the pups Jonne had brought home.

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Brian had never been so happy to deal with spring mud. Once things had cleared enough, and dried out enough to support the wagon they'd packed up their gear and headed back to the crossroads to try another direction.

Another uphill direction.

The horses seemed happy to be moving again as well, but Sammy suspected some of that was they just wanted to be out of the building they'd been using as barn, house and larder all winter.

For one thing the place stank. Even after they'd cleaned up as best they could it had the funk of a place to long lived-in without soap and water.

He wished they could find a spot for a good bath; he was tired of smoke baths and hasty scrubs in the snow. But it would be a while before they could find soap root or any other cleansing plants. Maybe they’d find a group that knew how to make real soap.
With that happy thought in mind they followed the trail up and around the hill.

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Sami knew when the Hunt got the fidgets. It was rather hard to miss. Even Birdie, Adam and Bailey were trying to find ways to hide how twitchy they were.

Spring flooding hadn't been as bad as it could have been this year, and they only had to rebuild a bit of the area around the hot springs and pull the usual amount of rubbish out of the pool under the waterfall. The cisterns meant they didn't have to worry too much about how cloudy to water was, they had enough to cook with and do some limited cleaning. Once the sediments had settled out they'd begun doing a more focused cleaning out of their living space.

Jason had gotten a good run in late winter when one of the settler's older children had come searching for him on horseback in a near panic because his oldest sister was in labor. The kid had covered the distance a lot faster than they'd thought possible in the snowy conditions.

That the kid had any idea of where they holed up was a touch disturbing, but Sami had decided after a bit of argument that it was just as well to let it go. They had a settlement within two days hard ride, less if the rider was a child and scared half stupid. They'd have to get used to it. At least the kid had gotten to them in plenty of time and been exhausted enough that he didn’t see Jason and Christian slip out to rig Jason’s pack to fit his wolf so he could cover the distance back in time to be useful.

The girl had been in early labor, and had been fine with just the old midwife, not that the old bird had been unhappy in any way to have help. Jason had counted it as a good learning experience, if this group managed to stick around he'd need the practice in dealing with women in labor.

To get back Christian had lent him one of his monster horses and come along as the mares were all getting a bit twitchy for whatever reason. A few weeks later they’d learned why, and why Christian had been both amused and resigned. The blasted things went into heat well before the normal herd did and that monster Christian normally rode busily went about making babies before anyone could do much to stop him. He'd already dealt with the old herd stallion as he was both a normal horse and was old enough they really needed to think about replacing him. At least they'd been able to get them away from each other before permanent damage was done and isolate the old herd stallion in a separate enclosure. They'd tried keeping Christian's monster in an enclosure of his own, but that failed when he proved to be more than capable of hopping the fence even with only a small space to run up in. Sami wasn't sure how he felt about the big beast breeding to their regular herd later in the spring, but he wasn't seeing a practical way to stop it at this point.

Now with the flooding mostly over and Rites season coming up fast Sami wanted to go back into the city and do a bit more looting. Some of the things they'd found in that underground mall Koira had fallen into last year had made for excellent trade goods. A quick run in to see if the place was still mostly undamaged by winter snows and spring flooding wouldn't take too long and they could settle back into spring and summer rites and do a more thorough looting in midsummer.

If nothing else it would help them all get the fidgets out, well other than poor Jay who would still be stuck here, before they had to deal with their tribes.

What Sami didn't expect was that on the way they'd find the place their pair of changers had spent the winter.

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“They had horses, and it looks like some kind of good sized wagon or cart.” Julian mused as he checked the ground more carefully.

Chriss grunted and kicked at a very clear rut.

“They left a while ago though.” He looked up and scanned the horizon. “Interesting.”

“Why wouldn't they come forward?” Asked Koira as he sucked on his teeth pensively, a habit he'd been picking up from both Julian and Risto.

“They were hiding too well to not know we were half looking for them,” mused Julian as he poked around the inside of the granary. Whoever had been here had taken advantage of the stairs spiraling up the inside wall of the building. They'd done a pretty good job of putting in a pair of loft spaces well above the floor, one of which looked to have been used as a larder space of some kind if the bloody stains on the rough flooring was anything to go by.

Koira sighed and shot Sami a look, which made Sami smile and answer the question.

“Could be a number of things. With only a couple of them they may have been running from their own people. They couldn't know we wouldn't just try and kill them on sight. A cart and horses makes me think they might be survivors of some kind of mess like our Ruski lot. No telling really.”

“They did a good job putting a loft in this place though; it's the only place still with any kind of a roof around here. I wouldn't have thought about using an old stone silo for a winter house.” Chriss said looking over the building.

Sami nodded and stared at the building meditatively.

“Later we may want to go over this place and build it into a better shelter. Put in a real loft and second floor anyway. Later though. Let’s see where our good looting sites are going to be this year.”

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The mall they'd found last year had water standing in it in several places, in one spot rather deep standing water. Christian had to take out another zombie that had fallen in and gotten stuck but aside from that things were rather eerily quiet.

With Janne and Koira spotting from above they'd been able to lay out a solid and safe path into and out of the area and Risto and Theon had found a couple good places for shelters and cache areas on the route.

Koira proved to still be a little magpie, but the huge stone globe he found had once been part of a water fountain and wasn't worth trying to move. The ceramic tiles he found might be worth salvaging as they had a slick finish when scrubbed clean but Sami hadn't decided yet and no one had offered up a reason to do more than note where they were for now.

Maybe their settlers would have a use for them. Christian had mentioned they used glazed tiles on their heating stoves.

But that was for later, they'd scouted things as planned and now had a round of rites to take care of.

~0~

Chriss was faintly disturbed to learn Koira's old tribe was still very rattled by their experience last
winter. He managed to play it off that sometimes benign spirits would hang around if they felt there were things they still needed to finish. And he'd been able to back the old shaman off of harassing Larry's Aunt and Jay's mother. It didn't matter that Jay and Larry weren't really dead, to these women they were, and they deserved to have their grief respected.

It just left him with a funny feeling talking about someone he'd seen only a few days before alive and well as if they had been dead for a long time.

The old shaman had taken an apprentice, one of the boys that had made it through last year’s Rites and the boy had an uncanny knack for knowing things. So far he'd shown no sign that he thought the Old Souls were anything unusual.

Well more unusual than normal.

The poor kid was also hopelessly gay. Something that could cause issues later, but he'd wait and see. As it was he'd gently taught the kid what he could about male to male pleasures while managing to keep the kid from getting too infatuated.

He wasn't sure how well that had worked.

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Theon, Risto and Julian had gone south into Birdie's old territory to do a quick sweep. The villages they'd found had been pathetically glad to see them, Which had left all three feeling a bit unsettled, but so far they'd only found two pre-emergent zombies.

They'd found signs of a possible zombie pack though, and that was disturbing. But they only did a quick search, if there were more than three zombies in the pack it would take more than just them to remove them. All they found though was hints, not solid leads or trails, so Julian passed it on to Janne when he flew in to check up on them and they continued their sweep. They would keep an eye on the general area, just in case.

In more positive news they'd explored several of Birdie's suggested safe havens and found three that could be made into real home places with a bit of work. They'd also found marshes that later in the summer and fall would be brimming over in wild rice. All they'd need was a dugout or two to harvest it. It looked like at one point it had been harvested if the rotted remains of canoes in the abandoned wreck of a village was any indicator. But it looked like the place had been empty for a long time, even before the sea plague that had sent Birdie, Adam and Bailey to them for shelter.

The place even had an abandoned and overgrown cane field full of tender new sugar cane and the wrecked equipment to process cane into sugar. Chriss was pretty sure he could reverse engineer new processing equipment from the remains of the old, and that would let them experiment more with Jason's centrifuge idea. He'd been using it to spin honey free of the wax comb but thought it could be used to pull molasses out of raw sugar.

Something to think about for later in the summer.

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Jason did his usual trade runs for sugar, salt and textiles. He'd gone down with Ivan and Tolov to show them the route as he was sure at some point they'd need to trade with the outside world.

When he came back it was with an odd expression on his face, a leather case with the lenses for a telescope for Jay and an odd story.
Malowi watched the wolf-man who came south to trade with cautious eyes. He'd come far north at the behest of the elders as it was not yet his time of changing. This was his test of manhood and he had no intention of failing for some strange pale faced man who walked on wolf paws.

But he came with two men who smelled like ordinary men. And he acted toward them with all the consideration he'd been rumored to treat other normal folk. The elders said he was properly in a pack, a good pack that cared for the land-mother they ran on.

He didn't smell solitary or sick so Malowi had to trust his elders were correct. His grandfather said he'd dealt with this man who walks on wolf paws before, when he'd done his journey to prove his own manhood.

Malowi hadn't quite believed his grandfather and had been shocked when this man who walked on wolf paws sniffed the air and looked around intently before his eyes locked on his own tall lean form.

He was also very direct.

“You smell like Mallo.”

“He is my father’s father.”

Malowi blinked at the sudden happy smile and the courtesy of offered bread and hot sweetened tea. This was not what he'd expected at all. Most folk he'd come across had been quite wary of him as his skin was quite dark and his hair curled quite tightly when it wasn't oiled into braids.

“Is he well?”

“He was quite well when I saw him three moons ago.”

That got him a nod of understanding. But he hadn't expected the man who walked on wolf paws to rummage into one of his packs and bring up something strangely familiar.

“When I saw him last he lent me a tool, and I never got the chance to return it.” He turned and offered the carefully shaped and carved length of ivory to him. Malowi swallowed hard and accepted it.

It was a spear straightener, in elephant ivory, marked with his grandfathers’ ownership marks.

They settled in to share meat and fire for the night.

Malowi learned the man who walked on wolf paws was named Jason. That he traded here almost every summer and often in the fall as well. He carried metal goods from the very far north down and traded them for sugar and salt and for woven goods and various fine cordage.

He learned he was just as generous as his grandfather had said he was. And he found himself with a small packet of highly valuable metal needles to carry back to his mother and sisters.

The elders had sent something with him, a hard leather case with fat circles of polished glass inside. The lenses for a far seeing glass, but one far larger than any he'd ever seen carried by any hunter or scout.

They said he'd know whom they were to go to.
When Jason talked to other folk he suspected the elders meant for things to go to Jason. When he listened to Jason's answers as to why he wanted large lenses Malowi was certain.

His pack had a star watcher, a young one with old memories. One who had no tools to scan the sky with, no means of watching for omens and signs.

That night he gave Jason the case.

And Jason refused to take it without payment for the value.

He turned for home with a full satchel and a full head.

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“I never expected to run into the bloodline again.”

“Changer blood?” Asked Sami as he watched Jay carefully stroking his fingers over the set of lenses.

“Malowi was, not a wolf I don't think though. Something canine, maybe a wild dog of some kind I never saw him change so I'm just going on what I smelled. His grandfather wasn't, not unless he's an honorary grandfather, and he smelled too much like I remember Mallo smelling for me to think that's likely.”

“It'll take a bit to build a proper housing for those,” teased Janne gently but he was smiling at Jay's clear fascination.

“The lenses coming out of the blue doesn't bother me as much as some rumors I've heard. Dealing with why we're getting folks moving in from the west.”

Jason had all eyes on him.

“Some sort of flying demon that spits fire and arrows. The descriptions make me think of a combat helicopter, but no one has those anymore. And if it was, what would they fuel it with? I'm not sure what to think.”

Sami chewed his lip while Koira just looked confused. He was hundreds of years too young to remember machines that could fly.

“I'm not sure what to think either. We'll keep an ear open. Antti in Blue Mountain has been more than happy to talk to Kris, so if anything odd comes through that way we'll at least have some word.”

Jonne spoke up hesitantly.

“You don't think the Americans hung onto things do you? Moscow hung on for a lot longer than we thought it would. They had more resources...” his voice trailed off.

“I don't know Jonne, I'm scared to speculate. For all we know someone found the remains of an army depot and freaked out.”

“Or found it while they were high and had a really bad trip,” offered Kris with a grimace. “The blue dream weed the Ruski brought with them can really mess a person up.”

“I don't want to know how you know that,” warned Sami even as Larry and Jonne turned to Kris in worry.
“Not directly, not after the stories Sasha had of his younger brother tripping out and flipping out.” Kris shuddered. “No thanks, it sounded nasty.”

Sami let out a soft sigh of relief.

“Okay then. We've got a bit of time before we need to do our summer sweeps, unless anyone has kids out there that tripped their suspicions?” He waited and got a collection of negative headshakes.

“Most of my lot probably won't have kids ready until fall or next spring, got a bit of a gap,” offered Theon. “And for all the rumor of a zombie pack down south we never saw more than faint traces, so I think that needs to sit until we get more solid information.”

Sami nodded his agreement, they'd learned not to spend fruitless hours and energy searching for rumored evil spirits and monsters when there wasn't any real physical evidence. The random fears people had could only be dealt with in their own minds, for Sami’s people to be able to do any good they had to be able to lay hands on the people or things causing the problems. Mental illness or overactive imaginations were things they couldn't fix.

“Then let’s do a bit of a raid into the city and see what trade goods we can find. Jason you said Sasha's crew were good for planting this spring and later this fall?”

“Near as I can tell. We got some beets and a few other root vegetables that they've turned into seed stock and they were able to glean out some wheat from some of the wild fields we didn't harvest last summer and fall.” He shrugged. “This year might be interesting, but I think they've got a plan.”

Sami nodded.

“Then let’s go with an eye to finding trade goods that we can take north and maybe get a good cylinder for Jay's telescope.”

“And cheese. That blue reindeer cheese they make is good stuff.”

There was a bit of laughter at how Risto still sometimes thought with his stomach.

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Sami had a funny feeling. They'd been hitting what was left of this city for random supplies for months now that they had three more to provide for at Satama and the group of Ruski settlers that were still finding their feet after running from zombies for god himself only knew how long. A good lot of the white tiles Koira had found last year got packed up and taken back to those settlers and Danja had been thrilled to get them as they would let them tile in an area for a proper bathhouse until they could cut and season the proper timbers to build a traditional one. They still hadn't found anything they could use for a cylinder for a telescope for Jay, scrap to maybe trade for someone to build one, but that would leave their shut in member without an eye for the sky for at least another year. Worse now every time they came into the city he got the crawly feeling they weren't alone.

Jason said he smelled strangers but for all their looking they never found anyone. It was almost like finding those tracks last winter but never finding the changers that made them.

Even with Koira and Janne in the air scouting they had other things to worry about besides his creepy crawly feelings.

He shrugged it off for now.
Levi grinned as he watched Squeaks back flip off a roof and drop to the street below. Brian was a half-step behind her with one of his silly superman jumps. But he had to turn and run up another broken wall and leap the gap to get back ahead in their little game of follow the leader.

They'd already done a round with Squeaks as the leader. And she'd teased Brian by signing 'if you can catch me you get to eat me' at him like she had all those years before when she'd been a questionably willing audition member for team Tempest. That she'd been half dragged there by Frosti as the Tribe already had their female fifth hadn't been relevant. She'd met Brian the day before and had tweaked his chain by not being what he'd expected.

Levi smiled as he kong vaulted over an obstacle.

That first day neither of them could catch her, now she was more comfortable and they knew her well enough they could anticipate her moves and be there to catch her. More importantly she trusted them enough to let them catch her. His smile turned a bit sad, he missed some of the guys, missed some of the challenges.

Hell, he missed indoor plumbing and not having to catch his dinner every day.

Levi yelped and flailed a bit then rolled to kill the momentum of his fall. That's what he got for getting distracted, at least now they all could take a longer drop without injury. It still sucked having the roof under your feet suddenly not be there.

But him dropping warned Brian and Squeaks to slow down, not that they weren't beside him checking him over for injury almost before he'd stopped rolling.

He'd be fine, Levi knew the scrapes and bruises he'd taken were minor and would heal in a day or two.

What had him more rattled than the fall was the fact that he could see another person at the far end of the alley he'd fallen into and he looked just as shocked to see them as they were to see him.

More than that, it looked like a kid, well teenager was more accurate. But he was small, not frail by any standards but shorter than Levi and his hair was a much paler blond done up in a wild mix of loose hair and fine braids with beads decorating the ends.

Even more confusing was the way his eyes widened when Brian stood and turned to see what Levi and Squeaks had been staring at. The kid took a sudden step backwards and fled. Changing mid-stride from a boy to a pale golden colored wolf.

Levi shifted and took off after the kid, maybe not the smartest thing in the world, but something in how the kid had turned and run triggered his instinctive need to chase.

At least Squeaks had taken the high ground and was pursuing as well.

From the way Brian was cussing them both Levi knew he was hot on both their tails.

Brian swore under his breath for a moment then stopped and saved his wind for running. Squeaks had shifted back, her human shape was better than her cat for tracing the rooftops and keeping Levi's bright gold fox shape in sight. It looked like whoever the wolf kid was he knew the area reasonably well, it also looked like he had a destination in mind.
He needed to get ahead of the pair of idiots. Right now he wasn't sure if he was calling the kid and Levi the idiots or Levi and Squeaks the idiots. It wasn't like the kid could fly; they could track him by scent and see if he really was all by himself.

Brian dropped neatly off the roof and landed beside a befuddled fox and only just remembered to not grab and shake his partner stupid. Squeaks dropped down beside him.

“Where'd the kid go?”

Levi shifted back and shook his head.

“I dunno, it's like he just vanished. I saw a hawk of some sort take off, kid must have scared it off a mouse or something but I can't find him now.”

“So we scent track him.”

“How about we stop and think?” Brian growled in frustration. “He didn't look like he was starving; his clothes weren't rags so he may have family around.” He raked his hair back away from his face and idly thought that maybe he should just let it grow out and tie it back like Levi did. Then he growled as Levi instantly protested. He really didn't want an argument right now.

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Koira panted quietly and watched the three argue on the street below. He couldn't understand more than the occasional word, and that was only thanks to Christian's determined lessons in Ruski so they could understand the group that had settled near them without resorting to broken mixed versions of trade and gestures. Wherever they came from their version of trade speak was rather different than here. But both sides were learning. It helped him understand some of what this trio was saying.

Koira still found it more than a touch odd that this group was happy to settle near a mixed group of vampires and changers. His home tribe would never have done so, not even with the best hunting and grazing grounds around.

What unnerved him was the bigger man looked a lot like Sami. Enough that when he'd seen him from behind in the alley he'd stopped to ask Sami how he'd gotten this far away from the rest of the Hunt. But then the differences in clothing had struck him. Sami had been in a sleeveless leather tunic this morning, this man's sleeveless tunic wasn't leather, it was something woven and his honey gold hair was uncovered and shorter, not tied back then hidden under a heavily patterned scarf.

Then he'd turned and Koira had seen the subtle differences in his face and seen the slightly bluer shade of his blue green eyes. He had ink on one shoulder, but Koira couldn't make sense of it, it was nothing like the faded star and scrollwork Sami wore. The lack of facial hair was a huge slap to the face. He was used to Sami's neat tuft of a beard just covering his chin.

He'd seen the smaller man drop off the roof and tumble to a stop and he'd been startled enough to stop to see if he was alright. Seeing another man so like his Sami casually dive from that same roof top had made his heart freeze. Seeing a sleek cat shape change into a woman had completely blown his mind.

Women never became changers, never became vampires. If they changed they became zombies. Sami and Jason said they'd never heard of a woman changing into anything but a zombie.
So who were these people, what was that woman and why had they chased him once they'd seen him?

One small bit of comfort was that they clearly cared a great deal for each other, even if the two men were bickering a bit about things. He listened more carefully, from the few words he could make sense of it almost sounded like they were bickering about him? Like they thought he was a child alone.

He blinked in confusion.

He'd thought it was luck that had given him enough of a lead that he could shift shapes without being seen and fly to safety. Through the fox had been faster than he'd expected and he almost hadn't made the change without being seen.

They really thought he was alone? They thought he might need help to get back home?

He'd have to tell Sami about these three.

~0~

“Hunh.”

That clearly wasn't exactly the reaction Koira had expected from his little bit of news. But Sami had to admit Jason's reaction rather neatly summed up his own reaction. So he hadn't been imagining things.

That was marginally comforting at least.

But hearing about what Koira thought they'd been talking about was a bit more worrisome, he disregarded Koira's remarks on how the strange Hunt leader resembled Sami to an uncanny degree. That could be written off as Koira not knowing him nearly as well as the rest of the guys, even Christian, Jay and Larry weren't as familiar anymore given they had spotty memories of their first lives.

Something to be said for living with people for a few hundred years, you really knew what they'd do in almost any situation.

Sami yanked his mind back to the problem as Lauri mused on how tiny a Hunt of three was and wondered aloud if they were just an advanced scouting group. Advanced group? Or was this the same group they'd been seeing signs of last winter? Koira had said the shifters were fox and a big cat of some flavor.

He rather hoped it wasn't a scouting group for a larger hunt, not after the last hunt they'd had to deal with. Though he supposed they could hope that another Hunt would be more sensible. Lauri, Adam and Bailey sure had been, even if it had taken them forever to show their faces. And they really had no room to talk about Hunt size, they'd been a lone trio for a very long time.

Sami also didn't pay much attention to Koira saying that one of the two changers was a woman, more than likely it was just a very effeminate looking man. Women not becoming changers or vampires was about as close to a universal truth as they had anymore. And Koira looked very much like a fragile girl if he was fully clothed, bare chested his gender was obvious.

Sami snorted a bit as the random memory bubbled up, after one winter hunt a set of rumors started about a group of men who charmed eagle maidens out of the sky to serve as their wives had started making the rounds. He wasn't entirely sure where the rumor started, he suspected the one cluster of
human hunters they'd had to make nice with after they'd all but tripped over each other. But after seeing how their transplanted Ruski reacted to Koira's shape shifting before they knew for sure he was male had been a trifle amusing even if it reinforced his notion that weird or bad news traveled further and faster than any other sort.

But back to the issue at hand; Koira was pretty sure he'd lost them by shifting to one of his flighted forms and now that they knew for certain there was at least a Hunt of three in the area they could keep a more careful eye out.

Janne quietly offered to go up in the air and keep watch, something that got no arguments whatsoever. They had two fledges back home at Satama to keep fed, and Jay couldn't take anything but the weakest winter sunlight yet. Jason had given the other changer a good boost up into the air and now Janne was circling lazily around their camp in his red tailed hawk shape.

~0~

“I didn't think red tails were native to this part of the world.”

Brian blinked and squinted up to where Squeaks was pointing. Levi shaded his eyes and squinted up as well then shrugged.

“Got me, I know I've never seen one here before. Big bugger too.”

And the bird was rather large, but Brian shrugged it off, it was a clear day so they might be misjudging how close it was and thinking it was further off. He was more interested in getting back to camp, and maybe a bath.

“It's a big bird, nothing to worry about. Come on, let’s get back to camp.”

“What about the kid?”

“We'll keep an eye out for him,” Brian answered easily. “He knows we're here Squeaks. If he's really on his own he may come and find us. He knows this area, he can find us if he wants to. For all we know he saw us and bee lined for his own people. Come on, I want a bath.”

Levi grinned, which made Squeaks roll her eyes.

“Fine, but one of you is combing my hair out afterwards.”

“Deal.” Brian shared another grin with Levi as they answered together.

“Let’s go.”

“Following you, oh fearless leader,” teased Levi as he bounced in place.

Brian laughed and ran for a wall to kick off of and climb.

~0~

Clean water in enough of an abundance to actually bathe was kind of nice. Being able to just lay back on a large slab of concrete broken from some roadway and bask in the sun while watching his lovers play in the water was even better. Brian knew at some point they would either come and cuddle or come and drag him back into their play.

His eyes snapped open at Squeaks cry of pleasure.
Levi grinned at him over her shoulder and fondled with knowing hands. He'd gotten Squeaks on her knees and had one hand between her thighs, caressing both her clit and her balls while his other hand pinched at a nipple. Before too long he'd have her hot enough he could shove into her a few times to get slick and change to the tight pucker of her ass.

Brian rose and stalked over to stroke the loose wet tangle of fire red hair, one thumb tracing over her bottom lip. It didn't take much encouragement for her to swallow his cock down. Brian groaned; he knew exactly when Levi pushed in; Squeaks let out a moan around his dick and made him ache to just start thrusting. But if he waited, Brian moaned again and had to drag that sweet mouth off; Levi was teasing her ass with wet fingers. Her moans made him want to come too fast and after the stress of the last few weeks he was of a mind to come inside her.

The look in Levi's eyes was full of lust and mischief.

Then he moved again and Squeaks let out a scream, not one of pain, they'd been together long enough to learn each other's 'stop that hurts' and 'more, now, harder' sounds. This was definitely the latter. He moved to line up himself and slid in as Levi lay back into the riverbank and pulled Squeaks to lie over his chest.

At least with his longer limbs he wouldn't squish them.

Then all thought went flying out of his head, replaced by the blood rushing in his ears, the cries of his lovers and the urgent need to come.

To make them come screaming for him.

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Another day of scavenging, another day of playing on what was left of the buildings. They hadn't seen any sign of the kid they had seen a few days before but they were seeing signs that people either lived here or scavenged here regularly. There were also signs of zombies, and signs that whoever scavenged here was quite handy in taking out zombies, at least as singles and small groups.

Brian wasn't sure if that was a comforting thought or not. The wounds on the few bodies they found made him think of arrows, and even with all their years of practice he wasn't sure Levi could have made those precision kills shots so neatly. That and some of the arrow wounds were made by really heavy arrows, that or something like Chai's heavy crossbow. Something big, heavy and barbed enough that whoever had killed the zombies had had to cut the head back out. That they'd retrieved the arrow heads told Brian whoever they were they were being careful of their resources. But that could just be simple practicality, good barbed arrow heads were a pain in the ass to make.

Then he'd had Murphy's Law bite him hard on the butt as he threw himself into a lazy man forward drop off a balcony and dropped into the middle of a group of men who had been peering down into a hole where a section of sidewalk had fallen in.

And of course Levi and Squeaks hadn't been able to stop and were right there with him.

And of course he'd about landed on some poor guy who was looking up at him with wide blue eyes and with long black hair tumbled everywhere.

The fact two of the others had yelped and lurched forward calling 'Bailey' hinted that maybe he'd better be kind of careful.

First off, get off the poor guy and get him back on his feet. Then he could figure out who was more
or less in charge.

Brian blinked and boggled a bit.

The guy in charge was big blocky and had honey blond hair only a shade or two off what he saw in
the mirror of their wagon or reflecting back at him from still water. His eyes were a shade or two
greener but the face was still creepily like his own. Enough that strangers might think they were
related

This could be very bad.

~0~

Lauri wasn't sure quite what to think.

On the one hand he wanted to fall over and just die laughing, on the other he wanted to grab a
weapon and defend Adam and Bailey with all he had until they knew for sure just who the hell
these three strangers were. It helped a little that the leader had scrambled off Bailey with a garble
of words that at least sounded apologetic and offered him a hand up and then not tried to restrain
him in any way.

The second, less civil reaction was being short circuited by the fact that none of the three appeared
to be armed with anything larger than a knife, and that they weren't doing much other than staring
in shock. Well, two were staring in shock, rather like most of their side was gaping at their fearless
leader staring into the face of a man who was creepily similar in features and build.

Not that Sami went diving off buildings just for the apparent fun of it.

Then the redhead spoke up, and laughter won out.

“Um, we come in peace?”

It wasn't so much her words spoken in a weird Ruski laden version of Trade, or the fact she spread
her hands in a non-threatening manner and smiled engagingly. It was how both men with her
groaned, the larger blond raking his hands through his hair and the smaller smacking his face into
his open palms.

There had to be a story behind that reaction. It might even be as good as the story behind how
Chriss had ended up dangling by his ankles from an oversized snare.

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Things were still rather tense when Theon trotted up with Christian loping along beside him in
wolf shape. He was just trying to find everyone and was somewhat surprised to find new faces
around the fire that should have just held six people.

Suddenly he had the urge to turn back and have Risto turn the wagon around.

Christian skidding to a halt and standing there with every hair out on end and his tail held stiff and
straight behind him really didn't help. He looked like a freaked out cat instead of a wolf.

The abrupt shift to man shape really didn't reassure Theon at all, his body language was stiff and
all off as he stalked warily up to the fire.

Theon hung back and watched.
Things that were different, there were more horses and there was a wagon that made Christian's lumbering monstrosity look more like a light racing wagon. There was a shortish slender blond perched on a rock by the fire and a larger, blocker one standing over him. More shocking there was a girl with red hair sitting at the short blondes’ feet.

A red head that had noticed their approach and was staring at Christian like she couldn't believe her eyes.

Then she was moving and Christian let out a small almost sobbing sound as he caught her in his arms and was hugged half breathless.

Theon cocked his head and watched in confusion as the two blond strangers reacted in a similarly strange fashion. They bracketed Christian and hugged him, muttering in what Theon now recognized as Ruski.

Sami looked over and gave him a confused shrug even as he rose to walk over to the strange cluster.

~0~

Brian jumped when he saw the new pair come up then boggled when the wolf shifted into Christof.

Squeaks wasn't nearly as restrained. She ran over and hugged the poor kid half witless chattering in the same mix of joy and relief Brian felt. A glance down and he could see Levi grinning from ear to ear.

“Told-ya he'd make one damn big puppy.”

Brian had to smile at that even as they both moved to rescue Christof before Squeaks finished mortally embarrassing him.

~0~

He'd thought he'd dreamed them, that that one year Grisha and Sergey had played host to another Hunt had been his imagination of the result of him having been so sick when they first arrived.

They were real. They remembered him, quite fondly if Squeaks remarks of how he'd gotten so tall were anything to go by. But her tone was affectionate and her hands gentle as they stroked his hair. It was a familiar feeling, comforting and he couldn't place quite why it would be so. Her scent though was familiar and brought with it memories of comfort, of gentle hands and a soft voice singing over him in his dreams.

Brian's hug was solid, real, just like the remembered arms that had held him and carried him back to the house after he'd fallen out of one the apple trees.

It also sounded like they'd been to visit when he had been off on trading trips with Sergey and later alone. They knew about the origins of some of the scars he'd managed to avoid telling the hunt about. That and Brian sounded pleased with how his ink had turned out.

He had thought they were just this imagination, but they weren't, even their scents, so familiar and comforting, dragged up memories and made his eyes flood with tears.

How could he have forgotten?
Theon growled protectively when Christian broke down into tears. But he only managed two steps toward the bitch who was upsetting his best friend before someone big and blond was in his way.

“Move Sami.”

“Uh, Thee?”

“Sami...” Theon growled again glaring hard at the broad chest in front of his face.

“Torstig!”

A pair of hands caught his shoulders and gave him a firm shake. Only then, after Theon had shifted his glare upwards did he realize the big blond he'd initially been snarling at wasn't Sami.

For one his eyes were too blue, for another his hair was too short and it was uncovered. Not facts that were going to slow him down much.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“We were just getting past the introductions Theon.”

Theon growled and glared again at the woman who was rocking Christian in her arms and whispering into his hair, her face streaked with tears. The only words he could understand were 'my baby' and from how she looked there was no way in hell this woman had been Christian's mother in this lifetime.

The stranger who looked so much like Sami, though the resemblance was getting less and less the longer he looked at him, twitched his shoulders a bit and answered.

“Brian, Levi and Squeaks. We came trying to find the kids of a couple friends of ours.”

Theon’s eyes narrowed.

“Friends?”

The shorter blond elbowed the newly identified Brian in the ribs.

“Grisha and Sergey, we've been tracking their wagons and trying to find their fosterlings Dmitri and Christof.”

Theon jerked in surprise. Christian had told his story so the whole Hunt knew about him being picked up and raised in this lifetime by the two former Russian rock stars. Then his eyes narrowed.

“So how were they when you talked to them?”

Brian closed his eyes briefly in very clear pain, then leveled a glare of his own right into Theon's eyes.

“They were dead.”

Sami wanted to laugh until he cried.
The two changers they'd been half chasing last winter had just been trying to find Christian so they could learn what had happened to their friends.

He also wanted to run screaming for the hills.

Squeaks was a changer, a female changer. That there was a rare set of circumstances didn't make it any less freaky to him. He'd never, ever heard of another female changer, even if this one had extra... well, bits. So much for Koira misidentifying her.

The explanation Levi and Brian gave made his head hurt. Here to film some show for television, then stayed over for vacation. The bombs dropped and everyone around them got sick. They got sick. Brian bounced back quickly, just like Sami had, but Levi and Squeaks hadn't and had ended up in an internment camp for the sick, so Brian snuck in. Brian was like Sami, able to take sunlight right from the get go. Nursing Squeaks back to health, and learning that everyone else they knew of with her condition hadn't gotten better. Escaping the camp using the skills they'd been showing off in their television show.

Running like hell.

They all could relate to that. Learning the hard way Squeaks would cycle and every three years or so would need blood like a fledgling vampire for a period of a few weeks. That she could feed like a vampire in the months before and after her cycle hit.

Sami felt slightly sickened when he learned what she'd done a few times to keep Brian safe from hunters. Not that if it hadn't been one of his people in that same position he wouldn't have done exactly the same thing. Women just didn't turn into any monster other than a zombie, it was a universal truth. Had been anyway.

But the very idea of a woman willingly going out trolling for rapists gave him the crawls, that she was stronger and faster than most human males wasn't a relevant point. You just didn't let women, anyone really, that you cared about walk into danger like that.

But here she was. And she absolutely changed shape. Sami had watched her when Adam and Bailey got bored and played chase in their wolf shapes. She was a lovely clouded leopard, but the rosettes in her fur had a very distinct red cast to them. Levi had a red fox shape, but he was golden colored and would probably vanish two steps into a field of dry grasses.

She was impossible.

Worse she riled every jealous instinct Sami had when as a cat she and Koira cat played pounce together like a pair of oversized kittens. Seeing them together made Sami aware that Koira's preferred cat shape had more in common with a cheetah than a real leopard, he wasn't nearly as blocky as Squeaks was and his claws didn't retract like hers did.

“She's not interested in him like that.”

Sami jumped and spun in place to face the man whose face was so like his own.

“What?” He was being abrupt, he couldn't help it. Brian just smiled at him, Sami had the irreverent and utterly irrelevant thought that if this was the smile Theon called the Mona Lisa smile that it was surprising that he didn't get punched in the shoulder more often and harder. It was inscrutable and tremendously annoying.

“I know that face. I've made that face and had Levi kick my ass over it. Squeaks isn't after your partner. He's a cute kid, but to us he's a kid.”
Sami's eyes narrowed and he growled at the unspoken implication that he was taking advantage of Koira. And clearly the source of his irritation was utterly transparent as his doppelganger instantly protested.

“Oh Jesus, not like that. But for her it would be like trying to screw Christof, Christian. Just not right.” He raked his hands back through his hair in a gesture of nerves even Sami could easily read and took a deep breath. “I'm not doing this so well. We've been together a long time; I know her signals when she's interested in someone other than me and Levi. She's not signaling like that.”

Sami cocked his head a little and examined the other vampires’ body language.

Brian wasn't scared of him, which was nice. The runners who made their living's carrying news all tended to be at the least very unnerved by him and his people. But if what Brian said was true his little group as of an age with Sami and most of his hunt. If that was true it was very likely that what Brian was saying was also true.

Some days he hated being logical. It was so much easier to be an emotional grump.

“So how is it that she calls Christian her baby?”

That provoked a pained wince.

“We found him. He must have been all of three. It looked like his family wagon had been overrun by hunters and he'd been left for dead. We came up within a day probably. Things were still burning anyway.” From the pained grimace and hard swallow the memory was still clearly disturbing, so the scene had to have been pretty bad. “He was the only survivor and he was battered and a very sick and dehydrated baby. He looked at Squeaks and she was hell-bent on taking him with us.”

“So why does he say Grisha and Sergey raised him.”

Brian gave him a level look, his eyes still haunted and sad.

“They did. We hide in plain sight as a family of acrobats. That's not a life for a child. Grisha had just had their last foundling leave the nest and they were feeling a bit odd with no one else in the house. Christof bonded to Sergey just like that. He saw him and stuck to him like glue, and Sergey was captivated even worse than Squeaks. They could provide for him better than we could.” Another pained grimace and a soft unhappy confession. “We couldn't even keep him well while we had him, no matter what we did he was just so sick.”

Hard and cruel logic, but clearly from the way Christian spoke to all of them they had visited.

“We came when we could, and had crap for timing most of the time. We were there when Grisha found Dmitri and had worries right off.” Brian closed his eyes and shook his head as if shaking away memories. “Dmitri wasn't quite right; whoever had him before messed up his head pretty badly. Now that we know Christof is safe we'll focus a bit more on finding Dmitri.”

Sami winced.

“You won't have to.”

He was speared in place with a stare very much like his own. No wonder the guys flinched when he leveled that look on them.

“Why do you say that?” The question was in as wary a tone as Sami had ever heard.
Sami sighed and locked eyes with the other vampire. There was no way to soften this news, so he just got it out and over with.

“Dmitri's dead. I know because he took some humans from a summer gathering and my people had to take out his hunt and followers. He's the reason Larry and Jay are vampires, if you come back with us you'll meet them. Christian killed Dmitri with his own hands.”

Sami was grabbing for Brian's shoulders as the other man wobbled.

“He made it quick?” The pain on Brian’s face and the little catch in his voice made Sami's heart lurch in sympathy.

“Very quick.”

Brian nodded and shakily walked away, quickly getting first Levi and then Squeaks by his side.

“Sami?”

Sami wrapped his arms tightly around Koira.

“They didn't know. About Dmitri. I had to tell him.”

Koira blinked, all he could say was 'oh' as he cuddled in close.

~0~

Theon wasn't quite sure what he felt. Annoyed and jealous for certain, confused as hell as well as he watched the easy affection the three strangers showed Christian. The girl in particular weirded him out. Watching her cuddling Christian and petting his hair just bothered him, and then he realized what she was doing with a small and clearly very sharp knife and a small dish of some black liquid.

He was taking a breath to yell when Sami grabbed him.

“Don't yell. If she jumps Christian will be pissed that you messed her up.”

“She's cutting him,” Theon hissed in distress.

“Torsit, she's the one who put his ink back on him.”

Theon froze and looked up into Sami's eyes, searching for what even he didn't know.

“She's putting the band mark back on, the one he'd been talking about before things went to hell.”

Theon felt his knees buckle, Sami caught him and eased him down to the ground. Theon just watched as the strange red head kept making delicate cuts and rubbing the black liquid into them then wiping them again with a cleaner cloth. All the while she appeared to be chattering away.

If she'd been using a tattoo gun and this was a clean shop it would have been comfortable, but in the open with nothing but a small flint blade and bowl and a few rags it made his insides lurch.

She'd done this with red? The clean sharp lines of Christian's star, the delicate curls of the scrollwork, all done with a knife? A knife that was really nothing more than a broken sliver of rock?

“If it helps, we don't watch her working either.”
Theon turned and found the smaller blond looking down at him with a sober expression on his face.

"Grisha asked us once, a long time ago to find a way to mark their foundlings, just in case they ever had another one stolen from them. So at least they might be able to identify the body if they found them again."

Sami went gray and Theon felt sick.

That implied some things he really didn't want to think about.

~0~

"Is he turning green yet?" Christian asked, not even opening his eyes as Squeaks worked at delicately cutting just barely through the skin before rubbing the ink in. The feel of her hands brought back more memories. The faint sting and the slight tugging on his skin as she worked with smooth and deft motions. The sharper burn of the ink as it was firmly rubbed into the cuts. He was glad she'd bothered to practice the outline moves before taking the sliver of a flint knife to his arm, there wouldn't be any blurring to the lines if his memory was at all accurate.

"Almost looks like he's going to be ill, I’m almost done with the outlines, then we can let things heal and see what needs touch ups and then figure out the fill."

Jason he knew had been watching. Christian was vaguely aware of the other changer lurking above the spot Squeaks had picked as having good light. But Jason would take an interest as if something went wrong he’d be the one helping clear out any infection that set in.

"How's it look?"

There was a soft snort.

"A bit bloody, you've put on a lot more muscle since I did your star." She wiped over the marks again and then began carefully binding it.

Christian opened his eyes and turned to face Squeaks as she finished.

"I don't remember. I vaguely remember getting it before, but not you actually doing it."

He got a sad smile and a nod.

"I half expected that. You were in such a huge hurry to show Sergey that you fell. Scared Levi and Grisha half stupid when you fell." Gentle fingers stroked through his hair and it was a comforting feeling, making little bits of memory stir up, so Christian leaned in and let her keep petting as Squeaks kept talking.

"Fortunately you had a hard head, even then. But Sergey got called to deal with a rogue and we left to help because it was a group, not a single. There were human hunters after them as well, so once we'd dealt with the problem we decided to separate and let the humans follow us while Sergey went back to you and Grisha."

"That was the winter he brought Dmitri home." Christian remembered that, even though he'd gotten flattened by a particularly nasty version of the winter sickness and spent most of the season feeling like he was going to cough his lungs out.

Christian felt his eyes sting again, and felt strong slim arms hugging him tighter. Dimitri had been
his brother. Grisha had been very firm that all their foundlings were brothers, they'd never picked up a sister for them, and Christian had a vague memory of asking for a sister as a small child. He still wasn't sure he understood the sad smile Sergey had given him when he'd said they couldn't promise.

“I know baby, I wish we could have made him happy.”

Christian just leaned into her and let the tears he'd held back for so long finally fall.

~0~

Jason winced when Christian broke down, but he knew that it was just a long delayed reaction to losing people he loved. Christian had been focused on finding Dimitri, and had shoved his grief for his foster fathers aside to keep to the task at hand.

That at least was in keeping with the man he'd been before. When recording Christian had been notorious for ignoring other things like food and sleep as trivialities until the work was done. Then he'd fall over. Sami and Theon both had been driven half mad by that habit and had retaliated by all but sitting on Christian and forcing him to eat or crawling in his lap and cuddling him until he fell asleep.

This was a needed thing, maybe now he'd be able to sleep through a night without rancid dreams.

It just hurt him to watch a man he'd loved like a brother grieving and know there wasn't a damned thing he could do to make things better.

~0~

Picking up the scavenging effort was a bit stilted with three new people. It didn't help that the trio had its own peculiar ways of dealing with things. Zombie's in particular.

Sami had felt like his heart was going to stop the first time he saw one chasing Levi into a dead end. Watching the small man bounce up the rubble and up the wall had his heart in his throat until Levi reached the relative safety of the top of the wall and he heard the heavy thump of Christian's crossbow.

Hearing Brian yell only helped a little, and Levi's cheerful comment that Christian was getting really good with his 'dart gun' had Sami dragging both men off where he could vent and not terrify Koira.

~0~

Levi squeaked.

Sami was scared and pissed and was damn well going to say his bit if the look on his face was anything to go by. Brian had a similarly freaked out look on his face, but the zombie had been a good bit faster than expected. Fast enough that it had gotten between he and Brian where their preferred confuse and distract tricks didn't work so well. He'd had to go for a wall and height just like the backup plan said to. But Sami and his team didn't know the regular plan, or any of the backups they had in place.

“If you stay with us, there are a few ground rules.”

Levi gulped and shut his mouth on the smart remark that had been bubbling up, Sami's face looked far too much like Brian's when he was freaked out.
“We teamwork, no crazy stunts, no running off without letting people know and for the love of god, no teasing the zombie's with no back up!”

Levi gulped and nodded.

“I didn't expect it to be so fast,” he offered meekly.

“And I slipped, or he would have had backup.” Brian hugged Levi tight, but didn't dispute anything Sami said.

How could they? Sami was right on all counts.

~0~

Sami still found looking into Brian's face a bit disconcerting, but when he saw that look in the man's blue eyes he knew somehow, somehow things had shifted.

“It's like in a troop, we work together, talk to each other. It's safer that way.” Brian's eyes shifted to something behind Sami, and Sami turned to see Squeaks her hands steady on a lighter version of Christian's heavy crossbow watching with wide worried eyes. Then he looked back and locked gazed with a pair of eyes just as serious as his own.

“It'll take some adjustment, but, we'd like to stay. If you'll let us.”

~0~

Theon had to get used to watching Squeaks working on Christian's tattoo, once she knew he was watching she tried to speak Trade rather than chattering at Christian in Ruski. But Theon learned that Koira and Kris both were using her as a way to help speed up how quickly they were gaining the language of their new neighbors.

He wanted to dislike her, but the more he watched the more he kind of liked her. He reminded him of a tech they'd had for their last tour, a girl who'd been raised by a single father with a horde of brothers.

A girl who was one of the guys.

He kept chewing on things in his mind as they worked at clearing the last of the underground mall and packing up what they found to carry home.

“Silly question,” she asked as they carefully sifted through what had been a jewelers storefront in search of bits of still usable metals. Most of what they found wasn't really all that useful now except as decoration to jewelry, and diamonds didn't have the cachet that they once had. Colored stones were far more popular now, and the double handful of dark blue tanzanites would get some serious interest from the northern miners. “Why are you picking up silver when so many of us are sensitive to it?” Squeaks paused and carefully set a few bits into a bag between them. “For that matter why are you guys picking up some of the stuff you are? You can't need a few hundred plain white bowls.”

He stopped and looked at her as she delicately picked slivers of twisted metal out of her hands and dropped them into the bag.

“Trade partly.”

She looked up and nodded.
“Our stock in trade was entertainment, so I get that. I figured that was why you grabbed all the stones and the gold.”

“The silver, we can use to desensitize our younger members.” Theon's eyes tracked over to where Brian had picked Koira up to have him search a higher alcove and to Christian who was grimacing at having found a deeper spot in the puddle he had been wading through and having gotten a partial ducking in feted water.

The look in her eyes when he looked back was sober.

“You're aware then. Good.”

That left him wondering, aware of what?

~0~

The wreckage of a curio shop got them a full set of apothecary jars, and a collection of odd sized singles that hadn't been broken, it also saw a gradual easing of the tension between Sami and Brian and a drop in the near hostility Theon showed Squeaks.

But as they were deciding they were done for this summer Janne dropped in with a warning about needing to get a move on for Summer Rites.

Sami had groaned. But it was important, and several of their tribes had clutches of youngsters ready for adulthood. Janne's words had necessitated a quick round of explanations to their new members for what exactly Rites were. But once the explanations were done Brian had nodded in easy understanding, and Levi had remarked that he had helped Squeaks sift through kids discretely when she was on her blood cycle.

That made things easier.

So after a quick run home they disbursed to tend to their people. Sami had mixed feelings about having the trio of entertainers back at Satama. On the one hand it was three more people who could help keep Jay fed, on the other if Theon beat him back it was that much time for Theon and Squeaks to get on each other's nerves.

But she, Brian and Levi were all Christian really had left that he could call family.

Sami sighed and hustled the horses as fast as they were willing to go.

Sooner out, sooner back.

~0~

Julian folded his arms and watched as Squeaks worked on Christian's tattoo. The outlines were clean, and they were working on filling in some open spaces.

The idea of using a knife like that gave him the willies, but Squeaks had told him the next best alternative was a row of teeny tiny spikes like the Japanese had used for traditional tattoo.

He'd rather she used slivers of flint. There at least she was using a fresh sliver every time, not sterile exactly, but a damn sight better than bits of bamboo or wood. It also helped that she regularly discarded slivers and chipped off fresh ones. Jason had explained the reasoning, and if it was something Jason was reasonably happy with Julian would accept it.
Julian had seen Risto getting a tiny glyph put on his arm in the traditional Japanese manner, it had been all he could do to not squirm and he hadn't been the one lying there with the artist going tap, tap, tap over him. Risto had said after that first traditional tattoo that he was perfectly happy getting the rest of his work done with a modern tattoo gun thanks very much. It was faster and hurt a lot less.

Christian was just lying on his belly with his head pillowed on his arms, looking like he was taking a nap except for the fact he was holding up his end of a conversation in soft Ruski with Squeaks.

Julian was just pleased he could keep up with their soft words, even if it sounded like inconsequential catch up chatter.

Theon still wasn't sure he liked Squeaks. Risto said it was jealousy of someone being close to his old friend and that given a bit of time he'd get over it. Julian couldn't see quite what he was jealous of given she was clearly and apparently quite happily attached to Brian and Levi.

Americans.

He hadn't thought about America in years upon years.

He wondered if they had done a better job of keeping technology than they had, not that any of the little group could say, they'd been in Russia when things had gone to hell.

Julian sighed softly and watched as Christian's new ink was wiped down first with just a clean bit of cloth and then with the solution Jason made to help prevent infections. Then the whole area was covered in the salve Jason made to keep infection at bay in deeper wounds, covered and bound neatly with a bit of linen bandage. Squeaks had a strange loom contraption hung on the wall of their wagon that let her weave a strip about twelve centimeters wide. Perfect for bandages or other narrow goods. Jason was looking at copying it to use with the cotton he spun and knitted into their bandages, he thought the woven would take less materials, though the knitted would probably be more absorbent.

It wasn't like they normally needed much of that sort of first aide though. But having supplies handy was always good, just in case they had another incident like poor Jay. Jason had used every bit of bandage they had on hand for his leg when he'd come in, and had to resort to boiling some of it for reuse. Julian knew it was safe, but the sight of those still slightly stained bits of cotton made him squirm inside. But Jason was working on making clean replacements, it just took time.

“We'll see how that looks in a few days and how much more work it needs.” Gentle hands gave Christian a shove. “Go play chase with your friend before he fidgets himself to death.”

Christian laughed and went in search of Theon, where he and Risto were off harassing the local population of small birds. Hunting Theon claimed, not that they were catching much of anything.

As she was cleaning up Julian ventured the question.

“How did you know Theon was fidgeting over Christian?”

That got him a low snort and a level green eyed stare.

“Any time the man is here he's glaring at me, worse if I'm being at all affectionate to Christof. I'm not blind, dense some days, but not blind.” She worked for a few more moments then gave Julian another unreadable look.

“I'm not going to steal his brother away. I love Christof dearly, but not the way Theon seems to
think. If we could have afforded to we'd have raised him as our own.”

That got Julian's curiosity well and truly roused and he moved a bit closer to sit on a rock beside her.

“How did you find him? I mean I know you three travel and do tricks and things, but how did you find Christian?”

Squeaks sighed and toyed with the bloodied rag she'd used on Christian's shoulder.

“We were part of a larger troop then, and were going between two towns on the group’s regular circuit when we found a few caravans that had been hit by hunters and all but burned out.” She looked down and stared at her hands for a moment. “The troop leader had us stop, partly to deal with the dead, partly to see if there was anything worth salvaging.”

“Looting?”

Squeaks winced but nodded as she looked up at him with sad green eyes.

“For all intents, yes. I heard him crying, this thin little baby noise, but Levi found him. We think he was around three. He was still so tiny and so frail and sick. He'd been shoved into a hiding spot under a bunk in one of the wagons and the hunters hadn't found him. He was covered in soot and smoke and his side was red and blistered but whoever had lived in that wagon had fireproofed it as best they could. Enough that when the hunters tried to set it on fire it didn't fully take.” Her eyes were haunted. “Some of the others weren't protected as well, and were still burning.”

Julian could see where this was going.

“You took him with you?”

The look he got was half indignant.

“We couldn't leave him. He was just a tiny baby.”

Julian winced and nodded his understanding.

“But if you took him, why didn't you keep him.”

The flash of pain made Julian wish he could take back the question. Clearly Squeaks had very badly wanted to keep baby Christian.

“We wanted to, gods how we wanted to keep him. But he wasn't getting better, with all the traveling we couldn't get him well and keep him well. We just couldn't risk losing him because we had to travel to make a living.”

Julian looked down at where Squeaks was wringing the rag into a tight twist.

“We knew Grisha and Sergey from before.” A vague gesture made Julian think 'before' might mean before things fell in. “And we knew they had a settled place, and a good living. They'd taken over the farm Sergey's family had outside Moscow and were stable and they kept taking in little ones that either had no family, or had family see the eye shine that means vampire or changer and freaked out and dumped them, and raising them. We took Christof to them and hoped they had space.” There was a watery smile.

“You didn't need to worry?”
“Gods no, Christof latched onto Sergey and had the poor man’s heart in his little hands right from the get go. We tried going back, got back about half the times we tried.” The smile came back. “We had miserable timing.”

Julian cocked his head inquisitively, now well aware that there were several people listening in.

“Every childhood illness known to man, if he had it we were trying to visit. Him falling out of one of the apple trees and breaking his arm, we were there just in time for Brian to pick him up and carry him home. Dmitri being brought in, Dmitri being sick, them being gone with Sergey on a trading or hunting trip. Him catching the worst forms of winter fever.” A helpless shrug. “We just had the worst timing.”

“He never dreamed of me?”

Julian jumped at Theon's voice. Squeaks, lived up to her name and squeaked before catching her breath and answering.

“I don’t know. When he was fevered and talking he'd sometimes speak in a language that wasn't Ruski and wasn't English or Trade. He’d call a name, or what we think was a name but if we woke him or asked later he'd never tell us anything.”

Theon's eyes sharpened and he lilted off a bit of the Soumi they used.

“Like that?”

Squeaks had him repeat himself, then nodded.

“Very like that, and the name Tosti, Torstig or something on those lines.”

Julian smiled as Theon went limp in relief.

“He missed me.”

~0~

Sami frowned.

Antti wasn't normally in his territory, but he'd come north with a group to trade with one of Sami’s northern mining groups.

That alone would have only raised his eyebrows a bit. Normally the Blue Mountain troop didn't come this far out of their territory unless something was drastically amiss. Normally they traded further south or even to the east with a group on the other side of the mountains.

But Antti came right to him and passed on a few things he heard from those groups that traded with them that were from further east.

More rumors of demons that spat fire as they hovered in the sky.

He wasn't sure quite what to make of that.

So he focused on his job and on making sure no zombies would pop up in the latest crop of young adults.

But it nagged at him in the back of his mind.
Chriss nodded as Sami outlined what Antti had told him.

“We’d been hearing rumors like that for the last what? “ Levi looked at Brian and Squeaks. “Ten, twelve years? Something like that. The further south and west we got the fewer times we’d hear about it.”

Sami’s eyes narrowed as the rest of the Hunt shifted in echo of their internal nerves.

“What were you hearing?”

“Something about a fire spitting or fire breathing demon or dragon that could fly. Some folks claimed it would creep up on bad folks and just wipe them out. Others claimed it would take out anyone out in the open at certain time of the year. Times varied a bit, but it was always in summer or fall, not winter or spring like you would think. Nothing that was solid enough where you could just go check. Never anyone seeing it with their own eyes, always someone's cousin's brother who knew someone kind of thing. Always something where you couldn't explain away the missing people by a normal natural disaster or running out of food over a bad winter.” Levi shrugged, clearly not thinking what he knew was all that significant, but it only made Sami's uneasiness grow.

“But Levi, several traveling troops stopped going north and east because of the rumors,” Squeaks protested.

“But we don't know why, Squeaky girl. What was that science saw you used to use on us?”

Squeaks groaned but answered promptly.

“Correlation does not equal causation. It's still suspicious. Some of those places were still somewhat industrialized.”

“And the demon descriptions still sound an awful lot like a helicopter,” agreed Birdie.

“But who would have a working helicopter after all this time? You said the most you ever saw was farming towns, not what we'd call real heavy industry.” protested Risto.

Sami listened to the Hunt hashing things over.

It left him with a very bad feeling.

~0~

Risto let out a low snort.

He was watching the three acrobats training. Most of the things they did looked awkward and uncomfortable, others just made him scratch his head.

Some made him gape in wonder and others made him laugh and if he'd been single playing with a girl as flexible as Squeaks was would have been fun. But he wasn't single, she wasn't either and if Risto was being honest with himself he wasn't really all that interested.

Brian doing something called a 'kong' over what was left of the low wall between the walkway and the waterfall for one. And he'd been moving at a gradually increasing speed when he'd pulled the move.

He heard the whoop then a strangled 'ohhh shit' followed by a loud splash.
stopped short of the wall and were peering over it with expressions of concern until Brian surfaced and yelped about the water being cold.

Laughing at the big man being as much of a goof as Sami sometimes was made for a nice distraction.

But so did helping Koira haul in wild grains and other edibles. And watching Sami being protective of Koira as they all helped their collection of Ruski settle in. Some of the girls kept trying to convince Koira to try the pleasures found with women, but he was still blushing, freezing up and hiding behind his hair or behind Sami. It was kind of cute.

It was a little odd to have a group so accustomed to vampires, and to having them be very up front about what they wanted when any of the Hunt visited. Nice, but odd to have pretty girls coming up with full knowledge that they would get nibbled on in exchange for pleasure.

He had to stifle another snort.

Jay had been floored when one girl had decided she was going to work her way through all the vampires in the Hunt and showed up on their proverbial door step and started with a confused but willing Larry and went after him second.

Apparently it was something of an accepted practice for a girl to get some experience with a 'Nightwalker' before she was considered available for marriage. Not required by any means, but not something that would get a girl disowned by her family. And given vampires and changers couldn't get a girl pregnant and none of the nastier sexually transmitted diseases could be passed on by either it was fairly safe. Jason had had to consult with Olma once on a yeast infection issue, as they could still carry that little problem. But it was easy enough to clear up and the old midwife had been terribly amused, and Theon had gotten ribbed mercilessly when he wasn't allowed to play with anyone until Jason was sure the problem was really cleared up.

Jay had very little control yet over his powers, he was improving, but until he mastered things he tended to make the girls who came to visit him so wobbly from intense and repeated orgasms that they couldn't be allowed to just ride home until they'd recovered.

It added to their reputation as a hospitable group, not that they had anyone else to really extend hospitality to other than the occasional runner.

He didn't remember having so much trouble, but then again when he’d been just starting out he was feeding off of Sami, and Sami had been good at hiding what he'd felt then.

He wasn't so good now, that or Risto had just gotten better at reading Sami's silent moods.

And right now that mood was worry.

~0~

Gregor panted in shock and a little terror. His home Hunt was burning. Igor had been a right bastard of a Hunt leader, but he’d been old, stubborn and set in his ways. Being a bit of a bastard tending to ride with those factors. But he'd been a strong and stable leader.

He hadn't deserved to burn alive.

None of the Hunt had.

He curled up in a tighter ball and watched, trying not to listen to carefully to the sounds of screams
under the roaring flames.

Trying not to think about how everyone he knew was either running for their lives or burning to death in the inferno that was their Sanctuary. Trying to not think about how the younger members were trading one death for a second slower one as they were far too young to be able to withstand even the mild sun of spring, never mind the strong sun of summer.

~0~

“Delta Six, the nest is burning, repeat, the nest is burning.”

The pilot grimaced at the words of his communications expert and watched as a few desperate individuals scrambled and ran for cover.

His orders hadn't included taking out individuals, so he and his teams were ignoring them. Unlike what he'd been seeing from Delta Four. Merchausen, the team leader, came from a Purist family and was an asshole besides. He had his door gunner taking out singles running away, no regards as to if they were vamp, changer or plain old human with a bad case of wrong place, wrong time.

The fifty cal that served as the door gun for most of the helo's was just plain overkill on a human shaped body, and strictly speaking wasn't allowed under the Convention's. Not that that little detail slowed Merchausen down any. He'd gotten away with it before claiming he'd thought he'd seen a zombie. A fifty was about all that would take out a zombie without trying. And given Merchausen's bird had a nasty mix of incendiary and explosive round mixed in with the tracers and standard hollow point 'knock down' rounds, yeah. Those poor bastards that were getting targeted didn't have a chance.

He just hoped they all died quick. Otherwise they'd be in for hell when the sun rose, especially the vamps.

He didn't much care for the orders to find major nests of vampires and take them out. But orders were orders. And so far they'd always been able to delay and see what kind of a group the nests were.

So far he wasn't losing too much sleep over the burnings. But he also wouldn't cry to much if someone on Four fragged Merchausen. He had a shitty habit of 'losing' converted parts of his team.

The smaller groups of vampires seemed to be taking a more protective attitude toward the normal humans around them. So they'd been able to keep Merchausen on a leash as far as command was concerned. Vamps and changers acting in a protective fashion were to be considered like the converted in the Alliance and left for the follow up ground troops to deal with.

This group had been rather domineering, and had taken in a group of weeping normals, clearly as some sort of tithe, so they needed to go. A half dozen Sunfire's shot into their home-place right before dawn fixed the problem rather nicely. Just sucked balls that they weren't allowed to go in after the 'tithed' humans.

A dozen kids would be considered 'acceptable corollary casualties', made him feel a bit sick.

But they'd wait and see how things went as they moved west.

~0~

Mikko rested a hand on the shoulders of the teams' werewolf and kept an eye out for trouble. He didn't expect any, but carelessness got people dead.
He had no desire to get dead at this point in the game, and he had no desire to take Frosti with him. He just wished that the unofficial field policy wasn't to euthanize a were if their vampire partner got taken out. Back in the states Frosti would get the chance to re-bond, out in the field if anything happened to Mikko it would be a silver bullet to the brain. At least it would be as long as they were part of Merchausen's team. Any other team and Frosti would have a chance, but not with that purist snot head in charge.

Frosti had a Lineage back home to look after, even if they weren't his kids exactly. The Tribe still lived on. Mikko's fingers stroked over a darker patterned patch of fur on the dark brindle shoulder. On skin the mark was plainly visible; Mikko wore a similar mark and had since Frosti's collection of misfit family had accepted him.

Well, more jumped him in really. Not that Mikko was complaining, it felt too good to have family again.

One of four founding runner families, the first four: Tempest, Tribe, Rogue, and Miami. The best runners and trackers. The best at finding the hidden and getting into impossible places and then getting back out again. Each one headed up by an original member, someone who dated back to before the Fall.

Frosti had handed over Head duties to Skipper as he did his round of obligatory service.

Some great wit had decided that as they'd finally found a gene therapy that would mostly curb the appearance of the zombie gene that it was time to sweep the rest of the planet and start over.

North and South America had been relatively easy. Weather had kept what had been Russia to a crawl but the teams that swept down through China and over toward India and Africa were having it easier. Not easy by any stretch of the imagination, but at least their progress could be measured at more than one hundred kilometers in any given sweep season. Though the India and Africa sweeps were being very careful to cover coastline areas first. Inland there weren't nearly as many people.

They'd learned not to do much beyond scouting in winter with any of the teams. The first winter after hoping the Bering Strait had been devastatingly nasty and cost them a full flight of twelve helo's, support staff and crews. It had taken over a decade to get that toe hold of a base put back in place. Now they were much more careful.

He'd heard rumors that the group that had made the long trip down toward Australia had met up with a similarly advanced government, one that had a good chunk of what had been Indonesia and the surrounding pinprick islands held safe, but so far he'd not been able to confirm anything. If it was true the Powers would keep things under wraps as best they could until a formal treaty was in place.

Mikko hoped it would be a formal treaty; he really didn't like the idea of fighting against fellow human beings.

It was bad enough having to play exterminator to vampires and changers gone predatory.

~0~

Sami squinted up into the winter sky, summer had passed all too quickly as usual and they were back to harvesting ice blocks so they'd have ice next summer.

Koira was circling above them idly hunting even though he'd only stooped a few times at the birds Julian and Levi had been flushing out. A few ptarmigan really didn't feed as large a group as they
had become.

Chriss and Jason had come back up from a fast turn down the coastline over what had been Birdie's old territory and Chriss had immediately gone in and fed Jonne and Jay and done a bit of updating to the map.

Birdie, Adam and Bailey had been saddened but un-surprised at the population shift. The few more inland groups were doing alright, but several of the more coastal groups had been all but wiped out due to contamination of their food supplies.

They'd tried to warn them, but hadn't had any luck. It was just depressing.

Sami jolted out of his thoughts when Koira plummeted and there weren't any other birds in the air for him to be chasing after.

Risto yelped and had to be snatched back from the edge of the open space in the lake where he'd just cut another block of ice free, and he grinned sheepishly at Christian's crack about not being a good time of year to go swimming. They had a sauna tent set up on the ice, but hadn't yet started firing it up, so anyone who got wet would be very cold by the time they got back home to the stone walled sauna down by the hot springs.

But then they were all looking at Koira as he did an abrupt wing over and plummeted for the lake surface.

“Runner coming, and coming fast.”

Theon frowned and did some quick counting in his head.

“That's odd.”

Levi cocked his head just as Brian asked the question.

“Odd why?”

Julian answered after chewing his lip a bit. Sami was more focused on wrangling the loose ice block Risto had lost.

“We just had the usual runner through last winter. We don't normally see one more than every second or third year.”

“They just picking up the schedule,” asked Brian as he reached out with one of the longer poles and tried to help Sami catch the wayward ice block.

“Doubtful. But we'll see. Damnit Risto, you let go of the damn thing you could help catch it again.”

~0~

Frosti huffed and watched the ground fly under his feet. Mikko had his hands steady on the door gun and was idly watching the terrain as well.

The further west they went the fewer rogue nests there were. That was good in that the forward flights could move slightly faster. This last season they'd managed to push the line of occupied territory almost two hundred kilometers at the furthest point. Scouts like them were further out, but they were still doing far better this year than they had for the last ten. On the good side they'd
pushed out into completely unknown territory right off when they'd been given clearance to get back in the sky.

It was also bad in that the people on the ground panicked even more when they saw any of the helicopters. It made life rather more lively than necessary for the ground teams that were following to ensure all the people they found had the proper inoculations.

But it was interesting in that the further west they went the fewer clutches of zombies there were. Not that Mikko was unhappy to see fewer of the things, it made parking a helo a night a damn sight safer. Further complicating things was the rumor of a recall of all flights. Spring was only just rolling over the area, and back home the expected issues with flooding and mud slides were rearing their ugly heads. Three years ago they'd only just started sweeping out and had to abandon everything to go back and do rescue ops for areas that had literally been washed away under miles of water and feet of heavy black mud.

He just had a bad feeling about the smug looks Merchausen kept shooting him and his partner. So to keep from snarling at the bastard he checked his gear.

~0~

Merchausen kept smiling at him. It gave Mikko a creepy feeling.

They were due to put down and drop a forward ground scout.

He and Frosti were up on the rotation.

Merchausen had been getting snotty about equipment on the scouts, trying to keep them from carrying the mandatory long wave radio and solar charging systems in favor of the lighter short waves.

Short waves that were piss useless if there wasn't anyone within five kilometers to hear you. Short waves like the other three converted pairs he'd 'left behind in secure areas to go deal with an emergency' and lost had been carrying due to 'equipment shortages'.

Equipment shortages that didn't exist, but always seemed to pop up when Merchausen wanted to drop a converted scout team.

It made him glad he was good buddies with the guys in supply, and had one of the newer, smaller long wave radios tucked in his pack. It had an effective range of over fifty kilometers and a low level satellite ping, which would give him a chance of raising someone if things went to hell. And they'd find their bodies if things really went pear shaped. A casual glance at the thing and it looked like one of the short waves; it was small enough to pass. He also had the locked com codes for Delta Six, Delta Nine and Alpha One-Nine-One. If he got the big surveillance planes they could bounce to anyone on this side of the Northern Hemisphere. The satellites were piss useless for actual conversation anymore. And it was hard to put up new ones to replace the old one that were falling out of the sky.

His gut froze when the order to put down to drop a scout pair came over his headphones. He could hear the channel bleed chatter that made him think a recall order might be coming very shortly.

A look over at Frosti and he knew the werewolf shared his misgivings. A decent commander would hold out for a couple days to keep from dropping a team if they thought a recall was coming.

Pity they didn't have a decent commander.
But they were setting down and Merchausen was asking did they have a radio. Mikko took a risk and quickly waved his long wave at his team leader. He'd buried the box with the solar recharge equipment in the bottom of his pack, and hoped Merchausen wouldn't decide to order a gear check before dropping them. Normally he didn't as gear checks took for freaking ever on a good day.

This wasn't looking like a good day.

The feral gleam in the man’s eyes made his stomach drop. But he shrugged into his pack and hopped out of the helicopter and reached back for the secondary gear pack as Frosti hopped out and began moving toward cover.

Mikko barely had their gear clear before Delta Four was shooting back up into the sky and east away from the clearing they'd been dropped in.

But he concentrated on catching up to Frosti and tried to ignore the bad feelings lurking in the back of his mind.

A pair of somber brown eyes met his as he cleared the tree line.

“You got a bad feeling about this.”

“Like you wouldn't believe. They hauled ass out of here too fast for this to be anything other than a deliberate ditch attempt.” Mikko agreed grimly.

“Bastard. I'd hope they went down in flames but that would be a waste of a good pilot.”

Mikko smiled wanly.

~0~

When Delta Six heard the formal recall order they were close enough to Delta Four to hear the pilot ask about retrieving the forward scout team they had just put down.

Close enough to hear Merchausen blow off the question with a crack about how the team could do their job and be picked up later.

It gave the whole crew a bad feeling.

The last three times Merchausen had left a team down they’d been lost. One team they'd found, dead, at their designated pickup point. The vampire had been curled protectively around his changer partner and clutching a short wave radio. They'd frozen to death.

When Merchausen made a crack about the pair had a short wave to yell for help their blood went to ice.

Command got a flurry of reports as each man on Delta Six as an individual went in and reported Merchausen for abandonment of crew in hostile territory. Several men from Delta Four filed complaints as well, under the Section Nine code of anonymity.

But by then they couldn't go back and pick up the converted team of Red Elk and Zernow. They had the expected flooding mess to pick up after and the more pleasant disruptions of negotiating with another big, and mostly friendly power.

~0~

Brian laughed at Levi where he was teaching Jonne some basic tumbling. Well he had been and
they'd come in for something to eat and Levi had started showing off by walking on his hands on the top of the little wall between the walkway and the drop down into the plunge pool under the waterfall.

He'd wobbled on a section that stepped down. When Brian laughed Levi shot him a dirty look.

“Who konged over this and went for a swim?”

“That would be me,” Brian teased back with a smile as Levi flipped back to his feet and landed safely on the walkway. “And for the record that water was really damned cold.”

“You're a wuss,” Levi jabbed, then his eyes went round and Brian rushed him and scooped him up in his arms.

“‘Really?’” Brian grinned impishly and held Levi over the drop.

Levi's eyes went gratifyingly round.

“Shit!”

“Have a nice swim,” teased Brian as he heaved Levi out over the middle of the pool.

Levi let out a gratifying shriek as he adjusted to hit the water feet first, when he came up shaking his head to clear the water away he heard a loud yell and yelped as Brian landed near where he was treading water.

“I thought you loved us!” Levi called up at Squeaks as she laughed down at them both.

“I do! Geronimo!”

Levi yelped and swam backwards and Brian swore and lunged out of the way as Squeaks flipped off the wall and dropped in between them.

He could heard Jonne commenting to someone else that they were out of their bloody minds and had to laugh.

Sanity was overrated anyway.

~0~

Jason sighed and sat down with Sasha to try and explain things. One of his people had seen Squeaks while running a trap line and panicked. He'd been handy helping Olma train the young woman who was going to be her replacement and had stepped in to try and help Sasha calm the half hysterical hunter.

“The leopard is one of our people.”

“But, but it was female. Nightwalkers are men, always men.”

Jason grimaced.

“Squeaks, well, she's one of a kind.” It was weak, and from the sidelong look Sasha gave him it sounded weak even to their ears. Jason just shrugged and continued. “She’s like us in that she's an old one. Back before there were a few people who were both male and female, as far as we know she’s the only one left.”
“She can breed and bear?” asked Dunja as she brought out a tray of cold sliced meat, assorted pickles and some of yesterday’s bread.

It took a moment before her words made sense to Jason, but then he shook his head.

“Before none of them could do either. No children at all from any of them.”

Dunja sighed and shook her head sadly, and had the slowly calming hunter and Sasha both looking at her like she’d lost her mind.

“That's a sadness then, to be a woman and know that you can never give your husband a child. She did have a husband yes?’

Jason shared a look with Sasha and got a mute shrug in answer, so he took a moment to carefully frame his answer.

“She's lucky in that regard, both her husbands survived and are still with her.” He wasn't about to try and say that Squeaks was only with one of her two men. Levi was devious and Brian was as stubborn as Sami on a bad day. The two could be wickedly inventive when it came to pranks.

“Both? She's got two husbands? Were women so rare in their homeland?”

The hunter let out a low snort about how he wouldn't share his wife that way with any man and Jason had to smile. He'd rather not share Chriss with anyone that way either, but at least he knew the girls Chriss taught and slept with in the name of Rites weren't any threat.

Chriss always came home to him. Even when he'd taken a bad fall trying to help find some lost children who had wandered away from their tribe he'd still tried to come home. Sami had been livid and Jason had wound up being sat on by Brian, Janne and Christian as he'd almost had hysterics when he saw how swollen Chriss knee had been and heard his feverish babblings.

It had taken a bit before he'd calmed down enough to be a proper medic. Thank all the gods that Squeaks had some skills to bring to the party, she'd been able to start treating Chriss' fever while Jason calmed down.

“I think it was less there not being women and more that they work well together. We can't sire children either, so it's better to have a partner with no illusions.”

That brought him a faint twinge of pain and from the sudden winces of understanding he hadn't been able to hide it. In the early days they'd had another group settle near them. A much smaller group than this one, and they had been much closer. He and Sami and even Julian had briefly taken partners from that group. Then they’d learned vampires and changers were sterile. Learned the hard way that they would outlive any normal human and been forced to watch as people they loved grew old and died.

That group hadn't lasted all that long. A few generations and the few survivors had picked up and gotten assimilated into a wandering tribe.

The memories still hurt.

A bit of ruckus from the doors had them all looking up, but Jason had to smile as Koira bounced in with cheerful greetings and his hands full of the satchel he could carry as a wolf.

“I have those herbs for Olma like you asked for.” He said with a smile as he dropped down to sit.
Jason suddenly had an idea and grinned impishly at Sasha, whose eyes went round for a moment before he began to smile as well.

“Koira, could you do a quick search for Squeaks and when you find her come back here with her?”

The hunter let out a strangled sound, but kept his protests mostly behind his teeth when he saw the looks Sasha and Dunja were giving him.

Koira nodded instantly and after a few soft words was back outside.

~0~

“Jason wants what?”

Koira winced at how shrill Squeaks voice went, but he dutifully repeated the request. Squeaks abruptly sat down with a low groan.

“That's what I thought I heard you say. Has he lost his ever-loving mind? No.” She held up a hand. “Don't answer that, I'm sure he's got a method to his madness. Just I can't fly away if things go pear shaped here.”

Koira cocked his head at her odd turn of phrase, but when she explained it he had to giggle. It was a very apt description. Eventually she nodded and shifted back to her cat form as it could cover ground in the woods behind the new settlement faster than her human one.

~0~

Sasha boggled at first when he saw the familiar pale gold wolf shape trotting in with a leopard jogging beside it. Like all the Nightwalker allies the cat was solid and healthy and had an eerie quality to how it moved.

When the pair got closer Sasha saw the leopard’s spots had a distinct red cast to them and that the cat’s eyes were green rather than the gold he expected.

Then the cat shifted and Sasha boggled.

That was quite clearly a woman. Not that any of the women here would ever dress as this one did. Her breasts might be small but they were only just covered by a snug halter type top that left her shoulders and arms bare. Her trousers were fitted to slim hips then flared loosely around her legs to gather down tightly at the ankles. And her hair was a red that made him think back to his mother’s warning about temper.

“You yelled Jase?”

Sahsa gulped. This woman was nothing like his own people. She was as forward and direct as a man.

And she spoke Ruski with the fluid lilt of a native.

Jason just grinned and tugged Yuri out and the poor hunter looked both shocked and a bit frightened.

Seeing him though made the woman wince.

“Oh bother. So much for herding sheep and not getting seen.”
Sasha gaped, if Yuri and several other men in earshot hadn’t also been gawping like fools he’d have felt a bit more embarrassed about it.

“Herding sheep?” asked Koira with an inquisitive tip of his head.

Jason just looked supremely amused.

The woman sighed and looked up at the sky. And muttered something that sounded like ‘no good dead going unpunished’ but that made no sense. Then she levelled a glare at Jason.

“It was your idea.”

Jason started laughing. That cryptic comment also appeared to resolve Koira's confusion as he began giggling.

Yuri just gulped and tried very hard not to stare at the creamy gold skin of the woman's belly.

“Sorry Squeaks, Yuri just saw you and was justifiably a bit concerned about a big cat in the area.”

What sort of name was Squeaks, Sasha wondered. At least she didn't seem offended the Yuri had been worried, she just grimaced and let out a resigned sounding sigh.

“He's got good reason to be.” She pointed up toward the higher hills. “There's a mountain lion or something like it up in the hills. It caught scent of me and looked like it was shifting its territory over more, but its good he's being careful.”

Sasha blinked and shared a concerned look with Yuri. That was something they hadn't known, but now that they did they could be more cautious.

“But herding sheep?” asked Yuri as his eyes kept tracking back to all that pale skin on display.

“Jason's idea.” Squeaks said stoutly. “To help give you a chance to catch the dratted things. I've been spooking ewes down where your folk can see them. Hard to build a good herd when you can't catch the things alive.” Squeaks stopped and leveled a look at Yuri. “Oh for crying out loud... I'm a girl. Get over it.”

Sasha couldn't contain the snicker. A soft comment from Ivan had him doubling over laughing.

‘No wonder’ indeed. This woman would drive one husband to an early grave, having two just evened the odds a bit.

~0~

Frosti swore and grabbed for the kid. He’d been doing a bit of a run and all but tripped over him.

Poor kid was way too damn skinny and was clearly scared half stupid as he struggled to keep Frosti away with a broken branch.

“Frosti?”

Frosti yelped and ducked as the branch was swung at his head. Clumsy swing or not if that had hit it would have really hurt.

“Bit busy Mik.” he called back as he ducked again.

“Ah, so I see.” Frosti would have rolled his eyes as Mikko started running down the list of
languages he knew trying to find something that the kid would answer to.

At least now he was starting with what some of the locals seemed to use when talking to other groups. Pity there were so damn many variations. He kept ducking and dodging while Mikko chattered away and hoped the kid’s hysterical energy would run dry before either of them got hurt.

He blinked when Mikko finally got a response.

“Yes, what?”

Mikko just snarled some words that Frosti only knew because Mikko swore in those languages pretty consistently.

“He thinks we're demons.”

“What?” The split second of distraction almost got Frosti clubbed, but he was able to duck at the last moment.

The kid over swung and Mikko pounced and grabbed him where he couldn't menace Frosti anymore.

“I didn't stutter, shit.” Mikko started up again in the language the kid had responded to, and got even more hysterical chatter back from him.

“Demons.” Frosti let out a rude snort and got the stick out of the kid’s hands. He just let out a dismayed hiss as how hot the kid’s skin was. “Shit, he's burning up. Sonova!” Frosti recoiled and just missed having the jaws of a terrified wolf snap shut on his face.

Mikko swore and buried both hands in the fur ruff on the youngsters neck trying to keep him pinned as Frosti shifted and did a bit of rough wolf discipline.

A moment later and the youngster was back in human shape, cowering, sobbing and begging brokenly for his life.

Frosti shifted back and shared a grim look with Mikko before he ran for their packs and the medical kits in them.

~0~

Mikko watched over the kid through the night. But everything they had on them wasn't enough to get his fever down.

Frosti had found a stream and they tried using the cool water to pull the fever out of the poor kid. That worked for a little while, but they were steadily losing ground.

At least all the effort Mikko put into talking to the kid had finally started calming him down. He wasn't begging for his life at least.

Then the convulsions started.

Within hours he was beyond anything they could hope to do. Mikko was pretty sure he was beyond anything a level three medical team could do.

They found a small notch in the stone of the hill and carefully laid the poor kid to rest in it.

They didn't even know the kids name.
It was a long time before they could bring themselves to leave the area and pick up with their work.

~0~

Chriss listened carefully when one of the girls he'd just pulled aside to complete Rites as she whispered her fears about flying fire demons.

For one what she told him was a lot more detailed than the third and fourth hand accounts they'd gotten before. And the 'demon' she saw had spat out two men rather than fire before shooting back into the sky and flying back east at high speed. She'd been with her brother going up into the nearer mountains as he courted a girl from one of the tribes there and they'd seen and heard the demon as it hovered like a dragonfly, landed and took off again.

For another this was far closer than any rumors had placed the flying nightmares.

Her description sounded a lot like some sort of attack helicopter, she even described a thocka thocka noise that reminded him of the noises rotors made.

Chriss distracted the poor girl, completed his check to be sure she wasn't a zombie in waiting and went over the usual short checklist of things they all went over with any girls they worked with.

Then he tracked down her brother and asked some pointed questions.

It confirmed his feeling that whatever these flying demons were they looked and acted like helicopters. It had hovered down into a clearing, and two men had hoped out of the side and scurried for cover then hovered back up out of the clearing and moved off, going back to the east.

That meant someone somehow had hung onto advanced technology, and from the way the man described the eerie silence of the monster as it flew away, had clearly not only hung onto things but had made advancements. It had only made rotor sounds as it hovered back up at speed.

He described the two men being spat out. One with short dark hair the other with long blond and how they had been dressed in something that made them vanish into the trees.

He'd said they had nothing that looked like a proper weapon to him, just oddly shaped clubs, but that they'd had packs. 

Chriss had thought quietly for a long time after he'd let the young man go. Just because he didn't recognize a weapon didn't mean much. A rifle really didn't look like anything more dangerous than a club, so they were probably armed rather nastily for the area. Then he went outside the camp and set up three small but very smoky fires in a neat triangle and waited for Koira or Janne to come and see what had sent up the smoke. Sami needed to know about this.

~0~

Frosti let out a low harrumph noise as he scanned the horizon with his binoculars.

Mikko didn't even look up from where he was tending a spitted rabbit over their small fire.

“Anything interesting out there?”

“Signal fires. Down on the plains, and some sort of a flyer moving at speed.”

Mikko spun on his haunches and looked up at him.

“Seriously? What kind of flyer.”
“Red tail hawk I think.” Frosti offered the binoculars when Mikko bounded up beside him.

“Red tails aren't...”

“Native, I know. And it's huge.”

Mikko took the binoculars and looked through them, adjusting as Frosti had for maximum magnification.

“I'll be damned. Frosti, that flier is a changer.”

“Millhouse was an avian changer.”

“Millhouse was blonder than me. This guy has darker hair.” Mikko handed the binoculars back so Frosti could confirm.

“Fuck. So much for finding any of our missing guys.”

“Frosti. I think we have to worry more about our short term gone indefinite scouting mission problem.”

“Merchausen is a fucking bastard. You get that last beacon set?”

Mikko smiled at the change in direction.

“Yes. Got a general distribution on the population near it too. So the imuno guys have a clue what they need.”

“You find it weird that we don't see many zombie's out here?”

“Yes.” Mikko squinted in the general direction of the fading black smoke. “Next to no zombies, no vamps that I can identify as being vamps and only the one changer kid.”

“And he was sick and scared stupid of us. So no threat,” agreed Frosti grimly.

“If this is normal, why are we even out here? East I could see, with those predatory groups, but here?”

“Here is a weird ass mix, some hunter gathering and some farming. And some of the farming is pretty damn advanced.”

Mikko nodded, but they'd had this discussion before.

“I wonder what our changer friend was doing.”

Frosti nodded.

“Maybe we need to go find out.”

~0~

“Boss, we got another Phelinger ping.”

Syn carefully circled the big Steagler aircraft back around in a big circle over the area.

“Anything interesting on it Zachy?”
Zack focused carefully on his boards, then his face lit up in a grin.

“We got a population grid for the imuno guys, with some language and culture stuff. It's got Mikko's tags on it and a warning that the grid is a guesstimate, and may be short.”

Syn narrowed his eyes and got his bird back on her proper flight path, he let out a soft snort. Mik's guesstimates were pretty damn good, the imuno guys had never run short using the standard round up and add ten percent trick with Mik's numbers. Other scouts didn't do so well and made life rather interesting.

“So our 'lost and can't be retrieved' boys are still active down there and doing their damn job. Merchausen finally nailed his own coffin shut. Gone native my fat white ass. Sling it home Zachy, the more the brass has the better.”

“Slinging all the shit all the way home, “Zach sing songed back.

“Zachy?”

“Yeah Syn?”

“Don't make me come back there.”

Syn sighed when the only answer he got was a giggle. He just wished he could take his bird down and pick up Mikko and Frosti, no more of this 'lost' and 'gone native' bullshit. But this bird was a bitch to get airborne again if he put her down in the field, she needed a long semi flat field to act as runway. And what looked nice and flat from the air was often anything but once you'd landed and it was too late.

~0~

Sami winced at Janne's report on what Chriss had learned.

Someone had survived with tech intact. That someone was now leapfrogging west. Why? God only knew.

“We need to find those two that the helicopter dropped.”

Janne nodded and there were sounds of agreement all around.

“We can start running that way and do more careful sweeps. We know the area better than any outsider and will be able to herd them.”

Sami gave Risto a wry look.

“Like we herded Brian, Levi and Squeaks? Risto, we need to be more careful than that.”

Risto winced, but listened as Sami continued.

“But you're right we do need more people out there. Jay, can you manage on your own for a while?”

Jay winced but nodded.

“I think so, if I can't I'll send up smoke for Janne and Koira and they can come back.”

Koira spoke up.
“We need to warn Sasha and his people. So they don't worry.”

Sami winced again.

“We don't have much to tell them Koira. But go ahead and fly out to let them know that we'll be mostly out of Satama and what smoke to send up if they need help.”

Koiranodded and scampered to get three small pouches of the mix Jason made to add to a fire to help it send up thick black smoke.

Sami rubbed his eyes and settled down to sketch a map and make plans.

~0~

Sami swore under his breath. Whoever they were tracking was being very careful to stay hidden. They'd been able to find the area the pair had been dropped in, but only because Janne had seen cleanly chopped branches on trees way too far up in the canopy to have been done by humans.

They'd found a few camp sites, mostly by evidence of the tiny fires that were left behind.

One spot they'd clearly stayed longer, and Chriss was grim faced when he said he knew why.

Up in a notch of the hills, buried under a heavy heap of stones was a body. Written on a sheltered bit of the stone wall was a short eulogy of sorts for a young male changer who had died of a fever.

What left Sami heavily uneasy was the words were left in English, Ruski based trade and Soumi.

~0~

Mata screamed when he came face to muzzle with a large dark wolf.

He expected to get mauled as he back-pedaled frantically into the creek to splash in an undignified sprawl on his butt in the water.

But the wolf just laid his ears back, let out a huff and backed away, then it turned and trotted off.

When the Wise Ones who had come hunting for the glimpsed spirits in the woods they found him safe if soggy and rattled.

They also found something that confirmed the wolf was no wolf.

There were strangely patterned footprints in the mud, ones that went from man shaped tracks walking in into wolf shaped tracks running out.

~0~

“I think we're getting hunted Mik.” Frosti hated bringing it up, but after that last kid he'd tripped over getting water it couldn't be put off anymore.

The haunted look he got back made his stomach drop.

“You too?”

Not good, a thousand kinds of not good. That meant Mikko was seeing, hearing and sensing things that were setting his instincts jangling too. He'd hoped Mikko's restless sleep would calm as they dropped down toward the plains, clearly it was getting worse.
The only way he knew to fix this was to catch a flight back home.

Not fucking likely.

~0~

“Still just the two?” asked Sami and Risto nodded.

“They’ve moved down a bit, closer to Chriss’ tribes now. But they seem to be staying where there is good cover.”

Peregrine nodded, but he was one of the best scouts Koira's old tribe had nowadays.

“The spirits appear to be trying to avoid contact with us Wise One. Eva saw the wolf but it ran from her at the river and no one has seen the other one, but we did find these at a place that looked like there had been fire for the night.”

Sami took the carefully collected strands from the scout.

Blond hair.

Long fine blond hair. Longer than Jonne or Koira's for certain and not the right color for either. Blonds weren't terribly common in this region, blonds like Koira were usually transplanted foundlings or the blond was significantly darker than his white gold or the wheat gold of the strands in his hands.

It seemed odd for the two they were stalking to have one with hair this long. But Perigrine's brown braids weren't much shorter, so perhaps it was a personal thing.

“How long ago was there fire there?” asked Theon as he paced in little circles behind Sami.

“Not long Wise One, three days at most.”

Sami shared a long look with Risto, and rose.

“Let’s see if we can't cut that three days to none.”

~0~

Mikko was glad Frosti was in his canine form when he looked up from a set of footprints leading away from an area thick with mushrooms that looked like ones that could be edible and found them surrounded by sober faced men with long spears.

“Oh joy, this can't be good.” He took a deep breath and managed a wobbly sort of half smile as he lifted his hands away from the sling his rifle was on and held them up in what he hoped was still a universal sign of non-hostile intent. He hadn't heard anything to make him think that there was anyone out here but them. From how still Frosti was he hadn't heard anything with his sharper canine ears.

That implied a number of things that frankly scared the crap out of him.

The looks on the faces around them didn't change, but several of the younger men adjusted their grips on their spears. Something that was not comforting to him at all was that each spear had a wicked sharp metal looking point longer than his hand and a solid looking metal cross guard a couple hand-spans back from the base of the point.
Boar spears, the kind of thing every group Mikko had seen seemed to have on hand for defending against zombies.

They'd work just as well on him and Frosti as they would on a zombie, and neither of them was as stupid.

So he tried to talk his way out.

The first dozen languages he tried didn't get any response, then he tried what the locals east of here called Trade, a polyglot of English, Russian and a few other Slavic languages.

That got him narrowed eyes.

So he kept trying in that and variations of it.

Then a snort came from behind him and a voice spoke up in what was now called Ruski, and he could recognize it as a form of Russian spoke up.

“Oh shut up. All you’re doing is annoying them by jabbering in something they don't understand.”

Mikko sighed, but didn't turn to face the speaker. A sudden move could get him stabbed with a spear.

“I'd rather talk than get skewered thanks.” he answered in the same language.

The speaker snorted again and moved around where Mikko could see him.

Mikko felt his knees come undone and was abruptly kneeling in the dirt. This man was familiar, the same square face and sharp blue eyes as the last time he'd seen him. His hair was longer and he was more solidly muscled but this man he knew.

“Christian?” Mikko rasped out in shock. Frosti was staying very still, but he didn't know Christian, hadn't mourned him as dead year upon years ago. In spite of his abrupt drop to the ground the circle of spears hadn't backed off any.

He collected a sharp eyed look in return, a measuring look but no spark of instant recognition.

“I don't think I know you.” The tone didn't sound certain, but it was still enough that Mikko felt hope implode and was fighting back tears.

“You look like someone I knew, a long time ago.” It was very hard to get the words out clearly, when right now all he wanted to do was hide from the grief he'd thought he'd gotten out of his system already.

“Hunh, that's nice. But I don't think anyone will buy you being here just hunting for people. Not when your people seem to have a fondness for raining fire from the sky.”

Mikko winced and weakly tried to defend himself.

“It's supposed to only be on groups that prey on humans. Not on any group that we come across.” He groped for the harness on Frosti, trying to ground himself with something solid when he felt like his world had just upended. Trying to make sure Frosti didn't change and get himself killed by all these armed men. Some of the fevered babble of the one changer kid they'd found made him think that Frosti changing might get them both very dead.

The look he got was dubious at best. This man didn't believe him.
Of course he had no reason to believe him either. Not when he was dressed in military style battle dress camouflage that likely hadn't been seen in this area in hundreds of years. Not when everyone else was in leather and bits of natural fiber cloth, when the weapons were metal tipped spears, bows and arrows and slings compared to his rifle.

Only the feel of soft fur and tough leather under his fingers was keeping him from going to pieces.

This man looked so much like Christian, had his facial expression, his body language, everything.

Oh god this hurt.

~0~

Singer cocked his head a bit and watched the stranger and his dog. It had to be a dog, no wolf would consent to being harnessed like this one was. The man looked to be in serious emotional pain. The dog let out a low whine and nudged the man with his nose, clearly trying to be of comfort while still keeping a wary eye on them.

Limited comfort that the man seemed grateful for as he listed from his knees to his hip and hugged the dog tightly and tried to regain his composure with what was clearly limited success.

But then the Old Souls began moving out of the crowd and the stranger's eyes locked on the one the Elders had called Varjo. Clearly seeing him was too much as his eyes rolled up in his head and he crumpled limply to the side with a strangled whimper that sounded like it could have been a name.

Vivi was a strange sort of name, but the Old Souls and Wise ones often had odd names, not that anyone he knew had ever dared to voice them.

The dog, clearly being a good and loyal sort, shifted to stand guard over the fallen blond and snapped defensively at any who reached for his master until one of the Old Souls hit it with a dart from a blowgun and the animal slumped over as well.

He shook his head sadly, for all the strangeness of the man’s dress he was still clearly just a man, and just as lonely.

~0~

Michael 'Frosti' Zernow knew things were different the instant he woke up.

For one he wasn't in his canine shape, so he had to have been out of it for over a day.

For another he was lying on something soft and someone was stroking his hair in a way that was disturbingly familiar.

He tried to figure out where he was by sound.

There were a lot of people talking, but it was all soft conversations in languages he didn't know.

“He's awake.”

Well, hell. Busted.

Then his eyes snapped open, he knew that voice.

A soft, familiar chuckle and Frosti found himself sitting up and spinning around on his butt.
“Levi,” he croaked in shock, and then his voice broke.

Squeaks had been beside him. And she accepted a bowl of something from someone Frosti didn’t know and put it under his nose with a look he recognized from a long ago incident of sheer stupidity.

“Drink Frosti.”

His eyes teared up and he swallowed hard, but obediently took the bowl in both hands and sipped cautiously of the steaming liquid. If Squeaks was giving him that look it wasn’t likely that whatever it was would hurt him.

It was tea of some sort, slightly bitter and earthly with tones of mint and salt with a hint of honey for sweetness. It tasted better than the sugar and salt mix Mikko had had to use last time he’d blown his electrolyte balance to hell.

He took a few more sips and tried to ask a question, but was sternly scowled back into drinking by Squeaks and Levi as they sat bracketing him on what felt like a bed. He could also feel Levi’s arm around his shoulders and Squeaks leaning into his side.

Then he saw the impossible.

Brian, two Brian’s, one with long hair being tucked neatly under a scarf, the other with a classically frustrated look on his face raking the longer bits of his hair away from his face with both hands.

And he couldn't understand a word either one was saying.

“I’m dreaming.”

“No such luck,” teased Levi with a small crooked grin.

The Brian without the headscarf saw him sitting up and broke off the argument he seemed to be having with his twin and stalked over to hug him silly.

It was all Frosti could do to not break down and bawl like a little kid.

Someone who knew him.

Frosti sobbed when he saw the bit of ink of Brian's arm.

Team Tempest.

Original members alive and well here in the back of fucking beyond.

He broke and wept in the arms of his old friends.

~0~

Sami sighed in a mix of sympathy and frustration as he watched Brian pull the much shorter changer into his lap and rock him gently as Levi and Squeaks bracketed him and comforted as best they could with soft words and familiar looking touches.

He shot a look over at Adam and got a shrug in answer.

Mikko had broken down when the first face he saw on waking up was Bailey's.
They really needed to find out what in hell was going on and why two people who apparently had been long mourned as dead and dust were not only alive but dressed up like soldiers.

What did they have to do with the fire in the sky monsters that had so many people freaking out? That was a critical question that needed answered.

They'd had Antti of the Blue Mountain bring in a terrified vampire they all knew. Gregor had been trembling and looking over his shoulder apparently for the whole time Antti had had him in hand. He'd only barely started to calm down in the hands of Dunja and Sasha and Sami thought it was questionable if he'd be completely right in the head after his ordeal.

He'd just missed being in his home Hunt's home-place when it was blasted into flaming bits by what sounded to Sami like missiles.

He needed to know what in the name of sanity Mikko and Frosti's people were up to.

And he needed to know now.

~0~

Brian's weird look alike spoke English, sort of anyway, it sounded a bit old fashioned to his ears now used to the Alliance version. But it was a language they could communicate in, so that was a plus.

After he'd had a good cathartic cry in Brian's arms Frosti had gotten ahold of himself and managed to calm down. Mikko had apparently roused before he had and bawled himself half stupid in some guy named Bailey's arms. But other than a bit of awkward behavior from them and the guys’ two current lovers things were settling.

Frosti wasn't concerned about Mikko wanting to try and pick things back up where they'd been left off. After this much time there was no way it would work for one, and more importantly one of the first things Mikko had done was introduce him to the old flame. For another they'd slept tangled up in each other’s arms for the last two nights, in the field they never had the luxury. If Mikko wasn't still bashful as hell about having folks able to listen in to him having sex Frosti would have succumbed to the temptation to screw his little vampire until he screamed.

But Brian's twin wanted to know what in hell was going on, so he didn't think they'd be ducking the inquisition for much longer.

Apparently they'd had contact with a survivor of a nest burning that hadn't stuck around for the ground forces to talk to and see if he was worth converting and keeping around or not.

Frosti winced.

Given how bad nest burnings looked from above he could well imagine what someone who wasn't used to any technology more advanced than a plow and cart would react to flying machines spitting fire down on them would react. Badly was probably putting it mildly. Hell if he'd near missed someone burning the Tribe's home place to the ground with most of his team still in it he'd flip, and he knew about Hellfire missiles and helicopters.

Sami wanted to know what in hell was going on. Frosti didn't blame him. Between them he and Mikko tried as best they could to fill in over two hundred years of historical gaps.

It took a lot of tea.
And it took several breaks for the twin and his folks to chatter, or yell, in that pretty musical language they had that wasn't words to him.

Clearly it was words to Mikko; he winced more than once when the other group yelled.

When they couldn't keep their eyes open anymore Brian had softly called for a time out for food and sleep.

Frosti had yawned his way through a bowl of good stew and fallen over to sleep curled up in a loose ball. He wasn't even aware of Mikko curling half beside and half around him.

~0~

When he woke again it was to Mikko breathing his ear. Frosti managed a grin and squirmed around until he was nose to nose with the other man and could nuzzle his whiskers under Mikko's chin.

The first time he just got a flinch the second a grumble and the third a sleepy curse followed by Mikko asking him what he wanted.

“How humped are we?”

That got two blue eyes open and looking at him in confusion. Frosti waited. Mikko might be a morning person, but there were limits.

“Mik? How bad?”

A yawn and joint popping stretch.

“If we talk to the eyes in the sky I don't think we're humped at all.”

Frosti's eyes narrowed.

“If you get your sinister buddy.”

“Syn is not that bad, and he's glued to Zachy anyway.”

“Says you.”

“Michael...” Frosti grinned at the growling tone of Mikko's voice.

“What? He loooorves you.”

There was an indescribable gurgle

“Brian is so wrapped up in Zach that if Zachy even sniffs he's falling over himself to make sure he's okay.”

“Un hun, so you say.”

“Michael,” Frosti grinned at the growl. “Synister Gates is not chasing me.”

“But he flirts with youeeeepppp!” Frosti squealed when Mikko lost patience and pounced him to tickle him silly.

Sami cuddled Koira closer under his chin and huffed a little. He'd have to prod Mikko about who
they could get into radio contact with, later, when he was more awake.

~0~

Syn frowned as he circled his baby in lazy loops high over the ground. Something had stirred the guys back home and he was finally back in the Steagler class harrier he'd trained in, a bird that could hover down as well as fly conventionally. Which if he had to land her out here where airfields just flat didn't exist meant he'd have a better chance of getting her back into the air compared to the fixed wing version he normally flew.

He'd missed his baby. He knew she could be a fuel pig, but he still loved her.

The powers wanted him here on a listening post until he either ran low on fuel or they got whatever message they wanted to hear. They wanted him able to land and talk to folks if one of their 'lost' scout teams turned up. And they wanted those scouts back if at all possible. Merchausen was dead meat, possibly in a literal fashion, but a few first hand witnesses might be able to muzzle the Purists.

And to get the treaty in place solidly the Purists needed muzzled rather badly.

Syn had some doubts there, but it couldn't hurt to try. He wasn't wild about those bigoted hacks rhetoric anyway, seeing them have to swallow it or get dumped in a work camp would be shiny in ways beyond telling.

Ground forces were starting to move back into the area and were getting treated very warily. More than the fact they didn't dress like the locals would account for. They weren't having folks running screaming, but it wasn't the wary but relatively open reception they'd gotten before.

Someone was talking to people.

That someone clearly had a very good communications network in place and the Powers clearly seemed to be hoping for another group like the Australians. So for now things were stalled out while they waited for this other group to make formal contact.

Zachy was dozing, strapped into his seat at the communications station, Johnny was dead to the world at the nav and Matt was slugging more coffee to try and stay awake.

Not the most fun flight he'd ever had, though it was good to have the band as all together as it could be again.

“Anything from anyone?”

Syn grinned wryly at Matt's ever so vague question. But Matt wasn't half listening in to the chatter that normally Zachy filtered through, Zach was welcome to the comm. board and the drivel that came over the lines.

“Lots of jib jab on Merchausen's court-marshal, some screaming from the Purists fucks and a bit of good news on the Australia treaty.”

Matt grimaced and finished his cup of coffee.

“Nothing that'll get us where we aren't doing an extended swirly in the sky?”

“Nope.”
“Fuck.”

“Go wake up Zachy and Jonny then.”

“Pluh leaze... Zachy'll pull the eyes on me,”

Syn grinned over at his longtime friend.

“Are you telling me you can't resist is pouty face yet?” He laughed at Matt's one finger salute as the other man thumped down in the co-pilot's seat.

~0~

Sasha considered what Sami said and shuddered.

The other tribal chiefs and their advisors also sat with varying expressions of shock and confusion on their faces as they listened to what Sami was outlining to them.

Most couldn't wrap their minds around it.

Sasha wasn't sure he was doing any better. It sounded so impossible.

That Sami was so old frightened him.

He knew Nightwalkers lived far longer than other men. But to learn this man and many of his brothers had lived in the time before the now, in the time Before the Sky Fell, well, it was more than a little unsettling. It had been disturbing enough two years ago to learn the woman called Squeaks might be so old, but he'd half discounted that and now was reluctantly thinking he might have to accept that Nightwalkers could live for tens of generations.

Several people already had refused to believe and walked out. Others had reacted with such terror that the Nightwalkers healer had been forced to dose them with a sedative.

The demons from the sky that were coming from the east were men, men in a type of flying cart.

What a strange idea.

He did have to admit that it did have its appeal. A flying cart could go over mountains, not get trapped on the wrong side of a flooding river, and would be able to make very long journeys at a very fast speed.

Sasha looked at the man with long gold hair and his strange mottled clothing. He'd replaced the undershirt that was worn to almost nothing with a soft linen tunic and his worn out boots with soft moccasins, but the outer shirt and the trousers in all their patched glory still looked odd to his eyes. The other man's clothing was also worn, but not so badly and Sasha had yet to puzzle out why that would be.

He understood scouts, his father and Petr had made sure he understood the value of a good scout. This man looked less like a scout and more like a scholar and that had him terribly confused.

But a consensus seemed to have been reached.

Sami sighed and looked at the blond.

“Call your people.”
A nod and he was reaching for a small box filled with little metallic stick and rock things that had been sitting on a rock between where he and Sami had been sitting. How the collection of things that looked like children's toys could call their people he had no idea.

~0~

Syn grumbled and turned in another round of mindless turns. Another day, another shift of mindless circling. This was worse than standard sweep patterns.

“We have new Phelinger pings.”

Syn jumped and half turned to yell back at Zachy.

“Pings? As in more than one?”

Zachy didn't even look up from his boards, didn't even flinch as Matt and Johnny both moved to look over his shoulders.

“Son of a bitch,” breathed Johnny.

Syn swore and yelled back at them.

“Come on, a little information here!”

Zachy sounded shaken.

“Syn, there are three sets of three.”

Syn felt his hands go ice cold and knew he'd gone white.

“Triangle pattern?” He closed his eyes and quietly begged for the pattern to be a broken square.

“Broken square.”

Syn let out a huge sigh of relief.

Three sets of three in an equilateral triangle was a signal for need immediate pick up. The last time he'd seen that pattern they'd landed to find they were far too late, the scout pair they found had been dead at least a week. Three corners of a square it was needing radio contact and broadcast. He could live with that. Broken square was people alive, and maybe this was the formal contact the Powers were waiting for.

God knew Mikko could talk to damn near anyone; it was about time that was put to a good use rather than all this slogging through the brush crap.

“Raise our birdie in the bush Zachy,” more softly he continued, “and find out what the fuck is going on.”

~0~

Sasha watched in a mix of terror and awe as the blond, Mikko, stood in the center of an open field with two wands of light in his hands pointed up at the sky.

Something out of a legend was over him, higher than a man could shoot an arrow and staying eerily still in the air. Not that he'd want to even try and shoot up at this thing, not with the strong
wind it sent down from it. No arrow would be able to go into that kind of headwind, assuming a man could see through the dust kicked up by the thing to even aim properly.

Gregor had seen it and curled up in a terrified ball whimpering about fire from the sky.

Sasha could understand that. Something like this in the darkness even with simple fire arrows would be terrifying. And if he was right the heavy things on the front were much more dangerous than simple arrows.

The thing came slowly lower as Mikko lowered his arms and began to drop down to one knee.

Slowly it came down, then it was on the ground and the things that made the wind began to slow with a low whine to silence.

Sasha squinted at it and boggled a little to see two men behind the front bubbles he'd thought were eyes to this thing. And one of them was pushing things with angry looking gestures. He yanked his head gear off, leaving his dark hair standing in short sharp spikes, and moved up and out of his seat.

As the man stepped out he stripped off the top half of his odd garment, left the sleeves dangling oddly behind him and stomped over to where the little blond was.

Sasha blinked and cocked his head to one side when the bigger man grabbed the smaller by his shoulders, gave him a hard shake and then enveloped him in a hard hug. He blinked again as he realized all the brightly colored marks on the man’s sleeves were on his muscled arms, not on his shirt like he’d initially thought. His tunic was sleeveless and hugged the hard planes of his chest far more closely than any tunic Sasha had ever seen before.

~0~

Bailey blinked in shock when the pilot stomped out, stripped off the top half of his coverall and grabbed Mikko to shake and then hug the crap out of him. He could almost understand the words the man was snarling.

“Don't fucking scare me like that again. Jesus Christ man, you about made Zachy cry.”

“I did not!”

A shorter, slimmer man with mussed black hair pounced Mikko for a cuddle of his own. Like the larger man he'd stripped off the top half of his coverall and was showing his heavily tattooed arms and neck to the world.

“Wasn't like we planned it Syn.”

Bailey narrowed his eyes as he bigger man, Syn, straightened and swept his eyes over the assembly.

“So, you been doing the silver tongue thing again?”

The sigh out of Mikko made Bailey smile; they’d used to tease him about being able to talk to anything. It looked like that hadn't changed.

“I can't talk to everyone Syn.”

“Coulda fuckin' fooled me.” Then his words shifted to something more like the version of Trade
they'd been picking up from Sasha's group. “So who's who and who's in charge?”

~0~

Sasha felt unsettled. He'd been somewhat pleased that Mikko had introduced him as the leader of his little group. Even as one leader among many, and he'd noticed the other leaders had seemed pleased by the courtesy. Not all of them seemed pleased by this Synster person. He was rather more blunt than Sasha felt was properly wise for a man coming to parlay with strangers.

On the one hand that was possibly a good thing; he wasn't wasting time with pretty lies and flowery words.

On the other he was painfully unsubtle, to the point where Sasha could see the man's words being taken poorly by some of the advisors to the other leaders. He could see the other men who had come out of the flying cart grimacing as well and one whose name was Matty muttered something that had Synster glaring back and snarking something that sounded challenging back.

Matty put up both hands and said something that didn't really sound conciliating, but the two men shared an odd smile.

A medicine that could stop monsters from coming out of people? That was a good thing, if it worked. But from the winces on Mikko and the changer called Frosti's faces it was a medicine they knew, and one that wasn't a perfect cure.

But willow wasn't perfect either. Sometimes a person would take a little willow tea for pain or a fever and die, and no one understood why.

Nothing was perfect.

At least Synster wasn't claiming it was perfect. When one of the other advisors had demanded to know what happened when their medicine failed he'd looked saddened but had answered.

At best the person that it failed with died, at worst the monster came out and they had to be killed. Some had fevers so high it destroyed their minds, and a very few came out with paralysis of a limb or limbs. The bad things weren't common, but they happened.

Sasha wondered if that was something his leaders would have approved of him telling them. His understanding of diplomacy told him that being so up front just wasn't done.

Some felt the new medicine was worth the risk, others felt it was foolish when they had a system in place that worked just fine.

He could understand not wanting to replace a system that had worked for longer than they'd been alive. But at the same time even Sami admitted sometimes you had someone who didn't change at puberty, who for some reason didn't until later and those unfortunate people made a horrible mess of lives. Not everyone had Nightwalkers to check the blood.

If the medicine would stop those people wasn't it worth it?

He also noted that Synster was exchanging unhappy looks with Mikko and the other men who had been in his flying cart.

He felt better thinking about the machine as a flying cart, even if he knew it could rain fire from the sky. A cart wasn't frightening, it was just an everyday object. Something useful, to be kept in good repair and stored away neatly when not in use.
But back to the unhappy looks those men kept exchanging.

“If people say no, will your chiefs still make people take the medicine?”

Sasha gulped when he realized he'd said that aloud and winced. The cold glares of the other leaders made him wince again. He'd just returned this 'Synster's' directness with directness of his own.

But the pained faces of the flying cart people made them all stop.

“I wish I could say they wouldn't.” Synster's eyes were sad. “But I can't. They'll look at the risks of even one zombie and declare it's worth doing no matter what the cost.” He spread his hands and shrugged with clear unhappiness.

There was an echoing silence after that pronouncement.

Who of them hadn't had to make an unpleasant choice for the good of their people as a whole?

~0~

People were unhappy. Mikko sighed and curled up a little smaller on the little ledge he'd found over the meeting area and wished he didn't feel like the bearer of bad tidings.

He wished Synster wasn't dead on in his suspicions of what the leadership would order no matter what the people down around those fires decided. And given the vaccines started out with an oral dose it was likely that none of those people would have realized if the ground teams had been careful. The doses carried well in food and water as long as it wasn't heavily alcoholic. And trial and error had let the med team formulate things where having more than the minimum dose wouldn't be harmful. It had been a trick to do, but it made sneaking doses into the food of a feast a lot easier. Injections were still more reliable, but those you needed consent and active cooperation for to get the weight and age for accurate dosing.

He squinted a bit as he looked into the sky and brushed futilely at the wisps of hair that had escaped his braid.

Change was coming.

It would have come no matter which team Merchausen had chosen to ditch. It would come no matter what the Purists thought, would come even if Australia decided not to play nicely with the North American conglomerate.

“This thing you got for skinny ass ledges way the fuck up off the ground has got to stop Mik.”

Mikko blinked and raked wispy bits of hair out of his face again as Syn edged out onto the ledge and settled on the wider section beside him.

“I just look at these people Syn, they have a system that works, vampires who are responsible, careful of their tribes, and it's all going to get dumped up over on their heads. Everything they know is going to change almost literally overnight.”

Syn grimaced.

“I know. Life sucks some days. And we can't even tell them that if they don't want the shots they'll be allowed to opt out.” Syn stared down at the fires, then up at the darkening sky. “Danny got back to me. Australia will only do a treaty if the Purists are muzzled.”
Mikko blinked, last he'd know they'd just gotten in contact and nothing was being done but
cautious overtures.

“They are in treaty talks already?” He felt horribly out of the loop, he hadn't thought they'd been
stuck in the wilds for that long. He knew they'd been out two years just because of winter, but he'd
thought treaty talks would take a lot longer to really start. Contact had been a rumor when he and
Frosti had been put down. A strong rumor, but just a rumor.

Syn nodded.

“Yep, they have a method to stop the zombies, but aren't sharing as long as the Purists have any
say.” Syn's face went pensive. “Something about not angering ancestral spirits.”

“Oh, I bet the Purists loved that.” Mikko couldn't stop the acid undertone from leaking out. “Them
being so modern and above primitive superstitions.”

Syn grinned at him.

“I missed your snark man,” but then he sobered. “According to Danny they had converted
vampires and changers in their delegation.”

“So they know what we are.”

“Yep, they know what we are, and it looks like their version of integration might be a bit nicer than
ours.”

“Wonder how the Powers will cope with that.”

“Same as always, bitching, kicking and screaming the whole way I bet.”

Mikko sighed and wished Syn wasn't indulging in his prophetic tendency. He still accepted the
warm arm around his shoulders and leaned into the larger vampire to watch the sun slowly rise.

~0~

Unsettling was a mild term. Urtho watched the Old Souls working with the flying men, both the
original set and two new sets, to make what they called a small place of healing. It looked rather
large to him with large square and rectangular white tents in neat rows. What unsettled him the
worst was the second new set had a different set of marks on the sides of their main flying cart. It
was quieter, bigger and far more colorful, with stylized animals painted on its sides. The only
animal of the lot that looked even vaguely familiar was the serpent that wrapped around and
around the cart with its brilliantly multi colored scales lovingly detailed out.

The stylization made him think of the paintings their shaman used to speak to the spirits before a
hunt. And he wondered if that flying cart was like a few places in the hills where the spirits
congregated. How would their spirits cope with spirit visitors from so far away?

The men that had piled out had begun setting up a place for healing, at least that's what the Old
Souls said. And Urtho had seen one child with a severe harelip taken into one of the odd square
tents and come back out to be placed in another longer tent to recover. His mother had been in
 tears, he wasn't normal looking, but he looked far better when the men changed his bandages. The
men said the child might need another sur-jur-ee to make things pretty, but he no longer had the
terrible split in his mouth.

Things like that helped, fixing a harelip, clubbed feet or removing the heavy disabling scars to
allow a hunter to use his arm again, but many were still very afraid of these new people.

It didn't help that they had a shaman with them that had skin that was blacker than any of his tribe had ever seen before, and white hair that curled in tight little spirals. But he wasn't looked at any differently by his fellows for having such dark skin, and a few of the bolder girls had speculated on what he hid in the loose trousers he wore.

He'd had a terrible shock though, he'd seen a bird come out of the sky to the fist of an Old Soul, and once it had been relieved of its burden it had changed into a man.

A man with white gold hair with dozens of bird shaped beads braided into it.

A man he'd known as a child, a man he'd last seen as a spirit.

Koira.

And he looked to be safe, not treated as an outsider, treated with respect by the strange shaman and his men. Treated exactly as Elder Buono had wanted before he died.

Urtho didn't know what to think.

If Koira lived, what had happened to Janne and Lauri? The men Koira spirit had come back to tell relatives had passed from the world of men. Clearly having passed from the world of men didn't mean being dead like he'd always thought.

~0~

Syn blinked. A couple of the kids with the Aussie contingent looked awfully familiar. Familiar enough it was actually bugging him, but it took one calling for one of the others by name before it clicked, then he felt stupid. He'd spent months on tour with these kids back before things went to shit in a can.

Jinxx.

The kid wasn't a kid any more than Zachy was. He watched and felt a twinge of regret when he only saw three of five familiar faces. Jinxx, Ashly and Andy.

Syn wondered if Jake and CC had made it.

He also wasn't sure if he wanted to ask and find out.

He watched Sami and his mad crew trying to keep their tribes calm.

“I'm glad I don't have their job,” Matt remarked as he settled beside Synster. “But with all the freaking nut jobs they minder...”

“Someone's gotta do it. And at least they are known faces.” agreed Syn with a sigh. He really didn't envy Sami's team. They were dealing with jittery folks, people who on a good day were idiots and folks who were acting like idiots because they were listening to wild rumors and freaking out.

“I know, keeps folks from panicking, and keeps mobs from happening like in Dzharmen.”

Syn winced. They'd been lucky to get back off the ground when the mob had come calling. Primitive technology aside they'd managed to do some serious damage to their bird and had dragged at least two ground techs off before everyone could be evacuated. Syn knew they'd died,
and still sometimes prayed that it was quick and not the burning alive he'd suspected from other negative reactions in the area.

He still felt like he was in a third world country.

He suspected he would for a long, long time.

~0~

Sami flopped backwards into his bed with a low groan. He sighed again when he felt Koira snuggle into his side.

If this was hard for him, it had to be a thousand times worse for his little lover. Sami at least had grown up with technology, knew things were possible, even if some of what he was seeing made him blink at how advanced it was.

The Australians could do a genetic screening for the zombie genes.

It wasn't perfect. But Boridel claimed that between the test and a later vampire's bite they had never missed a zombie.

They didn't test for vampires or changers.

When they were found they were taken and trained, but they weren't actively tested for.

According to Mikko it was something of a bone of contention. The North American Powers wanted to test for and eliminate all three variants. The Australians only took out one. He'd wondered if it was because there were so few making the change.

Sami didn't want to speculate.

Right now he just wanted to hold Koira tight and sleep.

They still had work to do, people to calm and explanations to make and rumors to debunk come morning.

~0~

Jinxx shifted and crept on light paws through the camps and listened. He'd been put to learning the languages that were local as soon as they'd landed. For whatever reason he picked them up quickly now, more quickly than he had when he'd just been a guitarist in a rock and roll band. When he mused on it Andy just snorted and told him to be glad he had a useful skill that came easy.

Not that Andy's ability to calm hysterical people down was useless, just Andy didn't see it the same way everyone else did. No matter how often he got told his talent was critically useful in emergencies and first contact situations like this one Andy down played things. But he was the one who had realized that one poor mom was about to flip with worry over her baby and gone to try and keep her calm.

One hysterical parent could make the spark for a huge and bloody mess. The North American Coalition didn't have a clue how deeply CC and Jake had gotten into their most secure files, had no idea how much information The Australian side, his side had on them, their practices and bad habits.

They didn't know that within a few hours of initial contact CC had been set the task of finding
where all the Alliance skeletons were buried, who had buried them and most critically why they'd been buried in the first place.

They'd found the expected atrocities. Before the Shaman had done a mass Dreaming there had been incidents at home as well. Jinxx had been in a camp for the sick when one of the Shaman had come for him. He'd been sick and scared and desperate enough to try anything just so he'd have the hope of finding his brothers again.

He didn't remember much, just a strange dream of walking through a desert landscape and talking to plants and animals. The sort of thing that before would have been written off as someone slipping him some nasty drug and him having a bad trip.

But Jinxx hadn't been scared, well he had been scared, but not the bone deep terror he'd had before.

When he woke up he'd been out of the camp, and Jake and CC had been in the beds on either side of him. Within a month he'd learned what happened to their crew, within two Andy and Ash were back with them. Within three he'd known where his Sammi-doll was buried. Andy and Ash had held him together after that, kept him from finding a tall cliff and walking off it.

Jinxx sighed and crouched down to listen from the shadows. A woman was nursing her baby and listening to the men near her, her husband? Her brothers? Father? Jinxx wasn't sure; he didn't see much resemblance between the woman and the men near her. But they sounded both scared and hopeful, better than the last fire where they'd just sounded scared.

He listened carefully.

One of the men wasn't convinced that the 'old souls' should be handing over their 'magic’’s' to strangers. That made his ears prick up. It sounded like the local vampire troop had a long standing set of near ritual practices to check for the zombie genes.

That sounded interesting. Had they figured out how to do the Dreaming here? He hadn't seen any indicators of it before. But they had run across a huge amount of territory to get here. Other teams might have found similar things. He'd have to ask Ash to ask Jake and see what he'd found. Given that Jake and CC all but lived in each other’s pockets now anything one knew the other would, and would pass along if asked.

Jinxx carefully shifted back away from the fire and went to find another.

He barely kept a yelp behind his teeth when he came nose to nose with a pale golden wolf.

They stared at each other for a long moment then the other changer nudged him and moved away from the circles of firelight.

Jinxx hesitated, and then followed. What could it hurt to ask a local?

~0~

“Why were you listening at so many fires?”

Jinxx winced. The changer was the small blond attached to the biggest Hunt in the area. But he sighed and answered; no point in lying.

“We're trying to learn what the traditions are, how you managed to keep the zombies from becoming a problem for so long.”
That got him a blink, but it also got him an opening to learn what the Elders really wanted.

And what he learned would make Boridel very happy. They used a ritual that was very similar to the Dreaming, and only killed those poor folk who carried the corruption, freeing their spirits for another dance with the Rainbow Serpent.

What made Jinxx happier was that with Koira's group the killing was done with sorrow and regret and done as quickly and painlessly as possible. That the vampires exchanged pleasure for the blood they needed to survive and traded for other goods rather than demanding tithes. Gift were accepted, but if Koira was to be believed quite often those gifts were used either as trade or were carefully slipped back into the economy with another group.

The sheer size of the territory made him boggle. They covered what had been a good portion of central Europe, not all of it to be sure, but the map sketched in the dirt made his head hurt. No Australian Dream Shaman ever covered so much area as Koira's group did. The largest territory they covered was a distance Jinxx could run across in two days at a moderate lope. This territory he couldn't cross in five at a sprint, and they routinely could cover it in less if there was need.

They had changers who could fly, flew sweep sand watched for columns of black smoke from their people, especially in spring when flooding was coming and in winter when sickness walked the land.

They took care of their people for more than culling out zombies.

It was food for thought.

~0~

Ash pretended to ignore what was going on around him in favor of knitting a sock. Andy still razzed him mercilessly about the habit he'd picked up while they were still recovering in the hospital tent both before and after they'd been reunited, but he'd found it was soothing and required just enough focus to keep him from worrying about things he couldn't change.

That and they always needed new socks.

He didn't look up when one of the local Hunt settled beside him and watched with apparent fascination.

“That's different than how Jason works.”

“Mmm?” Ash didn't look up at the slender blond.

“Jason does two at once. Um. Sorry, I'm Jonne.”

Ash smiled and stopped long enough to shake the proffered hand.

“I'm Ash. I can knit one inside the other, but not with this pattern.”

“So why use it?” Simple curiosity. “Is it better?”

“If you need more stability, this one is a bit tighter, has less give. So it's good for supporting an injured ankle.”

That made Jonne perk up.

“Oh, I hadn't thought of something like that.”
Ash grinned.

“If Andy wasn't accident prone I wouldn't have either. But he's terrible for spraining wrists and ankles.”

That collected him a giggle.

“He sounds like Risto,” Jonne turned and pointed to a slim man with dark curly hair who has helping one of the medical techs carry a large box that contained surgical supplies. “He's terrible for falling into things. Thee won't let him cook if he can help it, he still sets things on fire even after all this time.”

Ash couldn't help the gurgle of laughter.

“Jake is just as bad, CC swears he sets fire to every kitchen we use at least once.”

They would have continued sharing the foibles of their teammates but the sound of screaming had both of them dropping what they were doing and running to help.

~0~

Sami swore and carefully held the hysterical girls’ arms tightly to her sides. It didn't really help much as she'd already head butted him in the mouth and was kicking his shins with uncanny accuracy as she flailed and screamed. He tasted blood, and hoped he wasn't bleeding too badly as that would just make any of his tribes folk needlessly anxious.

Squeaks tried to help but the girl just upped her hysterics. After a moment she stopped trying and ran to get Jason.

It took Jason and two of the visiting medics almost an hour to get her calmed enough to feed a dose of Jason's sedative tea.

“What the hell brought that on?” asked Jason as he wiped at the blood on Sami’s chin.

Sami grimaced and got growled at as his lip bled more.

“Fewer funny faces, more explanations. Tallo? Can we get a suture kit?”

The medic nodded and scampered off as his partner kept a close eye on their patient.

“I think,” Sami started then winced again at Jason's prodding of his injuries. “I think she saw Squeaks change.”

“Oh,” Jason winced.

“You have an Earth Mother?” Tallo asked as he settled back beside Jason with a small kit in his hands.

“Earth Mother?” asked Jason as he ripped open the suture pack and began firmly swabbing Sami's split lip. Jason had been thrilled to see proper medical gear, and had been spending time with the visiting medical people to get them up to speed on some of the local hazards. They had proper tranquilizers now, but Jason was a touch reluctant to use them until they knew a bit more about how sensitive their people would be to them.

“A woman who can change her shape. Elder Shaman Boridel's teacher was one such.”
Sami blinked and started to say something but was sternly glared into silence by Jason. So he subsided and let Jason carefully stitch his lip. It wasn't like it wouldn't be mostly healed in a few days anyway. For whatever reason it seemed to help calm their people to see them using the outsiders 'magic medicine' themselves.

“Until we met Brian, Squeaks and Levi we had no idea women could become anything but zombies.” Jason said as he worked with his usual neatness.

Tallo and his partner exchanged a look, and then Tallo continued.

“It's a rare thing. Very, very rare. In the histories we only have record of four, and two of those have since gone into the Dreamtime. We never expected to find one here. Your Alliance has none.”

“Not our Alliance,” observed Jason mildly. “And given how prone some of them are to a shoot first, ask questions of the survivor’s mentality I'm not really surprised.”

Sami let out a soft snort. He'd seen Syn's reaction to Squeaks shape shifting. If he'd had a gun it would have been a lot less funny. He'd all but levitated up on top of a crate swearing like crazy and groped blindly for a firearm he didn't have on him. As it was it had left Brian and Levi very jittery around some Alliance people and hyper protective of their partner.

It helped that Christian tended to lurk nearby, and that Frosti had decided to be very vocal about his friendship with her.

Jason had boggled a bit when Syn's little lover Zachy had brought out a bit of communications gear that had let him get a video feed back to where Team Tempest was based.

Their tribes had been shocked to see the faces and voices of people coming out of the screen. But they had understood the tears of joy on those faces and the faces of Brian, Levi and Squeaks.

Apparently they had family still back in the States. Sami hadn't quite made sense of Frosti's explanations about Runner families. But he did understand the implications of finding lost family.

He bowed his head for a moment. He understood that all too well.

~0~

Levi sighed and watched Brian and Squeaks sleep.

It blew his mind. Tempest was still alive and kicking, and from what Sugar and Diddy said it was stronger than ever. Levi had thought that both men had died in the initial bombings and first wave of illness. He was rather glad to be wrong.

They could go home.

There was a home to go back to.

Levi sighed and let his eyes track over to where Christian was curled up by Theon and Julian.

Was the US even home now?

He wasn't sure anymore.

~0~

It wasn't smooth.
Transitions that shifted the very fundamental understanding of the way the world worked never went easily. The Purists tried to push their viewpoint and found themselves backed into a corner by more tolerant and forward thinking folk. The more radical elements turned terrorist. Or tried to.

The Australian contingent did some mystic mumbo jumbo; at least as far as High Command was concerned it was mumbo jumbo.

But it worked. The Purists couldn't hide.

They still tried, but converted teams kept tracking, kept putting pressure on them, kept shutting them down.

Kept pushing.

It still took years.

Long slow and painful years to reconnect every corner of the world again. Years of turmoil, setbacks and rebuilding.

But they did rebuild.

~0~

Koira looked up at the tower of steel and glass and watched as flitters flew in carefully regulated lines through the air.

It all seemed so very different than the open plains where he'd been born, but when he turned his attention back on the young people around the fountain in front of the building he had to admit that people still stayed the same.

A few boys were showing off to the girls by balancing on the slick edge of the reflecting pool and the girls were pretending to ignore them. In the center of the pool a stone globe sat in quiet state. Koira remembered finding that globe in the ruins of the old city that this new city now stood on.

One of the boys wore a shirt that carried the family mark of the Tribe and Koira had to smile at the tricks he was using to try and impress the girls.

“If he keeps that up Frosti is going to start running him through harder training.”

Koira jumped and turned to face Levi.

“Will it stop him?”

Levi snorted and shifted his backpack up onto his shoulder. Like many Runners he wore his clan markings on his clothing, but Levi was one of a very few in Tempest who also wore them on his skin.

“Nah, not likely. At this point I don't think him falling and knocking his head again will stop him. You and Sami coming to the Tempest dinner tonight?”

Koira smiled.

“Sami has been looking forward to it. He said that Tribe was coming as well.”

Levi grinned.
“Yeah, we'll have several Runner families coming. It'll be good to see everyone all together again.”

Koira laughed and nodded. Levi had been overjoyed when all four main families had decided to set up enclaves here, in the new city of Renou.

It would be good to see everyone again. Then he hesitated as he saw a familiar face running towards them.

“They accepted! They accepted! We got in!” Jonne yelled happily as he ran up to fling his arms around them both in his exuberant joy.

“You got in?” echoed Levi.

Jonne nodded. “Sami is still shock. This fall we'll be teaching!”

Levi's face lit up in understanding.

“That is so awesome!”

Koira giggled and tried to keep his balance as both men exchanged another round of excited hugs. But then he saw Sami crossing the square and ran to him.

He could cope with any changes life threw at him as long as Sami was there.

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