

## Finding His Place

When the flap of his tent was pushed open, Vanin hoped whoever was there was not there for him.

The diminutive, effeminate wolf cringed as he stood up a little taller, but he kept his focus on the lupine form on the table beneath him. His paws continued to slowly unspool a length of blood-stained bandage as the male beneath him cringed, and he sighed quietly to himself as he paused once more in his work. "You can take a spear's blow in battle, but cannot withstand my touch? You must be still." He reached into a pocket of his black robe for a new bandage. Boiling water would likely be needed, too.

The words however earned his paw a backhand from the male on the table, along with an irritated growl. "Do your job, *bender*. In silence."

It took all of Vanin to bite his tongue, but he nodded and set once more to work with an even more delicate touch. At least whomever had entered his makeshift infirmary didn't seem to have been looking for him. He didn't want to be pulled from his duties again; not after what happened last time. He set the clean bandage down beside his patient with a sigh.

When finally he was able to fully remove the blooded bandage from the warrior's wounded arm, he sighed down at it. Kam had pulled his stitches. Again. "You need to rest this limb if you wish it to be healed properly," he admonished the larger wolf.

Again came an annoyed growl. "I perform my duties in defense of Astikoranna and the Alliance, *bender*," he snapped. "You are the medic. Mend it better."

Vanin's hackles bristled as he glared down at the irritable wolf before him. "The body does not work like that. You are not a sword to be reforged; you are *flesh*. You must give yourself time to heal."

"Bah! Fool!" He batted away Vanin's paw again as he began to sit up. "Someone summon a magus! I need someone who can heal me properly!"

Eyes suddenly ablaze with anger, Vanin reached out with both paws to abruptly and firmly push Kam back down onto the table. "Be still, you ignorant oaf, before an infected wound is the least of your problems!" he snarled back, ears flat.

"Vanin."

The cold, calm, female voice at the wolf's back almost made him jump out of his skin, and he cursed himself for not having at least acknowledged the intruder in his tent. He should have looked. "Warmaster Taril," he muttered as he forced himself to turn and salute.

"You will come." The lupine there, leader of the Nakeletori wolf warband dispatched into the middle of nowhere, glared at him as she folded her arms. Her glare softened as it turned toward another wolf draped in the same black robes as Vanin. "Chasian, I expect you to tend Kam's wound in Vanin's absence."

The other wolf bowed his head as the warmaster turned to leave. It was with another sigh that Vanin hopped down off the small box that he'd pulled up beside Kam's table and followed his master out of the infirmary. Kam would be happy. He wouldn't have to be tended to by a damned *bender* anymore.

He looked up and about himself even as he kept his head low. The warriors that mostly milled about were absent their armors; obviously they had already secured the jungle in the immediate vicinity of the camp they'd made. The Emerald Reach was what the Serevokin scholars of Astikoranna called it. One of the ends of the world, and the last place the warband's prey could have scurried away to.

"I asked for you specifically for this mission, Vanin," growled the warmaster, and Vanin quickly hurried up his smaller strides to catch up to Taril. She at least waited until he was in-step behind her before she continued. "I had heard the rumors, but I was unsure if they

were true.” She snorted once. “The warriors seem to believe them, but the records are incomplete. Vanin of the Moon’s Blood. Potential bender.”

“Yes, Warmaster,” he muttered to himself as his ears and shoulders drooped. He’d suspected, but hoped desperately that the warmaster had wanted him for more than just his body. That perhaps his skills as a medic had been in demand, after all.

But alas, as the wolfess nodded, Vanin felt his heart sink. “Scouts reported that the last holdouts of the Cult of Rolkotarni are holed up just beyond the Emerald Reach. I needed you, Vanin. No other appropriate sorcerers or benders are presently available, and I was assured that the rumors of you were true.” She paused in front of another large tent, and Vanin expected it had to be her own. “Enter. I require proof.”

“Respectfully, warmaster, I came to mend the sick and wounded,” Vanin said, even as he complied. The tent inside was simple, with little more than a bedroll, a table and a chair, and a slew of papers upon both. He walked over to the table and turned back to face the warmaster as she closed her tent flap. “I came because I wanted to protect the warriors of the Alliance.”

“You came because you were ordered to come, and I am your warmaster. You will serve at my discretion.” Her eyes narrowed. “If we are to fight Serevokin with a predominantly male force, then your presence as a bender may do more than simply heal cuts and endure Kam’s abuse.” The wolfess nodded toward Vanin as she tilted her head up. “What few sorcerers we have at our disposal aid in our defense, not in this assault. A bender is needed. You will show me. Now.”

The wolf sighed to himself as he closed his eyes. Taril’s tone left no doubt that it was an order, and to disobey one’s warmaster was akin to treason. “Yes, warmaster,” he replied, as he reached down to hike up his robe. He hesitated a moment as a paw wandered down to his breeches, and he sighed once more as he untied the knot that held them up and tugged them down.

The warmaster leaned in close, and her eyes narrowed as she sniffed derisively. Her tail tucked up slightly as she nodded at the feminine slit that rested in place of the normal, masculine assets Vanin wished to have been born with. “So it is true. You *are* a bender.”

“Born to a Nakeletori male and a Serevokin sire,” he confirmed with a nod. Vanin kept his eyes closed. He’d seen the looks of disgust on too many faces, and he didn’t need to see it on so respected a warrior as the Warmaster Taril of the Night’s Claw. She had always been something of an inspiration of his, and it would hurt too much to see her disgust. If only a properly trained sorcerer had been available in his stead. “And yes, I can confirm that I am possessed of... *all* the traits that come along with being a bender. I only wish I had known. My sire had no prior record of producing benders before.”

With an appraising nod, the warmaster lifted her head back up and stood tall once again. “I do not care how you came to be, Vanin. I care only that you may be useful to the strike tomorrow. We know that a band of Serevokin have retreated to a cave at the far edge of the Emerald Reach, and you will attend the warriors sent to relieve those who observe the cultist scum. You will ensure victory for the tokari you are assigned to by doing the duty you know you were chosen for.”

“Yes, warmaster.” Vanin opened his eyes slowly as he saluted the warmaster once again. There it was. No choice. “With your permission, I will take my leave and retire for the evening to rest and prepare.”

Taril nodded and waved a dismissive paw. Vanin took the chance to immediately hurry away from the larger wolfess and all but dart out of her tent. At least his duties were done for the day. He wouldn’t have to deal with Kam’s abuse and anyone else’s insults. At least for a while. Tomorrow would be another story.

Quickly, Vanin hurried into his tent and tied off the entrance. The small wolf sighed as he turned to his bedroll. He wasn't even tired, but he knew he needed to somehow find sleep as soon as possible. Tomorrow, he knew, would exhaust him completely.

The early morning hadn't been the worst part, but Vanin had known that it was likely to come damn close to it. Likewise, the long hike he'd had to endure alongside a cadre of his tribe's elite warriors had been full of snide comments and sideways sneers. Vanin was all too familiar with the way they looked at him. Not even the Lo'tyren'naka were so reviled by their kin.

And it was only within the Nakeletori. The Serevokin didn't look down on benders. Nor did the Lissak foxes or the Virilo coyotes. The Linorika had no official stance, but those felines had never had to suffer the effects of the old Serevokin's interference in their ways to the extent that the other species had. The Nakeletori were a proud people. That pride had been tempered somewhat since the days of Aliastikora, but it was still a cornerstone of the lupine people's heritage and one that few were willing to surrender willingly.

To be a bender was to be born of shame, not pride. To be less-than. Wrong. It had been a stigma Vanin had been required to acclimate to early in life. He'd had to fight with everything he had to earn what little status he'd achieved amongst his fellows. It had taken years to convince the warmasters that he could be trained as a warrior, and even upon the completion of his training he had been forced to choose between only a handful of unsavory positions. Becoming a medic had not felt like his life's calling, but it had been the best option available to him. It was important work, if not swathed in the honor of combat. It also let him stay inside most of the time, and away from the tangled mess of places like the Emerald Reach.

At least the advance scouts had cleared a road of sorts. The Reach was among the most dangerous and unpredictable tracts of land in all the world, and Vanin would have hated to be one of the hunters responsible for trailing their prey through it. Then again, considering what was still to come? Perhaps the little medic might have preferred trailblazing rather than his assigned duty. The thought set his teeth to grinding.

The tokari he traveled with — the most exceptional and respected warriors of the Nakeletori — numbered six, but that was six more than Vanin wished he had been saddled with. The bulky Borhamis of the Stone's Grip took the lead, massive warhammer held ready before a form clad in thick, heavy plate armor. His brother Lijar of the Whip's Crack stood at his side, taller but more slender and with a short blade in either paw. At their back came Waesor of the Flame's Rise, the old magus still somehow able to keep pace with the young, strong warriors that flanked him. Vanin stood at Waesor's side, arms folded into his cloak as he tried to avoid the glares of the other members of their party. If only Waesor's skill allowed Vanin to return to his tent. Alas, it was not so. His talents were specific, and wrong for Vanin's task.

Farche of the Twilight Hunt was out of view, of course; the stealthy thing was only barely larger than Vanin himself, and he was their advance scout. Behind him was Zarett of the Great Wilds, the solid-black-furred wolf and accomplished hunter who of all of them had been the least offensive toward Vanin for his condition. That might have had something to do with the way he barely said anything at all, save to Kolm.

And then, of course, there was Kolm himself.

He was only a little smaller than Vanin, but that was because he wasn't actually Nakeletori. He knew that they were related somehow, but the feral wolf and the Nakeletori had obviously diverged at some point long ago. They made for fine hunting animals, though

few Nakeletori bothered to train the rebellious brutes for war. Kolm was an exception; the longtime partner of Zarett and considered the equal of any Nakeletori in their squad. Except Vanin, of course.

Kolm was also a wild card thrown in at the last minute that Vanin would have desperately argued against if he'd had any say in the matter whatsoever. His position as a bender put him at the very bottom of the pecking order — lower even than the brute beast at Zarett's side, which stung worse than the glares the other tokari offered in place of words — even if his status as a medic might mean that circumstances could dictate his control of the group. He was a tool, there for only a singular and specific purpose, and Vanin was not looking forward to that purpose in the slightest.

More than a few words had been spoken to that effect, as well. The brothers had been the loudest, protesting the assignment of the 'girl' to their overly-masculine squad. Waesor had been quiet for the most part; his silence had spoken volumes. He'd spent most of his conversation about Vanin with Zarett, in tones too quiet for the medic to hear. Zarett's responses had been curt, and more than once he'd responded to Waesor while staring directly at Vanin. He wondered what horrible things they had to say about him. At least the brothers were open about it.

As much as he'd expected it, it had been less than he'd hoped for. The tokari were the pinnacle of the Nakeletori warrior culture. They were the best of the best. The highest echelon any warrior of the tribes could aspire to. With the great war between the Serevokin Alliance and the Cult of Rolkotarni, the tokari had proved their worth again and again as fierce warriors able to turn the tide of any battle.

For his whole life, Vanin had looked up to the tokari; to warriors like Warmaster Taril who showed the world just how great, powerful and capable the Nakeletori were. He had wanted nothing more than to *be* tokari himself. He had applied for the trials. He had endured the eternal rejections. Nothing had stopped Vanin from trying to rise beyond his position, even though those above him were stunned that a lowly bender could even reach the position of medic. He had tried. He had tried *hard*.

But these were the tokari; the legends made flesh and armed with steel. These were the greatest warriors of the Nakeletori tribes... and they were just like everyone else. They looked at Vanin, and they *judged* him. They condemned him. They belittled him and derided him, even as he served them. He was less not because of his effort, but because of a factor beyond his control. Males could become tokari. Females could become tokari. Apparently even *beasts* could become tokari.

Vanin though could not, and seeing the contempt borne in the eyes of heroes was almost more than he could take. *Almost*. Instead he grit his teeth harder, flattened his ears against his companions' crude barbs and marched on. Tokari, it seemed, were no better than other Nakeletori in matters of decency to their fellows. He decided that their pride was unfounded, even though he would never, ever dare to say it to their faces. Such a thing would earn him a sword in the gut, without a shadow of a doubt.

"So I suppose it must be true," mumbled Zarett late into their march, his baritone voice just barely loud enough to be heard.

Vanin paused for a second and fell out of step with Waesor as he tried to figure out if Zarett had spoken to him. After a moment and a glance back confirmed that the black wolf's eyes were once more on him, the smaller male nodded slowly. These were Zarett's first words to him. "I am sorry if my presence causes you discomfort," he replied as he turned his eyes forward again. Shame. Shame on him and his family, simply for his existence. How wonderful every day was for him. *These* were who he had once looked up to? That he had aspired to be? Vanin's ears slacked. Drooped.

Even as Waesor snorted a couple of steps ahead, Zarett shook his head. “No. No discomfort,” he said instead, and the words — as close to a kindness as Vanin could have hoped for — turned his head back around. There was even a small smile on Zarett’s muzzle. “You will do the warmaster proud today, bender. You will help us achieve a great victory.”

“If he doesn’t just juice himself just watching the *real* males fight,” Borhamis shouted back, and his gruff tones earned him the clash of his gauntleted fist with that of his approving brother’s. “Just stay outta the way, girl. Wouldn’t want you gettin’ hurt before we putcha to use.”

Both of Vanin’s ears flattened as he allowed himself to growl back silently at the brute. He was surprised enough to almost jump out of his fur as Zarett placed a paw on the smaller Nakeletori’s shoulder. “Calm. His words are not worth rage. Find peace now as best you can, for you will not find it at the end of this march.”

There was wisdom — and was that legitimate kindness? — in the hunter’s words, and a glance up ahead showed that at least Waesor nodded his head in agreement. “I will... try,” he replied after a moment, and nodded back.

“But it *is* true, is it not?” Zarett continued even as Vanin turned his eyes back to the jungle around them. “What they say of the benders. Part male-”

“Part not,” Vanin confirmed with a slow nod. Normally it was a chore to explain himself, but Zarett at least spoke to him... perhaps not like an equal, but at least like a part of the warband. Like a part of the tribe, not some diseased outcast. “Another delightful complication of Serevokin breeding. I promise you, I am equally as capable of healing your wounds as I am inflicting them upon our enemy. I would pass the trials and become tokari myself, should anyone give me a chance to prove myself as more than a medic and... *mistake* of breeding!”

“Too bad the only thing you’re really good for is parkin’ our cocks in once we wash the blood off ‘em,” Borhamis grunted back again, and the brawler’s brother began to chuckle to himself. “Y’know y’really ain’t no warrior, right princess? No bender’s good enough a fighter to become tokari. Best leave that for the males here.”

But before Vanin could even begin to speak, he felt Zarett’s paw squeeze on his shoulder. “And you know that the warmaster would not take kindly to such an assertion, do you not?” he countered with raised voice, and Vanin could hear the smile in the hunter’s tone. “Is Warmaster Taril not the greatest tokari assigned to this mission, and does she not outrank us all?”

Whatever Borhamis grumbled in response could only be heard by Lijar, and the two of them turned sullen glances forward again. Waesor too remained silent, though there was a tight smile about his aged and graying muzzle. When Vanin glanced back at Zarett, the other wolf’s face was cold as stone once more as he nodded forward. The instruction was clear.

And for the first time, Vanin was more than happy to comply with the instruction. He turned face forward again and continued his march without another word. The paw dropped from his shoulder, and the small wolf once more marched onward. It wasn’t much, but it was something. Perhaps Zarett would be willing to see him as more than simply a tool with a hyper-specific purpose.

Or maybe he was just used to talking to *animals* rather than people. Either was possible, but at least for the moment Vanin could march with a little hope in his heart.

It was almost evening again when Farche rejoined the other tokari and guided them near to the edge of the cave that the cultists had taken refuge in. He’d given a short report of the situation, and numbered the Serevokin cultists at no more than ten. He’d made several

aside points that as long as Vanin could do his job, they would be no problem. The unspoken implication, of course, had been that Vanin could not.

Vanin for his part had been forced to simply sit back and take in the information alongside the squad's jabs at him. They, at least, were only words. He could deal with words. He was used to dealing with words. It was when words spilled over to other things that he wondered how he'd react.

At least Farche had returned at all. Vanin had been concerned that he might have let the cultists know that they were being hunted. If they'd found Farche, Vanin wouldn't have been close enough to do anything to help him. Whether it was fortune or training, the little medic was glad for it.

He only started to pay attention to the warriors again when Zarett stepped up. On the way to their destination, he'd assumed that the way the others all deferred to him meant that he was in charge. The black wolf commanded their attention simply with his presence, and even the much older Waesor deferred to it.

Zarett favored Vanin with a nod as he folded his arms. "Farche will sneak in first and take up a flanking position before they know we are here," he said. "Borhamis and Lijar will lead the charge inward and Waesor will weave enough flame into their weapons to stall out any of their regeneration. I will strike from afar, and Kolm will guard Vanin as he protects us."

"I see even the hunter's pet's a better warrior than the bender," muttered Lijar, but he was quickly silenced by Zarett's glare and Kolm's growl. Vanin didn't even feel the need to interject anything.

He need not have bothered; Zarett had him covered. "Perhaps you had best mind your tongue. Vanin is the key to our protection and success in this mission. You may not like him or what he is, but he is essential, he is here, and he is an irreplaceable part of this mission. If you would rather become *hashrah* for the cultists, by all means. Mock Vanin further. Our fate rests in his paws. It is his to decide, and it is he that you should fear to cross."

The warrior's head bowed immediately in supplication, and Vanin felt a momentary swell of pride. As much as he was not looking forward to the battle to come and his part in it and as much as he wished the support had come earlier in the day, Zarett's words felt nice. He nodded silently to the hunter in thanks.

If he saw the nod, Zarett didn't react to it. Instead he waved a paw, and before Vanin could even look around he knew that Farche was gone. There was a little rustle in the bushes where he knew the silent scout had stood, but he was already off on his mission. "The wind is favorable. Prepare yourselves. We move in one minute."

The other tokari began to immediately check and recheck their weapons and armor, but not Vanin. Instead, the little wolf's heart began to race as he tried to force himself to calm. One minute. He closed his eyes as he turned his mind inward and took a deep breath. The cool, near-evening air of the jungle surrounded him, along with a tang of something else. The others wouldn't be able to scent it out yet, but that was part of being a bender. Vanin could always smell when Serevokin were nearby. Better him than the rest of the squad, of course. Another part of it was his immunity to Serevokin domination. All part of his reason for being there.

But as he began to focus, a different scent started to override that faint aroma of the draconic cultists. It was Vanin's own, and as he opened his eyes he could feel the warmth begin to fill the air about him. He breathed deep of his scent, at once so familiar to him but so different from any other Nakeletori male he'd ever met. As he cast his gaze around, the other tokari did the same.

Rather than the glazed eyes that marked them as thralls of a Serevokin however, Vanin watched their gazes sharpen considerably. They gripped at their weapons as they

looked at him, and one by one Vanin began to feel something beyond himself. He could sense their thoughts and feelings as they took his scent into themselves, and the small wolf drew himself up tall. Was this how the Serevokin felt, when they unleashed their own pheromonal domination? Did they have this same power over their thralls?

Such musings could wait for later. For the moment, there was a battle to fight. The other tokari's thoughts were clouded over, and that left them absolutely entranced by Vanin. "Move in!" he growled quietly, and he was gratified to see the other Nakeletori warriors nod and move toward the cave. As he braced himself, Vanin moved to follow them.

The cave itself was only barely past the bushes they'd taken refuge near, and there was the soft glow of something inside to guide the warriors on. Borhamis and Lijar stepped in first; the brawler's hammer and his brother's swords were both wreathed in arcane flame. The same flame burned in Waesor's paws as he moved in to follow, and Zarett stepped in behind him. "Kolm, guard," he growled, as he pressed a paw to Vanin's shoulder. "Stay close, and stay down."

Even with his mind swayed by Vanin's pheromones — not as strong as a Serevokin's but still influential in the extreme — Zarett still commanded respect. It was a testament to his strength of will, and Vanin crouched down as the hunter drew his bow and nocked an arrow.

As Vanin followed them in, he caught sight further in the cave of the first of the Serevokin they had come to kill. The loincloth-clad, black-scaled draconic creature looked up from the tome it had been studying, and it almost looked insulted to see the four Nakeletori wolves on the march toward him. "And here I thought this evening would be dull," he crooned, and he shut the book quickly as he stood up tall. "Hello, pets... do come in."

"Oh, we intend to," Lijar growled back as he hefted his swords. "Do your worst, traitor."

As the Serevokin turned to face Lijar full on, Vanin took the opportunity to crouch down by a small outcropping. From there he could see the battle progress, and the soft inward breeze would help carry his pheromones deeper into the cave. Kolm growled as he leaned low to the ground, the feral wolf's eyes more on his master than on Vanin.

Even from that distance, Vanin could see the flare of the Serevokin's nostrils as the foreign scent reached him. That moment, his eyes went wide as they searched the wolves arrayed before him. He began to back up, until he caught sight at last of Vanin against the outcropping. Suddenly, it understood. Against any male, the musk of a Serevokin could assail the mind and turn the staunchest enemy into a willing servant. Any male, of course, that was not already swayed by another Serevokin.

Vanin wasn't another Serevokin, but he *was* a bender; half male, half female, and more Serevokin than most children of their unions with the other races. His pheromones were not stronger, but they were persistent, they were effective, and they had most importantly taken root *first*. The Serevokin, and any other Serevokin in the cave, would have to rely on other means to pacify their intruders.

"*Abomination!*" he hissed, even as he extended his claws and braced for battle. It figured, and Vanin couldn't help but sigh. Even the Cult of Rolkotarni viewed him as some vile thing. "Brotherkin, to me! We are assaulted!"

Any more words were forestalled by Lijar's leap forward. The younger brother brought both blades up in a deadly whirl, and the Serevokin lifted his scaled arms up to try and block the blow. The flaming energy that coursed along the edge of his blades ensured the Serevokin's failure however, and the arms were lopped clear off with the sizzle of burnt flesh. The Serevokin only managed to cry out for a moment before Lijar brought his arms back and drove the blades into the cultist's chest. He wrenched one up and the other down, and the draconic's insides spilled across the ground as he cleft the Serevokin almost entirely in two.

Vanin couldn't concentrate on the battle to come, as the rest of the cultist Serevokin poured out of the deeper reaches of the cave. He had to keep his focus purely on his own body, as he closed his eyes and turned inward. Serevokin could simply will themselves into exuding the musk that could ensure their domination of any situation. Vanin's pheromones, however, required effort to maintain.

And it was certainly not the easiest thing to keep himself aroused in the midst of a battle. Ahead of him, Borhamis and Lijar launched forward with their weapons at the ready. Zarett and Waesor both held back from the brothers, with arrows darting into the fray to needle the Serevokin that came in defense of their lair. Somewhere ahead was Farche, no doubt ready to bury his knives in the backs of some unwary cultists. Echoes of their thoughts and motions sang through his body and along his muscles via the connection they now shared.

Vanin had to try his best to block the sounds and feelings out as he reached down under his robe. Perverse and awkward; that was how it felt to dip his fingers in between his legs to feel for his sex, as his companions fought for their lives. Yet, by some genetic fluke, his presence and his pheromones were all that could protect the tokari from the domination of the Serevokin.

He'd expected a familiar warmth and wetness, but that wasn't what the medic found. Instead there was something cool, and wet that pressed in under his fingers. A shivering gasp slipped from the medic's muzzle as he cast a wide-eyed glance back, and those eyes crossed a moment later as a warm tongue lapped along the full length of his slit.

And he could only see Kolm's lower half exposed from beneath his robe.

Both of the medic's ears pinned back against his skull as he turned his eyes forward again. Zarett was completely ignorant of his pet's doing, so focused on the Serevokin was he. Another lick came before Vanin could do anything, and he shuddered for a moment before he pressed the flat of his paw back against that cold nose. "Down, Kolm."

The feral wolf growled but complied without so much as a nip at the fingers against his muzzle. Vanin felt a swell of pride. He may not have been Kolm's master, but the wolf listened to him anyway. Perhaps that was just the pheromones and their magic. Vanin frowned as he glanced back at the wolf again, and he took stock of the beast's full malehood on display beneath him. *That* had not been his intention. Were even beasts swayed by Serevokin musk? He'd never heard of such a thing before, but then he wasn't exactly a common breed.

A shadow caught Vanin's eye near the mouth of the cave, and he perked an ear quickly as he took a deep breath. There, beneath even his own scent, was something different. It was the musk of another Serevokin, and it couldn't possibly have reached him from deeper in the cave. The tokari were flanked.

Vanin turned his head before the owner of the shadow could come fully within view. One of his arms slid up his robe's sleeve to the strap at his side. Fingers closed around the hilt of the short, curved-bladed sword held there. He grit his teeth as he mentally prepared himself for battle as best he could. The other warriors believed a medic was unfit to be tokari? That a *bender* was incapable of a place of such honor? Well, he would see about that!

... or he would have done, if Kolm hadn't taken his distraction as an invitation and slipped back under Vanin's robe again.

The moan that rattled out of Vanin's muzzle came without warning. Thankfully his grip on his sword was tight enough that the tingles of pleasure that coursed through him didn't cause him to drop the weapon or give himself away to the Serevokin cultist he knew was on approach. He had to acknowledge that his scent had affected Kolm by then, of course. He was a trained warbeast. That he was shirking his duty to *deliciously* work his tongue up

into Vanin with deep laps could only be explained one way. Teeth ground together as Vanin clenched his thighs in an attempt to push the wolf's muzzle back and away.

Unfortunately, it seemed as though Kolm could only take that as a challenge. Vanin could do little more than gasp as that long muzzle thrust forward and more aggressively forced that bestial tongue into the Nakeletori medic's body. It took all that Vanin had to tilt his head ever so slightly to the side to bring the approaching Serevokin's shadow into his line of sight. He had a mission. He had to focus! He had to be ready!

The Serevokin was watching him; he knew that. He could tell from the angle of the shadow and the amused tilt to its head. Shame intermingled with pleasure as Kolm relentlessly worked at Vanin's sex, vast, hungry lick after lick up from clit to taint. That it would be the last thing the Serevokin ever saw was small comfort. The cultist would know Vanin's violation, and there could be no mistake in the way the medic's body trembled with want for more. At least it kept his musk flowing; Vanin knew well what would happen if he stopped it too early. If he broke concentration for too long, the tokari would lose their focus on the battle. They would become single-minded in their pursuit of one thing and animalistic in their attempts to gain it, and Vanin didn't want to even think about what it might do to Kolm. That eventuality had to be avoided.

The moment to strike approached quickly. The Serevokin drew closer and closer, almost close enough that Vanin was sure he'd feel the draconic's breath on the back of his neck if his nerves weren't already so alighted thanks to Kolm's single-minded interest. The wolf continued to lick, his tongue curling up in deliciously new ways to Vanin's under-experienced body. He squeezed tight enough at the hilt of the sword that he feared splintering it. Closer. Closer. *Closer.*

Then it happened. The Serevokin raised an empty hand, claws extended for the blow that would rip Vanin's head from his shoulder. At the same time and as Kolm withdrew his tongue from inside Vanin, the Nakeletori was left simultaneously free to move and disappointingly empty. Mind temporarily unburdened by the beast's pleasures, Vanin sucked in a breath as he slid loose his sword and rolled to the side.

Claws descended but sparked against stone instead of lupine flesh. One of Vanin's legs lifted to swing up and over Kolm's head, and the feral wolf yipped in surprise as Vanin's robe caught him up. It helped to shield him from the Serevokin's blood as Vanin sliced cleanly up through scale, flesh and bone, and the offending arm that drove those claws flopped wetly to the ground as the Serevokin howled in pain.

The scaled creature still had the presence in mind to kick out with one foot, and Vanin was in too awkward a position to parry. It carried him back and freed Kolm from his fabric prison. Able to see again, Zarett's pet leaped immediately into action and threw himself upon the Serevokin. Were he not locked in a fight for his life, Vanin might have considered the sight of the beast's fully erect shaft glistening in the firelight a darkly comedic in light of his viciousness.

He didn't quite knock the Serevokin down, but the cultist was still staggered by the weight of the feral wolf. His intact arm swung around to dislodge Kolm, but the wolf had already dropped off and backed away for another leap. The cultist's eyes were locked on the beast, and it gave Vanin enough of a chance to find his way up onto his footpaws and prepare his sword.

As Kolm fainted left and drew the cultist's attention, Vanin swept in from the right. The Serevokin swung his claws to block Kolm's potential pounce, which left him open to the strike Vanin landed on a scaled shoulder. Blood was drawn yet again as the Serevokin cried out, and a vicious swing from the cultist's one good arm slid under the sword stroke and knocked Vanin bodily back.

Any harder and the impact that bent him backward over the outcropping that had once kept him hidden might have snapped his spine. He cried out with the impact, but thankfully his paw tightened on the sword. Vanin saw stars, and he blinked rapidly to try and clear his vision as he groaned and looked up.

It was in time to see the Serevokin's severed arm beginning to regenerate; that damnable healing power of theirs had kicked into gear. It kept the rejuvenating limb out of Kolm's line of attack as the wolf leaped up on him again, and Kolm whimpered as another backhand landed and knocked him out of the air. He skidded across the floor toward Vanin, and the Serevokin followed. He sneered down at Vanin as he lifted his good arm, spread his fingers wide, and drove his claws down toward the Nakeletori's chest.

Instead of his chest, they ran into Vanin's sword tip.

He'd brought it up just before the blow came down, and Vanin grunted as he thrust up and right through the Serevokin's hand. Blood spilled across his robe as he sat up and pushed forward with all his might, and gasped triumphantly as he pinned the cultist's hand against his own chest. The sword broke through scales anew, and Vanin snarled at the Serevokin's pain and surprise. Everyone only saw a medic. They never, *ever* saw the lowly medic bender for what he had been trained for: a true Nakeletori warrior.

It was the last thing the Serevokin saw. He fell back, the mortal blow too much for his regenerative powers to sustain. Unfortunately, the grip on Vanin's sword was too great, and the Nakeletori cried out as he felt himself tugged off the outcropping again and pulled down on top of the Serevokin's body. He gasped as they hit the ground, and then grunted as he managed to slip his arms under himself and push his body clear. A quick shove cleared the space beneath him of the cultist, and Vanin slumped back down with a deep sigh. It was done. He'd survived.

His robe was soaked in Serevokin blood, however. With a sigh, Vanin set down his sword and began to slide one arm back through the sleeve. The practicality of a warrior's mind took over immediately. Better to remove the robe than get more blood everywhere. It wouldn't have much use soon anyway.

No sooner was one arm trapped within the offending garment than he realized just how soon it would become irrelevant. Kolm's muzzle was back between Vanin's legs again, and he immediately regretted turning his back on the beast. "Down, Kolm," he ordered the wolf.

This time however, Kolm had no interest in obeying orders. His muzzle vibrated with his response growl, and the feel and sound mixed together to send a shudder through Vanin's body. The medic opened his muzzle to admonish Kolm again as he turned back, but the words froze up in his throat at the sight.

Kolm's eyes, once a warm golden color while survival instinct had been in command, had glazed over almost entirely to a milky white. They bore a dazed intensity that Vanin hadn't seen since he'd reached puberty and discovered the full extent of a bender's abilities... or their dangers. "Oh, no," he mumbled as he instinctively gripped at the ground. This was why he'd wanted the fight over with quickly; he'd lost concentration for too long. Survival instinct wasn't in command anymore... and nor was Vanin.

The feral wolf's mounting leap came faster than Vanin was prepared for, and he yelped at the sudden weight pressed down over him. A warning growl came from above as the beast's forelegs wrapped about Vanin's hips, and the Nakeletori froze up immediately. He hadn't expected his scent to affect a mere animal before they'd set out, but at least now he knew with absolute certainty he could. What a joyous discovery.

He was less surprised with the wet splatter of fluids between his cheeks than he was by Kolm's ability to aim his twitching length right up beneath Vanin's tail. The beast didn't seem to have any problems acknowledging the male beneath him *as* male, but Vanin's eyes

widened nonetheless. The wolf was aimed squarely at the wrong hole, and he doubted entirely Kolm's ability to adequately slick him up for such a thing.

Once more Kolm's hips twitched, and this time they almost found the medic's tailhole. With one arm still bound up by his robe, Vanin reached back as carefully and quickly as he could to try and find that spurting shaft. He prayed that Kolm would not mind the extra touch even as his thoughts raced. Benders were far, far from barren. Kolm might have been a mere animal, but they *were* similar in form. Could he be bred by Kolm? Would the risk be worth it?

Then the wolf bucked forward again, his tip square with the Nakeletori's tailhole, and Vanin gasped with fresh pain. Rational thought left him as his fingers quickly grasped at Kolm's malehood, angled it down and guided it elsewhere. He took a breath, held it as Kolm shuffled on his hind paws-

-and moaned shamelessly when the beast thrust forward and surged between his folds.

It wasn't the first time Vanin had been taken, and the Nakeletori medic had become more than acquainted with different means by which to pleasure himself in the lonely years since puberty. Still, neither personal tending nor the pleasures of a couple of interested and curious parties had ever been so forceful as the way Kolm moved. With his shaft buried deep between Vanin's legs, the medic let go and placed both of his paws back on the ground again.

The sensation shook his whole body in a way that only had a little to do with the hammering of the feral wolf's hips against Vanin. Pleasure tingled out from his core and up throughout every inch of his body. His eyes remained bugged out, stunned and surprised equally with the vigorousness of the wolf's efforts and how quickly he'd begun to spread his legs wider for it. There was no time or room for shame; since he'd entered the cave, Vanin's mind had been firmly in the gutter so as to keep himself at a state of sexual readiness.

But that same effort had left him wanting, filled with a need that Zarett's pet was now hell-bent on fulfilling. Taken completely with the pheromone-laden scent that had so worked him up, the bright red shaft that had once dangled precariously from the wolf's sheath had found its target, and with each passing second Vanin found himself more and more okay with this turn of events.

It was shameful to find one's self beneath an animal in such a manner, but a new breeding urge had overtaken Vanin. The shame of it all didn't matter. He was a bender; his existence was shame. So what? The heavy panting in his ears, the rock of his hips as Kolm slammed into them, the feel of that thick length of flesh as it pumped into Vanin's squeezing muscles were no more shameful to him in that moment than anything else. His muzzle parted not to scold Kolm or warn him off, but to groan in pleasure.

Vanin arched his back slightly and bore back, the better to meet the beast's thrusts. His hips rocked back and forth to match Kolm's motions as Vanin's fluids dripped to the cave's floor, forming the smallest of puddles. His legs spread as far as he dared, lest he slip and deprive himself of Kolm's efforts. The wolf behind him moved smoothly, and he shifted with each movement Vanin made to maintain his breeding pace.

And any concerns Vanin might have had about being bred were just as swiftly fading. He could feel Kolm's knot growing with a twinge of tentative concern. The two partners he'd had were Lissak; the foxes didn't bulge up quite as large as the Nakeletori did. It broke through the pleasure-filled haze of the rut for long enough that Vanin reached back experimentally to where Kolm's malehood spread the lips of his sex wide, and he nearly shuddered with a combination of fear and delight as he felt the swelling of the wolf's knot.

Already the bulbous gland was larger than either of his former partners' had been, and the heat that boiled off it was almost enough to ease Vanin's mind; how would it feel to be stretched around it, tied and filled? His fingers trembled as they dropped away for a moment, before he forced himself to lift his paw again with a groan and try to grasp at Kolm's knot.

Despite Vanin's diminutive stature compared to his fellows, the wolf's knot wasn't quite large enough just yet to be beyond his grip.

Kolm certainly didn't seem to mind the tight squeeze at the base of his shaft. If anything, the growl that sounded from him seemed more approving than not as he hammered away at his bitch. Vanin's fingers grew more and more soaked by the moment in a mixture of his own juices and the pre that spurted from Kolm's tip in what seemed an almost unending tide. Each wild thrust dislodged more and more as the scent of Vanin's arousal was quickly overtaken by that of sex. It filled the cavern and flooded in from every direction.

The puddle beneath Vanin grew larger as his soaking fingers came back and away from Kolm's knot. His body sang; it cried out to let the wolf do as nature intended, and with each head-spinning buck of Kolm's powerful hips the medic found himself only more eager for the same. A deep, guttural, wordless moan dripped from his muzzle as he bore back all the harder against Kolm, and that thick knot mashed all the harder against the lips of his sex as it sought desperate, hungry entrance.

The more assertive Kolm became — and the closer the feral came to tying the bitch below him — the less resistance Vanin offered. The part of his mind that worried about the consequences of what was happening became quieter and quieter, as if washed away by every powerful thrust Kolm made. Not that there was much resistance to speak of, of course. He'd experienced the ferocity of a lover affected by his pheromones before, and he'd felt his own higher thoughts stripped away in the heat-like need that followed it for him.

But *never* had a lover taken him with such bestial need. Vanin stretched out languidly beneath Kolm as the feral wolf ravaged the medic, and he hissed as he felt that bulbous knot still mashing against him. That Kolm hadn't slid it in already might have seemed unusual to Vanin were his insides not being basted in hot pulses of the beast's pre. It did little to quench the growing fire in his body; if anything, it fanned the flames.

Such was his focus that Vanin didn't realize that the sounds of battle deeper in the cave had ceased. His eyes, long since shut against the pleasure of being so thoroughly rutted, couldn't spot the figures that moved toward him. He couldn't see the glaze in their eyes as they followed his scent back to its source. He couldn't even hear their growls as they approached, so consumed was Vanin by Kolm's efforts.

Instead, all he could focus on was the frenetic pumping of Kolm's hips as he humped harder and harder against Vanin's rump, the claws of his forepaws scratching almost but not quite painfully at his sides. Then he found himself unable to focus on anything at all, one thrust finally came with enough vigor to finally ram that knot into him. Eyes crossed as vision whited out for a second, and during that one second all of Vanin's awareness was narrowed to the spread of his folds as Kolm's knot breached him.

It didn't re-emerge as the beast on Vanin's back growled between panted breaths, but the bucks of his hips didn't slow in the least. Trapped as he now was, there was nothing for him but to hump his way rapidly toward the finish. What little extra motion he could get was enough to nudge his tip square against Vanin's cervix, the diminutive Nakeletori's pleasure interspersed with sparks of pain from the too-deep penetration. His cries betrayed none of that pain, as that bulldozer of a knot worked shallowly within him. It felt like that bulb of flesh alone could reorganize Vanin's insides, and that neither Vanin nor Kolm cared. It felt, now that it was in, like it was all that both of them needed.

Kolm didn't seem to need much more than that though, and within only a handful more thrusts Vanin felt the surge of the feral's climax race up his shaft. As his muscles squeezed down around the beast's length, Vanin's jaw fell slack at the sensation of that seed's rush up and into him. Time seemed to slow as the tip of Kolm's length pressed right up against his innermost barrier.

Then that seed poured forth, and the howls of both lupines echoed off the cavern's walls. Surge after surge flooded Vanin's deepest reaches, and any possible fears or concerns about the possible compatibility of their joined bodies was washed away in a tide of hot, sticky white. Vanin's hips rolled desperately back against the tied feral atop him, his body working on desperate instinct as this animal — this mere *beast!* — unloaded into him. Each spurt brought a new pulse of pleasure through Vanin's body, and if there was any part of him that still cared about the wrongness of his position it was silenced by raw, domineering pleasure.

All Vanin could do was lay there, rump raised up for Kolm to drain himself into. He squirmed as he cried out, his insides convulsing around the beast's malehood in a sympathetic orgasm that was only magnified by the heat that spurted over and over into him. It briefly entered Vanin's lust-drunk mind that his position would only help the dangerously virile feral's seed sink down deeper still into him, but that didn't seem to matter so much with the way his folds were bulged around Kolm's buried knot. Damage well and truly done, and it wasn't as though Vanin had put up much of a fight in the first place anyway. He would have blamed himself alone, if he was in any state to blame anything. 'Blame' was the last thing on his mind.

The pleasure started to fade for him, but any semblance of his rational mind was still lost in a satisfied fog. Vanin was vaguely aware of the way Kolm had begun to shift atop him, but the pulse of the feral's shaft didn't abate completely. Each throb brought more wet warmth into Vanin's body, and it left the little medic cooing as he squirmed around the knot that locked him to Kolm. He'd never considered bedding down with a beast before. Despite his initial resistance, Vanin felt he understood quite better why it might be that some would turn to them over their bipedal peers.

A glance back once he could finally uncross his eyes brought Kolm's hindquarters into sight. Zarett's pet had pulled off Vanin's back, but his knot kept him from a proper escape. That was fine for Vanin; the insistent tugs that came from Kolm as he reoriented himself rump to rump with Vanin only sent new tingles of pleasure through him. The little Nakeletori closed his eyes as he turned his head forward again and started to lay it down on the cavern floor.

The sound of metal boots on stone floor lifted Vanin's head though, and the sight immediately set him ill at ease. Before him was Borhamis, the large Nakeletori warrior quickly on approach toward the downed medic. His brother was a short ways behind him, both of them possessed of the same glassy, milky stare as Kolm. They had shed their weapons somewhere before they'd made their way back toward the source of the pheromones that had taken hold, and Vanin could only hope that a trail of Serevokin corpses had been left behind along with them.

That wasn't all they'd shed. Borhamis' greaves had been discarded somewhere as well, and the thick Nakeletori warrior's equally thick malehood was on open display. It was a far cry from the mind-blowingly massive knot that was currently lodged between Vanin's legs, but its thickness was uniform along the full length of his shaft. Lijar, by contrast, had the length to surpass Kolm but not nearly the thickness to match.

That flush of warmth deep in Vanin surged again at the sight of them and he whimpered needfully. He lifted a paw to reach up, but found himself tugged back as Kolm shifted away from him. Vanin gasped as his muscles instinctively squeezed down around the beast's knotted shaft, drawing deep yet another of Kolm's weaker, fading spurts. An errant paw ran down his front as he shivered, and Vanin found himself able to feel Kolm's knot through his spread folds. The moan that split his lips was shameless.

A yip of surprised followed it as Borhamis' meaty paws came down on Vanin's shoulders. He looked up as the larger lupine growled and tugged him forward. Pre from

Borhamis' shaft drooled down across the bridge of Vanin's muzzle as Kolm echoed his surprised cry, tugged along with him. The beast's sound faded into an annoyed growl for only a moment, before he tugged back and the conflicting forces resulted in his knot popping quickly, if not cleanly, from Vanin.

It was nearly a torrent of spent seed that came with Kolm's freed shaft, and it splattered the stone floor as Vanin was tugged forward again. The paws on his shoulders withdrew for a second, before Borhamis' arms hooked under Vanin's and hoisted the little medic up.

The larger wolf's shaft left a line of dampened fur along Vanin's belly as he was yanked up, and the sensation was obviously one that Borhamis found appealing. He ground his hips up and pressed against Vanin's stomach, smearing more of his fur with that slick pre. It wasn't until Vanin began to squirm that he was lifted a little higher, and the tip of the warrior's thick length suddenly found itself all the wetter. Borhamis' pre was washed away by a combination of Vanin's and Kolm's fluids, left drooling from his already well-used sex.

Not sufficiently used to Borhamis' liking, though. Kolm's rough, bestial breeding proved to be a blessing for Vanin, as the sudden buck of Borhamis' hips rolled that stubby, thick shaft right up and between his nethers. It sank all the way in as Vanin joined the brute in a gasped moan of pleasure, the feral's efforts paving the way for what might have otherwise been a tighter fit.

Both of Borhamis' meaty arms wrapped tight around Vanin, almost tight enough to crush the much smaller lupine in his embrace. There was no warmth or care in the gesture, either; it was purely to keep him in place as the warrior began to buck his hips hard. His thrusts swung Vanin out almost like a pendulum as he began to grunt, and the combination of the downswing and Borhamis' thrusts kept his shaft outside Vanin only for a moment before it was sheathed back inside his soaked passage.

But to Vanin, still dazed from the powerful breeding he'd been subjected to under Kolm, there was no chance of argument. Borhamis' nature and behavior earlier had been washed away in the wake of the medic's pheromonal influence, and in their place were left one warrior who needed to breed and another who needed to be bred. Vanin's legs lifted to wrap around Borhamis' waist of their own accord, the smaller male as lost to the situation as the one who thrust deep within him.

So taken was he with being taken that Vanin completely lost awareness of Lijar's position. The younger of the brothers seemed to have become tired of waiting for his turn, and a growl from Borhamis was the only warning Vanin received that Lijar was on approach. His head twisted slightly in Borhamis' grip, and out of the corner of one eye he dimly registered Lijar's lustful, glazed stare before a particularly sharp thrust from Borhamis caused him to squeeze his eyes shut.

Those thrusts became slower and more deliberate but no less hard as Vanin was bounced against Borhamis' lap. His teeth grit as sparks of pleasure raced through him, raked with each tug and pull of the shaft that plunged lewdly between his wide-spread folds. He was aware for a second of one of Borhamis' arms uncurling from around him and a strange motion in the large male's body, then a second later he gasped when the thick shaft that had so thoroughly pumped into him slipped entirely free.

Another body pressed to his back in that second. Another pair of paws began to share in the elevation of his weight as a narrower length of flesh nudged up between Vanin's legs. His back arched as Borhamis' tip pressed up with it, as if it had been planned. They lowered Vanin even as they thrust forward, and the smaller wolf yipped as he was spread instantly by both lengths of flesh.

They speared him deep and pied him wide, Vanin's legs left to twitch and shake impotently as both brothers sank into his wetness. Pulled open so by them both, Vanin's sex

drooled more than it had with just the larger male buried in him. His juices and Kolm's soaked both of the brothers' lengths, as they worked quickly into a rhythm that smashed the stunned medic between their bodies.

Vanin's jaw was left to hang open, deep breaths panted from his muzzle as his eyes rolled back. His tail was trapped up against Lijar's chest as his head lolled out against Borhamis' chest. Pleasure driven by the mating need he'd triggered in the brothers overrode the pain of being spread so wide, and what would ordinarily have caused Vanin discomfort only mildly distracted from the feeling of being so thoroughly spread out.

It was some small cosmic mercy that the brothers complemented each other well. Borhamis couldn't reach the depth that Lijar could, and Lijar didn't strain Vanin the way that the larger wolf did. It came with a delicious extra perk, in that the difference in their lengths altered the speeds at which they thrust. With their minds so consumed with that singular need, there was no way in the world that they had anything in them save for the desire to take Vanin as hard and rapidly as possible. What had started as a shared penetrative pace quickly broke down.

In stead, Vanin was bumped back and forth between the brothers as each one kept their own rhythm within him. Borhamis' thrusts came faster, jostling the little medic harder against Lijar. By contrast, Lijar's thrusts were longer and slightly slower. Borhamis dictated the way Vanin rocked back down against it, and altered the feel of every buck of Lijar's hips.

Where once upon a time Vanin had been completely unable to find anyone who would be willing to help him scratch his most intimate itches, the complete surrender forced by the domineering males around him was sweeter than anything he could have anticipated. He couldn't move, couldn't help or hinder, and he couldn't for the life of him think of anything else he'd rather be doing in that moment.

He was completely oblivious to the dominance game above and around him. The two brothers growled and bit at each other as they shifted against and around Vanin, any trace of their tokari training wiped in the wake of Vanin's lost control. With only the one purpose before them, each was desperate to be the one to control Vanin's diminutive body. They shoved against one another, and arms shifted to try and move him into a more advantageous position for their use.

All this resulted in for Vanin was a more vigorous rutting. There wasn't much room for him to move anyway, and it was all he could do to simply fall limp between the warriors and bear the brunt of their lusts. His pants for breath grew deeper and more laborious as the brothers shifted harder; their thrusts only intensified as they dueled within him as much as outside of him for control.

Vanin couldn't even think about what they must be feeling. The grind of their malehoods together within the vice-like grip of his sex was too much friction against his insides. So completely and totally filled, it seemed to the medic as though every little bit of his passage was being rubbed against at any moment. His most sensitive spots were ground into less out of a desire to please him, but because there was nowhere else for the brothers' pumping shafts to go. Borhamis' length, in particular, seemed to send paroxysm of pleasure through Vanin's whole self.

It all reached its peak for Vanin as the shuffling of the brothers around him reached at last a critical misstep. The puddle that had only grown larger between them and beneath Vanin's sodden, spread sex wound up under Lijar's left footpaw. His weight shifted onto it just long enough for him to slip on the combination of fluids from four different males, and three of them howled as Lijar fell backward and tugged Vanin and Borhamis with him. The hit the ground, both lengths of knotted malehood ramming hard up into Vanin.

Neither knot was able to breach him, so full already was he. But the sharpness of the unintentional thrusts combined with both brother's bodies insulation him from the impact

knocked the wind out of Vanin twice over. He squeaked as the grind of those bulbous glands mashed against his thoroughly stuffed folds, one above and one below. He hadn't the strength or the air to cry out as another orgasm washed down over him, but that didn't matter.

Not Borhamis nor Lijar seemed to care even a little about the pleasurable writhing of the medic wedged between them beyond the way his insides massaged down around their shafts. He could barely make out the spurting of their pre as it jetted up into him, but Vanin's head tilted back as much for fresh air as it was to cry out with delight. One paw lifted to grab a fistful of Borhamis' shoulder, while his other dropped to Lijar's side. There he braced, once more jostled by the brothers as they bucked together within him again.

The waves of pleasure that Vanin was subjected to were only further added to as both Borhamis and Lijar continued their little battle over his body. Each buck of their hips would wedge their shafts up into the medic's body, and the little wolf's climax was only amplified with each grind that worked against his insides. His eyes crossed and rolled back as he used his grip on them both to bear down onto their shafts, only adding to the sensation of his orgasm.

But when that orgasm began to wind down and his eyes refocused above him to bring an upside down view of the cavern back into his sight, some part of Vanin realized that there were other missing figures in the cavern with them. At least one more was heading toward them, and it took a moment for Vanin to realize through the darkness that it was Zarett. The hunter's black fur almost concealed him from view, and he wore it bare. His armor and weapon were gone, and a veritable *pillar* of ebon flesh rose from between his legs as he strode toward Vanin, Borhamis and Lijar.

If the shadows of the cavern just about hid Zarett, it was Zarett's fur that hid that titanic shaft from Vanin. The punishment his sex endured at that moment was nothing compared to the promise that rose from Zarett's sheath and glinted in his glazed eyes. The hunter's motions were less animalistic than those of his companions, though; for as consumed by the effects of Vanin's pheromones as he obviously was, he approached in measured steps. A spark of intelligence still lingered in his gaze as it fixed on Vanin.

Rational or not, Vanin was past caring. The frenzy he'd unintentionally stirred the tokari into had sparked an unquenchable fire in himself, and it was something he was equally as slaved to as them. He simply hung limp between the two brothers as he was used, eyes locked on Zarett's length as it drew closer and closer.

As he approached, both of the brothers seemed to become unsure. His position as leader might have meant less in the wake of their higher thought processes being stripped away, but they must have still recognized some authority in his presence. Their thrusts slowed slightly, but that just left their shafts plunged deep into Vanin's clenching depths as their knots ground against his folds with the slowed rolls of their hips. They seemed almost to be waiting for him to act. To decide something.

The near-stillness between Vanin's legs was the calmest the region had been since Kolm had mounted him, and it felt like equal parts relief and frustration to the medic. He couldn't move with how tightly he was sandwiched between Borhamis and Lijar, and his eyes never lifted for a second from Zarett's malehood. The wolf before him seemed to simply drink in the sight of what was happening, even as impatience won out for the brothers and the began to tentatively thrust once again.

They didn't even stop as Zarett made his way finally over to them. He stood close enough that Vanin could even scent the difference between the rut in the air and the musk that boiled off of the black wolf's shaft. It didn't hurt that Zarett lowered himself slightly toward Vanin, nor that the motion brought that spire of flesh right in line with the medic's muzzle. It took only the single poke of a pre-drooling tip against the side of Vanin's muzzle before his lips parted, and within a moment his jaw was stretched wide by the hunter's girth.

But instead of thrusting down to the root as Vanin might have expected, Zarett seemed to hold steady. Just the tapered tip of that lupine length was sheathed within the warmth of his mouth, but there it remained. The only motion that teased along it came from the combination of a curious tongue that ran up the side — where it could find room in the surprisingly snug fit — and the rock of his lips when Borhamis and Lijar resumed their contest in earnest.

He rolled his head up as much as he could to bring Zarett back into view, and Vanin's ears folded back. Zarett was already staring back down at him, still unmoving as a statue and with his eyes locked firmly on the medic's. Only the pulse of the flesh between Vanin's lips betrayed the wolf's presence as real. There was a tenseness to his body, toned and taut beneath all that thick fur as his stare remained steady.

It was almost like he was still waiting for something, as the brothers continued their assault on Vanin's nethers. Vanin couldn't comprehend what it could possibly be, but the presence of the shaft in his muzzle was enough. It'd been put there for a reason, after all. While Vanin's meager experience had been with his *other* lips being penetrated, he'd heard tell of that particular method of pleasuring a male. Why it was so sought he couldn't tell.

But as he began to slide his tongue up along Zarett's malehood and ease more of it into his muzzle, he became gradually aware that it must have been good. A deep, low growl of satisfaction rolled out of Zarett's throat, and no sooner had Vanin begun to lick and suckle on the hunter's shaft than it began to shift in his mouth. Perhaps it was a function of size or a concern for an inexperienced muzzle full of sharp teeth, but Zarett's hips moved much more deliberately than either of the brothers.

They didn't seem to care in the slightest what was happening to the other end of Vanin's body. They were more than contented in the embrace of his lower portion. From Lijar's position on the ground, he couldn't quite use the full length of his shaft to drive up into Vanin. That didn't stop him from trying with increasing vigor, and surges of watery pre splashed warmly up and into the medic's passage.

Each spurt was joined by one from Borhamis' malehood. What he lacked in Lijar's length he made up for with his girth, and that was only helped along with his brother's thrusts. They helped to angle that stubby shaft upward, grinding it into sensitive spots that Vanin hadn't ever felt so thoroughly stimulated before. His sex was a wet and sopping mess, as each buck of their hips spilled more fluid into Vanin than he could take. What little of Kolm's seed remained in him was likely too deep to wash out, but both brothers gave it their best shot. It wasn't just Vanin soaked through by their efforts; Lijar's entire lap and tail were as soaked as Vanin's thighs.

And throughout the duo's assault on Vanin's folds, Zarett provided a steady, reserved counterpoint. He was no less firm than any of the other males in the cavern had been, but that came with a sort of gentleness that would have impressed Vanin if he'd been capable of sorting his thoughts sufficiently to appreciate it. Instead, all that he could do was roll his tongue across Zarett's tip when it pulled back far enough that he could successfully do so.

The taste was unlike anything Vanin had ever experienced before, and his immediate reaction was a negative one on that point alone. 'Earthy' would be the way he might have described it, had he been able to overcome the sheer maleness of it all. That had nothing to do with the way that it spread his jaw wide enough to hurt as he instinctively tried to keep his teeth from raking along it. That didn't stop little teasing nips from running along the underside as Zarett thrust in from time to time, but to his credit Vanin only heard assenting moans in response to those light nips.

They couldn't be helped, of course. Not with the way that his body was jostled about. Three males vied for dominance over him. Three males had buried themselves within him. Vanin's body was not so much his own to command and control at that point. If there was

much of Vanin left — if there was a part of him that was not the heat-stricken creature that he had created once he'd surrendered to these lustful creatures he'd created out of the greatest warriors of his people — he might have chafed at the way he had no decision or say in what happened to him,

But the Vanin that was stuck between Borhamis and Lijar and Zarett had nothing to say on the subject at all in a way that had nothing to do with the shaft in his muzzle and everything to do with it and the other two that pumped eagerly between his legs. Knots battered at his folds as they sought entry, both of the brothers wrapped their arms tight around him as they tried to move him into a better position to visit their lusts upon, and through it all Zarett remained the calm, cool eye of the storm.

It was Borhamis to lose his control first, perhaps owing to his first few minutes of access to an unhindered Vanin. Regardless of the why, his howl rivaled Kolm's cry of exultation as he pushed up as hard as he could and crammed his knot up against Vanin's sex. Stretched and abused though it was, his brother's length prevented it entry. He was left to impotently buck and grind up against Vanin as his shaft erupted, his seed jetting up and hosing down the medic's insides.

At the same time, Vanin's own cries were muted by a spurt of pre from Zarett so voluminous that there was no way for the smaller Vanin to contain it all. He coughed around the malehood stuffed in his muzzle, his throat clearing itself of the fluids that were desperate to rush down into him for only a moment before a second spurt came alongside it. This one was handled better as he shifted his focus more to Zarett's efforts, swallowing down with a rhythm that matched the pulses of Borhamis' shaft. A shiver ran through Vanin with every shot; Kolm was an unknown quantity, but Borhamis was Nakeletori. He could certainly be bred by the seed that poured into him.

But that seed was not taken with fear or concern; such things were beyond Vanin. Instead, each sticky spurt brought a sense of satisfaction. Pleasure rolled through him as his body drank in first just Borhamis' seed, and then his brother's as Lijar joined him in his climax. Fluids spilled out of Vanin as they both continued to grind and grunt through their peaks, as if each sought to outpace the other. Even in the midst of orgasm it seemed that the brothers were still locked in competition, with their prize the pride of their virility.

While neither lupine could knot him as Kolm had, the sheer volume of two loads spilled inside Vanin made up for their shared lack of depth. A choked gasp came from Vanin around his filled muzzle as a moment's pressure built and was then relieved, as if an inner barrier had given way once again. The flow of backwashed seed from between his legs no longer sullied three males' worth of thighs; Vanin shuddered and gave a gurgled little moan as it sank in deeper.

That deeper satisfaction was only borne for a couple more moments before the brothers roughly pulled back out of him again. Borhamis was the first again, and he stumbled back from Vanin as if in a daze. His shaft was still hard as rock, glistening and soaked in a mixture of fluids as he sat back, panting for breath. He fell back further until he lay on his back, and his chest rapidly rose and fell as he tried to recover from what seemed to have been an almost painfully intense orgasm.

Lijar fared somewhat better. With only Vanin's minuscule weight atop him then, it took little effort for him to roll the thoroughly-used medic off of him as he too fought to suck in air in deep, huffing breaths. If Zarett hadn't pulled his shaft clear of Vanin's muzzle, as Borhamis pulled away from the little bender, the force with which Lijar dislodged him might have sunk teeth into his most sensitive flesh.

But such a travesty had been averted, either by accident or design. The sudden freedom to close his muzzle was ignored for a second as Vanin's mouth hung open, leaving him able to breathe again. His sense of smell was assailed with every inhalation by the scent

of rut, but in the wake of everything he could *still* take in the unique scent that was Zarett's. He hadn't moved an inch since he'd been evicted from Vanin's muzzle, but his eyes had remained locked on the medic while his shaft continued to drool across the ground.

It seemed to be an opportunity, if Vanin was willing to take it. He didn't have to submit to any further use; none of the males around him were in the slightest capable of giving pursuit to him right now if he left, save for Zarett. He wasn't behaving like the others, though. His stance, while tensed with deeply physical need, was easier and more person-like than the way the others had approached him. Vanin wasn't even certain that if he ran, Zarett would pursue. He might not. He might just wait there in the cavern until the rut that Vanin had induced wore off and restored him to sanity.

That it was what he had been selected for didn't enter into Vanin's mind for a second. He glanced toward the cavern entrance, still within view. He was on forepaws and knees. It would take little to gather his strength and bolt for it, and then allow the tokari to sort themselves out in the wake of his presence. He didn't owe them anything. Vanin didn't know them. All that was there was obligation, and odds were good that they would not remember anything when their senses of self were restored. However pleasurable the acts he'd already been subjected to had been, there was no need to further subject himself to them.

Which is why it somewhat left a part of him confused when Vanin turned around, presented his rump to Zarett and curled his tail up high. He stared out at the wall opposite, the hunter and his shaft no longer in sight as he waited and trembled in anticipation. It wasn't duty that had caused him to act so. It wasn't even the lustful need that had been building steadily with every pump of tokari hips against him. It wasn't the anticipation of Zarett's shaft and how it might feel spreading him wide.

But spread him wide it did, as a moment later paws found his hips and guided him back onto that length of flesh. It didn't exactly nudge its way between Vanin's folds with the ease that he might have expected, and the feel of Zarett working him wider even than Kolm's knot — wider than the brothers *combined* — crossed the medic's eyes. They rolled back into his skull as his whole body trembled. Pain? Pleasure? He couldn't determine one from the other as inch after glorious inch sank into his soaked passage. How much was there? One inch. Two. Four. Seven. More. *More*.

Spent seed and pre was forced out to make room for that titanic length, and it squelched out around Zarett's malehood in lewd slops to splatter the floor. More of his shaft still might have slid in, guided with steady, unrelenting force if not for Vanin's inner barrier. His cervix, despite the battering Kolm and Lijar had given it, still refused Zarett's shaft to sink in all the way. It might have been a problem for Vanin, but it seemed as though Zarett himself was more than comfortable with the length that was consumed within Vanin's spread body. What was not was soaked in the effluence from his other recent partners, but Vanin couldn't even begin to feel the stirrings of a knot. It sent a new sensation swirling through the pit of his distended stomach: fear. Could he even take a knot as large as what Zarett's had to be?

Such concerns were robbed of him as Zarett's hips ground into motion. They moved slow but with incredible strength, and the paws that rested on Vanin's hips squeezed him tight and guided him into exactly what position he needed to be in. Even if Vanin had been able to be upset with his loss of control, he would have been hard pressed to feel it. Zarett's grip on his body, inside and out, was all-pervasive. It guided Vanin exactly to where he was. To where he needed to be. To where every fiber of him *wanted* to be.

That black shaft shone in the cave's firelight for the brief moment that it was exposed to the air again, and for that moment fluids began to drool once again out of Vanin's abused entrance. He might have wondered if Zarett was busy admiring the view, but that thought was

stolen as the hunter thrust forward again. Teeth grit instinctively against the pain of Zarett's shaft sinking in further than it was meant to, but that pain never came.

Instead, the tip of his shaft barely kissed the medic's cervix. There was a moment's sensation — a tingle, barely — and nothing more. Somehow that tingle was even more tantalizing than the desperate pounding of Kolm, or the dueling thrusts of Borhamis and Lijar. Vanin's legs trembled as Zarett drew back for another thrust, just as slow and methodical as he had before.

The thing about it all was the *evenness* of it all. It felt exactly as needful as everyone else had been when they'd taken Vanin. More so, in fact; Zarett had obviously been forced to wait the longest so far, and the way his claws threatened to dig into Vanin's hips was all the evidence he needed to know how badly the hunter needed what he was getting. It didn't consume him the same way it had the others, though. Something had balanced it out, and it gave Zarett's motions something more. Not restraint per se, but a temperance.

That temperance stoked the flames in Vanin in a way that none of the other tokari had been able to. They had all given everything they had and then more besides, driven on by something beyond any of their ability to control. Each roll of Zarett's hips was slow and easy, firm and deep and *reserved*. As if he knew that he could simply break the medic beneath him, and so adjusted himself accordingly. It almost spoke of care.

Such considerations were too far from Vanin's mind, though. The restraint that Zarett had shown him only inflamed the smaller wolf's needs further. Vanin's hips began to gyrate back as he worked himself back and down along the hunter's shaft. He grunted and groaned as he pushed himself down hard, harder than he'd ever wanted to with anyone else before. He'd taken Kolm completely. He'd taken Borhamis and Lijar. He wasn't about to be left wanting with Zarett.

Unfortunately it was the size of his body that was the limiting factor. More than two heads shorter than Zarett, there was no way the full length of the hunter — let alone the girth of the knot that was to come — could possibly all fit within him. As Vanin bore back, he felt another half inch push into him. It strained his insides and there was a fresh spark of pain, but the hungry growl that it birthed from Zarett was itself almost worth the pain. Then Zarett pulled out completely, and Vanin shuddered with the sudden emptiness. His sex felt much like the cavern around them; hollowed out and mostly empty.

He wasn't prepared when the fingers on Vanin's hips tightened and lifted his body. The world spun as he was turned about, and Vanin cried out in confusion as much as surprise as the cavern's ceiling came into view. His eyes dropped lower to bring Zarett back into view, and he shuddered anew. He could see more clearly the hunter, kneeling down on both legs with Vanin's middle hoisted up toward his lap. Zarett's malehood stood up, flanked by Vanin's spread folds as he gave an experimental thrust up into the open air.

Pleasure sparkled from the friction, and Vanin's back arched up and into it as he pressed against that hot, lupine spear. At that angle he wasn't likely to be able to force it back into himself, but that mattered less as Zarett ground himself up and down along Vanin's sex. Each thrust grew longer, soaking more and more of that massive length in Vanin's spilled, shared fluids. Closer and closer his tip came to that delicious point of reentry, and Vanin found himself panting rapidly with need. He watched, unmoving and unwilling to move, the anticipating building and building.

And then it dipped just low enough, caught, and the next thrust brought nearly all of the hunter's malehood back down deep inside Vanin. The tip passed right by his cervix and spread it open as a spurt of pre was deposited squarely in and amongst the mixed seed that already pooled there, and Vanin whimpered less with pain and more with *delight* at the feeling. It did nothing to curb the heat that flooded him, but it felt right. That was where

Zarett needed to spend himself, and by all the gods that ever were Vanin knew he would make it happen.

He pressed down harder and grit his teeth, but he couldn't quite force any more of Zarett's shaft to spread his inner barrier wider. The effort only made Zarett draw back and thrust in again, though he refused to push himself in quite as deep as he had before. The grip on Vanin's hips returned immediately, claws and all, as he squirmed against Zarett's lap. The larger wolf simply held the medic steady, as if to prevent himself injuring himself in the midst of his 'duty.'

Such injury was the last thing on Vanin's mind. His hips continued to roll as he clenched his legs closed as best he could around Zarett's waist. He used the leverage to shift and work himself along the hunter's shaft, as much working himself up as he hoped he was working up Zarett. It certainly seemed to be helping, if nothing else; Zarett's nostrils flared as his growls grew deeper, and each squeeze of the fingers on Vanin's hips seemed to pulse in strength with each surge of pre-seed that ran along his shaft.

It was almost as though Vanin had become hyper-aware of his sex. What once he'd considered nothing more than a hideous deformity and aberration against his masculinity was now repenting in spades. It wasn't just the pulses of Zarett's pre that he felt. It was every single throb and twitch; every delightful grind and painful stretch. He'd felt Kolm's knot stretch him, and he'd felt the brothers doing their best to breed him. Never though in his life was Vanin quite as aware of his body in the way that he was right then and there, and it only made everything all the better.

Still Zarett seemed to hold back for whatever reason, but Vanin couldn't be satisfied with just what he had. He watched as over and over again the combination of his squirming and Zarett's thrusting caused the myriad, black inches vanished into his sex, only to be pulled back a moment later. The sight was almost as electric as the sensation, and it was almost hypnotic to Vanin as he simply lay back and *stared* up along his body. Over and over his soaked lower lips parted, spread wide by Zarett's malehood to take as much of him as was physically possible. The pain of those initial, shallow breaches began to lessen with the ongoing efforts Vanin made to sink the rest of the wolf's length into him. Pride and lust were a dangerous combination. They wouldn't brook anything less than a knotting.

That danger became more and more apparent the longer Vanin watched. It started slowly enough at first; an innocuous swell at the base of Zarett's shaft that he might have missed entirely given the overall thickness of his malehood. But as Zarett became able to plunge deeper and deeper into the mindlessly needful Vanin, Vanin was able to feel his folds parted further for the first time since Zarett had first slid into him. If he might have ignored the evidence of his eyes, his other senses shored it up. That knot was growing.

And Zarett showed no sign of letting up. It was as if Vanin's desperation had evoked a greater need in the hunter, and his thrusts only picked up their pace. Suddenly it wasn't about tempering his thrusts and managing his depth with the diminutive medic, no. No, now there was a new curl to Zarett's muzzle; a snarl that betrayed a deeper-seated need. If he'd somehow been able to hold off the depths of needful depravity that the others had succumbed to, Vanin's efforts to take him fully had only help coax him toward it.

Vanin didn't care. He couldn't care. His whole awareness was narrowed to that channel between his legs and the rolling tide of flesh that ebbed and flowed up and down it. Every action was either to get more of it, or to pull back in preparation for it to spread him open anew. He might have forgotten to breathe, if not for the desperate panting that punctuated his gasps and moans of pleasure.

His efforts weren't completely in vain, though. The combination of Zarett's slipping reservations and Vanin's single-minded breeding drive led them gradually deeper and deeper. The smaller wolf's legs to spread wide, taking in as much of the hunter as he possible could.

Zarett began to pull Vanin down harder still, insistently pulling him onto that still-swelling knot. Already wider around by far than both Borhamis' and Lijar's shafts had been side by side and still swelling, it began to take more and more effort to pop it even half in and out of the medic's well-used passage.

Each time it slipped in and out was a new wave of pleasure to ride for Vanin. The waves built on one another and fed into his desperation. It was so close! *He* was so close! He could almost taste it; he *could* taste the remnants of Zarett's pre on his tongue. He knew the taste of the fluids that continued to seep into him, deposited spurt by spurt into his womb by a slab of malehood that his body was never seriously intended to take in. He knew the taste of the shaft that throbbed inside him, swelling and growing even as his body strained to accommodate it.

The moment came when the hunter's knot was almost too big to slip past Vanin's folds. It was still growing, swelling desperately with the need to see Zarett's shaft erupt. Vanin's sex could only take so much though, and the extra depth was still too much for him to take. Once, and Zarett bucked forward and ground the knot into Vanin. Twice, and Vanin bore back to try to help it.

Three, and it surged in as both bore down at the same time.

It felt to Vanin like a dam breached, and it may as well have been. Pain tore through him as more of Zarett's shaft surged into him far deeper than he'd ever expected, pushing into a place it was never meant to be. That pain was subsumed by the magnitude of the accomplishment and the feel of that oversized knot inflating the rest of the way. It pressed down on every little shallow spot that could bring pleasure, and the pain was swiftly swept aside in the wake of pleasure sufficient to throw Vanin far from the cavern and into the clouds. An orgasm rolled through his whole body, from the tips of his ears right to the end of his tail, and his body spasmed against Zarett as he lost full and complete control of himself.

All he could do was lay there, back arched as his body was wracked over and over again by those mirror sensations. Zarett continued to buck against him, but he had precious little more to give now that his knot had stuffed and plugged Vanin completely. What little range of motion had left he went ballistic with, his knot surging back and forth shallowly and tugging on Vanin from the inside out. There was no chance of it vacating the medic's sex, though; its sheer size and Vanin's clenching muscles ensured it was going nowhere.

Hot on the heels of Vanin's climax came Zarett's. With Vanin's body wrapped so completely around his malehood — indeed he could probably see the indent in Vanin's stomach where he'd been filled so utterly — and tugging back on that ever-sensitive knot, it was only a matter of moments more before he could no longer resist the need to seed the little wolf beneath him. Claws dug into Vanin's side, pinpricks in the wake of what he was already feeling as Vanin's howl of pleasure was drowned out by a guttural, bestial *roar* of exultation from Zarett.

Then came the flood.

There was nowhere for it to go but in. His innermost reaches breached and Zarett's knot creating a near perfect seal, all Vanin could do was reach out with both paws to the hunter's legs beneath his back and hold on for dear life. Through the throes of his own climax, Vanin shuddered and shook with every spurt of thick, hot seed that rushed into him. He felt it from his spread folds as Zarett's gargantuan knot pulsed, could trace it right up along the hunter's shaft, and then it vanished for a moment before it exploded down and into him. The fires of need that had been so inflamed in the wake of his lost control were drenched, completely consumed in a tide of white that rushed forth in equally searing waves. One heat was replaced with another, and Vanin almost felt himself washed away in the same tide.

The totality; the *finality* of Zarett's climax sent sympathetic shocks through Vanin's already overloaded body. Echoes of his orgasm reverberated through him, end to end. The echoes didn't slow until the flood began to subside, and even then they continued to linger. Vanin felt as though he himself had become nothing but seed with all that had been pumped into him. He felt like nothing so much as a puddle of sticky goop on the cavern floor, unable to move his legs or lift neither head nor arm. His tail, soaked much like his entire lower half in the fluids now of five different males, was still, but the tip twitched as his toes curled and uncurled.

For a moment he wondered if he might black out. For another moment he wondered if he *had*. Awareness wasn't exactly something that Vanin had in excess as he gasped desperately for breath. In the wake of such a world-shattering orgasm, he felt almost... whole again. Like the part of him that had been given control through what all had happened was finally under his command again, and that he had his true self restored.

With that came the reality of his situation, but Vanin pushed the possibilities and the futures out of his mind. More immediate was the soreness in his body as he sprawled out with a deep, shuddering sigh. Some part of him realized that if Zarett stood up right now, Vanin might find himself suspended by the hunter's shaft, and the silliness of the thought launched him into a quiet fit of giggles. They only lasted until he tried to sit up some, and his spine rebelled against him.

Instead, Vanin groaned and lay back down again. Zarett hadn't moved in the wake of his climax, but there was still the sound of movement around them. Vanin wondered how long those sounds had been there, while he'd been distracted. He tilted his head slowly about and tried to bring the source of the sounds into view.

Part of him wished he hadn't. It was Borhamis and Lijar, the brothers once more upright and nearby. Those two lengths of flesh stood proud and tall once more, as if undiminished by what Vanin had already been through. He winced at the sight of them and bit back a sigh. They were still stuck in the rut he'd caused. It was going to be a long night.

But then, as Zarett shifted and started to tug slowly back, Vanin felt the first stirrings of the heat inside him flare up again. He hissed as Zarett tugged back at him again, less in pain or distress but with the way it shifted the buried, knotted shaft inside him. He seemed to understand, just as the rest of them did, that there was still a long, debauched night still ahead of them.

For how long they remained in the cave, venting their lusts on and within Vanin's body the medic couldn't be entirely sure at the time. Later he'd learn that they'd only been in the cave for a night and much of the next morning, though they'd all collapsed from exhaustion after such a long period of time. By that point even the hard stone floor where he lay, covered and caked in the fluids of more spent loads than he could count, seemed a fair approximation of a bed to Vanin. He'd been all too happy to sleep, as had the others.

When they'd woken, Zarett had been back to his characteristic, terse and cool self. Borhamis and Lijar were back to normal too, and they resumed their little teases. Even Kolm was the consummate trained animal, though he was certainly more friendly with Vanin than he had been before. It had been a blessing so far as Vanin was concerned. At least someone had warmed to him, and that was enough to put him in a better mood.

Much more sobering had been the recovery of Waesor and Farche's bodies.

It explained why Vanin had never seen the magus or the scout after the battle, though he'd been distracted at the time. While Zarett, Borhamis and Lijar had remembered everything that had happened, it had taken some time into the early afternoon when they'd

awoken to realize that the two were missing. The discovery of their bodies had stolen any levity the brothers might have retained in the wake of the otherwise successful mission, and even Zarett had become more subdued than usual. Logic said that two lost for the destruction of an entire cultist cell was a fair price to pay, but for the members of the group — warriors who had fought alongside one another for years — it was still two too many.

The brothers had carried their bodies back, one for each of them. Zarett and Kolm had taken Farche's scouting duties and led the way back to the warband's camp. Vanin had trudged silently behind. It still hurt somewhat to walk after the blow he'd suffered in the fight and then the relief he'd had to offer his companions immediately afterward, but the pain in his back and the ache in his loins were a small price to pay for surviving a mission that had claimed two tokari. Borhamis and Lijar had, at least, been silent all the way back. Somehow, that felt worse than their barbs and insults. As though they carried not only friends, but a fallen part of themselves.

The funerals had been a closed affair that Vanin, even having accompanied them on the mission that they had fallen on, had not been allowed to attend. He had wanted to pay his respects, but had been forced to wait until after the quiet, midnight ceremony. He'd stayed up all night, waiting until the mournful howls of the fallen's companions had died off near to dawn, before he'd attended their bodies and offered each a short, quiet prayer.

And then life went on, much the same as before. The warband's job was not finished; the cultists that had been cornered were believed to be the last, but operations in the Emerald Reach were not complete until every last acre had been scouted, evaluated and declared clear. Vanin's job too continued; members of the warband were always getting injured sparring, or misstepping in the foliage, or running afoul of some of the beasts that called the Reach home.

It wasn't until one morning, over a week later, when Vanin had been preparing to head back to his tent after an all-night shift in the infirmary when he'd found a familiar beast in his path. He smiled as he knelt down and brought his head equal with Kolm's as he reached out to rub at the feral wolf's side. "Good morning, Kolm."

The wolf's tongue lolled out in lazy, positive acknowledgment as a shadow fell across Vanin. He quickly straightened as he found himself before Zarett for the first time since the mission. Vanin quickly cleared his throat and stood up taller, his ears pinned back. "Sir."

"Zarett." The larger Nakeletori tilted an ear up as the edge of his muzzle twitched for a moment. "Please. After... everything, there is no need for military formality. I am not your superior. We have fought together side by side. Status matters little to me."

The smile came before Vanin could control it, but he allowed it to remain on his face as he relaxed. "Zarett, then. What can I do for you?"

But the larger male shook his head and offered Vanin a rolled up sheet of paper. "What have *I* done for *you*," he corrected.

Confused, Vanin accepted the scroll and unfurled it. His eyes scanned the words inked to the page for a few moments before they widened considerably. "The warmaster *permitted* this?"

The disbelief in his tone drew a laugh from the normally-stoic Zarett, short though it was. "I twisted her arm, so to speak," he replied. "You had said as we set out that none would ever give a bender such as yourself a chance to prove your worth as tokari. I sought to prove you wrong, Vanin of the Moon's Blood."

Vanin waved the sheet at Zarett as if to assert its very existence. "I am *not* tokari," he protested with a shake of his head. "And more, I am untested! Untried!"

"You faced down a Serevokin cultist and slew him while, as you noted in your report to the warmaster, considerably 'distracted' by your duties." Zarett's eyes dipped briefly to Kolm, whose tail wagged as if he knew he was being spoken about. "You asserted yourself

when necessary, and proved martial ability sufficient to warrant at least a fair trial of your capabilities—”

“But I am no scout!” Vanin continued to cry out, ignorant of the Nakeletori eyes that began to draw toward them. “Nor a magus! I could no more replace Farche or Waesor than... than Borhamis and Lijar would want me to!”

Zarett shrugged. The friendliness was gone from his tone, replaced by seriousness. “Nevertheless, we are understrength and in need of new tokari to supplement our numbers. I have had your records checked. You have applied more than any other Nakeletori in the last fifty years to be tested as tokari, and have endured more rejections than any other. Bring this selfsame dedication to your trials, and neither Borhamis nor Lijar will have cause to argue when you succeed and join us as an equal in rank. I believe you can do this, Vanin. I believe you should.”

Vanin couldn’t think of a reply, so instead he looked at the sheet again. The words seemed surreal. Impossible. Benders, as far as he knew, could *not* become tokari. Yet here was the summons to the trials that he had always been forbidden, allowed now under Zarett’s forceful recommendation. It was everything he had ever wanted.

His other paw, however, drifted to his middle. He stroked pensively across it, and winced as Zarett’s eyes followed his paw. “You are concerned you have conceived.”

That *had* been a pressing thought, once normalcy had returned to Vanin’s life. There had been more than enough seed spilled — and *from* so many! — within him to make it a serious possibility. “I cannot be sure yet,” he admitted. Would that benders could see the visions that Serevokin did, and that he could know instantly. “But if I am, and from you, or Borhamis, or Lijar... or perhaps even...”

Kolm’s tail wagged harder. Vanin glared at him. The beast was too smart for his own good.

“Then once you know, your trials or service will be suspended,” Zarett replied. “At least, until such time as you have birthed, recovered and are prepared to resume them. Parenthood will come first, if such is to result from our...” His tail tucked up slightly as he perked an eyebrow, “Our joint operation, as it were.”

It was a tempting offer, to be sure. It almost sounded too good to be true. To be tokari — to be the first *bender* to earn the rank and stand alongside the greatest warriors of the Nakeletori — was the stuff of dreams. Of legends. It would elevate him above his poor breeding and his shame. None could deny him his personage if he passed the trials of the tokari. He would finally *be* someone amongst the Nakeletori. He would finally be seen as Nakeletori.

It was everything he had ever wanted.

And yet, with a sigh and the smallest of smiles, Vanin handed the scroll back to Zarett. “I am honored to be given this chance,” he said as Zarett stared back in confusion. “But as it stands, I currently hold a position of great importance within the warband. I am your medic. I have seen the way the least of the Nakeletori are treated by the greatest, and as medic I am afforded a chance to do right. To treat all Nakeletori as equals before me as I serve them.”

The confusion only mounted further on Zarett’s face. He cocked his head to the side as both ears perked forward. “You have the chance to do that, *and* rise above your station,” he said. “Why would you choose not to accept it?”

“Because it is not about station, Zarett,” Vanin replied. He reached up to the larger lupine’s paw and gently closed Zarett’s fingers around the scroll. “Station matters little, as you said. How we choose to treat others is what matters and, while you stand above all tokari I have met in this regard?” Vanin’s smile warmed. “I cannot stand shoulder to shoulder

alongside those who would look down on me, regardless of rank. You are one tokari who may see me as worthy, but I cannot — I will not — stand alongside those who would not.”

Zarett looked down at the scroll in his paw. Stared a moment. “I thought this would serve as salvation for you. A gift for your service. Thanks for all you have done.”

He looked so perplexed, so unable to understand what had happened that Vanin could only laugh. “Your thanks are enough, Zarett,” he said. “But I am a bender, and reviled simply for being what I am. Think back nearly two centuries, to the time before the Alliance. Think to the Nakeletori tribes *before* Aliastikora’s influence. Once we treated those males who would lay with one another to the crack of the whip.”

“We have grown beyond such barbarism,” Zarett pointed out.

“Now the crack I suffer is the whip-strike of the tongue, from each and every person I have ever worked with save for yourself.” Vanin shook his head slowly. “I have seen my heroes and my tormentors both treat me as something less than Nakeletori, and now I may be elevated only through the actions of one who they view as worthy.” Vanin felt his spine straighten as he spoke. The words felt right. “The path of the healer is one *I* have chosen. I earned my position on my own merits, and I did not need the approval of one of my betters to reach that position. It is not glorious, Zarett, but it is *mine*.”

The larger Nakeletori began to nod slowly, and he breathed a quiet sigh as his ears drooped slightly. Fingers nevertheless tightened around the scroll for a moment before he lifted his head again. “I think I understand. And I think perhaps it is a shame upon others that they cannot.” He tucked the scroll back into a cylinder on his belt and instead offered his paw to the smaller lupine. “Thank you, Vanin of the Moon’s Blood, for your service to my brothers on our mission.”

Zarett’s grip was warm, tight and firm, and Vanin matched it as best he could as he smiled up. “And thank you, Zarett of the Great Wilds, for seeing me not as a bender but as Nakeletori.”

The paw wrapped around Vanin’s tightened further for a second as, once again, a little smile played at Zarett’s muzzle. “And if I might be so bold, I would ask your favor and your presence at dinner this evening.”

Both of Vanin’s ears perked up, before they flattened quickly to hide the heat that flushed through them. “I... ah... are you asking me—”

“To dinner, Vanin. At my side, if it would please you.” He perked an eyebrow again as he watched the medic squirm. “And, if you find it to your liking, perhaps again at a future time and in a more personal setting.” He nodded to Kolm, one ear perked ever so slightly. “Kolm prefers us to dine alone, but he will have to suffer this one time, if you would grace me with your presence.”

*This*, for sure, was not something Vanin had expected after everything had happened. Especially not after rejecting Zarett’s offer to join the tokari. It took him a moment to find his voice again, and even then it was high-pitched and uneven in betrayal of his surprise. “I... am surprised that you would wish me to. I thought that beyond my, ah... *influence*, you would consider me unappealing.” He blinked and frowned as he thought back to their time together in the cultist cave. “But then, you did not seem to be completely subsumed when we... you know.”

The larger lupine reached down to pet Kolm’s flank. “To hunt and live as one with animals, one learns to balance the reason of a person with the instinct of the animal.” He nodded down toward the feral wolf. “An animal cannot elevate their thoughts beyond base instinct, but we may be lowered to it. When you learn to think as an animal does, you learn your own base self. Once you know yourself, mastery may be exerted.” One eyebrow perked up slightly. “Why else would I not interfere until I knew what you wanted? Consent is not an animal trait.”

“No. It is not.” Once more Vanin leveled a glare at Kolm, but the beast’s tail continued to wag instead. “Yet I still find it hard to believe one would want, well...” He waved a paw to indicate his body. “... *this*.”

Zarett shrugged. “Your belief is not required in matters of factual truth. My tastes do not usually tend toward males, but you...”

“Are not male?” Vanin offered.

“Would be hard pressed to locate an exception I would be happier to make,” Zarett corrected him.

The heat in Vanin’s ears continued to mount. Zarett was certainly well-spoken, but this was just too much. There was no mistaking his come-on now. Still though, the medic hesitated. “I am... flattered to be invited to dine with the tokari, Zarett. But for you to be seen in such a situation with a bender would be...”

“Improper.” Zarett shrugged again. “I do not care. I am not asking you to dine with tokari. I am asking you to dine with me, but only if you would like.” His ears tilted back for a second as he looked Vanin over. “It would be a chance for me to come to know you better, so long as this time we remained clothed at least through the meal. I believe I would *like* to know you better, especially given the intimacy of our mission together.”

It was Vanin’s turn to perk an eyebrow, and one ear lifted with curiosity as he smiled. “At *least* through the meal?” he echoed, in as close an approximation as coyness as he could manage.

Zarett met his gaze stoically, but finally allowed his muzzle to split in a smile so predatory that Vanin felt his nethers twitch. “I can make no promises for afterward.”

Vanin gulped again as he glanced down at Kolm. He looked like a puppy, tongue lolled out as he wagged his tail at the medic. Perhaps he’d made a good impression on the beast as well, and perhaps this offer from Zarett could also be good. There was only one problem. “I... I am sorry, Zarett, but I have another night shift this evening. I would not be able to come.”

For the briefest of seconds, Zarett actually seemed to be legitimately disappointed. His tail, ears and shoulders all started to droop for a moment, before the tokari gathered himself and stood tall again. Once more, his face was impassive; the perfect stone-carved vision of detached tokari strength. “Of course. I understand. Thank you again for-”

“*However*,” Vanin quickly interrupted him as he tugged gently on Zarett’s still-held paw, “I am free at the moment. I may not be able to meet you for dinner, but... perhaps you might show favor to a lowly bender medic and share breakfast with him instead?”

Until then, every single smile that Vanin had seen on the larger male’s face — with the exception of the teasing one he’d just offered — had seemed to be carefully concealed if they’d been there at all. Now though, with the dawn light shining through the trees at the edge of camp, it looked as though he’d cast off completely the cool, tokari attitude. “I think not,” he replied with a sly wink and a warm grin. “However, I will gladly share breakfast with *this* Nakeletori medic.”

Vanin didn’t even try to hide the beam of his own smile as he nodded and ran a thumb gently over the back of Zarett’s paw. The hunter didn’t see the family shame. He didn’t see the twisted body, or the lower status. He seemed to truly see Vanin for the Nakeletori he was.

It seemed to Vanin that he’d been wrong. Membership amongst the tokari had not been what he’d always wanted. This feeling; this sense of true personage was. Perhaps the mission had done him good, not as a means to ascend as tokari but as a means to find peace in himself. Maybe he had found an end to his loneliness in his own way. Unexpected, but far from unwelcome.

It was an exciting prospect, and the thrill of his prospects drew Vanin’s grin wider across his muzzle. As he gently tugged Zarett toward the warband’s makeshift commissary

and Kolm trotted after, food and rest were the last thing on his mind. Hope instead filled him, for the first time in too long.

And perhaps if Zarett continued to play his cards right, hope would not be the only thing that filled Vanin.