

Exile's Surrender

A Two|Kinds Fanfic

Preface

The following is a work of fan fiction. It features characters created by Tom Fischbach in his comic TwoKinds, and are owned by him. They are used without permission (*sad frown*), this is really a twisted tribute to Tom's abilities, and I'm hoping he won't threaten me; therefore this exists at his pleasure – a note from Tom and it disappears as much as things can disappear from the Internet. There are a few things to note about this work. First is that it's both slash and lemon, so it's going to contain rather large quantities of mature content. Continuing to read is an acceptance that you'll probably run into things that will offend you or others. Heck, it offends me and I wrote it. In addition, it's a self-aware fanfic, that is, it is written as a fan fiction, so there is no question in anyone's minds that these events are not canon and do not occur, even in one of the infinite parallels in the 'verse (let's hope). What that means should become clear when you start reading. I could use this as an excuse for the poor writing, but I choose not to. Any particularly poor writing is due to my own limited faculties and not due to the nature of the tale...well, some of it's due to the nature of the tale, but if you understand what a slash fic is, then you already knew that. I'm hoping that the characters are kept as true to their roots as possible (providing for exceptions to permit the “plot” to actually work). The characters and settings are written to the best of my knowledge and conjecture. The fic is set to deviate from the actual storyline roughly around the December 1, 2007 comic (I couldn't have written a better introduction for the fic if I'd tried), so Alaric has just revealed his statue of Keith, but Keith has not yet been ordered to pose for it to be finished. If you aren't familiar with TwoKinds and it's characters, you're going to have a great deal of difficulty following some parts of the story, particularly anything involving the extremely confused Natani, so I highly encourage you to read the comic first (besides, it's a spec-freaking-tacular webcomic).

Oh, and also, before you get any bright ideas, I should add the disclaimer that I'm not gay, bi, or even particularly experienced. Yes, this means that the entire fic is based on my conjecture, but that's life for you. In addition, I am not about to turn gay – if I were to sleep with another man at this juncture, my best friend would be quite pissed at me. (I think he's tried to call dibs...)

Thank you to my crack team of advisors, including Verilidaine, kryss, and Sappholf from the TwoKinds forums. This would have been far more difficult to accomplish without your help. Thanks also to Tom, for creating TwoKinds and tolerating the existence of this perversion of his creation. And finally, thanks to you, my reader, for taking the time to check this out.

Enjoy.

-- Avvy, avvy@deviantparadigm.com,
avwolf from the forum



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Keith and Alaric stood in Alaric's private stone-working room, statues finished and unfinished surrounding them. Morning light streamed gently through narrow windows, their heavy, leaded glass blurring the courtyard outside to little but indistinct shapes. Standing in the center of the room, holding the position of honor, was a life-sized, all-but-naked statue of a Basitin warrior. The warrior's features were blank, the face unfinished, but the obvious care that had been taken in the fur and the intricate detail work spoke of the love and skill that had gone into the statue. Alaric stared at Keith with obvious glee and anticipation. This statue was his greatest creation yet, and, befitting such, was of Keith, his old friend. He couldn't wait to get everything finished up, now that Keith was back. Alaric's memory was good, but the statue was to be of Keith as the triumphant warrior, returning from exile, the first Basitin to return from banishment in hundreds of years. So memory would not suffice – only the Keith of now could model for it. Keith

leaned up against a block of marble, a statue yet to be born, and gave his mind a moment to settle.

"This is just too much, Alaric! The Templar? And turning to magic?! And then you want me to betray my friends? Murder one of them, even, at the Templar's request! And this statue!" Keith was at his wits' end. Too much was happening at once, he needed things to slow down so he could figure it all out.

"So, you don't like the statue?" Alaric asked worriedly, disappointment evident in his voice. A moment ago, he'd been clapping and his tail had been wagging. Now his ears drooped, and his whole frame softened. He looked like Keith had just told him that his pet had died, down to the shining hint of tears in his eyes.

"No, no. It's, it's very flattering, Alaric." Keith rubbed the bridge of his nose. He wished he didn't have to deal with this right now. "I just don't think it's appro—*hurk!*" Alaric wrapped Keith in a bear hug.

"Great! I knew you'd love it." Alaric put Keith back down and smiled happily at his friend. Keith just sighed.

"This is all so overwhelming, Alaric," Keith groaned. Alaric turned to stand beside his old friend, staring at the statue. To his eyes, it was a beautiful representation of the future, still unfinished, but shaping up almost perfectly. *How can I get Keith to see what I see?* he wondered.

"Keith, trust me. I wouldn't do anything to put our people in danger. Especially now that you're back," Alaric stated, nudging Keith with his elbow. Keith gave him a shifty glance. Alaric clapped Keith on the shoulder and smiled. "Don't fret. I know this is a lot for a person to deal with at one time, but you're one of the strongest people I can think of. You made it back from exile. That takes a strength of character which is almost unheard of," Alaric said confidently. Keith nodded a little and smiled half-heartedly.

Alaric's right, Keith thought, I can handle this. I made it back home, after all. I should be able to manage all of this.

Then Alaric leaned up against Keith, rubbing the top of his foot down his friend's leg and pressing in to whisper in his ear. "And besides, Keith...You've got me, and I'd do anything to make you happy. Why don't we retire to my private quarters from here and I can help relieve some of that stress. You know, give you a *real* hero's welcome." Alaric gave Keith's backside a little pinch, ensuring that his meaning wasn't missed. Alaric's tail wagged with barely contained emotion. Keith's tail shook too, but for different reasons. He was shocked, confused, and a little angry.

“Alaric! Stop it! These jokes aren't funny,” Keith shouted. Alaric sighed, and wrapped one arm around Keith, dangling a finger down the neckline of Keith's tunic.

“What if they're not all just jokes?” he asked. Though the statement was rhetorical, Alaric's tone was serious.

“Then they're illegal!” Keith protested, pulling away with a jerk.

“You keep forgetting, Keith. 'Master General.’” Alaric grinned, gesturing toward himself. “That means I get to interpret the law as I see fit. Oddly enough, the way the law is written, it can easily be interpreted to refer only to the reproductive act. So as long as it's not reproductive, physical...intimacy, is totally legal. By my decree.” Alaric quirked one eyebrow seductively.

“But...It's improper!” Keith shouted again, somewhat more subdued.

“Improper? Because you're beneath my station? Hardly. You and I both know that if your father hadn't been a drunken ass, you'd be wearing this armor instead of me. Besides, when have you ever known me to be 'proper'?”

“You knew?” For a moment, incredulity won out over indignation in Keith's voice.

“Keith, I've always known. There wasn't anything I could do, but I've always known... So, do you want your chance to be the big general? I'll let you order me around and everything. I'll do anything you want me to,” Alaric smiled broadly at his old friend and leaned in close again, his expression dangerously close to becoming a leer.

“I...I don't...I'm not gay!” Keith was becoming more and more bewildered by the moment, confused by the race of emotions tearing through his mind. He could hardly think beyond Alaric's musky scent filling his nostrils, the general's deep voice in his ears.

“No, Keith, you're not gay. Neither am I,” Alaric put on his most comforting expression. “But you and I both know how you feel, how your body's reacting.” At these words, Alaric brushed up against Keith, smiling as the smaller Basitin's tail quivered with the contact, “You're not gay, but you're willing. You've always felt the same attraction to me that I've felt for you. We aren't limited by convention, Keith, you and I.” Alaric leaned in for a confidential whisper, “Why not embrace what we are?”

“No! I'm not...I can't...” Keith continued to argue, though his sentences trailed off, like he was arguing more with himself than with the general.

“Think about it, Keith,” Alaric prompted, “Think about how you feel, how you react, every time I teased you. Every time I brushed my hand down your arm, every time I nudged your foot with mine, every time you felt the strength of my arms around you.” Alaric acted his words out, his every motion sending a shiver down Keith's spine. Fire burned through his bloodstream, his fur tingled like he was standing in an electric storm. Keith fell to his knees before Alaric.

“I can't...I can't...” he repeated, over and over. Then he turned his face up toward his friend. “Please,” Keith begged, his ears drooping low with mental exhaustion. His tail flopped lifelessly to the stone floor. Keith's eyes glistened in the light, barely containing his tears. Alaric took Keith's face in one hand, running his palm down Keith's muzzle, feeling Keith's teeth against his skin and longing for them to be elsewhere on his body. His fingers brushed aside Keith's hair, and he looked deeply into Keith's trembling eyes.

“I won't force you, my friend. I care too deeply for you to do that. I just beg of you... Please don't just throw away what we could have. I will always be waiting for you, just as I have always waited, all those years when you were gone. I never forgot you, Keith, never doubted you'd come back, even though your task was to be impossible. Please, Keith, consider this. Give us the chance we need.” Alaric traced a finger along the lobe of Keith's ear. “I leave our fates in your hands, Keith Keiser. Even the Master General must bow before his heart.” Alaric closed his eyes for a long moment, then bent over carefully and, with the most delicate touch he could manage, pushed Keith's helmet up a fraction and allowed his lips to caress Keith's forehead. Alaric straightened slowly and marched from the room, his normally confident stride marred by hesitation. He didn't care to have

Keith see his tears, but he couldn't easily pull himself away from his friend's presence either. Keith lacked Alaric's carefully cultivated control, and as soon as the Master General turned his back, his shoulders shook with silent sobs as he cried.

“Why?” Keith whispered to himself, “Why does this happen to me? Why do I always have to deal with these things?”

Keith wandered around the docks aimlessly. He wouldn't realize until much later that he missed seeing Laura by only a handful of minutes, but then again, he was hardly in any frame of mind to deal with meeting her anyway. He felt like he was being torn apart from the inside. Thoughts boiled in his head like angry hornets, stinging at his heart. He sighed loudly, causing a couple of the passers-by to give him an odd look before continuing on his way. *I can't just wander around. I'm wasting too much time. I need some advice; that'll help me sort this out.* Keith shook himself free of his self-absorbed miasma and made his way back toward the inn. *Maybe Trace'll be around. With any luck, that bonehead's figured things out and can give me a few hints.*



“Hey, Keith! How was your visit with the General guy?” Flora's cheerful voice greeted Keith as he opened the door. He breathed a sigh of relief. It was nice to hear from somebody who wasn't weighing him down.

“Oh. Uh, complicated,” he said simply, “A lot of personal Basitin stuff; what I need to do to get ready for my trial tomorrow. Is Trace around?”

“Your trial?” Natani asked. Her voice was unexpected. Keith hadn't noticed her sitting beside Flora, though he felt like he should have. Her fur was bristling a little, but he couldn't figure out what could possibly have upset her.

“Yeah, just a formality.” Keith couldn't meet her eyes. He suddenly felt very uncomfortable, as though he couldn't breathe; not with Natani looking at him with what felt like an accusatory stare, and not since he was under orders to kill her.

“Trace went out and hasn't been back just yet,” Flora said helpfully. She could feel something strange between Keith and Natani, but couldn't put her finger on it. *Maybe they're fighting.* She didn't even know gay guys had lover's spats like this, but it made sense. It'd explain why Natani was so jealous all of a sudden. “There was a fox that came here after you left with the general though. Laura. Could she be your lost fiancée?” Natani's hackles raised completely when Flora mentioned Laura. *Ah! So that's it. Natani must be worried about Keith going back to his old fiancée. That must be a serious fight they're having.*

“Laura? She came here? Looking for me?” Keith's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. He'd been surprised enough when Alaric said she'd come to the islands searching for him, but he didn't expect that she'd come looking for him so soon.

“Yeah,” Flora said, while Natani continued to glower, “I'm not sure what she wanted though. She just asked for you and then left when we told her you'd gone with the general.”

“Oh,” Keith wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or relieved. “I'd better find Trace though, I still want to talk to him.”

“Well, there's no need to look, I'm right here,” came Trace's voice. The ex-Templar walked into the room. His face was still clouded by his recent conversation with Nora; it reminded him that he wasn't done dealing with his past, but it was difficult for him to be gloomy around his friends.

“Trace, I can I have a few private words with you?” Keith asked, grabbing Trace's arm and pulling him down the hall and out of easy earshot of the others.

Wow, Trace thought, Keith must really be concerned about something. “Sure, Keith,” he said

with a good-natured smile, “What's this about?”

“It's kind of personal, but I figured you'd be the one to ask. How do you deal with having feelings for someone that might be...inappropriate for your people? I mean, you and Flora are so obviously in love, and I know that you've struggled a little with being in love with a Keidran.”

“Well,” Trace started to think fast. This wasn't an easy question, and it was one that he still had trouble with. *Why would Keith ask this? Unless...Is that why Natani sounded so jealous yesterday? Is Keith gay?* Trace's eyes widened with surprise as he considered that possibility. Keith raised an eyebrow expectantly. Trace quickly composed himself, realizing that he was standing there looking ridiculous. “When I start to doubt our love, I just think of what you told me on the ship, Keith. Seriously, you're the one who set me straight. I love Flora because of *who* she is, and not *what* she is – just like you told me. And I have to make my decisions based on that. The 'what' doesn't matter. It's all about the 'who.' What sort of a person would I be if I turned Flora away because other Humans didn't approve? Sure, I still have struggles; I'm still trying to deal with not being able to have children with her, for one. And she occasionally says or does things I think are weird. But I wouldn't trade what I've got with Flora for anything, no matter how 'inappropriate' my feelings might be.” *There. Not bad, Trace, not bad.* Trace smiled confidently at his friend. Keith looked down, mulling things over.

Keith's own remembered words echoed in his head. “Base your decision on *who* Flora is, and not just *what* she is,” he'd said. *What makes me so different? Why would those words fail to be true for my life,* he wondered. “Thanks, Trace,” Keith stated, “That's just what I needed to hear.”

“I'm glad I could return the favor for once, Keith.” Keith looked up at Trace's trusting smile. Another pang of guilt tore itself through the Basitin's gut. He longed to warn Trace about the Templar here, their tower, and their ominous plans about him, but he'd sworn an oath to Alaric not to tell anyone. He chewed his lip. Trace took Keith's nervous indecision to still be a part of the whole relationship question. “Don't worry, Keith. I won't judge you. We've already been over this – you're my friend, no matter what happens, or what you have to do. Or who you fall in love with. Provided it's not Flora,” Trace chuckled. Keith tried to laugh, but too much of Trace's comment struck home.

“Thanks again, Trace. I couldn't ask for a truer friend.” Trace smiled with such good humor that Keith couldn't help but smile back. “I'd better get some things done.” Trace's grin broadened with Keith's words, and he gave the Basitin a conspiratorial wink that set Keith's fur on edge. *What's Trace think I'm up to?*

“Alright, Keith,” Trace said, walking back into the inn's common room, “Good luck.” Then he called out, loud enough to make sure Keith could hear, “Come on, Flora, let's go walk around a bit more. I want to see some more of the city while we still can.” Keith smiled again at the sound of Flora's giddy excitement to Trace's announcement.

Trace is a lucky man. Keith made his own way to the common room and was about to reach the door when Natani spoke up again.

“Keith, where are you going? You're not leaving me here alone again, are you?” she asked, somewhat worriedly. Natani was sick of being stuck here with no one to talk to and nothing to do but watch the strange people wandering around. If she had to sit around much longer, she'd go back to the ship and find Eric's slaves. At least they spoke her language.

“Sorry, Natani. I just...remembered something that I've got to talk to the Master General about. I'll be back as soon as I can.”

“Fine,” Natani sighed. Inside, her heart twisted with a jealousy she tried hard to ignore. It whispered to her mind in a cruel voice: *Keith just wants to spend all his time with his Basitin friends. He's forgetting about me.* Natani shook her head free of such thoughts, rationalizing her plans to herself. *Going back to talk to that general so soon? After immediately talking with Trace? Hrm...I wonder if they're making some arrangements to return Trace to the Templar. If so, my superiors are going to want to know what Keith and the General are going to discuss. I'd better not just wait around this time.*

As soon as Keith was out the door, Natani headed up to their room. She had to get properly dressed and collect her gear.

The leaders of the guild had agreed with Natani's assessment – she ought to do some spying and see if she could determine the Basitins' plans for Trace. It'd let her know if she'd really have to worry about them trying to hand Trace over to the Templar or not. Zen had been somewhat less supportive. He'd suggested the same thing as that tiny voice that she kept trying to ignore.

“Finally got yourself a boyfriend, little brother, and now you can't stand to see him around other men, eh?” he'd sent, *“Well, I won't tell anyone that this whole stunt is really just because you're jealous.”* She'd bristled at the suggestion and they'd had a fight, though Zen seemed to be very amused by the whole thing. She finally just blocked him out of her mind. She got the faint sense of him sulking on the other end, reminding her that he still had some presence in her mind, but she ignored it.

Zen'd only be a distraction anyway, Natani thought bitterly. She ducked into the doorway of a nearby home as a pair of patrolling guards walked by. One of them cast their gaze toward the house, forcing Natani to hug the shadowed door jamb more tightly. Fortunately, the other caught sight of someone showing too much fur, or littering, or smiling too broadly, or something else that violated some ridiculous law and the pair stalked away to investigate. She breathed a short sigh of relief and chided herself for not paying closer attention. It'd be hard for her to explain what she was doing this far away from the district where she was supposed to be staying; especially since she couldn't speak their language. Vowing to be more careful, Natani stepped back out into the street and kept following Keith's distinct scent. As she moved through the city, it didn't take her long to realize there was only one place the scent trail could possibly be leading to – the castle.

Natani crept over the castle wall with ease. It's not that the guards were inattentive; they just weren't paying close attention to the walls. After all, who would be crazy enough to scale the wall in broad daylight, in the most secure city the Eastern Kingdom? So all Natani had to worry about was when the patrol passed within easy sight of the part of the wall she was climbing. Fortunately, she'd found a shady alcove and the Basitins built their castle walls out of a stone that was fairly close in color to one of the thin, draping cloaks that she carried to wear while climbing and hiding. All she had to do was make sure that she didn't move when the patrol was close by. To make things even easier, the patrol passed at regular intervals. For a trained assassin, practiced in the art of slipping quietly into guarded areas to slay the beings within, this was nothing. Natani suppressed a proud smile. If her clan had wanted to start a war, she could have killed all three generals and their king, and been back out before any of these clueless guards were even aware that there was an intruder in the castle. *Wait, wait, move...wait, wait, move...* she recited in her head, keeping the tempo.

The sound of boots crunching on the ground beneath her and a pair of Basitin voices made Natani freeze. This wasn't the patrol; someone else had wandered over here. She muttered a prayer that she hadn't been noticed. The voices carried on, lost in a conversation she couldn't understand. Natani took a deep breath. Her luck was holding. Then an errant zephyr tugged at her cloak. It didn't reveal her, but it was just enough motion to catch the eye of one of the wandering Basitins below her. She heard a voice raise. She couldn't understand the words, but the curious puzzlement was clear in the sound. Her good eye searched the wall around her desperately. *There!* Up in an overhang nearby was a nest of roosting birds. She eased one hand down to a pouch on her belt and pulled out a single caltrop. She held it carefully between thumb and finger, and flicked it up into the roost. A bird flew



out of the nest, calling angrily. The voices below her turned dismissive. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears and her arms began to cramp, screaming for her to change position. Still she waited. After another few minutes, the voices moved off, fading into the distance, just in time for the next patrol to come by. *Just another moment*, Natani begged her limbs. As soon as the patrol passed, she laboriously pulled herself up the remainder of the wall. She gave herself an instant to rest in a dark corner of the battlement, realizing that she could ill afford it: this was the most dangerous part of her journey over the wall. Natani cast a careful eye over the side of the wall, observing the guards' movements on the inside. It looked like a similar patrol structure as that on the outside.

Natani slipped over the edge of the wall and started to let herself down slowly in the gaps between patrols. Most of the way down the wall, she caught sight of a form in one of the courtyards. Her brow furrowed. It had just been in her peripheral vision, but she could swear the silhouette was human, not Basitin. She shook her head, clearing the curiosity from it. She had her goal, and she wouldn't be distracted. She leapt from the wall and silently sprinted the short distance to the keep. In the shadow of the keep, she stripped off the mottled gray cloak and wrapped it tightly back amongst its similar fellows. She took stock of the situation, finally deciding on creeping in through a nearby embrasure.

Inside, Natani stuck to the shadows, her dark clothing helping her blend into them. She wished that she'd been able to wear something that would have better concealed her body, but long robes would have been in the way. It's hard to sneak around when you're tripping over your own hemlines. She stood still in a dark corner near what smelled like the larder. She didn't know the layout of the castle, and none of her fellows that Zen had been able to reach could offer much advice. It'd just been too long since there'd been a war with the Basitin. All the assassins who'd served then were long dead, and there weren't any maps left from that period of time either. Natani frowned, considering the situation. If Alaric was indicative of the past Master Generals, then it shouldn't be hard to find his office – He'd be at the center of it all. Alaric was too much of a meddler, too involved in everything to be in an out-of-the-way place. All the major hallways in the castle ought to converge at his doorstep, leaving those who wanted to avoid his attention to track down tiny by-ways, ones that he probably had watched. Natani nodded to herself, confident in her thought process. Alaric's office wouldn't be in the center of the keep, but it'd be close, and that's where she'd find Keith. Natani slunk down the keep's corridors, to where intellect and intuition suggested she'd find her quarry. She hadn't had this much practice in staying invisible in well lit areas for many months.

Up ahead, she could see a pair of burly Basitin guards next to a door, bearing the Basitin crest proudly across it. The guards themselves were better armed and armored than the other troops she'd seen on the island. Though their armor wasn't as fancy as Alaric's, there was a clear resemblance. Over the top of the door was a huge window, open now, and the voices floating out of it confirmed her suspicions. This had to be Alaric's office. But the shadows here weren't substantial enough for her to hide in. She couldn't get any closer, especially not with those two guards there.

Natani reached up to the mana stone necklace she had crafted and now wore. She knew just the spell for this. She didn't need to grasp the stone with it on the necklace, but it helped her focus and her hand would help to block the stone's glow when its magic was tapped. As her fingers closed around a stone, she felt a pang of guilt, remembering that Keith had bought these for her before they'd left the mainland. He probably wouldn't appreciate the gift being used to spy on him. As the moment of guilt passed, an increasingly familiar heat took its place, a memory of the heat she felt when Keith'd handed her the bag. Natani took a deep breath, silently cursing her body again, getting her focus back. When she opened her eyes, she clenched the stone in her fist and murmured the words to a well-known spell. The shadows detached from the wall behind her, embracing her form, blending it with them, clinging to her like sticky cobwebs, and pulling her into them. Unless she was really foolish and got right up to them, the guards wouldn't be able to see her. Which she didn't intend – with that window, she could hear everything from the other side of the hallway. She virtually slid along the wall, nearly invisible,

her form, her footfalls, even her scent, swallowed up in the shadows around her. She stared intently at the door, waiting. A shiver ran its way through her body. A side effect of the spell; the shadows were frigid. They also made it slightly hard to hear what was going on around her. They always seemed to be whispering at the very edge of her perception. It might have been her imagination, but the voices in the shadows seemed to be louder here than they were on the mainland. Natani spared a thought about the Basitin graveyard and wondered if the dead souls trapped there were the ones murmuring to her thoughts. She blinked, thrusting those thoughts from her mind with a deep breath. Now was not the time. Natani reached up to her neck for another mana stone. The next spell wasn't quite as well remembered. It was seldom that an assassin really needed to comprehend other languages, but this was one of those times. Unfortunately, the spell took a lot of concentration and always left her with a headache, making it more impractical than convenient. The voices around her snapped into clarity, their words coalescing from incomprehensible sounds into actual language.

"Sir," Keith's voice echoed through the window, "This is a little...sensitive for me. Would you mind if we spoke in private?"

"Of course not, Keith," Natani could hear the smile in Alaric's voice. It sounded like she'd gotten here just in time. "Guards," he ordered, "Clear this area. The exile has a report to give, and I'd rather not there be any prying ears. Make sure *everyone* is out. I'll call for you myself once he's finished with his report."

The door opened, another pair of similarly appointed guards striding out confidently. They conferred with the two at the door, passing on their orders, and then the whole group marched out. Alaric just made Natani's job easier for her. She smiled. Now there wouldn't be anyone around to see her, even without the shroud of shadows.

"Thank you," came Keith's voice.

"Now," Alaric said, lounging behind his desk, his hand plucking a couple large walnut-like nuts from a bowl on his desk and idly juggling them in his fingers, "What's this about, Keith? Come to pose for the statue?"

"No. I just..." Keith started, then sighed. He changed the subject. "Did you really know about my father?" Alaric smiled, amused by Keith's obvious discomfort.

"Yes, I did," Alaric said, then he too sighed, "I wished then, and I wish now, I'd been able to do something about it. You were my best friend...and I'd like to believe that you still are, or could be..." He paused for a second, gathering his thoughts. "I would have died for you, Keith. I would have done anything... But your father was the Arms General, and your trial was such a public affair. My parents forbid me from interfering; I suppose they knew I had promise for promotion through the ranks, though I doubt they thought I'd be Master General in the end. Despite that, if I thought I'd be able to accomplish anything, I'd have thrown everything away..." Alaric stopped for a moment, realizing that he'd started to ramble, "Anyway, there wasn't anything that could be done. Someone had to be punished, and your father's sins had to be hidden. To do otherwise would undermine the structure underlying society." Then he added quietly, "No matter how much I'd have liked to." Keith blinked a few times, staring at his feet. He pursed his lips.

"I've just been thinking that..." Keith bit back his words. His eyes roved around the room, searching for something to focus on besides Alaric's kindly smiling face. A wide mat on the floor near the desk caught his eye, and he leapt at the chance to avoid his point for being here again. "A bed? Do you sleep here often, Alaric?"

"Oh, the futon?" Alaric gestured over to it and chuckled. "Yes, more often than you might think. The work of a Master General is never done, it seems. Besides, it's more convenient than going home sometimes. You'd be surprised how many candles I've burned to nubs in my stone-working room." At the mention of Alaric's hobby, Keith looked away. That statue still made him feel uncomfortable.

Of course, Keith thought to himself, It is pretty impressive. And for Alaric to have spent so much time working on it... He closed his eyes. He'd better act while he still had some nerve left. *It's now or never.* "Alaric? I really, uh, I really wanted to talk to you about what you said earlier today."

"Oh?" Alaric asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I've spent years denying myself everything. For once, just once, I'd like to see what could be." Keith looked down and his voice faded to a whisper, "It seems like I've been alone for so long. And I'd be quite the hypocrite if I denied what I felt because of 'what' it means instead of trusting in 'who' you are." Alaric grinned eagerly. He slipped off his gloves, leaving them folded neatly on his desk, and beckoned Keith over to a fountain near the east wall. He'd prayed for this moment to come, prayed for years and years.

The fountain took up most of a wall, and was of a pair of young Basitin males, just boys really, playing in the waterfall. The two boys looked to be out on some adventure, half in and half out of the textured back wall of the fountain, which formed the waterfall. The fountain poured water steadily down the stone waterfall and over the youthful pair. Keith blushed slightly when he realized that he and Alaric were the figures in the fountain, a stone echo of a long lost memory, from a time when they'd run off into the hills around the city and found this waterfall, fed by a small stream. They must have played in that waterfall for hours. Even then, Alaric was bucking the decency laws, and he'd successfully convinced Keith that they ought to leave most of their clothing on the bank, to keep it from getting wet. Keith could almost hear the laughter they'd shared that afternoon. Alaric reached up and grasped a lever in the wall nearby. He smiled at Keith.

"Do you remember that time? It's still one of my favorites. And even though the fountain's not the best of my work, it has both sentimental and practical value," he said. Then he pulled down on the lever.

The sound of rushing water filled Natani's ears. She cursed inwardly. So much for being able to hear everything from this side of the hall. She couldn't just walk away now. Those things Keith had been saying... *What did Keith and the general speak about earlier? What did he mean by "denying what he felt?" Keith's not making any sense. And, "do you remember that time?" What "time" was that general talking about? I need to hear the rest of this conversation.* She'd just have to get closer. She relaxed the part of her mind maintaining her shroud. It wasn't like there was anyone around to see her anyway, so it was just a distraction. The shadows peeled away from her form reluctantly as she stepped away from the wall, like walking through a doorway filled with black cobwebs. When she stood fully in the middle of the hall, she shook herself, glad to be free of the frigid chill of the shadow shroud and its unsettling whispers. Natani slipped up to the door and examined its lock. It wasn't terribly complex, she'd be able to pick it in a few moments. Zen was a bit better with the picks, but she wasn't a slouch. *But first...* Natani pulled a small pouch from her belt. She still remembered when she learned this trick in her training, using slimy cheese to oil hinges and keep a door from giving away her presence. Of course, she wasn't a trainee anymore, and she had all her gear at hand, so she wouldn't need cheese this time. Very carefully, Natani squeezed a bit of grease from the pouch onto the hinges of the door and rubbed it in. Then she replaced the pouch and pulled a set of lock picks from her right bracer, one of nearly a half dozen pairs that she had secreted about her person. It took a handful of minutes, and the lock yielded to her skill with a soft click. Considering that she could barely hear the noise over the rushing water, she doubted that the Basitins inside would...But she'd underestimated Basitin hearing once before, and she wouldn't do so again. She pressed her body up against the wall next to the door, ready to cast a quick spell or pull a dagger at the first sign of trouble. Time passed, heartbeat by heartbeat. Natani hoped that they hadn't heard anything inside. She wasn't quite sure what she'd do. *Assassinate Alaric? Knock Keith out? Those Basitin take an awful lot of punishment.* Fortunately, she didn't have to go through more than one or two scenarios in her head before her instincts told her that if anyone was coming through that door, they'd have done it by now.

Natani took a deep breath. This was the tricky part. Very carefully, very slowly, she opened the door a crack, just far enough to see through it with her good eye. With luck, Keith and Alaric would be in view from the door. As the door gently rotated inward, silent on its newly greased hinges, the voices of the pair of Basitin males became distinct again. Then the crack became wide enough for Natani to see through, wide enough to reveal Keith and Alaric within the office. Natani's eyes shot wide...She wasn't sure whether she could consider this sight lucky or not.

“Alaric, please....Can we just, you know, take it slow? This is my first time...I haven't even...” Keith bashfully looked down at his hands. Alaric tilted his head and smiled warmly. He brushed Keith's hair away, letting his fingers run down the side of Keith's face to the smaller Basitin's jawline and tilted Keith's face to his.

“Believe me, Keith,” Alaric's words were soft and caring. Even his dead eye seemed soothing and kind as he looked directly at Keith, doing his best to allay his friend's fears. “I wouldn't do this any other way than slow.” Alaric caressed Keith's cheekbone with his thumb and leaned in close, to press his smiling lips firmly against Keith's quivering ones. But it was Alaric who was surprised – Keith didn't crumple in fear or shy away. Instead, the his friend pressed in harder, kissing Alaric back with a ferocity born from years of loneliness and quiet despair. The kiss broke, and Alaric was left breathless. “Keith...I...” he started. Then Keith started to nuzzle Alaric's neck, kissing his fur, nipping at his flesh, and leaving Alaric gasping. “Mmm...” was all the more Alaric could manage as his eyes slid shut in a long blink, his fingers combing through Keith's hair, tugging gently at the roots.

“So I've finally found the way to leave you speechless?” Keith whispered.

“Mm...” Alaric murmured, “For someone with no experience, you're very good at this, Keith.”

“I guess I'm just a talented amateur,” Keith beamed and stole another kiss.

“Very talented,” Alaric replied. Alaric reached up and pushed Keith's torc off, letting Keith's cloak fall to the floor before undoing the tie on his own cloak and dropping it as well. The pair let their lips meet again, their teeth locking. Tongues danced in a grand promenade of sweet saliva and the exotic taste of another's hot mouth. When they broke apart, Alaric smiled impishly at his friend. “So, do I order you to disrobe, or shall I do it myself?”

“I thought *I* got to play the Master General,” Keith grinned back. “But you know what...I'd rather just be as we were years ago – not general and soldier, but just two Basitins laughing at the world they'd eventually get dragged into, enjoying themselves.”

“Ah, but there's one big difference between then and now.” Before Keith could inquire, Alaric gave him a swift kiss and continued, “We're not enjoying ourselves. We're enjoying each other.” Keith just laughed and kissed Alaric again. “Well, I'd wanted to see how exile had treated that body of yours, Keith,” Alaric sighed, “But if you're going to keep doing that with your tongue, I suppose I can wait.” He grinned and added, “Though not for long.” Alaric nuzzled at Keith's cheek, his fingers seeking Keith's belt and untying it. Keith traced Alaric's shoulder blades through his tunic and shirt. He ran his fingertips up and down Alaric's spine, brushing against Alaric's own hands as he reached back to release his own belt. “So, am I to undress us both?” Alaric whispered into Keith's ear. Keith quirked his mouth into a crooked smile and pushed himself away from the larger Basitin.

“At least not entirely.” Keith pulled both his high-collared tunic and his underlying shirt off in one smooth movement. Alaric eyed Keith's exposed chest greedily.

“Hrmm,” muttered Alaric thoughtfully as he walked around Keith. Keith blushed. He hadn't expected this sort of examination. He was starting to feel like a prized bovine on display. Then Alaric



sidled up to him. Alaric's hands ran through Keith's fur, gently teasing at it, feeling the contours of Keith's musculature. "Exile didn't treat you too badly it seems," Alaric smiled, his eyes sparkling. His hands played over Keith's chest and stomach, buried themselves in the tuft of fur over his breastbone. Keith closed his eyes and sighed, leaning back against Alaric's firm body, enjoying the feel of Alaric's delicate touch. Then Alaric's hands reached lower, circling Keith's navel, sliding down his stomach. They hesitated a moment over a pucker in his fur; a scar from a relatively recent puncture wound before continuing their journey. Alaric rained kisses down Keith's neck and shoulder, biting it tenderly. He started to toy with Keith's trousers, and the smaller Basitin's eyes cracked open. Keith caught Alaric's hands and looked over at him. Alaric gazed back at Keith with puppy-dog eyes, bearing a hint of disappointment.

"Not so fast, Alaric," Keith grinned, his tail wagging, "You're not going to get it all so easily." Alaric made his lip tremble in what Keith had to admit was a rather adorable pout. "Don't even try that. Your tail gives you away." Alaric looked back and down at his tail, which was shivering excitedly.

"Oh," he murmured before grinning back at Keith. "Traitorous thing." Alaric rubbed his cheek on Keith's shoulder, "Are you *sure* you don't want to get all naked for your Master General?" Keith grabbed Alaric and spun him around. Keith reached under Alaric's long tunic and shirt, pushing them up until his fingers could sift through the fur on the small of Alaric's back.

"Not unless you're prepared to do the same, General." Keith met Alaric's gaze unflinchingly, even though he still was blushing a little. Alaric leaned forward to press his lips to Keith's nose.

"Well, if you're going to be like that," he murmured playfully and winked. Keith smiled, and slipped Alaric's clothing off over the general's head. The Basitins stared at each other for a long moment, both only dressed now in their trousers and foot wrappings. They fell into each other's arms, standing together, eyes shut, locked at the muzzle in a passionate kiss. Their hands moved over each other's naked torsos, each marveling at the other's taut muscles, soft fur, and hot flesh. Alaric let his toes travel up the arch of Keith's foot. The smaller Basitin jumped. "Take care," Alaric chided, "You almost bit my tongue."

"It'd serve you right. You shouldn't do that without warning." Keith retorted.

"Oh, but you like it." Alaric looked at Keith with coyly lidded eyes and nudged Keith's foot again, smiling when Keith shivered.

"You are absolutely incorrigible, Alaric," Keith chuckled. Alaric hummed happily, tucking his head to look down at Keith's stomach. He stroked Keith's ribs with his knuckles. Keith brushed Alaric's bangs from his face, and tilted his head up so that Keith could look him in the eye. Keith reached out to touch the scars on Alaric's face, following them as they crossed his eyebrow and ran down his cheek. "You know," Keith whispered, "I didn't think that it'd be quite like this." Alaric gave Keith a simple smile and a gentle kiss.

"The very best things in life are almost always surprises." He kissed Keith again.

"Shall we take a bit more of the surprise out of it?" Keith asked, winking. Alaric's smile widened to a full grin and he leaned back, as Keith let himself slide down Alaric's body, his claws gently tugging through Alaric's fur, delicately scratching his skin. Keith feared that his touch would seem fumbling, but Alaric just let his eyes close happily as Keith moved to Alaric's feet. As Keith closed his fingers around the top of Alaric's foot wrappings, teasing them loose, he spared a thought at how unthinkable this situation was. An exile from the Isles, hesitantly stripping the Master General's ankles nude. Even if anyone had predicted that an exile would be able to complete their task and return successfully, they certainly wouldn't have guessed that this would have happened next. Keith's fingers were numb with excitement as he tried to unwrap Alaric's feet, each turn of the binding revealing more of the General's ankle. The intimacy of this was impossible to explain to a non-Basitin, it was a pleasure reserved for them alone. Alaric's fur bristled with the pleasure of Keith's touch on his sensitive arches. When the last bit of fabric lay pooled around Alaric's toes, Keith found himself

unable to prevent himself from staring at Alaric's feet, the fur meticulously groomed, the claws clipped carefully short, Alaric's taut, toned muscles standing in sharp relief beneath his fur. The moment stretched on until the sound of Alaric quietly clearing his throat broke Keith's concentration. Keith's gaze traveled up Alaric's body, pausing for an instant over the notable bulge in the General's trousers, appreciating again his lean torso before reaching Alaric's face.

"Not to distract you, Keith, but I think it's my turn." Alaric quirked an eyebrow seductively, a broad smile spread across his features. Keith sighed.

"I – I suppose..." His voice trailed off nervously and he glanced away. He'd spent the last few years of his life without his feet bound, and had even returned to the island that way, so his feet were nothing Alaric had not already seen, but now... Now it felt different somehow, and he was a little bashful at Alaric catching sight of his naked ankles again. *Especially after seeing his feet...Mine are so ragged and unkempt in comparison.* Alaric reached down with one gentle hand and tilted Keith's chin back up toward Alaric's face, his features softening as he saw Keith's embarrassment. Keith rose, almost imperceptible pressure from Alaric guiding him to his feet.

"You don't need to be bashful, Keith," Alaric whispered, "You have nothing to be ashamed of. You have the feet of a man who's walked the whole world. I'm jealous." He leaned in close, kissing Keith firmly, hoping some of his confidence would flow into the smaller Basitin. Then he worked his way down Keith's body, his fingertips tracing eddies and swirls in Keith's beige fur. When Alaric finally reached Keith's foot, he rubbed his cheek on Keith's ankle sensuously. He grinned impishly at Keith's rapid intake of breath in reaction. The poor man had no idea what was in store for him. Alaric sunk his teeth into Keith's foot wrapping, tugging it loose. His muzzle was ill designed to remove the binding, but he stayed in close, his hot breath and the soft brush of his lips following the teasing touch of his hands as each finger's width of Keith's feet was exposed. Alaric examined Keith's naked feet with an artist's studied eye, memorizing every contour. Keith's smile quirked upwards wryly. He had a feeling this close analysis would result in a statue or two. Alaric let the legs of Keith's trousers fall back to place, rising more quickly than Keith was expecting. Keith took an involuntary step backward, nearly losing his balance until Alaric grabbed him up in an embrace, steadying him. Their muzzles locked in another hot kiss, as Keith regained his footing and leaned into the General.

"I fear, my friend, that I am at the end of my patience. I've waited too long for you." Alaric nibbled at Keith's throat and slipped free of his trousers. Then he knelt before Keith slowly, letting his hands caress the smaller Basitin's body as he traveled down, his nose buried in the fur of Keith's torso, devouring Keith's scent. Keith groaned happily. He tussled Alaric's hair, reveling in the general's hot breath on his body.

"Wasn't I worth the wait, though?"

"Oh," Alaric said, nuzzling the crotch of Keith's pants, "Absolutely." Alaric cupped his hands around Keith's backside, feeling its curves while his muzzle traced Keith's thighs. The tease was as much for himself as it was for his childhood friend. Alaric had dreamed of this night, many, many times; a restless sleep that always woke him, sweaty and excited. And those nights he knew he would not be able to return to the dream, so he would spend them in his private masonry chambers, working on statues by the dim light of a taper. Statues of his dreams, statues of this man before him. So Alaric savored his anticipation, testing his patience with it, praying to the Masks that his dreams come real would not disappoint him. Alaric crawled around behind Keith, preferring to put off the chance of shattering his dreams for another moment. His fingers slipped inside the waistband of Keith's trousers, reaching around Keith's body to tease at the coarser fur concealed by Keith's clothing. Alaric pressed himself close to Keith, and pulled Keith's trousers to his feet. Keith twisted his body so he could look down at Alaric as his body came free of his restraining clothing. Keith exchanged a smile with Alaric, then the general closed his eyes and started to rub his cheek up and down the small of Keith's back to the base of his tail. Alaric's fingers danced through Keith's fur, circling the base of Keith's manhood. Keith drew a sharp intake of air. Alaric hummed with glee as he cupped Keith's jewels. He kissed the

base of Keith's tail and pulled his hands back, letting them barely brush around Keith's fur to grasp his tail. Alaric tickled the tip of Keith's tail, giving it his full attention. "Turn around, Keith," he said, and then looked up to meet Keith's eyes, "I want to see you at last."

"You know, before I came here, I thought I'd never do anything like that...But now I was worried you'd never ask," Keith smiled. He reached back to let his fingers follow Alaric's jaw as he turned to face his friend. "What do you think?"

"Oh, my..." Alaric said, staring at Keith's manhood, letting his eyes explore it thoroughly. "I see I'm going to have to make some adjustments to the statue." He looked up at Keith and grinned again. The tip of Alaric's tail wagged back and forth with his excitement and good humor.

"Don't you dare," Keith laughed. He suddenly realized that he could laugh about the statue. He didn't find it irritating or creepy anymore; it was just flattering now. Another weight lifted from his shoulders, making his smile come that much easier again.

"Suit yourself," Alaric smiled, "But this is something to be proud of." He leaned in close, letting his breath blow across the throbbing head of Keith's erect member. Keith's tail quivered at the feeling. Alaric's smile grew. He stroked the underside of Keith's manhood delicately with one finger. Alaric extended his tongue and slowly licked at Keith, then drew his tongue around it in a tight circle. Keith shut his eyes as his muscles contracted with the pleasure of Alaric's hot mouth, and his fur stood on end.

Fire and butterflies burned in Natani's gut. She gasped for a breath that wouldn't come, her chest feeling sensitive even beneath her constricting bandages. Natani gave a quiet prayer of thanks to the Masks that she'd shut Zen out before embarking on this adventure. Even so, she knew he could feel part of this; that she'd have to explain this to him. She leaned her head against the door jamb, and closed her eyes tightly, trying to drive the images she was seeing from them, but the sounds from inside would not be so easily shut out, and the scent of sweat and musk and things she didn't even want to contemplate lodged itself so deep in her nostrils that she thought she'd never smell anything else ever again. There was a part of her that wasn't sure she wanted to. *Sweet and salty and sour and masculine and strong...* her thoughts tumbled over each other like the bodies of lovers...Like the bodies in the office right now. Natani felt her hands play over her stomach, tease at her thighs. Their movements were unbidden and unwanted. The intoxicating scent wafting through the door did things to her body, stoked the furnace inside her abdomen ever hotter. Natani clenched her eyes tighter and forced herself to grip the door frame, her claws digging furrows into the wood. She was so confused now...She was torn with jealousy, not just at Alaric having Keith, but also at their bodies, male perfection, chiseled, firm, and strong; while she was trapped in this unruly female form. She desired Keith, even more now, but more than a little of her hated herself for it. *What sort of a man is attracted to another man?* Then the sound of Alaric's appreciative murmurs reminded her that the most powerful Basitin on the islands was that sort of man.

With her eyes closed, her mind made up new images. Natani opened her eyes, desperate to stare at something other than visions of herself, casting off her clothing, joining the other men in the room, breathing again, loving, living. The images tempted her, but also mocked her. She knew well that her body did not appear as she dreamed it, and she doubted she'd be welcome as she appeared. Natani gritted her teeth against their chattering with the exertion to keep her composure. She knew she should close the door, flee from the castle, but now that she'd opened her eyes again, she couldn't tear them away from Keith and his smooth, toned muscles rippling under his fur as he pressed into Alaric. *This stupid body, why was I cursed with it? Why can't I have the right body, one like Keith's?* she shouted silently in her mind, cursing herself and her form with the strongest language she could muster until tears filled her eyes. *Be strong, Natani. You're a strong assassin now. You're not some weak little girl, a servant to her body's stupid demands. You're strong now. Be strong!* Her words to herself were somewhere between a pep talk and pleading. Natani released the doorway and twisted her hands

into tight fists, staring, feeling her body getting ever warmer, like her skin was on fire. A million details pressed into her mind: the way the light flickered over Keith's fur as he moved, the way his chest heaved with each breath, the crystal clarity of his gorgeous yellow eyes. She felt like she could stare at them forever, studying how they twinkled, brimming with tears of pleasure. But Natani didn't let her eyes linger too long. They traced back down Keith's tightly built chest and abdominals to drink in the way Alaric's saliva clung to Keith's masculinity. She longed to feel Keith's mouth on her in just such a way. As she imagined Keith's hot breath, a thrill of pleasure shot through her body. The shock of sensation snapped her out of her reverie for a moment and she realized that her hands were tracing delicate lines over her abdomen again, rubbing and teasing. Her muscles quivering with the effort, Natani fought herself for control, forcing her hands to the cold stone floor. That accomplished, her sight returned to the sensual scene unfolding before her.

What little gasps of air Natani could summon were stolen away from her in a moment when Alaric's eyes flicked away from admiring Keith over to the doorway. She wanted to rip herself away, to hide in the shadows, to avoid Alaric's gaze, but she couldn't convince her body to move. She was frozen. But then Alaric's eyes looked back up toward Keith's face, drinking in Keith's ecstasy as though it were Alaric's own. He smiled broadly, running his tongue up the underside of Keith's member to flick across its tip. Natani sighed in relief, sinking to her knees, her eyes still affixed to the Basitins. Her body was tingling all over; it was more than she could stand. *Damn this body!* Natani knew she couldn't resist the feelings tearing through her forever, but the more of Keith and Alaric she saw, the more she wanted to see. She lost herself in her imagination again, putting herself in Alaric's place, fantasizing about taking Keith in her own mouth. And then he would do the same...In these feverish fantasies, Natani had the body she dreamed of and Keith commented about her size before engulfing her manhood in his muzzle. Raw physical pleasure tore through her mind again and she lost her breath in a rush with its intensity. Her fingers had worked their way to her crotch and were brushing against the clothing there in slow, smooth circles. She could practically taste Keith herself as Alaric released the other Basitin and licked his lips before going in again. A whimper escaped Natani's muzzle. She was losing this fight against herself, and she had nearly decided that she didn't care to win anyway. Natani felt like her world was falling into a jumble. Everything was heat and desire; a willingness to do anything for pleasure. Saliva dripped from her panting tongue. Her hands worked as if of their own mind, obeying her body's impulses and not her thoughts; what few coherent thoughts remained. Her sash unknotted, her trousers slipped to the stone floor, and her fingers found their goal. Natani gave in. Any thought that remained outside of her focus on Keith and Alaric's magnificent forms was annihilated in an explosion of bliss.

Keith had never felt anything like this before in his whole life. His whole body burned. A fire, deep inside, that longed, threatened to tear itself out of him. "Alaric," Keith whispered desperately, "I can't...I'm going to explode." Suddenly, Alaric's warm mouth disappeared from Keith's body, his touch evaporated. Keith's eyes, squeezed shut in ecstasy, cracked open. He whimpered slightly, all his muscles tense and quivering on the cusp of orgasm. Alaric looked up at him, grinning. A single drop of fluid emerged from Keith's engorged member to dribble stickily down his shaft.

"Oh, Keith," the Master General laughed, "I couldn't resist the tease." He leaned in close, his every breath pushing Keith further and further to the edge. "But I have not spent these years dreaming of you to let even the slightest taste of you escape," he said, eyes fixated on Keith's body, speaking into Keith rather than up to him. Alaric delicately licked Keith's rod clean and smiled for a split second, savoring the taste. Keith's eyes clenched back shut and he gritted his teeth. Realizing how close Keith was to losing control, Alaric engulfed Keith's whole member with his muzzle, wrapping it tightly with his lips. He played with its tip using his tongue, and sucked until Keith couldn't take it any more. Keith felt the pressure building, his loins pulling close to his body. Then a rush, an explosion. Fire tore itself from his crotch and his mind went simply blank. Keith tilted his head back and called out to

the Masks in a roar of unfettered pleasure. He arched his back, throwing himself further into Alaric, holding his old friend come lover tightly. For a blissful heartbeat, Keith thought the waves of pleasure might never end. Then, it was as though he'd poured all his strength from his body into Alaric's hungry mouth. Keith drooped, the only real sign of energy was his tail, wagging rapidly with pleasure. He'd never thought that sex would be like this...No wonder people were always comparing things to it. Alaric released Keith from his muzzle and let the smaller Basitin slump down to a kneel, eye to eye with him. As Keith gasped for breath, struggling to find his bearings in a sea of carnal delight, Alaric rested his forehead against Keith's. He looked directly into Keith's eyes and smiled more broadly than ever before. This was his fantasy come true. Well, not yet that, perhaps, but it was getting there. And so far, it was better than he'd ever fantasized. "Rest up quickly, Keith. It's my turn next." Keith responded by looking tiredly up at Alaric. He gave a small smile, then tilted his head and gave the Master General a hard kiss.

When the kiss broke, Keith simply looked wordlessly at his friend and smiled. He glanced down at Alaric's lap, and the hard erection it contained, then flicked his eyes back to Alaric's face and back down. He didn't need to say anything – Alaric understood. *As you wish, my General, my friend, my lover.* Alaric stood and smiled down at Keith. Keith simply stared up at Alaric, examining his body closely for the first time. The practiced, perfect stature, the battle-hardened muscles standing out in Alaric's lean frame, the small scars from weapons that barely missed his life producing little ridges and cowlicks in his fur, and, of course, Alaric's loins, thick and strong with lust and desire; all these details and more Keith truly absorbed as he never had before. Keith played his hands across Alaric's body, tracing the scars with his fingertips.

Keith dipped his head and took Alaric's balls into his mouth. He rolled his tongue over them, enjoying the rough texture of Alaric's dense fur. Alaric's musky scent was intoxicating at this range. It spoke silent volumes of Alaric's strength of body and will. Alaric's tail twitched and his eyes slid shut with a quiet moan. Keith took this as encouragement. He must be doing something right. *Let's see...What would really excite me in this situation?* Keith wondered to himself, trying to make things up as he went along. He let Alaric slip from his muzzle and pursed his lips, blowing gently against Alaric's damp fur. The Master General shivered with the sensation. Keith followed his breath with a kiss, spreading hot little kisses up Alaric's shaft to the head. He circled the head with his tongue before planting a big kiss on it. Keith used his finger to draw little circles over Alaric's sack, tickling and teasing it as his tongue did likewise to the rest of Alaric's manhood. Alaric's moans turned into a gasp. Keith's other hand moved around to stroke and scratch the fur at the base of Alaric's tail, his friend twisting and arching his body. *So this is how it works.* Keith smiled. *I think I have this figured out.* He slid close to Alaric, nipping delicately at the general's stomach. Alaric closed his eyes in a long blink and sighed, delighting in Keith's warmth against his fur.

Oh Keith, Alaric thought, You're better than I'd ever imagined. Some of those cold nights I gave up hope...But this makes up for them and so much more. A tingle ran through Alaric's form as Keith rubbed his nose against the base of Alaric's manhood and grasped it firmly in one hand. Alaric moaned as Keith sensually stroked Alaric, his other hand tickling border between Alaric's body and tail. Keith let his tongue drag sinuously through the dense fur of Alaric crotch. Alaric bared his fangs in pleasure with the sensation and let his fingers dig deep into Keith's hair.

"Mmm...Alaric..." Keith whispered.

"Please, Keith," the general panted, "Call me Nickolai. I think you've earned that privilege; though of course, that can't leave this room, I'm afraid. But it'll be good to hear my given name pass your lips again after all these years." Keith just chuckled and reached up to kiss his friend again. Keith held his half standing pose as long as he could, kissing Alaric deeply, tasting himself on his lover's tongue. One hand wrapped around Alaric's neck, helping to support his weight, and his other hand continued to gently stroke Alaric's tackle. Finally, Keith's legs shook with the effort of maintaining his pose, and he let himself down Alaric's body slowly, nuzzling and kissing Alaric's chest as he went.

Keith finally took Alaric fully into his mouth, in a single, smooth, almost graceful motion. Keith left his mouth open, his breath hot against Alaric's heat. Alaric groaned and pressed himself into Keith. Keith cupped his tongue around Alaric and took a moment to savor everything, Alaric's taste, his scent, his warmth, his shallow breathing as his muscles quivered with anticipation for Keith's next move..

In a way, I'm glad I waited for this, Keith thought. He wrapped his lips around Alaric's masculinity. Alaric gasped and murmured as Keith began to suck, gently at first, and bob his head. Alaric's moans gave Keith confidence, though his friend's exuberance made him blush. Keith was sure that at least part of it was an act Alaric was putting on for his benefit; to make him feel good about himself. Alaric looked down at Keith, smiling through his deep gasps of pleasure. Alaric found the smaller Basitin's self-conscious blush adorable, a softness to contrast the hard heat of his mouth. Alaric could feel his muscles begin to tighten, his body growing warmer with each move of Keith's head. Keith took his mouth off Alaric, who shivered at the sudden chill of the air. Keith looked up at Alaric and smiled, letting his hand take back over for his lips. He closed his eyes and ducked in close to Alaric's manhood once more, giving the head short, solid licks with an extended tongue as his hand stroked the shaft. Alaric couldn't restrain a whimper. His fur stood on end and his tail quivered.

"Keith, mmm, that's good." Alaric's chest heaved as he treasured each sensation. He cracked his eyes open and glanced up to the ceiling, his eyes traveling around it. They alighted on the window over his door and took in the reflection. Alaric grinned even more broadly. He dug his fingertips deeply into Keith's scalp and moaned, letting his eyes slide back shut. Keith took a break from lapping at Alaric's hardness to purse his lips and blow across it. Alaric's body shook, and he let his hands travel down to tease Keith's neck and collarbone with a delicate touch. Keith gave a short moan of his own and planted a sweet kiss on the end of Alaric's manhood before engulfing it in his muzzle again. This time he suckled at it harder, more aggressively. Alaric nearly jumped as Keith's hands danced around the base of his tail and caressed his thighs, sliding down Alaric's legs to titillate his sensitive ankles. As Keith began to vary his strength and speed, Alaric could feel his whole body go taut. Fire spread through him, threatened to take him over, dominate him. He felt dizzy; vertigo at the edge of an abyss of pleasure. Alaric groaned, clenching his stomach to hold in the impending explosion.

"Hold, Keith," Alaric grunted, "I have other plans for you." Keith paused and looked back up to Alaric's smiling face.

"So, you get to taste me, but I'm denied you? With all due respect, Nickolai, that's not going to happen." Keith took Alaric's manhood back into his muzzle and redoubled his gentle suckling.

"Keith," Alaric gasped, "I can't hold out forever. I just wa—ha-ha-hau..." His voice trailed off into moans of pleasure as Keith grasped his foot and started to tickle it teasingly. Keith smiled around Alaric's member. Alaric finally gave in with a sharp intake of breath. He clutched Keith to his body as spasms of bliss rocked him. Fire and electricity burned through his every nerve, unhindered, unbound. And when the wildfire had consumed all of him, it sought its way out. Alaric burst into Keith's waiting mouth with a greater force than Keith had anticipated. Keith choked and recovered, swallowing greedily just to keep up with the hot cream pouring into his mouth. The taste of Alaric filled him, for a moment it even wiped his memory of any other taste; as though the only thing he had ever tasted, the only taste that ever mattered, was Alaric. It was saltier than Keith had expected, unmistakably similar to Alaric's sweat, but with a unique tang and an almost smoky twist. Alaric shook as he emptied himself, his moans fading as his body went weak. Keith let Alaric slip from his muzzle and stood, letting Alaric wrap his arms around Keith's neck for support. Alaric looked at Keith lazily, his eyes half-lidded as he recovered from ecstasy. "It looks like you weren't quite ready for everything, Keith," he chided playfully. Alaric grinned and wiped his forefinger up Keith's chin, collecting a thin bead that Keith had been unable to keep in his mouth. Keith smiled back and held Alaric's hand.

"I'd best clean up then," Keith whispered coyly. He took Alaric's finger into his mouth and wrapped his tongue around it, sucking it clean. Alaric couldn't help but shiver. "What's next then?" Keith asked breathlessly.

“Oh, I'm sure you can guess,” Alaric smiled, “But first...” Alaric released Keith and walked somewhat unsteadily over to his desk. He grabbed the bowl of nuts from it. He set the bowl down near the futon and plucked one nut from it. With a sharp motion, Alaric snapped the nut open. Thick, syrupy fluid drizzled out of the nutshell, coating the shell and pooling in Alaric's hands. He dropped the now empty shell to the floor and returned to Keith, letting the goo pour viscously from one hand to the other and back again. “Now, just hold still a moment.” Alaric crouched, and slathered the fluid over Keith's member. At Alaric's touch, as the cool juice flowed over him, Keith quickly grew fully erect again. The syrup gummed Keith's fur into clumps where it touched, but on the smooth skin of his masculinity, it formed a thin, slick layer. “There, that'll make things a bit easier all around.” Alaric stood, running his fingers up Keith's stomach against the grain of the Basitin's fur. The remaining goo wiped off Alaric's hands and made patches of Keith's fur stand up in great cowlicks. Alaric leaned over to kiss his friend gently and smile into Keith's eyes. Alaric took Keith by the hand and led him over to the futon, where he knelt, facing away from Keith. “Now, Keith,” Alaric said, dropping to his hands and knees, and glancing back over his shoulder, “Please be gentle.” Alaric flicked his tail out of Keith's way, to give the smaller Basitin easy access, and let it dangle over one hip. The tip of Alaric's tail quivered excitedly, betraying his anticipation.

Keith looked down at Alaric's backside, and the ripple of fur traveling down one hip from a particularly long scar. He swallowed hard; this was farther than he'd thought this would go when he came here. Alaric's salty taste still clung to his tongue. He looked down and let his eyelids slide shut. This was another moment of truth. His heartbeat filled his ears and he could feel his own heat in hands, but his mind was, for an instant, far from this room. He had spent many long, cold years away. He'd had love torn from his grasp. He had denied himself any indulgence of the heart since then. It wasn't worth the risk. The last time he'd been told he was worthy of love, his lover had run from his side. The last time he'd been offered a view like this, it was accompanied by Natani's anger and pain at Keith catching sight. Now, this time, Alaric did not offer a look of betrayal but rather one of expectation. It felt profoundly strange to Keith that he come home to find someone who cared about him, who wanted him. But in its own way, it also felt right. *Is this love?* Keith did not often spare himself pity, but it slipped in with all the lust and longing and other emotions churning through his brain. *Is this what it really means? I'm finally desired... It's not everything I've wished for; but right now...Right now, this is what I want, maybe even need.* Keith opened his eyes again and knelt behind Alaric, gripping himself more firmly with one hand, and letting the other play down Alaric's spine and follow the General's scars. “Nickolai?” Keith asked, smiling, “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Then, with a wistful whisper, Alaric added, “I've been ready for this moment for years.” Keith positioned himself carefully as Alaric breathed deeply, trying to relax his body. It wasn't easy. The excitement of the moment had all his muscles tight. Keith pressed into Alaric, sliding slowly into the General. Alaric exhaled with a hiss as Keith entered him. It hurt, but Alaric expected the pain, and he knew it would be worth it. Keith began to slide his hips forward and back, slowly and carefully. His heart beat faster, his lungs heaving harder with each thrust. Alaric gasped with mixed pain and pleasure, Keith's every motion driving waves of ecstasy through the General's body. Alaric's eyes began to go blank, his mind losing itself to the sound of Keith crashing against him and the sensation of his friend pushing deeper and deeper. Keith paused with a low groan, sliding his hands up Alaric's back as he draped his body on the General's form. Laying over Alaric, Keith allowed his hands to slip down Alaric's sides and slowly investigate his chest.

“Umph,” Keith grunted into Alaric's ear, “Nickolai, this is almost more than I can take.” Keith's fingers worked down Alaric's torso, probing his tight, lean muscles appreciatively before reaching Alaric's manhood. Keith wrapped his fingers around the shaft, still slick with his saliva. Alaric inhaled quickly, his body tightening around Keith, squeezing him, before exhaling with a shudder and a moan.

“Keith,” Alaric crooned, “You seem to have things well in hand.” Keith grinned, and stretched forward to lock muzzles again with Alaric in a kiss. The smaller Basitin then pushed himself up off Alaric and rejoined his smooth thrusts. Alaric's body arched with pleasure as Keith's thighs slapped against Alaric's backside, faster with each stroke. Keith's gasping breaths could barely keep up with his motion. A warm fire spread through his body; his whole being tingled, and his fur stood on end. Keith's fingers clenched in Alaric's fur, tan tufts protruding from between them. His claws pressed into Alaric's skin, further mixing the delicate blend of pain and pleasure driving the General in lustful ecstasy. Alaric's toes curled, his tail twitching so quickly it scarcely seemed to move at all. Each could feel the restrained strength of the other, and the feeling of raw physical power ready to burst charged their desire for one another. Sweat mingled in the press of their bodies as the world outside of the other Basitin faded for each of them, leaving only the other's warmth and scent, the only thing audible over the blood rushing in their ears was their moans of shared pleasure. Together, Alaric and Keith roared to the world as they crested the summit of pleasure into nothingness, tumbling in unison into the void of satiated lust.

“So,” Keith panted, flopping over onto his back and staring over at Alaric's exhausted form, “How'd you know to have a bowl of those nuts here?” Alaric returned Keith's look with a glint in his good eye.

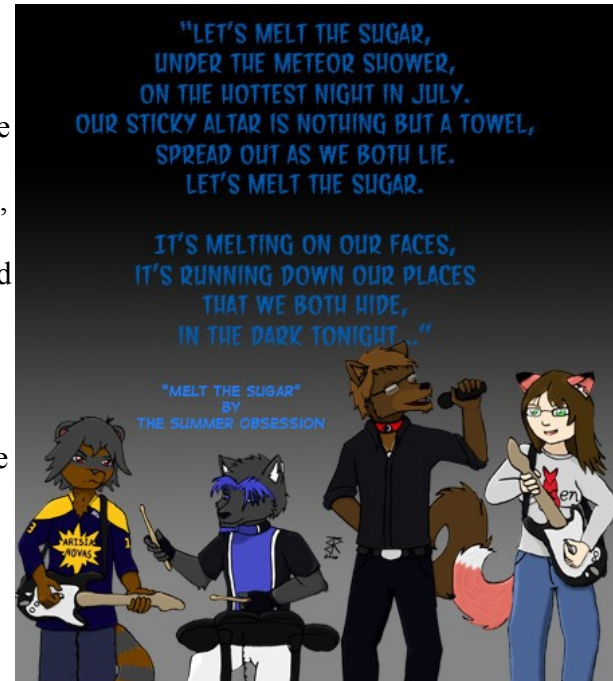
“I've kept some nearby at all times, ever since you came back. You know, 'a Basitin is prepared for battle at any time,’” Alaric grinned, quoting the proverb drilled into them as children during their training. A proverb that they'd joked about for some time, demanding preparedness from each other at random intervals. Each of them had ended up in streams and mud puddles more than once in an unwary moment when the other thought to take advantage. Keith smiled back at the memory.

“Are you prepared for battle *now*?” he bellowed, imitating their old instructor before reaching over quickly and slapping Alaric on the backside. Alaric laughed in response, soon joined by Keith.

As Alaric and Keith lay next to each other, basking in the afterglow and sharing pillow talk, Natani came back to her senses. *It's not fair...* was her first complete thought in a long while. Then she shook her head, trying to bring back her focus. *Come on, Natani, snap out of it. You're deep in enemy territory...* Then she looked down and added, *half-naked*. Her fingers were slick from their recent occupation, but that wasn't the real problem. The real problem was that she was sitting in a small pool of sweat and bodily juices that she didn't want to consider, but that smelled undeniably like a highly aroused female wolf. She reached up and pulled the door smoothly shut and breathed a sigh of relief.

NATANI! Zen's voice tore through what was left of the block she'd left on the link and shocked her breath from her once more. She could feel his worry and puzzlement, and a bit of anger. *What happened?! Your time just got over; I don't understand what's going on. Are you okay?* His following mental mutter echoed in her head, making her ears burn with embarrassment, *The next time you need a few minutes of personal attention, warn a guy...*

I...I'm sorry, Zen. I wasn't expecting it myself; it just sort of...happened. I saw something that got to me. Natani's plain embarrassment came through to Zen and he felt a little guilty about his anger. It hadn't cause him any trouble, fortunately, but it had been one of the more bizarre things he'd experienced over the link. She'd limited the link enough that he didn't know much of what had been happening, and now he was just glad she was safe and seemingly back to normal; or what passed for



normal in Natani's case.

Just so that you're all right, brother. I've been in that sort of situation before, as I think you'll recall. Zen's words were comforting, while he tried to figure out the proper response. A part of him was elated that his little sister was finally expressing some interest in someone. Another part of him, while being somewhat supportive of her choice, had all kinds of concerns about who she was falling in love with, and was even more concerned about what sort of trouble she was getting herself in that she was...doing things like what she'd just done. Zen didn't even really want to consider his sister doing anything sexual. Natani spared herself a grin at Zen's words to her. She remembered the time Zen was referencing. They were watching a target in shifts and it was Zen's turn. The target had been...entertaining his mistress much of the day, and while it had been a largely dull vigil, their voices had carried over to the wolves waiting hidden in a nearby glade. Zen hadn't been with a woman since the incident that had bound he and Natani together, and Natani knew it bothered him sometimes. Not as severely as her...problem, but the loneliness bothered him nevertheless. There were needs that your brother could simply not fulfill, and listening to their target and his mistress all day had driven that point home to Zen. Then, unexpectedly, the target's mistress entered the glade to bathe in the stream, not a dozen paces from Zen's position in the brush. Natani did have to credit him a valiant fight. Her brother had always been strong; she'd always admired and envied him for that. But in the end, he'd lost out to the impulses of his body too. Zen had a few...unguarded moments which woke Natani, who had been dozing quietly nearby, and left her with the strangest sensations coming over the link. Pleasure, tinged with shame and drowned in jealousy and desire. The very same feelings that bubbled through her right now.

Thanks, Zen, Natani sent to him gratefully, *I'm sorry. If I'd had any idea this would happen, I would have warned you, or avoided the problem.*

It's all right, Natani. Sometimes the unexpected happens. You can fill me in later. Just get yourself out of there and somewhere safe, little brother.

Between the memory and Zen's efforts, Natani's panicking mind slowly calmed and she was able to recall the skin of spoiled wine tied to her pack. She carried it to cover up the scent of death: blood and offal, in those cases where it was best a body not be discovered too soon. The same properties that made the wine help eliminate those odors would work in her favor here as well. She pulled the plug from the wineskin and slowly emptied its contents over the floor. She could hear Alaric and Keith's voices raise in volume in the office. Her spell of comprehension had long faded, but she knew that must mean that they'd be preparing to leave soon, and despite Alaric's orders, she could hear footsteps echoing through the hall. Natani ducked into the deep shadows, hugging the wall closely. She had no desire to meet whoever it was who would defy the Master General's orders and the muscle of his honor guard. Natani started to painstakingly trace her way back through the castle. Fortunately, following her own path backwards had been ground into her during training until it was instinct. It didn't take long before she was slipping from shadow to shadow without thought or effort.

Despite the danger of her situation, once her mind could trust her body to move without it, the reminder of Zen's moment of weakness echoed through her thoughts and she couldn't help but compare him to Keith. Natani wasn't exactly sure what had happened to lead Keith and the Master General to...do what they'd just done, but Keith was stronger than anyone she knew, even stronger than Zen. Natani couldn't think of a time when Keith had experienced a moment of weakness. He even guarded her patiently during that...time. That couldn't possibly have been easy, and if he'd been the slightest bit weak, well, she knew she wouldn't have had any strength left to resist. *Keith's simply the most amazingly strong person I've ever met. Maybe he really is gay. Why else would he have fallen for the Master General?* Natani looked up from her distracted thoughts and stopped with a shock, ducking into a nearby alcove and trying to quiet her breathing. She'd managed to come within a palm of a guard's back. The guard paused. A chill ran down Natani's spine; it took a moment before she realized it was because her back had suddenly gotten damp. She allowed a glance over her shoulder. She was hiding

next to a curtained embrasure, and the wind caught the curtains occasionally, blowing them slightly open, enough to let rain spatter in. A rumble of thunder growled through the castle. Natani pressed herself more firmly against the wall. The guard turned, casting her eyes over the alcove. Natani didn't even dare breathe. The wind whistled again, rain spattering noisily outside and threatening to make Natani shiver when it blew through the window and struck her neck. The guard's eyes hesitated for a heart-stopping moment. Then she shook herself and strode off, back on patrol, muttering something quietly under her breath. Natani let out a sigh. She couldn't let herself get distracted like that again. If she were caught, or even if she just had to hide for a while, she wouldn't beat Keith back to the inn. Natani slunk back into the shadows in the hall and kept retracing her steps.

When she'd reached the embrasure she'd crept into the castle through, Natani realized her problems weren't over. She now had to cross the courtyard and the wall in the middle of a rainstorm. While the storm would help conceal her and muffle the noise of her passing, it still required careful consideration. The slightest footprint would be disastrous. Natani sighed and pulled the thin pack off her back. She reluctantly extracted a pair of sandals and slipped the pack back on. She hated wearing foot coverings.

Oh, they're not that bad. Zen chided in her head.

Of course you'd say that. You like them. I hate how they constrict my feet, and I hate how they make me feel disconnected from the earth. Natani pouted, but slipped them on her feet. They were better than nothing – at least any tracks she left wouldn't be so obviously lupine. Natani eased her way out of the castle and into the courtyard. In this rain, all she'd need would be an opportunity and a bit of shadow near a tower. The rain would shield her from any cursory glances toward the wall. She glanced around. There was a patrol, coming in this direction, but they looked to be the only Basitins in sight. Natani held her breath, crouching behind a bush as the patrol marched past. *So far, so good.* Natani jogged across the courtyard to the wall, with a low, loping stride that she knew made little noise. She began to scale the castle wall, where it met a tower. Not only was the spot in shadow, it was also relatively sheltered from the rain. The climb wasn't particularly difficult, not with the wall only somewhat damp, and the rain not pouring into her eyes. She peered carefully over the battlement, verifying that it was clear of wary guards before pulling herself over, crossing swiftly, and beginning her descent.

So, Natani, did you hear anything useful about the human, or was this all just to get an eyeful? Zen's voice was playful, now that it seemed that Natani was safely out of the castle proper.

*Oh, lay off, Zen. I **was** trying to get information on Trace. It's not my fault that they weren't actually discussing him. Sometimes a spy doesn't learn what they expect to learn.* Natani mentally replied with some indignation. She picked her way slowly down the wall. It took more concentration than she'd expected – the stones were slick with the rain. Natani was starting to become concerned that Keith would beat her back, considering how long it was taking her just to slip out of the castle undetected.

*So, Zen sent, and Natani could feel his impish smile through the link, **What was it that you *did* learn? Something about a certain Basitin? How his fur lays under his armor maybe?***

Shut up, Zen. You wouldn't want to know anyway.

Come on, little brother, you can tell me. I promise I'll leave it out of the report.

Zen! I didn't hear anything about the human. The rest is none of your business! When Natani lost her temper, it broke her concentration. Her fingers slipped from the handhold she was aiming for and for one perilous moment, she hung in mid air. She scabbled for purchase on wet stones, but her claws scratched futilely at them and she half-fell, half-slid the remaining distance to the ground, landing with a violent splash into a large puddle of water. She lay there for a moment, stunned. Zen could scarcely contain his amusement at Natani's predicament. Her ears burned with Zen's laughter. She scowled and dragged herself to her feet, only to have her right leg collapse when she put weight on it, dropping her back in the puddle with a barely constrained whimper of pain. Zen immediately quit

laughing.

Natani, he asked worriedly, *Are you okay?*

I'm great. Just great. Natani sent back, her thoughts virtually dripping with sarcasm, *I'm thoroughly soaked, freezing cold, and I have a twisted ankle. Why did I do this again?* At that, a memory floated past, one she was careful not to let slip down the link to Zen. A single image, Keith's fingertips deep in Alaric's hair as he moaned in pleasure, every lithe muscle taut and visible as light played over the soft brown of his sweat-soaked fur. Natani felt a tiny ball of warmth deep in her body spring to life, like a candle, suddenly lit, chasing all the dark shadows out of a room. She had to make it back to the inn. This little thing wouldn't stop her. More carefully this time, Natani struggled to her feet. Her form disappeared into the rain, hobbling toward the inn with as much speed as she could muster.

Alaric glanced over to Keith, watching appreciatively as the smaller Basitin dressed. Keith kept adjusting his tunic, as though it no longer fit quite as he remembered. "Oh, and Keith," Alaric said, grinning teasingly, "Tell your wolf friend that she's welcome to join us next time. I don't mind sharing."

"I – What?!"

"Yes, she sat outside the whole time watching us. Well, watching us and touching herself. I'd say I was surprised you couldn't smell her, but it was very subtle. She must have been hiding it somehow," Alaric smiled slyly at Keith, "She couldn't take her eyes off you, you know. I think she was quite impressed." Keith blushed deep crimson under his fur. "Not that I blame her," Alaric added, mostly to himself.

"I, uh...I-I mean, she, erm..." Keith stuttered, trying to recover himself. "Wait, Nikolai, wouldn't that be illegal? I, mean, since she's actually female in the guise of a male and all?" he wondered.

"Funny you mention that," Alaric said, scratching his head, "I'm sure you can put together that men and women *can* manage to do what we just finished with." Keith blushed and looked away, now that Alaric stated that, it was obvious. "However," Alaric continued, "The laws, for being so obsessive about Keidran promiscuity, are bizarrely silent about the actual sex act with them. It might simply be because our unions are not fruitful, but I get the distinct feeling that I am not the first Master General to have both the ear of the King and a desire for looser...restrictions. So, it's actually easier to deal with for your Keidran friend than for another Basitin – she is effectively free of legal limitations, provided we keep it private. She can legally join us in...play." Alaric grinned. Then Keith remembered his situation.

"What about my orders to kill her?" Keith glared sullenly at Alaric. *Was this whole suggestion some kind of trick?*

"Mmm..." Alaric murmured, considering everything for a moment, "Your orders stand, but there's plenty of time before your trial tomorrow. You might as well take this chance to enjoy her while you still can," he said with a wink and a leer. Keith's glare intensified. "You know, if you were hoping to bribe me with your body, you should have thought about that before you gave it to me freely. Besides, this gives you an advantage – she'll never expect you to deal with her in the afterglow." Alaric tapped his nose knowingly. Somewhat to Alaric's surprise, Keith turned away icily.

"Until tomorrow then, General," Keith stated flatly and stormed off.

"Keith, wait!" Alaric called after him, to no avail. *By the Masks!* Alaric cursed inwardly. *That's a twist I didn't quite expect. Another Keidran... And to think, I'm supposed to be the one who refuses to abide by tradition.* Alaric sighed. *Ah well, I've dealt with more complicated situations than this one.* "Keith, I promise you, I didn't wait these long years to see you smile again, just have others steal it away once more," Alaric vowed to the image of Keith in the fountain, his voice a whisper in a room that seemed dark and empty without Keith's presence.

Alaric was never one to waste time. He dressed quickly and recalled his guards. A plan was starting to form in his head, but he'd have to act quickly. It was time to set the first stage in motion and see if the whole thing was worth going through with. If he'd misjudged the situation, it wouldn't do to put himself in a position of too much risk. "Lynn," Alaric called out. The old Basitin messenger appeared quickly, still fleet despite the ravages of age. "Among Keith Keiser's traveling companions is a wolf, Natani. Bring he—him here. I need to interview a few of the exile's companions before the trial tomorrow. Tell the wolf that we have matters to discuss concerning Keiser. You'll probably find him at the inn near the docks." *I can't imagine she'd go anywhere but back to the inn, hoping to beat Keith there.*

"Of course. Master General," Lynn nodded and shuffled off. Alaric nodded to himself. He knew he could trust that Lynn would be discrete. Now it was just a matter of waiting for Natani to arrive and figuring out how to approach the wolf. Alaric leaned against the door to his stone-working room and let his eyes wander around inside absentmindedly. They focused on a column of newly hewn marble. Alaric raised an eyebrow speculatively. *Hrm...That one might be large enough for a few figures. And I've never sculpted a Keidran before...*

