

The soldier stared straight ahead. His expression would have been unreadable, even if it had been visible beneath the concealing metal mask he wore. "I apologize for being unable to determine why the General had ordered his guards away, sir. I moved in as soon as I heard of it, but I was unable to get there before he and the exile finished their conversation."

"You did well, operative, thank you for bringing this to my attention." The operative's superior officer betrayed none of his interest. And, like the soldier, his dress uniform prevented any of his body language from being read. The dull steel masks were blank, devoid of any identifying characteristics. Their bodies were hid similarly by the draping fabric of their uniforms. The uniforms were long, flowing robes, so formless that it was impossible to determine anything about the wearer other than their height, stitched together from a deep gray fabric, matte and plain, save for a Basitin crest, embroidered over the chest in a silver thread that left it invisible unless the light struck it just right. Thin black pips on the collar were the only indication of rank either of the Basitins wore. "Do you have anything else to report?"

"Only that the General was donning his armor when the exile left, suggesting that he removed it while the exile was present. That's all, sir."

"Very good." The operative's superior paused, considering the situation. "I want you to keep a close eye on the General, report his movements directly to me."

"Sir?"

"His...history with the exile might cloud his judgment, despite his best intentions. We cannot permit the law to be bent, even by accident."

"Sir." The operative saluted and strode away, his footsteps quiet through disciplined practice. He disappeared down the hallway, like a ghost cast from steel and shadows. The remaining Basitin's face twisted into a smile, invisible beneath his mask. He didn't honestly believe that Alaric would bend the law on accident. No, Alaric would bend the law *on purpose*. And this time the Master General wouldn't get away with it.

Natani stumbled into the inn and limped hurriedly up the stairs, desperate to get herself to the room, changed, and dry before Keith arrived; assuming he wasn't here already. Natani mentally crossed her fingers. As she dragged herself over the threshold, the innkeeper angrily shouted something at her. *Probably mad about the mud I'm dripping on the floor, if his mop's any indication*, Natani thought.

You know, I don't think he likes you, Zen's voice laughed in her mind. He'd seemed to have taken on a much cheerier disposition now that they were back in out of the rain. Zen hoped Natani didn't realize that it was all a front. He was more worried than ever, since now she'd be facing that Basitin crush of hers, injured and vulnerable. And Zen alone realized how vulnerable his little sister could really be. But he had to admit, Keith seemed to make Natani happy, particularly if the earlier incident was any indication. Zen was sure Keith was at the bottom of it, whatever it had been. *Natani deserves to be happy*, Zen thought, careful not to let those words make their way through the link. Zen would gladly give his life for his sister. He'd sworn to protect her, to take care of her. He was ashamed to admit to himself, daily, that he hadn't done a terrific job. Perhaps it was time to let her choose happiness and someone else who'd be better at keeping her safe.

Natani fumbled at the doorknob. Even when you had the keys, doors never opened quickly when you were in a panic. She finally threw the door open and wobbled unsteadily into the room, each motion sending further twinges of pain shooting through her ankle. She'd stripped her shirt off and cast it aside before Zen mentally nudged her. *Natani, why don't you lock the door before you take all your clothes off? Or at least, you know, close it*. Natani blushed deeply, catching the door with the heel of her injured foot and flicking it closed, wincing with the action.

Thanks, Zen, she sent gratefully. That was Zen...Sometimes he was a bother, but he was always

looking out for her. She smiled and let herself fall back against the closed door, quickly locking it. Natani leaned against the door for a few heartbeats, letting herself catch her breath and calm down as she dripped water on the floor. *Well, I can't sit here forever... Keith will be back soon. I can't have beaten him here by much.* Natani began to unwind her soaked bandages. Her breasts were more sensitive than usual after the sight she'd seen in the castle, and the wet bandages were chafing painfully.

*What **did** you see back there, Natani?* Zen wondered. *You're still all...uh...worked up.*

I told you, Zen, it's none of your business. Natani hoped her anger would translate through the link well enough that Zen would quit asking. Chest unbound, Natani took a deep gulp of air, glad to be able to breathe again without rubbing herself uncomfortably against the tight linen wrap, and peeled her trousers off, taking care with her swollen ankle. She threw the pants aside with the rest of her clothing, her eyes searching the room for a towel, a rag; something she could use to get dry. Natani drew a sharp intake of breath as the cold air in the room penetrated her wet fur to the heat even yet smoldering between her legs. An image flashed through her thoughts: Keith's quiet and sensual breathplay, only she was in Alaric's place, and it was her manhood Keith blew against. Unsure if she could savor it with Zen listening in, Natani let the picture slip away. She closed her eyes and tried to steady herself, get her mind to focus. *Stupid body...* Natani grumbled to herself. Natani glanced around the sparsely appointed room. The Basitins apparently believed in minimalism when it came to furnishings. Apart from the bed, there was only a small dresser. Natani wasn't entirely sure of its contents; she knew that she'd stuffed her belongings in one drawer, and Keith had carefully packed his into another, but that left a couple drawers with unknown contents. Maybe they were empty, but Natani decided she had to look. If there wasn't anything in the dresser, she'd have to borrow the blankets off the bed to dry off with, and she had little doubt doing so would both upset the innkeeper further and leave her without anything warm and dry to sleep under tonight.

Natani pushed up off the door and hobbled over to the dresser, pawing through the drawers. "There's got to be something to dry off with in here...Ah ha!" Natani pulled a large bath towel from a drawer. She had only started to pat herself dry, squeezing the water out of her fur, when she heard the telltale rattle of keys in the lock. *Oh no!* Natani hurriedly wrapped the towel around her body, trying desperately to conceal herself from prying eyes, and turned away from the door. "Keith!" she called, "Don't come in right now!"

"What was that, Natani?" Keith asked, swinging the door open. Once he'd caught sight of her towel draped form, Keith quickly looked away and closed the door. Natani sighed.

"Nevermind," she muttered, and then added angrily, "I just hope for your sake you don't intend to get an eyeful!"

"The thought never entered my mind," Keith lied, staring very hard at the polished hardwood floor while he tried to shoo pictures of Natani letting the towel fall to a pool around her feet and embracing him out of his head. *What's wrong with me?* Keith wondered, *I still don't feel quite myself after...Alaric and I...Great. I'm getting excited again.* A sneeze shook his body and interrupted his thoughts. "Natani," Keith asked, wiping his nose, "Could you please see if there's another towel in there?"

Natani looked down, embarrassed that she was getting angry at Keith, while he just stood there dripping. And...shivering? "I thought you said Basitins couldn't get sick." She cast the statement over her shoulder while she rooted through the drawers for another towel.

"Well, normally – *Ah choo!* – we can't. But if we're wet and cold... Well, as you might guess from my fur, Basitins were meant to stay warm and dry." Keith reached over and locked the door, securing the bolt. "*Ah choo!* This way – *sniff* – nobody's going to burst in here and see you."

"Thanks, Keith." *That's thoughtful of him,* Natani thought. She pulled a second towel from the drawer and hobbled painfully over to Keith, handing him the towel. "Here. Just don't you be looking either!" Some quiet part of her protested at her half-felt final remark, reminding her that there was little she wanted more than Keith to look at her admiringly.

“Thanks,” Keith said, taking the towel gratefully, trying to avert his eyes from Natani. “Umm...Nat...If you wouldn't mind, could you, uh, turn around?”

“Oh! Uh, yeah. Yeah, sure. Sorry.” Natani reddened, and turned her back to Keith as he quickly doffed his armor and clothing. Still, she couldn't help sneaking a peek when she thought it wouldn't be noticed.

Natani, Zen's voice broke in, If you're going to do that, could you please limit the link a little? I really don't care to get a nice long look at your boyfriend's backside. Natani blushed deep crimson beneath her fur and cowered a little bit at getting caught.

“I'M NOT –” she started, before realizing she was shouting the words out loud, *I'm **not** staring at his backside. And he's not my boyfriend.*

“You're not what, Natani?” Keith asked, still working the towel through his wet fur. A thrill ran through him as he realized that Natani might be stealing a look at him. It was so...*indecent*. But he was kind of getting used to that. He'd been exiled for too long. No proper Basitin would be excited by such a flagrant breach of decency and protocols. But any depressed thoughts about no longer fitting in amongst his people faded when Keith considered that she might even *want* to look at him... *Alaric had said she was watching. Maybe she **did** like what she saw.*

“Sorry, Keith. I was just talking to my brother, Zen. Sometimes I forget to keep myself from speaking out loud.”

“Your brother? The one I...Uh...” Keith couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence. He was more than a little embarrassed that he'd run Natani's brother through, especially now that he and Natani were friends, even if they had been enemies at the time. Keith knotted the towel around his waist, his fur mostly dry and his shivering having subsided.

“Oh, don't worry about *him*,” Natani growled, “Zen's fine. He just lounges around the village now, and pesters me. Next time, you should stab him twice, *at least*.” Her final words were directed more at Zen than at Keith. She could feel Zen's insufferable smirk through the link, as clearly as if he were standing right in front of her.

“Oh... I... Would you like me to hang up your clothes so that they'll dry faster?” Keith asked, turning to the coat pegs near the door to hang up his own garments.

“Thanks,” Natani limped over to the pile of clothing she'd left in the corner and bent down. A sharp spike of pain drove itself into her ankle as she reached for her wet clothes, forcing the breath from her body. Keith couldn't help himself but to cast a worried glance at her.

“Natani, are you okay?” Sharp words died on Natani's tongue when she realized the heartfelt care in Keith's voice.

“After you left, I, uh, went for a walk. And, ah, after it started to rain, I hurried back to the inn, but I, er, I slipped in a puddle and hurt my ankle. I'll be fine.”

Well, technically, all that's true, Zen chuckled.

I'm glad I'm amusing you, Zen. Now shut up, Natani sent back in retort. She looked back up, surprised to see Keith suddenly looming over her.

“Here, let me take those,” he said, smiling and tugging her clothing gently from her grasp. Keith turned and walked over to the coat pegs, draping Natani's clothes on them beside his own. “Will you please go over and sit on the bed? I might know a thing or two to help that ankle. Those sorts of injuries are pretty common in training.”

“I said, I'll be fine,” Natani stubbornly grumbled. “I don't need you taking care of me like I'm some sort of weak little girl.”

“Natani, do we have to go over this again?” Keith said crossly, shooting her a scowl. “I'm helping you because you're my friend. I'd do the same thing for Trace or Flora if either of them were hurt. I'm offering to help because that's what friends do for each other.” Natani made her way over to the bed, still somewhat reluctantly, and sat on the edge.