



# SURRENDER

Eric Alan Westfall

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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## SURRENDER

**By Eric Alan Westfall**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Cover Art by Enny Kraft

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# SURRENDER

By Eric Alan Westfall

## Photo Description

A black-haired, muscular young warrior, leather shirt open, six bleeding punctures in his chest, stares off to the right. Blood is everywhere. Dripping from the bared blade of his sword; from his open-palmed right hand and wrist; from the fangs of the monstrous Stone Beast on a pedestal behind him. Its eyes are blood-red, its long snout open in a snarl, its wings arced high. The scene is lit by thick candles oozing white wax.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I'm intrigued to learn who this man is. Why does he have the blood on his chest and wrist? Is it the gargoyle that did to him? Is the gargoyle a shifter? Tell me what is the story behind this image.*

*My requests: Set in dark fantasy. No BDSM this time. I want a story that'll creep me out. I'm more interested in plot than sex. So keep sex to minimal :D Length doesn't matter. The ending is entirely up to you. It can be a bittersweet, HEA, or HFN.*

*Sincerely,*

*Zach Sweets the one that loves horror :D*

## Story Info

**Genre:** dark fantasy with a hint (or more) of horror

**Tags:** The Kingdom and Empire, mages and magic, shifters, warriors, Stone Beasts, a mysterious Wall, a more mysterious painting, a tested love, an enduring love?

**Content warnings:** No HEA, no HFN, violence and blood, pain and suffering, mental/physical rape. Perhaps hope; perhaps not.

**Word count:** 44,033

### *Acknowledgments*

Thanks to Averin, Kaje and Rick (alphabetical order only) for stepping up to the plate, without even a cyber-bribe, and helping with beta reads of the first, very rough, draft of the story. They pointed out things that needed pointing out, and I'm sure that whatever quality this story has, it would be less without their help.

A very special thanks to Enny for her above and beyond efforts in creating a fantastic cover in such a very short time frame.

And especially to Zach, for selecting an image and writing a prompt that took me into new writing territory. Whether it worked is for others to judge.

Cover design by: Enny Kraft (<http://ennykraft.weebly.com/>)

Gargoyle image by: Andrew Borgen | Flickr

Warrior image by: Nikolay Klimenko | Dreamstime

### *Author's Foreword*

The tags told you. The content warnings told you. Now it's my turn.

This is not one of the HEA or HFN stories you have already read or will read from most if not all of the other LHNB authors.

Is this an M/M romance? Most definitely so. But it's not an easy romance. Not for Karel and Caaroc. And not for the reader.

So if those heads-up! words in the tags trouble you, make you uneasy, give you a Gibbs gut feeling that you really don't like stories that are like "this"—then honestly, you'll be better off reading something else.

On the other hand, if the warnings and tags intrigue you, or perhaps make you want to get out of your usual reading comfort zone (and we all have them, I think), I hope you'll take a chance on *Surrender*.

Eric



# SURRENDER

**By Eric Alan Westfall**

*From forth the fatal loins of Aerisan and Gaarchan foe,  
a pair of Beast-crossed lovers grow.*

**2 Summer 32, 19103 After Seren**

**9676 House Andrae**

**The Wall**

**tir-Lothian, Kilthar**

The painting is not merely larger than life. It is enormous when we see it from the end of the narrow mountain pass that brings us to this barren valley. The painting grows larger, more awesome, as our group of sixteen moves forward. No one has ever figured out how a painting this large can be hanging from the Wall. Mages say there is no spell to hold it up. Perhaps there is some unknown “super” glue.

The guide brings his *grila* to a halt about twelve furs from the Wall. We Kilthari do the same. Four of the five off-worlders have laugh-worthy difficulty getting them to stop. One doesn’t succeed until the *grila* has stubbornly plodded several furs closer, and then fights being turned around to come back.

None of us laugh, though we would if the scrawny man with the weasel face was one of us. We leave the mockery to his friends. Particularly the sneering nobleman. The travel price paid by each of the off-worlders is likely to be four, if not eight times greater than the rest of us combined. But even Clan Aeris knows you do not offend paying customers. Gouge the ones who are foolish enough to be gulled, but save your laughter for later. In private. As you count their coins again.

The guide waits patiently, or as patiently as is possible for an Aerisan, until the others are gathered close enough to hear him without having to lift his voice too much. I am, as always, at a distance. A sometimes real, sometimes merely felt, space between the rest of them and me. In the past five days the guide has never made a gesture, said a word, to bring me closer.

He gestures toward the Wall. “The Mystery of tir-Lothian.” Heads turn obediently, hearing the capital “M” he puts at the front of the word, and his voice pulls them back. “The painting is four fours and a half-four wide. Six fours and a quarter-four tall.”

Even with their backs to me I am sure the off-worlders are looking confused. As with most of our visitors from the Kingdom and Empire... the *rest* of the Kingdom and Empire as of two generations ago... they haven’t bothered to learn how to count. The guide’s tone tells them he is explaining once and then they are on their own. “Eighteen feet wide, twenty-five feet tall.”

Three nods of comprehension. The massive, towering off-worlder who rides his *grila* as if born to it, and stays close to the nobleman, doesn’t move his head. Neither does the nobleman. I imagine his face is arranged to display a false, “Of course *I* knew that, even if the rest do not.”

The guide dismounts; we follow suit. The off-worlders are politely moved aside as the other Kilthari put feedbags on the *grila*. I take care of my own.

The guide waves back an off-worlder who starts toward the Wall, and speaks to all of us. “Take a moment to examine it from here. Closer and you will not have the full effect.”

I suspect no one else is troubled by these odd dimensions. A painting this size, magnificently done by a talent that is a direct Goddess-Gift, should honor Her four aspects. It should be four fours by six fours. Proper dimensions. Like the Wall itself honors Her by being a perfect square of eight fours to a side.

Not only are the dimensions wrong, but something else is wrong with the painting. I *know* it. But I have no idea what that wrongness is. I turn my

shudder into a feigned stretching of muscles made weary by the final five hours of riding.

“The frame is solid silver, six inches wide, two inches thick,” he tells us, ignoring, not understanding *another* set of wrong dimensions. “The designs in each corner are made of inset rubies.”

The color of gushing blood.

Even from here I can see the edges are wave-carved. I have heard the flat surface is incised with runes. If it is a language, no one has been able to decipher it in the five years since the painting was discovered. Some believe it just artistic fancy. I do not care.

I wince at the flash of a memory crystal being used. It is nearly eight, half the day is gone, the sun is blindingly brilliant, and still the flash is like a lightning bolt striking nearby, without the noise. Another. And then another and another. It must be nice to be wealthy enough to own a memory crystal. Or more than one.

I have never... No. I *did* own a memory crystal. Once. It was... It was... Why can't I remember?

*# Focus. #*

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

Since I have no memory crystal I will have to store the image in my mind in sight and words.

In the right foreground of the painting is a young Kilthari man, slender and broad-shouldered with a heavily-muscled upper body. Tall. His thick, straight, black hair curves around his head, waterfalls over his forehead, almost obscuring his eyes. His eyes are the silver of Clan Aeris. Smooth skin, a thin nose, a wide mouth with slightly plump lips that one can imagine would look well around a cock. If one were a disgusting *shkiril* who might imagine such things. His head is down and he is looking off to his left, expressionless.

“No. That man is *not* Aerisan.”

The guide's voice is flat. Dangerously so. Calling the man in the painting a member of Clan Aeris is the second-most offensive thing that can be said about it. The off-worlder who asked the question I didn't hear is the only one of them dressed appropriately for the kind of journey we have endured, since the rough terrain makes it far too dangerous for anyone to use a Road Gift to speed our travel.

The off-worlder is a scholar, perhaps, from the tone. An inquiring mind who only wants to *know*.

The scholar points at the man in the painting. Not everyone looks. I cannot help but doing so.

The man who seems too young to be a warrior nevertheless wears a warrior's tight, oh so very tight, black leathers, and the right side of his neck is pierced and scarred to display his four successful hunts. A thin leather collar almost tightly circles his throat, with two silver chains attached to it, and the Aerisan knotted cross hanging from the lower. The shirt is open, showing a smooth, broadly muscular chest. There is a long, old, jagged scar that runs from the top of his left pectoral down and towards his right. There are three bleeding punctures in an angled line on each side of his chest.

The scholar points out the pendant, and the belt with the knotted cross and other Aerisan symbols. He doesn't point out how the belt hangs well below the warrior's waist, emphasizing the impressive bulge just below it. Nor does he mention the warrior's torn—perhaps clawed?—trousers. Nor that his left hand is on the hilt of a bared sword held behind his back, the end dripping brilliant blood. Nor the out and down right arm, the black-gloved palm toward the viewer, fingers spread wide. There is a bright line of blood across the warrior's wrist, running down so that his fingers are wet as well.

The scholar's focus is so narrow he can see nothing else, as he argues that surely the man in the painting must be an Aerisan. If not a real one, an image intended to represent one. Surely, the guide would agree, that with all this evidence, the only rational conclusion...

The adamantine voice of the guide cuts him off. “He is *not* an Aerisan. We do not permit the making of images of *dream* warriors, fouling our insignia by stealing them for a false display of something which never happened. Like this painting. If he had been a *real* Aerisan he would be *remembered*. His face and prowess would be known. He is not.”

“But...” the scholar starts, then abruptly stops. The guide’s face and words finally make an impression on him. The scholarly voice withers away, a grapevine shriveled by drought.

The Imperials do not... yet... know all there is to know about us. I do not think they know of the *sh’alii* who preserve our histories, our traditions, our records, joining minds to transfer knowledge from dying elder to younger caretaker. They told Clan Chief Lorel, who told the Clan, who told all the world, that the painted warrior, so clearly Aerisan, is *not* Aerisan. He is unknown to them.

And still doubt lingers, though no one dares speak of it. At least not where an Aerisan might overhear someone wondering what the Clan is trying to hide.

Once again I pull my attention away from the painting and back to the group.

I suddenly realize what an *odd* group we are.

There are no women on this trip, though I know some wanted to come. Granted, three were pampered, bejeweled off-worlders, two belonging in some fashion to the nobleman. The excuse for refusing them might well have been their obvious inability to deal with the rigors of days of travel *grila*-back. But two others were Kilthari Clan Mothers, of Salis and Balir. No man, Clan or not, would be stupid enough to suggest a Clan Mother cannot endure the rigors of a trip overland, not if he wants his balls to remain intact and attached. In a very literal sense. I wonder how the guide got them to change their minds?

The off-worlders are naturally odd from that fact alone. We are too new at being members of a not-very-exclusive, still-growing Great Clan they call the Kingdom and Empire to be entirely comfortable with any of them, whether they arrive in large groups or a small collection like this one.

The nobleman made sure we knew from the outset that he is il-Iran Kilset-Herin—a dilettante pseudo-artist, pseudo-archeologist in my opinion—from the Throne World. From Illoraen-the-City itself. He is a member of a... Lower House and Family? Lesser? Minor? Not All That Fucking Important? Something like that.

Then there is his toady. From the customary expression on his face, and his assiduous attentions to the nobleman as we prepared to depart and then on our way here, my only wonder is whether he *wipes* his master's ass clean, or licks it so.

The large guard has the look of a skilled fighter, and the demeanor of someone who actually knows what he is doing, rather than being one who simply kills on command, or maims. The scholar is fourth.

The last, the one whose *grila* troubled him, reminds me of a *kiril* who prefers to skitter and chitter in darkness and scuttle away from light back into the walls, but is now bravely out in the day. Perhaps hoping to scavenge something.

The guide is, of course, Aerisan. Once Chief Lorel saw the image he simply... *decided*... that it would be Clan Aeris which would take control of the site. And access to it. And studying it. Though the Kilthari Clan Council *could* have objected and chosen another clan, perhaps claiming a conflict of interest and a lack of objectivity, they wisely chose to let the Aerisan decision stand. The simmering rage over the portrayal of a false Aerisan, rage that simmers and bubbles still, could have erupted into the kind of Clan infighting that would bring the Imperial Army down on our heads.

Oh, hells damn it. The scholar has shifted topics and is now on his way to the major disaster that is avalanche-after-a-shout imminent. Can't the guide figure out something to distract the man?

Far too late.

“And what is the significance of having a mythical creature crouched on that pedestal behind the... the... *non*-Aerisan warrior?” I can see a bit of his profile as he looks at the painting. He is trying to remember something—has

it!—turns back to the guide. “Don’t you call the creature a... stone beast? We would call it a gargoyle.”

The guide’s patience, paid for or not, is rapidly running out. “We don’t particularly care what *you* call it. That ‘mythical creature’ is one of the Stone Beasts of the Gaarch. Our greatest enemy for most of the last two four-hundreds.”

The Beast is so very lifelike. His chest is huge; it has to be to support the stone wings which arch above his back. His snout is long and reptilian, lipless, jaw dropped to display rows of fangs dripping brilliant blood. A long, narrow, pointed tongue hangs out, drooling. There are bony ridges above his glittering red eyes. Slender ears are laid back against his skull. A thick horn rises from each temple, slightly curved, ending in a thin, stiletto-sharp point. Deadly cones start at the center of his forehead and march between his ears, down his back, onto the prehensile tale that is just visible behind the warrior.

The scholar’s voice squeaks. “It... it’s r-real? Eight... eight *hundred* years?”

The guide shrugs off both reality and time. “They have killed many of us over the years. We have killed many of them. The warriors of Clan Aeris, *my clan*, are renowned as Beast-Killers.” He nearly thumps his chest with his fist to emphasize his point. “Though the last kill was just after the Empire... ah... arrived. Perhaps you frightened them away.”

His face, his voice, his stance, suggest how very unlikely that is.

And now the avalanche drops in. “But if the... the beasts are an enemy, why is the Aerisan, no, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, the *non-Aerisan* warrior, well, *protecting* it?”

Exactly my question. Though I am smart enough not to voice it. I know, as the scholar does not, that a Kilthari... *an Aerisan most of all*... would die before befriending a Stone Beast. Particularly since there is no known way to “befriend” a cunning, devious, but still not human-intelligent monster. And then to escalate the depravity of the idea by suggesting an Aerisan would not only befriend the Beast but defend it from anyone or anything, including the

Clan? That kind of thinking, spoken out loud, is normally a killing offense, by dueling, if the speaker of blasphemy is of the Kilthari Clans, or quick execution if he is not.

But protecting, and thus implicitly befriending, is the only reasonable interpretation of what we see hanging on the Wall.

The scholar survives asking the question. Off-worlder, money, ignorant. Those are all reasonable excuses for ignoring the insult to Clan honor and doing nothing to him. And there is also the never-admitted knowledge of what the Imperial Army would do to if he died an honor-death. Or a less-than-honorable knife or three in vital organs.

If I had asked, or even hinted I agree with that interpretation of the painting—well, I am not certain if it would be most or all of the eleven Kilthari who would join in my initial punishment, a beating.

I get my answer to my unvoiced question. The guide's face is flushed red with fury he has no choice but to repress, so he turns his head away from the scholar. And looks at me.

Something... *feral*... passes behind his eyes, something personal and aimed at me. Then it is gone.

Though I do not understand that expression, I know now they would all join in that beating, and as we Kilthari are methodical even in our angers, they would take turns, trading off on the tasks of preventing the non-Kilthari from interfering, restraining me, kicking me, and otherwise doing their Goddess-damned best to hurt me short of death. I would not die from that beating, because they could not count on the off-worlders to stay silent, but there would likely be a mysterious and fatal accident on the trip back. I have no intention of finding out if I am right.

The guide's voice is under control; the flush is fading. It is still cold enough to drop the temperature in the valley to nearly freezing. "The *false* Aerisan warrior is most definitely *not* protecting the Stone Beast. To suggest that he is, is an insult to all of the Clan, and by extension to all Kilthari. You might even say it is a culturally insensitive remark."



It is the scholar's turn to turn red. His face must be flaming given the color of the back of his neck. Cultural insensitivity is one of the Imperial taboos, we have learned, particularly with respect to a recent acquisition, or as the paid linkers refer to that group, "the primitive worlds which have voluntarily petitioned to become members of the great Kingdom and Empire of Illoraen, in order to experience all its benefits and glories."

The scholar searches desperately for a new topic. One which will not find bombs of mage-fire being lobbed at him.

"Ah. Yes. Of course. Well, ah, the Wall, the... the Wall is unusual, is it not?"

The puppet heads now turn to look at the Wall of blue-grey stone.

All but one other and me.

He is one of the other nine Kilthari who make up the remainder of the travelers.

The man who did not look is largest of the Aerisans, barefoot, filthy, wearing ragged clothes, standing to the left of the guide, slightly away. He can see me clearly, and the others cannot see him. His eyes... flicker... and then get... hungry. His left hand reaches down in a quick movement to grope himself, wrapping thumb and forefinger around his cock and balls so they are briefly pushed forward and clearly outlined against the sweat-soaked thin fabric of the trousers he wears. He thrusts his hips forward. He is enormous.

I back up a single step, averting my eyes. Shamefully, my cock does not shrivel in fear or disgust, but enlarges. Thankfully, my clothing is loose and I am not so well enough endowed that there would be a significant risk of being seen even if I were fully hard.

Why would he do something like that? Take that risk? And why with me?

It does not matter that the laws of the Kingdom and Empire are completely clear that men who... who... who have sex with other men do nothing illegal, and those who hurt or kill them for that reason, or any other reason, will face Imperial justice. Merely joining an Empire that includes a great many of the

stars we see at night and far more that we do not, is not enough to change opinions that have endured for many four-hundreds. I wonder how many years it will take to change. Or if ever it will. I know I will not be around to be unafraid for the first time in my life.

Men who fuck men are *shkiril*. *Kiril* are the worst vermin in our world, and it turns out even the Imperials have them. A *shkiris* is lower than the lowest vermin, an abomination fit only to be destroyed on sight or gelded and enslaved. Clan Aeris tends to employ the latter technique. Chief Lorel himself gelded two of the abominations some two fours and a half-four years ago. The shame that one of them was an Aerisan and a friend of the Chief's son was expunged by the swiftness of their punishment and the harsh conditions under which they worked. Within a year the friend hanged himself, and the other walked over a cliff. The Chief shrugged when he was given the news.

And this fool is courting that danger. And risking me as well!

Yet I cannot challenge him, since there are no witnesses. Just me. And I know I will not be believed.

I look up at him again. His mouth shapes the words "I'll fuck you" as his hands shape his cock and balls. I stare back at him, frightened, not daring to move. Then... the hunger vanishes, he lets the engorged cock subside... nearly subside... behind the thin trousers. The gross display is over. The puppet heads turn back, as if that ending was a silent signal it was now safe to look.

The guide continues along his well-traveled verbal trail.

"There are passed down tales told to children or as entertainment in a long winter, about great palaces with walls that were eight fours to a side in Her honor. If the tales have even a modicum of truth, that time could only have been long before the fall of tir-Lothian. Never since. The Kilthari no longer create, if we ever did, buildings so tall, so wide, with so much wasted space."

I stop listening to the explanation about the Wall that I know so well, though I have never been on this journey before. I barely scraped together the two golds for this one occasion. I should be hearing these words as entirely

new. But they are not. Why am I remembering things I cannot possibly remember?

*# I have told them to you. Let those memories go. #*

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

Architecture aside, what makes this wall the *Wall*—the only Wall in the world that has a capital letter everyone can hear when the word is spoken—is its existence. The assumption is that it was part of tir-Lothian, and when that city and its empire were crushed five four-hundreds ago, the Wall survived. By chance? Some purpose? No one knows. We have no records of that fall, not even garbled tales handed down from generation to generation.

The Wall may have been part of some structure, or it may have simply been built where it is for some unknown purpose. Or no purpose at all, since a ruler's whim is purpose enough in and of itself. It is free-standing in a strangely level valley that seems almost designed to direct a visitor to this site.

So we stand under the brilliant sun, shading our eyes as we stare at the Wall, its edges hazy against the backdrop of the eye-dazzling blue of the cloudless sky. The midsummer heat sears both us and the dry land, barren of life as it is barren year round, devoid of any hint that here, where we stand, where the Wall stands, where the patient *grila* chew the grains in the bags we have each placed over their muzzles, here there were once streets and walls and halls and buildings and people. *Life*.

There is no life here. Except for us.

Or is there? Someone is watching. Hair rises on the back of my neck. I start to turn. Stop. Am stopped?

*# No one watches. There is no reason to look. Focus. #*

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

There is no reason to look.

The guide's sweeping arm gesture tells us to move toward the Wall, so we squint in the midday light, and tread forward, shoes, boots, sandals, that one

pair of hairy, roughly callused bare feet, making little puffs of hot dust rise, drift briefly and fall back as we walk.

Even from where we first stopped, and more so as we approach, it is clear that the painting is as crisply colored as when the last glistening brush stroke was laid down. If anyone actually painted it. There are those who believe it is mage-made. Five years of weather and it is untouched.

The others move right up to it, but that close you can only see pieces, shards of detail, not the whole. I stay back, pausing at six fours to drink it in, the image invigorating water to a dry mind, as refreshing as the warm water I carefully ration to myself from the leather-covered bottle.

Closer. I stop. I want to fix it in my mind, so that I will be able to recall it a week, a year, eight fours of years, twelve fours, from now.

The scholar speaks, and the irritating voice of the irritating Illoraeni idiot irritates me into paying attention again. I move closer until I am only a few feet from the painting, still well apart from the rest of the travelers.

“Good Goddess, man, how can you say that?”

I stumble at the sharp sound of the scholar’s voice. Regain my footing. Look over, ahead, to see him gesturing almost wildly at the stolid guide.

“How can you possibly claim that this painting was not here until five years ago? This is clearly a perfectly preserved—a *mage* preserved—painting of the del’Arte School of Exotics, extant in the Empire around the time your tear, tor”—he mangles the words and waves off his linguistic failure—“vanished, or whatever it was that happened. I am an Authority on this School.”

My ears are accustomed to vocal capitals. I can hear them easily. The Scholar has capitalized both himself and this type of painting. Are we to be awed? Bow down and worship? And if so, who and what are we to worship?

“*Obviously*, someone made use of the Gate you didn’t know you had.”

This last is accompanied by a sneer precisely suitable for speaking to ignorant peasants. It is followed by the excessively patient tone of a man explaining something even the village idiot should be able to comprehend.

“Why a mage-artist of such talent chose this remote location for a masterwork, among people who patently do not appreciate its quality, we will, of course, never know. We can but be humbly grateful that he had the foresight to ward it and preserve it for the future. Preserve it for... how long did you say since”—an irritated wave sloughs off a war and the death of a nation—“it happened? Two thousand years? At least, the way *our* Empire counts time and money.”

The smug look dares the guide to try to find an answer to his irrefutable logic.

The expression on the guide’s face is a reasonably close approximation of a smile. He is clearly reminding himself how much he has been paid, part of which is for being courteous while under the duress of dealing with off-world stupidity. Those of us who know some or all of the truth would prefer the simple solution of strangling the arrogant prick.

So the guide carefully explains. The first recorded visit to the Wall was four four-hundreds ago. Between then and the late spring of ’68 there were... and he pointedly translates our numbers for the Imperials... one hundred two recorded visits. Each of those visits was meticulously recorded. Not *one* mentions an impossible to miss or ignore painting magically hanging on a wall in the middle of nowhere.

“Absurd! Simply absurd! Inaccurate record keeping, visitors who didn’t really come here, are the more likely explanations. And if they aren’t, then just how did this ‘mysterious’ discovery occur?”

I can almost hear the guide’s teeth grinding. “As I said, sir...”

“Lord Kilset-Herin!” snaps the Imperial, at the same time his toady is saying, “My lord!”

The guide slowly inhales, shutting his eyes. The direct question has been asked and his contract of hire binds him to answer. He exhales, reopens his

eyes, and decides to avoid a confrontation over honorifics. At least for now. The guide inhales again, begins. “The man who made the discovery was... *shkiril*. He...”

“A squirrel? What is a...”

Does this man never shut up? Much more and the knives will be out, and the Aerisans at least, or at best (worst?), all the Kilthari minus one, will take a chance on their ability to cover up the tragic deaths of five Imperials. Fortunately for interstellar amity, the toady tugs his master’s arm, and whispers a few words of apparent wisdom in his ear. The off-worlder’s face moves from confusion to shock to... approval?... in a smooth glide.

“Ah. Yes, yes, of course, I understand your... upset.”

The toady is whispering to the other off-worlders, making sure they understand as well.

There is no need for whispering to us.

We know.

That Goddess-damned *shkiril* is why Kilthari, but especially Aerisans, hate to explain how the painting was discovered.

The guide waits, staring at the Illoraeni until the nobleman breaks and looks away. Silence ensured, the guide resumes.

“A man appeared one day in the Gate city. No one knows from where, though he was most definitely not Kilthari. Most likely an off-worlder.”

The word sounds obscene as the guide uses it, but there is nothing the off-worlders can do about mere sounds.

“Besides being *shkiril* he was also a whore, and freelancing is frowned on by the licensed brothels. He was not directly in competition with them, since it is unlikely that the off-worlder men who used him, in whatever dark corner they could find, would have visited the brothels anyway, but that did not ease their dislike. Nor the dislike of the Kilthari at having the man flaunt his perversions where everyone could see, and no one could give him all that he deserved.

“So it was... made clear to him... that he was not welcome in the city, that perhaps he should find a way to use the Gate and go back to a world where those perversions would be accepted. Of course, the enforcers tried their best, as is required by Imperial law, to discover the men who had beaten him so thoroughly. A thorough investigation was done each time it happened. Regrettably, they were unsuccessful. The whore claimed the men had not only beaten and whipped him until he lost teeth, had his back scarred, and was blinded in one eye, but that they had raped him as well. Repeatedly. Every time.

“That was, of course, nothing more than the desperate lie of an abomination, and why he thought he would be believed no one understood. Or cared. Yet still he went on plying his trade. He survived somehow, though he surely must have made less and less after each time the displeasure of the city was made known.

“Finally he began to look ill. A kind of wasting illness that turned the stomachs of the perverts who paid him. No one would use him. And with no one to pay him, he had no food, no shelter.”

The guide pauses and looks at the off-worlders. His voice is smug and contemptuous, risking much to make his point. “You Imperials require much of us, but you cannot require charity. You cannot force us to feed and clothe and house that which we loathe. So we did not.

“The city watched him begin to die, since you off-worlders were no more charitable. All was going well. The whore failed day by day, grew weaker by the moment. He would have soon been dead, but then he produced the memory crystal.”

The noble inhaled sharply, disbelief rife when he spoke. “A dying whore had a memory crystal in his possession. And waited to say so until he is near death? Absurd.”

“Agreed, sir.” The guide looks at the nobleman, at the toady, dares them to challenge that last word.

“True, even so. All Kiltari, and the rest of our world, know the prices you charge for memory crystals. And it was not a tiny speck that might hold only a few words, a letter home, a short remembered moment. It was the size of a man’s thumb. A *large* man.

“A dying whore, a *shkiril* whore, with a crystal that was worth many, many golds, regardless of what was on it? No one would touch it, touch him, of course, not where he stood, half-blind, skeleton-gaunt, there in the open market, displaying it on his trembling, open palm when he asked for food and was refused.

“But later? When he was somewhere else, when the moons were down and it was dark? I think he might have... lost... the crystal. Tripped and fallen, perhaps, injured his head but not enough to die. Not then. Just enough of an injury that he could not recall where and how the crystal had vanished.

“Instead, the whore spoke up. Spoke loudly so sellers, buyers, warriors, visitors, all within the square could hear his offer of an honor-bargain to Clan Aeris. He would return the next day to speak with the Clan’s representative. And he left, the crystal in a pouch at his waist, his hand fisted around the pouch. Only a thief would ever have stolen the crystal. Even a thief knows better than to interfere with the offer of an honor-bargain. Especially with Clan Aeris.

“At noon the next day, the market was full, more so than usual since no one bothered with stalls except a few on the fringes who thought to, and did, make a profit on cool drinks. In the open circle in the center stood the whore and Chief Lorel. The whore pulled the crystal from his pouch, and a vial of *kitlit* as well.”

He pauses, looking at the off-worlders, realizes they do not know the word. “*Kitlit* is one of our deadliest poisons. The scent is distinctive and not deadly at all. A drop on your skin and you die slowly in agony. Drink some and you die more quickly but with the agony compounded and compounded again as it is compressed in a shortened time. It is a vile way to die.



“It was a Ninth-Hell bargain. He offered the word of an abomination that the crystal contained *memories* of extraordinary value by themselves, and a way to more wealth than whatever reselling the crystal would bring. But that way to wealth would have to be verified. He asked for three fours of gold immediately and an agreement that he could spend it in the city on food and shelter and he would not be charged any higher rate because of who and what he was. And if the Clan, in honor bound, agreed the crystal offered a way to wealth, the whore would get three four-hundreds of gold, less the coins already advanced.

“When the crowd mocked him for offering a bargain where the risk was all on the Clan, and he could just slither away with his first golds and away through the Gate, he finished the offer. If the memories were not valuable, if they could not possibly lead to other wealth, then he would swallow the *kitlit*, or if he balked, the Clan could hold him down and force him to swallow. He lifted his hands, palms up, the vial in one, the crystal in the other, and said the ancient words, ‘It is by the Goddess sworn.’”

The unbreakable oath. Those are the words the scholar mutters. As if we do not know that already.

“The Chief placed his palms atop the whore’s, repeated the oath, and the honor bargain was made.

“The crystal contained the whore’s memory of the Wall and the painting. Four fours of memories that could be easily sold despite the offensive nature of the painting. The round trip to the Wall to verify the existence of a painting that had not been there before, took two weeks. We despise this painting for the lies it tells. We would destroy it if we could, wealth or no. But since we cannot, we will profit from it.

“The whore got his gold, less the advance, though he staggered and nearly fell while carrying the chest away. He was never seen again. No word of his death came back, though who would care to report the doings or death of a *shkiril* whore? The golds that were specially marked so that Aerisans could see the coins were tainted and reject them were also never seen again.”

*“There was no painting on the Wall until five years ago.”*

The near-glare that accompanies the end of the tale dares the Illoraeni, any one or all of them, to ask questions. They wisely do not.

In the following silence, it is the scholar who finds a change of subject. “Is it true the painting cannot be touched?”

The guide smiles a mocking smile and gestures toward the Wall. This is customarily the last part of the trip, unless one of the travelers wishes to quickly make more crystal memories of the Wall or the painting before departure. Even leaving soon, it will be well after dark before we get back to the last place we camped.

“Try it. The Clan has offered five thousand golds to the one who can touch the painting, and of course, do it without causing damage.”

Nearly everyone who makes the trip to see the Wall is tempted, and ultimately tries for the gold. No one has succeeded.

They begin moving toward the Wall in a strung out group. I hold back. I have no desire to touch, even try to touch, a painting that unnerves me so. But I follow.

By the time I reach the painting, standing beyond its left edge, they have all, even the guide, made their unsuccessful tries. Their hands are stopped an almost... but not quite... imperceptible distance from its surface.

“Your turn.” It is the guide’s voice. I raise my head from contemplation of the dirt and shake a negative.

“Afraid?”

An Aerisan would take offense, challenge him to an honor-duel. It is obvious I am not Aerisan. It is undoubtedly obvious a short, thick, middle-aged man is not going to challenge him. What is not obvious is that I will not touch the painting. Nothing can make me touch that... that *wrong* painting.

*# Touch it. #*

A bubble of rebellion rises up in me. *# No. I can’t. #*

A whip that no one can see because it is in my mind lashes me. My back arches in the actual world. I can feel the blood oozing out of the thin line. Did they hear me scream or is the scream it only in my head?

*# Pleasure is in the mind. #*

Ecstasy runs through me, nearly unbearable but I am made to bear it, and I come. I can feel the hot seed splashing my trousers, leaking through, staining them.

*# Pain is in the mind. #*

Another lash making an X with the first.

*# Your Goddess must be praised. #*

A third, a fourth.

My back arches again, and again, and again. And then I curl my body, try to escape, as if I could ever escape. I drop to my knees gasping.

I drag my head up, look to my right. The off-worlders, the Kilthari... they just... *stand*. They are not shocked by the man in their midst who has shrieked and writhed for no reason at all. Not one blinks. Not one moves to help the man who stupidly turns to them and raises his hand, only to let it fall.

There is nothing *there* behind their eyes. Nothing of *them*.

It looks out at me. From all of them.

*# Touch the painting. #*

The rebellion-bubble burst and gone, I have no choice.

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

I struggle to my feet, since the pain is no less real for not its cause being invisible. I step forward slowly. Too slowly. A tiny *flick!* of that whip compels me to stumble faster. I stand before the lower left corner and before the whip can urge me yet again, I stretch out my arm.

My right hand goes *through* the painting, touches the Wall... and remains there. I struggle to get my hand free, hearing mocking laughter inside my head.

Followed by shouts of terror. I turn my head toward them, twist my body so that my arm crosses my chest, nearly touching. They are clumped together, now, back behind their own eyes, weapons drawn, visibly terrified. The toady has pissed himself.

Terrified of what?

*# Do you see what I see, standing at the Wall, little man? Do you see what I see? A Beast, a Beast, growling in the light, with a tail that cuts like a knife. #*

The voice rocks with laughter, and then suddenly, I am... inside the heads of them all, fifteen terrified men holding bared blades in the direction of that middle-aged man with a belly. But what they see, what I see, is a towering Beast.

In Third Form. Not fully Beast, not fully man. Eight feet tall. The face more nearly human than the Beast's True Form, but still fanged. A tail with a single deadly spike on the end lies coiled at my... the Beast's... feet. Grey, stone colored skin. Naked. So very obviously male. Unarmed.

"It's a Seeming!" I scream at them. "A hells-born illusion!"

I hear the *words*, but through their ears all I hear is the wild howl of an enraged Beast. The mortal enemy of Clan Aeris. They will remember that, the Aerisans at least, any second. Remember that they do not wish to die reviled because of cowardice, or be shunned if they run away to survive. Any second they will charge at me, and there will be no Beast, no Caaroc, to fight back. Just an unarmed man who will easily die.

Caaroc? Who... what... is Caaroc?

Quiet wicked laughter inside my head.

Will they feel remorse when I am dead and the Seeming is gone?

Unlikely.

Whatever held them in place moments ago has gone. They can move, and do so as if the restraint is not remembered. It has probably wiped away that small strand of memory. Only the off-worlders are utterly still. Voluntarily,

this time. The Aerisans are emboldened by the fact the Beast just stands and rages, does nothing to move toward them, not even striking out with that vicious tail.

Useless though it is, I shout, and shout, and shout that it's just me, Kindal, a sightseer from... from... *I cannot remember!* But I'm not a Beast, I'm not. I beg them to stop, beg them not to hurt me, kill me. And all they hear are the insane growls of the Beast. All they see is a slaving Beast towering above them, unmoving. As I have been unmoving.

*# Bend forward. Swing your left arm up, out and down, as if you are going to scoop something off the ground. #*

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

My arm swings out and down and the Beast appears to move, its killer-clawed paw striking toward the men at the back of the group. The cluster falls apart, splitting into tinier clusters, those in the back yelling, and scrambling and fighting to get as far away as possible. Which leaves an opening for the men on the inside of that arc.

They take it. Two of the four blades sink into the Beast's leg, but the Beast doesn't react except to pull away and slightly back... as I do. The blades don't touch me, but that movement takes me right into position for the other two blades to run through me. One to my right shoulder, one just below my heart. The blades come out my back and stick, and the frightened, angry swordsmen yank and struggle and twist, desperate to get the blades out so they can strike again before the Beast takes revenge.

As my blood spouts, first in fountain arcs and then a steady flow, I collapse to the dirt, the pain overwhelming. My hand pops loose from the Wall.

And just like that, the Beast is gone. What remains is a group of frightened men at the far end of the painting; a quartet of men close in, valiant non-warriors who have nevertheless acquitted themselves as if they were, bravely battling the feared and loathsome... death-bleeding man on the ground. A man who had paid two golds to travel just as they had paid, only his payment turns out to be for a journey to his own death.

The coins are well-spent.

The two who missed stare at me in a different kind of horror, grateful now that it is not they who have murdered a traveler. The two who killed me look down on my almost-corpse with avidity. They see, or think they see, what no else yet has. They have killed a shifter. No one knew the Beasts were shifters, which makes them even more of an abomination. For this information, almost more than the Beast-killing, they will be rewarded, honored, praised, fucked almost to death by grateful women who want a chance to bear their children.

Fools.

I can't speak; can barely think; my life is draining away.

I am grateful. This is real. This time it is real. This time I will die.

I don't know why I must die. Why I need to die. Only that I must, and do.

I am close, so very close. My heart is slowing, slowing, slowing. Four beats, that's all it will take, four beats to pump out the final dribbles of blood and I will be gone.

Three.

Two.

O...

*# No. Not today. #*

I am on the ground still. In the same position in which I almost died. Except... I live. I am fully clothed. My body aches with the pain of the wounds that never physically happened. I slowly lift my head, look up at the two who almost killed me, or thought they did, over at the two who killed me—or thought they did.

Dully I realize it has done it again. Pain is all in the mind. Inflicting it. Receiving it. Feeling it.

Their eyes reflect amazement that I live, which slides into confusion about what just happened, which glides away into no memory at all.

*# You touched the Wall and fainted like the coward you are, is what they are thinking. Stand. Claim the reward the Aerisans promised. #*

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

I turn mostly on my belly, pause only long enough to take a deep breath and not so long as to be lashed. Pull my hands and knees beneath me. Struggle to get on all fours. Get part way up, stagger, drop back to one knee, one hand in the dust. No one moves to help me.

When I stand, the residue of almost-death nearly undoes me. I sway, but control it. I look at the guide. I start to speak, can't, pause, inhale, gain control. "Five thousand gold. Word of Clan Aeris. Five thousand to touch the painting. I touched the painting."

I actually didn't, since the painting vanished and I touched just the Wall. But who am I to quibble and lose five thousand gold?

The guide shakes his head. It is his turn for momentary uncertainty. Then certainty. "No. You didn't. It was some sort of trick. An illusion, a Seeming, a trick. You get nothing."

"And so the honor of Clan Aeris..."

He raises the sword as if to strike at me, but the Illoraeni nobleman's voice cuts across the silence of another attempt at dying. Goddess damn him. The other was not real, but this is. A non-Clansman insulting Clan honor is suicide, death by Aerisan. This could end it all and the fucking off-worlder interferes.

"Make him do it again."

The guide swings angrily around, temporarily lowering his sword, the unbloody one that so recently did not nearly kill me, though I have the pain to prove, inside my head, that he made the effort. "What?" he snarls.

"If he touched it once, he can touch it again. And this time we won't be tricked."

The guide whirls back. "He's right. Touch it again."

"Once was enough. That was all the bargain called for, honorless Aerisan."

Goddess damn! Fury rages across his face. But he controls it. Goddess damn!

He steps closer, but only enough so that the blade can dart out and up, the flat side of the tip resting under my chin, the point pressing up into that hollow just behind my chin bone. It produces a tiny drop of blood for the tip to drink. He pushes up, forcing my head back.

From here he can, with ease, adjust his arm to make a straight thrust parallel to my jaw and through my throat, or another adjustment for thrust upwards through my mouth and into my brain. Success either way.

I press my head toward him, and the blade bites deeper, blood seeping around the edges. I want to scream from even this small pain, but I do not. His eyes widen as I do it, but he doesn't back away. He also doesn't push forward himself.

*# Touch the wall. #*

Can I bear another punishment like the last one, even knowing I will be made to survive? I do not think so.

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

My aloud "very well" is a little bit garbled given the blade point, but he understands. He lowers the blade, watches me warily as he steps back, giving me space. The group moves in, forming a rough half circle around me, but with plenty of space in case something happens, though they no longer remember, no longer fear what that something might be.

Something does.

I feign confidence to mask the fear, look as arrogant as a man such as I can dare, when I am encircled by Aerisans who are a knife's edge away from killing me, and all of us watched by off-worlders.

*Flash!*

Imperials who are recording memories of my humiliation. My still-possible death. All of it into several crystals. Fuck them all.



I move into place, the half-circle of Aerisans moving with me. To ensure I do not bolt and run?

Where would I run?

Leap onto a *grila* and send it speeding toward the passage from which we came, at a pace barely more than a healthy man's fast walk? A sound plan to elude anyone coming after me. Or run around the Wall and head *away* from that passage, directly into the dead lands with no food or water or shelter from the blazing sun? An even better plan.

I face the Wall, move in close so if I lift my hand and stretch it out, my fingertip will touch the stone. I position myself. Take a step closer. I will not do this with fear, using only a fingertip and ready to pull it back. Palm flat and facing the Wall, I move another step forward, a half step.

I push my palm against the painting.

I touch nothing. My hand is sucked past it, through it, stuck against the Wall, the dirt and grit of five four-hundreds and more grinding into my flesh.

My scream this time must be real, for I hear the gasps behind, around me when it begins. I hear it both inside my head where it soars upward, trying to escape to the dark between the stars. I hear it with my ears as my voice soars here as well, rising to a pure silver note even Zhila, the most powerful of the countertenors of the Goddess' Temple in the capital, would envy. Though he would forego the praise and applause that note might bring, in exchange for not enduring the pain that creates it.

The painting begins to change. I begin to change.

My skin becomes warm, then hot, then burning. I have been tied to a stake and cannot move as every muscle, every fiber in my body howls in agony, the flesh bulging, tearing my clothes until they hang in tatters, then fall away. Lumps... some so tiny they can barely be seen, others as large as my fist, begin to travel under my skin, making it ripple, swell, fall and rise, moving over every inch of my body to ensure the pain is equally shared.

I am somehow aware that the warrior in the painting is undergoing the same, though the lucky bastard does not feel what I feel.

The Beast before was an illusion. A mage's Seeming. *Its* Seeming.

Or... not a Seeming at all. Just control of the viewers' eyes, and... My mind splinters, the thought shatters.

But this... this is different. I am *shifting*. My body is actually changing its physical shape. I would pray to the Goddess, but why? She will not listen. She never has. And there is no reason to bother with crying out to Her since I will be dead when the shifting is complete. Not from it, but because I am a double abomination, both *shkiril* and shifter. That the Aerisans will only know the one and not both will not change my death or how I will meet it.

The fire burns in my blood until I am sure my flesh will just char and fall off in chunks.

Instead, it all ends.

The Shift is over.

I am at least standing. Naked but upright, not crouching like a beast or Beast, though my head is down. I appear to be a normal man. A normal *shkiril* who naturally checks his cock, relieved to see that it, too, is normal. Perhaps better than normal. Slender legs, muscular. Narrow feet that seem to have a strength all their own. The long black hair hides my face.

I am done. I am... what I am. And what I am I will not excuse.

I raise my head. The man in the painting does the same.

That odd vision returns. I look through my own eyes at the circle of men with bared blades. I see through their eyes as they look at me, look at the painting. My eyes are silver. I am Aerisan.

I am dead.

Without ever knowing who I am.

But I will not die, here and now, except by fighting.

I wait for their attack, my stance, my body language, hinting at resignation, at submission. This body—my body? my real body?—is young and despite the enduring pain of the shift, strong. And I know I am a warrior, though I have no idea where that certainty comes from. It doesn't matter. Naked, without a blade, I *will* defend myself. I will get one of their blades, perhaps two, and send at least some of them to the Hells, whether they join me in the Ninth Hell or not. As I will be heading there, because I cannot defeat this many.

The ones directly opposite me do not move, just stare at me. I see horror in some of the faces, horror because of something more, I think, than the abomination of a Shift. My cock is blessedly soft, so it provides no blatant announcement of my... *other*... nature. I glance right and left to see if the ends of the half-circle are closing in, trying to force me forward so I am surrounded.

They are not. Although the off-worlders have edged closer. Two memory crystals *flash!*

It is the guide who finally speaks, and though his voice trembles, his sword is steady. "Karel?"

The name means nothing. I shrug.

His face loses all expression; his eyes go blank. The ones in my direct sight are the same. And then the guide's face contorts with rage. *Its* rage? His own? It doesn't matter. He shouts "*Abomination!*" and as if it is a battle cry, the rest take it up, raise weapons to their best killing positions, and then they surge forward to do their Aerisan duty.

Except... they stop after only a step or two or three. Not enough to bring any of them within blade reach.

The stopping is not voluntary. I can see the increased rage in their eyes as they blame me for their immobility.

I am an Aerisan, true. A *shkiril*, true as well. Apparently a shifter. But I have no mage gifts. I have not done this. Words would be wasted, so I do not say them.

Only I can move. Somewhat. I look past the Aerisans. The off-worlders are again motionless themselves. The smart thing is for me to race past them, grab a *grila*, and try to get as far away as I can before this... spell... or whatever it is shatters and lets them follow. I will at least have a chance to live. Although a part of me wonders why I wish to.

I am smart enough to know I should run. I just cannot implement the plan.

Now, I, too, cannot move.

*# Remember. Remember it all. #*

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

\*\*\*\*

I remember... gathering this group of men, this particular group, doing something... no, it bars that sliver of memory... doing something to persuade them to come on this trip.

I remember... farther back, the trip before this one, when I arrived at the Wall as a near-doddering old man, and it tortured the minds of those who traveled with me, killed them and maimed them and restored them, again and again, until the other old man had a heart attack and died. Truly died. Those travelers watched, uncaring, as I endured the agonies of a shift and became... Kindal. I left the group before arrival at the inn from which the Wall trips started. Their memories of me were gone before I was a step away.

I remember... the trips to the Wall before those, the pattern always repeated, the worst poisons and pains reserved for me. I remember... how many of those who had been on the Wall journeys died later. But not nearby and so no one ever connected the Wall with their deaths.

I remember... dear Goddess, *I was the shkiril whore!* I remember the pain as *it* shifted me, gave me the body that I surrendered to the men who paid me and used me and abused me. I remember the beatings, the rapes, every *real* moment of every one. I remember where the gold is hidden. A fortune that could get me... several Gates, several worlds away. Except, if I leave and die, how will my soul find its way back here to be reborn?

The memories roll over me, drag me under, allow me to rise gasping to the surface, as I remember back and still back.

All the way to the *first* memory. The one that *it* has kept from me all these years. And all that followed.

Dear Goddess.

I remember...

\*\*\*\*

**Winterdeath Eve**  
**2 Winter 31, 19096 After Seren**  
**9669 House Andrae**  
**The Drunkard**  
**Halintown, Balir**

We introduce ourselves in a privy, exchanging names as we stand side by side, shoulders just touching, neither pulling away, pissing mightily into the equally side-by-side shit holes. With that much piss to get rid of, neither of us particularly cares whether the wood around the holes gets wet for whoever might use them next.

This exchange of names comes well after his arrival at The Drunkard. I was nursing my latest Zinarri ale when he opened the door and walked through, carefully ducking. He was so tall, when he straightened, a step inside, it seemed like the swept-back peak of the long hair topping his head should touch the ceiling. He stood at least a quarter four over my puny one four and a half four, though the Clan Mother has assured me I will grow and soon surpass my brothers, my *younger* brothers, and my father and uncles, all of whom tower over me. She has no idea when that might be, though, so after eighteen years of waiting, I know the truth. I am what I am. I am also not stupid enough to contradict the Clan Mother. Particularly when she is in fact my own mother.

I wondered why a man like that would be in a Sixth-Hell-damned tavern like this.

He turned his head slowly, made it seem casual, but this was no merchant checking for buyers, no enforcer checking for someone with a warrant against his name. This was a warrior checking for danger. His smooth, unlined face was remarkably young against the grey-silver of the hair that framed his face and rippled down onto his upper chest. Which was also remarkable. Remarkably broad and muscular, even covered by grey leathers buttoned

nearly to the throat against the cold outside. The bitter cold he had temporarily brought in with him.

A wide grey leather belt with a design stitched in silver that cinched his waist. A worn grey scabbard oddly on his right, a plain metal pommel protruding from it. The wornness was from use, not age.

I have perfected the art of looking at the bulges that conceal the cocks and balls I may not ever have, without seeming to do so. I am *shkiril*. I assume it is what we do, since I do it so often and so well. Though I have never known another who I could compare notes with. Or thought I had not.

I sat there and willed myself not to cry. Tarik was my friend, though I must deny him still. As I did when I and all the Clan watched him be gelded by the shears used on *grila* males for the same purpose. When the Clanless man whose cock Tarik was sucking when they were caught was gelded, too, their wounds cauterized with red-hot steel between their legs. When they were made slaves. Deny him even in death.

I will not cry.

I gulped down the last of the ale. I fingered the coins in my pouch. I had enough for another Zinnari. Or I could lower the standards I had already lowered just by being here, and instead get two, perhaps even three of the *grila*-piss beer that is the normal fare at this aptly-named tavern. Three gets you more drunk than one, no matter the foul taste in your mouth later. I should have figured that out earlier.

I got up and carefully, carefully did *not* stagger on my way to the bar. I had no fears someone would take my empty seat. True, this is Clan Balir territory, not far inside its part of the Four Corners, where the borders of Aeris, Gaarch, Balir and some strangely long-unclaimed land meet in border lines that are more ragged than the name suggests. But I *was* Aerisan, I *was* armed, and I *was* blooded with the first of what I am sure will be many silver chains woven into the side of my neck to show my hunt prowess. Though like everyone my age, I yearn to be the first of our age-group to kill a Gaarchan Stone Beast,

despite the fact none have been seen since the last kill—oh, multiples of fours past. Yes, my chair was safe.

That I passed closely by the grey-clad stranger was, of course, inevitable. I had to get to the bar, after all, if I was to have any *grila*-piss to drink. Moving to the left around the table crowded with men who lived up to the tavern's name, arguing over some dice game, was, in truth, a slightly longer journey to my destination than going right.

But left to see a left-handed warrior seemed a reasonable reason for my route at the time.

I surreptitiously continued my subtle *shkiril* inventory. Long, muscular thighs that strained against the leather trousers. Darker grey boots, once shiny, rose over his calves and ended below his knees. Large feet. I often wonder if there is a relationship between foot size and cock size. My own long and slender feet seem to establish there is. So did furtive looks at other men and boys when swimming or bathing in the public pools, or on the trail, though the only ones I saw hard were by sheer accident and they quickly turned away.

The greatcoat he wore seemed to still exude the cold he brought in, chilled air sliding off the also grey leather that hugged his waist, then flared out to swirl around his ankles. Inspection done, I passed him by, went to the bar, got a flagon just by asking in a friendly tone for the barkeep's finest *grila* piss, and turned to go back to my table.

I turned left so that in making that half circle I would see if he was still by some chance standing in the same place. He was not. I finished the turn, started to look for him, found him easily. He was seated at my table with a large goblet in his hand. Perhaps I should have waited for a barmaid. He had pulled up another chair, so he had not technically taken my seat, and thus had not challenged me. There wasn't exactly a hush as I crossed back, just the tiniest dip in volume, as the other customers watched and wondered if, hoped that, a young Aerisan would be foolish enough to challenge an older warrior over a tavern chair.



Older, yes, I was certain. I thought at first not by much, but as I approached the table he had invaded he seemed much older, though that could have been a trick of the not well-lit interior of the tavern. Though I have heard of Imperial races that do not appear to age for fours of fours of fours, until suddenly they are simply *old*. Was he an off-worlder? Possible, but as I reached my table... my suddenly *shared* table... I decided he was not. Though he was from no Clan I recognized. Not that I have all that much knowledge of other Clans beyond those near Aerisan territory. I wondered how far he had come to get here, and why. What he had experienced on the way.

I stopped beside my chair. Looked down at him. His eyes were the grey of storm clouds, the grey of the darkest granite. I knew my own to be clear, shining silver.

I stood over him, a momentary advantage that would vanish if he decided to stand, took a swallow of the beer, and felt unbearably young and foolish when I realized I had a foam mustache. I tried for nonchalance and undoubtedly failed as I attempted licking it off, gave up in disgust and raised my left arm to wipe my mouth on the sleeve. It was dirty anyway, so the addition of beer and more sweat didn't matter.

I could think of nothing clever to say, certainly nothing befitting an Aerisan warrior no matter how young. I sat. And tried not to slouch. Clan Mother raised me not to slouch. The head slaps, neck slaps, back slaps worked well as a training method. Clan Mother has a *hard* hand, and I am grateful others are now feeling it.

I felt his eyes on me as we drank in silence, ostensibly not looking at one another. He gulped the goblet contents down, raised his hand, and the barmaid miraculously appeared, simpering and thrusting her great breasts at him. I avoided shaking my head in disgust. Did she do it because that was just the way she was with any man she hoped might fuck her and pay her well? Or because she was trained to be?

Travelers in from the usual cold of Winterdeath Eve, especially in a place like this, often relished that kind of heat. Or so I have heard. I would probably spew in her face if she was beneath me. He declined without acknowledging

he had been propositioned, and tipped her well to assuage her disappointment when she refilled his goblet.

We drank some more in silence. Stared at nothing and everything other than each other. I was certain I was intentionally not staring at him. Whether he was returning that favor I could not tell, which was, in a way, the whole point of not staring at each other. He finished his wine as I finished my foul beer.

He put the goblet down. Carefully. With the kind of care that usually meant, in my limited experience, that you are uncertain whether you are actually setting it on the table top, or whether you are going to set it on air and have it smash to the floor when you let it go.

“I have to piss.”

This pronouncement was made as though the fate of Clans rested on it. There was also the faintest “ish” sound to the end of the word. My grey-clad warrior... mine only, of course, in the cock-hardening fantasies my mind was already frantically weaving about these moments... had been celebrating elsewhere.

“Where do I piss?”

It was with the faintly belligerent tone of a man who might, given an unsatisfactory or too slow response, simply haul his massive cock out of his trousers... it had to be massive, my fantasies demanded it... and start pissing here and now.

“Privy.”

“Where?” He looked around the room as if he more than half expected to find one or two or three holes waiting for his use.

His head was turned away from me, and I did not dare touch him to get his attention. The temptation to caress and not let go was that great. The reality of death by grey warrior, death by tavern customers, death by gelding and slavery quashed the impulse. I spoke louder. “Down the hall.”

He looked at me again, grey eyes glittering. “Which hall?”

I blinked. He must be drunk indeed. There was only one arch leading to one plainly visible hallway. The only one in sight. I jerked my head toward it, and his eyes followed the motion, came back to my face. “That hall. To the end. Turn right. Second door on your left. A very short hallway. And then outside.”

He nodded his understanding, stood up carefully with only a slight sway he mostly hid. It was his turn to tower and given his both-of-us-standing height advantage, it was towering indeed.

He repeated his lesson with careful precision. “Down the hall. That hall.” He jerked his head in imitation of my gesture and for a moment I thought there was some humor in his stare. “To the end. Turn right. Second door on my left. A very short hallway. And then outside.”

He paused. Inhaled slowly, let it out. “I sometimes lose my way. Show me?”

I wasn’t fast enough to stop my mouth from dropping open, but at least I managed to regain control before it hit the floor and broke my jaw. He couldn’t be serious. Was he? Did he somehow know what I was and this was a ruse to get me alone? To kill or maim me before shouting for the rest of those who would be eager to help finish what he started?

I shook my head. He turned and headed toward the hallway.

That was *not* regret I saw in his eyes.

I looked down at my empty flagon. Looked carefully up and around. No one stared after the grey warrior. No one stared at me. It would be an incredibly stupid thing to do, to go after him.

So I did.

I could blame my decision to get up, with my own kind of unsteadiness, on all the ale and beer I had consumed. But Father had trained me to be honest. Honest with other Aerisans at least, reasonably so with other Clans, less so with the Clanless, carefully but not necessarily so with the Imperials. But I can never be honest enough to disclose *my* truth to them. And so I will not hide my

own truth or any part of it from myself. The truth that I was following the grey warrior because I wanted to. Because I *needed* to.

And now we are here, pissing side by side. Not looking at each other again.

“I’m Caaroc.” His voice sounds oddly loud over the sounds of liquid hitting part-liquid, part-solid... substances... at the bottom of each of our holes. I wince at the thought.

Feel my cock twitching at the image of a different liquid hitting, spurting, into the bottom of different hole.

His? Mine? Either would do.

“Karel.”

I wonder if he, too, feels odd about introducing himself to another man while pissing. Do you grip forearms as is customary, even considering where your hand has just been, or do you clean your hand first? And where? In the snow? And how do you do a warrior’s clasp when one is right-handed and the other is not?

Caaroc has a solution as we finish, squeeze the length of the tube to get the last drops out, flick them off, and stand there, cocks still out, foolishly, dangerously, still out. His right hand grasps my cock. I freeze.

My voice is a harsh whisper. “Are you out of your fucking mind?”

His thumb caresses the knob end, pulls the skin down a little on a back stroke toward my belly. He whispers, too, though there is a tinge of mockery in it. “We’re alone. We’re safe. And you want this.”

He is right about all three, but not completely right. We are alone—for now. We are, indeed, safe, if that means merely being temporarily not in imminent danger of dying. A situation that could change in seconds just from another drunk who needed to piss. He is most right about my wanting to do this. What “this” would actually be since up to now I have only had my own sick imaginings of what might be possible. I just cannot do it. Cannot risk my life, risk humiliating my family and my Clan if the next drunk who needs to piss or shit stumbles in on us. And there is no lock on the door.

But perhaps I need not stop him. Not just yet. I can take this chance, feel a man's hand, a *warrior's* callused palm circling and rubbing and stroking my cock. For just a moment, only a moment. Something to remember. And then I'll make him stop, even if I am left whimpering.

Or perhaps several moments.

I moan as he strokes a little faster. Better, ah, so very, very much better than my own hand. I am building so rapidly... No. I cannot do this. I grab his wrist. He stops.

He does not let my cock go, a silent demand to let him finish, and my aching, leaking cock knob silently berates the thick-headed knob up above for denying both of my knobs pleasure. I could... I could squeeze his wrist, not hard enough to hurt, just enough that he understands my decision and releases me. I don't. We are at an impasse, though I know I am strong enough to force myself to do what needs to be done. I think.

In the near-darkness, I have the oddest sensation that he swells up, becoming so tall and wide that if my imaginings were real the privy shed would be blown apart, leaving a cock-groping grey warrior, and a grope-accepting Aerisan warrior standing visible in the rubble. And then his invisible self shrinks back and vanishes inside him.

Goddess, I have indeed had far too much to drink, if the result is all these fancies.

His voice is confident. "There is no one near, no one coming down the hall. No one coming through the snow around the building. I will know if there is. We have plenty of time."

I want to ask "time for what?" but doing so would be just a demonstration of how stupid I am. The *plenty of time* we have is for him to suck me.

Without letting go of my cock, he sits on the ledge, his ass over the hole he has just pissed in, ignoring what his own piss and whatever filth might still be on the wood are doing to his coat. He tugs me toward him and with a complete lack of warrior grace I find myself straddling his left leg, my trousers undone and pushed below my ass, his left hand caressing my balls, his right hand

grabbing my ass cheek and pulling me so that every inch of my cock slides right into the welcoming heat of his mouth, and his throat.

I have *imagined* sucking. So very often. I have *heard* about it only a little. Never about the detestable *shkiril* version of it, of course. Just hints and raw, foul comments by men of my family and Clan, and men of other Clans on joint hunts, about women who had, women who might, women who would, if only, if only... Though part of my wondering has always been how a woman could do it well. Wouldn't a man, despicable though the thought is, know better what would pleasure a man because he knows what he likes when he is sucked?

It turns out I have no imagination at all. If a good imagination about getting sucked off is a full cup of the finest ale that money can buy, my imagination is the last drop of the last dreg of the *grila*-piss beer I am drinking tonight.

He slides all the way back, his lips and tongue getting me more slick it seems than the oil I sometimes use to pleasure myself. His tongue laps and tastes and teases around my knob and into my slit, then he moves forward again until his forehead is pressing against my belly. He slides back and this time lifts his mouth away. I don't like cold privy air on my prick. I prefer heated Caaroc air.

"Do you think you can fuck my mouth," he says with a quiet smirk in his voice, "without shouting so loud when I let you come that we will be found by most of the men inside who will want to know who is dying, or better yet, who is getting sexed so incredibly well and can they get some of that, too?"

I let my indignation be felt when I grab the sides of his head and hold his skull in place while I take measurements of the depth of his mouth and throat, with my cock as a guide. I am losing my virginity with a magnificent man, fucking his face as I have so often dreamed, though in honesty my dreams more often involved the use of my presently unskilled mouth and throat by someone like my grey warrior. It takes an embarrassingly few strokes for his lips and tongue and heat and throat to make me cram my cock into him one final time without caring if he can breathe or not. And then I am seeding his throat, hells, I am seeding his Goddess-damned belly!

And though the bastard is right and I want to scream my triumph, shout as if I have just earned another hunt-chain woven into my neck, I remember his sarcasm, and hold it back.

He holds me in his mouth and throat, breathing quietly through his nose, as I gradually soften, and then he lets me slide free. I gasp as my cock pops out and away from his lips, start to sag. Why won't my legs hold me up? My grey warrior does instead.

"That was... That was..."

His voice is soft, only slightly sarcastic. "Superb? Wonderful? Magnificent? Both a mind- and cock-blowing experience?"

My befuddled mind slowly slides to earth from the clouds in which he had me soaring. He deserves my honesty. "All of that. And more."

I caress the side of his face, run a thumb over lips that I can feel are slightly swollen. I am ridiculously proud that I caused that swelling. "I never expected..."

His "Never expected?" is loud enough that I have to hiss at him for silence, or if not silence, softness.

His voice is far more quiet, far more shocked. "This was your first time?"

I nod, realize it is unlikely he can see me since the only light is sliding through the uneven slats of the badly made door from the lantern on its hook outside. Men do not need a lot of light to piss or shit; they simply aim in the general direction of the target, and hope—sometimes—for accuracy. "Yes."

He sits abruptly upright. "Goddess damn, Karel. Why didn't you say so? I could have gotten us a room, a decent bed..."

I clamp a hand over his mouth to stop the heresy that can get us both killed. All it would take is a man out in the cold, waiting for the holes in the privy to be vacant, listening avidly through the thin planks of the door. "Are you out of your fucking mind?" is the only logical thing I can think of to say. Again.

I lift my hand away from his mouth and frantically begin tucking my cock and balls back inside my trousers, though they plead with me to be allowed to

stay out and play. I am hurriedly getting myself right again so no one will suspect what the two abominations have just done. Or rather, the *one* abomination. I have done nothing. One warrior helps another, no matter how great or small the task, a warrior's debt is owed. While my particular task is—was—not great, more of a long and slender task, a debt is due.

But that debt will not, can never be paid in a tavern room. Where else? I almost laugh aloud at the idea of taking him to my home and explaining that I owe an honor debt... my father is big on honor, enormously so... and I am therefore taking my grey warrior to my room so I can suck his magnificent cock. And perhaps I will put myself deeper into his debt by persuading him to fuck me, deep and hard, despite my probably inept oral ministrations. Or if not deep and hard, at least briefly and thoroughly.

My smile is bitter in the near-total darkness. My throat would be cut before I finished the word “suck,” my blood-fountaining body falling to my father's floor. It did not bother him when he gelded my best friend, enslaved him, and set him to tasks no man should endure. He did not care when my best friend hanged himself. But oh, he would care about the Clan finding out his own son is *shkiril*. He could not endure my gelding and enslavement though he would certainly think it just, but *his* shame would take precedence over the ruin of my body and my life. So he would kill me himself and make up a story that all would believe. And weep copiously over my corpse. And have no tears for my grey warrior's slashed and mutilated body, because they could not let him live and be enslaved and possibly tell the truth.

I force my attention back to reality. They say all bad things come in threes, for no evil would dare the four sacred to Her. So I repeat myself in a harsh whisper.

“Are you out of your *fucking* mind? We are *shkiril*...” That word hits me, an unexpected gut punch from Samel, a giant among Aerisans with fists like hams... stone hams. I have never said it aloud before, and I realize that until this moment I have never truly believed it of myself. I get myself under control. He must understand what that kind of arrogance can cause.



My voice is low, and I let all the resentment and bitterness show. “We are *abominations*. We do not get rooms so we can fuck and suck while the rest of the tavern customers go about their business. We hide like the vermin we are and scuttle into darkness whenever someone tries to shine a light on us.”

I have the temerity, and the luck, to reach out and grab his shoulders and try to shake some sense into him. “You will get us both killed, you arrogant fool.”

He puts his hands up, curls his fingers around my wrists. He does not pull them away, does not crush them though I am certain he could.

His voice is as soft, as intense as mine. “I am sorry. I did not understand. In... where I come from we, you and I, warriors who love warriors are the ‘luck-found ones’.”

The idea that someone, anyone, anywhere, could have what I cannot, hurts. Far more that I could ever have expected, but then, until this second I had never believed it possible, except, perhaps somewhere far away in the Kingdom and Empire.

His thumbs caress me. “We are the *sh’kir*. And we are not abominations. *You* are not an abomination.”

That certainty staggers me, and some of the tension flows away. Leaving just the natural (unnatural?) tension arising from the fact that we are in a fucking privy fucking, or sucking, and all those potential consequences are waiting to land on our heads. Which is, of course, most of the reason for the fucking tension in the first place. And then there is the different tension from the fact I owe a warrior’s debt. I will pay it. Just not in the complete cold, out there somewhere in the snow. It will have to be in the nearly-as-cold, breath visible and lingering if we had light to see it cold of this fucking privy.

“Are you still certain we are safe? No one is coming?”

Why in the hells am I asking that question? And *trusting* his answer?

Again that sensation that he swells to some giant size, listens, and falls in on himself. “I am certain. They are... at least some of them... having a pissing

contest in the snow in the street out front. They don't really need this privy now. Why?"

Arrogant asshole knows why. He cannot be the warrior he so clearly is and not know. I start to drop to my knees.

He stops me and in the tight confines I lose my balance and tilt forward, my knee smashing into the sharp edge of the ledge on which he sits. Goddess shit damn hells.

"No."

It is my turn for my voice to be low and dangerous. "No?"

His turn to be soft, and not just in volume. "I will not be anyone's duty fuck."

"You mean I can fuck you? That's even..."

He unerringly raises his hand and presses two fingers to my lips. I imagine I can see the grin that is invisible except for a faint hint from a line of light on his cheek. "Or duty suck."

My tongue darts out and licks his fingers. He jerks them back as if he'd been pricked, but merely by a needle and not something better.

"I owe you, true." I make my voice low and seductive. "But I want this because I want to. Here. Now. With you."

Apparently I don't do low and seductive very well, because he chuckles. His hand reaches out again, this time to caress my lips with his thumb, push it between my lips, let me suckle on it, before sliding it out again.

"You're going to suck me? Here and now? Without knowing how large my cock is? Whether it will choke you? Whether it will hurt you if I hold your skull tight and fuck your face?"

I am hard again and my only answer to all those questions would be a loud "Goddess, yes!" if I were only allowed to shout. I have to make do with a vigorous nod.

However, nods that cannot be seen do not work well even with perceptive grey warriors. I improvise with a casually nonchalant, world-weary, *I have been there and done this before, you know*, “Of course.”

It is clear I do not do casual, nonchalant, or world-weary well. He chuckles again, and I laugh a little with him, only a little, softly. So I get down on my knees to start sucking my first, and undoubtedly only, cock.

Except...

Well hells, it never occurred to me that swords on the hips of both men are rather awkward things when you're in very tight quarters, even when all you really, really, *really* want to do is either suck the cock before you, or get your cock in the mouth in front of you. Especially when speed is something of a necessity, despite the virginity of the mouth and throat of the sucker. We mutter, and curse, and twist, and juggle, and wince when one of the sword hilts slams loudly against the side wall. We freeze and don't breathe and while we're doing both I give somewhat smug thanks to the Goddess, from whom all blessings flow, that it wasn't *my* sword.

In a fairly quick “eventually” the swords are off, their scabbards leaning against the ledge on his right, his legs are spread, I'm on my knees, his trousers are open, and I'm ready to... *For Goddess' sake! stop stalling!* I tell myself. *You can do this.*

I reach out in the near-total darkness to grab hold of his cock, being careful not to bash it in the process of finding it.

I need not have worried.

A blind man on a moonless, overcast night, down in the middle of the mile-wide cavern buried far under the Nelarín Mountains, with no torches and no mage lights, could have found this cock with absolutely no trouble. It could not possibly be missed.

The Clan Mother would definitely not appreciate my remembering her words in circumstances like these. But I cannot help recalling that when I was a child and begging the Goddess constantly for a wide variety of things I had

no need for and were far more likely to do me harm than good, she often said, “Be careful what you ask the Goddess for. She might give it to you.”

I now understand that “Ask and ye shall receive” can be a mixed, a *very* mixed, blessing.

I *did* pray to the Goddess that I could suck at least one magnificent cock before I died. And be fucked by one as well. She granted the first part of my wish. I would have appreciated some warning, however, that there was a high probability I will die from sucking that cock. With a proper notice, I might, perhaps, have reconsidered and withdrawn my wish, or substituted “modest” for “magnificent.”

Being killed for being a *shkiril* caught sucking cock in a privy would undoubtedly be painful. Just... could it possibly be more painful than choking to death while sucking *this* cock? Goddess, it feels like it belongs on a Stone Beast’s body. Not that I have ever seen a Stone Beast’s cock, except in the few ancient paintings based on descriptions of those who survived a battle with the Gaarchan monster. None of the pictures portrayed an erection, probably because fighting for your life, whether man or Beast, isn’t generally a hard-on-producing event.

I scoffed and mocked with the rest of the boys, as we told each other the artist exaggerated, that no cock, even on a Beast, could be that size. I am also sure I wasn’t the only one to find a private place later and look between my legs and feel miserable.

I bring myself out of the memories that I am using for stalling. My grey warrior has noticed the stalling.

“Second thoughts?”

He touches my hand, to remove it, perhaps, but I squeeze and stroke and tell him “no.”

I am an Aerisan warrior. I haven’t been trained for this but... I can do this. An Aerisan warrior can learn to do anything he needs to do, even something as *abominably* wonderful as this.

I lean forward and he sits up, pushing that erection down toward the... not terrified, just terribly nervous... hole it is about to enter. With my left hand I circle the large knob, using my thumb on the slit, smearing the copious precome around in the hope that slickness helps. I lean in, with all that prick rubbing the side of my face, and bury my nose in thick, curly groin hair that my mind has decided must be grey and silver as well, gambling that I will be able to smell something other than the fumes rising from the holes, although his coat and ass at least form something of a seal over one.

The luck dice turn up eight. Despite the open hole near his thigh, I somehow block the noisome odors from my mind and nose, and I smell... the hot musky scent of a man who has been exercising vigorously. I have smelled that smell on myself but it has never been sexual before, and it's only a passing thought to wonder what he had done before coming to the Drunkard. A clean scent, too. The crisp smell of the air, cold and sharp in your nostrils and throat and lungs, high up in Ghilar Pass just before the first fall storm hits. And... something else. Something... odd. He smells like... *granite*. Or as I imagine granite would smell if granite actually did.

His rough-palmed hand caresses my hair, moves down my face. His thumb runs across my lips. His voice is gentle, "You don't have to, you know."

I do. Not because of duty but because I want to, I *need* to.

I could twist and start humping his left leg to demonstrate with my own erection how very interested I am, but that is just more delay.

I let go of his cock, put my left hand on his right wrist, hold it lightly in place and suck his thumb in, swabbing it with my tongue, sucking it like a miniature cock for just a moment's practice. I pull my head back, smile up at him unseen, move his hand aside, and lower my head.

My jaw isn't really dislocated as I somehow manage to get that knob all the way in. It is huge, and my exploring hands tell me that a foot, two feet, three or so downwards the shaft gets *really* wide. I pull back just a little and then force my head downward. I acquire perhaps a half inch more. At this rate it will be Summer's Eve before I can take it all, and long before then one of

the other customers will have either noticed our long absence in the direction of the privy, or not knowing or caring what we are doing, just throws the door open to demand his turn.

The holes in the ledge may be available to everyone, but not *this* hole. Special men... grey warriors... only.

If my grey warrior doesn't get upset by the almost non-existent progress and just give up on me in disgust.

Instead, he puts those long-fingered, strong hands on either side of my head, runs his fingers through my thick hair, holds me still, and says, "Let me. I will teach you to be an *amazing* cocksucker, my Aerisan warrior. And I'll do it so well, you'll only want to practice on me. Yes?"

Cock knob in the mouth is not conducive to talking; even I know that. I try to make my vigorously approving head shake as pleasurable as possible. I must be succeeding, at least a little, since he moans... just a little.

With whispers of just very general instructions to breathe through my nose, and relax, he begins working that massive prick not only into my mouth but down into my throat. He moves my head in tiny circles and twists and turns, nothing painful, but with each one I can feel my throat expanding and accepting more and more. When he reaches the halfway point (Dear Goddess, don't let it be any less than that!) where his cock widens, I am certain that is all I can take.

He pauses, presumably to let me get used to the log cutting off most of my ability to breathe, and then starts slowly pushing up while pulling my head down. I have a moment of near-panic which he senses and soothes, just with his thumbs on my temples, and then it begins to work. My throat is adjusting! Relaxing, opening wide, wider, wider.

And then it is all in. Not some, not most, but every Goddess-blessed inch. We both hold very still, and then I can feel his cock move, just a little, tiny adjustments. For only a second I have the oddest feeling that it is his *cock* which is *adjusting* to the shape of my throat, shrinking just enough so that he

stretches me but does not overwhelm me. Rather than my throat naturally, or perhaps forcibly, spreading to accommodate his length and breadth.

Absurd. Completely absurd. I am just a very good, natural born, vile *shkiril* cocksucker. It is *my* throat that makes the necessary adjustments and accommodations.

I must also get to work and complete the lesson my grey warrior is providing, or it may well be the last lesson I will ever learn.

My throat, his cock, we fit perfectly now. I proceed to prove it, slowly withdrawing until it is just the piss slit inside my mouth, then sliding back down again. All the fucking way! And again and again and again, increasing the pace, instinctively working his balls, feeling the tension in his whole body build and build, and then his balls are tightening up against his body and he is spewing his seed into my throat, on a direct line down to my belly.

And spewing, and spewing, and spewing.

I swallow all of it.

When at last he is done, he gently raises my head and as his thick cock slowly slides out I can feel my throat closing up after him, until it is only as wide as it originally was. But I now know what it's capable of.

I start to get up but he grabs my shoulders, leans forward and kisses me, deep and hard the way I have sometimes seen a man kiss a woman when they're fucking and don't know they can be seen. Tongues and kissing are a wonderful combination; more so with the sharing of the flavors and juices from each of us.

Then that, too, has to end. All of it has to end. But at least I know now what I will never have again, and at least I had it once. A kiss. My cock sucked. Sucking cock. And a grey warrior from the Goddess knows where whom I desperately wish was mine.

We get our cocks and balls hidden again, stand, kiss once more, and decide that we can put our swords back on out in the open. Two men using the privy side by side, pants down, is not unusual; it would be logical to remove swords

and come out carrying them and put them back on again where there is room. If asked, that is the story I will tell, and I will stick to it.

The snow has been falling again and our footprints and the path cleared by men tromping to and from the privy is almost covered. Swords on again, we stand facing each other, Caaroc's back toward the privy. We are awkward now and I am far too new at this to know what to say or do to stop this strangeness. I wish, oh how I wish I could kiss him just once more.

But one moon has come a little out, and the lantern dimly lights this space between the back of the tavern and the alley. That kiss will not happen.

Only... will it? He leans in, moves his head close to mine, all it would take is a slight head turn and our lips will meet. I... do nothing at all.

Especially since he says quietly in my ear, "Your knees look like you've been sucking cock in a place with plenty of shit and piss and general filth on the floor. Any idea where that might be?"

I look down in shock. Goddess damn! And my cloak is back inside, draped over the back of my chair. I try to figure out what the hells I'm going to do and Caaroc solves my problem. He grabs me, unbalances me, turns me, and tosses me forward and down so that not only do I fall on my knees in fresh snow I continue falling and wind up with my face in it as well. My front is covered with snow and whatever might be beneath it.

Goddess damn him and his damned chuckling. I roll over on my back, neatly avoiding entangling myself with my sword. Raise myself onto my elbows, look up at him, grinning. He grins down, proud of himself.

He has apparently forgotten, if he ever knew, that Aerisans believe in payback. Even when being slightly sneaky is necessary to get it done.

I smile a smile as rueful as I can make it, which, surprisingly, is more than good enough, since when I stretch out my arm so he can clasp my forearm and help pull me up, he actually bends forward... and I kick his feet out from under him so that he lands flat on his ass. It is my turn to chuckle, and then toss my head back and laugh.



I definitely do not want to know what might be in the handful of snow which hits my face, a good part of it going into my mouth. We briefly become boys again in a rolling, tumbling, neither-of-us-trying-very-hard, battle that more than explains my now-soaked knees, and mostly-soaked rest of me.

All too soon our laughter dies and we help each other up in earnest. And stand again. Staring in silence. The Goddess be thanked for allowing us even this much time alone.

“Would you...?” Caaroc’s voice trails off as if he, too, is as uncertain as I.

What I hear is a sentence that ends “like to meet again?” and my joyous, “Goddess, yes!” has to be contained in an unsmiling nod.

He understands, but hesitates. Looks away, bites his lip. Looks back and down into my eyes. His voice is stern. “We are fools to do this, Karel. *I* am a damned fool for even suggesting it. In so many ways more than you know. Your luck dice rolled for us tonight and they came up eight. We should be grateful and let it go at that.”

I can’t touch him, but I try to let my eyes tell him I understand, I agree. Tell him, too, that *I* can’t just “let it go,” unless I am forced to by his walking away. I take back a little of the lead I had surrendered so surprisingly and willingly such a short while ago, with such surprisingly wonderful results. “But you don’t want to do that.”

I see him try, for just a moment, to say precisely that in a way that will make me believe. See him surrender, too, to the recognition that my words are true. “No.”

“Neither do I.”

He sighs and slumps, shakes his head. Inhales deeply, stands tall, looks at me.

“I have to leave tomorrow. On a journey for... for my people. I will be gone—” He pauses, visibly calculating. “I will be gone the two more months of Winter, and then all of First Spring, possibly a week into Second Spring. To be safe, let’s say Second Spring sixteen, or seventeen? Can you be here?”

I have no idea how, but I will. I tell him so.

“Good. Be at the Drunkard about the same time as I arrived tonight. You won’t see me, but I will get word to you about where to meet, so we won’t be seen.”

I nod my agreement. Then do not try nearly hard enough to crush the brief surge of jealousy. Jealousy I have no fucking right to feel. “You’re very good at this, aren’t you?” My tone is definitely not approving.

He looks bewildered for a moment and then his face breaks into an extraordinary grin. He doesn’t move closer but his voice drops so that we are both certain only we can hear. “You mean making assignations? Finding a hidden place where I can take a gorgeous man and fuck him reasonably carefully the first time, since he’s a delicate virgin Aerisan warrior with a great deal of raw, untrained potential? Then, when I *have* trained his hole, fuck him into the bed or the wall or over a table a couple of times more? Perhaps even teach him how to be a better cocksucker without my dying from the results?”

I smile back and the jealousy evaporates. And then he is slightly more serious. “No. I never have. I have never had to. But for you, I will.”

My turn to be solemn. “We could die from doing this.”

“And we might as well be already dead if we don’t, if we’re not willing to risk... finding out what ‘this’ is.” And he flaps his hand in the air, to make sure I clearly understand what “this” he is talking about.

He is right.

He looks down at me with an intensity that is only visible in his eyes. “Imagine that I have just pulled you into my arms and kissed you so long and so thoroughly that I leave you gasping for breath.”

I can better that. “And I kiss you back so well your knees are weak, you can barely stand, and I’ve just made you mess your trousers with come.”

He lets out a sharp bark of laughter, and then spins on his heels, the coat flaring around his legs, and strides off down the alley. I go back inside to retrieve my cloak.

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*It lets me... makes me... remember...*

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**Winterdeath**  
**2 Winter 32, 19096 After Seren**  
**9670 House Andrae**  
**Aeris Hall**  
**Aeris, Kilthar**

“Don’t get her pregnant.”

I look up in shock from contemplating but not really eating the Winterdeath feast. My mind keeps wandering back to last night, early this morning. Caaroc’s cock in my mouth and throat. Mine in his, though obviously not so wide or deep. The promise of more, if he keeps his promise to return in Second Spring. The presence of Clan Mother, all three of my younger, bigger (as they so frequently remind me) brothers, plus three grandparents, one great-grandparent, and too numerous to count aunts, uncles, and cousins keeps me from getting hard.

Unfortunately, at just that moment my food contemplation involves actually starting to swallow a large bite of buttered bread dipped in thick, sweet *stenoch* gravy. I promptly start choking, which naturally requires brothers Denin (seventeen) and Larel (sixteen) to leap from their chairs beside me and begin vigorously pounding my back. Purely to preserve my health, of course, and not from any desire to pound me without fear of Father’s retribution, or my own.

When I recover, Father is looking at me with a smug smile at my discomfiture. I say nothing, in the vain hope that will end it. That is not what the Goddess has in mind for me.

“I was beginning to wonder about you.” He pauses and lets the silence stretch. There is something in his eyes that hopefully only I can see. Dislike? Disappointment? Disapproval? We have never been at ease with each other the way he is at ease with my brothers. Perhaps being the oldest but smallest of his

sons has something to do with it. Even though I have excelled at every task he has set me, it never seems to be enough to get the grins my brothers so easily gain, the hearty back slaps. The hugs.

I vow that this time I will let the silence go. I make no attempt to stare him down, but everyone is aware of this brief contest of wills. The room does not go silent, because that would be an admission of listening in, but if you never admit it, you can still do it. I lose the contest, of course. As I always have.

I ask him, with enough deliberate insolence that it can be heard, but not so much that he can rightly call judgment on me, "About what?"

"Whether you'd ever get laid."

He maintains a blank face for a second, then guffaws loudly and slaps the table with his huge palm. Nearly everyone else laughs as well after he does. It is an ingrained response. When the Clan Chief laughs, you laugh as well. But Father's laughter has a false, *sour* note. So does some of the other laughter, although I do not know who since at the moment all I can see is him.

I cannot prevent the flush. So he wants to play out this humiliation in front of everyone. So be it.

Fury rises inside me, but I lock my face against its display. I am mad as all the hells, and I will not take this anymore. No denials. No evasions. Just lies. I *can* do this, I *will* do this.

"Yes. I did. Do you want me to describe her cunt and how well I fucked it, or is it enough to know that I did?"

A sword slices through the sounds in the great hall, kills them instantly.

The Clan Mother does not like gutter language at table, regardless of what her men... and boys... say elsewhere. What the Clan Mother does not like, the Clan Chief does not allow. It is a fist, now, that slams the spot where his palm landed. Bowls and glasses and utensils leap and fall back. He rises from his chair, sending it toppling. "How dare you!"

"How dare *you*, old man!" My turn to stand and shout and topple my chair.

Father is a huge man, taller, heavier, stronger. He could just reach out, since I was sitting, am now standing, immediately to his right, grab my throat with one hand and simply crush it. I will not do physical battle with my father, but words... yes, I am more than willing to use words. Particularly to divert attention.

The “old man” has given him a strangled look of inarticulate rage.

I lean toward him, yes, looking fucking up, but still confronting him. I will not back down. Never again. I could not face him, my grey warrior, if I did. My words tumble out, in a rush of unlocked, spilling out fury.

“Do you *wonder* about Denin, too? Wonder what hole his dick has been in, or whether he still has to use his hand? Have you asked him before the Clan at a sacred gathering whether he’s fucked anyone yet? Have you done the same with Larel?”

Denin, the most hot-headed of my brothers, starts to rise, possibly planning on using his height and weight against me. Possibly not. But I *am* a fucking Aerisan warrior. I spin to my right, my heel lashing out to kick the fallen chair well away and give me some space if I need it. There is a sharp cry. Apparently the chair hit someone. I don’t give a fuck.

He is only halfway out of his chair and freezes when I look at him. “Sit the fuck down, Denin. Or Goddess help me, the next time we spar I will forget how much you don’t know, but I won’t forget how fucking much better I am than you with sword and spear and *kimro*, and I will fucking give you a fucking lesson that ends in something broken. But it won’t be anything of mine.”

His face whitens. He sits.

I turn to look at Father. “That is the last time you question me about who I fuck, or how often, or what position. No more of this ‘I was only joking’ shit at my expense. About anything. Never again.”

I raise my voice so there is no question that everyone in the Great Hall can hear me. Fuck, the *grila* in the stables can probably hear me. “All of you. *Never fucking again*. I am a fucking Aerisan warrior! I will be treated as a

warrior and Clan Heir deserves to be treated, unless and until I dishonor the Clan, or I am no longer Heir. Try me, any of you, and I will call an honor-duel on the one who does. No matter who he or she may be.”

There are a few gasps, some in surprise, some in horror. And in the pause a tiny voice shouts inside my head, “Don’t do this, don’t do this, don’t do this.”

I do it anyway. “It is by the Goddess sworn.”

The unbreakable oath has well and truly burned bridges, and built walls that can possibly never be breached. Father cannot sit while I remain standing or he loses face. He has lost enough already.

Am I out of my fucking mind? I must be.

Words as a fucking *diversion* from the fact the Clan Heir is a *shkiril* abomination and is yearning after another abomination? I haven’t temporarily diverted the course of the river Jahila into a different channel a mile to the west, from which it will eventually return to its original course. I have moved the whole river to the fucking other side of the mountain. And it will never again flow in the same channels.

So be it. But still, I must end this. Ah.

I bow to Father, honoring him precisely as Clan Heir to Clan Chief, eldest son to father. He accepts with the required nod and remains standing, waiting to see what I will do now. For the first time ever there is hint of uncertainty in his eyes.

I turn again and look down the length of the main table where all my closest family sit in various poses, most of their faces composed once again so that they do not show me what they really feel or think. I feel most sorry for Eron, only fourteen, who is white-faced and trembling. I will repair what I can, if I can, when I can. I look at my mother, and again bow precisely. Clan Heir to Clan Mother, eldest son to... beloved... true mother. Her face is serene. At some cost, but I do not know the price she has paid for that serenity. And I never will.

I rise from the bow. “Clan Mother, my apologies to you for disturbing the feast. With your permission I will leave to...”

Cry in pain over what I have just done to myself. To my family. Think of Caaroc and try to figure out if there is indeed anything more to what happened between us than just incredibly good sex. Try to avoid letting that thinking turn into stroking my cock as it did this morning.

“...meditate on the requirements of honor.”

An acceptable solution, and I see gratefulness in her eyes. A warrior may always, without question, meditate on the requirements of honor, and remain undisturbed while he does so.

She nods permission.

I turn away from her, look around. An honor-gift will be required for great-uncle Lirin, since it was his knee which bore the brunt of the connection with my chair. I make an appropriate bow to him and offer him the first apology. I have always liked Uncle Lirin. He grins and waves it off. I place the chair where it belongs, offer my still-standing father a slight bow, and take my leave.

My words must have had some effect. Before, had I ever made such a scene, the gabble of voices would have exploded just about the time I reached the door. Today, the explosion is obviously being held back until it is absolutely certain I am out of earshot.

Oddly enough, back in my room, I *do* meditate on the requirements of honor.

Until I fall asleep.

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*It lets me... makes me... remember...*

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## **2 Spring 18, 19097 After Seren**

### **9671 House Andrae**

#### **The Drunkard**

#### **Halintown, Balir**

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

I got drunk last night, got drunk the night before, and tonight I'm going to get drunk like I have never been drunk before.

The fucking bastard is not coming.

The last two months of Winter, all of First Spring, I made sure I excelled at everything I did. Never once allowed myself to be distracted by thoughts of “my” grey warrior when I was working, eating, pretending to be social in a way that hid how little I wanted to. I even made the Clan believe I was overjoyed with the celebration of my nineteenth birthing day.

My distractions occurred only when I was alone. When I could call up the memories, the sights and sounds and smells, every sensation as vivid as if stored in a memory crystal and replayed. When I could try to guess what it might be like when Second Spring sixteen and seventeen were finally here. Would we have both days? Just one? Part of one? Will I get to fuck him? Will he fuck me? When I could stroke myself to one or more comes remembering and wondering ahead.

When I told them I was taking time off, that I would leave on Second Spring fifteen, and probably not be back until at least the nineteenth, there were no objections. Nor was there a raucous, laughing departure with crude jokes from the men being left behind. There never had been with me, and although my relations with the Clan have improved since Winterdeath, I doubt that I will ever be accorded that familiarity, that closeness.

So be it.

I hired a room well way from the Drunkard. Third floor at the back, above a filthy alley. Not a good part of Halintown at all, but it has the advantage of an outer staircase, and nothing but warehouse buildings across the way. Not exactly the normal abode of an Aerisan warrior, and there is no way to hide what I am. It is not my fault that the owner believes I am acting on a Clan matter, perhaps even a matter of Clan honor. That belief, of course, did not stop him from charging me full rate for the two rooms served by that stair, or trying to gouge a little more.

And if he imagined that the full weight of Clan Aeris would come down on him and his if he disturbed me or spoke of my presence, that, too, could not possibly be my fault. I never told him so. Not directly. Though I may have given him... a hint.

I was smug the night of the fifteenth. Sleeping in that narrow bed, not touching myself as I had not touched my cock for the last week. The fifteenth made the ninth day without coming. But my grey warrior would be here on the sixteenth, the seventeenth at the latest, and I had solved the riddle of where we could be alone.

The sixteenth was Zinarri ale. I was celebrating the soon-return of Caaroc, and when he did not show by the time we set, I soaked my sorrow, but did not quite drown it, in the ale. I had been so sure that he would be there on the sixteenth. I staggered to the building, dragged myself up the outer stairs, collapsed.

I drank sparingly on the seventeenth, only enough to justify my presence. Until his arrival time was gone. Then Therlessian brandy with ale back whiled away the empty hours until they threw my ass out. I vomited twice on the way to my room, and collapsed again.

I should have left, gone home, but I weakly gave him one more chance.

Now I sit. And wait. Drink the *grila*-piss beer as I will not waste more money on him. Fourteen arrives and departs. He is not here. I am tempted to give him another two hours, just until midnight, but I have humiliated myself

enough. Time to remember that I am in fact an Aerisan warrior, and not *just* a vile *shkiril* pining for cock.

I get up, pay for the *grila*-piss that I hardly drank. Over-tip to cover the sixteenth and seventeenth as I was probably too drunk to be respectful. I am not drunk. There is barely beer on my breath. So as I step into a night that is unusually cool for Second Spring, I am not pleased to be called a “young drunk” by the *old* drunk who barrels into me and nearly knocks me on my ass.

He grabs my left arm to steady me but I regain my balance on my own and try to shake it off. It is an unusually powerful grip.

I keep my voice low, though for the moment it is only the two of us on the street. “Take your fucking hand off my arm, or lose your hand.”

I am reaching for the dagger at the small of my back, but he grabs that arm, too. It isn’t the hands that actually stop me from hurting him and getting free. It’s the words. The whisper.

“But if I have only one hand, how can I play with your cock and balls at the same time?”

Caaroc. It’s Caaroc’s voice. And he’s a mage? He can Shift? Create a Seeming? What in all the fucking hells...

I angrily break loose, though I have no way of knowing if he lets me or if I do it on my own. I look into the face that looks nothing like his. “Fuck you. Fuck your hands, too.”

The eloquence of an angry young Aerisan warrior can at times be awesome. This is not one of those times. I turn away from him, and take long strides down the street. He catches up far too easily for his apparent age and gaunt, decrepit look.

It is the old man’s voice, but still Caaroc’s voice, which says, as we walk side by side, “I’m sorry, Karel. I couldn’t take the risk. I had to be sure.”

*That* brings me to an abrupt stop. Something he clearly anticipated since he does not go on walking, but stops almost simultaneously with me.

Mindful of the public space, particularly since it is neither late nor well-lit, and I do not know who may be lurking nearby, I somehow manage to keep my voice from exploding with loud rage, though he can still hear the explosion beneath. “*What* fucking risk? Sure of fucking what? This... this whole stinking pile of *grila*-shit mess is a risk to me, too.”

He starts to touch me. Stops. “Please. Can we... just go back to your room and talk in private? Then, if... if you tell me to leave I will.”

That note of uncertainty—real? Assumed to gain what he wants?—nevertheless tips the balance. I nod and begin leading the way. It takes me five full strides before my mind catches up with my hearing. How in the nine hells does he know I have a room? And if he knows I have a room, he has been there, and I am “leading” him nowhere he does not already know. That fucking bastard.

I convert the almost-stop into a stumble. I’ll deal with this when we get there. He touches my arm to steady me and I shake him off. Lengthen my stride and increase the pace. Since the fucker that exists somewhere beneath that old man image is taller than me with fucking longer legs, he easily keeps up. Fortunately, for him, he is not stupid enough to move ahead so that *he* is leading the way.

So we keep up the pretense a little while longer. We reach the alley and as I am about to turn in he says, “Wait.” When I glare at him, the look telling him he has less than a second to explain why I should, he adds a “please.” It is clearly a word that Caaroc does not often have to use.

I change my expression to “Get the fuck on with it.”

And he does... that *thing* again. The old man just stands there while *something* expands around and above him, invisible. Out in even the minimal light of the two moons that are up, and the street lantern nearby, rather than in the near-darkness of that privy, that *something* has no shape but I know it is at least ten feet tall, and that his head, its head, whatever constitutes a head, turns back and forth. Then Caaroc “shrinks” again until only the old man is in front of me.

“It’s safe.”

I had no reason to trust that assurance last Winterdeath, but I did. I have less reason to trust now, but still I do.

I sarcastically wave him forward and he immediately takes the lead, still in character, carefully, carefully climbing the steep stairs and artistically pausing for breath every so often. Without waiting for me, he proceeds to unlock the door I had so carefully locked earlier. Bastard.

Inside, the only choice for sitting is the bed or a somewhat fragile chair that is unlikely to hold his weight. He makes the obvious choice, sits, while I follow him inside, locking the door behind me. I maneuver past his slightly outstretched legs, careful not to touch him, light the candle on the small clothing chest, and when I look at him again, the Seeming or whatever it was is gone. My... no... that lying fuck Caaroc is back. And sitting there with his Goddess-damned legs spread, just enough to show off the bulge that is, as he fucking well knows, impressively bulging at the moment.

Mistake. Not a huge mistake, or at least not this moment, but he’s sitting on a bed that is not all that far off the floor anyway, which puts him, so my cock forcibly lets me know, at precisely the right height for me to stand between his legs, feed his mouth and throat my cock, and then, holding him in place, face fuck the Goddess-damned hells out of him.

My mind decides otherwise, and my infuriated cock demands a rematch. Best two out of three. Before turning to him, I have already pulled on the warrior face I rely on when going into battle or into a hunt. It is cold, emotionless, calculating. I surprise him. He flinches. Just a little.

“Explain why I shouldn’t change my mind, haul your ass up off that bed, and then throw it and you over the railing.”

“Because you couldn’t?” He sits up straighter, stops flaunting. Or at least, flaunting so much. With what he has, flaunting is inevitable.

“Are you telling me that after what you’ve done, if I decide to do just that, you’re going to resist?”

“Ah... no.”

“Then fucking explain.” I pray that the warrior face and tone are enough to prevent him from hearing the rest. The “in a way that makes sense, so I can forgive you and believe you, though that sequence should be reversed, and we can get down to the serious sucking and hopefully fucking I’m desperately in need of.”

“I was told... ordered, really... not to meet you.”

“Who the fuck...?”

His upraised palm stops me before I can get well and truly started on the outrage.

“We... we are... not from here. We...”

“*Goddess!* Caaroc. Did you think I was too stupid...”

I notice his glare and get the message that I should just shut my mouth and listen, because unless I do, the glare also makes clear my mouth won’t be getting used for anything else. And *his* mouth being used for anything other than talking is less likely still.

“We are refugees. From...” He shakes his head. “I thought I had this planned. What do you know of the Worlds Beside?”

I stubbornly wait to say anything, for just a while, as if unsure I am now allowed to speak. “Of course I know about the worlds outside. Hells, the Goddess’ Gates connect the stars...”

It is his turn to interrupt me. At this rate, six or seven Winterdeaths will arrive and go before we are finished.

“Not worlds *outside*. Worlds *Beside*.”

“Then, no. No idea. Well, unless you mean worlds in a galaxy other than the Heart and Spiral.”

He shakes his head. He holds up his hands, palms facing, almost but not quite touching. “Picture a very, very fine parchment, so fine you can almost see through it, between my palms. As long as the parchment is there, my

palms can never touch. But if there is a hole in the parchment, a ripple, a bulge, a wrinkle in one palm might touch the other. And something, something so small as a drop of sweat, might move from one palm to the other.”

He put his hands down on his knees. I carefully refrain from looking at his hands, because that would lead to his legs and his thighs and his groin, and my cock would start making demands again.

“Every speck of your Goddess’ universe touches the parchment that separates an infinite variety of Worlds Beside. We were that drop of sweat when we came through such a hole, many years ago, and found ourselves here. We never intended to stay, just pause long enough to rest and regroup and then move on. Except the mage who knew the secret of making those... holes in parchment... died four days later from wounds he received guarding the way, holding it open until we were all safe and he could seal it.”

He sighs. “We have been trapped here ever since. Your world has been... less than welcoming. And after all this time, we feared our race was doomed to die here. Until the Kingdom and Empire arrived.”

“You didn’t know about Gates any more than we did.”

His voice is so very, very patient with the not-quite-bright student. “No, Karel, we did not. A World Beside is not necessarily more advanced than the worlds it is beside. And yes, as you have surely guessed, we have found a new refuge. But even though we learned some of us have the Gate Gift as well, though none who were born where we came from, we couldn’t just storm the nearest Gate and force the Imperials to let us pass. Certainly not all of us at once. The Imperials, or you Kilthari, or both of you together would have destroyed us if we tried.

“So we have been... sneaking out... as rapidly as possible for the last nearly twenty-five of your years. Uh, six fours and a quarter four?”

I carefully refrain from explaining that if barbarians like the Imperials, and apparently, Caaroc’s people, whoever they are, do not know enough to calculate numbers so as to honor the Goddess’ Four, that does not mean those of us who do are too stupid not to understand a different numbering system.

“This last trip was... nearly the last trip. One more, perhaps two, and then they... we... will all be gone. My orders are to make that happen as rapidly as possible. Without side trips, without distractions. Yet I came to see you. Perhaps your Goddess knows why, since I certainly have no *reason* to do it. Only... a feeling, a compulsion, a *need*.

“I also told my family about... us.”

My mouth drops open. Fuck the warrior face. He told his father, his *family*, that he sucked an Aerisan warrior’s cock in a *privy*, and then had his own mouth fucked? *In a privy*? I open my mouth to express some of that horror, but apparently my face has said it all.

He holds his hand up to stop those words from tumbling out. He also smirks. “*Not* the precise details. Well, my great-uncle might enjoy those details since he is luck-called, himself, but the rest did not need to know. I just told them that... I believe I am luck-called. To you.

“Great-uncle is certain a luck-call can never be wrong. My sire, my grandsire, insist it might. Insist you are a danger, and an Aerisan danger, at that. They insisted...”

He pauses. “Have you ever had a sire *and* a grandsire *insisting* you were wrong about something, when you knew, even if you couldn’t offer them tangible proof, that you were right?”

When I was Eron’s age... I nod. “And they are unwilling to admit even the *possibility* that you are right?”

His turn to nod. “They are certain that with as much warning as I gave you, with a precise statement of where I would be and when, I would walk into a trap with you as the bait. I would be captured, tortured, killed.”

He pauses. His voice has an almost pleading sound to it, but I won’t let it sway me. My warrior face is back.

“So... I had to be certain.”

“Certain I wasn’t a trap. Certain I wasn’t luring you into one.”

He nods.



And then just sits motionless, with the kind of stillness that speaks more of predator waiting to leap on prey, than a man waiting on a verdict he has said he will abide by. He stares slightly up at me.

I step away from him. Pace a few steps, all that is possible, and then back. Again. I am not certain whether I am actually thinking, or avoiding thinking, in those steps. I stop, stand in front of the connecting wall, only a few feet across the room from him.

Look at him. Let him see the hurt, but more, the anger.

“You arrived early. Waited for me. Spied on me in some Seeming or other. Watched me for two fucking days, three days? Let me believe you felt nothing last Winterdeath Eve, let me believe you would not show, all because you thought I might be planning to kill you.

“Well, not actually me, since you are *possibly* smart enough to realize I *am* smart enough not to believe I can do all that to you *by my fucking self*. So what you were really concerned about was possibly getting killed by the army of Aerisan and Baliran and Goddess knows what hordes of mercenaries I am hiding in the next room, knives and axes at the ready, waiting for the signal. The signal to use them both to hack and carve an opening through this wall so they can rush in and surprise you. By coming through *this fucking wall!*” I am so close to it that the angry thump of my fist on the wood startles him.

“Of course you’re too fucking stupid to notice them trying to cut through the wall, and do something about that. And you’re too fucking stupid to notice the other contingent coming through the only actual door to this room, which is, you know, the fucking door that is perhaps eight fucking feet from where you’re sitting, while you stare at my dick and not notice anything. And as a result of all this stupidity, you were concerned that they—*that I, you fucking bastard*—might capture you and torture you and kill you?”

He opens his mouth. Shuts it. Nods. He has the grace to look at least slightly embarrassed.

“And you think this is fucking reason enough for me not to just grab your fucking non-resisting ass, shove it through the door without bothering to open

it and then toss you over the railing to see if you bounce when you hit the alley?”

Caaroc does sheepish well. Extremely well. Goddess-damn it.

I will deal with the issues of people, people who don't believe in the Goddess, people I have never heard of who have come to and have almost left Kilthar, or wherever in the hells their departure point originates, and Worlds Beside, later. Right now, my cock is satisfied with the explanation... fuck! my cock would have been satisfied with a fucking “I'd really like to fuck you right now” as an explanation... and is making his opinion known with the tent in my trousers, since I am not wearing smalls.

Apparently my mind is satisfied as well. Fuck it. I shrug. “Sounds reasonable to me.”

His burst of laughter fills the room, and the room beyond, perhaps the whole building. If the landlord knows what is good for him, he will not remember this laughter.

And now we are naked.

I have no idea how that happened. How we got from raucous laughter and shared relief that two drunken fools who sucked each other in a stinking privy and did not meet again until tonight might actually have a chance to be something more than despicable *shkiril* looking only for cock, any cock.

I am on the bottom, on my back in the bed that is so very far from being just right for a man as large as Caaroc, or even one of my size. And even less so for the two of us together. Perhaps the whores and the men who use them, the usual occupants of this room, with rentals by the hour, by the minute, are all small. Or they make no real use of the bed. But this is all we have.

“I'm going to fuck you.

I smile up at him. “As if you had a choice.”

He slides off me, first grinding our leaking cocks together, and then he is kneeling at the foot of the bed, pulling me toward him, and when my ass is at

the edge, slightly over, he says, "Raise your legs, warrior, spread them. Open for me.

Aerisan warriors do not surrender. It is never an honorable choice. We win or die But this... this does not feel like surrender. This feels, somehow, like rising up and joining something.

"This is going to hurt." He pauses. "Oh, not this, but your first fuck will not be easy." There is something almost unbearably smug about his next words. "Especially not since I am your first."

Bastard.

I am a fucking Aerisan warrior. Sometimes, when potential pain is about to become unavoidable and actual, it is a good idea to remind myself of that. And what that honor requires. So I forcibly squelch the high, shrill, tiny asshole voice that wants to squeal, "Don't hurt me, don't hurt me, don't hurt me."

When you can't say anything smart-assed, don't say anything at all. I say nothing at all. Although I do yelp... a definitely *manly* yelp... when he puts his hands on the joining of thighs and ass, spreads my legs and my cheeks and puts his tongue on my hole.

I was expecting a finger, two, three, many, going inside first to get me ready, all spit-slicked, or lube-slicked from the vial I forgot to tell him is on the chest. Not his tongue. *Shkiril* actually lap and lick another man's ass with every sound of enjoyment?

They do. Caaroc goes even further. His tongue is up inside my ass! I remember it from when it was in my mouth, but apparently my memory is flawed. I do not remember it being this thick, this long. It twists and curls and strokes the flesh inside my ass that I never knew could be pleased at all, much less this well. And it is almost as if the tip of his tongue has narrowed, extended, become as agile as a finger as it teases, taunts, and suddenly strokes over this... bump? lump?... inside me. Sparks leap through my body, and I am suddenly near, but not quite, making a joyful noise unto the Goddess.

If she will accept sexual praise from a *shkiril*, as I have been taught She never could, never would. And then I don't care whether She will or won't

since he does it again, and my cock spurts a large spray of precome, plopping to my belly to lie glistening in the candle-lit dimness.

Caaroc lifts his head from my hole, looks up at me through the vee of my straining legs, up past my painfully hard cock, to where my head is lifted, straining my neck, to look back at him and see what he is doing to me.

Smug. So very smug. So very proud of himself and what he's doing to me. Bastard.

"Aerisans always have a plan, don't they?" His tongue, just an ordinary tongue after all, Goddess be praised for my wonderful imagination, laps my balls.

I manage a nod.

"Do those plans include a lubricant, or did you destroy it when I didn't arrive on the seventeenth?"

He goes back to eating my hole. My imagination about his tongue and its capabilities takes off once again. I finally manage to say the whole word "chest," after six or seven stuttering attempts with just the "ch" sound. I am sure he understood after the first one, certainly the second. He likes torturing me. I like being tortured.

I continue holding my legs up as he rises, walks over to the chest, picks up the vial of oil, and stand sideways so that the light outlines him. He uses his teeth to pull the small cork, and then pours some of the oil on the long, long length of cock standing straight out from his body. His hands caress himself, circling, stroking, listening to my panting, knowing I am staring helplessly at him.

I tell myself firmly to remember that I had that cock in my throat. All the way. So having it go in my ass is no different.

My self reminds me that sometimes I have a meal of meat and cheese and sauce and onions on a thick roll, and a bite of that is actually far bigger around than Caaroc's cock. So my mouth and throat are more used to the idea, the reality, of having big things in them. My self also conscientiously reminds me

that no turd that has ever come out of my ass has been as big around or anywhere as long as what is about to go in the other direction.

I tell my self to shut the fuck up and stop bothering me.

He is back beside the bed. He leans over. His arm muscles swell as his left arm goes under my knees, his right goes under my shoulders and then he simply fucking lifts me up and moves me closer to the tiny headboard. He climbs in between my legs, uses his left hand to push my right leg back. I follow with my left and my ass lifts off the bed. His right hand swirls the leaking, slick knob of his cock around my hole. I should be demanding that he stop immediately; that he force my ass up in the air so my hole is pointing directly at the ceiling, and then that he ease the edge of the vial to the edge of my hole, and quickly tip it up and down and in, so the rest of the fucking vial makes all my insides slick, perhaps even slimy. *That* is the proper way to fuck an Aerisan warrior fuck-virgin who is *not* feeling at all uncertain.

I don't bother. As little as I know my grey warrior, and I have no *reason* at all to call him so, I know him well enough to know he is going to fuck me as and how he pleases.

And it pleases him to tell me to open for him at the same time as he shoves.

Caaroc cock: 1. Karel ass: 0.

It is not a scream that comes out of my mouth. Warriors, especially Aerisan warriors, do not scream at a little pain. Or at a fucking lot of pain that feels like the sharpest of war knives has sliced every nerve in my ass and up through my body wide open. It is... a *grunt* that comes out. Warriors are allowed to grunt when they are in pain. It is, I admit, but only to myself and I will forever deny it if Caaroc challenges me, a *slight* bit high-pitched. But then, my voice is more tenor, and not the rumbling bass of Caaroc.

His knob well in... *so fucking well in*... he pushes a little more of the shaft inside. This grunt is not as high-pitched as the first grunt.

He pauses, lifts his oily right hand from where he had been holding my left knee, and smears the residue on my cock. He tilts his head, drops spit once,

twice, three times on my cock and smears that around as well. I like my cock slick. I like it even better when it is *his* hand making it slick.

I reach up to begin stroking my cock myself, but he bats my hand away. “Not yet. I don’t want you coming that quickly.”

There are several war knives’ worth of pain radiating from my ass, he’s shoving a log, granted, a hot, wet, slick log, at least a foot wide, perhaps more, up my ass and he thinks I will be coming any time soon?

“Open for me, Karel.”

I try, but it isn’t as if I’ve spent my entire life training the muscles inside my ass to move as I command, as I have with the rest of my body. So I have no idea precisely what it is I am supposed to do, especially when my hysterical self is yelling at me to “push back, push back, you fucking fool, push the invader out.” But whatever I do works and another few inches... feet?... of log slide inside.

Oh.

It is a good thing I am not stroking and neither is he. He has hit that button or lump or something. I gasp. He eases back, pulls a little out, and my self snarls, “No fucking way are we letting that go. Do something, you fucking idiot. Clamp down. Hard! Don’t let it get away!”

I do. And smirk just a little as he gasps above me. And then he shoves more inside me. He reaches a barrier. He pushes and nudges but no farther. I am sure if I could raise my head up and look between us I would see his hips thrust back at an awkward angle because of the massive length of cock that won’t fit. But what does fit is fine.

Then his hips push forward. Quickly.

That other pain. The one when his knob went inside my ass. That was a pin prick compared to breaching that second barrier. Fortunately for my survival and my sanity it is ended almost before it is begun. My ass is adjusting just as my throat did. A natural talent at both ends. I ignore the muttering of my self that “it isn’t us, it isn’t us.”

I feel the thick hair of his groin against my own hairless cheeks. Some day we can do this in the day, or a well-lit room, and I can see if that hair is the grey-silver I want it to be.

He slides a little way out, pushes back. Again. And again. His strokes become longer. My legs move around his waist, locking around his back. He lowers his head to mine and devours my mouth. I try desperately to devour him back. He lifts his head away, looks into my eyes, moans, lowers to rest his forehead on the pillow beside me, and begins to pound my hole. I instinctively nuzzle into his neck, licking, teasing, nibbling, nipping. His strokes lengthen until I can barely feel his knob inside me when he pulls back before shoving far and deep.

His cock... Goddess damn but his cock seems to swell up inside me, accompanied by a swift surge of that knife pain again just as he crushes against that lump. The combination of unexpected pain mingled with hoped-for pleasure makes my teeth clamp down against the soft flesh of his neck. The skin breaks. Blood spurts onto my lips, into my mouth.

Caaroc reacts as if a war knife, a pair of war knives had been rammed into him. He yanks his head away, rears back on his haunches forcing my legs apart so I am sprawling like the whores I have heard my uncles describe when they thought I was not around. I am still well and truly impaled so I am going nowhere. He presses his hand to his neck, pulls away, rubs his fingertips. His eyes are wide with something that looks like shock.

“You didn’t swallow any, did you? Tell me, please, that you didn’t.”

It is... was... only a little blood. I have tasted blood before. My own with a cut lip, or making an X with a knife tip in my forearm last spring, to suck out blood and venom and spit both out after a *ginelik* bite. When you are battling, and a warrior in front of you, friend or foe, gets his throat cut, blood is inevitable and sometimes you taste it.

His is... was... unusual. Not coppery at all. Cool and thick, the way granite should taste if it had a taste. It was only a little. He does not look like he has any disease, so why the panic?

So I do what any reasonable man does when he is caught doing something he is not supposed to be doing, even though at the time he starts doing it, he doesn't know he's not supposed to be doing it.

I lie.

When in doubt, deny. When questioned, deny vigorously. And then be righteously offended at the slightest hint that you are being accused of lying.

Caaroc believes me. I am so relieved I make an instant vow to never lie to him again. But I do not give the unbreakable oath, which would be stupid, because men need the ability to lie to each other.

But still he just sits there between my legs. So very still. I can feel him withdrawing, not physically, but inside.

“A warrior who's afraid of a little blood? What the fuck, Caaroc?”

That jolts him out of wherever his mind has taken him. Hinting at cowardice, however mild, stiffens a warrior's sinews, summons up the blood, though here the stiffening and blood are not for his sinews. He shakes his head, the loose thick hair spreading wildly about him, and down onto me. That shake shakes away whatever the panic was about.

His face becomes serious. Only... serious in the way a man is serious about achieving something he desperately wants, or needs, or both. Such as coming in my ass. I suspect that same look is on my face because it is a fucking consummation I devoutly pray for as well.

“I'm going to fuck you through the mattress.”

I snicker. “Go ahead. The mattress, hells, the fucking bed, will break before I do.”

And we proceed to have just that competition. The bed, not too sturdy to begin with, actually does break about ten minutes later. Just two legs on the right side, which tosses us onto the floor, but we roll, laughing, even when his cock comes out. I look at the tower of flesh as he lays beside me and regret there are no awards for taking a cock that massive inside you, at either end. I deserve one.



He gets up on one knee, looks at the bed, and the two remaining legs. He stands, moves, lifts the right side of the bed with one hand and uses his left to snap off the third leg of the frame. Getting rid of the last one is a little more difficult but fairly quickly the mattress is flat again.

“On all fours.”

I may have bruises on my waist I will have to make sure no one sees, given the strength of that upper body and those arms and massive hands, but it will be worth it.

This time he needs no command to open for him. I am already slick with the oil, with fluids inside my body, with sweat and passion. He slides home easily, and it *is* home, it *is* where he belongs. And if his cock seems to thicken and lengthen once it is inside me it is just my body adjusting to the almost painful stretching it first endures and then ecstatically enjoys.

I am sure I will never again experience the kind of joy I experience from the way he fucks me. At least not until the next time he does it, and though it is not yet over, though I pray for a miracle that will just let this fuck go on forever, I can sense the ending approaching for both of us. He is not stroking me. I am not stroking myself, but I am close, so very close.

I desperately want this first time to end with us as close as it is humanly possible to be. Blind with lust I turn my head, twisting my neck towards where his sweat-slick forehead rests against my left shoulder as he pounds and pounds and pounds into me. He raises his head, our eyes meet, he moves forward and as our lips meet, as his mouth closes about mine, as our tongues tangle I realize how stupid I have been.

He stops. Doesn't move, doesn't breathe, doesn't take his lips from mine.

Shit fuck shit fuck shitfuckfuckfuck!

He fucking *knows*. How could he not? His blood is on my lips, on my breath, in my mouth.

*Goddess-damned fucking idiot!* I scream at myself. My self silently agrees.

My turn to hold very still, afraid that any movement I make, anything I say or do, will damage what we have, even more than the damage my stupidity has just accomplished. I *know* we have something beyond this fuck, beyond the privy sucking. I pray he knows it, too. I pray I have not damaged it beyond all hope of repair.

He slumps over me, just a little.

“You lied to me.”

Discretion, valor. Discretion, valor. I choose, I hope, valor and admit I did.

He puts his hand on my shoulders and digs his fingers in, pulls me up from my almost collapse.

“You never lie to me.” There is a growl... behind, around, through... his words.

Discretion. “No, Caaroc.” I whimper as he thrusts savagely deep. “I... I mean, yes, Caaroc. I won’t lie.”

“*We never fucking lie to each other.*” There is a hitch in his movement, the equivalent of a short, sharp inhalation. I am certain if I could see his face, I would see a “what the fuck have I done?” expression there. Followed by a “so be it” as he resumes, increases the now brutal pounding of my ass.

We are soaring somewhere, the two of us, up and out and beyond the whore’s room in a slum where our bodies sweat and grunt and moan and swear, where he is fucking my hole ruthlessly, not caring whether I come or not, so long as he gets what he wants, needs, from my ass. From me.

His cock swells inside me and I ignore the pain. Concentrate on the waves of pleasure, approaching tidal, that run through me.

“Come for me, damn you!” His voice is even more the growl of a beast, a dire wolf about to make a kill, perhaps, or a great bear.

I want to say something mocking in return, to show I am still in control. That doesn’t happen. My mind, my sanity, my self-control are all gone. I do what he says. I come for him, spraying the thin sheets below me, my chest, my chin, my arm, clamping my ass tight around his cock. And as my body does its

very Aerisan warrior best to snap Caaroc's cock off at the base, he comes as well.

Hells, not merely "as well" but far better than. I have stopped coming and still he is going as I try not to collapse on my belly, painfully pull that spewing cock out of my ass and wind up with a seed bath over most of my back and all of my cheeks and crack and gaping hole.

Eventually he stops. Holds very still. His gasps are loud in the room, though perhaps not as loud as when I screamed his name as we came. His cock is so wide and deep it is becoming painful. My first fuck was far from the gentle fuck he first mentioned. Not that I am complaining, but I will be complaining if the pain gets much worse.

And then his hard cock... shrinks... and starts to soften.

I am so grateful to have the just-starting pain go away, and ease even further away as he slides his nearly softened prick out and out and out, that I do not quickly understand the sequence.

His cock did not start to soften after coming, and then shrink. His cock shrank *first*, and then began to soften.

*What in the fucking hells?*

When he is finally all the way out, he scrambles off the narrow bed, allowing me to drop, belly down, into the multiple wet spots he is responsible for. I would purr if I could. But I cannot relax, drop off into the well-fucked sleep I so richly deserve.

I have to salvage this if I can. So I begin talking. With my face away from him at first, because what I have to say is too painful to be facing him. I tell him about my life, about being the runt, the smallest of the litter though I am born alone and first. About knowing, nearly all my life, that I am *shkiril*, and therefore, an abomination before the Goddess no matter the things I have overheard Imperials say to the contrary.

The rustling of clothes he was putting on stops. He sits on the mattress beside me, pulls me to him, holds me carefully in those massive arms while I cry, loud and long for all I will never have.

And when I am done, he has my truth. All of it.

It is past midnight. Seventeen in the morning, perhaps? Eighteen? He cannot stay too much longer. Even in this part of the town, a disheveled warrior looking well-sexed, sneaking, or even boldly striding, out of a room known to be rented by another man is too risky. You might be a whore, a drug runner; you might trade in slaves and children; you might be an assassin, and no one in the under-city will care. Being *shkiril* gets a knife in your gut.

I wonder if he will gift me with any of his truths in return.

He is silent, though, and when he speaks, his mouth muffled as he buries it in the hair on top of my head, he just says, “I have a selfish question to ask.”

He feels my nod against his chest, but pulls back, moving me so that I have no choice but to sit up. He puts a finger under my chin to tilt my head up. He brushes a light kiss... no tongue at all, damn it... across my lips. “A serious question. A very serious question. So I need you looking at me, listening, actually paying attention.”

“Asshole.” I almost twist against him, and snarl as if I’m going to take a mock bite out of him. Fortunately I realize in time that is a joke that will not go over well; indeed, it might destroy this moment of peace between us.

He smiles tenderly, but there is something... pulling away... in his expression. “Will you let me make love to you one more time? Before I have to go? And...” This pause is much longer, but I wait patiently. “Even if what happens after is not... is not what you thought or hoped it might be?”

It is my turn to stop and think. To overrule my instinctive response to just tell him, “Of course,” and tease him for doubting me.

This is not something that warrants an unthinking answer. Here and now, I see only two reasons for his hesitation. For his belief, no, for his near certainty that whatever is going to follow our making love could damage or destroy that

which is building between us. Or for me, that which has already been built, of solid stone, well-joined.

First, he is going to tell me that all I have imagined and hoped is nothing more than that. Now, he must get back to his family and his people, because he cannot take the risk that even though I did not betray him today, I might yet do so. And thinking that I will, I might, betray my honor by betraying him, he will walk away, trusting to my honor not to betray what his people have done, where they might be going. If those are his thoughts, my—perhaps—grey warrior is far from as astute as I have assumed.

Second, and far more likely, he is going to tell me at least some portion of his own truths. Perhaps the most important part. Apparently loving me, if he in fact does, is not high on the list of important truths. Or at least not as high as this truth he thinks will... what? Terrify me? Disgust me? So much so that I will not merely walk, but run from him as far and as fast as I can?

So. He is selfish enough to want one more round of sex as glorious as the two of us can make it, in case everything goes to the Ninth Hell immediately after. I am selfish enough to want that as well.

So be it.

I smile at him, which makes him blink a little, as if I have actually caught him off guard. “I plan on fucking you, Caaroc, at least as hard and fast as you just now did me.”

That *definitely* catches him off guard. He blinks. And blinks again. I would tell him his open mouth makes him look like a fish about to be hooked, but that might upset him. Instead, I smile and finish. “But let’s plan on that next time. For now, how about you fuck me? Twice if you can spare the time?”

His mouth acquires an even more fish-like gape, and then he closes it and does exactly as I ask. Not twice, unfortunately, but oh, that once more. A long and leisurely loving fuck that has no odd cock issues at all, except, perhaps the tiniest niggling thought that his cock, as wide as it spreads me, as deep as it is inside me, is not *quite* as long and deep as it was before. He works my body as if the Goddess had sent him, a specially designed man who knows precisely

how far he can push my body, and then take me a step beyond. Again, and again, and again, the bastard takes me to the edge of the cliff, and never pushes me over the edge, falling endlessly until I crash and drown in the swirling seas below. He also doesn't let me throw myself over the edge either.

And then, finally, we both fall off the cliff.

I die happily, hoping as I fall asleep that it was a good death for him, too.

I wake only because he shakes my shoulder and quietly demands it. I groggily ask what time it is. His response is curt. "Half past twenty-four. Sunrise is a little past twenty-nine today. I need to be long gone by then."

"Fine. Then go." I sound like a sulky child, know I do, but cannot help myself. He is leaving, just walking away. So be it.

"Karel. You... gave me truths tonight. I made you no promise in return..."

I cut him off. "I noticed. My fault. I should have demanded the Oath before I spoke."

He hears the capital letter in my voice and looks puzzled. "What oath?"

It is my turn to be puzzled. How can he not know the unbreakable oath? "The unbreakable oath."

His brief laughter is sarcastic, pointed. "Any oath can be broken, if you are willing to dishonor yourself and be foresworn."

"This one can't. If you promise to do something, and I ask you, 'Swear you so by the Goddess?' you can always refuse, and take an honor-oath, or another oath instead. But if you reply, 'It is by the Goddess sworn,' only your death or the completion of the Oath will release you."

He laughs again and then abruptly cuts it off when he sees from my face, by the light of the relit candle stub, that I am not happy with his disrespect to the Goddess and Her Oath. He holds his hands up in a calming gesture. "Peace, Karel. I respect your beliefs and should not have mocked, even though I don't believe in this Goddess of yours."

He pauses. “Now, please. Get at least some clothes on before I forget my own oaths and duties and decide to put you ahead of them. And then come outside.”

I understand that temptation since I feel very much the same about him. I stop questioning. I lever myself up, and quickly throw on a loose shirt tucked into trousers, a pair of thick socks, and half-boots. I start to gather up weapons, but he stops me.

“You don’t need them. Just come outside, please. And I will... explain. I won’t harm you. I will *never* willingly or intentionally harm you.” He stops talking, and stares at me. An odd expression ghosts across his face.

His thoughts are turned inward as he stands with his hand on the latch. I don’t think he realizes that he is speaking aloud when he says, “Yes. This is right.”

He brings his focus back to the room, to me. “You heard my promise?”

I nod.

“That promise? It is by the Goddess sworn.”

I stand very still. He is not a believer. I have heard vague rumors that somewhere out among the stars there are those who do not believe in the Goddess, who say She is a fantasy, a superstition. I know better. My people know better. And it makes no difference whether you believe in Her at all, or only occasionally, or with daily devotion. If the intent is there, then for that instant, the instant you give the Oath, you believe in Her. And you are bound.

He has given me a profound gift. The greatest gift I have ever had, perhaps the greatest I will ever receive. I will not dishonor that gift. I put the weapons back. Follow him outside, down the steps.

We are in nearly complete darkness, except for the faint light of two of the waning moons. The candle in my room was such a tiny flame that my eyes quickly adjust.

His face is somber in the shadows. “My family will be less than happy with what I am about to do. But before I explain, I need your word that you will tell

no one, not your Clan, not another Clan, not the Imperials, what you learn tonight. Nor what more you will be able to figure out from what I tell you.”

He sees my hesitation for what it is. “With this addition. If you can in honor swear that what I tell you, what you figure out, will bring harm to your Clan, to anyone, then your oath is released.”

He trusts me to make an honorable choice. I have no choice but to trust him. “It is by...”

“No!”

“But...”

“Please. You should not, must not give me that Oath, that particular Oath, based on what I’ve just said. An oath on your Clan’s honor will be enough. More than enough.”

“Very well. On my Clan’s honor.”

When he tells me that there is just one more thing, I resist rolling my eyes.

“If... if, after I explain, you still wish to see me again, this trip will not be quite as long. First Summer twelve? At the Four Corners Pillar? Midnight?”

The Pillar marks the point at which the four lands connect. It is many four-hundreds old. It is also well off the main roads, in the center of flat, open terrain that makes it impossible for anyone to sneak up on someone at the Pillar. Which means if he arrives early, he will know if I am bait for a trap, if someone is going to make the attempt to capture him, torture him, kill him, since he will be able to see them coming.

The same dishonorable insult twice in one evening. The only reason I don’t give in to the anger is because of his Oath. And because he has not demanded the same oath of me. It is an odd kind of trust, that he will rely on my honor, and not on an Oath that compels me to be honorable. Or at least to *act* honorably.

“Yes.”



He looks uncertain, still not entirely sure he should tell me whatever it is he has to say. The silence drags out.

He inhales. And between the downward stroke of an eye-blink, and the upward return, a Stone Beast stands in the alley. Precisely where Caaroc stood.

I am, I admit, that entirely un-Aerisan thing: utterly terrified. My bowels want to shit, my bladder wants to piss, and my legs want to run when all that is done, or better yet, while it is happening and fuck the mess. I restrain them all.

It makes no sound. No, not an “it.” *He*. The Beast is definitely male. I can hardly fail to notice that fact since it... he... is not wearing clothes or armor, and his cock and balls are on display pretty much at my eye level. The old paintings did not do the Beasts justice; the artists’ imaginations were far too small.

He stares down at me, and then slowly, carefully, lifts vast wings of stone feathers, peaking them above his head, spreading them wide. From wingtip to wingtip the span must be four fours, hells, five fours or six. The long tail with the spike on the end coils up and up, and then the spike slashes down as if intending to smash into the ground. I don’t move since it is not moving at me, and I am certain it will not make the kind of noise that will draw attention to this meeting. The tail stops moving a moment before it would land, and then drops to lie quiescent in the dirt.

The Beast’s bright ruby eyes shine in the darkness, telling me nothing I can understand. He opens his mouth and even in the dimness I can see the brilliant white of the rows and rows of fangs, and the long, long snake-narrow tongue. And then in another moment of a single blink, Caaroc is standing there.

He pretends to be calm and quiet, but we both know that is untrue. What he has done has enormous potential consequences. He has put not only his own life, but the lives of his people—the Stone Beasts of Gaarch, who are not, after all, beasts at all, but who have been killing Kilthari, generally and Aerisans particularly, for generations—at risk. I could destroy him, and potentially all his people at the cost of a broken Clan honor-oath.

“I will not speak.” I am proud that my voice does not shake.

He offers the faintest of smiles. “Before... I did ...this”—and a single sweeping gesture encompasses the shift to Gaarchan and back again—“I admit I offered a little prayer to your Goddess. Taking no chances, you see. Perhaps she might exist after all.”

That last still sounds dubious.

I have questions, he knows I have questions. But we both know I cannot ask them now. He does explain one thing.

“What I showed you is my True Form. We call this” —and this time his gesture is just to himself—“our Lesser Form. I am one of the few who can take a Third Form.”

An idea occurs to me. The bastard. “A form somewhere between your Lesser Form and your True Form?”

He nods. I think he understands where this is going, but that’s not really important.

“So, part you and part...”

“You can say it. We actually consider the name Stone Beast something of a compliment.”

“And that means you have some control over your size and shape.”

His nod is wary.

“Which explains making me think I was having hallucinations because your cock kept changing size? Or that I simply have this incredible natural talent for taking enormous cocks inside me at either end?”

“Uh... yes?”

“Your tongue, too?”

This time it is just a nod. Yes, Caaroc does sheepish extremely well.

“Fucking bastard.” I make my sigh loud and ostentatious. “Just make sure it happens again. Only next time let me at least try to be that incredible natural talent?”

“Karel, are you all right?”

The nonchalance that I was so not good at before is working now, though it is much harder to maintain, since there is still that part of me that wants to run howling down the alley, race home and have the Clan Mother hold me tight, stroke my shoulder and tell me everything will be all right. Though I was, in fact, allowed to do that only once. When I was four. Aerisan warriors, even warriors-in-training, do not cry. They do not need reassurance.

“Of course.”

“*Of course?* Karel, you just got fucked by a fucking *Stone Beast*. You just found out *I’m* one of those fucking Stone Beasts. One of your Clan’s enemies for something like eight hundred of this damned planet’s years. Your generation has been raised and trained in the hope that the Stone Beasts haven’t mysteriously died out, so that at least one of you can find one and kill it. And all you’re concerned about is how well I can manipulate the size of my cock to avoid hurting you?”

I have to find the right words. I can’t just say, “And your tongue, too,” because I don’t think he’ll appreciate my un-Aerisan sense of humor right now.

Truth. He could have slaughtered me any time, possibly as my grey warrior, probably in this Third Form, though I have yet to see it, definitely in his True Form, because I would never have seen it coming.

Truth. He asked for my word as Clan honor rather than the compulsion of the Oath.

Truth. He gave me an unbreakable oath that he will not willingly or intentionally hurt me, even if he does not truly believe the Oath is unbreakable. His mind, I believe, will interpret that oath to include not only direct physical harm, but indirect harm through my family. Unless he has to kill in self defense—unwilling harm, unintentional harm—he has effectively taken himself out of any future battles between the Stone Beasts, no, the Gaarchans and my Clan.

I tell him all this. Carefully.

“Are *you* any different than before I knew about your... Forms?”

His “no” is nearly indignant.

“You are still you, no matter what Form you wear?”

His “yes” is rapidly approaching indignant.

“Then as long as you’re not going to try fucking me at either end in your True Form, my natural talent notwithstanding, then all we have to worry about are simple things.”

I pause to allow him time to sputter over the words “simple things.”

“Simple things. Like anyone finding out we’re *shkiril*. Like avoiding gelding and enslavement, or just plain death, if we are found out. Though you have the edge on me when it comes to that whole avoiding business. You know, height, weight, fangs, claws, tail, wings. Simple things like anyone finding out the unsuspected depths of my perversions, since I’m fucking a monster. Uh... I *will* be fucking you, won’t I? It seems only fair.”

The strain has vanished from his voice when he agrees to my fucking him *sometime*, though he carefully does not set that time. And he finds my efforts at humor worthy of at least some chuckles.

“And while we’re at it, perhaps, just perhaps, we could...”

“No. Not True Form. Absolutely not. Your Goddess would probably create a special Tenth Hell just for me, just for that. No.”

“Well, then, Third Form?”

Relieved that I have given up being unreasonable so readily, he nods. Pauses. Realizes he has given me what I actually wanted. Realizes I must truly *not* see him as a Beast, as a monster, if I am willing to trust him in all his Forms.

Which brings us back to the uneasy silence of enforced parting. A parting where we are not permitted to hold each other one more time, to say a final “fare well, my love”—though while I foolishly, freely admit to myself I would

add those last two words, I do not know if he would—not here, where we stand, in case someone sees.

Our voices become as soft as, softer than, his last going away, since we necessarily are standing farther apart than we were outside the privy. Had we been that close, I'm not sure I would have survived his transformation, even though my death or damage would have been accidental.

He smiles and says once more, "Imagine that I have just pulled you into my arms and kissed you so long and so thoroughly that I leave you gasping for breath."

I can still better that. He has let me better that here and now. "And I kiss you back so well your knees are weak, you can barely stand, and I've just made you mess your trousers with come."

We are smiling far more broadly than this night of revelations might have been expected to allow.

He turns with that same flare of his coat and heads down the alley.

I trudge up the three flights of stairs, thanking the Goddess for both darkness and the emptiness of the alley, so there is no one to see the wide and spreading stain on the seat of my trousers. Goddess damn, but my man, my grey warrior, my fucking Stone Beast Gaarchan, *my Caaroc* produces a prodigious amount of seed! I briefly wonder whether there is some magical connection to the Beast balls in his True Form that just replenishes his seemingly ordinary man-sized balls while he's fucking.

I have to clean up. Thoroughly. Pay for the damage and more silence. Return home without allowing myself to be seen when I arrive. Or after. And then I have until First Summer twelve to figure out where we can go from the Pillar to be alone. I am certainly not going to have my next fuck, no matter how talented Caaroc is, or better yet, my first fuck of him, out in the open by the Pillar.

\*\*\*\*\*

Oh, Goddess, no!

*It* makes me remember...

\*\*\*\*

**1 Summer 12, 19097 After Seren**  
**9671 House Andrae**  
**Four Corners Pillar, The Shrine**  
**Outside Kilthari Territory, Kilthar**

Is it inevitable that when you love you become a better liar? Or is it just me? Since that Winterdeath Eve I have learned that not only do I have a natural talent for taking cock in my mouth or ass, despite some little or *large* help from Caaroc, I apparently always had it in me to be a proficient liar.

I have continued the pattern of deception I started last Winterdeath. I make sure I continue to excel at everything I am asked to do, at everything an Aerisan warrior, a Clan Heir, is required to do. My brothers and I get along as well as we ever have, if not better. The Clan believes that things have returned to whatever the “normal” was before last Winterdeath.

And when I leave for a day here, a day there, I do it without confrontation. And without questions on my return. Even Father says nothing. But he watches me. Always. As if he suspects. But he can't. I have never said or done anything in his sight or hearing, nor in the sight or hearing of anyone who would report to him, that could possibly lead him to believe I am *shkiril*.

So I tell myself it is just my imagination. It is just Father being Father, or being Clan Chief.

It appears, however, that my proficiency as a liar is only with others. I am an abomination at lying to myself. But there is nothing I can do that I have not already tried, and so I let the watching go. And remain watchful myself.

And on the last of the trips to get away for no reason than getting away, I found the place for us for tonight. I lean against the Gaarchan side of the Pillar, lit by three full moons, unquestionably visible. Unquestionably alone. I have not betrayed my grey warrior, will not.

There are places in Kilthar that we might have gone, but they have the greatest risks of our being seen. We are not the largest of the Clans in Kilthar,

but the most well-known, and being seen together by someone who knew someone who knew someone Aerisan was an all too real possibility. For the first time in my life, I regret the hunt chain in my neck because only my Clan marks its warriors so. I regret, too, for reasons I do not care to examine closely, that I am Clan Heir and known more widely for that reason alone.

In theory, we could leave the Pillar and follow the trail into Balir. But that leads only to Halintown, where a repeat, whether of privy or private room, would be foolish beyond all reason. Particularly since I couldn't just walk up to a stranger and ask him where I could rent a room for a few hours so another *shkiril* and I could fuck around. Or even if I was not that explicit, I would probably be given the name of our temporary landlord and the same address, which would have left me with the necessity of explaining we had been there, had done that, and asking the stranger whether he knew somewhere even more sleazy.

The next closest town, more of a village, actually, is six wasted hours of walking there, and six back. I didn't bother to go in. Alone, I would be a Goddess Day wonder and talked about for months. The two of us, whether we seemed to be together or not, would be linked in town gossip for years.

I did not cross into Gaarch. I gave myself two reasons. First, if there was a likely place there, Caaroc would know of it and he would have already said something. Second, I could not risk renewing a war by invading Gaarchan territory. *That* thought was a jolt when it crept up on me and tapped my shoulder.

Two four-hundreds of tales of the insanely violent, incredibly cunning *animals* we call Stone Beasts, of fighting and killing them, often losing several Clan members to one of their deaths. How could I be the only one to have learned that the Beasts are people? How could I be the only one to have realized that what we did on both sides was not hunting, but *war*?

I am not. Great-grandfather was Beast-killed, and no Beast death ever avenged him. For twelve fours and a quarter four all young Aerisan warriors have been trained to hunt and kill the Beasts, but while there are hunts, no



Beasts are ever found. There *is* a truce, unspoken, though I do not know how it is accomplished. I could not risk destroying it.

So very logical in my analysis, so very virtuous. Eventually, though, I told myself the truth. I was terrified that by crossing that border I would be found by another Stone Beast in his True Form, and despite my logic, despite my certainty, I would be killed before I could see Caaroc again.

My last, desperate hope was somewhere outdoors. A cave, a forest clearing, anywhere with some degree of cover, and a location that would give us some chance of hearing anyone approaching before they stumbled upon us with one or the other's cock buried in one or the other's hole. And the only possibility for that was the unclaimed land.

When I crossed *that* border, I encountered something only a mage could have done. I had heard of battle spells, in the tales, but the Clan has not had, has not used, a battle mage in fours and fours of years. And since I was not lightning-blasted or fireball-blasted into cinders, or some equally dire fate, it could only be a ward. And mages set wards to prevent entry. But I went through with only a slight push against an invisible *something*, which meant that the ward was designed to keep something in.

I did not panic with that realization. I did not experience brief, heart-pounding terror that I was locked inside the unseen barrier. I did not turn around and race back through, tripping over my own feet and falling flat on my face.

I did not.

The test to determine whether the ward would allow me in *and* out was calmly carried out. If anyone other than Caaroc asks for the tale, that is my tale and no other.

I found the place within a mile of the barrier ward. A midsize stone building set back in a hollow. Weathered and worn. Part of an ancient roof was still there. The remains of a single, unusually wide door sagged on the one hinge partially left. Inside, it was, surprisingly, a single room or open space. A room which had seen war.

My training has taken me to battle sites, recent and not long ago, and ages ago. They all have the feel of ghosts walking still, no matter how long dead their bodies might be. Those ghosts walked here.

At the far end of the room I found the remains of what looked like an altar, but to what I could not tell. The single slab of the top was shattered in three places, the pieces angled against the stumps of the supports. On the wall behind it, someone, perhaps many someones, had hacked away at whatever was once carved there. I could only make out a faint “oth.” I wondered if this place had something to do with tir-Lothian and the odd Wall.

I shrugged it off. As I shrugged off the feeling of being watched, both then and when I returned the next day with a laden, rented *grila*. The results of my efforts were not an immaculate, romantic bower, but there was a clean place under the roof remains. The well outside the no-longer-there side door still produced clear cold water, after a bit of cleaning. With blankets, and multiple armfuls of the overgrown sweet grass, I thought two warriors could fuck, and fuck hard and frequently without too much knee or back or side or ass damage.

When I left, given the fact that there were no signs anyone had been there before me since... what?... the fall of tir-Lothian five four-hundreds ago?... I was sure it would be unchanged when my Caaroc and I got there.

*If* we got there. If he did not decide he and his people were safer, despite my honor-oath, if we never saw each other again.

He did not make that decision.

I see him, as he sees me, walking toward the Pillar so that we arrive precisely at midnight. Alone. I thought for some reason that he would not be coming from Gaarch, but he is. I arrive from Kilthar.

And now at the Pillar we stand smiling foolishly at each other. Though I think both of us would take great *physical* offense toward anyone foolish enough to call our expressions foolish. He sets a large, heavy pack on the ground. Mine is not quite as large.

He is gorgeous. The long, thick hair I *still* have not seen in light is braided, and it hangs down his chest. His shirt is open, and though I can't see the large

nipples and thick nubs I remember so well, at least I can see the sweat gleaming on his chest. I lean in to sniff, and he laughs, and both smell and sound make my already-hard cock ache.

“You were that confident I would make the preparations, find us a place?”

“Wha... Huh?” I wake from overloading myself with *him* after his aeons-long absence. I smirk up at him. “No. I found us a place. Not far, and if it works as well as I think it will, we can use it again.”

A profound silence drops on us at my unspoken, “one last time before you and your people are gone forever.”

We shake the silence off.

He shoulders his pack, and then hesitates when I pick up mine and start toward the unclaimed land. I am a few steps on before I realize he is not with me. I turn to look back at him. “What?”

I do not know him all that well, true. Well enough to know what I feel, though. And at least some certainty that the feeling is returned. I would never have expected... *uneasiness* in his face.

“The place you found is *there*?” He indicates the obvious with that chin-up, reverse nod men do.

I smile brightly. “Yes. Not more than a mile or so. Not much of a walk for a big, strapping—” I deliberately look at his crotch, and lean in to fake-whisper in the empty air, “*hung* Beast, is it?”

He doesn’t smile back. “We don’t go there.”

I did not expect that. “Why?”

He shrugs. “We just do not. If anyone ever has, no one has ever said. We are just... taught, trained, whatever you want to call it, not to go there.”

Fuck. And there is nowhere else to go. I don’t have a backup plan. Except... perhaps I do.

“Fine. When is the last trip?”

“What?” The change of subject disconcerts him. It fucking well should. He recovers and answers, “The day after tomorrow.”

“Last of your people, last of whatever you are taking with you?”

“Yes.”

“Then fine. We say good-bye here.” I step closer. Hold out my hand, and offer him a sincere traveler’s blessing. “The Goddess go with you, and keep you, and guide you safely to journey’s end.”

He looks from my hand to my face and back again.

“I’m not having sex around here, even if it is past midnight and unlikely in the extreme anyone will suddenly arrive. I am not stupid enough to go back to Halintown and try to rent those two rooms again, or even one of them. There is nowhere else, unless you have a plan.”

He shakes his head. “No plan. I... just got back and came here as quickly as I could.”

Perhaps I should not be doing this. Manipulating him. No. There is nothing there but an ancient ward that keeps nothing out, and there is nothing to keep inside. I want this. It might be, it will probably be, my last time with him, my last time with anyone, unless I abandon my Clan and my home and Gate out of here.

“If we cannot, we cannot. Good-bye, Caaroc.” I push my hand just the slightest bit more toward him. Will it be enough to topple him over the edge?

It is.

“Very well.”

I carefully do not show any glee over getting what I want. He wants it, too, I know he does. And I have found a way to make it happen. For both of us, not just me.

He remains silent, though, as we walk. Until we reach the ward. He knows it’s there. And says so.

I shrug. “It’s nothing. Whatever it was supposed to do, the reason is long dead and gone. Watch.”

I step through the ward, and back again. I repeat it. Then step through again. I keep my face expressionless. I won’t manipulate him again. He has to choose.

I very carefully avoid recognizing that stepping through the ward and waiting while saying nothing is both challenge and manipulation.

He steps through. Turns around and steps past it, but more slowly. As if he has to push his way through what is nearly non-existent for me. He stands there, his back towards me. I force myself to say nothing. I just hope he will choose me.

He does. He turns around, steps past the ward and up to me. His face is serious, almost grim. And then he lightens his expression. “As we are still in the open, though no one is near, consider yourself... lightly kissed.”

“Lightly is good. Deeply and well is better. But soon.” I turn to lead the way.

“You do know we are being watched, don’t you?”

I hope my laugh does not sound forced. “Of course. This was once, a long, long time ago, the site of some fight, some battle that no one remembers. The ghosts of those dead are still here. That is all you feel, all I feel. Nothing more.”

There is a short silence, an inhalation as if he is going to say something. Then nothing. Then in a slightly challenging tone, “So be it.”

I smile, making sure my back is toward him when I do. It might be misinterpreted as gloating over having gotten what I wanted. No. What *we* want; what we need. We walk on.

When we get there, when he sees the building, he stops, grabs my shoulder. “That’s a shrine.”

I shrug as best I can, what with his fingers gripping me so tightly. “So?”

He pulls me around to face him. “It’s a shrine.”

I do not understand the seriousness of his face and tone. And I will not let it interfere with... anything. “It isn’t a shrine to the Goddess. If it was, and She had a problem with what is about to... what is *hopefully* about to happen in there, She would have made Her will known. Hells, I probably wouldn’t even have found the place if She objected. But whatever it was, it isn’t any longer. It’s just an old, dead building, with the remnants of a carving that has something to do with tir-Lothian.”

Some of the wrong kind of stiffness drains out of him. “Are you sure?”

I evade with, “Would I lie to you?” And he takes that as answer.

He starts walking toward the building, more confidently now. “How did you manage to get mattresses, a table, chairs, fine food, candles, wine, out here?”

His tone is so very serious that for a moment I *believe* he is serious. My laughter when I understand he is not is tinged with relief that he has given in, though I hope he doesn’t notice. I will make it up to him. I will make it up to him so well he will die in ecstasy. I carefully remind myself that Aerisan warriors, nineteen or not, do not go off on flights of fancy or fantasy.

This once I will. We will.

“Nothing so fancy as all that. I wasn’t really sure you were worth that many golds, so I didn’t spend them. Perhaps another time? If you show me that you are?”

He snorts in reply.

“But we’ll be under a roof... sort of a roof. A mild night. Clear skies. Sweet grasses piled thick to spread our blankets on. Oils. Several vials of oil, actually. And if you have the interest, you might see how well you can fuck me into the ground.”

He rounds on me just before we go through the door. Grabs me up, and his kiss tells me he likes that idea very much. So does the massive cock straining

at his trousers. I hope he is not wearing smalls, as I am not. One less piece of clothing, one moment faster to get started on the reason we are here.

He fucks me twice, taunting me with subtle and not so, subtle changes in the girth and length of his cock, carrying me with him up to a higher peak than we'd ever reached before, and when we have tumbled over and died the small death, he waits... oh, not very long at all... to show me that there were peaks to be won that were higher yet.

The walls and partial roof provide some shadow, and, combined with the unusual lack of animal noises, we sleep well beyond dawn. I wake before he does, and though I don't wish to leave my comfortable spot curled up beside him, his arm around me, I have the choice of staying in what will soon be very wet bedding, or moving.

I carefully roll away, and pad naked through a partially open side door. Stuck that way for fours and fours, probably. Outside I turn to face the wall, brace myself, and with careful aim at the stones, at an angle that minimizes splash back, I proudly piss like a *grila* trying to get rid of enough piss for multiple batches of beer for The Drunkard. Feeling much better when that feat is complete, I go back inside.

Caaroc has rolled over on his back, his arms spread wide. Goddess. My grey warrior *snores*.

My grey warrior is also hard. The least I can do is help him with that. That pillar might just come to some harm if it isn't cared for properly. My ass is slightly sore, so I am not going to be oiling my insides and sitting down on it. However, I think he'll accept my lips and tongue and throat as at least reasonable substitutes.

More than reasonable, judging by the sounds that soon start leaking past his lips. Much like the slick, tasty precome that begins streaming from his slit. I carefully work him up, heading toward a cliff that won't be quite as tall given this past night, and then stop. I lift my head away and sit back on my haunches.

He raises his head. Looks down his length to examine his length, then looks over to me. “What the fuck, Karel?”

Not angry at all. Just a very careful “I will not beg, I will not beg” tone behind the words.

I smile down at him. Spread my knees a little wider, and stroke myself. I raise my hand and twist my nipple, hurting it just a little bit. A slight addition to the marvelous, numerous small hurts he’d given me last night. I flaunt myself, just to be sure I have his attention, of course. Not because it turns me on even more to put myself on display for him, to watch him get even more excited by the way I use myself for his pleasure.

My best “innocent” expression is clearly not innocent, or nowhere near innocent enough, at all. Especially when I say, “Third Form?”

I’m not sure if the noise from his throat is a growl, or a snarl or an incipient roar. “No. We are being watched.”

I sigh. Goddess damn it, we went through all this hours ago. “Ghosts, Caaroc, or more likely, just the memories of people and things and events long past that have seeped into the stones, into the soil, and have no effect on the here and now.”

I pause. “Look, do that... thing you do. Get all swollen up—” and he clearly hears the intended double meaning “—and check. If you tell me there is danger here, actual danger, I will be leading the way to the ward, as fast as I possibly can. Try to keep up.”

He smiles somewhat ruefully at that. Sighs, puts his head back down. “I did that while you were still sleeping.”

“And since you didn’t wake me, or just toss my ass over your shoulder and bolt for the border, you didn’t find anything.”

His voice is reluctant, but he finally agrees.

“Well, then?”

He hesitates. “Third Form is... unnerving.”



I let out a bark of laughter.

“Do I look unnerved at the thought? Did I look unnerved when you sprang your True Form on me? Did I run screaming into the night like a little child, setting aside the fact that Aerisans, young or old do not run screaming in fright anywhere? Did I become enraged and attack the vicious Stone Beast who had just fucked me so very, very well? Did I...?”

He holds his left hand up. “Enough. Enough!” Another sigh. “Move back.”

I shake my head. “Nope. I’m comfortable here. Just... grow, or shift, or change, or whatever the great grey Gaarchan Stone Beasts call it—over that way.”

*That* was definitely a snarl.

And then he is in Third Form. I gulp. My Caaroc is magnificent in all his Forms. He stretches his legs, pointing his clawed toes, just as I do when my body is tight from sleeping in a less than just-right position. He stretches his arms straight up in the air and I realize those stone-grey biceps are nearly as big around as my waist. Then above his head so that the backs of his hands touch the ground, and then a downward, wing-like sweep, to lie with his arms stretched straight out. He moves his left leg, too, nudging me, and I can hear his laughter, or the only laughter I have known up until now, through the rough gravel his voice has become.

The laughter is because I am staring, spell-bound without a mage in sight, by the tower rising up from his groin. I lick my lips. “You’re not fucking with me, are you?”

Definite gravel laughter, deep and reverberating. “Would you like me to?”

That makes me hesitate. As he intended. I point at the cock that is so clearly defying gravity. “Is that real, or are you just ‘adjusting’ things to be impressive?”

“That is as real as it gets. Each Form has a particular size and shape, and while... some... ah, ‘adjustments’ can be made they are downward, never up.

Do you want a demonstration? Though the range of change is not as major as you seem to think.”

“Later, perhaps.” Perhaps? Goddess damned right there would be a demonstration later, but right now I just want to see what I can do with all that shiny, leaking reality.

I raise up on my knees, move closer, use one hand to brace myself on his thigh, the other to hold the cock somewhat in place, lower my head, open my mouth, a lick the drooling slit. Incredible. I...

*#ABOMINATION! #*

Sound and light hit me. The loudest thunder in the worst storm in the last several four-hundreds punches my ears from an inch away and I can no longer hear. A flare of light stronger than looking directly into the sun smashes my eyes and I can no longer see. White fire washes over me, through me, burning me from the inside out. I feel nothing but pain, *am* nothing but pain.

I am...

Somewhere else.

I drag my eyes open to blurred vision. My head pounds, my ears ring, and I am uncertain I can even lift my head, so I just look downward for a moment. Waiting to see, hear again.

Downward? With what just happened I should have fallen onto Caaroc, or beside him.

*Caaroc!*

My head snaps up. I have to...

Go nowhere at all. I am tied—wrists and ankles, chest, belly and thighs—to wood. Wood standing up in the shape of a giant X. Most of my weight is borne by my wrists; some by the chest and belly ropes.

My head is free and I look around but wherever I am, dear Goddess, wherever *we* are I hope, is utterly dark. A torch flares into life. Then two, three

and four. I squint in the brightness, slowly open my eyes. The torches are in holders high against the... cavern walls?

Caaroc... my Caaroc is on the floor of the cave. Dear Goddess help us. In his True Form. His wings up and out and flat against the ground. Flat because they have been cruelly spiked. The arms he had stretched out as I leaned in to caress his cock are spiked as well...through his palms, his shoulders. Spikes in his feet and just above his knees. His head is raised, his eyes bright red, with tiny orange flames reflecting in them.

I call his name, but he says nothing. I do not even know if he *can* speak, at least Kilthari, in this Form.

I know better, I can tell how well I am tied, but still I struggle. And slump when it accomplishes nothing but to add pain.

A voice laughs. But I only hear it inside my head. Caaroc doesn't move at all, but if the way his head moves, if any part of his body could do the same, he might well be free, spikes or not.

*# Exactly. The abomination... the other abomination will not be moving. It is doubly pinned to the ground. #*

Despite the lack of noise coming into my ears, I look around as well as I can. No one is here but us, unless he, or it, is hidden far back in the shadows.

*# No threats of what will happen when the mighty Clan Aeris comes searching for its Heir? No warning of what the Stone Beasts of Gaarch will do in double or triple repayment for damage to one of their pack? #*

Something slithers inside my head, looking at me on the first sentence, at Caaroc on the second.

The voice knows no one will come for me. The Clan has no idea where I am. I suspect it is true for Caaroc's people as well. And if we are in a cavern where no one knows we have ever been, there will be no one to exact retribution for us.

Especially not for abominations.

*# Especially not for abominations. #*

“Get out of my head!”

*# Very good. If you want the other abomination to hear, you’ll have to speak aloud. But if you want a private moment, have words only with me, all you have to do is think. #*

“I have no private thoughts for you. And if you’d release the spell that keeps Caaroc silent, he’d have no words for you either.”

*# I prefer it this way. And now I just need to decide what to do with a pair of abominations three times over. #*

“We are not abominations.” Whoever, whatever, *it* is, this immaterial voice, I hope it cannot hear the lie.

*It* does.

A jagged gash appears slowly, slowly on Caaroc’s chest, starting at the spike and meandering in the general direction of his breastbone. The flesh parts and grey blood bubbles up. He says nothing.

*# Lie again and the Beast is hurt worse. The more you lie, the greater its pain. #*

“All right!” I shout at the air. “We are *shkiril*.” And for all our captivity it is somewhat freeing to say the words aloud.

*# The first abomination. What of the other two? #*

“I... If there is something other than that, I don’t know.”

A sharp, jagged blade slices down my chest to match the wound on Caaroc. And then another to make the sides of my chest match. I do not allow myself to cry out.

*# You profaned the shrine of the God-Emperor Tiroth. #*

Speaking before I think will be my damnation, the Clan Mother has always told me. Unless I, *we*, can figure something out despite the impossibility, the both of us are damned anyway.

“Never heard of him.” Despite the pain and the blood and the ropes, I try to join the words with a shrug. I don’t quite succeed.

*Its voice is suddenly hysterical, and that invisible blade with the jagged edge slices into me repeatedly as it shrieks.*

*# You would have! # Slash.*

*# Tiroth sent four of us and your Goddess could do nothing. # Slash.*

*# We found hosts, eager, willing hosts. So very willing. # Slash.*

*# We were making tir-Lothian great, a god of nations, to take control and join with Tiroth. # Slash.*

*# And then your mages rose up, your warriors rose up. # Slash.*

*# They razed the city, and salted the earth. # Slash.*

*# Destroyed the other three, and when I killed my host and hid, they caged me! # Slash.*

*Its voice is out of control. Had it been real its voice would have been panting and raw, hoarse and nearly gone.*

*# I have been cut off from the God-Emperor for two thousand years! I slept, but am awake again, still caged. You will repay my pain. #*

*The knife, or whatever it is, slashes over and over again.*

*When it stops I am nearly unconscious from the pain and loss of blood.*

*And then the wounds are gone. But only part of the pain.*

*# You won't die just yet, my little Aerisan warrior. You and your beast have a debt to pay. A special debt for your third abomination. #*

*I refuse to ask.*

*# I might have let you live. If it was only the two I would still have caught you as I have. I would have told myself it has been millennia since the altar was used, so there is not much to desecrate. Even the abomination of a man lying with a man as with a woman would have only led to making you both suffer, long and well, but still you would have survived. You won't now. Have you guessed, little warrior, what your third abomination is? #*

A whip this time, also unseen, lashing out until I am certain I will die as the young Baliran boy did when his father went insane and whipped him to death. But I survive. As *its* voice promised.

I open the eyes I have held closed and see Caaroc again. I force myself to hold back the gasp. Everything that has been done to me has been done to him.

*# Your Stone Beast is a shifter, just like those at... #* The voice stops and with barely a pause goes on. *# And you, you drank the shifter's blood. You bit the beast willingly and drank the blood and now your blood is corrupt as well. #*

An extended silence. More so because I try to speak, to reassure Caaroc somehow, some way, only some mage trick deprives me of my voice.

*# Your beast, little Aerisan, the one spiked to the floor. Would you protect it from further harm? Do anything to protect it? #*

There is no need to think about the response. Not anymore. “Yes!” My shout bounces off the walls and ceiling, wraps around the pointed pillars that drop from the ceiling and rise from the floor, fades into tiny echoes and then silence.

*# Prove it. #*

\*\*\*\*\*

“You caught a monster?”

I am no longer tied! But Caaroc, Caaroc is still on the floor. In his True Form. The spikes—vicious, hammered deeply, crusted with granite blood—still pierce his wings, his palms, his feet, his shoulders, his tail in several places. He is motionless, but his red eyes glow. He is conscious, in pain, but I am free. I can get to him. Help him.

And then the fact of the voice hits me like a sword-hilt to my temple. The fact that it is Father's voice is a blow to my other temple. Both jar my mind. I am unsurprised that Father's voice holds no approval for his eldest son and Clan Heir actually capturing a Gaarchan Stone Beast, subduing it, supposedly fucking *nailing* it in agony to the floor of this... warehouse? Wasn't it a cavern

a moment ago? I shrug the uncertainty off—uncertainty gets warriors killed. No surprise, either, at the question that accents the “you?” with some degree of incredulity.

I whirl on him. I am... not naked. I am fully clothed in a warrior's leathers. My sword slides from the scabbard with an angry hiss as I spin. A twist of my fingers and the scabbard falls into my left hand. A flick of my wrist that does not interfere with my movement, and the scabbard is tossed, clattering to the floor well out of my way.

I face father, legs braced for battle, my blade up and toward him.

“Turn that blade away from me, warrior. And then let's kill the monster.”

“He's mine.”

Father laughs, and it is not a pleasant sound. He pulls out his own sword. “You'll get credit for the capture. And for sharing the kill. But the last death of man or Beast was your great-grandfather's, *my* grandfather's. The Beast ripped his heart from his chest, clawed his belly until his entrails spurted out, crushed his legs and crushed his skull. The battle with that Beast is why your grandfather has a twisted leg and limps. It is why I became Clan Chief too soon. That Beast escaped; this one will not. I *will* have my revenge.”

I back up a step, desperately trying to figure a way out of this. I make my voice strong and even. “No. He is mine. Just leave and I will deal with this.”

Deal with this? *Deal with this?*

Get the spikes out? Bandage him with nothing but my leathers available in this filthy room? And then what? If he can't shift to his Lesser Form, to become my grey warrior, what? I am one four and a half four tall; Caaroc is at least two fours in this Form. Precisely how do I even get him upright? Much less out of here, wherever in the Nine Hells *here* actually is.

Father is angry now. “Get out of my way. Stand aside, or help, your choice. But I *will* kill the Beast.”

“No. I told you, he is mine and only mine.” I do not tell him precisely how my Caaroc is mine, but let him think what he will of my arrogance and selfishness.

“You arrogant child. You are good, Karel. You were good when you humiliated me before the Clan last Winterdeath. You have worked hard, become even better since then. But you aren’t as good as me. You don’t have a true warrior’s instincts... like your brothers have. Eventually, soon, really soon, you will lose to them. As you will lose now, to me. *Stand aside!*”

The last is a bellow that shakes the room, followed by a charge and a powerful swing at my sword, aimed at shocking me into inaction so that the sword is forced from my hand. He almost succeeds. I manage to get my blade up, to block the swing. And then I am fighting my father, seriously fighting.

Yet not. I am just defending myself. For all he dislikes, perhaps even despises, me, for a reason he has never disclosed, he is still my father. I cannot hurt him. But I cannot let him kill Caaroc.

I have to figure a way out. I have to...

...do nothing at all.

Ever again.

Father’s blade is in my belly. We stand in place, staring in horror at each other. I begin to fall...

\*\*\*\*\*

*# So. That is how much you “love” your monster. You throw away your life, and let the Beast be slaughtered. #*

“No!”

My voice echoes in the cavern.

I... We are back in the cavern? But... How? Goddess, how? I look around, as much as the rope now around my neck will allow. I am naked again. Tied again, so tightly the ropes cut deep into my flesh. Caaroc is in agony on the ground. But... but I can still feel the sword in my belly, the exit wound at the



back. Yet I am certain that even if I could bend and look, I would see no sign of the holes. Nor blood.

“No!” I scream once more to the cave that is empty except for Caaroc and me. “Come out! Fight me! I will not let him die.”

*# Prove it. #*

\*\*\*\*

I am back in the warehouse. *We* are. Caaroc, Father, me.

Back at the moment when Father shouts and swings at me. I block it more easily this time. I know it is going to happen. We continue fighting. The blows we strike are different; we aren't repeating everything that went before. I can change the outcome!

My breathing gets ragged. Harsh and loud. I am not used to fighting on the defensive. And this... this feels so *real*. But isn't. It's an illusion, a mind trick. And knowing that, I will be able to...

...do nothing at all.

Father's blade slices through my throat.

\*\*\*\*

I remember... each and every time I fight my father in that stinking warehouse. Each and every death. And all of them mine.

And with each battle Father's anger grows, as if somehow, phantom though he is, he remembers all that has gone before, notices cumulatively things he had not noticed individually, as they occurred. All my deaths, though, are accidental. There is an expression of near-horror on his face each time he strikes the killing blow.

Until the last one. The longest-fought battle. And in one of those odd pauses where two warriors silently agree to stop, for just a moment, the most temporary of truces, just to breathe deeply and gather ourselves before resuming, his face changes.

“You aren’t fighting me to keep the honor of the Stone Beast kill for yourself. You are *protecting* that fucking abomination.”

I am so shocked by the accusation, by the cold, absolute certainty of his tone, that I take too long to deny, and by my silence, admit.

“*You disgust me, shkiril.*” He leaps at me, breaking our temporary truce with the same energy he had when this fight started. I am completely on the defensive.

“You have shamed me almost from the moment you were born.” The blows are so powerful I am forced back.

“I... prayed to the Goddess... that you had not been tainted by that foul *shkiril* you called friend.”

The next blow almost deprives me of my blade and earns me another death.

“But I knew. I *knew*.” He cuts through my defense, slices my shoulder as I avoid a killing stroke.

Another few exchanges and I am bleeding again. And again. How can I survive? I am exhausted from each of the times I have fought him before, and he does not recall a single fight. And each time we start anew he is as strong as if all the rest had never happened. As they have not, for him. Just for me.

He leaps back and breaks off.

I am desperately glad for the respite.

He is gasping, too. And then he controls himself, his voice. “Redeem some small part of your honor. Submit and I will not geld and enslave you as is my right. Your death will be quick, your shame will be mine to know and the Clan will believe your Stone Beast killed you.”

I control my own breathing so I will not pant between words. “And if I will not?”

“Then you die a slow and painful death, and I will make sure that the abomination spiked to that floor behind you will die, if not as slowly, then in far more agony. Surrender.”

I scream my “No!” at him and launch myself.

I lose.

I lie on the floor, gut sliced open, bleeding out while the numerous slashes on my arms and chest and thighs and scalp drain me as well.

And while I die, my Father kills my grey warrior, slicing and jabbing, prolonging his pain, though he never makes a sound.

From time to time, Father pauses in his slaughter. He comes to stand over me, the blades he is using dripping granite blood on me. Deliberately. Knowing what it will do to me. Not caring. Each time, he tells me, “Surrender. And he dies now... quickly.”

And each time I refuse. I cannot, will not surrender. Caaroc would not want me to.

When at last he is done, and Caaroc’s remaining brilliantly red eye has dimmed to pale pink and then flickered out, Father is covered in bits and pieces of my warrior’s grey flesh. His whole body drips with grey blood and gore. He walks back to stand over me once more. This time with nowhere else to go. He doesn’t speak. Just spreads his legs for good balance, plants the sword point in the wooden floor. And then, grim-faced, he watches me die.

\*\*\*\*

*# Surrender to me, little Aerisan. I will give your monster the clean death it does not deserve. #*

I am whole. Back and tied yet again. Unreal. All of it is unreal... was unreal.

And yet... and yet...

I feel every wound from every fight. My body trembles from the fatigue of long battle. I recall every blow, every movement my body made. If I were not

tied so tightly to the X-frame that matches my Caaroc's sprawl on the ground, I would be down in the dust, sobbing.

My mouth is desert-dry, so my "no" is barely croaked.

*# Then once more, little Aerisan. You will not like what happens if you lose again. #*

\*\*\*\*

I do not know who spiked my Caaroc to the floor so thoroughly he cannot loose himself, though he is in True Form. Who silenced him since he does not speak, but his eyes tell me hears, understands, and is in the kind of pain I do not think he would let anyone see but me. I beg him to shift to his Lesser Form, stupidly thinking the spikes will not follow, since as a man he will not have those huge wings, those massive legs, thinking the spikes will only be in the floor, and not in him, through him.

He does not shift. And I cannot tell if it is because he cannot or will not. Goddess damn!

I do not know what to do for him, whether pulling the spikes out with my bare hands will hurt him or save him or kill him. Aerisan warriors do not cry, but fuck that rule. I let him see my tears, tell him my uncertainty, my fear. I lean forward, caress the massive muscles of his left shoulder, straining from being stretched so far, held in place with a spike in his palm, a spike in his shoulder. I stroke a finger along the stony flesh beneath his glowing red eye.

That is when Father roars at me.

I do not know how Father found me. Found us. Startled by the sound, I whirl around and it is only the distance from the door to where we are that saves my life. He is charging me, his sword out, and his expression is one I have seen before, in battle last year against a group of bandits that had plagued the trade caravans for some months. An expression that says death and only death will satisfy him.

My death.

He says only one thing as he nears me and lunges as if he truly expects me to stand here and be run through. "Abomination. My son is an abomination!"

I did not hear that much contempt and disgust when he named Tarik in front of all the Clan... before gelding him.

But my sword is out, though he is not paying attention to it. So easy. I can raise it, extend it, twist my body to avoid his blade, and run *him* through. I don't. He is my father; he is my Clan Chief. I am honor bound not to harm him by word or deed, not to shame him or the Clan.

Except that I clearly have.

I begin fighting for my life. I am younger, stronger than I look, than he really knows, faster. I am fighting a man still in his prime, though he is five fours of years my senior. Taller, heavier. A longer reach.

He glances only once at the floor behind me, seeing only a pinned Stone Beast and not my grey warrior. His face tells me what he will do to when he has finished with me. Father never lacks confidence in himself, in his abilities. It is always justified.

But not today.

His momentary inattention is enough for me to take the battle to him, to force him back and away from Caaroc, to the open space in the dim room where the noise we make echoes as though we were in... a cavern? No more talking. Nothing except the clashing of the blades, harsh breathing, the stomps and slams of booted feet on wood as we dance death.

Death is the reason we dance, death the only outcome but no solution at all, for the one left standing will be destroyed as well.

We dance to the music of the blades. We sing the song of steel. And when it is over... I am the one left standing. Chance? Skill? Terror-driven strength? A hesitation on his part? I do not know.

My father lies on the blood-spattered floor, dead. I stand weeping, panting, trying to pray for forgiveness for choosing Caaroc over my father.

"You killed Father!"

I raise my head and blink, and blink again, to get rid of the tears. I cannot use hands or sleeves to wipe my eyes, as both are bloody. Denin stands in the doorway. Sword drawn.

Dear Goddess, *no!*

What does he see, looking into this room? A vast Stone Beast on the floor, dead or dying? His father, dead? His older brother, the Clan Heir, standing over his father's blood covered body, holding an equally blood covered sword? All this he sees, but not the regret, not the despair of having had to make that choice.

Another mantle of abomination to drape about my shoulders. Father-killer.

"Denin. I had no choice. He..."

"You had a choice, you fucking bastard. You always have a choice!" His voice is shaking.

"Let him kill me?"

"Yes!" he shouts. "If you fucking deserve it, honor requires..."

"*Fuck honor!*" His mouth drops open at my shout. "I don't surrender."

"Then die."

Denin is eighteen now, not quite as tall as Father is... was... not as heavy. Nor as skilled with the sword as he thinks he is.

Once more I am desperately defending myself, once more trying to persuade an opponent intent on killing me to back off, trying to get myself the time and space to think of a way out of all this. And all the while my Caaroc lies helpless behind me. Denin is nearly all that Father was, all that mattered to Father that somehow skipped me and went to him. He will not give up.

I cannot give up.

And now my brother lies dead on the floor as well.

Dear Goddess, what in the Nine Hells possessed him to bring Denin with him on the hunt to find me?

The voices from the shadows beside the door shake me out of my stupor. I cannot help myself. The “no” that erupts from my mouth is a long wail of total dismay. My fucking Father brought all my brothers with him.

I send up a brief, panicked prayer to the Goddess not to allow this, to turn this aside somehow. I should not have to choose!

But life is choice. And if I must choose my life, Caaroc’s life, over the lives of my brothers—as I have already chosen him over Father and Denin—so be it.

They are as stubborn as Father, as stubborn as dead Denin. They will not listen to my pleas to stop. They attack me together, yet not in the coordinated way of warriors trained to battle in pairs or trios, their swords and war knives weaving an almost choreographed dance of death, knowing from experience, training, instinct how to move with your team, never interfering with each other. They are blind with rage and fear, but still they fight.

And lose, as it is inevitable they would.

My brothers, all my brothers, are dead.

A soft, stuttering breath intrudes on the silence broken only by my harsh breath and sobs.

Oh, Goddess.

Eron lives. Dear, sweet, fifteen-year-old Eron who never truly wanted to be a warrior. He will be dead soon. Bleeding out on this filthy floor. I pray yet again, knowing I will not be answered. Pray that he does not ask.

He does.

His voice is the thinnest of whispers as he says the one word every warrior has the right to speak, the one demand every warrior has the right to make, even of the most hated foe. “G... grace.”

And so, blinded myself with tears that nearly make my task impossible, I give my little brother the Goddess’ grace. I plunge my blade into his heart.

*# You slaughtered your family to save a monster. Are you not just a monster, yourself? #*

I ignore *its* voice, which is everywhere, nowhere, perhaps only in my head, where my mind is being fucked. I no longer have any certainty about what is real and what is not. My only certainty, above the vast chasm of regret and despair, is that I made the choices I had to make.

I stand in a room reeking of death, an abattoir I am unlikely to survive myself. Though I am exhausted, I will battle yet again, if only, if only I can find a foe on which to use my blades. But there is none visible.

And then the bodies of my family are gone.

I blink, and blink and blink, but my eyes are not cleared. I am still in the warehouse room. I still smell the stench of their deaths.

*# You are going to die. So is the monster on the floor. You have sacrificed your family for the Beast, are you not willing to sacrifice yourself? Let the shifter have the clean death it does not deserve, little Aerisan. Surrender. #*

I say nothing. Can *it* feel the terror inside me, the despair? There has to be a way, *some* way for us to survive this. Together.

*# Your choice. Your responsibility. #*

I am frozen once more. No X-frame. Just locked into place. Unable to move, unable to blink, only able to stare as *it* begins to kill my grey warrior. That invisible blade slices through a single feather. An invisible hand yanks it out. Blood oozes, only a drop or two, and then stops as if on command. Then another and another and on and on until his wings are bare, punctured flesh. An invisible blow crushes a wing joint, the blade slices through it. Again and again until nothing is left of his wings but ragged bits of flesh and bone.

*# His voice is his own again. He could howl his pain, but your monster is stubborn. #*

The blade starts in on his left foot, cutting the claws off one by one. Slicing the foot until the wounds gape, the invisible hammer or boot or whatever it is, smashing his ankle joint. Then the other foot. Upward along each leg, slicing,



gouging, pounding, destroying the backward-seeming joint; upward still until his knees are tiny chips of bones and the muscles are loose strands of flesh. Then up his thighs, blood spurting with every cut only to turn into a slow ooze.

Caaroc lives through all this. I see the pain in his eyes but still he will not give voice to it. If only we could link like the Imperials. I could at least share what I cannot prevent, cannot heal.

Caaroc's legs are no longer truly legs, just the ugly remainder of the power they once had. *Its* hand lifts Caaroc's balls, rotating them, almost caressing them.

*# A clean death for your surrender. Say the word. #*

My mouth is set free but the only word that comes out is another "no."

His balls are excised from the sack, held bloody and dripping on two invisible palms, which slowly crush them. His cock is next and then slowly, so very, very slowly, up to his belly where his entrails are bared and pulled out, this time with gushing fountains of grey blood. And again the blood dries up to just a slow, steady flow while Caaroc impossibly continues to live.

*# Your choice. Your responsibility. #*

His hands are next, fingers severed, joint by joint, and then the bloody stump at his wrist crushed. Upwards to his elbows, and when the destruction there is done, slicing and crushing to his shoulders. Then back down to the spike at the tip of his immobile tail and upwards destruction again to where it disappears under the hips he no longer truly has. Ears and horns are hacked away.

It is only when I realize that that invisible blade is hovering over his eyes, ready to pop the red orbs out and forever blind the love I see somehow still blazing in them as Caaroc looks at me, as he struggles to send me a message I cannot read, that I give in.

I drop to my knees... *it* allows me to drop?... head bowed as if praying. I do not want Caaroc to see my face as I do what I must.

“I surrender. Kill me as you wish, but... but just give him the clean death you promised. End his suffering now.”

*# Look at your monster. #*

I don't want to, but I realize I must. I raise my head and look directly into my grey warrior's eyes. If eyes could burn with despair, what I see in him would be a forest fire engulfing an entire continent with no mage to quench it.

*# Say it again. So your monster can hear what you do. #*

I shout it now, an agonized scream. “I surrender.”

Tendrils of blackness pierce my ears and begin burrowing inside. More up my nose, even more forcing my mouth open and sliding down my throat. My hole. My piss slit. Foul, slimy vines of darkness that slither and crawl into my core, take root, grow, fill my body, until only blackness pulses inside my skin. *It opens my eyes.*

The warehouse or wherever we were is gone. The cavern is gone. We are... we are...

*# Right where you have always been. Right where two abominations despoiled the God-Emperor's shrine. #*

I am naked, on the floor, Caaroc's come leaking out of my well-pounded hole. He is beside me, in his Third Form. For a precious moment I forget where we are, forget all that has happened... or *appeared* to happen. Instead I remember thinking in that instant before everything ended, that I liked his Third Form. Though I would have to remind him to be very careful of the size of his shifted cock. The actual size would probably destroy me. And Goddess knows I could never spread wide enough, mouth or ass, to take his cock when he is in his True Form. But it might be fun to try, just a lit...

*# Those thoughts were disgusting when they first occurred. They are no less so now. I will wipe those memories from you, my little Aerisan warrior—one painful slice of recollection at a time. Perhaps I will store them, then restore them so you will understand all you gave up when you took a coward's*

*way out and surrendered. And then I will take them all away again. But for now, I want you to remember it all. You have a task. #*

“It was unreal? All of that? You fucking *mind-fucked* me? Us?”

*Its voice is vile inside my head. # Pain is only inside your mind. So is pleasure. #*

My cock is suddenly hard though there is nothing erotic about what has happened, what is happening to me, to us. I cannot move except to look down my body to see my prick standing upright, flushed red, straining, precome pouring out in a steady flow I have never before experienced. The waves of pleasure coursing through me are also beyond my experience, making my entire body flush. I can hear myself gasping and begging as if I am being ruthlessly fucked from the inside out, and then I am spewing a lava-flow of come that spurts out and away, spattering on the blanket and... dear Goddess... on Caaroc's leg.

I have never been ashamed of anything I have done, more than I am by the white globs that glisten against the grey in the bright morning sun.

I try to speak, to tell Caaroc something, anything, to explain what just happened. *It* does not allow me.

My body rises. Not by my choice! I walk over to where we dropped our clothes, our weapons, in our urgency to fuck. My body bends, squats, my hands rummage through the piles, find the knives, his and mine. My body rises and walks over to the fireplace, I don't ask why wood is available, and kindling, I simply start a blazing fire. And when it is burning well, I slide Caaroc's knife into a metal holder, and then swivel the holder on the long metal rod so that the blade is well inside the flames. A convenient design.

I rise again and go back to where Caaroc is still sprawled.

I stand looking down on him, knife clenched in my hand. I drop to my knees, use my left hand to grasp the large, clawed toe on his motionless left foot.

*# Cut it off. #*

“No!” My voice is shaking with new-found fear. “We had a bargain. If I... if I... surrendered, you would give him a clean death. You are honor-bound...”

*# Fuck honor! # He throws my phantom-spoken words back at me. And from his expression I can see Caaroc is hearing all this as well. # I lied. There is no honor lost in lying to a monster, or in lying to a human whose blood is shifter-corrupted. But then I have no need of honor. All I needed was one of you... willing.*

*# Weakling. If you had only held fast I could not have... acquired... you, could never make you do what you will now do. Could never do all the things I will do to you when the monster is rotting. Cut it off! #*

It lets me have my voice. “N... no.” I have the urge to voice a child’s defiant “you can’t make me,” but I know *it* can. Know *it* will.

*# And as you cut, as you will do with every thing I demand of you, you will say, “As I am commanded, so will I do.” #*

I clamp my lips tight, strain against the muscles that want to move my arm and hand, to move the knife and slice as I have been told.

That white fire surges through me again. Every nerve is ablaze with flame. The fire stops and my hand does what my mind does not order. I cut off his great toe and my mouth says, “As I am commanded, so will I do.”

And then I repeat all that the invisible knife did to my grey warrior in his True Form. All that was not real before is real now. I know. Slightly different, of course, since what I am destroying is his Third Form. And there is no magic, or control of my mind, to stop the bleeding, reduce the flow. Just the heat of Caaroc’s blade to burn and cauterize. With every cut, or gouge or blow I repeat the words I am required to say. And with each repetition, a part of my soul dies. As I reach his groin I am covered in his slippery blood.

Tears, if I had any left to give, would not wash me clean. All the water of the Inland Sea could not wash my hands clean. I would be more likely to turn the seas red.

I no longer know if it is *its* compulsion or my choice, which lets the words, “As I am commanded, so will I do,” be said.

Over and over, endlessly over.

I want Caaroc to shout at me, to swear at me, to curse my body and soul, what little there is, if he has any mage Gifts at all. But he is silent.

Hours pass, how many I have no idea, as I continue with my careful carving and cauterizing. And through it all, Caaroc is silent. Initially because he would not, then because he can not. Blinded, without tongue or ears, with horns only a stump, charred flesh the only thing holding the remains of his Third Form together, he yet lives.

*# Kill him. #*

I am already on my knees, beside his destroyed body.

“As I am commanded, so will I do.”

As I never did with Eron, or perhaps I did and the lie was that it was only inside my head, I give my Caaroc what little remains of a warrior’s grace. I cut out his heart.

I weep inside, in the vast emptiness where my soul had once been.

*# Karel, my love. #*

*# No. Don’t do this to me. Don’t mock me like this. #* I try to shout that tiny defiance, but my mouth no longer answers my commands.

*# It is me, my love. #* There is an almost amused chuckle. He is laughing? No, impossible. This is just another of *its* mind-fucks.

*# It appears I must believe in your Goddess... our... Goddess after all. My people can only speak mind-to-mind with each other. We have no “Gift,” I think you call it, for “linking” with others. Or hearing them back if we could. #*

*# But you’re dead! #*

*# Nearly. I have never prayed before, especially not to a non-existent deity, but She has apparently decided that a monstrous Stone Beast is worthy of a*

*chance to say farewell. So She has given me... us... this moment. This is a death-link.*

*# And it cannot hear us. Does not know this is happening. But our time is brief. # Another small laugh. # Living without a beating heart is not exactly easy, you know. #*

I somehow summon a smile inside my head and hope that he can see it. My body is frozen in place. I can feel *it* savoring its victory, but only as something far away that can not possibly hurt me. I know that feeling is only temporary.

*# The rest of the Gaarch are gone. #*

*# Through the Gates? # No. Not just that. There is something in his tone. # You found a... better refuge? #*

*# Do you remember the World Beside? #*

I am not sure how he “hears” a nod.

*# Well, your Goddess... # and I can hear a wince as if he is being reprimanded, # our Goddess does not always pay attention to every spaarit fall. There are far too many who do. But eventually She did, no matter how little a Stone Beast looks like a tiny spaarit, and She found us another World Beside, with Gaarchans ready to welcome us. The dragon-shifters in the core of the Heart would have taken us in, but this is better. #*

*# Dragons? There are fucking dragon shifters in the Heart? #*

*# Focus, my love, focus. My people are actually gone. There was no other journey. I stayed behind for you. #*

*# All so that I could kill you. # I know he hears the pain.*

I can almost feel his hand, in each of his three Forms simultaneously, gently caressing my face.

*# I will come for you. #*

*# How? You're dead... dying... and it fucking owns me, body and soul. #*

*# Never your soul, my love, never your soul. No matter what it steals, hold fast to this memory. It will always be with you, even if... even if there are times*

*when you do not know it. I am bound to you and you to me. I will find a way. #*  
*There is a near smile in his silent voice. # Perhaps I will even pray to Her to*  
*be the first Gaarchan ever reborn. #*

I hear but I cannot believe. I was too weak. I fucked up. *# I fucking*  
*surrendered. #*

*# A wrong choice? Yes. Weak? Never. Now, ask me for my Oath. #*

I hear the capital letter. No. Surely not. *# Why? #*

*# Ask the question. #*

I can't. I can't let him do this. *# No. That would bind you to me, forever. #*

*# Oh, my love, I am already bound. But you need this, and our time is*  
*running out. Ask. #*

I surrender... yet again. But somehow it is not as if I am giving in, but  
rising up and joining.

*# S... swear you so by the Goddess? #*

*# I love you. I will come for you. It is by the Goddess sworn. #*

And then he is gone. Caaroc is dead.

I hide the memory and pray that the Goddess grant me this small mercy,  
since She will not send me grace: that *it* never notices, never finds this  
memory.

\*\*\*\*\*

## 2 Summer 32, 19103 After Seren

### 9676 House Andrae

#### The Wall

#### tir-Lothian, Kilthar

It is done. I have remembered it all. Every instant of every thing I have done, whether I willed it or because I was commanded. Compelled.

I can feel *it* watching us.

Or... have I? I feel as if something is missing. A memory? But that cannot be. I had no choice but to remember it all. As I am commanded, so will I do.

Caaroc, *my* Stone Beast, my love, is dead. And I killed him long before my body took my knife and his and carved him to his death. I killed him the instant I manipulated him into crossing the ward. And for what? So I could be fucked. That one choice changed all. A different choice and we would be... would be at least alive.

Daily *it* ensures he is the only love I will ever have, ever remember, but only when *it* allows me the memories, so that it can painfully rip them away time after time. As *it* will when this day is done. If this day is not the day I actually die.

I pray for the Goddess' grace. It never arrives.

I look at my fellow travelers.

Did they watch Caaroc die by my hand, there on the painting that does not exist except when a mind is near to be manipulated by *it*? Do they understand it was my hand, but never my heart, my mind, my soul, my will?

Do they revile me, us, for what they saw? For what I have done since I killed Caaroc? For what I am? Do they *care*? Or is *it* just mind-fucking them, as well?



They surround me now, close enough to touch if they or I reached out, close enough to make me feel as though they are cutting off all my air, making me gasp, become frantic to get away. But I have nowhere to go.

No choices to make.

No freedom to choose.

*# Hands and knees. #*

*# No. Please. #*

I look in the faces of these men, one by one, turning myself in a complete circle as they now encircle me. Each face is the same as they stare back. Eyes overflowing with fear, disgust, hatred, shame.

Dear Goddess, no.

Lust.

*# Please don't do this. I will, I will... #*

An Aerisan warrior never surrenders. But I did. An Aerisan warrior never begs, but I do. I am so very tired of the pain.

And so I grovel, knowing it is futile. I have nothing to offer, nothing to bargain with, to say if only you will not, I will...

*It knows that truth.*

*It squeezes my skull inside my skull, the pressure increasing until I feel the bones begin to crack. I tell myself this is not real, this is imaginary... nothing more than its depraved imagination. But my body shouts "Liar!" as my ears are crushed, pushed inside my head along with fours and fours and fours of four-hundreds of knife-sharp bone fragments.*

I drop to all fours. My skull is not cracked, my ears are not crushed. The pain remains.

*It makes my cock hard.*

*# They will geld you first. #*

I scream. The men around me hear, but do not know why. They do not care, and if they tried, *it* would not let them. My voice is raw and ragged from all the screaming that has gone before. This time, unlike some of the times before, they can hear my voice, hear my terror. And still they do not care.

There is... something... something in each of them even without *its* control, something that responds to a serpent whisper that tells of the pleasures of pain and wickedness and evil. The whisper coils and coils and coils around their souls, slowly sinks fangs from which poison oozes, to slither through veins and arteries, burning, burning bright, destroying the light.

*It* lets them loose, just enough that they can move, but not run. Do they hear *its* voice inside their heads, telling them they must be naked for what is to come? They must, because when they begin to disrobe, they are slow, clumsy, reluctant to expose themselves to the other men, a last moment of humanity before they succumb to the kind of invisible *kitlit* that glides inside along muscles and sinews, veins and arteries and will finally destroy them.

If not today, eventually. Trapped inside the remains of tir-Lothian, *it* has all the time in the world.

Does *it* flick a whip of silent pain across them? They jerk and twitch as if they have been lightly lashed. *It* must have done, because they move more rapidly, discarding clothes in tangled heaps.

They are naked now, closing in. Too many to stand side by side in that circle without touching each other. Some... most, all?... would never voluntarily touch a man the way they are touching each other now. Especially the off-worlders. But to do what they are going to do to me, they must be close. Close enough to hear me no matter how small and raw my voice may be. Close enough to see the muscled body of the former Aerisan warrior. Close enough to smell the fear rising off of him. Close enough, ultimately, to touch.

A man cannot rape without touching.

They move in slowly, coming closer and closer to me, closer and closer to each other, a smooth noble shoulder rubbing against a hairy smuggler's arm, a fat Baliran belly pushing against the ass of the Imperial toady. They angle

themselves to get close to the naked, crying man on all fours in the dirt. Sides are pressed against sides, hips and thighs against hips and thighs. Cocks begin to rise; hard cocks graze the skin of other men, for the first time, for yet another time, some leaving an oozing trail of precome. They stroke themselves, and after a hesitation begin to stroke each other. All the sizes and shapes of my rapists' cocks are hard now.

The Aerisan who licked his lips, and flaunted himself at me is the largest. Larger than me, certainly, but not larger than my Caaroc. Not in any Form. I am no longer used to being fucked by a Stone Beast cock in his Lesser Form. By a Stone Beast cock in his Third Form. My ass is tight. The *it*-forced Shift has ensured that. His cock will be the most painful to take, unless my hole has been opened up by one of the others, more of the others, first.

But that will not happen. He will be first.

*Its voice inside my head is smug. # He will. #*

I have no choice. No matter what I do, I have no choice.

Except to do what I did when I *had* a choice.

I surrender.

As I have before, I will again.

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

They kick me, and punch me, do all that they can to hurt. And when I am curled in on myself, they turn me on my back, spread my legs to the point of agony. Numerous hands and knees press down on me.

I scream, over and over and over again, as my balls are hacked off with a filthy Baliran knife.

I howl in agony as the fucking off-worlder lord applies a white-hot sword tip to where my balls used to be, never questioning how he acquired a Kilthari sword, how it came to be white hot in the time it took him to lose control, get naked, get hard.

The blood is not stopped by the unreal sword *it* makes them see and believe, but by *its* control of my body.

*It* lets the pain continue.

Will *it* use my scant shifting ability to heal my body as *it* has before when the pain was real and not just inside my mind, when the wounds were actual? Or will *it* leave me maimed this time?

They force me to all fours again.

They laugh at the ball-less man they are going to use, every one of them. They spew obscenities at me, describing how I will be used, how I will be hurt, each word an acid drop on my skin, eating it away. The acid cannot touch my soul for there is nothing left to dissolve.

Tears drop from my bent-down face to briefly moisten the dust. Will my tears turn into a river's torrent to wash away the dirt below, or will the soil just suck each drop up and make it disappear? My body could dry as all the moisture departs; I could shrivel into dust and drift away to rejoin my grey warrior, if the Goddess will only allow.

She does not.

The Aerisan, the first of the fifteen who will rape me, as many times as their cocks can rise and spew seed, mounts me and enjoys my howl as he thrusts full-length into my bowels. I scream aloud though my voice is nearly gone and it can be barely heard, ripping my throat apart until I doubt I will ever be able to speak again.

Inside, inside, I scream louder and longer, where I have the voice *it* allows me to have, where *it* can devour my screams and gorge *itself* on my pain. And then *it* begins *its* own rape of my mind.

And then I remember. The memory *it* does not know about, the one *it* has not stolen.

The memory that is a single mote of light deep within the infinity of the Goddess' Long Dark between the stars. *It* does not, can not, *must never*, hear my Caaroc's voice, soft as the sound of a feather landing on a sky-piercing

mountain of feathers on a world at the farthest edge of Her universe. # *I love you. I will come for you. It is by the Goddess sworn.* #

And so, I rejoice in a place *it* cannot see, the only place in which *I* still exist, and then I hide that light again, terrified that *it* will find that single bright spot and stamp it out, silence Caaroc's voice and leave me utterly alone.

And so...

I enter into hell.

Once more.

And ever more.

But perhaps, just perhaps... some day... never more.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*In the “real world” I write for a living, in a non-fiction “genre,” in which what we write is all too often considered fiction. That same profession would not appreciate this story, thus a pen name that has a meaning for me. I have, by what miracle I am not sure, now completed two stories that in the aggregate are around 93,000 words. A whole novel! Plus the 8,600 words of Unbirthday Present—a shifter love story with not a beast among ’em. Then there’s the nearly-done The Meeting, (“The Warlord. The bard. The Kingdom and Empire will never be the same.”) Plus a good start on bloodLight. (A serial killer stalks the criminals of Dialhon; a chief of detectives tries to hunt him down before his own death from a mysterious disease, while the City’s Senior Healer desperately tries to find or create the spell to cure his husband’s illness.) You know, there may be something to this writing stuff after all.*

*As I am not a social media person, you can reach me by email, if you have the good kind of “wow!” to share... or even other words.*

## Contact Info

[Email](#)