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The Path of Iro
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The Path of Iro

By Mike Shade

Chulu's Path

Chulu walked along the path he had been following for days. He was tired -- his feet were sore from walking and walking and he'd abandoned his shoes a few days ago, the forest floor cool and right beneath his soles.

It wasn't so much a path as a feeling that he was traveling the right way, and though the trees and bushes closed in around him from all directions, as long as he followed the path that felt right, they seemed to part in front of him, to let him through.

He was on his way to the temple of the followers of the Path of Iro.

He didn't have a map or directions to follow, he just... he just knew. His feet found their own way. Each step had been more sure since he'd taken off his shoes, too.

The sun shone through the leaves, dappling the ground, casting living shadows on the simple white tunic he wore. He carried nothing with him, feeling in his heart that he was expected to arrive at the temple with all his baggage left behind. And surely enough, when he grew hungry he found berries and tubers. When he was thirsty, it did not take long before a stream or pond crossed his path.

Chulu continued on for several more days, his tiredness leaving him as each evening found him curled upon a moss-covered rock or in the lee of a low-branched tree, sleeping soundly.

A part of him wondered if he would walk forever, following the path in his heart until his days were over. He was less distressed by the thought than he had imagined he would be.

When he arrived at the temple, it was without warning, so sudden it was most startling.

The temple sprawled in a clearing at the base of a mountain, the buildings low and simply decorated in nine different colors. A large field bordered it on the right, several men working in it, tilling and picking, filling large woven baskets.

Chulu continued on, going straight to the clean, simple ivory building. This was the right one. He was sure. How he was sure, he did not know, but his instincts had been correct as to which path to travel to find the temple, so he continued to trust them.

There was a small gong on the door and Chulu picked up the clangor that hung from it, hitting the gong timidly. It made a soft noise that seemed to expand in the air, growing slowly louder.

The slender round in the door slowly opened, a young, pale man in a homespun tunic standing in it smiling, nodding. "Welcome to the Ivory Shard, traveler."

"Thank you. I've come to follow the Path of Iro." Again, he knew not the right words and only had his instinct to follow.

The door opened, the young man bowed. "Enter then, and leave your material self."

"Oh. All right." He wasn't sure how he could leave his material self, except maybe to leave behind his things. Which he had except for the tunic he wore.

Stepping over the threshold, Chulu worked loose the belt of his robe. He removed it and the robe itself, handing both over to the young man, trying not to feel self-conscious; he was not accustomed to being nude.

The young man offered him a warm smile, then led him into a bright, sun-filled room with a large tub of water situated in the center. The water steamed, pouring into the room from a copper tube. A series of trays were arranged -- fruit and drink, simple homespun cloth, bars of pale soap. "Cleanse yourself and I will fetch our curate."

Chulu bent in a simple bow. "Thank you."

He stepped into the large, low bath, moaning softly at the way the water caressed and eased his feet, his tiredness returning for just a moment before the water stole it away. He took one of the cloths and dipped it into the water before rubbing the soap over it and then rubbing his own skin with it.

It was a luxury and he cleaned himself slowly, enjoying each moment.

Slowly Chulu became aware of a thin, tall man sitting in a chair. The man's stark white hair was long and loose, the robes that covered him blinding as the sun upon the snow. Most shocking, the eyes themselves were white and blank, looking toward him.

He carefully put down the cloth and the soap, and bowed before the man. "Master," he said softly.

The man tilted his head, seeming to listen to something. "Yes, perhaps I am. Bright finds your day, little one. I am Pandreas, curate of the Ivory Shard."

Chulu had no idea what an Ivory Shard was, but he bent again. "Thank you, Master."

"What brings you here?" The man's voice was low, kind.

He wished he had some glorious reason, but he did not, so he told the truth. "I'm not sure, only that my heart insisted."

"That is the best reason, you know."

"It is? Oh, good." He smiled, this man making him feel comfortable.

"There is food, drink. Please, help yourself."

"Can I get you something, Master?" he asked, the question coming naturally.

"I would like a goblet of juice, thank you... What is your name, then?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Master. It is Chulu. At your service, Master." He bowed again and then quickly poured out a goblet of juice and brought it to the man. He was unsure if Pandreas saw him or not, so he held the earthen goblet out. "Here you go, Master."

Long fingers reached out, stroked his own for a heartbeat, an electric shock moving through him. Then the goblet was taken, lifted to thin lips. "Thank you, Chulu."

"Y...you're welcome, Master." He took a step back, shaken.

"Be at ease." One hand was offered to him, steady and sure.

He reached for it, wary of another shock, but following again the instincts that had brought him here. The long fingers folded over his, the sensation less shocking, but still there, still present.

"Amazing," he murmured, his own fingers curling into Pandreas' hand.

"The Bashin prophecy says, 'When the master finds the one that completes him, a star is born from the light they create together.'"

"I do not understand, Master." They had only just met, he was a pilgrim in a strange land and only just arrived; Pandreas could not mean what Chulu thought he meant.

"It matters not. You will." Pandreas smiled. "All initiates remain here to learn our ways, our history, to be matched with the teacher he needs. Please, eat."

"Thank you." He didn't want to let go of Pandreas' hand though and he let his fingers slide away reluctantly -- he also had no desire to disobey!

Pandreas sat, quiet and still, seeming to listen to him, eyes closed.

Chulu took some fruit, finding himself to be quite hungry once he began to eat. He tried one of everything, some of the fruits familiar to him, others entirely new. Each one was tastier than the last and he washed them down with water that was cool and sweet.

The room wasn't silent, music and bells, birds and song sweet on the air. It soothed him, eased him, fed him.

When he was full, Chulu stopped eating and wiped his mouth.

Body dried by the air, he moved to sit at Pandreas' feet. "I have eaten, Master, thank you."

Pandreas' hands stroked through his hair, gentle and steady. "Tell me about yourself, about your heart."

His eyes closed as he enjoyed the soft touches.

"I am not sure about this Path of Iro, Master. But I have dreamed that this is where I belong and my heart has led me here. And now that I am here, I feel... settled."

"And your family? Do they support your quest?"

He nodded. "My father has always told us we must follow our own path. My sister is a healer and my older brother tends a pig farm. He was disappointed that my path took me so far away from the family. I. I miss them."

"It is the hardest challenge we face -- to turn away from our lives, our families, and devote ourselves to the will of the gods."

"Yes, Master. I am ready to devote myself to the will of the gods."

"Do you understand what that might entail?" The hands continued stroking, petting him.

He shook his head. "Only that it will take all of me."

He got a quiet smile. "There are many paths to opening yourself to the gods' will. Each way defines itself by a different stone -- amethyst, emerald, sapphire, amber, ruby. Each shard, each stone has a curate, priests, initiates, novitiates."

"How do I know which way I should choose?"

"Your heart will tell you and I will assist you. It is my gift, to help initiates find their place."

"Thank you, Master." He wondered if every initiate felt such a pull to Pandreas.

"You are welcome. Find a tunic, Chulu, and let us walk. I will show you the grounds."

"Yes, Master." He nodded and went to the row of tunics, all simple, all ivory in color, and found one that fit him. The material was soft, comfortable without being sensuous.

Pandreas stood, so lean, so tall. "Come now, we shall walk and talk."

"Yes, Master."

He walked next to Pandreas, feeling that that was where he was supposed to be, not behind as he would have thought before coming here. Despite his long legs, Pandreas seemed to find a stride that matched his perfectly.

The halls were bright, filled with sunlight, a very few people passing them with pale tunics trimmed in different tones.

"It's beautiful, Master." He looked at everything, enjoying the light on his skin, the brightness.

"The people in the tunics are initiates of varied levels. The ones with trimmed tunics have been apprenticed to a shard and are awaiting the beginning of their training."

"And you will help me to know what shard I belong in?" That thought was comforting; he liked Pandreas very much.

"I will. We only accept a very few into our doors, so that each may know that he is known and cared for, that his path is true."

That thought made him stop. "You mean I might have been turned away?"

"No. The gods led you here. Another would have lost his way in the forest, been led back to the village again and again."

"Oh. I see." He smiled and continued on with Pandreas. "I'm glad I made it."

"I am pleased as well." Pandreas' hair tickled his hand, brushing against it lightly. They came to a courtyard, each path leading to a different large shelter, each path a different color. In the center, there was a circular garden with benches and fountains, many people walking together.

Some wore tunics, much the same as his. Others had bright jewel tones, head to foot, black cords around their waists. There were others in lighter shades, white collars about their throats, some with a single gem worked into them, some with many. Most shocking were the few that had no clothing at all, led about by long pieces of leather bound about their most private parts.

He stepped a little closer to Pandreas, the man's warmth and quiet strength soothing, reassuring.

There was a beauty to the people that matched the garden with its greenery and flowers, as if they were a part of the garden, too. He was more confused than ever, but his heart insisted he was where he belonged.

"Shall we sit, sweet one? You may ask your questions and I shall answer all."

"Oh, yes, thank you, Master." Chulu took Pandreas' hand and led him to one of the benches. "I have so many questions I don't even know where to begin."

Pandreas' chuckle seemed to fill him, warm and fond. "Just ask about the first thing..."

The gentle words were broken by the sharp bark of a small, sharp-featured man dressed in dark violet. "Pandreas! Have you heard from Brash this day? Roko has been threatening to mar my boys with his ink again."

Chulu made himself as small as possible, peaking out from behind Pandreas' arm. The man reminded him of Butcher Vandi; the only thing missing was the large carving knife that the Butcher never was without.

Then he noticed the person who trailed the angry man. He was tall and pale and looked very strong, and was absolutely naked but for the dark purple collar around his neck and the one around his very full, very large cock.

For such a big man, he walked quietly, almost like a shadow.

Pandreas petted Chulu, soothing. "Ah, Lux. Roko is harmless, mostly. Lux, this is Chulu. He is new to our order. Chulu, Curate of the Amethyst Shard, Lux, and his novitiate, Cord. How does the day find you, Cord?"

Cord bowed his head, but remained silent.

Chulu hoped that being silent wasn't something they all had to do, he was fairly certain he wouldn't be very good at it at all.

Pandreas nodded as if the man had spoken. "Ease yourself, dear man. Your master will allow no one to mark you. Lux, I believe Brash should be ending a training session soon. Perhaps you will find him in the onyx salle?"

Cord did ease at Pandreas' words and even the sharp-tongued Lux seemed to relax. So he wasn't the only one who felt that from Pandreas.

Lux actually smiled, leaned down and kissed Pandreas' cheek. "Thank you, Pan. Will you be at Brash's for latemeal?"

Pandreas nodded. "Yes, I will attend. Chulu should meet the others."

The dark eyed man's eyes went wide. "Indeed?"

"Yes. At dusk."

Cord looked at him, dark eyes solemn, but not unfriendly and he was given a small, warm smile. He found himself smiling back.

"Come, beauty. We'll find Brash." The purple robes flared and the man hurried across the yard again.

Pandreas chuckled. "Lux is a man of amazing energy. He and Curate Roko tend to clash."

"Is that allowed?" he asked, somewhat shocked by the idea that masters could... clash.

"We are men even as we are priests. They love one another, would die for each other, but they are not friends. More... family."

"What is latemeal like if they clash so?"

"There are nine Curates and their novitiates, their personal gifts from the gods. That would be chaos itself. Latemeals are usually held in two or three separate shards, with the attendees rotating. Lux and Brash and I are close friends and often dine together."

"And will you bring your novitiate to latemeal?" He didn't understand why the thought disappointed him so.

"I do not have one who has consented to be my own. It was my hope that you accompany me."

"It would be my pleasure, Pandr- Master." He was happy to be asked, but even more thrilled to know that Pandreas had no novitiate. He bit his lip suddenly, somewhat ashamed. "I am sorry, Master."

The long hand cupped his face. "Ease yourself. The initiates call me Curate. I believe though, you are meant to continue as you began, yes?"

"I don't know. But it is wrong to be happy you have no one special? You should have the very best novitiate in the world, I am sure." Pandreas' touch did ease him, made even his shame at his thoughts seem simpler, easier to talk about.

"I should have the one the gods have sent for me. This man is the one that eases my soul."

He nodded and bent his head. "Of course, Master. No other would do. I hope the gods see fit to send him soon."

"Do you not believe that perhaps they have sent him today?" People passed by dressed in gold and sapphire, deep amber and bright green.

Chulu looked up into those strange eyes, convinced that Pandreas could see him. "You mean me. I am not sure that I am worthy of you, but I would like very much to try to be."

"You do not have to be sure, sweet one. You simply have to believe in me." Pandreas' smile was beautiful, stunning in his peace. "What questions do you have?"

"Are you blind?" He blurted it out and Chulu found himself blushing.

Pandreas blinked and then laughed, the sound ringing through the courtyard with its beauty. "Yes and no. I cannot see with my eyes, but my sight is nearly as accurate as your own and in some ways even sharper."

He thought he would like to hear that laughter again, the sound fluttering inside him still. "How is it sharper, Master?"

"I can see your heart, your needs. It is my gift, to help people find their own gifts, their place."

"So no one can hide anything from you." It was a little scary, the concept of never being able to hide, but he knew it was important to give himself over to the gods completely.

"Oh, you can hide your thoughts, your words, your expression. I see... the larger picture, perhaps? For example, a person might be angry now, but his soul is basically at peace. His current anger might escape me, but his inner peace I see."

"Doesn't that get confusing?"

"If there are too many people, too many demands? Yes. I cannot leave this place and mingle in the world as many of the others can."

"What does it mean, if I am to be your novitiate? What must I do?"

Pandreas smiled. "Well, I sense two questions here. I am unique among the Curates. I do not proscribe to a particular path to enlightenment -- pain or service, art or bonds. Most novitiates are the ones the curates practice the highest form of their art upon, the pairing is one of complete trust. My demands are more esoteric. I will wish to learn you completely, to join our energies so they might work together."

He shivered, just the words awakening his nerves. "That sounds incredible."

Pandreas nodded. "I have waited many years for you to find your way, Chulu."

"Are you very old?" Chulu asked, surprised at Pandreas' words, for the man did not seem that old.

"Old enough to be pleased my wait is over."

"I'm sorry I made you wait, Pandreas." He reached out, touched Pandreas' cheek. "Please teach me how to be what you need."

Pandreas nodded, drew him close for a soft, sweet kiss. It was not until the touch ended that Chulu realized the courtyard had gone still and silent, all eyes upon them.

A deep, melodic voice chimed out, breaking the silence. "Pan! You have chosen a novitiate! It is a day to celebrate!"

Chulu peeked up from beneath his lashes, seeing a large dark man wearing a simple loincloth the color of sapphires. His eyes were dark and friendly, a wide smile on his face. Chulu blushed dark, but sat straight, proud to have been chosen by Pandreas.

"Bron." Pandreas smiled up, received the gentle kiss that all the Curates seemed to bestow on his master's face. "It is indeed a special day. This is Chulu."

Chulu bent his head in greeting. "Master Bron."

Bron laughed wholeheartedly, but without malice. "You are a sweet one. Come and see me if you wish to practice my arts upon your boy, Pan -- he would be beautiful wrapped for you."

"Your arts are always breathtaking, brother, as is your smile. Do you dine with us this night or did Dinae and Nidan tempt you and your Turik into their chambers?"

"Well they had, but I must admit that now that I see you have a shadow of your own, I would like to join your table."

"I will speak to Brash, make sure a place is set for you. Will Turik be eating with us or will he be bound?"

"He will be bound, but I will bring him, feed him myself." Bron looked most pleased at the idea. "Let your sweet boy begin to learn the pleasures to be had at our temple."

Bound? Fed? Chulu's heart began to pound and Pandreas stroked his spine easing him. "That sounds most perfect, brother. I will arrange a meal with Dinae and Nidan when the moons are waning. They are less busy then."

"Wonderful! I cannot wait to tell Turik about this encounter."

Chulu watched the big man go and took a breath. "Master... I think I have much to learn."

His face was lifted, Pandreas' fingers sliding over it. "Yes. Would you like to see your rooms, sweet one?"

"Yes, Master, I would." The touches left him gasping and searching for his breath, no one had ever touched him as Pandreas did.

"Your rooms are attached to my own. You have a private chamber where you may entertain, relax, and a meditation room."

Pandreas stood, leading him back toward the shining white building.

"What if I were not meant for you?" he asked, walking next to Pandreas, marveling at the way the man walked as if he could see as well as anyone. "Where would I be going?"

"There are dormers -- four of them, Niko and Gerani are in two now -- and you would remain there until your path is shown." Pandreas opened the door for him. "The amber shard calls for Niko, so he will leave us shortly and begin his training."

"It all seems very complicated, I'm glad you are here to explain things to me."

"It is my calling in life. Soon, you will welcome new people in, draw them into our world."

"I will do my best to make you proud, Master."

He stepped into Pandreas' rooms and it was like stepping into a cloud, peaceful and bright.

The rooms were simple and beautiful, soft padded furniture carefully placed about. There were two doors and one was opened to show a bed, soft and square. The next door led to a pair of smaller rooms, the furniture white and bright. "These are yours."

"They are beautiful." Chulu took a deep breath and stepped in, looking more closely. He was more nervous away from Pandreas, aware again that he was here by himself, away from his family in this strange place. For some reason it had been easier on his journey, sleeping in the forest.

"This is your sitting area and your meditation room is beyond. You will spend much time there. You will sleep in my chambers."

"Oh, good." He nodded happily, feeling more at ease. "I have never had a special room just to meditate before."

"You will spend one hour at dawn, one at dusk and one hour when your heart brings you here, everyday." The sitting room had a small wardrobe, a divan and a chair, a huge

window to let in the sunshine. In contrast, the mediation room was covered in thin pillows, the windows high and covered with pale sheers, giving the air an otherworldly glow. Censors for incense stood in every corner.

"What if my heart does not bring me here?" He did not want to disappoint Pandreas.

Pandreas tilted his head, and then smiled. "Then I will until your heart finds its way."

He giggled and pushed against Pandreas, wrapping his arms around Pandreas' middle and burying his face against the thin chest. "Thank you, Master."

Pandreas lifted his face, kissed him gently. "Come, we will meditate together, ready ourselves for our new lives."

He licked his lips, tasting Pandreas on them. He hoped there would be more of that soon.

"Yes, Master."

"Light the incense, I must send a message to Brash telling him Bron will be attending latemeal."

"Yes, Master. After we have meditated, will you tell me about Master Brash?"

"Of course I will. Brash is my best friend and the brother of my heart."

"The brother of your heart?"

Pandreas nodded. "One that I trust, that is my family even though we do not share the same mother."

"Have you known him a long time?" Chulu asked, belatedly remembering he'd been asked to light the censors.

"Many years, yes. I was here when he arrived."

He quickly lit the four incense stands. "How long have you been here, Master?"

Pandreas thought, then smiled. "I arrived earlier than most. I have been here almost twenty-nine winters."

"Twenty-nine winters! How old are you?" The words blurted out from him, but he was surprised. He barely had twenty winters himself.

"Old enough to know how to lead you on your path and young enough to be excited by the thought."

"I'm sorry, Master, I was rude." He bowed his head.

"Well, one day the passage of time will not seem so long, yes? Settle yourself and I will return in a moment."

Yes, Master."

He sat in the middle of the room and breathed slowly, trying to calm himself, prepare for meditation.

He did not hear Pandreas return, simply felt the man settle behind him, a brush sliding through his hair. "Brash is my oldest friend and the most elite of the Curates, barring myself. He is the most controlled of all of us, but it was not always so. His novitiate, Ton'al, caused him much concern when they first came together."

He hummed softly, the brushing and Pandreas' voice mingling with the incense, making him feel as though he were floating....

The Onyx Shard

Brash moved through the rooms of his new salle, trying to find the place that called to him for his bed.

He was frustrated and unsettled. It had been moons since he'd been named Curate of the Onyx Shard, but only now had he been guided to move in. And still... he was unsettled.

Unfettered.

And perhaps that was the problem. For years he had waited for his novitiate, the one who would complete him and here he was, moving from the Ruby Shard to Onyx and still waiting, still missing his other half.

Perhaps that was why this place did not feel as if it were truly his yet.

Brash strode to the front door, intent of finding Pan. He could speak to Pan.

Opening the door, he found his best friend standing there, hand lifted to knock, white eyes wide for a second before Pan smiled. "Brash."

He chuckled and opened the door all the way, inviting Pan in. "You always know when I need you my friend."

"It is my gift." Pan entered, reaching out for him. The layout of the place was unfamiliar to his friend and the shiny black floors were hard for Pan to see. "What troubles you?"

He took Pan's hand and led him to the garden that was in the center of the square building. "I thought this move was the right choice, Pan, but now I'm... it was the right move, but it is incomplete." That was the best way he could describe it.

Pan took his hand. "Do you miss having an initiate of your own, perhaps? Someone to befriend, to learn?"

He nodded, fingers stroking Pan's palm. "I am lonely, old friend. And I imagine it doesn't take someone with your intuition to figure that out."

"No. No, brother." A soft kiss brushed his temple, Pan's scent so sweet. "I... I may have a solution for you."

"Yes?" He raised his head, bringing their lips together in a kiss as sweet as Pan's scent. Oh... it had been a long time since they had shared their bodies.

Pan slid closer, skin cool under his touch. "My beloved friend, we've been too busy."

"We have." His fingers slid along Pan's cheeks, learning the lovely contours again.

Pan slowly worked his robe open, exploring him, loving him in the quiet, sure way Pan had. Moaning, he pulled at Pan's robe, more impatient than his friend. So pale, so lean, Pan chuckled, hair slick and cold on his skin. The long fingers slipping down to circle his shaft were warm. Sure. Firm.

It was such a pleasure to be with someone like Pan, someone who knew what they were doing, someone who knew *him*.

Pan's kisses were drugging, slow, the passion so deep, so still within. He lay back on the grasses of the garden, pulling Pan down on top of him, fingers exploring the smooth, cool skin.

They rocked together, bodies finding the places they fit, white sliding against dark. He closed his eyes, just feeling, using the techniques Pan himself had taught him.

Pan arched, so hard, skin heating. The kisses went deeper, their shared breath making him lightheaded.

"Are you ready, Pan? Are you still in the habit?"

"I was not, but this afternoon... Yes. I am."

He purred and rolled them, putting Pan beneath him. "It still makes me shiver how you know these things. It's sexy, Pan."

"It is my gift. Let me feel you, Brash. No one fills me."

"I will fill you," he growled. He spread Pan's legs with his own, nudging at Pan's hole.

Pan arched, bearing down. "Such heat. Such passion."

"You always know how to bring it to the surface, Pan." He pushed in, Pan's body accepting him, pulling him in.

They had cared for one another for years, knew each other better than anyone, even their former masters. They knew how to move together to make each other feel good. He knew just where to thrust to hit the center of Pan's pleasure.

"Oh... Oh, again. There." It was heady, the soft whisper, that perfect peace shattered for him.

"And again and again," he promised, watching Pan's face.

"So good to me, so good." Those blank eyes were wide, filled with pleasure.

"Circles, Pan." He cried out and moved faster, one hand wrapping around Pan's cock, the beautiful pale skin flushed a dark red.

"Yes..." The energy flowed between them, sharp and bright behind his eyes, two Curates joined, flying.

He finally let his eyes close, the vision of Pan's face in pleasure locked behind his lids as he soared -- as they soared. He could feel the love Pan felt for him, the deep respect, the simple pleasure in his company; it poured over him, soothed him, buoyed him. In return he offered his own love, his need, his adoration and admiration of his peaceful friend.

Pan hummed softly, fingers stroking his skin. "I have someone for you, brother. Someone for the hole inside you."

He lay against Pan, let his friend ease him. "Are you sure, Pan? I have been alone so long."

"He is lost, undone. He needs so badly. The balance in the Gold Shard is askew, broken."

Oh. Ton'al. The man had been bound to Nalin, the Curate for the Gold Shard. Nalin passed beyond the veil in the winter, leaving them.

"None have touched him since Nalin passed, Pan. Are you sure he will find ease in my shard?"

"If he does not, he will follow his master into the veil before the snows fall again."

"Oh, that would be a shame, he is a beautiful spirit."

"It will not be an easy path, but he will glow beneath your hand, you will take him places he has never dreamed of."

He kissed Pan softly. "I will trust your soul, old friend." He would trust Pan with his life, with his heart and his own soul.

"My beloved brother." Pan smiled, petting him.

"Yes, Pan. Remember that when Ton'al and I are making you insane."

That laugh was blessed by the gods themselves.

He stayed where he was for a long time, buried in the peace and comfort his Pan offered.

Ton'al had been mediating for days.

The Curate had sent him to meditate. "Go," the man had said, "Think about your path."

He had fallen into the routine. One glass of water at dawn, relieve himself at dusk. Other than that, he prayed.

He was beginning to fear that the gods did not listen.

He came out of his meditation at dusk to relieve himself and when he opened his eyes there was a man crouched in front of him. He had a riot of brown curls around a tanned face with the greenest eyes. The Curate, not of his own shard, but of the Onyx Shard.

"Hello, Ton'al."

He bowed his head to the ground. *Curate. Welcome.*

A large hand, solid and warm slid over his scalp. "So beautiful."

Oh.

He shivered, tears coming to his eyes.

He hadn't been touched in so long.

Those hands continued down along his back and around to the front of his shoulders, encouraging him to sit up. "Sh. Sh, Ton'al. It is not your tears that I have come for."

He forced his tears away, motioning his apologies for his lack of control. Even a winter ago he would not have been so weak.

Curate Brash's fingers slid on his cheeks, brushing his tears away.

"Well, Ton'al. Have the gods spoken to you yet? They have spoken to me through one of their favorites."

Spoken to him? The gods had forgotten him. Lost him. He shook his head. He'd tried for so long.

"No? I am sorry to hear that. I shall ask you formally then."

The Curate stood. "Ton'al, will you join me, Brash of the Onyx Shard?"

His eyes went wide, looking up into that green. The Onyx Shard took no initiates. Only novitiates. His heart pounded, throbbed. He was not needed in the Gold Shard. He was lost. He was...

Ton'al nodded, leaned down to bow at the Curate's feet.

"Is there anything you need before we go?"

He shook his head. All of his things he had sent with Master Nalin to beyond the pale.

"Then come with me." The Curate turned and began to leave.

He nodded, tried to stand and immediately hit the ground, the days without food and movement hobbling him. Still he crawled toward the retreating man, determined to obey.

Curate Brash turned at the door. "Ton'al!" Brash was not a big man, but could pick him up nonetheless, seeming to carry him easily.

Ton'al moaned, embarrassed beyond belief, shaking with shame. He hid his face, eyes closed, the Gold Shard left behind.

Brash walked with confidence, his strides heavy, echoing even along the soft stone pathways that connected the shards one to the other. The Onyx Shard with its black stones and dark clinging vines suited the man, as solid and *there* as Brash was.

"You are welcome in the Onyx Shard," Brash told him as they crossed the threshold.

He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the scent of male and strength, letting it soothe him.

Brash smiled at him. "Can you stand if I put you down?" The question was not unkind, Brash's green eyes warm.

He nodded. He would stand. He would.

"When was the last time you ate?" Brash asked as he was set carefully on his feet, one solid hand at the small of his back, offering him the Curate's strength.

Ton'al thought for a moment, then held up eight fingers. The Curate told him to meditate, so he had.

"Eight days!" Brash growled. "I will have to have a word with Sint. If the man cannot even care for his predecessor's novitiate, then he cannot possibly do right by his initiates. You will eat. I hope you like real food. I am not one of these starve your body types."

Ton'al nodded, acquiescing. He would eat. He enjoyed the scents and flavors and textures of food.

Brash frowned suddenly. "You can speak, man, can you not?"

To'nal nodded, then shook his head, then shrugged. He had spoken, long ago, but his master had bid him be silent years and years ago and he had not spoken since. He assumed he could still speak...

"Well then, speak. I am not one who has patience for quiet suffering. You will tell me when you need things. You answer me when spoken to, you may ask questions, speak with your friends." Brash shook his head. "I cannot imagine not being able to speak!"

Brash moved over to the pantry area, hand waving him toward the low table. Everything inside the Onyx Shard was made of heavy, dark woods, their colors and textures warm as well as strong.

Ton'al sat, unsure how he had offended, eyes upon the dark wood, hands folded in his lap. Once he had been most loved, his master proud of his obedience, his focus, and he held tight to that memory, held it to his heart, the heavy golden collar around his neck seeming to throb.

Brash worked quickly, moving between the pantry, the counter and the fire and soon two plates were placed on the table, one in front of him. Each plate had a steak, a potato, carrots and a large salad. A glass of clear spring water was set down next.

"Mmm... smells good, doesn't it? Eat!" Brash sat beside him at the head of the table and dug into his food with obvious relish.

Ton'al's stomach clenched, but he began to eat the carrots, chewing each piece thoroughly, forcing his stomach to hold the vegetable in.

Brash stopped eating suddenly, green eyes watching him. One hand reached out and slid along his cheek. "Ton'al, I am sorry. I bring you here, expecting you to conform all at once to my ways, my rules when you have been another's for so long that it must be as natural as breathing to you." The man gave a short bark of laughter. "I have been without a novitiate for long enough that I do not know how to follow the ways to bring us together. Please. Find a way to eat something and then we will meditate together."

Oh. Oh, he was seen. Brash saw him. Thanks be to the gods.

Ton'al took a deep breath, turned to kiss the square palm in thanks. He mouthed the words 'yes, sir', but no sound escaped, just a huff of air.

"One day I will hear that voice of yours, Ton'al." Brash's green eyes twinkled suddenly. "I just hope that I do not discover there is a malharmonious reason your Master ordered you to silence."

To'nal chuckled, surprised and amused. His former master had been a man of great strength and it had been an amusement, in the beginning, to test whether he could remain silent.

Brash smiled widely. "Ah, there is a sweet noise. It is a good beginning."

Ton'al dared to smile back, then turned to his meal, eating as best he could, moaning softly over the flavors.

"You are a sensualist, Ton'al. I shall have to remember that. Tell me, have you spent any time in any of the other shards, or only the Gold?"

He lifted his head, touched his collar, lips moving as he tried to speak. He had only been within the Gold, his master busy.

Brash's eyes settled on the collar. "What would you think if I asked that you remove that?" Brash asked, reaching out, but not touching the collar. "You will not be mine as long as you wear it."

Ton'al touched it, considering. He had worn it for many years, the weight was constant, heavy. Still... He did not belong to the Gold Shard anymore. He belonged elsewhere now.

Ton'al nodded, turned the collar so that Brash might see the clasps.

Brash beamed at him, every movement and emotion so large, loud. Not quiet. The thick, solid fingers moved on the clasp, against his skin, and then the collar slid away, his no longer.

A tremor rocked him and he watched Brash, clinging with his eyes, willing himself not to be lost.

The collar was placed on the table and then Brash's fingers returned to his skin, warm and solid, sliding over his bared neck. "You look naked. But I believe we need to meditate together before my collar replaces the other."

He nodded, just watching Brash's eyes. Holding on. Holding tight.

"Have you eaten your fill, Ton'al?" Brash's hand slid away from his neck, moving to take his hand.

Ton'al nodded, fingers twining with Brash's.

"Then come, let us sit together and meditate, merge our heartbeats."

Brash stood and drew him to stand with the Curate. "I can feel your need to be seen, to belong. It seems to fill the holes inside me with promise." Then Brash laughed. "You are turning me into a poet, Ton'al."

He reached up, traced that smile with a trembling finger. Thank you. Thank you, Master. Brash's eyes grew warm and his finger was taken into Brash's mouth, the man's teeth, sliding along his skin. He gasped, entire body suddenly alive and alight. He had not been required for his former master's passion in many years, all desire sublimated into obedience.

Brash purred, eyes narrowing, growing warmer still as those warm lips closed over his fingers, sucking it into amazing heat. Something between panic and need warred within him, a low keening sound filling the air. Brash gasped and his fingers slid from Brash's mouth.

Warm hands slid on either side of his cheek and he was drawn in, Brash's mouth pressing hard against his own. His world shifted, lips parting without question, desire filling him, shaking him, dissolving him.

His Master's tongue pushed into his mouth, sweeping through him, taking him in a thorough kiss. His body responded, silent and still for so long that it surprised him, sent an ache through his shaft, his sacs.

Solid hands began to remove his robe, the man's passion evident in the hungry growls and moans he made, in the way his shaft, hard and hot, pushed against Ton'al's thigh. Emotions moved through him so quickly he could not control them, the fear of losing control sending those same emotions spinning faster.

Brash's hands on his skin were hot, solid, touching his body with sure knowledge. Ton'al sobbed, twisted, reaching for help, for release, for support. Brash's hand settled at the small of his back, guiding his movements as Brash brought their cocks together.

Oh, he arched, energies soaring, the blessings of the gods pouring down upon him in a wave, an answering heat pouring from him.

Brash moaned, accepting his gift, accepting the gods' gifts, and heat pushed against him, splashed on him, Brash's own gift offered to him.

Ton'al swayed, the world a dark blur, the only light his master's eyes.

Brash picked him up again, carrying him. "Come to my bed, Ton'al. I need to know your shape as if it were my own."

He nodded, lips brushing against Brash's throat, entrusting himself totally to the strong arms, trusting that Brash would help him come home.

Brash walked through the Onyx Shard, carrying his other half with him. Pan had worked his magic again, had known. His brother on this path was truly a Master, a magician.

Ton'al's warm cafe-au-lait flesh called to him, begged his touch, his marks, his dominance. And he would practice the arts of all the shards on Ton'al.

He laid his burden on his bed, admiring. Ton'al relaxed, lips parting, long eyelashes casting shadows on the thin cheeks. He longed to hear Ton'al's voice crying his name in pleasure. He knew he would. One day the gods would gift him with that.

Brash bent and kissed Ton'al's belly. "I will mark you as mine, Ton'al. We will visit the Emerald Shard and paint our joining on your skin."

Ton'al's eyes opened, watching him with a curious expression, but the man nodded, obeying without question.

"I am the Curator of the Onxy Shard, Ton'al. I have no one art that I practice, but am Master of all." Would Ton'al accept that?

Ton'al nodded, watched him, lips parting as if to speak.

He sat close, hand on Ton'al's belly. "Yes, Ton'al?"

No sound escaped, but the words were clear on Ton'al's lips. "I only know the path of Gold. I know no others."

"Will you let me teach you, Ton'al? Will you put yourself in my hands?"

Ton'al nodded, face solemn and serious.

"Good. You will be the quiet center to my storm." He laughed. "That doesn't mean you aren't allowed to speak. I would hear you as well as see you, Ton'al."

Ton'al smiled, responsive to him, to his laugh.

"I will make love to you now, Ton'al. It will be our gift to the gods for bringing us together."

Those eyes stared, so quiet, so steady.

He purred, fingers spreading on Ton'al's skin. "I have chosen my collar, Ton'al. You will wear my marks on your skin."

A soft gasp sounded, but that was the only indication Ton'al gave of concern.

"These marks." Bending, he wrapped his lips around Ton'al's skin and began to suck.

The emotions poured off Ton'al, evident even to him. No wonder Pandreas worked to find a place for this one; the aftershocks would be maddening to his sensitive friend. He pulled up the mark and then moved on to the skin next to it, making the next link in the chain.

Ton'al panted, heart pounding against him, throat working. Brash moved again, forming another link in the collar he was making around Ton'al's neck. Tiny sounds began to fill the air, along with the scent of arousal. He purred against Ton'al's skin, mouth moving, continuing the circle.

Ton'al shuddered, hands opening and closing upon the sheets. He took one of Ton'al's hands as he moved his mouth over more neck, bringing it to his own body. He felt the cry instead of hearing it, Ton'al's touch sure and wanton, surprisingly so.

Purring again he continued his work, the marks nearly meeting now. He turned Ton'al to finish the last few marks. When his mouth touched Ton'al's nape, Ton'al jerked, hips rocking, a true sound escaping, deep and raw.

Purring, he focused on that spot, scrapping with his teeth. Ton'al shifted, breath coming faster. So starved for touch, so hyperaware.

"The collar is complete," he murmured, touching the livid marks with his fingers.

Ton'al whimpered, muscles rippling and taut. Brash slid his fingers along Ton'al's spine, licking at his collar around Ton'al's neck. Each touch drew a shiver, a gasp, Ton'al completely focused on him, his touch, the pleasure he offered.

He began to lick his way down along Ton'al's spine, heading down to open the man up. Heat poured from Ton'al, sweet and addictive, Ton'al moving constantly beneath him.

To be needed so, to be wanted with such eager abandon... Brash moaned, delighted and filled by it, by Ton'al.

He lingered at the base of Ton'al's spine, wetting with his tongue, scraping gently with his teeth, stimulating this point where the gods gathered a man's nerves. The cries were so rough, so raw, but audible, his alone.

With a pleased purr, he continued on down to Ton'al's crack, hands spreading Ton'al's ass cheeks apart. He moved slowly, letting Ton'al feel each drag of his tongue, gradually moving closer to the small, wrinkled hole. He could feel Ton'al's pleasure, feel the heat pushing against him, surrounding him.

"Such response, such heat and need. You honor me and our gods, Ton'al. You will be a credit to the Onyx Shard." He whispered the words before pushing his tongue into Ton'al, penetrating him.

Ton'al surged up onto hands and knees, the sound he made shocked, desperate.

"Yes, Ton'al. *Feel.*"

He pushed his tongue into Ton'al again and then again, his hands wrapping around the slim hips to encourage Ton'al to push back onto his tongue. He flew with it, years of passion trapped by perfect obedience set free, offered to him, given to him.

Brash could wait no longer, not with the pleasure and need flowing through him. With a cry, Brash went to his knees and pushed himself into Ton'al's body. They connected, Ton'al head snapping back as their energies slammed together. Such power! Such need!

If his own needs and desires had not been strong, if he did not have the places that were empty inside him, he might have been overwhelmed. Instead he was filled and in turn passed his own pleasures back to Ton'al, the two of them making a circle that grew and grew as they fucked.

Ton'al pushed himself up into Brash's lap, taking him in deeper and deeper.

He wrapped his arms around Ton'al, one hand open on the warm belly, the other circling Ton'al's heat. He pumped as he thrust, moving with Ton'al, their pleasure painting the air, spreading out over the shard, over the temple.

"Master." The word was hissed, the barest sound behind it.

"Yes, Ton'al. You are mine. All the temple knows it now."

He wrapped his mouth around the back of Ton'al's neck and began to suck. Ton'al's body went tight around his cock, squeezing like a fist.

Brash roared. "Yes! Yes, my own."

His come filled Ton'al's body in pulses, his pleasure flowing into Ton'al and up to the skies. Ton'al joined him, heat spraying over his fingers, their pleasure as one. Their spirits curled together, rose up into the skies with their pleasure and then slowly came back down into their bodies.

Brash gasped and shook; he had never felt such a joining, such rightness with anyone else.

Ton'al was still, eyes closed, traces of tears on the thin cheeks.

He stroked Ton'al's belly, rubbing the come into Ton'al's warm skin. "Thank you, Ton'al. Thank you for accepting my invitation."

They settled into the furs, Ton'al snuggling close, body still holding him, the whispered "yours" sweeter than any song.

"Yes, my Ton'al. Yes."

He stroked the fine, soft body, holding Ton'al as close as he could.

His novitiate -- his own -- moaned low, sinking into sleep immediately, trusting him implicitly.

Brash just held Ton'al, full of wonder. He had enjoyed so many pleasures, so much worship of bodies and pleasure offered to the gods, but there had never been anything like this. Not ever.

A quiet tap came to his window, his pale friend a touch flushed, glowing. "It went well."

Brash chuckled. "You felt."

"The entire world felt." Pan smiled. "It will be a new life for him."

"For us both, my brother." Ton'al was not the only one who had found a new life.

Pan beamed at him, nodded. "If you need me to hear him before he finds his voice..."

He nodded and grinned. "I know where to find you, my brother. But something tells me we will find a way to communicate."

"You have healed that which was broken." Pan looked at peace, satisfied.

"All I did was open my heart and love, my brother."

"Yes. Rest well, Brash. I will come for latemeal upon the morrow."

"I look forward to introducing you to my novitiate, Pan."

He watched his friend go and then turned his attention back to Ton'al, back to his life.

Chulu's Education Continues

Pandreas smiled, the memory of the pleasure in his heart-brother's voice enough to make any man happy. "They are still together, still a bright pair."

Chulu gazed up at him, eyes full of wonder and arousal. "It is a beautiful story. I look forward to meeting them."

"Ton'al is still a quiet man, but he enjoys the gardens, cooking, and painting. He is a good man to befriend." And they would spend many hours together. He saw Brash daily.

"Did he ever learn to speak again, Master?"

"He did, although he speaks very rarely unless he is with Brash." Pandreas knew Brash loved Ton'al's voice, loved to hear the man's pleasure.

"I think it would be very hard not to speak ever."

"The Gold path is a very strict one; the ones who are called there have a narrow road to lead them to glory."

"I am glad I was not called to the Gold Path, Master."

"I think all believe that they should only be on the path they are on." Pan smiled. He remembered when Sint came to lead the Gold Shard. The man and Brash had come together in a fury over Ton'al, over imagined wrongs. Still, it had been Brash who had found Sint's novitiate, a man wrongly sent to train to be a priest. "Master Sint and Hook worship the gods in perfect harmony, now at least."

"What do you mean, Master?"

"Hmm? Oh, simply that Sint's coming together with his Hook was... volatile. Hook was not interested in submission; in fact, he wished to follow the Emerald path." Pandreas chuckled. Hook was chaos embodied, crashing against the strength of Gold.

"I thought you said to follow your instincts? Why did Hook wish to follow the Emerald path if he was meant for the Gold?"

"Perhaps the gods wished to prove Master Sint's strength. Or to ease the ill will between Brash and Sint. The gods wished them to battle for their balance."

The Gold Shard

He could feel Brash's summons tickling along his spine, insistent and stubborn, and Pandreas finally took his leave of the newcomers, heading across the courtyard to the Onyx Shard. Ton'al waited there, strong and silent, reaching for his hand in welcome.

"Is Brash well?"

Ton'al nodded, opened the door for him, leading him to the Curate's private chambers.

Brash might not have been sick, but he was not exactly well, frustration pouring from him.

"Brother?" He moved close, reaching for his friend's hands, knowing his presence alone soothed.

"Ah, Pan. So good to see you, as always." Brash squeezed his hand and nodded at a barrel-chested man standing at the window. "I'm sure you remember Hook."

"Of course I do. Roko always speaks highly of you." The man was hard to focus on, the swirls of anger mingling with the hundreds of spirals inked into his bared skin. "Are you well?"

Hook bowed to him, growling softly. "It is always good to see you, sir."

"Hook seems to believe he should return to the Emerald Shard, but Roko insists not. Meanwhile he is disrupting the Onyx Shard with his volatile nature!"

Pandreas frowned, reached for Hook's hand. "Hook, I wish you to find your room here, meditate."

"Master Pan, I..."

He reached up, brushed Hook's lips, his serenity pouring out. "Meditate upon your path. All will be well."

"Yes, master." Pandreas waited until Hook left, the massive shoulders twisting to get through the door, before turning to Brash. "What do Roko's wishes have to do with anything? You are the Curate here; the priests go where you send them. I send the initiate..." He stopped, took a deep breath. "You did not make him a priest."

"I did not." Brash crossed his arms in front of him, looking solid and immovable.

Pandreas stepped close, hands offered. "If you did not, it is because it was not meant to be. You are the voice of the gods in this." Pandreas would not disrespect his friend by doubting him.

Brash smiled at him. "Thank you, my brother. The truth is I do not believe he will be a priest. I do not believe he is meant to be a dominant at all. I had hoped that you felt the same things I did from him."

Their fingers twined and Pandreas cast out his heart, letting the gods lead him. "I see danger for him, in the Emerald Shard. Roko cannot control his strength, his will. They require pain to transcend, but Hook... He cannot become a priest."

Brash nodded. "Thank you, my brother. I was sure, but... well I am more sure when I have your blessing."

"What shall we do with him?" It was unusual, having a man whose fate was shared between them.

Brash's mouth twitched. "I have an idea about that."

"An idea?" That could be dangerous or perfect, knowing Brash. Perhaps both.

"We should send him to Sint. He should initiate in the Gold Shard."

Pan's eyes went wide. "Sint?" The path of the Gold was harsh, strict, the polar opposite of the Emerald way.

Brash looked rather pleased with himself. "Sint."

"They will war."

"It won't be boring, that is true." Oh, there was that twitch in Brash's lips again.

Pandreas chuckled, shook his head. "Sint will hate him -- all the metal, the ink. And Hook will not remove them, they are his status."

"He will do as his Curate tells him. Eventually." Brash grinned outright now. "Come on, Pan. I admit, it was more an amusing thought to start with, but Hook needs someone who will push him back, someone who will demand his submission and expect nothing less."

"Will you speak to Sint? Or should I?" He was unsure, but his faith in Brash was complete.

Brash snorted. "You should speak to him, Pan. I will wind up calling him a cold bastard and spilling his soup over his head. Again."

Pan laughed, shook his head. "Oh, my. He spoke harshly to your Ton'al."

"He *looked* harshly at my Ton'al." Brash growled a little, bristling.

"Which is ridiculous. Your Ton'al is most dear."

"He is!" Brash growled again. "Sint *is* a cold bastard, Pan. I almost feel guilty sending Hook to him."

"He is a controlled man, but his heart runs deep, his love runs deep."

"Hmph. He nearly killed Ton'al through neglect!"

"Yes, but he was new, frightened and faced with a silent, lost man he could not help."

"Excuses." Brash had no love for Sint. At all.

"Yes, but had your Ton'al not needed so, I might not have heard him and brought him home to your arms." He leaned in, kissed Brash gently. "I will speak to Sint."

Brash calmed at his touch and he was given a soft smile. "Thank you, Pan."

He traced Brash's lips, reveling in Brash's presence. "Whenever you need me, brother."

Brash relaxed further, smiling for him, tongue coming out to lick at his finger. "And what about you, brother? Have you need of me?"

"My need for you is eternal, my friend. A constant." He stepped closer, leaning into warm arms. "Does your Ton'al resent our love?"

Brash shook his head. "Ton'al trusts what he and I have. It is undeniable."

"It is. It is pure beauty." He took a kiss, the flavor there familiar and dear.

Brash's tongue pushed into his mouth, one hand sliding into his hair and tilting his head so Brash could deepen the kiss. Pan moaned, lips parting, hands sliding to hold Brash's shoulders.

"Oh, Pan, you taste hungry. You should have come to me sooner."

"I was giving you time with your novitiate." He did not deny his hunger.

"You are too generous."

Brash's mouth closed on his again, the kiss long and deep. His body responded, cock filling, pushing out to attract Brash's attention.

Brash chuckled, filling his mouth with the low sound. "You honor me with your eagerness, brother."

The back of one of Brash's hands slid along his cock, the material of his robe almost maddening.

"Tease." He laughed. Of all the Curates, his path was the gentlest, the least passionate.

"Oh, I shall have to do something about that then, because I do not mean to tease you, my friend." Sure, solid fingers pulled away his robe and then slid on his skin, sparking his passion easily.

"Brash!" His pleasure poured through him, offered easily.

"Oh, my Pan. Maybe it is I who should not wait so long next time."

"My doors are always open to you." He stroked Brash's cheek, body begging. "As are my arms."

Brash purred and stepped closer, rubbing against him. Those solid hands warm on his back, on his ass. He moaned, hands tugging Brash closer. They rocked together, soft sounds shared between them.

The pleasure built quickly, Brash's hand closing around both their cocks, tugging and pulling. His hand joined Brash's, joining their pleasure, their prayers.

Brash's tongue fucked his mouth, sliding in and out, as their hands urged them higher and higher. He arched, opening himself to Brash, sharing himself fully. The hand at his ass squeezed, pulling him in even closer, Brash's muscled body so hot against him.

"Yes..." His head fell back, fingers squeezing.

"I feel your pleasure, Pan."

"You bring me such joy, my brother."

"As you do me." Brash's lips slid over his cheeks, along his jaw. "Such joy."

He smiled, pleased deep inside. "Yes. Soon."

"I know. I feel it, too."

Their mouths met again in a kiss, hands working hard as their tongues danced together.

They climaxed together, pleasure spreading between them. Brash hummed softly, forehead resting against his.

Pan smiled, taking a soft kiss. "My dear friend."

"Brother of my soul," murmured Brash.

"Yes. Come to me for late meal? You and your Ton'al? We can relax. Laugh together."

"It will be our pleasure, Pan."

He breathed in the heady scent of their passion together, shoring himself for his upcoming discussion with the Gold Shard.

Simple and cold was how one could describe the Gold Shard. Both the demesnes itself and the Curate.

Sint knew that the initiates of the other shards feared him. Indeed, many of the Gold initiates did as well. They claimed he had no heart. They simply did not understand. True dedication took discipline, hard work, a passion for perfection. He took initiates and molded them into pure submission.

He rose from his meditations and ran a hand over his bald head, pulled his robe over his body and went to the door, opening it for Pan.

"I had a feeling you would be visiting me."

Pan smiled, fingers soft on his hand, welcoming. Pan's pleasure at seeing him was constant, honest. "Sint. You always anticipate me."

"As you anticipate me, Pan, when I have cause to visit you. Come, I will make you some tea."

"Thank you. Are you well? I have not dined with you in too long." Pandreas sat, graceful and peaceful, upon a low divan.

"I am sure the pleasure of your company is much sought after and I... am not the most popular of dining companions." He poured out two cups of tea, and joined Pan on the divan.

Pandreas made a soft, pained sound and turned to him, as if drawn. "Your path is hard, dear Sint, but your love, your passion? Runs deep within and is most precious."

He folded his hands in his lap and gave Pan a small smile. "Yes, I know. But it is very nice of you to say so."

"Truth, my friend." A soft kiss brushed along his cheek. "I have something to discuss with you, Sint. An initiate sent to the Onyx Shard to become a priest. The gods say death and danger lives upon that path."

"Then he should take another path. Surely you did not need my advice to see that?" He had to admit he was interested now. Pan was most devious.

"No, I did not come for advice. I come with information. The initiate, I believe, belongs to you, but he... He does not believe himself submissive."

Intriguing.

"I require utmost dedication and focus. Many who pass through the golden doors leave without attaining their goal. What makes you believe he belongs with the Gold Shard?"

"I believe he belongs with you, Sint."

"Why?" Just because he was intrigued didn't mean he would give in so quickly.

"He was an initiate in the Emerald Shard. He is strong, powerful, willful. There is none other who could have him. The Lapis Shard? He would absorb the pain. Lux's path requires will to serve." Pan shrugged. "He believes that he knows the will of the gods, but he cannot follow the path of his heart. He has been... misled."

Sint bristled. "Misled? There is no love lost between myself and most of the other shards, Pan, but I refuse to believe someone would mislead an initiate!"

"There are other forces which seek to disrupt our passion, our balance. You know this. You and I, of all of us, understand this."

Sint sighed. "I do know. And I am not surprised that they would use their influence upon an Emerald practitioner." He gave Pan a sharp look. "You realize what you are asking me? The road ahead would be hard enough as it is, if the man does not believe himself to be a submissive in the first place, let alone belonging in the Gold Shard... well, you yourself will suffer almost as much as this man and I in the beginning."

"It is not my choice, friend. It is the will of the gods. He is a strong man, a *good* man and his will comes from great passion and love." Pandreas sighed. "Any path that bases itself upon pain and beauty opens itself to the furies of the outside, but without them, we would stagnate."

"Indeed, Pan. I did not mean to suggest there was no place for them in the Temple. It will bring great disruption to the Gold Shard though." He sniffed. "Perhaps the gods feel that we need to be shaken up here. And, given that I am currently alone, there is no better time to be disrupted."

"If any shard is strong enough to weather disruption, it is yours. Your priests are devoted and the initiates obedient to a fault."

"That is the way of our path. It is strict and hard." Sint chuckled dryly. "It will be most interesting to watch this man's strength turn from fighting the path to following it. It takes tremendous courage to truly submit."

"Roko says his passion is vast, that he submitted to his modifications without binding." Pandreas sighed softly, empty eyes worried. "I pray he finds happiness with you."

"There is much joy to be found upon the Golden path, but it often takes much pain to find the way."

He closed his eyes and meditated for a moment, focusing on the shard, willing the gods to share their plans. He shook his head. "I do not feel his approach, but neither do I feel disaster looming. Will you send him to me? He must walk through the door of his own will."

"I will. If you need me, I will come." Pandreas took his hands again, peace emanating. "I will send him."

"Thank you, Pan. Bright day to you."

Once Pandreas had taken his leave, Sint went to inform the priests and initiates that he and the new novitiate would need seclusion, peace and many prayers.

He was not sure who had betrayed him. Someone had, for he was being cast out of his home, of his dream and sent where he would surely fail.

"Why not just banish me, Curate? Why not just say I have failed and send me away?"

Master Pandreas' eyes seemed sad, as sad as the eternally peaceful man could be. "No one believes you have failed, Hook."

"I belong with my friends, my brothers."

"You cannot return there."

"Master Roko?" He loved the man with a passion, had many hours of Roko's attention sealed in his skin.

"It is beyond his control."

Hook swallowed his sigh, nodded. "Let's get this over with, then. When I fail, will you promise to be the one to lead me to the gate? You have always been kind to me, Master."

Pandreas made a soft sound, but nodded. "You have my word, Hook. Should you have true need of me, I will be there."

"Thank you." He turned up the stones to the Gold Shard, heartsick and empty. He did not look back; he simply knocked.

Time to finish his journey with the order of Iro.

The Curate of the Gold Shard opened the doors to him. The man was bald, even his eyebrows missing, standing tall and thin. A long, silken robe of gold flowed from his shoulders.

"Who knocks on the golden door?"

"Hokonnen." His voice was rough, raw, his hands fists at his sides. He had gone to the Emerald Shard with such joy, to the Onyx door with such pride and honor. Now he was punished for something he didn't understand.

The man looked so stern, so joyless, but he was offered a small smile and a bow. "The Gold Shard bids you welcome. Enter and we shall find our worship together."

He did not believe that he would find anything but sorrow here, but this Curate had never once treated him ill, so he bowed, offering respect for the position. "Thank you, Curate."

The Curate stepped back and a hand was held out to him. "Disrobe, please. I will have that returned to the Emerald Shard."

He swallowed his sigh, but removed his robe easily enough. He was seldom dressed in the shard -- his body was covered in text, a hymn to the gods. Jeweled rings adorned him -- nipples and navel, ears and eyebrows and nose. Even his cock and sacs were pierced, the rings joined by a fine chain and leading back to a hidden ring behind his balls.

The Curate's eyebrows went up as he was looked up and down. "Oh, my."

He stood straight, his body decorated by the most talented of hands. He had been wanted once, cared for, befriended.

The Curate shook his head. "I don't suppose there is anything that can be done about the ink, but the peircings must go. Do you need help removing them?"

"No." They were his own, earned by pain and devotion. He would not remove them.

The Curate seemed to draw himself up even taller, the look bestowed upon him quite haughty. "I beg your pardon?"

"They hold much meaning for me. I will not part with them." The Curate could send him away if he was judged distasteful.

"You are in the Gold Shard now. I am Curate here. My word is law. I told you to remove the piercings -- they have no meaning here. One day you might earn some back, but until then you will dress and decorate your body as I tell you to."

Hook simply stood, stared. He had bent enough. He had acquiesced all he would. On this he would stand.

The Curate crossed his arms and stood, still and silent, staring down at him.

Waiting.

He stood, drawn into himself, breath slow and steady and sure, remembering the touch of Roko's hands upon him.

The Curate did not move a muscle, did not say a word, merely stood and waited to be obeyed.

Hook brought his will to bear, holding his fury and pain tight within his fists, nails digging into his palms until blood dripped, splashed onto the stones.

He heard footsteps on the courtyard behind him, even once heard Master Pandreas' soft voice and Curate Brash silencing it. The Curate ignored them, face impassive, eyes on him, the will in the green depths hard, complete.

The urge welled up in him to scream, to turn and walk away, walk himself to the white gate and head into the mountain, let the stone and snow and animals devour him.

"I was told that you were strong," said the Curate, breaking the silence between them. "Prove it. Remove your piercings and walk the golden path. Few are strong enough to submit to my will."

He saw Master Roko, and for a moment he thought himself saved, but the man turned from him, disappearing into the place his spirit called home. Hook growled low, let the hard edges of fury take him and he began tearing the metal from his body, the skin ripping and splitting, blood pouring upon the ground.

In the distance he heard a moan, a cry, but he ignored it, offering himself wholly to the pain within him.

The Curate look saddened, but let him continue without word, eyes strangely warm and sympathetic.

He couldn't reach the one behind his sacs, his fingers burned and were slick with his blood. Finally he simply tore at the chains until they were out. Then he stood, forcing himself not to fall. "Let me in or show me to the gate. You have what you asked for."

"Thank you, Hokonnen. You honor the Gold Shard with your sacrifice." Taking his bloody hand, the Curate led him in, the golden doors closing solidly behind him.

Wordlessly, the Curate took him to the kitchen. "Stand there." And as he stood, the Curate filled a basin with water and then came and knelt in front of him.

Hook did not speak, he did not move. He did nothing but hurt -- everything about him beautiful and passionate and honored, torn and ripped and bleeding.

The Curate began to clean him, the water warm, the touches of cloth gentle. It stung nonetheless. It was a different pain than he had endured. Before the pain led to peace, to beauty. This pain led nowhere. It was simply an end.

Sint cleaned Hokonnen until the blood was gone and then he rubbed healing salve into each wound. He felt for the man, he truly did, but the Golden path was a lonely one, a harsh one, and there was only so much he could do to ease Hook's way.

There were many who were naturally submissive, but Sint knew that it was the strong ones, to whom submission was not natural, who most glorified the gods when they finally submitted to their will.

Hook was quite beautiful, but also wild and full of a dark energy that needed to be tamed.

And Sint had to admit, if only to himself, that he felt a pull, a desire to have this man submit to him, to have this man *want* to submit to him.

It was almost a need, and that was very humbling.

"You will join me in the courtyard and we will meditate together."

He received no response, the mismatched eyes empty and distant, the agony within them hidden away.

"You will answer when I speak to you. I wish to hear 'as you will, sir' when I bid you do something." He had no desire to break Hook's will, but the man needed to know who was the Curate, the Master, and who the submissive.

Hook's lip curled, the fury within him a palpable thing. "As you will, Curate."

"As you will, *Sir*." He would not fight Hook for every battle, but he had to fight him for the first few, to prove he was serious.

A deep, dark growl sounded, Hook's nostrils flaring.

He met the man's eyes and waited.

"You will send me away, now or later, Curate."

"I have no desire to send you away, Hokonnen." And he found, to his surprise, that he spoke the simple truth.

"No one calls me that."

"No? What would you like to be called?" The man was talking. It was an improvement over the silent fuming.

"Hook. Master Ro... Pandreas calls me Hook."

"Very well, Hook it is. Now, if you will say what I have asked, Hook, we can retire to the courtyard and perhaps find a moment of peace together."

Hook laughed, the sound devastated and pained. "As you will. Sir."

Sint nodded and stood, held his hand out to Hook. He towered over the man, but Hook was solid for all his shortness, the tattoos on him making his skin appear alive. It was quite fascinating and he was going to have to work harder to tune it out so he could meditate.

Hook followed him to his private courtyard, silent and vibrating, reminding him of a geyser readied to explode.

He sat among the lily of the valley and waited until Hook sat across from him. "A healing meditation, Hook. Soothe your pains for a little while."

Hook looked at him, then those odd eyes closed, hiding away from him.

Sint swallowed his sigh and inwardly cursed himself for caring. This would have been so much easier if he was eager to turn Hook over to Pan.

Sint knew Hook could not find the peace of meditation, the man's pain and anger and outrage poured from him. There was fury and shame, betrayal and hatred and a dull bitterness. Instead of releasing them, dissipating the emotions, Hook was filling himself with them.

He opened his eyes. "Hook."

"What?" Such pain. Such loss.

"If you cannot give up your pain it will kill you."

"Perhaps your initiates can release all at your word, but I cannot."

"Then give me one of your pains to carry for you."

"Why would you want to? The Onyx Shard took my pride, the Emerald my heart, Gold my beauty. Master Pandreas can have my faith. That leaves my pain for me."

"Tell me, Hook. What brought you to the Path of Iro?" He would find a way to get through to Hook. Even if just a bit.

"I was a soldier. I followed a dove into the forest."

He was surprised. "You were not called to the temple?"

"I was. The dove brought me."

"But your following of the dove was random; you were not pulled on your own to the temple?" Everyone who came was called, led by their heart, by their need. How could he relate to Hook if the man had not had the same experience?

"I never believed it was random, but perhaps I was allowed in by mistake."

"No, that was not what I meant. I am sure it was not random, that you were brought here by the gods. I was merely surprised. What made you choose the Emerald Shard?"

"Master Pandreas bade me choose between Lapis and Emerald. Master Roko's skills called to me." One hand lifted to a torn ear, then fell, fingertips stained.

"Did you ever consider becoming his novitiate or were you always on a path to become a priest?" Hook's history was fascinating in its differences.

"He needed another priest. The shard needed another priest."

"I am sorry you were not meant for that, Hook. I am more sorry you were guided upon an incorrect path."

"I was a soldier. They make poor priests."

"They do however take orders well," he pointed out.

"Not those that follow random birds into magical forests instead of waging war, Curate." Oh. Oh, the man had a sense of irony.

He chuckled dryly. "No, I suppose not."

Hook's eyes closed. "I am sorry Pandreas forced me upon you and your shard."

"I was not forced to take you. I was asked. I would have refused if I had thought it was a wrong choice."

"What do you want from me?"

"I want you to give the Gold Shard an honest try. I know many people believe I am cold and unfeeling. I have ears, I have heard the talk. But it is a very rewarding path for those who can follow it."

"I was not meant to be here. The gods have betrayed me, my faith."

"What makes you so certain?"

Those eyes flashed open, burning with a sudden fury. "Years I offered myself, my heart, my passion, my love to them. I gave all of myself, my life and here I am, torn, honor lost, turned away twice and offered to a house who finds my very skin distasteful. It would take a fool to not be certain."

Sint bowed slightly. "I apologize for making you believe I find you distasteful, Hook. I do judge harshly and early. It is not an asset. But there is much honor to be found in the Gold Shard. More honor than in any other shard."

"I will attempt to not disrupt that honor, Curate. I do not wish to cause ill-will in your house."

"I want more from you than to just not be a bother, Hook." The poor man was so confused, Sint could feel it pouring off him in waves with the pain. With that confusion came anger, Hook near shaking with it. "I have cleared the east side of the shard. You may scream if you need to." Hook needed to get the anger out, let it go, find a way to see beyond it.

"I. Want. To. Go. Home." The words were bitten off, growled, aching with pain.

"And what if I tell you that you are home?"

"No." Those square hands tore at the inked thighs, nails digging in.

"Stop." His voice was sharp. He would not have Hook harming himself.

"Why?" That look dared him, defied him. It would have discouraged him if he had not seen the fear there, too, the desperate loss of control. The need.

"Because it pains me," he said quietly.

"Everything pains me. All of this." The growl was becoming a roar.

"It would not if you let your pains go."

"They are all I have, all your gods and your path have left me!" Hook stood, screaming, roaring at him, poor cock bleeding anew, sacs swollen.

Sint stood as well and held out his hand. "I have not."

"You will." Hook turned his back, shoulders hitching.

He stepped forward, putting his hand on Hook's back. "I will not."

Hook spun about, grabbed his hand, eyes wild.

He reached out with his other hand, touching Hook's cheek. "I will not abandon you, Hokonnen."

"I don't want to hurt you." The whisper was low. "But I'm so angry. Please. Leave me alone."

He shook his head. "I will not abandon you." Hook was his responsibility now, had been the moment the man stepped through the golden door.

He could smell blood and pain, fury, could feel the tremors rocking his novitiate. "Share your pain with me -- you are not alone." Reach out, Hook, reach out.

"I was happy, even just a moon ago."

"It takes but a breath of air to change the direction of a sail."

"I am no ship, Curate. I am... I was a vessel for the gods. Now I am simply a man."

"We are all just men, Hook. There is no shame in that, but there can be joy."

Hook's throat worked, eyes staring into him, entire body shaking. "What do you want?"

"You."

"I..." Hook's eyes closed, a single tear sliding down the man's cheek. "I don't know what to do next."

He wiped the tear away and stroked Hook's cheek. "You breathe. One breath at a time."

Hook nodded, took a single deep breath, swaying a little. Oh, yes. There. Connection.

He nodded. "Would you like to see our rooms?"

"Our rooms? Yes. I... Yes."

"Come with me, Hook." He led Hook back through to the set of rooms that were his. "Here at the Gold Shard the submissives share space with their dominant."

"I..." Hook looked around, obviously trying to take everything in.

"You will have a chance to know these walls and everything in them, Hook. One at a time, just like each breath."

He led Hook into his own room. The place was pristine, his bed large, taking up most of the room.

"Where... where do I take my rest, Curate?"

"On the bed, Hook."

He received a confused look. "I... With you?"

"Next to me, yes. With me will depend on you."

"Riddles?" Hook shook his head. "I am not a clever man."

"I did not mean to speak in riddles. We will sleep in the same bed, but I do not expect to make love to you unless you wish it." He believed he would enjoy that very much, but he would not push. He had patience.

"Oh." Hook wrapped his arms around himself, pacing, wincing, going to the window and looking out again and again.

"Is there a problem, Hook?"

"No? Yes? I..." Hook's hands landed on the sill with a sharp slap. "Yes. I don't belong here. I don't know what to do. I *hurt*. I want to scream and scream. I want to go home and there is not one."

"Then scream. You have a minute beginning now."

To his surprise, Hook slammed his hands down and howled, the sound agonized and scared, full of betrayal and pain and tears. Those hands hit the wood, again and again, the skin splitting, the sound escalating. He'd have Pan in here, panicked and called, if they weren't careful.

He counted carefully to sixty, risking Pan in order to keep his word. He had a feeling Hook would not forget one broken promise, no matter how small.

The moment he counted sixty though, he was behind Hooks, grabbing the man's arms and pulling him away from the window. "Your time for screaming is over."

Hook gasped, breathing hard, trembling like a leaf caught by the wind, but the sound died away. He drew Hook to him, lending his strength to the man. It was a measure of Hook's exhaustion that he did not fight, just gave a soft sigh.

He waited until Hook's breath slowed and then he walked them together to his bed. Hook followed his lead, eyes closed, spirit needing the succor of sleep, of dreams. Sint put a light cover over Hook and lay down next to him, hand resting on Hook's chest. "Sleep, Hook. I will guard your dreams."

He received no answer, the poor lost man fading into sleep.

Closing his own eyes, he slipped into a meditation, seeking guidance, strength. He had no intention of losing Hook to his pain and fear.

Spirits with burning eyes and claws and teeth haunted him, chased him through his dreams, but every time they came close, the Curate was there, banishing them with a snap and a snarl.

Again and again Hook ran, and again and again the Curate helped him.

Slowly he tired of running and collapsed at the feet of the dream- Curate, accepting the protection, the rest, the peace. So tired.

The Curate curled around him, keeping him warm and safe.

Hook cuddled in, whispering about how hard he'd tried, how tired he was, how he felt so lost, how ashamed he was to not be worthy of the Emerald Shard, the Onyx. It was all a dream and safe, so he hid nothing, just poured all of his heart out.

There was no judging, no words of censure, just acceptance of his pain and his shame.

Finally the words stopped and he simply rested -- no dreams, no fear, nothing but healing sleep.

He was drawn up from his sleep by his body's needs, a soft kiss from the dream-Curate blessing him as he woke. Hook opened his eyes slowly, waiting for the peace to dissipate, the reality to crash upon him.

The Curate lay next to him, hand over his heart.

A quiet numbness seemed to blanket him, protect him as he slowly stood to take care of his needs, perhaps cleanse himself, his wounds.

"Will you let me tend your wounds, Hook?" Curate Sint asked him.

"Y..." He stopped, his voice, his throat, raw and rough as if he'd talked for hours.

"Thank you." Sint stood and nodded to the left. "The bathroom is to the left."

He nodded, moving slowly, the wounds on his groin painful, ugly. Sint followed him, hand coming to rest in the small of his back, the Curate's strength offered freely to him.

The bathing area was large, bright, clean, the huge tub filled with heated water that poured into the room. He wanted to sink into the tub up to his neck.

"I have some oil with atrove. It would be good for you to soak in it."

He tried to thank the Curate, but his voice was gone, so he nodded.

Sint poured the oil into the tub and swirled it around with his hand. The smell was rich, good, and he breathed it in deep, letting it pour through him. Once he was in the tub, Sint began to cup the water in his hands and pour it over him. He felt an echo of the same peace, the safety he'd found in his dream, touching him deep inside.

Sint remained quiet, his presence soothing, the soft ministrations continuing, making a ritual of it. Hook felt himself respond to the care, muscles and nerves easing, spirit at rest. The quiet was as soothing as the wash of hot water over his skin.

After all the noise and screams of the day before, this rest was a blessing, almost magical.

Sint began to chant softly, the song a prayer to the gods. The hands pouring water over him began to rub his skin, softly, gently. Hook closed his eyes, unwilling to threaten the peace.

All his skin was touched, rubbed, explored by Sint's long fingers, the man learning him, not attempting to arouse, that intention clear in the air between them. It was a strange sensation, to have his form learned, not the images inked into his skin.

At length the touches stopped, the soft chanting drifting away and leaving silence behind. "It is time to remove yourself from the water, Hook. I will rub more salve where it is needed."

He nodded, took a deep breath. "Thank you for your care, Sir."

Sint gave him a small smile. "You are welcome, Hook." The Curate stood, his simple gold robe soaked and clinging to the long, slender form.

Hook moved from the water, taking a towel and offering it to the Curate.

The Curate took it and began to dry him, ignoring his own wet clothes in favor of Hook's skin. The touches were careful, especially around his wounds. He blushed, looking down. The Curate made him feel... safe. It unnerved him, unsettled the things he believed.

"Are any of the wounds especially painful, Hook?"

He nodded, sighed softly. "The one behind my sacs, Curate. It burns."

"Then I had better take a proper look. Infection is a nasty business and I would hate for you to be in pain needlessly."

He nodded, unsure what a proper look entailed.

"Hands and knees on the bed, legs slightly spread." Sint removed his own robe and dried himself off.

Hook moved back toward the bedroom, assuming the position. It occurred to him that he should feel sexual, should feel perverse. Instead? He felt...

He shook his head at himself. He didn't know what he felt.

Sint hadn't bothered to put on a dry robe and he climbed up naked behind Hook, making a soft noise. The touch to his perineum was gentle, but it still made him hiss. "You might need stitches, Hook."

He shuddered, shaking his head. It was already so sore, so ugly.

One of Sint's hands stroked the small of his back in soothing circles. "I can do it, or I can ask Pan to come and do it. But it does need to be done, or you won't heal properly and may never find pleasure being fucked again."

"No one else." His shame was large enough without sharing it.

"Very well. Let me get a needle and thread."

He waited until Sint left the room to stand and begin pacing, trying to find the place inside himself to embrace the pain.

Sint was back in a moment, handing him a small piece of root. "Chew on that. It will numb the pain. It will also possibly bring a few hallucinations."

"Hallucinations?" He looked at Sint, very seriously. He had much anger within him and no wish to hurt the Curate. "I... You are strong? I would not want you harmed."

"I am, but I could bind you if you are worried. I will not hurt you, but I must close the wound."

So many decisions -- he could take the medicine and lose control, hold his control and hurt, refuse to allow the Curate's touch. Be bound, free...

Sint put a hand on his shoulder. "You will not take the root, but will remain absolutely still while I sew you. Assume the position."

He growled low, muscles clenching. He did not want to do this. He did not. This pain did not lead to beauty. "I will be terrifying by the time your gods are finished betraying me."

He moved onto the bed, head on his hands.

"I'm glad my making the decision has given you a chance to focus once more on how terrible it is to join the Gold Shard!"

"Join?" He moved, turning quick as a snake, ignoring the aches in his body. "I did not ask to join you. My master turned me aside. I did not ask to be found wanting. I am not a blank slate waiting for instruction. I have a will of my own. It matters not at all to me if this body fails, if it never finds pleasure again. Not a day ago I had worth and now I have none."

Sint hissed at him. "You keep saying how being here means you have no worth. Are you aware of the insult that is to the Gold Shard? To me? Very few are called to the Gold Shard, even fewer have the strength and the will to commit, to succeed here. I thought you were strong enough to be one of the few. So did Pan."

Sint drew himself up, looking down that long nose at him. "I have asked you to be here. I have been kind. I will not hear another insult or I will beat you with my own hands. If you hate it so much in our shard, you will leave."

He had been waiting to be told to leave; he hadn't expected it to hurt. "As you will it, Curate."

"No," hissed Sint. "My wish is that you stay. Your departure is in your own hands."

"I want to know why. Why I am here. Why, if I was judged unworthy twice over, I should believe myself worthy to belong here. Why, when you continue to speak of being called and of belonging, I am so lost."

Sint closed his eyes and took a breath and then another. When he opened his eyes again, the anger had faded from them.

"You were not judged unworthy, Hook -- you were not where you belonged." Reaching out, Sint touched his cheek. "You were sent here because Pan felt this was where you belonged. You have stayed because I feel the connection between us, I feel your strength and know it belongs here, with me."

"Why did I spend so long where I did not belong? Why did the gods lie?" He met Sint's eyes, finding an echo of his dream there.

"Perhaps there were lessons there for you to learn, Hook. Perhaps this strange beginning is a lesson for us both, myself as well as you."

"Part of me wants to believe you and part of me does not want to. I... I am weary, Master. Hurt deep inside and I do not know how to heal it."

"Then you should rest and let me try to help. No one needs to be alone at the temple, Hook. No one *should* be alone." Sint reached out a hand, offered it to him. "I did not believe it when you first came -- I did not know if you belonged here -- but I do believe it now, Hook. I believe it very strongly. Let me believe for both of us."

Hook looked at Sint's hand, sure and strong. His own fit with it, fingers twining together. He could think of nothing to say, so he simply held on.

Sint sewed up Hook's wound, chanting softly as he did so and soothing the hurt with a healing salve when he was done. He had been careful and the scarring would be at a minimum. He could not guarantee the same for Hook's inner wounds.

He helped Hook fall into slumber again, wove a chant to protect his dreams around him and then went to find Pan. He needed to speak to his friend, to feed from the calmness that was so much a part of Pan.

He was ashamed of the way he had spoken to Hook, the way his anger had controlled him.

Pandreas waited for him, quiet and still, welcoming him without a word, just wrapping him in pure peace.

He relaxed, letting go of his burdens and his control, head resting on Pan's shoulder. Pan's hands soothed him, held him, loved him with a simplicity that could not be denied.

He sighed deeply, eyes closed, peace filling him, renewing him.

"I am afraid for him, Pan. So much anger and pain. What if I cannot reach him?"

"You will. You must believe in him. He feels himself lied to, betrayed, unworthy. He is terrified that you will reject him, that he will be lost." Those empty eyes seemed to look through him. "There is something, is there not? Something within him that reaches out to you?"

"Yes, Pan. He will not be the only one who loses if I cannot reach him."

"How can I help you? What can I tell you about him that you need to know?"

"I know he has the strength to be one of the greatest submissives in the history of the Gold Shard. I do not know if I have the strength and the patience to reach him."

"You must have faith, dear one. What tries you the most?"

"His constant denigration of his path within the Gold Shard. I am used to the whispers and comments from others, but never from within the shard itself."

"Does he denigrate your path or himself?" Pan tilted his head. "You can gag him, keep him silent and listening. Or keep his eyes covered, his sight focused on your will and not the outside world?"

"I was hoping he would be able to focus on his own, but perhaps it was too much to ask too soon." He pet Pan's thigh. "I knew you would have valuable insights my friend."

Pan kissed his cheek. "He is trapped in web after web of lies. I should have seen. Roko should have seen. If it were not for Brash's attention? The web would have grown. You will free him; he simply does not understand yet."

"No, he believes I have ripped him from everything he loved and made him low in my second class shard." He tried to keep the bitterness from his voice, but he was frustrated and tired, even Pan's peace fleeting in the face of Hook's pain.

"No. He believes Brash and Roko have denied him, that you are acting from pity. He does not believe himself worthy of love."

"He is wrong." Of that Sint was sure.

He leaned over and gave Pan a kiss. "And I must return to him, guard his sleep -- it is the one place he has accepted me without question."

Pandreas' face lit up. "Oh? Then his spirit has found yours? Oh, there is hope."

He smiled and nodded. "Yes, my friend, there is. I just needed to be reminded it was there."

"Whatever you need from me is yours."

"Your support and peace is more than enough, old friend. I pray that I will not need more from you."

"Go to him. Remember that his pain is not that he feels you unworthy, but that he feels himself worthless."

He nodded and, recharged, made his way back to his shard and the troubled man beneath his roof.

Hook's dreams were peaceful, any disease stopped by a stern word, a look, his dream-master close and focused.

When he woke, it was reluctant, his dreams filled with a peace Hook could not deny.

The Curate sat next to him, legs folded over each other, meditating. Sint's eyes opened as he looked over at the man.

"Good... evening?" He looked about for the window, some indication.

Sint smiled. "Yes, good evening, Hook. How are you feeling?"

He shifted, thought. "Sore. Unsure. But my sleep was very good."

"Excellent. That at least is a start."

He nodded. "What..." He met those dark eyes, finding kindness there. "What happens now?"

"I believe it has been some time since you last ate. A meal is in order."

"I... I cook... poorly." He blushed dark. There were many skills he had -- he could carve, he could build, he could work leather. Cooking? Escaped him.

"I am good at eating overcooked food. Undercooked food. Food without spice. Food with too much spice... many of the initiates that have come through our doors have been unable to cook." Sint gave him a wink. "Perhaps I shall help you this one time."

He surprised himself with a short laugh. "For your own health as well as mine."

Chuckling, Sint stood and held a hand out to help him up. "You will learn. And I can survive on boiled water. I have done it before."

He shivered as he stood, the stitches between his legs strange, making each step odd and awkward.

"Do I dress?"

"Indeed, it is *much* safer in the kitchen." Sint's mouth twitched and he smiled.

He let himself chuckle, relax enough to smile back. "Sage advice."

It felt so odd, to be sharing himself in this way.

Sint led him to the kitchen. "What do you enjoy?"

"Sweet. I like sweet things best." He enjoyed fruits and rice, honeycakes.

"We'll find something to cook that is sweet then."

"What do you like?"

"Rice and asparagus with sweet teriyaki sauce is my favorite. I will teach you to make it."

Hook nodded, unsure what to do, what to say. Sint had measured out a bit of rice and water when they heard footsteps in the hallway, a priest of the Gold Shard appearing with his quiet initiate.

"Good evening, Curate. How does the day find you?"

He could feel the way the priest looked at him, curious, judging. It made him angry.

"It goes very well, Waln. I would like you to meet my novitiate. This is Hook." The Curate sounded... proud.

He nodded to Waln, who nodded back, a quiet pity in the familiar eyes. They had known one another when they were both initiates, had been friends. "Welcome to the Gold Shard, Hook. I hope you find a home here."

"Only the gods know, Waln." He lifted his chin, he would not submit to this man. "I am given to their will."

One of Sint's hands slid along his back, the touch subtle and gentle.

"Do you need anything, Waln? I believe I asked for privacy."

Waln nodded. "The main dining area is out of honey and I came to take a bowlful. Irit? Please draw off a bowl for me."

"Yes, master." The little thing moved and Hook felt the anger try to flare again, only to be moved by the Curate's touch, dissipated.

That touch remained until Waln and his initiate had gone. "I'm sorry, Hook. I asked for privacy to give you time to settle before you had to meet anyone."

"He was my friend, years ago. He is a good man." He sighed softly, head pounding. He wanted to... Actually he didn't know what he wanted. Maybe to stop wanting. "What should I do to help, Curate?"

"Fill the saucepan with water and put it on the fire. Once the water is hot we'll put in the rice. In the meantime, you can cut up fruit for a salad."

Hook nodded, putting the water on the fire and then picked up a knife, testing its edge against one finger. Sharp, well-balanced.

Sint filled the kettle and placed it also upon the fire and then joined him and began to peel a guava fruit, fingers deft, moving easily.

"You work well with a knife." He cut berries quickly, the sound of his blade chopping hypnotic.

"I have spent some time training with Dinae, learning his art. It is quite beautiful to watch, even more so to be involved in."

He nodded. "My mast... Curate Roko entertains Curate Dinae often."

"Yes, I imagine they are good friends."

Hook nodded. He supposed so. The last few days had shown him that people he'd thought were his friends were perhaps not. It was not a comfortable feeling.

"The Gold Shard is a fairly solitary path, Hook. It takes great will to submit one's life completely. Many of the other shards do not understand us, believe we are... weak and uninteresting compared to their wilder, more decorated shards. I assure you that it takes great dedication and belief in oneself to succeed here. Belief in one's master or subordinate. All pairs are passionate and intense for each other, but we..." Sint smiled at him. "We will be complete in ourselves you and I in a way others cannot understand."

He was caught in those warm eyes, suddenly and totally, Sint's presence within him, through him. He gasped, the knife slipping from his hand, falling to the board.

Sint's hand came up to cup his cheek, thumb stroking his lips. "You begin to see, Hook."

"I..." He wanted to run, to hide, to press close and be held. All of these needs worried him, confused him.

Still, those eyes. Those dark, warm eyes.

Sint bent and slowly brought their mouths together, lips touching, breath mingling.

Tremors started deep inside him, as if a war was being fought that he didn't understand, couldn't understand.

Sint's tongue slipped into his mouth, just for an instant and then Sint straightened again, smiling down at him.

He watched Sint for a long time, until the knowledge that he must seem a fool overrode his fascination, then he picked up the knife, cutting them enough berries to share.

They shared their meal of rice with teriyaki sauce, Sint explaining how best to prepare the simple sauce, followed by the fruits with honey drizzled on them and cups of dark tea. It was only after they had finished that Sint pointed out that Hook, despite his claims of not knowing how to cook, had prepared a good portion of the food on his own.

While they ate, Sint considered Pandreas' suggestions and decided to set them aside, Hook seemed calmer now, was responding well to him.

If he needed to, he would help Hook focus.

Until then, he was a patient man. "Ah, food shared, both in preparation and in consuming is delicious."

Hook nodded, eating lightly, eyes wandering, exploring.

"Is there something you would like to do when we have finished eating?"

"I... I don't know." Hook sighed. "I never expected to be here. I had a plan and my mind cannot seem to understand that I failed, that I must begin again."

Sint shook his head. "You did not fail, you were not on the right path and those who guided you failed to notice, *they* failed you."

"How... How did you know, then? How do you know your path is right?"

Sint chuckled as he remembered his early days. "Oh, I knew. I also did not want to be a part of the Gold Shard. The master here at the time was very old. Very set in his ways and... much revered."

Sint sighed. He had made many mistakes as an initiate, more as a Master. "When I became the Curate of the Gold Shard, I inherited my predecessor's novitiate. Poor Ton'al suffered until Pan found a place for him. I did not know how to deal with him. I had no connection to him." He took a sip of his tea. "I was sure I had been led astray."

Hook looked at him, nodded. "But you weren't?"

"No. Ton'al was not meant for me, but I was meant to be here, to be the Curate here. But my point is that my road was not clear, and many times I faltered, needed to be helped back onto the path." He reached for Hook, took his hand. "I hope to be your guidance, to be your help when you falter."

"How can I follow the path, Curate? I am not submissive as a rule. It is not a gift of mine."

"Then think on how great the reward will be for all the work you will have to put into it."

Hook laughed softly, the sound bittersweet. "You should have asked your gods for someone less troublesome."

"You mean boring?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

"I mean worthy and blessed."

"But I have someone worthy and blessed, Hook. Just because you do not feel it, does not make it any less true." He leaned in and kissed Hook again, having quite enjoyed their earlier contact. He could begin to crave this, knew he only did not already because he foolishly believed he was guarding his heart.

It was already given.

He could feel the war within Hook, the fight. He could see it in those mismatched eyes. He stroked a hand over Hook's head, let his tongue slide into his warm mouth for a moment and then ended the kiss.

"You are my own, Hook. And I have the patience to wait until you discover it to be true for yourself."

Hook blushed dark. "I... I don't know how to be someone's. I thought I did."

He stroked that hot cheek. "You will learn. I'm not going anywhere."

Hook closed his eyes. "Yes, Curate. I will try to not fail you."

"I see great strength in you, Hook. You will not fail either of us." He leaned forward again, sealing his words with a kiss.

Hook moaned, pushed into the kiss for a moment, giving him a hint of deep, wild passion before pulling away, lips parted. "I'll take the dishes away."

Sint let Hook get away with it, but as the man passed, he stroked his hand over the tight buttocks. Hook jumped, blinked over at him, and then disappeared into the kitchen.

Sighing and shaking his head, he reminded himself what he had just told Hook, that it was the hard fought battles that brought with them much joy.

He waited for Hook to return, but the man didn't.

And didn't.

And didn't.

He got up and discovered Hook was not in the kitchen.

The only place Hook could have gone without Sint seeing him was out to the courtyard, so Sint went out and there Hook was, standing in the rain, head raised to watch the storm roll in.

A flash of lightning illuminated the garden, Hook's painted skin, making him appear a living statue.

Hook didn't see him, hands reaching up as the wind began to blow, reaching for the chaos as if trying to draw it to himself.

Draw it in.

"You cannot take in the storm, Hook. It will ravage you. You must weather it instead, search for the calm at its center. At *your* center."

"That was not what we were taught. Open to the wind, feed on it. That the strong will fly."

"Be flung right into chaos is more like it. There is no place to belong in chaos -- it is in order that we find ourselves." He went and took Hook's hands. "Sit with me. We will meditate."

"I... Here? In the storm?" Hook's eyes were fastened to the skies, fingers twined with his, holding tight to him.

"Yes. We will carve out a piece of order in the chaos." It was what Hook needed.

Sint sat, keeping hold of Hook's hands and closed his eyes. "Match my breaths, Hook, I will not abandon you."

It took Hook time, the lightning distracting him again and again, but finally Hook fell into sync with him, breathing with him. The storm seemed to rage harder and harder, the chaos unwilling to let his novitiate -- his Hook -- go. He held tight to Hook's hands though, and kept his breathing loud and even, anchoring Hook to him.

The chaos could not have Hook.

He could feel it, the wonder when Hook's prayers joined to his own -- first tentative and then more and more strong. The thunder roared, the lightning slammed between the clouds, and Hook simply held to him.

The storm poured on them, wind lashing the rain against them and it mattered not. Together they were calm, at peace as they meditated. The storm seemed to rise to a crescendo, screaming with fury as he and Hook remained in their island of calm.

As quickly as it had come, the storm blew over -- chaos could not be sustained with none to feed upon.

Hook's eyes were wide, watching, wet. "Master."

He smiled and squeezed Hook's hands. "Yes, Hook."

"I... I want to come home. Please." The words cost so much for his strong one.

He nodded and let go of Hook's hands, crossed his arms over his chest and then spread them again, opening them to Hook. "You are welcome in the Gold Shard, Hook. You are welcome as my novitiate. Welcome home."

Hook nodded, moving into his arms with a soft sound, accepting his strength for the first time. "Thank you."

It was the strangest sensation, this feeling of having someone belong to him, of him belonging to someone else. No one had ever touched his spirit the way Hook did.

He wrapped his arms around Hook and whispered his reply. "You are most welcome, Hook. Most welcome."

The days passed quickly, his Master asking little of him, barring hours of meditation, healing, bathing. Dreaming.

Slowly and surely parts of him began to change -- he removed his collar from the Emerald Shard, his stitches were removed. One night he woke from a dream in tears, his fingers tearing at his face. His master stopped him, fingers held with his own as they fought the demons within him.

The next morning his master called him by Hokonnen and he left the name Hook behind as well.

He learned to cook, more than just rice and fruit and he and his master would work in tandem in the kitchen, the movements almost like a dance, becoming more intricate as the days passed.

One evening after supper was done and the dishes cleaned, their evening meditation finished, his master smiled at him. "Hokonnen, will you come to bed with me?"

"Yes, Master." He had become used to the peace, the simple truths they found together in their meditations. "I will."

"I would like to touch you this night, to find pleasure with you."

He looked into those dark eyes, finding love there. "Do you think the gods of pleasure will welcome me, Master?"

"I believe the gods of pleasure have been missing you, Hokonnen, and will welcome you with open arms."

Hokonnen nodded, moving into the circle of Sint's arms. "I would find pleasure with you. I would give myself to you."

Sint's arms held him tightly for a moment, almost stealing his breath. "I have waited to hear those words from you, my Hokonnen."

"I worried that I would never want to say them, but you..." He looked up, offering his heart. "You are my center, my path. I would wear your collar, your marks, your will and be proud."

Sint's nostril's flared. "Hokonnen. I will spend just from your words."

He dared to step closer, allow Sint to see his passion, his need. "Master."

"My Hokonnen."

Sint's mouth closed over his, a soft sound filling his mouth. He opened, eager and wanton, his passion kept in chains for too long. Sint's tongue swept into his mouth, the kiss not about exploring or tasting, but about need.

He felt the desire surge up inside him and he offered it, believing his master strong enough to accept him. Sint's hands slid to cup his head, tilting it, the kiss deepening. Hokonnen arched, hands stroking his master's stomach, sliding inside the gold robe.

Sint pressed close and then pulled away. "Come to our bed, Hokonnen, before our passion makes us forget where it is."

"Yes." He stepped closer, drawn to Sint's heat, entire focus on their connection.

Sint took another kiss and then another, walking them slowly toward the bedroom. He followed easily, knowing when the next step came and the next. Soon they were next to the bed and Sint pushed his robe off, hands moving over him, touching him with an intense thoroughness.

He moved into the touch, praying that his master find him pleasing, find him lovely. Sint moaned, cock hot, pushing from Sint's robes to press against his belly. He rippled, reaching for that hard shaft, stroking, pleasuring his lover.

"Hokonnen!" Sint's cry was a song to his heart.

He nodded, dropping to his knees to pleasure the long, heavy cock.

Sint chuckled and long fingers slipped beneath his chin, tilting his face up. "Next time you will wait until I ask you to pleasure me."

He met Sint's eyes, surprised, suddenly reminded that his lover was the Curate of the Golden Shard. "Oh."

The look in Sint's eyes was still warm, still full of love. "Please, Hokonnen, pleasure me."

"As you will..." He dared the tease, happy, playful. "Master."

Sint laughed, his face brightening.

He threw himself into the act of sucking his master, head bobbing, fingers rubbing and stroking Sint's thighs. Sint gasped, hands dropping to his shoulders, holding on. So hot, so thick, his master's cock was pure heat on his tongue.

Sweet words rained down on him, Sint singing his praises to the gods. He swallowed, the praise echoing within him. He could feel Sint's eyes on him, heavy and good, like the hands that held onto his shoulders, Sint leaning upon his strength as the thighs beneath his fingers began to tremble.

His beautiful lover. Master. Friend. Sint. He swallowed hard, taking all of Sint in.

Sint's cries rose to the heavens and fell back down again to blanket him as heat shot into his mouth and down his throat. His mouth continued moved, working and cleaning Sint's shaft.

Sint's hands left his shoulders, sliding to cup his cheeks. "That was beautiful, Hokonnen."

He nodded, breath slowing. "You are."

Sint's smile was warm, his eyes full of love. "I am not the only one."

Then Sint's hands moved to his arms and encouraged him up. "In the bed now, before I fall into it in an undignified manner."

Hokonnen chuckled and stood, the gift of his master's humor thrilling as always. "Undignified Curate? Surely not."

"One would hope not, but you have my knees awfully weak, Hokonnen." His cheek was cupped, a soft kiss pressed to his lips. "And you taste like me. Get in bed, Hokonnen, I will have your taste on my lips as well."

He moaned, nodded, slid into the soft sheets, cock full and needy.

Sint shrugged his robes off and climbed into the bed, crawling over him and bringing their mouths together with a warm purr. He pushed up against Sint, rocking, hands exploring the long body.

Sint's hands were doing exploring of their own, but where before any touches had been to learn him, these seemed bent on arousal, the touches alternately light and hard, stroking over his skin.

He gasped, oddly surprised. He had known he loved Sint, that he belonged with his master, but this? This need?

He had never imagined.

Sint's mouth left his, began traveling the path already mapped out by his fingers. Hot and wet, leaving a trail of longing behind it, Sint's tongue drove him to pleasure. His skin was healed, the scarred flesh of his nipples kissed, touched. It was as if they were sacrifices, an offering to his new path.

Sint's mouth moved on him, slowly taking his master down to the center of his need. Sint's fingers were there first, exploring, holding, touching. His eyes were wide, soft sounds pouring out of him.

Then Sint's tongue touched his cock, tip pressing into him.

A bright sensation flooded him, sharp and heated and necessary. "Master!"

Sint purred and took the head of his cock in, sucking strongly. He arched, heels thrumming on the mattress, the moonlight on the walls making the gold shine. Sint's head began to bob on his cock, fingers playing gently along his balls, on the skin beyond them, now healed.

"Yours. Marked as yours." He twisted, pushing deep, desire riding him.

Sint spoke around his prick, the words muffled by his own flesh.

He bucked, seed pouring from him, heated and burning, pleasure denied for weeks.

Sint drank him down, took him inside his master's body. Another hum vibrated his prick and then Sint pulled off, smiling up at him. "You taste like you are my own."

"Yours." He stretched, moaning low. "Your own."

"Yes. My own Hokonnen."

Sint smiled and kissed one of his hips, finger playing along his crack, touching the heat hidden there.

Hokonnen shifted and spread, hips moving, trying to tempt that touch.

Sint laughed softly. "So pushy."

He smiled. They had not resolved the submission issues between them. "Need you."

"I know. I will not leave you needing, this I promise." Then Sint was encouraging him to turn over and rise up onto his hands and knees.

The last time he had been in this position, his master had been healing him, carefully removing the stitches holding his skin together. There was a charge in the air now that had not been there then, a trembling, waiting feeling that exploded into pleasure as Sint's tongue pressed against his entrance.

His muscles rolled, his cry echoing through the room.

"I knew you would taste like this. So... necessary."

"Master. Master, I... You are my heart."

Sint moaned at that and that hot tongue pushed right into his body, piercing him.

"Oh..." His head raised, thighs sprawling, riding that heat.

Again and again, Sint's tongue pierced him and then it was replaced by two fingers, both slick, stretching him wide. He rocked back, fucking himself on the touch, reveling on the touch of his master.

"Such perfect heat." Sint's fingers slid away and the blunt, hardness of Sint's cock replaced them.

"Yes..." He arched, taking Sint in, low cry filling the air.

Hard fingers wrapped around his hips, pulling him back further onto Sint's cock.
"Hokonnen..."

"Yes. Master. Your own." He pushed up, riding Sint's cock.

Sint growled softly, the hands on his hips tightening, pulling him into each thrust. The stretch, the burn, the ache -- it was all so good, so perfect.

One of Sint's hands slid around to grab his cock, stroking him. His own hand joined Sint's, joining them into a circle. Sint shifted and then shifted again, finding his gland and hitting it with each thrust. Everything within him jerked and went tight, his cry filling the air over and over.

"Come for me, Hokonnen. Give me your pleasure."

"Yes..." He shot, eyes wide and empty, sight filled with gold.

Even as he emptied, Sint's pleasure filled him, heat pushing deep inside him.

He hummed, the circle of Sint's arms perfect.

A soft kiss pressed against his neck. "I love you, Hokonnen."

"I know. You have my heart, Sint, my spirit."

"Then I am a very lucky man. Missing only one thing in life."

"What are you missing? What do you need?"

"Something only you can give me, Hokonnen." Sint kissed his neck again and slid out, settling next to him.

He turned, meeting Sint's eyes. "I would give you all I am."

"And that is all I ask." Sint chuckled. "It sounds so simple, doesn't it? I just want one thing. Everything."

He leaned in, kissed his lover, unsure what he could do to ease Sint. "I am yours."

"I know. Be at ease, Hokonnen, I am happy and you are where you belong."

Sint kissed him softly. "And one day we will find the balance between us that the Gold Shard needs."

He met Sint's eyes and nodded, for the first time, believing they would.

The Ivory Shard

The sun was casting long shadows by the time Master Pan had finished the story of Sint and Hokonnen.

Chulu lay curled up against Pan's chest, comfortable and warm. He looked up into the sightless eyes. "Are we like that Master? Will we praise the gods with our love, too?"

"We will, Chulu. We will come together, our voices, our love a prayer." Pan looked as if he could not be more happy.

He reached up and touched Pan's cheek. "May I have a kiss, Master?"

"Oh, you may have as many kisses as you would like, dear one." Pan's lips were soft, warm, welcoming.

Chulu moaned softly, the gentle touches waking places deep inside him. Pan offered him a sweet, low sound, one long hand slipping within his robe, stroking his belly. He shivered, cock beginning to rise, feelings growing inside him.

"Would you share you pleasure with me?" The words were whispered, breathed against his lips.

"Oh. Oh, yes, Master." He nodded, pushed close.

Pandreas opened their robes, drew them together, skin-to-skin. He moaned. Oh, it felt so good. Pandreas' skin was warm and silky.

"Sweet love." His lips were taken in another kiss, Pandreas' tongue sliding in.

His mouth and eyes both opened wide, hands reaching for Pandreas' shoulders to hold on. Pandreas' care, love, poured over him in waves, seemed to fill him. He rubbed against Pandreas, body moving instinctively.

"Yes..." Pandreas settled him, hips rocking, shifting, their shafts sliding together.

He felt so alive, every nerve in his body responding to Pandreas, spreading the pleasure.

"Mmm... the gods sing for us, sweet love. They chant your name."

"M--my name? No, it must be yours."

"No. You are fine. Beloved. Beautiful. My own."

"Oh, Master." He pushed up against Pandreas, hands sliding on warm skin.

"Yes. We will share our pleasure. Our hope. Our..." Pandreas' head fell back, throat working. "Prayers..."

"Yes, Master." Chulu moaned, reaching up to lick at Pandreas' neck, tasting his skin. Oh. Sweet. Warm. So soft. Pandreas' hair was like silk, pouring around him.

His hands moved on Pandreas' skin, on the silk of his hair. Oh, it was all so big, so beautiful. The soft, deep purr was unlike anything he'd ever heard before. It sent the pleasure through his body, all the way to his toes and his fingertips, all through him. It made him whimper and push closer to Pandreas.

"Mmm... yes." They rocked together, Pandreas' heat amazing, addictive.

He gazed up into his master's strange eyes, sure he could see his own pleasure there, inside Pandreas. Pleasure poured through him, one wave after another, so hot, so sweet.

He began to shake with it, his shaft rubbing against Pandreas, his balls tight against his body.

"That's right. That's right. Come for me." Pan's fingers tightened, drew him close.

"Master!" As if his body had waited only for Pan's command, the pleasure spilled from him, making him shake and collapse against his master.

"Yes..." An answering heat joined his, spreading on his belly.

"Oh, Master." He buried his face in Pan's neck, holding on.

"Home. Home, my Chulu. My own."

"Yours, Master Pandreas. Oh, yours. Yours." He closed his eyes and let his heart speak. "I love you."

"I love you, my Chulu. My heart."

He pushed closer still, he was never letting go of his master, his Pandreas. The way Pandreas' arms circled him, he thought his master felt the same way.

And more than ever he was so glad he had followed his heart to come here.

They were due to latemeal at Brash's shard and Pan was eager to share the beauty that was his novitiate with his dearest friend, his heart-brother.

The Onyx Shard was lovely, cool and dark, comforting in a way that few understood. It soothed him, Brash's presence throughout.

He smiled at his sweet Chulu. "Are you ready for late meal?"

Chulu's hand slipped into his and his Chulu took a breath. "Yes, Master."

"Here we are friends, brothers, followers on the same path." He smiled. "Remember, though, the Sapphire Shard will be here and they follow the path of bonds."

"The path of the bonds, Master?"

His Chulu's curiosity, the way he soaked up knowledge about the different shards was beautiful.

Pandreas drew his initiate to the bench in the garden. Perhaps they had long enough for him to explain.

The Sapphire Shard

Bron performed the stretches of on-tu, centering himself, toning his body. He did it four times a day without fail. It was his routine, his meditation, a joy.

Once a day he performed the on-tu in the center courtyard of the temple, Pan having asked him to lead the exercises for all who wished to partake of them. It had been his pleasure to share the physical meditation with his brothers on the path.

Today was a good day.

He could tell, he felt it in every breath he took.

He would make art of his initiates today. Perhaps of his priests as well.

Of course, that thought came immediately before a loud crash and a billow of smoke from the Ivory Shard. Pandreas came out first, carried by a tall, gangly boy with a shock of red hair and a panicked look on his face. As they all watched in surprise, Pan was dropped to the ground, the lad running back in, stumbling over the stoop and crashing to the ground before Pan's cat came running out, whiskers smoldering.

Bron was frozen for a half second and then he ran, along with the others in the courtyard. He saw Brash reach Pan and several others go into the building. His focus was on the red-headed boy.

He went to the door way and turned him over. "Hello?"

Eyes the color of the summer sky blinked at him. "I was cleaning the chimney. It went... badly."

Bron put his head back and laughed. "I would say it did indeed." He helped the boy to sit up. "And then you found the floor the hard way."

The boy nodded, rubbing his bruised nose. "I did and... Master Pandreas!"

He nodded and turned to see Brash helping Pandreas up. "He is well."

The boy stood, stumbling over his own feet as he careened toward the very very pale and very very shaken Curate.

Bron steadied the boy, held him. "Brash has him. Perhaps we should watch from here."

"I didn't mean to hurt anything. I was trying to help." As unsteady as a newborn colt, the boy was breathtaking, energy constant, moving and sparking.

He stroked one arm. "I know and I'm sure Pan does as well. Curate Brash," he called out. "How is our Ivory Curate?"

Brash nodded. "Shaken, but whole."

"And my clumsy initiate? Is Turik well?" Pandreas offered over a smile as Turik blushed nearly purple.

Bron chuckled and thumped Turik on the back. "The boy is just fine. And perhaps not your initiate any longer."

That energy would be amazing bound to his will, to the will of the gods. And the temple would be safer...

Brash laughed and Lux walked by, pointed nose in the air. "Thank the gods. I lived in fear Pan would foist him onto my good china."

He bristled for the boy. "No, I envision far greater things for him than being a table, Curate Lux."

Turik shrank down, embarrassment pouring from the boy. "Forgive me, Masters. I didn't mean to. I'll clean it, Master Pandreas. I will. I'm sorry."

"The Sapphire Shard will help, Turik." He glared at Lux and then shook himself. Oh my. He was not one to take offence at any of the other Curates.

Lux arched an eyebrow, smiled. "Interesting."

"You're too kind. So kind. Such lovely eyes. Oh. I have to go." Turik hurried into the Ivory Shard, Pandreas wincing as something else inside broke.

"Bron... Take your Turik home. Please."

He laughed and gave Pan a hug. "I will."

He turned back to the Ivory Shard and put his head in the door. "Turik. Come with me, please?"

"I... Should I? Shouldn't I help?" Still Turik came to him, dust coating the boy's hair.

"I will send the initiates to help, you must come with me, be properly welcomed into the Sapphire Shard."

"Me? Honestly? A place? I..." The boy leaned close, almost knocking their heads together. "You should know I'm very clumsy and I talk a lot and people get very tired of me."

"Well I have ways of keeping you from being clumsy, from talking. And I do not get tired of beautiful birds with red curls very often."

The boy was a delight. Someone dangerous, but a delight.

"No?" He received a quick, bright smile. "Should I get my things? I don't have many things at all because I left them behind but things *find* me."

He laughed softly. "Things *find* you?"

Turik nodded, blue eyes dancing. "Stones and feathers and pebbles and flowers and beetle shells."

"You, Turik, are something special. I will ask one of the initiates to make sure they get your things from Curate Pandreas." He put his hand in the small of Turik's back and led him toward home.

Turik kept looking at him, wide-eyed and excited, almost bouncing, happy, nervous chatter filling the air.

Bron chuckled. Oh, such life and joy coming into his shard, into his life. He was a very lucky man.

Oh.

Oh.

Someone wanted him.

Him.

It was amazing and stunning and a little scary, but not as scary as when Master Pan's fireplace collapsed or as scary as Master Lux's face during the last tea he tried to serve.

Cold tea was nasty, but safe.

Much safer than hot.

He was talking to Master Bron, or part of him was anyway, the part that wasn't noticing the pretty flowers or the part that wasn't reminding him he was hungry or the part of him that wasn't singing thankful songs to the gods.

Master Bron laughed, the sound like one of his songs, bright and joyful. "You need to take a breath, Turik."

"Do I? Oh. I do." He stopped, breathed deep enough that it made him dizzy. "Oh. Master Nidan said that to me once, but said my spirit did not belong in his shard. He was kind, though, very kind."

Bron nodded. "The Ruby Shard requires great discipline, quiet."

"What... what do you require? Am I it? I mean, can I try to be?"

"You are it indeed, Turik. You are all I require."

He bounced, daring to kiss Bron's cheek. "Thank you... Master? Curate? Sir?"

Bron beamed at him. "Master will do. Bron when we are alone and not practicing the Sapphire arts."

He nodded, smiled, then his eyes were caught by a bird flying overhead, dark and huge with a white head. Pretty!

Oh. Ow. Rock.

Before he hit the ground, strong arms caught him, pulling him against Bron's strong body.

"Oh. Thank you. Sorry." Oh. Warm. Strong. Sure. Turik blinked into Bron's eyes, more than a little stunned. "Clumsy."

"Just a little." Bron didn't look upset though, eyes smiling.

He smiled back, he couldn't help it. "I think my feet are too big."

Bron's smile increased. "Or perhaps they're too far away from your head."

Oh, that made him laugh, made him happy. "Could be. Yes, that could be."

The Sapphire Shard was beautiful, the color bright and reflecting the sky.

"Welcome to the Sapphire Shard, Turik."

"Look at it. So beautiful..." He gasped, smiled. "Thank you."

"It will be my pleasure." Bron looked so convinced.

"What... what should I do? I'll be careful, honestly. I try to be good."

"I will help you become more aware of your body, Turik, and I'm sure we'll do fine together."

Bron's hand stroked over his back. He smiled, stretching under the touch.

Bron chuckled quietly. "Not that you are entirely unaware of your body. This is a good thing."

"You just feel good and your laugh... it's like the songs I hear in my dreams."

"It is a good sign; that you dreamed of me."

Bron brought him inside. "This is your home now."

He looked around, vibrating with excitement, with nerves. He was scared to touch, to ruin anything.

Bron smiled gently. "Remember this. In the Sapphire Shard, we value people over material items."

"I... Thank you. I don't want to ruin this. I do, you know? Ruin things."

"Things are unimportant here, Turik. It is the souls and hearts we cherish." Bron's hands were warm on his cheeks.

"Oh... " He swallowed, heard pounding, caught in Bron's eyes.

"May I kiss you, Turik?" That deep voice was soft, low, warm.

"Oh. Yes. Yes, please. I'd love to feel... I mean, if you want me I... I mean." Oh, Turik, shut *up*. Shut up before you're sent home.

Bron laughed, but not *at* him, not at all. And then that smiling mouth pressed against his, soft and warm. Everything stopped for a moment, went still and clear and perfect.

Oh.

Bron's dark eyes watched him, the lips pressed against his moving gently.

He stood still, just a little stunned, then the stillness unnerved him and he stepped back, the world moving again. "Did... did you feel that, too?"

"Feel what, my dove?" Bron stroked his cheek again.

"The world stopped." He blushed dark. "Okay, that sounded silly. I'm sorry. I'm just. Your kiss was. This place is lovely. I like blue. I do."

"I felt our connection, yes." Bron drew close again, giving him another kiss.

He reached out for that heat, the sweet stillness. Bron's tongue slipped past his lips, pushing into his mouth. He gasped, lips parting, eyes wide. It was. Bron was. Oh.

A low hum sounded between them and the hands on his cheeks tilted his head, tongue pushing deeper. Oh, he could stay here forever and ever, held close. Bron was... beautiful.

The kiss flowed from one into another and another, Bron's taste filling his mouth. Turik groaned, shaft hard and aching, passion flowing through him.

"Turik," murmured Bron as he ended the kiss. "There is much to see at the Sapphire Shard. Would you like to see my bedroom first?"

He nodded, entire body throbbing, aching in a way he'd never imagined.

Bron's eyes held his, the bright smile aimed right at him as he was led to a room with large round bed in it covered in cushions. There were gauzy curtains everywhere, billowing and blowing in the breeze, making the room seem almost as if it were underwater. When they sat together on the bed, it moved beneath him.

He jumped up, squeaking, reaching for Bron's hands. "It moved!"

Bron laughed, the sound making his belly warm. "Yes. It is a skin filled with water. It is the most delightful sensation."

"Oh. Oh. A skin? Water? Oh, I might break it. My... I'm bony. It looks so fun..."

Bron's laughter increased. "Don't worry about breaking it. And it is fun. Join me." Bron slipped off his sandals and robe, the brown body hard and muscled, glorious.

"Oh... Look at you. You... Can I touch you? I mean, I just want to feel."

Bron beamed for him and lay back on the bed, making it move. "I am yours."

"Mine?" He scooted up onto the bed, still in his robe, fingers sliding along Bron's body.

Bron nodded and rippled beneath his touches. "Yours, Turik. I know you can feel it -- you did when we kissed."

He nodded, distracted by the motions of Bron's body. Yes. His. So beautiful. So strong. And the scent? Oh.

Bron hummed, one hand sliding through his curls. "Will you disrobe for me, Turik?"

He nodded, then stopped. "I'm not beautiful like you are. Is that all right?"

Bron reached and touched his cheek again. "No, you are beautiful in your own way and that is more than all right."

Turik nuzzled into Bron's touch, then slowly, self-consciously bared himself for Bron.

Bron hummed, purred. "You look fine to me, Turik. Quite fine."

Oh. He blushed dark, pressing his head against the sheets. "Thank you."

"And you do not need to hide from me. Hopefully soon you will know that."

His head was tilted, Bron pressing their lips together again in another drugging kiss. Turik couldn't resist the urge to touch and rub, to press close and feel. Bron rolled onto his back, pulling Turik on top.

Oh. Hot. Big. Good.

Turik rubbed and rocked, the feelings within him huge. Bron's hands were large and warm and left tingles behind on his skin as they traveled along his back.

"Master. I... I'll come on you, if you don't stop. It's so big. So good."

"I hope you do come on me, Turik. I'm counting on it."

"Oh!" Those words were... the thought of his seed on the dark skin was... fascinating. Arousing. So good.

Bron purred again, tongue tracing his lips. "You are delicious, Turik."

"Delicious. Oh..." He groaned, moving faster, shaft so hard it hurt.

One of Bron's hands slid down to his ass, cupping it, holding it, encouraging his movements.

"Master!" He met Bron's eyes, the pleasure more than he could stand, seed pouring from him.

Bron looked so happy that he came, so pleased.

"Th...thank you. Thank you." He leaned in, kissed Bron's smile.

"It was my pleasure. Very much my pleasure."

"Oh, I'm glad you saw me today. What if Master Pandreas had found another home for me."

Bron smiled. "That would not have happened; Pan is very astute when it comes to placing initiates."

"Oh, good. I want to be here. With you. A lot. Well, not a lot of you. A lot of want."

"Not a lot of me?" Bron pouted, eyes just twinkling.

"Oh. I want all of you, but that's so greedy and there's so many good people and I'm just one people. Person. And not good all the time -- have you noticed that you're *very* warm?"

Bron chuckled and took his hand. "Not warm -- hot." His hand was drawn down to Bron's cock.

"Oh..." He smiled, he couldn't help himself. It felt so good. "Yes. Hot. And soft, but hard."

Bron hummed. "Your touch is wonderful, Turik."

He just hummed, feeling whole and home for the first time ever.

"I would very much like to make love to you," Bron told him, brown eyes holding his, intent and so hot.

"Would you? I never have before, is that all right?"

"More than all right. I would be honored to share your virginity with the gods." Bron's hand squeezed his ass.

"Will it hurt much?"

"I will take my time and it should not hurt and after, I will bind your limbs so that you might focus on what we have done together, what it means for us to have joined."

"I'll try to do it right, Master." Oh. Bind him. That sounded. Oh.

"Just follow your heart, Turik and you will do it right."

Bron's mouth closed over his again, hot tongue pushing in between his lips. He opened, wrapping around Bron with a happy cry. Those brown eyes watched him as warm fingers slid over his skin, discovering him. It made him ache, made him shiver, to be seen.

Bron's tongue pushed into his mouth again and again, the movements a promise of what was to come. Turik relaxed, caught in the rhythm of Bron, the heat and pleasure.

He was eventually pushed to his back and Bron's mouth left his in favor of exploring his jaw line. Bron's warm fingers moved over his skin, slowly and carefully tracing his collarbones, shoulders, chest.

"Bron..." He twisted, moaned, heat filling him.

"Yes, Turik?" Bron asked, mouth moving down to slide over his neck.

"Feels so warm, so good."

"It gets better, Turik, I promise you." Bron's smile was beaming and then his neck was being kissed again, licked, Bron's tongue *hot*.

He moaned, stretching, needing to move so badly.

His collarbone was traced, Bron's tongue dipping into the hollow there and flicking back and forth over his skin. His gasp echoed, body pushing up into Bron's and rubbing. Bron purred and moved on, finding his nipple with that hot tongue, sliding over the suddenly hard flesh.

"Master!" He twisted, panting and aching deep inside.

Bron looked up at him. "Yes, Turik?"

"I. That. Oh. Big. Please."

Bron chuckled, the sound warm, sliding over him like a wave of warm water. Then his other nipple was taken into the heat of Bron's mouth, was sucked. Hard. He arched, crying out, world going bright and beautiful.

His legs were spread, Bron's hand sure between them, stroking the insides of his thighs, the base of his cock and his balls.

Oh, so good, so *right*. He would offer this man anything.

Bron's thumb slid along the small, tight place where his body opened. He tensed without even thinking, then relaxed. Bron cared for him. He knew that somehow. Over and over Bron's thumb slid against him until his skin screamed from the gentle touch, his nerves so alive.

"Please, master. Please. I need... something."

"Yes." Very gently, Bron's thumb pushed into him. *Into* him!

"Oh. Oh, I... Oh." He blinked, more curious than worried.

"Sh. Sh." Bron's breath slid against his belly as that thumb moved slowly, pushing in and coming out again, in and then out.

His hips began to move, shift in time with the touch. Bron hummed, mouth sliding on his belly, his cock nudging Bron's chin. Nothing had ever felt so heated, so perfect.

And then Bron's thumb disappeared and two fingers, slippery and hot, pushing into him. But before he had time to absorb what was happening, Bron's head turned, mouth closing over his cock. His cry filled the air, pleasure and stretch huge, overwhelming. Perfect.

Bron's hum vibrated through his cock, seemed to meet the fingers inside him and make them vibrate as well. Pleasure poured through him, hips jerking and shifting, seed spilling. Bron drank him down, fingers still moving inside him, stretching him.

He panted, blinking up into the blue of the ceiling. The bed shifted beneath him, rolled him on a gentle wave as Bron moved to kneel between his legs.

"Master." He reached up, stroked Bron's face.

Bron smiled down at him, bent and kissed him. "Are you ready, Turik? Ready to be filled."

"With you, Master. Please."

Bron kissed him again and then heat, blunt and sure, pushed against him.

So big, wider than anything he could have imagined. "Master..."

"Breathe, Turik, and let me in."

He took a deep, shivering breath, lips parting as Bron pushed deeper.

"Oh, my Turik... so tight, so hot. You are divine."

"So full. Full of you." He shook, stretching, shifting.

"Yes. Yes, my Turik. You feel amazing."

Bron began to move, gazing down at him as he was filled with heat and silken hardness again and again. He didn't think he would be able to stay in one piece, not at all.

And that was when Bron's hand wrapped around his cock. He bucked, moaning low, nerves firing and hot.

"Yes, my Turik. So strong and lovely." Harder and faster, Bron's body pushed into him.

"Y...yours. Bron. Master. Please." He thought he might die. Or fly. Or explode. Or something.

"Let go, Turik. Let our pleasure be offered to the gods."

"Yes..." The room went bright and his body offered itself eagerly.

The sound of Bron's pleasure was joyful, the heat of his seed filling Turik.

He shivered, breathing hard, eyes closed. "Master..."

Bron purred, the sound echoing deep inside him. "Yes, Turik?"

"I... I would be yours forever. Forever and always."

"Yes. You are."

Bron sealed the words with a kiss, tongue pushing into his mouth once again. He opened, shivering, sensations filling him completely.

As the kiss ended, Bron's heat slid out of his body, his Master lying next to him and pulling him against the warm body. He cuddled in, fingers traveling aimlessly, energy building inside him, built by pleasure.

Bron hummed happily and stroked his belly, carded fingers through his hair, kissed his shoulder softly.

"Feels good. You feel good. I mean, to me. You feel good."

Bron chuckled and nodded. "And you feel good to me, too, Turik. I am so happy you made the chimney explode today."

Turik blushed dark, but laughed, hiding his face in Bron's shoulder.

He could feel Bron's smile against the top of his head. "I would not have missed finding you for the world, Turik. And I imagine the sooner I did find you, the less wrecked Curate Pandreas' shard would be." Bron's chuckle vibrated against him.

He nodded, grinned sheepishly. "Trouble finds me."

Bron laughed. "Yes, something about the way Master Pandreas asked for me to take you home suggested that."

"I don't mean to. I don't. I try so hard, master." He looked up, met Bron's eyes.

"I know, Turik. And as I told you -- things here are just that. Things. People are far more important." Bron's eyes twinkled suddenly. "And I have ways to keep you from finding trouble."

"But do you have ways to keep trouble from finding *me*?"

"We'll have to find out."

He was being kissed again, Bron pushing him onto his back and reaching up into the drawer beside the bed. He watched wide-eyed, curious, unaccountably nervous.

Bron smiled at him. "Sh. Sh. Turik. I will not harm you."

"Yes, Master." He smiled back, his trust easily found.

It was a length of silk rope that Bron removed from the drawer, white and soft, but very strong looking. "As you know the Sapphire Shard follows the path of binding to make our prayers to the gods."

He nodded. "I have never... I mean, I have not trained with your priests."

Bron nodded. "Good. No one else will touch you but me."

His hands were taken and put together, Bron wrapping the rope carefully around his wrists.

He watched, chewed his bottom lip. "Why... What prayer will we find here?"

"Stillness. Pleasure. When you are tied you will be able to focus on all your limbs, on my touches."

His elbows were bent, hands bound to his forearms.

"Still... I'm worried I will disappoint you."

Bron stopped and smiled, cupped his face. "That, my Turik, would be impossible."

"Oh. Honestly?"

"Yes, my Turik, honestly."

His legs were put together, Bron looping the rope around his ankles.

His toes curled, muscles shifting. "Will you leave me like this? Alone?"

"Sometimes. But not today."

His knees were bent, feet tied to his legs so that he was in a fetal position. "Not today."

He began to shiver, the ropes holding him tight. "I don't know if I can do this, master. My heart is pounding."

Bron lay down facing him, fingers stroking his cheeks, a soft kiss pressed to his lips. "Why?"

"I... the ropes are everywhere. I can't move. It..." He was at Bron's mercy, Bron's will, his body held.

"That is the idea, Turik. I want you to look into my eyes and to focus on the stillness of your body."

He nodded, struggling against the ropes for a moment before his eyes met Bron's, held.

"The more you struggle, the tighter the rope pulls. It is a hard lesson to learn, but one that will guide you to stillness, to peace." Bron peppered his face with kisses.

"Master." The kisses distracted him, eased him. So good.

"Right here, Turik. Right here to guide you."

Bron's tongue slid into his mouth, sure and hot, tasting him.

Oh...

He opened to the kiss, let Bron in to take anything, everything. Bron's fingers slid on his skin, warming him, pushing beneath his bound arms to tease his nipples, making them rise up, hard.

He blinked, gasped into the kiss. Oh.

Bron teased him, pinching and rubbing his hardened nipples. He whimpered, body tugging at the ropes, cock filling again.

"There is nowhere to go, Turik, nothing to do but focus on me, on your own pleasure."

"Yes... Yes, Master. I'm trying." So hard. He was trying so hard.

"I know." One of Bron's hands slid down his belly and wrapped around his cock. "Let me help you."

"Oh." His eyes filled with tears. He was not being criticized, but loved, helped, touched.
"Yours."

Bron kissed away his tears. "Yes, Turik. Mine. And I am so proud of you, so happy."

The hand around his cock moved, stroking up and down.

He would follow this man forever. Always.

He was kissed again, his cock squeezed and rubbed, made to feel so good.

"Love." Bron kissed him again and again; made him breathless.

Each kiss was interrupted by a word. "Yes. Love. Belonging. Quiet. Joy. Knowledge. All are yours. Ours."

"Yours. Master." He could hear the gods singing within him.

"Yes. Oh, yes. Feel the joy. Feel the prayers. We give ourselves and our art to the gods."
Bron's thumb slid across the tip of his cock, pushed into it and spread the liquid around.

"I do. Master. Master, I *hear*!" His eyes went wide, unseeing, caught.

"Yes. Yes. Give yourself, my Turik. Let the gods have your offering."

His heart pounded, seed pouring from him, his entire being filled with prayer.

"So beautiful. Such prayers, such love. Oh, Turik. The gods were drunk on happiness the night they created you."

"Love. Master. Thank you." He believed. Truly, intensely.

Bron's kiss was sweet and long. "Thank you, Turik. Your love is truly a gift."

"Your gift."

"Yes. Mine." His master's happy voice grew fierce for a moment as the word was repeated. "Mine."

He relaxed in the ropes that held him, nodding and happy. Bron's arms pulled him close, held him as surely as the ropes, the happiness flowing between them.

Turik breathed easy, home and safe and sound in his master's arms.

Bron had a happy soul, but ever since Turik had entered his life and joined him, he was happier than he had ever been.

His smile was never very far from his face, even when there were crashes and bangs and yelling and Turik came to him dusty or splashed with many colors, wet, singed, Turik's head low. Trouble did indeed find his Turik, but to Bron that was just part of his beauty, his gift.

Turik was a sweet and kind lad, who never meant any harm to anyone and his spirit shone.

And he was Bron's life, his greatest joy.

Bron walked through the courtyard, ready to begin the on-tu in a few moments.

"Bron!" The shout was shrill, furious, Lux dragging Turik by the hair, his beloved boy spattered in filth and shards of glass and leaves. "I will not have this creature of yours disturbing my shard. He fell from the tree into the courtyard where the initiates were training. If you cannot keep him contained, I will complain to the Onyx Shard."

Turik's eyes were horrified, terrified. "Please, Curate. I'm sorry. I meant no harm. I will make amends."

Bron reached for his Turik. "Unhand him immediately, Lux."

"He is a menace, Bron. Graceless and troublesome."

"Tshaw. He is a dear sweet boy, eager to help, to find the joy in life." He retrieved Turik from Lux's grasp, hands moving over the lovely skin, frowning as he found glass embedded in Turik's flesh.

"Forgive me, Master. Please. There was a ribbon in the tree. Malichai's ribbon." A pale blue strand was stained and wet, held tight in Turik's hand. "His master gave it to him."

Lux rolled his eyes. "And a ribbon was worth destroying my courtyard?"

Pandreas came to the clearing, one hand on Sint's arm. "Is there a problem, Bron?"

"Not at all. A few things were destroyed. They can be replaced. Turik is only mildly injured and Malichai will not have to tell his Master he lost that which meant the most to him because it was gifted to him. All will be well if Lux will accept Turik's sincerely offered apology." No one understood his dear Turik.

Lux sighed, looking at Turik. "You are trouble, Turik, but your master speaks truth. Your heart is pure. Stay out of the trees."

"He is not trouble -- trouble finds *him*." Bron gave Turik a wink as he made the pronouncement and then grinned and slid his arm around Turik's waist.

Turik hid his face, cuddling in. "I'm so sorry, master."

"I need no apologies, Turik. You followed your heart and I cannot find any fault in that. Come. You need to be washed, to have the glass removed before it causes you more pain and infections."

He nodded to Lux, Pan and Sint. "Bright day, my friends. I do not believe I will be joining you for latemeal."

Pan nodded to him, smiled. "Shall I have salve sent, brother?"

"Thank you, Pan, that would be helpful." He turned to Lux. "Turik and I will be by to fix your courtyard in the morning, old friend."

"No. No. I'll put the priests to it. Keep your boy close."

He bowed. "Thank you."

He had a smile for Pan and Sint as well and then took his sweet Turik home.

Turik shivered, head dropping, entire visage defeated.

He hummed. "Sh. Sh. You have nothing to be ashamed of, Turik."

"I meant no harm, master. Now I've ruined your afternoon, Curate Lux's. I thought the branch would hold."

"Oh, my afternoon has not been ruined, not for a second and Curate Lux will find something wonderful happening because of the interruption, I am sure of it." Bron pushed Turik's hair off his face. "You are a constant joy to me."

Those sky-blue eyes were red, wet. "I am? You aren't disappointed in me?"

"When have I ever expressed disappointment in you, Turik? Do I not tell you how much joy you bring to me every day?"

"You do. You do. You are so good to me. You make me so happy."

"Then there will be no more talk of disappointment. I love you, Turik and nothing will change that."

He led his novitiate into the bathroom at the Sapphire Shard. "Strip and get into the tub. I want to get you cleaned up."

"Yes, master. I love you." The poor, stained, torn robe was removed, set aside.

He smiled. He was a very lucky man. "I love you, too, Turik. With my soul, yes?"

"Yes. Yes, master." Turik stepped into the tub, offering him a sweet smile.

He stripped himself and stepped in with Turik, washing the dirt and leaves from the lovely skin, making a noise as he found glass piece after glass piece embedded.

"It frightened me when I fell, master, but it was like flying, for a moment."

He threw back his head and laughed, gave Turik a hard kiss. Turik pressed close, rubbing and shifting against him, pretty lips parting.

Bron kissed Turik for a moment but then pulled back. "Let me get rid of all this glass first, I will not have you hurting."

Turik nodded, cheeks pink again. "It stings."

"My poor love."

He found the tweezers and began to remove the glass, shard by shard. Turik shifted, sliding away when he pulled the deeper pieces out.

"I am sorry, my Turik." He stroked one cheek gently.

"Not your fault. It... it can't stay in."

"No, it can't, and no, it isn't, but I will still make it up to you." He smiled up at Turik and waggled his eyebrows.

Turik smiled for him, eyes warm. "You will?"

He chuckled. "I will. I even have new ropes."

"New?" Turik's shaft filled, even as he ducked his head. "Do you think I need to be bound, master?"

Oh, sweet boy. Was there a person alive that needed binding more?

He purred, fingers sliding over Turik's belly. "I know that I need to bind you."

His Turik moaned, head falling back. "Are you going to bind my middle?"

He continued to stroke Turik's belly, fingers dipping down now and then to rub along Turik's shaft. "I am going to bind you everywhere, Turik. I am going to make you mine from bottom to top and back down again. I am going to make you my most elaborate and greatest prayer to the gods. You will be more beautiful than ever."

Turik panted, eyes fastened on him and him alone, fall and ribbon and glass and tree forgotten. His mouth covered Turik's, his hand wrapping tight around Turik's length as his tongue slid between Turik's lips. The sweet cry made him need, the way his Turik jerked into his touch perfection.

"Come to the courtyard. I will bind you on the bed of mosses beneath the sun's touch."

"Y...yes, Master. Yes." Turik was his, completely.

He drew Turik out of the bath, using a soft cloth to dry the beloved skin. Turik moaned, moved for him, adoration singing out. He grabbed his sapphire bag as they passed the bedroom, and led Turik out into the sunshine.

It was a glorious day and the grass was green, the flowers adding a sweet fragrance as well as color to the courtyard. The sky was as blue as their shard, the sun warming everything.

His Turik's face lifted to the sky, glorying in the heat, the light. So beautiful, so lovely. He touched Turik's face with his fingers, loving his boy better than even the sun could.

"Master..." Turik smiled for him, adoring him. "I love you."

His own smile was just as adoring, he was sure. "I love you, my Turik. My blessed boy."

He took another kiss and then went to his knees, searching in his bag for the soft blue silk he would bind Turik's cock with.

Turik's fingers were soft, gentle on his hair, eyes warm.

He looked up, smiling, Turik's hardness right there in front of him. Bron leaned in, licking at the tip of Turik's cock, tasting the salt and bitter and sweet of Turik's pleasure.

"Oh. Oh." Turik's thighs parted, head falling back. "Love."

"Yes, my Turik. Yes."

He took Turik's cock into his mouth, sucking, tasting, moaning around the heated flesh. There was no harm in Turik coming once before they began. The happy cries filled the air, blessing the trees, the skies, the sun with pure happiness.

He took Turik all the way in, nose pressing against Turik's bared skin, waxed clean just the day before.

"Bron. Master. Love." Heat and salt and love filled his mouth. He drank Turik down, reveling in the flavor of Turik's pleasure.

He kept Turik in his mouth, encouraging the long prick to stay hard for him. Turik shivered, leaning into his strength.

Humming, he pulled slowly off, smiling up at his boy. "You make me so happy and proud."

"Thank you." He got one of Turik's smiles, sweet and soft and bright.

That smile filled him; he could live on such a look for a very long time.

He picked up the silk and wrapped it around the base of Turik's cock, separating it from Turik's balls. Turik's eyes watched every motion, thighs parting. He hummed happily, pulling the silk tight and wrapping it up along Turik's length.

"So beautiful."

"Tight. So tight around me..."

"Yes, my Turik. You will not forget your shaft while it is wrapped like this. You will not forget your sweet balls." He touched them lightly, the heat of them escaping the silk easily.

Turik moaned, trembling, just a bit.

He leaned in and kissed the tip of Turik's cock and then Turik's belly, lips and tongue tracing the gentle ridges of Turik's abdomen. Turik tasted of sunlight and pleasure, hot and warm under his tongue. He licked away the salt on Turik's skin, and then drew back, stroking the warm belly with his fingertips again.

Then he found a dark blue rope in his bag and began to wrap it around Turik's middle, reaching around Turik's back, face pressed against the warm belly as he brought the rope around his novitiate. Turik moaned, breath coming slow and deep and steady. He wrapped the rope around and around Turik's belly until it circled his novitiates' body four times and then he tied it, tight enough the knot bit into Turik's skin, just by his navel.

Turik shifted, legs moving, belly rippling. "Oh. Master. Holding me."

He nodded, hands sliding over Turik's middle, loving the way the ropes interrupted the heat and silk of Turik's skin. "That's the idea."

"Love you." Turik's throat worked, the sunlight making him glow.

He purred and helped Turik to bring his legs together. He wrapped another length of dark blue rope around Turik's ankles and took a white rope, tying one end around the bottom rope circled around Turik's belly. He looped the other end around the rope around Turik's ankles and then began to slowly wind the rope upward around Turik's legs, leaving a couple of inches in between each loop.

The skin left exposed shone in the sunlight.

He could feel Turik's muscles, fighting and shifting, wanting to move.

He hummed, pressing soft kisses here and there, his fingers testing the give, the tightness. There would be marks come morning, but there should be no loss of circulation.

"Should I lie down, Master?" Turik moaned, leaned toward his touch.

"No, I will lay you down when it is time."

He stood and used more of the same white rope to tie Turik's arms against his chest. "So beautiful."

"For you. Always." Turik took a deep breath and he waited for the exhale to tighten the ropes.

The last rope was dark blue just like the one at Turik's waist and ankles and he put it carefully around Turik's neck, making sure it was felt, only taking the smallest bit of Turik's air. Turik blinked, but didn't balk, accepted his will.

He pressed a kiss to his sweet Turik's lips, then lifted him and laid him on the ground.

Oh yes.

Turik was quite beautiful, body bisected by the blue and white ropes. They would leave marks when he removed them, reminders for a few days of these moments.

"How do you feel, Turik?"

"Held close. Made yours. Kept."

"Loved?"

Turik met his eyes, smiling. "Every moment of every day."

"Excellent."

He lay down with Turik, close enough their bodies touched here and there, the sun warming them both. "Feel the stillness."

"Yes, Master. You and the sun and the moss."

He chuckled, eyes closing. "There is peace here."

"Home. Here."

"Yes." He turned and looked at his handiwork, at his beautiful novitiate. Reaching out a hand, he began to stimulate Turik, touching the skin, tugging on the ropes.

"Master. Oh. Oh, I feel you."

"I hope so. There is nothing else for you here but the sun and the ropes."

Bron bent and kissed a bare patch of skin, tongue sliding along the edges of the rope.

"Mmm..." Turik twisted, pulling at his bond.

"There is nowhere to go."

"My mind knows, my body will not listen, Master."

He chuckled. "Your body will learn."

Those beautiful eyes met his. "Promise?"

"I promise, Turik."

He pressed a kiss on Turik's lips and then went back to exploring the warm skin framed in rope. The struggles continued, slowly easing, Turik calming. He kept licking and kissing Turik's skin, tugging on the ropes, hand occasionally sliding over Turik's bound prick.

Turik moaned, trying to move closer, to feel him. He only hummed and licked more, stroked more, tugged on the ropes harder.

"Master. Master, I. I need to move."

"No you don't, Turik. You only need to feel."

Those blue eyes clung to him, wide, bright. "Please."

"You do not need to move, my heart." He smiled down into Turik's eyes, petting his hair.

"My heart. It beats so hard." Turik leaned into his touch.

"It will not beat out of your chest, Turik. I promise you."

"Yes, Master." Turik nodded, holding his eyes.

"Focus, my Turik. Focus on my touch, on the way your limbs throb in the ropes, the way the silk holds your cock tight."

"Oh..." Turik's eyes closed, focus on his voice.

"Focus on how the heat of my fingers moves on your flesh and disappears as I follow the ropes, how the ropes have a heat of their own." He tugged on one, letting it rub against Turik's flesh.

"Master..." Turik bit his own bottom lip, skin beginning to mark.

Bron tsked. "Sweet boy, do not bloody yourself. It is my marks alone that you will wear."

He slid his hand along Turik's lower lip. "Hmm. Perhaps I should run a rope through your mouth as well..."

Those pretty eyes went wide, huge, the look shocked.

Oh, now he had to, Turik needed to experience that.

Smiling gently, he searched for a small length of rope, but wound up finding another yard of the silk ribbon. "This will do."

"Master?" Turik shivered, spirit stretching just a touch more.

"It is a part of the binding process I have yet to teach you. Bindings for your eyes, your ears, your mouth. I will just start with your mouth."

He bent and kissed the mouth in question, licking his way in. The soft protesting sounds eased, Turik losing himself in the kiss. It was one of the things he loved about Turik -- all he had to do was remind his sweet novitiate why they were here and Turik's nerves eased, his eagerness returned.

That immediate, complete trust honored him, honored them both.

They were both panting by the time he drew back from the kiss and he gazed down into Turik's eyes as he gently placed the ribbon in Turik's mouth and wrapped the ends around Turik's head. Unsure and unnerved, Turik still allowed him in, let him have his will.

He didn't make the gag tight and it would not inhibit noises, but it would stop words from being understood and keep Turik from marking his lips with his teeth.

"You are mine," he murmured, fingers beginning their dance with Turik's skin and the ropes again. Turik nodded, moaning low as he twisted, moved under the touches.

He kissed Turik again, the kiss odd with the ribbon gagging his novitiate. Odd, but delicious, different, sexy. Turik's eyes rolled, gasps pushing into his lips, heat beginning to pour off his novitiate's body.

He let his weight settle on Turik, moving against skin and rope alike as he continued to kiss Turik's ribboned mouth. He wrapped a hand around Turik's bound prick, stroking it, spreading the liquid that leaked from the tip of Turik's cock.

He could imagine how lovely all this need would be, bound and watching at his side during a communal late meal, allowing the others to see Turik's still side. Just the thought was enough to spur his need and he began to hump against Turik, his cock sliding over skin and rope alike.

Turik moaned and whimpered, watching him, needing him.

As his own need drew close to a climax, he loosened the ribbon from Turik's cock, freeing it to the touch of his hand. "Now, my beautiful one. Now."

The soft keening heralded the splash of heat against him. His reply was a splash of his own as his body released the pleasure inside him against Turik's bound body.

He licked at Turik's lips, at the ribbon where it bisected Turik's mouth, moaning out his satisfaction.

Turik relaxed, moaning behind him, eyes closing.

"So beautiful, my love."

He settled next to Turik again, hands moving slowly, petting, soothing, his entire focus on the love between them. Turik lay at ease, allowing the bonds to hold him, cradle him.

Such devotion and trust as Turik always showed him came along once in a lifetime. Bron was glad he had recognized it when it came to him.

He held Turik as the sun moved across the sky, quietly rejoicing in the bonds that held them together.

Latemeal Shared

"So you see, dear one? They need one another much as we do."

Chulu nodded and wriggled a little, eyes shinning. "Each shard is so beautiful in its own way, Master."

"Yes. That is the secret, is it not? That each shard is beautiful and together we complete a perfect circle."

Chulu nodded. "You are such a good teacher, Master."

"It is what I was made for." He smiled, stole a gentle kiss. "Shall we go in, meet our family and friends?"

Chulu nodded again and that warm little hand slipped again into his. "Yes, please, Master.""

They entered the Onyx Shard, Ton'al greeting them with a silent bow.

"Hello, Ton'al. You look well."

Pan received a soft, gentle kiss on each cheek.

Brash came along behind his initiate, boisterous and noisy, like a whirlwind around the eye of the storm. "My brother! Here you are at last and with an initiate. The rumors are true then!" He was taken into a bear hug and kissed soundly on the lips, Brash's taste familiar and good.

He heard his sweet Chulu gasp softly. He smiled, took another kiss of his own, then bent to kiss Chulu, share their flavors. Chulu's mouth opened to his automatically, his sweet boy so eager.

"Ah, you look magnificent together, Pan. Even I can see the auras around you. Beautiful, aren't they Ton'al?"

There was no answer for a moment and Brash made a soft noise, then Ton'al deep, husky voice murmured, "Yes, Master."

Chulu's cheeks grew hot, but he did not pull away. It was only when Pan broke the kiss that Chulu buried his face in Pan's robes.

He petted his dear one, gave Ton'al a warm smile. "Thank you, Ton'al. Have the others arrived?"

"Yes, yes. Just Bron tonight with his Turik. The others felt your new initiate might become overwhelmed if he had to meet too many at once, though I believe more than one Curate expressed an interest in coming for dessert." Brash was all smiles, eyes so happy every time they looked at him with Chulu.

"Yes, I spoke with Bron. Turik is bound and quiet after his little... incident in the courtyard, yes?"

"Yes, indeed. That poor boy is going to injure himself one of these days."

"He means no harm and will come to no harm." Bron's happy face appeared as they moved down the hallway toward the dining area. The big man beamed at him and at Chulu. "Come, come. I want your initiate to see how beautiful and still my Turik can be - what a joy he is to the gods."

Pan nodded, smiled. "He is joy made flesh." Of course, it would be pleasant if the joy was tempered with good sense...

Chulu's hand slipped once again into his, holding on tight as they entered the dining area.

Turik was indeed there, on his knees next to Bron's place at Brash's table. He wore a ribbon around his mouth and his body was wrapped with red cord. Turik's cock was hard and bound in white, the flesh that showed through the ribbon almost as red as the ropes around Turik's arms and chest.

Chulu gasped softly and stepped closer, though Pan noted that his sweet one's eyes were simply fascinated.

"He is not hurt, simply held, contained so that he might focus." Pan leaned down, kissed Turik's forehead. "Good evening, Bron's own."

Turik bowed his head in acknowledgement, Bron's initiate looking curiously over at Chulu.

Chulu gave him a small smile and a nod. "Hello."

Bron laughed. "Excellent! Very well met!"

Pan chuckled, settling in his customary chair. He did enjoy the zest with which Bron lived.

Chulu waited beside him, watching as Brash also sat, To'nal waiting beside him. Chulu waited only a moment before kneeling next to Pan. He reached out, stroked Chulu's hair in praise. Such a dear boy. Such exceptional instincts.

Chulu smiled up at him and nuzzled into the touch.

Ton'al served them, silent and strong, perfectly focused. The ring of bite marks around the man's neck hinted at the passion hidden there, hinted at Brash's passion. He knew when his Chulu saw them, could read it in the way his initiate held his breath and went completely still for a moment.

"They are most striking, are they not?" He continued petting, touching his Chulu.

"Yes, Master."

Brash grinned and slid a hand along Ton'al's ass. "My collar."

Bron merely dug into his food with gusto, his initiate like a statue beside him.

Pandreas chuckled, serving Chulu from his own plate, the action as natural as breathing. "So, what excitement has been about while I have been involved in my shard?"

"Well, you heard about Turik," said Brash, with a grin.

"What are you implying?" Bron asked, making Brash laugh.

"Only that your initiate is a constant source of excitement, Bron, nothing more."

Pan chuckled, smiling at Brash, at Turik. "He keeps his master happy, busy."

Bron nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, exactly." A beaming smile was bestowed upon Turik. "He keeps me young."

Turik's skin went a warm pink, body reaching for Bron, leaning toward the man. Chulu made a small noise and seemed to lean toward them, eyes on them as Bron reached out to caress Turik's cheek, the simple gesture imbued with intimacy.

Pan smiled, settled in his soul. It was good that Chulu saw this, saw the love and care that brought the two of them together. Chulu sighed softly and leaned against him, head resting on Pan's shoulder.

Brash laughed softly. "We were all worried about shocking your initiate, Pan and instead we have made him glow." Brash chuckled again. "Or perhaps that was you."

"He belongs here, brother. His spirit has come home." He smiled at his dear one, heart rejoicing. "He knew where he belonged at once."

Chulu blushed, turning his face into Pan's shoulder. "I only followed my heart, Master."

"Yes, but not every path is as easy as yours." His heart and mind flew to Roko, the master blessed late with his novitiate.

"None of the paths sound as easy as I have found mine, Master. I think you must be the best Curate."

"No, not at all. I am simply *yours*."

Brash laughed again, obviously quite enjoying the byplay. "Come on, Pan. If you can't let your own initiate believe that you are the best of the best, who can you?"

"I will not lie to my Chulu. I am simply who I am."

"Of course that then begs the question of which Curate *is* the best, old friend." Brash's eyes were positively glinting, wicked man.

Pan laughed, smiled. "My predecessor, of course."

Brash and Bron both laughed.

"Well if you learned from the best, wouldn't that make you the best now, Master?" Chulu asked him.

"Sweet boy." He leaned, took a kiss. Oh, how wonderful to have this companionship.

Chulu's mouth opened beneath his without hesitation, though he could feel the heat in Chulu's cheeks as Brash whooped in delight. He took his time, staked his claim, let Chulu and the others know his joy, his passion. Chulu's arms slid around his neck, his sweet one holding on, matching his passion.

He drew Chulu up into his lap, holding on, rocking them. He heard Bron's purr and the muffled whimper of his Turik, the scent of passion rising around them. Even Brash and his silent Ton'al were pressed close in an embrace. Each of them fed the other pairs with themselves as they shared their passion with their lovers, the very air becoming an aphrodisiac.

Pan opened Chulu's robe, his own, rocking them together. Chulu gasped, legs shifting to wrap around his waist.

Bron's moans were low, Brash's groan's harsher, but more familiar.

His fingers wrapped around Chulu's hips, their movements continuing, bodies sliding against each other. Chulu's fingers held onto his shoulders, sweet gasps and moans filling his mouth with Chulu's breath.

Oh. Yes. Yes, beloved. He arched, pulling Chulu in closer. Chulu's shaft was hard and hot, pushing against his belly.

"Both of us, lovely. Both of us in your hand." He encouraged Chulu to touch them, stroke them.

Whimpering, Chulu reached for their pricks, small hand circling them, stroking with a sweet, gentle touch.

"Yes. Yes." Pan's eyes rolled, hips rocking.

He could hear the gasps and cries of the others, but it was Chulu's that drew him, that warmed him and sent him flying. They rested together, both panting, the scent of their seed heady, strong.

Chulu nuzzled against him, hand still warm around their pricks.

Oh, how pleasant latemeals were going to be...

Brash wiped his hands on his leggings, his own and Ton'al's come mingling there, the smell good, familiar and right. He grinned at the rest of the table. Things were going to be very relaxed if this was how latemeals progressed in the future at the Onyx Shard, not at all the usual arguments and friendly back-biting, not with everyone all sated and feeling fine.

He wondered if it was Pandreas and his new initiate. The Ivory Shard's Curate was able to read the rest of them with such ease and to give them all what they needed; were his powers now so augmented with Chulu that their emotions spread out over everyone they were with?

It was good to see his Pan glow so. It had been a long time in coming, this companion for his dear, dear friend. Pan, who cared so about each of them, who worried and fiddled and made their lives right.

"We have a meal to finish, my friends and finish it we should. It seems we all need to keep our energy up." He gave Pandreas' little one a wink, watching the blush climb in the pale cheeks.

Bron's laughter was rich and full, easing them all further, making them all chuckle except his perfectly controlled novitiate. He purred a little. His Ton'al. A gift from Pan, found for him.

Brash finished his meal without further interruption and sat back, satisfied, watching those at his table enjoy the offering of food.

Pan and Bron laughed, Chulu watching them all, smiling quietly. His Ton'al stood behind him, still and quiet. Sure.

Such peace.

The mischief maker in him wished for Roko and his chaos to come in through the door. It would certainly be a breath of fresh air. He chuckled at the thought and Bron laughed. "You are up to no good, Brash."

Pandreas chuckled. "Our beloved Curate is easily bored. It is always been so."

He shrugged. He could not deny it. Pandreas knew him better than anyone, even if the man not had a gift in that direction.

"I admit that I enjoy Turik's mishaps and Roko's wooing of chaos. Utter peace is... boring."

"Yet your novitiate is the embodiment of peace and control." Pan was teasing, pushing.

"At the moment." He gave Ton'al a wink and slapped the shapely ass.

Ton'al's eyes watched him, the spark hidden deep, deep within, shared only with him.

He purred and let his hand land on Ton'al's ass again, lingering this time in a caress. "We all find the initiate we need, don't we? Even when all hope seems lost."

Pandreas nodded. "All of us. The gods are good, even when the outlook is... bleak."

"Bleak, Master?" asked Chulu.

"He is thinking of Roko, the Emerald Master," Brash told the boy. "After Hook, he was convinced he had been led astray."

The Emerald Shard

Unlike the rest of the Curates, Roko's home was atop his shard, where the wind and the birds and the wildness of the world could find him, inspire him. Heal him.

He needed healing.

His heart ached. He had led an initiate astray.

Roko had presented himself to the Onyx Shard for punishment days ago, but Brash had been with Pandreas, the gentle man's cries of pain cared for, eased. So he had retreated with ink and paper, pens and quills, and designed fantasies and prayers, tossing them down for his priests.

"It isn't nice to litter, you know." The voice was bored beneath the thread of amusement.

"I am working." He looked over, one eyebrow raised. "What do you need?"

The man picking up his drawings wore a single ivory robe, his skin lightly tanned, an almost golden color, the hair on his head was blond, the eyes looking up at him a startling green.

"I am working, too. Master Pan has bid me clean the walkways."

"Indeed." Someone must have complained of boredom. "I am Roko, Curate here. You are?"

"Sol. A new pilgrim to the path."

"Welcome." He drew Sol idly, sketching the fine lines of the man's face. "Which shard calls you?"

Sol shrugged. "I've not found one yet that can alleviate the boredom that eats at my soul."

"Boredom? Perhaps the Sapphire Shard? They claim they cure that."

Sol shrugged again. "I met the priests, the Curate. I was quite bowled over by the Curate's novitiate. Literally."

Roko smiled, chuckled. Little Turik was the embodiment of chaos. He continued sketching, working the lines of Sol's shoulders. "Take off your robe, please."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Take off your robe." He needed to see the lines of Sol's body.

Sol tipped his head, looking up at him. "Are you a priest or a Curate?"

"I am Curate here. I wish to see your skin."

An image of a winged serpent came to him, the visual green and bright, inspired.

Sol bowed suddenly and began to remove his robe. "I am sorry, Curate, I did not know."

"We all must learn." He waved his hand, unconcerned. Oh, yes. Such lovely lines. Hollows. Tones. He sketched furiously, the gods touch upon him. "Tell me of yourself."

"My name is Sol. I want... something that the world could not give me. I thought maybe through the path of Iro I would find what I needed." Sol sighed. "So far it is very similar here to the world."

"You have not found the right path. Turn around please." He took up a pen, dipped it in the ink and drew.

"You mean leave?"

"No. I mean let me see your back, lovely one."

"Oh." Sol turned and then looked back at him. "You find me lovely?"

"Yes. You are a canvas, bare and ready." He sketched in the feathers, cock filling.

Sol gasped softly. "You mean tattoos?"

"I do."

"Permanent." Sol looked down at himself. "You'd have to be really sure about something like that."

"You would trust the gods to lead you, to lead me." He prayed that the gods led him in the right direction.

Sol tilted his head. "I'd never considered the Emerald Shard, Curate."

"That may be why you had not found satisfaction."

"Is that an invitation?"

"If you are strong enough, yes. This path is one of beauty and pain."

Sol turned to face him again. "What if I'm not sure?"

"Then you should look elsewhere. I have need for someone willing to join with me, add their skin to the gods' prayers."

"I thought Curates were supposed to guide, lead."

"Curates have many jobs -- mine is to paint the gods' will onto skin." He was only the barest of leaders.

"Oh." His words elicited a small gasp, Sol looking up at him. "If you put it like that..."

"Go tell Pandreas you are mine, lovely. Then come home and we will begin your life." The gods would not lead him wrong again.

"Yes, Master." Sol picked up his robe and put it over his head and then stopped and looked back at him. "Thank you, Master."

He smiled, then moved close, touched the soft skin. "Thank you, lovely."

A shiver went through Sol, those green eyes looking at him for a moment before Sol bowed. "I will return."

"I will await you." And he would pray and give thanks.

Sol wandered down the path to the Ivory Shard. "Curate Pandreas?"

The white haired man smiled up, "Yes, initiate. Did your chore suit you well?"

"You sent me on purpose -- you knew I'd find the Emerald Shard."

"Did I? How very clever of me. How is my dear friend Roko?"

"Roko? Do you mean the Emerald Curate? He is..." Sol thought about it, really thought. "He looks sad."

"He is. His heart is sore, scarred. He has not accepted anyone close in many seasons."

"So I'm getting the broken master?" Great. Just great. He should never have come here.

Pandreas lifted his chin, mouth tightening, the white eyes going cold. "No. No, you are definitely not. Return to your room, Sol. I will speak with Curate Roko."

He cringed from the sudden change in the Curate. "I'm sorry, Curate. I meant no disrespect."

"Yes, you did. You know nothing about the man, nothing about his heart, his gift, yet you pass judgment. You are offered something other men would die for, and you pass judgment."

He took a step back, confused, hurt. "I thought you were supposed to help the initiates, not make us jump through hoops we don't even know about."

"I do help. I will help. But Master Roko is just healed. I will not put him in jeopardy."

"Then why did you send me there?"

"I sent you to do chores. Your heart went where it would."

He shook his head. "I don't understand. I don't understand any of this!" They all expected everyone to know what they wanted here, to follow their heart and know their paths and Sol was just... bored, waiting. Lost.

He turned and headed for his room, fighting tears of frustration.

He ran into a solid body, covered in a deep green. "Come home."

"M..Master Roko? But Curate Pan said to go to my room."

A long hand stroked his face. "Come home."

He looked up into Roko's eyes and nodded, blinking back tears. "Yes, please."

Curate Pandreas' voice sounded. "Roko, I..."

Those bright green eyes never left his. "I'm taking him home, Pan."

Something tight and hard inside him broke at the words and the tears did come then.

He was wrapped in Roko's robe, drawn close to the warm body. "Now, lovely. Now you know why you are here. Come home with me."

"Yes. Yes." He buried his face in Roko's chest, the strength there calling to him, wrapping him.

Roko nodded, leading him out into the sunshine, out into the courtyard. His face turned up to the sun, up to his Master's face, tears drying.

Roko was not a beautiful man, the pale skin inked with...

Flowers and butterflies, birds and water.

But the images had been black, sharp edged, fierce.

He had seen them.

"Master," he asked, hand reaching for the bright images.

"Yes. The gods welcome you."

"Through you." It was amazing. He expected the bird and butterflies to fly right off of Roko's skin.

"Yes." Those eyes smiled at him. "Soon they will through you."

A shiver went through him, part fear, part anticipation. "Does it hurt?" he asked.

"All things hurt in the beginning, before they find their way to pleasure."

He nodded. He wasn't afraid of pain so much as he was of failing, of not being able to withstand the pain to achieve what was beyond it.

Roko led him back to the emerald building, the walls covered with art, with designs, with color.

He stopped at the door, fingers clinging to Roko's hand. "What if... what if I fail, Master? What if I don't live up to what you expect of me?"

Those eyes met his, searched him. "You will not fail."

He nodded, there was something in Roko that called to him, that made him offer everything he was. "I will succeed or die trying, Master."

"I will not ask quite that much." He got a wink, saw a sudden flash of humor, of joy.

He laughed and leaned against Roko's strength. "I mean it, though."

"Good. I want you to be here -- all of you, in all ways."

"I am yours, Master." The words felt better than anything had for years.

"Yes. Yes, my own. Come. We will find you clothes, food, a bath." He got another look. "You will be decorated, blessed by the gods."

He looked down at himself. His skin was golden and smooth, unmarked by even a scar. "Yes, Master."

"You will be the most beautiful prayer ever."

His master led him through the shard, introducing him to the priests, the initiates. Everyone was marked and inked, decorated. He felt plain beside them, unadorned.

Roko's hand was hot, strong against the small of his back, directing him. It was comforting, gave him the strength to stand tall, with his head up. Helped him battle the small, niggling voice that insisted he didn't belong, that he wasn't meant to be here.

Roko stopped suddenly, turned and kissed him with an intensity, a hunger that stunned him. His mouth opened to Roko on a gasp and he reached out to hold on. The kiss kept on and on, pushing him, opening him.

He lost his footing, hands wrapping around Roko's arms so he didn't fall. The muscles under his fingers were surprisingly strong, firm. He pulled himself close, rubbing against Roko's body, his skin alight wherever he touched Roko.

Those green eyes stared into his. "Mine. Lovely. Home. Do you understand?"

"I think so." He knew he was going to hold onto Roko.

"Never doubt me. I will never lie to you."

"Yes, Master." He knew he could believe Roko. He could feel it.

"Good." He got a warm smile. "Now, white doesn't suit you. Green will."

"Yes, Master." It was true. White didn't suit him. Neither did any of the other colors. Only green.

"Now, tell me how you came here to me." They walked down another hall, Roko choosing a robe for him.

"I have been searching for you all my life." He smiled. "I know it sounds crazy, but I always knew there was something out there for me, somewhere that I belonged."

"That doesn't sound crazy at all, sweet one. You have been searching for me." The robe was slipped over his arms, the fabric soft and silky.

He hummed softly, and ran his hands along the material. He was not used to being cared for like this. It felt nice. "I didn't know."

"Something inside you knew." Roko leaned down, kissed his cheek, his nose, his ear.

He giggled at the slight tickle, smiling into Roko's eyes. "It feels good. Finding you, I mean. Being here. I feel... lighter. Not bored."

"No? Good." He was drawn closer. "I am going to make your skin a hymn."

"Will it hurt?" he asked, coming back to that notion again, not entirely sure what he hoped the answer would be.

"Yes. But it will not be more than you can bear."

"How will you know?" he asked, a shiver going through him.

"I will know."

He looked up at Roko, at the amazing decorations on Roko's skin, the thick black lines that seemed to dance with life and color at the corners of his eyes. "I believe you."

"Good. Come with me. We will begin with little steps, little prayers."

"Yes, Master."

He followed Roko, expecting to be led to the meditation garden, or a quiet corner within the shard.

Roko led him up and up, back to the airy, open rooms on the roof, the wind blowing the huge curtains. "This is where I live, work, pray."

"Oh, wow." He looked around, turning slowly. "Doesn't it get cold?"

"Sometimes. I have a fireplace that sits in the center of the floor."

The room was simple, clean, the only real decoration the artwork tacked everywhere.

"I like the breeze. It feels like a good place for someone who's... restless."

"I love the air here, the light."

His eyes were caught by a piece of artwork on the small table, held captive by a pot of ink. The ends of the paper danced in the breeze. He couldn't quite make out what it was, but it intrigued him and he moved closer.

Roko didn't say a word, just watched him as he moved toward the paper. Oh. Oh, it was him. On the paper. Him.

Him decorated.

"Oh, Master. You *knew*." Tears filled his eyes. He had doubted and ranted and all the while, Roko had known.

"Yes, my own. The gods tested me and found me worthy and sent you to me." That low voice was filled with a surety, a confidence.

"I'm not sure I'm such a prize, Master. I called you broken. Curate Pandreas was ready to send me from the temple."

"You do not need to be sure. Nor does Pan. I know my heart." Those arms opened to him, accepted him.

He went into them, wrapping his own hands around Roko's middle and holding on. It was like standing on sure, solid ground in the midst of a storm. Roko was heated and strong against him, heart beating, lips nuzzling his temple.

It made him smile and he looked up, wishing to share the feelings with Roko. Roko's lips covered his, the kiss wilder than he expected, almost fierce. It made him gasp, and Roko's tongue pushed in, filling his mouth with heat and wriggling and the taste of Roko. It overwhelmed him, made him arch into Roko and rub.

Sol spread wide and pushed and slid and opened himself to Roko and the sensations. He was no shrinking virgin, but here with Roko he felt new again. Roko slid his robe away, fingers exploring and learning his body, his skin. Moaning, he rolled his head back, body pushing into the touches. Roko's hands were steady and fine, warm and sure.

"Wanton. I will make passion alive on your flesh." Lines were drawn with a single finger, patterns on his skin.

He shivered and pressed closer, his cock hard, begging Roko's touch. Roko gave it, fingers sure and firm, pumping his shaft, working him.

"Master!" He pushed into Roko's hand, the pleasure moving through him.

"I will put a perfect ring here." One nail scraped the tip of his cock, the sting sweet.

A shudder moved through him, his eyes wide as he looked up at Roko. Fear and pain and pleasure warred within him, his body knowing what it wanted, what it needed. His hips continued to move, riding Roko's touches.

"You will know that you are mine, all of you."

He nodded, beginning to understand that that was what he wanted, what he needed.
"Thank you, Master."

"Yes, you begin to understand." That hand moved faster, more sure.

He nodded, whimpering as the pleasure built and built inside him. He'd never gotten so hot so quickly from just a hand on his prick.

"My own. How you soar..." Roko's eyes were burning, watching him.

"For you. You make me fly!" His body shuddered again, pleasure pouring out onto Roko's hand.

Roko's fingers brushed his lips, made them wet before licking them.

Moaning, Sol leaned against Roko's solid body. "Make me yours, Master."

"Every inch." He was led to a low bed, stretched out upon it. "Every single inch."

Roko sang, soft and low, hands working endlessly over his initiate's skin. In the weeks they had been together, he had prayed, working ink and metal into the perfect skin for hours. His dear one had been patient, had learned quickly to breathe, to pull the pain into himself and release it to the gods.

In fact Sol had grown to anticipate the pain, to revel in it and the results. He was a perfect canvas.

There was a ring in the tip of Sol's cock, one in one nipple. Designs covered one arm, one leg, the side of Sol's back -- winged creatures and butterflies, birds and storms. So far it was all in black, the rings black gold to match.

Sol's golden skin took the ink beautifully.

Roko finished the curve of a feather, the ink tracing the pale skin of Sol's buttocks. There. Perfect. He spread the thin cheeks, exposing the tiny hole, the entrance to Sol's body.

Sol's hole spasmed, as if in invitation and a low moan came from his dear one. "Master."

"Yes, my Sol?" His tongue flicked out, tasting the heat and flavor of his love.

Another moan was offered to him. "I am yours."

"Every inch of you." He licked again and again, tasting, teasing.

"Yes, Master." Sol pushed back, eager for his touch.

Two fingers slid inside the tight heat, stretching and spreading, tongue slipping around the edges of the wrinkled flesh. His. Sol bucked, pushing onto his fingers, sweet begging noises coming from him.

"Yes..." He looked up along the inked skin, free hand tracing the skin behind Sol's balls. The next ring would go here.

Sol's flesh tightened beneath his touch, as if his thoughts had been heard. He pinched lightly, knowing Sol would understand, would feel him.

A deep shudder wracked Sol's body. "Oh, Master!"

Yes. A perfect black circle embedded in golden flesh. His mark. A prayer.

Sol whimpered, body shivering and moving back. "Oh, please, Master. More."

He pinched harder, lips sliding up along Sol's spine. "My own."

Sol's legs spread. "Yes, Master."

"Let me in. Let me have you."

Sol pushed back toward him, offering the decorated, pale ass. He lined up, pressed in, pushing himself into perfect heat. Sol cried out, back arching for him. The painted skin rippled, making his drawings come to life.

"Yes." He thrust, hips rocking, pushing, eyes following the ink upon Sol's skin.

It flowed with Sol's movements, with his dear one's body as Sol pushed back to meet his thrusts. Sol's cries rose to the heavens, carried by the breeze that flowed through the large windows.

His skin tingled, the ink forming prayers and songs to the gods. For a moment the ink on Sol's skin shimmered and colored, became alive.

"Yes. Yes, beloved!" His heart soared, the magic and need and love inside him huge.

Sol's cries met his own, just as the golden body pushed back into each thrust. The gods sang for them, the song loud and constant. And they sang back, their cries joining together, harmony and melody making beautiful music. They climaxed as one, their hearts, their minds joined.

When the feelings had passed, their heartbeats slowing once more, Sol lay beneath him, tattoos again quiet.

"You are home, blessed by the gods." He was so proud.

"And by my Master." Sol sounded happy, at peace.

"Yes, most loved." He nodded, kissed the winged man on Sol's neck. "By your master. Where you belong."

Dessert Shared

Chulu thought about the Emerald Shard as Ton'al quietly and efficiently served a light dessert of fruits in honey. It sounded very chaotic, but also beautiful. Each shard was, he was discovering. And yet as beautiful and compelling as he found each one, he could not imagine being novitiate there. He could not imagine pledging himself to anyone but Pandreas.

"They sound very beautiful, Curate Brash. With the tattoos." And the piercings sounded... a little frightening to contemplate.

"They are. Roko mentioned something about dropping by with his Sol. Perhaps you will have a chance to see for yourself."

Pandreas nodded, hand stroking his spine. "They are the heart of us, much like the Ruby Shard is the heat, the blood."

"The Ruby Shard, Master?"

"Pandreas!" Curate Brash tsked. "You haven't told your dear boy about the twins yet?"

"I have not, brother. Perhaps you should, with your need for the dramatic."

Curate Bron laughed, hand petting the bound initiate at his side. They were so full of life it was beautiful to see, but Chulu thought it also had to be tiring. Once again he was thankful for the Master he had and he slipped his hand into Pandreas' as Curate Brash began the tale.

The Ruby Shard

Winter hit the valley with a fury, freezing the lands, the skies, the water.

All of the shards pulled into one another, sharing heat and food and wood, mainly in the Ivory Shard, as Pandreas was best equipped to keep more people. Dinae slept with his brother, their bodies curled together. It wasn't as comfortable as his own bed, his own home, but it was warm and safe, Pan's serenity sinking into the very stones.

He was deeply asleep when a cool hand touched his shoulder, Pan's empty eyes staring at him. "Dinae? My friend? I have need of you."

Dinae nodded, sliding from the furs into a heavy cloak, following Pan from the room. "What troubles you, Pan?"

"Troubles me? Nothing. Yet... This night the gong chimed, a seeker come through the snows on the night before the full moon..."

"A seeker?" A thrill went through him. Curates waited their entire lives for the Ivory Curate to find their novitiate for them.

"He is cold and frightened, quite lost. I thought you might wish to see him."

"I do. Please, Pan. Where is he?"

"In the bathing chambers."

He nodded, moving toward the room, steam pouring through the door.

The young man in the bathing pool was pale, lips and fingertips almost blue, Dinae presumed from cold. He was shivering, using a small bowl to pour water over his head and shoulders.

"You look as if your blood has frozen." Dinae slipped off his outer robe, and poured more hot water into the tub.

Wide blue eyes looked up at him, the long, dark hair cascading in wet curls around his shoulders. "I think it has," whispered the young man.

Dinae reached out, finger sliding on a cut upon the lad's face from a piece of falling ice or a stone or a branch, gathering the meager drops of blood. "Not yet. You are safe."

He licked the blood from his fingertip, the flavor filling him in a rush. Oh. Gods.

The lad gasped, eyes going wider. Those almost blue from the cold lips were licked by a soft, pink tongue.

"Your name?" This one had been sent for him, he could taste it upon his tongue.

"Doril." The young man bent his head. "At your service."

"Yes. I am Dinae, Curate of the Ruby Shard. Welcome to our order."

"Thank you, Curate." Doril's voice was lovely, soft and melodic.

"You are most welcome." He poured the water again and again, heating it when it cooled, watching the blood rise to the surface of the lad's skin.

When they were not made blue by the cold, the lad's lips were a lovely red and that pale skin warmed to a beautiful rose. The more he warmed, the more sensual Doril became, twisting and pushing into the water's wet touches.

Dinae would bind this one in the private courtyard, slide his sharp knives upon perfect skin, make their offerings to the gods. He would lap the heat of life from the hollow of Doril's throat...

Doril seemed to pluck his need from the air, body pushing close to him, a soft moan sounding.

"What things I will show you..." Dinae drew Doril closer, heedless of the water, head bending to taste.

Doril's mouth opened for him, breath sweet and warm, filling his own lungs even as the soft, delicate taste of Doril filled his mouth, like the blood he had feasted upon earlier, but gentler.

The flavors were luscious, but he wanted more, wanted to claim this one as his own. Dinae drew Doril from the tub, his furs drawn around them both. There would be a place for them to touch, to rest. Pandreas would have seen to it.

"The path was long and cold and more than once I nearly gave up." Doril shivered and pressed close. "But then I would have missed this."

"This is the beginning of a life you cannot imagine."

Pandreas waited for them, directing him to a tiny, warm room filled with a fur-lined bed. "Good night, Dinae."

He smiled. "Thank you, brother."

His Doril bent in a bow to Pandreas. "Thank you, Curate, for your welcome and your help."

Pandreas cupped Doril's cheek. "May the gods bless you on your path."

Dinae nodded, smiled. "They have, Pan."

Doril nodded as well. "I was guided through the snows and the wind and the chill and now my blood has been warmed again and it is like there is a fire in me that I have never felt before." Though Doril answered Pan, those blue eyes looked into Dinae's own.

Dinae nodded, drawing the lean body into the room, into the furs, into the fire they would stoke together. "You will be my beloved."

"Yes, Master." Doril pushed close, movements gentle, almost shy, untutored, and yet there was an eagerness here.

He pressed close, taking the soft mouth, tongue pushing in, tasting it. Moaning softly, Doril opened to him like a flower to the sun, the taste of Doril welling up into his mouth.

"I will paint your skin, carve your faith into you. You will be most loved." He rocked, pushing harder, fueling their fire.

Soft whimpers were fed into his mouth, Doril's fingers curling around his arms, clinging to him.

"You will be the balm to my spirit." He pulled the tiniest blade from the medallion he wore, cutting a fine line into his wrist, then in Doril's, drawing their skin together, mingling their blood.

Doril gasped as his skin was cut and then a second time as their blood joined. There was splash of heat against Dinae's belly, Doril crying out. His own passion soared, hips driving against Doril's skin as their blood whispered secrets to each other.

Doril's body moved against his, learning the movements from him. Dinae leaned in, kissing as their arms slid together, fingers twined. Doril's mouth opened to him again, the lad's sounds so sweet.

He could hear the whispers of the gods about them, blessing them, sealing them together in prayer and he spent, offering his seed in sacrifice.

Doril's eyes widened. "Oh." The young man pushed into him, arms wrapping around his waist. "I'm found. I was so worried I was lost."

"Never lost again, beloved. You have my word on it."

"Thank you, Master." Oh, those blue eyes were clear, so adoring. The promise they would make beautiful art together whispered around them.

Dinae wrapped the furs around them, bundled them close together. "Welcome home, Doril."

"Thank you, Master." That smile would warm Dinae through any winter.

Doril spent the night watching his new master.

He was frightened. He knew that he had just committed himself to a very intense, very hard path.

But when he looked upon the caramel skin of his master, upon the almond shaped eyes and the long, dark hair, when he looked at their twined fingers, their arms with their combined blood painting them... he could feel how it was good, it was right. He had found his way to where he needed to go.

Indeed, he could hear the whispers of the gods, could hear them telling him he was to be an instrument to their glory, his path was true.

By the time the sun began to light the room he fell asleep, fears left at the feet of the gods who demanded this of him.

He was awakened by a soft touch, cleaning his arm, caring for him, a soothing salve spread across his skin.

"Master," he murmured, smiling up, offering himself completely.

"Yes." The touch, the gentle care reinforced his surety that he was in the place he was meant to be.

Impulsively, he reached up and kissed Dinae pushing all that surety into it. Dinae chuckled, leaned into him, returning the kiss with a slow, heady passion. He moaned, opening wide, so eager to prove himself.

"Such hunger." Dinae reached down for him, stroked his shaft to fullness.

"Oh! Master!" He gazed up at Dinae, hips beginning to move, his body knowing what he needed, what he wanted.

"Yes. Mine." The touch kept going, stroking faster, harder, heating him all through.

He could hardly catch his breath, each sensation building on the last, pushing him higher.

"Breathe, beloved. Focus on the touch, the joy."

"Yes, Master." He tried to do as Dinae suggested, but it was the touch and joy that made him breathless.

Each kiss was deeper, headier, making him shiver and gasp.

It was too much, too good, too big and he cried out, spilling his pleasure over Dinae's hand.

"Beautiful." Dinae licked and nibbled at his lips, dark eyes heated.

"For you, Master." He shivered at each touch, body so sensitive.

"Yes." Dinae leaned down, teeth scraping a path to one of his nipples.

Gasping, he cried out, bucked, his cock growing harder again. It was all so big.

"Such hunger." His nipple was taken between those teeth and tugged.

"I didn't know I was hungry." He didn't know this existed, this need so deep inside him.

"Your spirit did. It led you to me. To us."

"Yes, Master. I kept seeing my blood pouring from me in sigils and signs, and it felt so good." It had scared him at first, but then he came to love the dreams, to want them more and more until finally his feet let him to the shards.

"I will carve the will of the gods upon your skin and you will come to crave the touch of my blades."

He shivered, both from fear and from need. It sounded harsh and a part of him still believed that such a thing was strange, but that part was quickly dissolving, his resolve to come here reveling in the thought.

"I will serve you with all my will, Master."

"Yes. I will care for you until the end of time. We will worship together."

"Thank you, Master." He hugged Dinae tight, the feeling of belonging washing over him, dissolving what was left of his fears.

Dinae rocked them both together, holding him close, surrounding him with strong arms. The pleasure began to grow again, the slide of Dinae's heat against his own so good, it felt necessary and right. He held Dinae's eyes, looking into the face he'd watched all night.

"I will take you to the Ruby Shard, introduce you to Nidan, my brother, bring you home."

"I am already home now that I am in your arms," he whispered.

Dinae's eyes went dark and hot, pleasure evident. "Yes. Yes, beloved."

The word slid through him, warming him deep inside. "Yours."

"Until the end of time."

"Oh... yes, Master." He felt tears pouring from his eyes, the happiness and fullness overwhelming.

Dinae licked each tear away, purring over him, watching him so close. He felt so special, so needed.

"I must speak to Pan, tell him you will wear a ruby collar."

His hand went to his throat. "So all will know I am yours."

"Yes. So all will know that I have you in my hand."

"Oh." He pushed close. "Oh, yes, Master."

A soft chuckle sounded from the door, the man standing there a near exact match to his master. "It is true. You have chosen."

Dinae nodded. "I have, brother; congratulate me."

"You have my blessing, my greatest joy."

Doril blushed and buried his face in Dinae's neck, shy suddenly.

"Doril, this is my partner, my brother, my fellow Curate, Master Nidan. Nidan, this is my novitiate, Doril."

He looked up and up and was glad he was pressed against Dinae because he was quite bare. He smiled. "Hello, Nidan."

It was amazing how much alike they looked, but he could see the differences, knew he would never mistake one for the other.

"Good morning and welcome. My beloved and I look forward to making a home with you."

His eyes widened, and he looked to Dinae. "Am I... both of yours?" It didn't feel right, not right like belonging to Dinae felt.

"No." Dinae's voice was sure. "My brother and I are the Curates for the Ruby Shard. His novitiate lives in his quarters; you and I will live in mine. You will offer him respect, but you are mine and mine alone."

He did not want to be rude, but his relief was great. "Thank you, Master."

Nidan chuckled. "We are all the children of the gods, brother."

Dinae nodded. "That matters not. The gods have spoken to me."

Doril shivered, the possessive sound in Dinae's voice addictive, seductive.

"I will leave you to your Doril. The morning meal calls." Nidan left with a smile, closing the door behind him.

"I hope I didn't cause trouble between you," murmured Doril. "But I have no desire for anyone but you."

"You belong with me; Nidan understands that."

He giggled. "I'm not sure I understand, Master, but I know it's true."

"Your laugh is a gift to the gods." Dinae's hands began to travel again, exploring him.

"Oh, Master, you make me feel so important."

Those dark eyes met his, suddenly serious, sure. "You are a gift from the gods themselves, offered to worship them. What could be more important?"

"*You*, Master."

His words were rewarded with a wild, deep kiss, Dinae easing him to the ground. He cried out, arms wrapping around Dinae again, body pushing into his master's.

Dinae's fingers stroked his shaft, his sac. "Have you been taken? Have you been loved?"

"Never, Master. I waited for you. Though I didn't know it was *you* I waited for."

His master ducked down, spread his legs apart, tongue sliding over the hidden entrance to his body, making him jerk and shudder.

"Master!" He spread his legs further, gasping for breath, fingers curling into the furs.

Dinae purred and licked, spreading him, wetting him. He'd never felt such pleasure, the touches making him shiver and shake.

Dinae leaned up, shaft nudging him, bumping against him. "Let me in."

"How?" he asked, eyes wide.

"Relax. Breathe. Trust." The pressure increased.

"I trust you, Master."

He did. And he relaxed, body letting Dinae in. The stretch was slow, the burn low and deep, making him gasp.

"Yes, my beloved. So good."

He moaned, eyes holding to Dinae, trust in his master. Slowly, easily, Dinae spread him, filled him deep inside.

"So big. So hot." He wriggled a little, gasping as pleasure shot through him.

Dinae chuckled. "One day you will meet Padin. He is large."

He shook his head. "Only you."

Dinae stilled, meeting his eyes. "No one will ever touch you like this, but me. No one ever."

He reached up to touch Dinae's cheeks, his eyes catching on the thin slice on his arm. It relaxed him, reassured him. "Yes."

"Yes. You are mine." Dinae's cheek rubbed his skin, the cut stinging.

"Yours." His body rippled, squeezed around Dinae's cock.

"Yes." Dinae's hips began to move, thrust.

"Oh." The heat was incredible, the feeling of being filled... wonderful, not scary like he'd feared.

"My own." Dinae's kiss stole his breath, his sense.

"Yours. Yours." He opened for another kiss, letting Dinae have his sounds, his need.

One hand wrapped around his shaft, stroking, pulling in time. He cried out, body singing.

"Yes. Mine. Feel me." Dinae moved hard, slamming into him.

"Master!" He bucked, meeting the next thrust.

"Doril." Something within him sparked, pleasure filling him. His hands wrapped around Dinae's shoulders, holding on as they moved together. The pleasure spread, grew, wrapped around him, pushed inside him. The push and pull of it found a rhythm, grew faster, and made his head spin and spin.

"Soon, beloved. Soon." Dinae arched, rocking, pushing deep.

"Please. Oh." His eyes rolled in his head, the pleasure shooting along his spine, making him arch and buck.

"Come for me. Share your prayers with the gods."

He cried out as the pleasure rolled through him, his cock throbbing in Dinae's hand, his body going tight. Heat filled him, Dinae groaned above him, rocking and pushing deep. He felt Dinae's pleasure as if it were his own, or perhaps it was. He moaned, hands holding tightly to Dinae.

"Yes. So good. My beloved."

"Yours." Such a simple word and yet it brought him almost as much pleasure as what they had done.

"Mine." Dinae kissed him. "Inside and out."

"Yes, Master."

His blood, his body, his heart, his soul.

All of him.

The moon was full and, even though the winter still raged, he and Nidan were bound to ritual.

Dinae heated the room to a near uncomfortable warmth, setting out his blades and bowls, his salves and cloths. A simple collar of pale metal with a single, heavy ruby was placed upon the low table. He had prepared this room himself, pouring his energies into every corner, the satin covered walls a dull, warm red, the floor stones stained to match.

It had been made for this night.

He sweet Doril called from the doorway, wearing a simple pale rose robe, looking in with wide eyes. "Master, have you need of me?"

"Yes, Beloved. It is time to worship together, to make our offering to the gods." The potion they used to ease pain and heighten pleasure rested upon the hearth; he would have this night be one of joy, one of dreams.

"I am pleased to be able to share this with you, Master." Doril bowed before him. "What must I do?"

"Bare yourself and drink of the loka root tea. It will soothe your nerves." Dinae smiled over, stroking the soft hair. "Unless of course your nerves are soothed already."

Doril purred and pushed into his touch. "Your presence soothes me always, Master."

He hummed, removing the rose robe and drawing his beloved to stretch out upon the table. "Do you need to be bound, beloved?"

"I do not know, Master. I would like to do it however you wish me to." Doril was so earnest, so eager to please. So beautiful, pale and stretched out.

"This time we will bind you, so you do not twitch. In time, the bindings will not be necessary." He wrapped white silk around Doril's wrists, fastening them to the table.

Doril took a deep breath. "As my master wills it." Those eyes watched him, watched every move he made.

He bound Doril well, then fed his beloved a draught of the potion, baring himself and opening himself to the hunger of the gods. A light sweat broke out on Doril's skin, the pale flesh turned pink as the heat brought his blood to the surface.

Dinae started simply, taking a deep, slow kiss before drawing the faintest line upon Doril's arm, the blood barely beading. Doril didn't even flinch, one soft breath following the next.

Dinae began to chant, to pray. The decorative lines were created with the sharpest of blades, the scent of copper and heat beginning to fill the air. Doril gasped, shivers and shudders going through the slender body. He could feel his novitiate's submission, could feel the desire to please, the lack of fear.

The design began to take shape -- a mountain surrounded by an ocean of peace, a pair of gulls in the air. One nipple was surrounded by tiny, short slices, the rays of the sun itself. Doril's cock was hard and began to drip, soft sounds of need and pleasure coming from him. Each new cut brought a new sound, a twitch of the cock.

"Yes, that's it, beloved, offer up your need." Such pure beauty.

"All that I am is yours," whispered Doril.

Dinae bent, slid his tongue through the drops of life on Doril's chest. "All we are is theirs."

Doril whimpered. "Yes, Master." Doril took deep breaths, chest rising and falling beneath Dinae's tongue.

He sucked the abused nipple, pulling hard, stoking Doril's passion to flames. Doril's cry was sweet and high, the pleasure flying up to the gods.

Yes. Yes. The flavor of Doril poured through him, heated him, passion filling him.

"I am your vessel, Master, your canvas. Thank you for painting me for the gods."

"You are beautiful." He nicked the soft skin of Doril's inner thigh, spreading the heat about as he moved to lap at Doril's shaft.

"Your craft makes me so, Master." Doril's words were broken by soft, needy cries.

"I would see you, seed and blood spread over your skin." He took the soft sacs into his lips, tugged gently.

Doril cried out again, limbs shaking in their bonds. "Please, Master."

He smiled, sucking harder, pulling steadily. Yes. Yes, beloved.

"Oh, Master. I can see the gods." Doril whimpered, chest heaving with each breath.

Dinae moaned, shifting, stroking the silk-covered heat with blood streaked hands. The gods sang their praises, accepted this gift.

"Master! I need to..." Doril's body shook and heat poured from his cock, seed mingling with the blood on Doril's chest.

His own need would wait as he cared for his beloved. The water was warm, the cloths soft as he slowly washed the gods' gift clean. Doril was quiet beneath his ministrations, occasional shivers rocking the slender body. His novitiate's blue eyes stayed on him, somewhat glazed, bright with pleasure.

"I have a collar for you, one that marks you as my own. I would have you wear it and never remove it." The salve came next, carefully worked into each mark.

"Oh! Master, you honor me so." Doril looked near tears and very nearly overwhelmed.

"Release your energies, sweet one. The gods wait for them and accept them."

"Yes, Master." The tears slipped from Doril's eyes, sliding down his cheeks. "I have never been so happy, Master."

"You are home, beloved one. You are loved."

"I know. My blood sings with it."

Dinae released the silk around the thin ankles, pushing his novitiate's legs apart. "I need."

Doril's legs spread further, his hips tilting. "Oh, please, Master."

"Yes." He crawled up, cock leaking, the gods' passion taking him. "Are you ready for me?"

"Yes, Master." Doril nodded and beamed, licking at his lips hungrily.

"You will be rewarded." Dinae lined up, pushing deep in a single motion, seating himself within his beloved.

Doril cried out, arms straining against the bonds. "I already have been, Master."

His need did not go gentle, hips slamming into Doril, shaft hard enough it ached. Doril's legs wrapped around him, ankles hooking behind his back as his novitiate's moans filled the air.

Yes, the gods blessed him, offered him such hunger, such beauty. He reached for the collar, lying it across Doril's throat. "Mine."

Doril shuddered, ass going tight around him. "Yours."

"Yes." The collar was beautiful. Perfect.

Doril's cock had firmed again, pulsing hot between them. Come and blood mingled together on Doril's chest and belly, the collar topping it all perfectly.

His fingers wrapped around Doril's shoulders, the kiss they shared wild and edged with hunger. Doril matched him, need for need, hunger for hunger, giving him everything.

The gods moved within him, sharp edged and insistent, and he poured himself into Doril's body. Doril cried out, more seed splashing between them.

"Beloved." He reached up, fastened the collar about his novitiate's throat.

"Yours. Yours, Master." Doril's focus on him was complete, total.

Dinae nodded, the moon shone down on them, the cool light reflecting in the ruby upon Doril's collar.

His Doril glowed, the perfect gift to the gods.

Ruby's Other Half

Husn spent his days since his arrival at the temple meditating in the Ivory Shard. Curate Pandreas brought him fruit and water and he meditated.

He was supposed to know where he belonged, was supposed to be drawn to one of the shards, but he did not. The call from the temple had been so loud, so clear in his heart he'd nearly run all the way here. But once here... he was adrift.

The place was peaceful, quiet, silent. Empty.

Except when he opened his eyes, a dark haired man sat before him, meditating, silent, dressed in red. His eyes widened; he hadn't heard the man come in at all.

Eyes black as pitch opened, the man nodding once.

Husn smiled, feeling hope for the first time since he'd realized he didn't know where he belonged aside from at the temple.

The man did not speak, simply sat, breathing in tandem with him, staring into him. He stared back, feeling like his very soul was being weighed, judged. He felt almost breathless.

As they sat, their joined breath slowed, his own will caught, snared. He thought maybe if this man stopped breathing, so would he.

His body began to tingle, his shaft filling as his breath slowed even further. His eyes widened even more, but he didn't panic, something about the man's eyes held him.

Seen. He was seen. Heard. Held although he had not been touched.

He didn't think he had blinked since they'd begun, he didn't want to miss a second.

A soft, almost inaudible chant started, his sacs drawing tight, cock responding as if touched.

Amazing. The pleasure was undeniable, pure and hot.

He didn't notice they'd almost stopped breathing until his sight wavered, the need to find completion intense, overwhelming. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out, his body beginning to shake.

"Come." The word was sure, short, vibrating through him.

Seed shot from his cock, the pleasure like waves inside him, moving through him over and over again.

Strong hands eased him back, his breath returning, the aftershocks delicious. He didn't try to speak, instead enjoyed each sensation, each pleasure as it moved through him.

The silence seemed heavy as a blanket, warm and comforting, holding him.

Soft lips brushed his, breath pushing into his lungs. He took it in greedily, the breath leaving him again on a moan.

"Come home."

"Yes, Master."

And just like that he knew which path he was to follow.

Nidan took his novitiate home without a handful of words shared between them. Pandreas had promised him that the man was meant for him and he saw no need to discuss it endlessly.

One moment in the room, breathing with his novitiate and Nidan knew the bond was true. Better yet? Husn's spirit knew it as well.

Husn followed him silently, walking a half step behind him, his simple ivory robe now edged with red.

His brother Dinae fell into step beside him, eyes warm, happy for him. "Then it is true? You have chosen?"

"I have." Nidan nodded, so pleased, so proud.

"Congratulations, brother. He is lovely."

Husn seemed to stand a little taller, a little closer.

Dinae's Doril smiled over at him and nodded his head. "Congratulations, Master Nadin." Then the boy smiled at Husn. "Husn, this is my brother Dinae and your counterpart, Doril. You will share a home."

Husn bent in a low bow, eyes downcast.

Dinae nodded, then smiled. "We are going to dine with the Emerald Shard, brother. Are you to join us?"

Nidan shook his head. "No. I wish to settle my novitiate into his place."

A ripple went through Husn, his novitiate standing again, face impassive, though the grey eyes were pleased, focused on him alone.

"Come, Husn." He nodded to his brother, continuing toward the Ruby Shard, eager to have them home, together.

Husn kept up, seeming as eager as he.

"This is your new home. The Ruby Shard. Welcome." He opened the heavy red door, the shard quiet and empty.

"Thank you, Master," murmured Husn, almost as if afraid he was not meant to speak.

"You will have quarters beside my own. We are a small shard." The smallest shard, the most dangerous.

"Yes, Master." Husn bowed to him and waited, silent and still.

He showed Husn the kitchen, the main room, the way to Dinae's quarters, to the initiates' room. The rooms were small and functional, warm. Husn took it all in with the same quiet stillness.

Then he led Husn to the calm, quiet quarters they would share. Simple, functional, beautiful -- they were imbued with a steady passion.

"Oh..." Husn gasped softly and stepped closer to him. "This is ours."

"It is." He nodded, drew Husn close.

Husn gasped again as their bodies touched. "Master..."

"Yes." He leaned down, covered Husn's mouth with his own, tongue pressing deep. This time Husn's gasp filled his mouth, Husn melting against him.

Yes. His own. He pushed his breath into Husn's mouth, filling his novitiate's lungs. Husn's eyes rolled, he could feel the long prick fill against his thigh.

His kissed Husn until his heart beat hard, then lifted his head. "Strip."

"Yes, Master." Husn's voice was breathless and he swayed for a moment before hurrying to obey.

Nidan stripped himself bare, watching Husn undress. Husn removed his robe and folded it carefully, laying it on the small table beside the bed and standing before him, cock standing eagerly.

"I want you to wear my collar." He wanted to tighten the leather band around Husn's throat, send him flying.

"Oh yes, Master. Please." Husn's head lifted, exposing his neck.

He went and fetched the thick leather, two rubies set side-by-side. "By accepting this, you are mine."

"I already am, Master."

The leather closed around Husn's neck, the red color well suited to his Husn's skin. Slender fingers slid over the leather. "Oh. Thank you, Master."

"It suits you," he purred, watching the fingers on the collar.

"It feels good, right. Now everyone knows that I am yours."

"Yes. My own." He drew Husn to the bed. "All of you -- your heart, your love, your breath."

A shiver went through Husn and his reply was immediately, breathless. "Yes, Master."

"You must trust me with all of yourself." He tightened the collar slightly.

Husn swallowed and took a shallow breath. "I do, Master."

He began to rub them together, staring into Husn's eyes. "The gods bless us when we offer all unto them."

"Yes, Master. All that I am is yours to offer."

"Yes." They moved together, his body hot and burning.

Husn pressed up into him, following his lead. Their eyes locked, hearts pounding together, Husn's cheeks rosy and flushed. Their breathing synched, had for most of the time since he'd first seen Husn.

He slowed his breath, stealing Husn's little by little. Those eyes never left his, Husn either unaware or unconcerned over what they were doing.

He tightened the collar only a bit more, Husn beginning to gasp, hips pushing up into his. Those eyes never left his, doubt never entered them; they only darkened as their passion swirled higher. He could feel Husn's heart pounding, the long cock dripping and heated. There was trust there, faith. Prayer.

He could do anything to this man and Husn would only come back for more. Beg for more. Just like those grey eyes were doing now.

He held his breath, arm pressing carefully on Husn's throat as the need between them flared. Those grey eyes got darker, Husn's lungs fighting for breath, but the body beneath his did not fight to get away. Husn's cock throbbed between them.

"Now, my own. Now." The touch of the gods slid down his spine, pouring from his cock.

It was met by an answering heat splashing against him from Husn's cock, the bliss in his novitiate's face the finest offering.

He released the tightness of the collar, breath coming easily again.

Husn reached up and touched his cheek. "Thank you, Master."

He kissed Husn's palm. "Welcome home, Husn." Husn beamed up at him, happiness and devotion obvious.

Nidan eased himself down, lying on his novitiate, almost purring. Beautiful. Husn's arms wrapped around him, the slender body warm and comfortable.

He pulled a light sheet over them. "Rest."

He extinguished the lamp, let the darkness fall around them.

Husn curled into his arms, trust complete. "Yes, Master."

Nidan smiled, peace filling him. Yes.

Thank the gods, his novitiate was found.

Husn was in love: with his Master, with the Ruby Shard, with the things they did to praise the gods. Just thinking of Master Nidan made his breath catch in his lungs and his prick begin to harden.

It had been several days since they had touched. He and Doril had been bid to fast and meditate, to prepare for their first full moon ritual as four. Then he and Doril had cleaned each other, inside and out in the bath with its magical pipes of warm water.

Now he waited, Doril beside him, both of them still and silent, empty and waiting for their masters.

The night fell, the moon rising before Dinae and Nidan entered, dressed in deepest red. He and Doril were both naked and they bowed before their master's, movements synched by their meditation.

Two wooden forms stood in the moonlight, and Nidan took his arms, bound them, chanting softly, offering them to the gods. Just the touch of his master's hands made him moan, his need great, the chanting and three days of chastity enhancing it.

"You may not spend until the gods demand it."

Husn trembled, worried he would not be able to do as the gods demanded, but then he looked into Nidan's eyes and he nodded. "Yes, Master."

He received a soft, long kiss, Nidan's tongue pressing into his lips. His mouth opened wide, accepting his Master's tongue, his Master's will.

He heard the soft cries and moans behind him, smelled the metallic hint of blood. The pleasure of Dinae and Doril was already flavoring the air, sending prayers to the gods.

His own pleasure awaited his master's commands.

Nidan began chant, eyes holding his, making promises, drawing him in. His breath automatically found Nidan's, his mind beginning to rise, to float on Nidan's chants. His collar was tightened a single notch, Nidan offering their breath to the gods. His body thrummed, anticipation making his cock leak, making him eager. His breath remained in sync with Nidan's though. It would until he could draw it no more.

Nidan's hands trailed over his body, nails scraping lightly, his skin so sensitive.

"Master..." His eyes rolled, and he had to fight to keep their breath matched.

"Focus. Focus and follow the gods' will."

"Yes, Master." He found Nidan's eyes, found his master's breath and focused.

"Yes. Yes, most loved. The gods desire your very breath."

"It is yours to give them, Master."

"Yes." The collar was tightened yet again, stealing his words, making his eyes roll. His cock throbbed, his muscles rippling with need as the world danced in his eyes.

He heard Doril's cry, heard his master and Master Dinae's songs join, entwine.

He didn't have the breath to cry out, not and keep his breathing matched with his Master's, but he knew each labored breath was a song in and of itself, knew that because Nidan's eyes burned into him, praised him, loved him.

Fingers pushed into his body, slick and burning and sure, driving his need higher, faster. The pleasure overwhelmed his search for breath and he shook, barely able to contain the need, keep it inside. Those fingers found his gland, worked the sensitive nerves relentlessly. His breath came in harsh gasps now, his body rocking, shuddering, his fingers curled into fists.

"Close, now. Listen for the songs of the gods." The collar was tightened once again, Nidan's mouth covering his own. His vision swam, the sounds of Dinae and Doril's voices raised in prayer and ecstasy growing faint. His pleasure was overwhelming.

"Now. Now, love." Nidan's hiss cut through everything, demanding his pleasure.

Everything went black as the pleasure spilled from him, offered to his master, to the gods, his life, his need, his pleasure purely theirs.

The world slowly returned to focus, his body held in his master's arms, songs of praise pouring down on him. He reached up, holding onto Nidan, his own songs of happiness and love joining with his master's voice.

The gods sang along, well pleased.

An End to Latemeal

Pandreas rocked his Chulu, knowing the innocent eyes were wide and shocked. The Ruby Path called few and kept fewer and his dear one was not meant for such a life. "Relax, beloved. This is not your path."

Chulu shook his head. "No. No, not for me, Master."

"No. You belong with me, easing the newcomers into our lives." He took a kiss, smiled. "We each have our places."

"I hope I can help you, Master. I feel so new and confused still myself."

"You will." He had no doubt. None.

"Oh." Chulu beamed up at him.

Bron purred. "Beautiful. You are beautiful together, Pan."

He smiled over, nodding. "I am blessed."

Chulu blushed. "Me, too."

Pan nodded, cheek resting upon Chulu's head, looking over at Ton'al. "Are you blessed, sweet Ton'al?"

He received a smile, a nod.

Brash's smile was bright. "All those who follow the Path of Iro are much blessed. It is a sacred calling."

"It is, brother, and one I am eternally grateful for."

Chulu yawned widely and covered his mouth with his hand. "I'm sorry, Master."

"No. No apologies needed. The moon is singing its lullabies and we should rest."

"I don't want this day to end," Chulu admitted. "The first day with my Master."

Oh, he felt so very warm, deep inside. "And tomorrow is the first day of the rest of our path together."

"Oh! So it is." Chulu grinned sheepishly and wrapped thin arms around his waist. "I love you, Master."

Pan smiled, drew his dear one up. "As you are loved, Chulu. Good night, my brothers. We will find our beds."

Bron and Brash called out their farewells and Chulu's arm wrapped around his waist, his sweet initiate staying close.

The courtyard was quiet, except for the soft moans coming from in front of the Amethyst Shard. One of the priests there had an initiate on hands and knees as a chair, one hand slowly pushing a lit candle into the tight hole of the man's body.

He saw Chulu's eyes go wide as his initiate watched, but it wasn't until they were back inside the Ivory Shard that Chulu brought up what they'd seen. "Master? What we saw in the courtyard..."

Pandreas chuckled. "Yes, dear one?"

Chulu colored softly. "What were they doing?"

"They were worshipping. That shard is focused on service. Some members act as chairs, tables. Some serve perfect meals. Some are caretakers."

Chulu frowned. "Act as chair and tables? I'm not sure I understand, Master."

"There are men whose actions, whose prayers to the gods are by servicing others, by allowing themselves to act as a place to rest, to pray."

"That seems very different from the other shards, Master. Would you explain it to me?"

"Of course." They settled into the big, soft bed, curling together.

The Amethyst Shard

Lux threw a full ewer of water square at Roko, the jug landing on the ground with a crash. "Keep your threats to yourself, Roko, else I turn you into a lampshade!" The Curate of the Emerald Shard infuriated him, constantly teasing and taunting and threatening his sweet ones.

Beast.

Boor.

Misguided ape.

Roko snarled and stepped forward, running right into the back of Brash.

"Now, now. What is wrong with the two of you? You are Curates, Masters. What kind of example are you to your novitiates and initiates?" Brash growled, frowning at him and Roko.

Roko glared. "He is a rabbit, frightened of his own shadow."

Lux tossed his head, hair flying. "I have never backed away from a conflict with you, Curate."

Brash rolled his eyes. "Stop it now or I shall have you both over my knee!"

Roko snorted, but Lux was new enough to his position that he had trained under Brash, had been turned over those thighs and well-punished, well-strapped on more than one occasion.

Brash turned to Roko and raised an eyebrow. "Would you like to test your will against my hand, Curate Roko?"

"You wouldn't dare."

The tension flared and, right on cue, Pandreas came fluttering, hair twisting in the wind.

"I would dare, Roko. It is my job, my place. *I* am the Curate of the Onyx Shard. You are my charge. All Curates are."

"In the Onyx Shard, Curates. We draw eyes." Pandreas slid one hand down Lux's spine, the touch immediately soothing. "This is not a public discourse."

Brash nodded. "Of course, Pan. That was what I was trying to explain to these two thick-headed men."

Brash took Roko's arm and firmly led him toward the black door of the Onyx Shard.

Lux followed Pan's guidance, starting to tremble with anger and frustration. "He will not cease his eternal teasing, Pan."

"And you're a fussy little prig, worrying endlessly over the status of your gardens."

Lux puffed up, eyes searching for something else to throw.

"Have you two really so little to do that you must endlessly scrabble at each other?" Brash asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"You know that I am always busy." Lux was offended. Truly. He worked deep into the night, was awake before dawn.

"And yet, you and Roko continue to feud. You are an embarrassment to the temple!" Brash strode down the hallway, leading the way to a small room at the back of the shard, where punishments were typically meted out.

"He insults my shard, my initiates! He frightens my dear ones, laughing as they stumble! Do I go to his shard? Point at the painted and bloodied decorated ones?"

Roko snorted, eyes rolling. "If you had strength, power within, you would not squeal so."

Brash turned his angry eyes onto Roko. "And you, Roko, what is it that brings you to the Amethyst Shard to mock? I do not remember this being a part of the Emerald path."

Brash pulled out a sturdy stool and sat on it, patting his knees. "You may tell me as I beat you."

"I will not just bow before you like a child." Roko looked as if he was going to explode, the air filling with a wild, dark fury that grated against Lux, abrading his soul.

Pandreas looked to Brash, the Ivory and Onyx Curates suddenly seeming powerful, gifted beyond anything his young eyes had seen.

Sometimes? It was horrid to be the youngest Curate.

Not to mention the smallest.

"You are behaving as a child," Brash told Roko reasonably. "So you must be treated as one."

"I will not." Roko growled, almost like a beast. Lux watched, stunned as it was Pan that met Roko's fury, accepting it with a pure calm.

"You may rage and rage, beloved brother, you are safe here, always."

Brash sighed and crossed his arms, nodded. "Yes. He's right." The Onyx Curate looked expectantly at Roko.

Lux watched Roko growl and stomp, shake his head and make refusals, and still Brash waited and Pandreas accepted and he? He just watched, unsure of his place here, his position.

Brash noticed him watching and held out an arm to him. He went easily. Brash was his mentor, his friend, one that understood him, had helped to mold him.

Brash pulled him against the muscled body. "Why do you let him taunt you so, Lux? Where is your serenity?" Brash spoke quietly, not interrupting Roko's growling.

"I..." He sighed, pressing close, whispering. "No one finds me worthy, brother. The constant comments fly -- he is a child, he is weak, he is this and that. I... I am working very hard, yet my peers seem to disregard me."

"Have you ever heard such a thing from me, Lux? From Curate Pandreas? Did I not train you myself to be the Curate of the Amethyst Shard?"

"You did. I... I did not think it would be so lonely, so alone."

Brash nodded. "You have no novitiate, no one who is your own. I remember what that was like. But I always knew I could go to the other Curates, find friendship, companionship among them. Lux, you had only to come to me and I would have happily played with you." Brash chuckled and nodded toward Roko. "In fact perhaps you have only misread some overtures made to you."

He blinked over, surprised. "To me?"

Pandreas' blank eyes were warm, almost amused. "You are quite lovely to him, Lux, delicate, but strong."

Brash purred, stroking his hip. "Yes. Quite lovely. And not just to him."

"Oh..." He shivered; it had been months since he'd been touched, felt.

Pandreas took Roko's hand, brought them both closer, Roko's rage fading, the maddening green eyes staring into him. "Your skin is perfect."

Brash chuckled. "And it marks beautifully."

He blushed dark, mouth opening to protest when Roko's took him, hard and hungry, tongue sweeping through his lips. Brash groaned, the hand on his hip sliding around to

cup his ass. Lux moaned, heart pounding, Pandreas' hands sliding over Roko's head, his face, petting them both.

Brash's thick fingers pulled at his robe, at Roko's, making them both naked. Lux arched, the heat of Roko's body surprising, shocking him. He moved against Roko, not submitting, but meeting the passion head-on.

"Yes," murmured Brash. "Oh, you're beautiful together."

Roko's hands were solid on him, exploring his skin with a firm touch. Lux pushed all his aggravation, his worry, his stress and turned it into passion, want, pure need.

Roko's cock was hard, pressing against his belly. There was a ring embedded in the tip and it fascinated his fingers, the metal smooth and heated. Roko groaned at the touch, teeth threatening along his lower lip, fingers digging in a little.

Brash purred. "Yes, he likes that, Lux. Try tugging on it."

Oh. Oh, he could do that. He rolled the ring, then tugged, making Roko feel it. Roko bucked, the tattoos on his skin rippling. The sound Roko made was... gratifying, arousing.

It made him feel good, knowing they were sharing pleasure, passion. He met Roko's eyes, took a deep, long kiss. The passion in them was fierce, but true.

Wrapped as he was in the kiss, in Roko's presence, he almost didn't notice the finger that pushed into his body, slick and thick and sure. He groaned, opening, parting for the touch. Oh. Oh, he hadn't thought to look for this here, with his family, his brothers, his friends.

Brash's fingers opened him, one and then two and then three pushing into him, spreading him for the thick cock he knew from his time in the Onyx Shard. Roko moaned and rocked, testament to similar treatment from Pandreas.

The passion became sharp and sweet, the burn and heat and need bouncing between them. Brash's cock pushed into him, pushed him into Roko, in a long, slow move. Roko moaned and tilted his head, tongue fucking his lips.

Brash began to fuck him, Pan to fuck Roko. Lux could see Pan, eyes empty and wide, almost staring at Brash, watching. There was a thread between them, a heat that nearly burned him.

They were pressed together, cocks and asses and lips and prayers working together.

Roko's fingers found his nipples, pinched. "You'd look amazing with a pair of rings, Lux."

He arched, body rippling around Brash's cock. "That might encourage my beloved ones to better service. The...the chance to touch, to play."

Roko's eyes darkened and his nostril's flared, cock just leaking against his belly. "I would love to do that for you, Lux."

His nipples were pinched again. Lux groaned, lips parting, the sensation sweet, wicked, dark.

Roko bit at his lips again and Brash pushed harder into him, sending him hard against Roko's body.

Oh. Close. So close. His finger caught in the ring in Roko's cock, tugging.

"Lux!" Roko's cry rang through the shard, heat spraying up over his hand.

"Oh. My... my brothers!" Lux came, his entire body and soul offered to the gods.

Heat filled him and Pan's pleasure circled them all, made their offering complete.

They panted, four men together, focused, praying. Hands slid on his body, touching, keeping the pleasure flowing. He moaned and rocked, eyes closed, lips on Roko's jaw. Roko's soft purrs vibrated against him, Brash's movements still pushing him into Roko, slowly, but surely.

He kissed Roko's ear, whispering soft prayers, wishes, sharing with his peer, his fellow Curate. Roko's hands were gentle on him now, writing prayers of Roko's own upon his skin.

Pan purred, the sound a balm. "Yes, brothers. Much better."

Roko grunted and nodded and Brash laughed, the sound rich and deep. Lux hummed, leaning into Roko, eyes closed. Roko was there to hold him up, supporting him instead of tearing him down.

Pan leaned, lips meeting Brash's, the kiss slow and deep. Roko's moan was low and his tongue flicked out, touching Pan and Brash's lips. Lux took the opportunity to lick and nuzzle at Roko's throat, trace the lines of ink. Roko purred, head going back, tattoo's shimmering again.

"Beautiful." Roko was stunning, lovely, and Lux was fascinated.

Roko purred. "You're fun when you aren't being uptight, Lux."

He reached down, pinched Roko's rear end.

Hard.

"And you're not bad. Much."

Roko laughed and reached up to pinch one of his nipples again.

"Those are mine, Curate." He tasted that laugh, found it pleasing.

"Yes, but you're going to let me decorate them. I'm practicing."

They all laughed together, the tension between them all fading.

Brash pouted. "Damnit. I wanted to spank someone."

Roko chuckled. "Pandreas is here, brother, and deliciously pale."

Brash laughed hard. "And if ever anyone has needed a spanking less..."

The laughter filled the air again, healing empty parts of him Lux hadn't known were aching.

Brash kissed his neck. "You will have someone of your very own, Lux. Have faith. And in the meantime? Have fun."

"Yes, Brash. You have made your point." He smiled, nodded, squeezed Brash's shaft.

Brash gasped and swatted one ass cheek. "Just don't forget it. The next time you two get into a shouting match there *will* be beatings."

Roko chuckled, "Promises, promises."

"I can still beat you tonight," Brash warned.

"But I thought you wanted to see Lux's skin marked."

"I have seen it marked already." Brash's fingers slid along his spine, the move full of memories.

He blushed, moaned as Roko chuckled. "But I have not."

"My hand is in fine form, Roko. If you want something, you need only ask the parties involved."

Pandreas nuzzled Roko's shoulder even as Lux blushed darker.

"Lux quite enjoys the touch of my hand, the marks I leave... do you not, Curate?" Brash was murmured, practically purring the words.

"You are most talented with your touch. You make a man transcend..."

"Then all we need is for Roko to decide it is what he wishes and to express those wishes to us." Brash never did let anyone do things the easy way.

"I want to see him marked."

Lux blinked, stared up at Brash. Surely this was... Not happening.

But Brash's cock was hard inside him again, the Onyx Master obviously looking forward to renewing their relationship.

Pan hummed softly. "This place, Lux? We don't have to be anything but men, lovers, friends, brothers. This shard is our place to find freedom."

"My shard is for us all." His neck was kissed. "But only if you want this, Lux. You are not Master here, but neither are you initiate."

Roko slid down, lips slipping down along his belly, eyes hot. "Please, brother. I wish to see your skin, red and hot." Lux groaned as Roko's tongue brushed his cock.

"Don't cheat," whispered Brash, voice low and rough, fingers sliding on Roko's cheeks.

Roko licked Brash's fingers. "Not cheating. Seducing."

Lux laughed, charmed, amused, aroused.

Brash laughed and that hard cock slid out of him. "Oh... that was a good place to be."

Brash then took his hand and Roko's and tugged them back toward the chair. His legs were weak, cock bobbing as he followed. The emotions in the air were warm, rich, different than he expected, than he knew.

Brash sat, cock also hard, sticking straight up.

Lux met Brash's eyes, searching them. He wanted sensation, passion, need, but he did not want to lose face. He was shocked by what he saw there. Love, need, want, pride in him. It warmed him, drew him closer, hands reaching out for his friend.

Brash's fingers twined with his. "You are so beautiful, Lux. The willow is stronger than even the mighty oak, my friend, for it bends beneath the wind and is not broken."

He leaned in, offered his lips, his body. "Thank you, my friend."

"This is my pleasure, Lux. You are my pleasure." Brash's mouth took his, passion rising between them.

It was different now -- not a punishment or a lesson, nothing but pleasure and want and release of will. He was placed over Brash's lap, strong hands smoothing over his skin, sensitizing him, readying him.

Pan came and sat before him, hands taking his own. The man was almost vibrating, soaking in the excitement. Roko took up position near his head, stroking his shoulders, eyes on him, hot and heavy. He didn't feel weak, ashamed. He felt wanted and desired, as if he was offering a gift, receiving one.

Brash made another adjustment, bringing their cocks together in his lap. "So beautiful, Lux. Your skin has always begged for my touch."

"You have amazing hands, Brash. A wonderful touch."

Brash purred, caressed his ass. "Now, Lux." It was his only warning before Brash let his hand fly, coming down onto Lux's ass hard.

He groaned, lips parting, the burn moving through him.

Pandreas gasped. "Brash..."

"Yes, my brother?" Brash asked, voice low. Another hit landed before Pandreas answered.

"Oh. Such need." Pan was flushed, panting, and if his entire focus hadn't been on his ass, Lux might have been curious at the tone of Pan's voice, the implications hidden there.

Brash moaned and hit him again, fingers snapping. He jerked, fingers closing around Pan's, the sting sharp, intense. Roko's fingers began to trace designs on his skin, the touch warm and sweet, such a contrast to the smacks on his ass. Brash had a very firm touch.

The heat filled him, his entire body moving under the blows, eyes closed, focused on sensation.

Suddenly Roko's mouth was at his ear, breath hot on him. "Lux. Please. Let me fuck you while Brash spans you. Please." There was a note of desperate need in Roko's voice.

"Yes..." He turned his head, offering a heated, hungry kiss. Roko sucked on his tongue, moaning softly.

Brash's hand landed on his ass again, square in the middle, making him jump which sent his and Brash's cocks sliding together. He cried out, the sound pushing into Roko's lips, his fingers squeezing Pan's.

Roko broke the kiss and moved behind him. Suddenly Brash's hands were no longer hitting him, but holding him open for Roko's cock. His body burned, skin alight and alive as Roko's thick heat speared him, spread him.

Roko moaned. "Oh, Lux. So tight."

He groaned, full and taken, held and cared for. Oh. Oh, he'd missed being touched. How could he have forgotten how he needed this?

Pan's lips brushed his cheek. "That's right. Feel. Open yourself."

"Oh, he's open. Nice and tight, but open." Roko laughed, the sound happy and full of joy, joy from being inside him, and then Roko began to move.

The strong thrusts were met by Brash's hand coming down onto his ass again. He heard Pan shift, then a long, thin prick pressed against his lips, filling him there, too.

It was so much, cocks filling him mouth and ass, another rubbing against his own, and Brash's hand, hitting out the rhythm they all moved to. He soared, spirit singing, praising their gods, their passion, the four of them in a perfect sync.

He had no clue how long it went on for, there was only pleasure and prayer and perfection.

The pleasure shook him, made him ache, his cries muffled around Pan's shaft, his body squeezing Roko's.

"Yes. That's it. Praise the gods, my brothers." Brash's voice was raised to the skies, the hand hitting him landing harder and harder.

Pan filled his mouth as he himself shot, the pleasure and pain twined together, too much to resist. Roko and Brash were bare seconds behind, heat filling his ass and spraying up along his cock and against his belly as Brash's hand came down one final time.

He slumped, panting hard, almost shaking with the intensity.

Roko leaned over him, kissing his spine between his shoulder blades. "Thank you, Lux."

Pan leaned to kiss Brash, fingers petting his head.

"Thank you, brothers."

He could feel the heat from their kiss, feel the way Brash's muscles tightened for a moment.

Then they were all breaking apart, Roko sliding from him, three pairs of hands helping him up.

Pan leaned into Brash, almost cuddling. "The tubs? We could soak, relax?"

Brash purred. "Excellent idea. You will join us, Roko, Lux." The way Brash said it, it was not a question or request.

Roko's eyes twinkled, the green mischievous, amused. "Yes, brother."

Brash laughed. "I could still beat you, too, Roko."

"Your hand will get tired." Roko laughed back, the sound friendly, warm, inclusive.

Brash's hand slid down along Lux's spine and rubbed gently over his abused bottom. "Not when its task is such a joy."

Lux purred, body rippling, and he leaned for a kiss. "You still teach me, Brash."

"It is what will make you a good Curate, Lux. Knowing that you are never too old or established or in charge to learn."

"And who teaches you, Brash?" Roko's eyes danced.

"Brat," Brash accused, hand landing hard on Roko's ass. "I am open to all experiences."

Roko flushed, chuckled, as Pan smiled, sinking into the huge copper tub. Brash reached out, braided the soft, silken hair with a gentle touch.

Roko took his hand and led him to the water, eyes warm. They settled together, hands washing one another, just caring. It felt like a balm, to be able to just be, not think.

"You must remember this," Brash told him, "when you have an initiate of your own. Remember that we are always here for you even then and that sometimes, it is a needful thing, to be with one's peers, with those who are your equals and who love you."

Lux nodded. "I will. Thank you. I... I needed this. To be here today."

"And we needed to be here for you." Brash leaned over and kissed him.

"Of course it will not do for the Amethyst Curate to be too mellow," noted Roko. "So I will be sure to keep you on your toes."

He rolled his eyes, managing to continue kissing even as he pinching Roko.

Roko shouted in surprise, green eyes wide. "He pinched me!"

"No more than you deserved," noted Brash.

He chuckled, nuzzling into Brash's neck, sharing a kiss with Pan, whose face was against Brash's neck, too.

Brash purred, hand on his back, stroking. "Well, my brothers, this has been wonderful, but we have shards to run."

"Yes." He nodded, kissing each of them in turn. "Come to latemeal, Roko?"

Roko looked surprised, but also pleased and he gave a nod. "Yes, Lux. It would be my pleasure."

"For me, too." He crawled from the tub and dressed, noting that Pandreas moved not an inch. "Good day, brothers."

Roko was also dressing, taking his leave. "I will walk out with you, Lux."

Brash just waved.

They walked out together, the sun shining, bright, warm.

Cord arrived at the temple of the Path of Iro with only the clothes he wore and a sleeping mat rolled up and carried under his arm. He was tall enough that he would have to bend to go through the door. If they would open it for him. He shook his blond curls back out of his face and knocked again.

The heavy door opened, a little man in a purple robe standing there. "Come in, come in. Curate Pandreas is ill and I'm... helping. You did come at an strange time, indeed."

Cord dipped his head, went through the door and stood there, towering over the little man. "I'm sorry. I don't think I could come back though, I wasn't sure I would find the place as it was."

"Odd is not bad." The little man was sharp-featured, quick, moving down the hallway. "In fact, it could be good. You can stay at my shard until the Curate is well. We're taking turns, housing newcomers."

"Your shard? Is it dangerous?" It sounded dangerous, sharp. His skin bruised easily, broke easily and he wasn't graceless, but he was large and tended to knock things over more often than smaller men.

"Dangerous? No. No, the Amethyst Shard is devoted to service, nurturing." He was given a smile, quick and still oddly warm. "Care. Oh, I'm Curate Lux. Who are you?"

"Cord, Master." He held out his hand and smiled back. Lux's hand was cool, the shake firm, a jolt of electricity shot up Cord's arm. He gasped, snatching his hand back and rubbing his arm. "Master?"

"Yes..." He got a long, careful look, the Curate's grey eyes sharp, bright. "Come with me."

"Did you feel that?" Cord asked, following the quick steps. "Was that normal?"

"I did, and normal is relative. All things are relative."

"They are?" He was confused, but he kept following, drawn by the little man.

"Of course they are." The white building opened up into a wide courtyard filled with people and colors and sunlight.

"Oh, it's beautiful." He stopped walking a moment, turning in place to look at everything. There were buildings radiating from the courtyard, each a different color. The courtyard itself was beautiful green grasses and benches, flowers.

The little man stopped, looked back at him. The mouth opened, then shut with a snap, a pinched look replaced with a smile. "It is, isn't it?"

He nodded and took one last look before addressing the man. "I hope I'm not too much trouble, Master."

"Somehow I don't think you will be." He got a wink, a somehow wicked grin.

His mouth dropped open and he followed along quickly, not wanting to get left behind. "You are most unexpected, Master."

"You are not the only person to say so, Cord." They moved toward a purple establishment, two nude men kneeling outside the door, trays of food and drink held on muscled arms.

"Oh, I'm so hungry. How did you know?"

"They, or their brethren kneel outside every day, serving all who need."

"Oh. Oh. Why?" Cord stroked one muscled arm and another strong back.

"Because that is their place, their calling. They serve." They were beautiful, peaceful, perfect.

"Oh." He nodded. It made sense. He took a glass of water and a piece of fruit.

They tasted wonderful.

Each man was given a caress by the Curate, a smile, a warm word.

He smiled at the gestures. "They are yours."

"They are. Come inside." One long, thin hand was offered over.

He took it, feeling that jolt along his arm again. It made him gasp, his fingers curling around the master's.

Those eyes met his, sure, shining. "Yes. Yes, come inside."

"Yes, Master," he murmured. As he walked over the threshold with the master, a shiver of anticipation went through him. He was here.

Eyes met him, dozens of them -- some curious, some happy, some quiet and still. "There are no empty rooms, Cord. You may have the room off of mine. For now."

"Thank you, Master." He hoped he wasn't going to be sent away. He liked it here and he never felt comfortable so quickly in new places.

"This is Was and Linae and these three are the triplets -- no one can tell them apart, not even themselves."

"That must be confusing." They were all so beautiful.

"Sometimes. Mostly, we keep them together, let them serve as a matched set of chairs."

"Chairs?" His mouth was hanging open again, he was sure of it.

"Chairs. Boys, assume the position." The order was fond, the three boys dropping immediately, Lux sitting on one without hesitation.

He blinked. "Oh, wow. That's... something."

"It is. They are beautifully trained." Lux reached down, petting. "They are a comfort."

"It's lucky you're so light, Master."

That earned him a laugh. "You might need two brothers, Cord."

He laughed softly, pleased to have made the master laugh.

"Tell us about yourself. Where do you come from? What do you seek?"

He cleared his throat and stood there, feeling as though he were towering over them. "I'm from the lowlands. My father has a farm. He wasn't very happy when I left to seek the temple, but I knew I was meant to be here, so I came. I'm not sure what I seek... happiness."

"Happiness? Peace? Passion?" Those grey eyes held him, seemed to look inside him.

"Yes, yes, Master." He nodded, feeling all jittery inside. He was being judged, he knew that, but he didn't know what they needed from him, so he could not present himself that way. He could only be who he was. "I know I'm meant to be here, Master. Nothing has ever felt like a better decision than to follow the path to this temple."

To his surprise, he received a nod. "I felt much the same way. Have you ever bathed another man?"

"No, Master. To be honest, bathing has never been more than a quick dip in the pond or a swipe or two with the cloth. We are farmers, Master. Not nobles."

"Then you should be bathed first, to learn how."

"As you wish, Master. I promise to learn as quickly as I can." He didn't think somehow that it was his place to be bathed, but he would hate to do it wrong for someone else.

Lux nodded, stood. "Come then. Havva will bathe you in the courtyard while I oversee high tea. It is a beautiful day to bathe in the sunshine."

Cord followed the little master, keeping his thoughts regarding bathing outdoors and taking one's time with it to himself. He was no longer a farmer.

A huge copper tub sat in the courtyard, surrounded by men acting as tables, chairs, men carrying pots of tea and trays of food. A willowy blond stood by the tub, bottles of oils and soaps in a basket. "May I serve you, Master?"

"Havva, this is Cord. He has never been bathed by anyone. I wish him to learn its joys so he may share it with others."

Cord gave Havva a bit of a nod, a bit of a bow, feeling a little panicked suddenly at being left by the only person he knew here, even if it was only a short acquaintanceship. He

took a deep breath though and gave himself a stern talking to. He'd not come all this way to embarrass himself now.

He waved his sleeping roll about. "Where should I put this, Master?"

"Oh. I'm sorry. Rase, will you please put this in my quarters. It belongs to our new friend, Cord." To his surprise, the master sat beside the tub, the 'furniture' moving to him. "I do enjoy late spring so. There may be storms tonight, but it is perfection now."

"It is beautiful and warm," he agreed, smiling at Lux, so thankful the master wasn't abandoning him. "Do I get into the tub?"

"Oh, I think naked first and a little rub down to keep the dust from bathing with you." The words were warm, fond, they made him feel included instead of mocked.

"As you wish, Master." He took off his boots first and then his leggings, his tunic falling over his genitals and rear. He was not used to being naked in front of others, let alone out of doors! But most of the people acting as furniture were naked and so he resolved to put his shyness aside and removed the tunic.

He stood stiff and straight in front of Lux and Havva, looking somewhere over Havva's shoulder.

"You're lovely, strong and proud." Lux stood, one hand on his stomach, fingers petting. "You may relax, Cord. You are welcome here."

He gasped at the sensation of Lux's fingers on him. It made him begin to get hard and his cheeks went warm and he had to fight getting even stiffer.

"Oh, that is lovely..." Lux smiled, hand weighing his sacs, stroking him.

He swallowed and looked into the grey eyes, smiling tentatively -- it felt so very good, no one had ever touched him there. "I am happy I please you, Master."

"You do." Lux smiled back, fingers exploring him, making him feel so good.

"You are pleasing me too, Master." He wanted to make sure Lux knew it was making him feel good, that maybe he was going to come if it continued. He was pretty sure there would be rules about that here and he didn't want to break any.

A soft, silken ribbon was wrapped around his cock, his balls, holding them firm.

His eyes widened, the purple ribbon doing more than just decorating his genitals, he could tell. "Master?"

"Breathe. This passion? This need? Belongs to the gods, to me. Have faith, Cord. Trust in the path."

"Yes, Master." He breathed as he had been instructed, eyes on Lux as the man bound him. It made him shiver. It made him want.

"You are beautiful." A warm cloth was taken up by Havva as Lux spoke, the grime wiped from him.

"Me, Master?" He had never been called beautiful before. Strong and able had been his parent's highest compliment. He was not perfectly formed like much of the men acting as furniture, nor was he fine like the master.

"Yes. You... you suit well." He got an enigmatic smile, then he was helped into the tub.

He was so pleased to have made a good impression on the master that he didn't fuss at all over getting into the tub and staying there instead of making a quick job of it. Master Lux had said something about bathing being a joy.

Havva poured oils into the water, beginning to wash him, fingers moving over his skin.

He gasped as pleasure slid through him at the touches. Oh. Perhaps he could see how bathing could be a joy.

"Relax, brother. Enjoy. Our master will expect that you learn well."

"Yes, b...brother." He gave Havva a smile and tried to relax. He paid attention to everything Havva did, so he would be ready to do this to another. The master relaxed, watching him, drinking tea, smiling.

The touches were arousing rather than relaxing and he went with it, knowing his prick was bound and unable to spend. His nipples pulled into tight points, making him gasp each time Havva's fingers passed over them. The oil seemed to make everything slick and sensitive.

"Mmm... Master, he feels so much, offers so freely..."

He felt his cheeks heat, but he could not stop his body for continuing to respond to the touches, to the glide of water over his skin.

Lux leaned over him, suddenly, lips covering his own, tongue sliding in to taste and lick. His mouth opened in surprise, his eyes wide as he looked into the grey of Master Lux's. The kiss went on and on, deep and heated and wild and bigger than anything he could imagine. It made him tingle all inside his skin, and his cock throbbed, balls beginning to ache. Such a big thing. Such a huge thing, this kiss. Just a kiss.

He could feel it everywhere, his toes to his head, hands opening and closing under the water. He thought maybe if he hadn't been bound, he would have spent. Just from this kiss and he had never heard of such a thing. He whimpered into Master Lux's mouth.

The kiss ended, Lux watching him, eyes searching his own. He gasped for breath, trembling and ready to do anything Lux asked of him, absolutely anything at all. "Master," he whispered. "Oh, Master."

"Yes. Yes, I believe so." Lux panted against his lips.

He reached out to hold on and then let his hand drop back into the water. He hadn't been given permission to touch and something told him he needed that permission.

Those eyes smiled, the kiss easing. "Finish bathing him, Havva. I wish to have him in my quarters."

"I'm doing all right?"

"More than. I think you've come home."

He beamed. "Thank you, Master. I've been hoping since you let me in you would keep me."

"Yes? You have good instincts." That long, thin hand cupped his jaw.

He nuzzled into the touch, gazing into Lux's eyes. "Thank you, Master."

The praise was like a balm to every word his father had said, trying to convince him the Path of Iro was not for him.

"You're welcome, Cord."

Havva rinsed him, helped him stand. "Welcome to our shard, Cord. I look forward to becoming friends."

"Thank you, Havva. Maybe I can return the favor soon." Then his attention turned back onto the little master he knew was his own.

"Come with me, Cord. We have much to learn, much to do."

"Yes, Master."

He left behind his clothes, left behind his worries, following his new master in the purple robes.

He would follow where ever Master Lux led.

Lux moved quickly in body and in mind. His heart moved slow as sap in winter.

He kept Cord with him, teaching and training. The man was not the most graceful, but there was an eager joy in every service performed, a quiet pleasure in bathing and feeding, in helping Lux dress, in sleeping close.

After two moons, Lux went to Brash -- his friend, his confidant, his mentor -- to seek advice, answers. "Brother? Do you have time..."

"Of course, Lux." Brash's arms opened wide, inviting him into their warmth and support.

"We have not seen much of you these last months."

"I... I believe I have found my novitiate, brother. I... I love him, he completes me, makes my heart and my nerve ease." It frightened him, to feel so much for a single man.

Brash's face lit up and the hug turned into a fierce squeeze. "Wonderful! I am so happy for you, my dear Lux." Brash brought their faces close. "Why do you not look happier, sweet man?"

"I... I am...It worries me, to feel so much, to hold so much in my heart."

"You worry too much, Lux. You must set aside everything and embrace your novitiate, hold onto him with both hands. The gods have given you a gift -- do not insult them by being too timid to accept it!"

Lux nodded. "He... he is most strong -- I imagined my novitiate would be perfect, graceful, willowy, but he is strong and happy and eager."

"Now what fun would a perfect novitiate be, dear one?" Brash laughed and gave him a kiss. "All he needs is to love you and for you to love him. That is what makes a good novitiate."

"Yes. I know. I do. I just... my heart is slow to understand what it believes."

Brash chuckled, hands moving on him, almost absently, as they talked. "He will not go anywhere, Lux. You may take all the time you need. Just remember that the longer you take, the less time you have to enjoy it."

He nodded, relaxing beneath the touches. "He will not go, he belongs with me."

"No hesitation in your words. Why then does your heart hesitate?"

He rested against Brash, considering. "To serve one and one alone... It is much like the Gold Shard... It destroys so much if the bond is not true."

"And yet you *know* the bond is, Lux. You have told me so just now."

"I do. I have no doubts." It was true, completely. He just needed to speak the words aloud.

"Then you know what you must do." Brash gave him another kiss. "And much as I would like to dally with you, there is another who needs your attention now."

"Yes. Thank you, Brash." He smiled, kissed the corner of Brash's mouth. "You guide me well."

Then he headed to where his own waited, quiet and peaceful.

Cord was in the courtyard, silent and still where he'd been left. He was kneeling, arms out, the tray upon it absolutely still. Of course the tray also held only a single plate with a pear on it, but it took small steps to build the members of the Amethyst Shard.

He could see Cord's nostril's flare when he came into the courtyard, knew Cord was aware of his presence, though there were no other outward signs of it.

He walked up, took the pear from the plate and cut a single, paper thin slice. "I would have you as my own, in all ways, in all things."

The tray trembled but did not fall, Cord's face turning up to his, those blue eyes shining. "Oh, yes, Master. I am yours. Please."

"Yes. Mine." The bit of pear was fed to Cord. "Come, most loved. I require your service, your heart, above all else." Speaking was easy, once he knew his heart.

"Yes, Master." He could hear the joy in Cord's voice, the eagerness.

The tray was carefully placed on the ground and Cord bounded up, beaming at him.

He resisted the urge to take a kiss, to allow himself to luxuriate in Cord's strength, Cord's lips until they entered his bedchambers.

Cord went to his knees beside the bed, bowing. "I am yours, Master."

Lux nodded, smiled, pleased throughout. "Mine. Undress me, Cord."

Cord reached up, finding the clasp that held his robe closed and undoing it, fingers warm where they touched his skin as Cord tugged the robe down off his shoulders.

"Yours next, my love. We will love each other this night; we will be as one."

"Oh, Master, I have been waiting for this." Cord smiled as he stood to take off his robe. "I thought I had done something wrong."

"No. No, you have been most pleasing to me, most appealing." He held nothing back, offering Cord all of himself.

"Oh, thank you, Master." Cord bent and kissed his feet. "I have wanted to be yours since the first day, Master. I could feel such pleasure in your eyes."

"You are mine, you have been my own." His shaft filled, heavy and dark, wanting.

Cord nodded and stood before him, no longer the stiff awkward farm-boy. Oh, Cord was no graceful nymph and never would be, but Cord was strong and proud and eager and all his. He reached out, hands sliding up Cord's stomach, over the tight nipples, over the smooth skin. Oh, the scent of them together was heady.

Cord moaned, eyes dropping closed. "May I touch you, Master?" Such need in the simple request.

"Yes. Let me know your touch. Give me your pleasure." His fingers touched Cord's cheeks, lips.

Cord's hands reached for him, large and strong, they were also gentle and warm, touching him as if he were more precious than the fine china he served tea in.

Lux moaned, sharing his pleasure, his joy, freely, openly.

Cord's blue eyes followed his hands, fingers exploring, discovering the curves and angles that made Lux. His skin was alight, the service of Cord's hands pure perfection. One index finger gently stroked over his right nipple, Cord gasping as it went hard beneath the soft touch.

"Yes. Yes, Cord. Feel me." He eased them both back onto the bed, lips exploring Cord's face.

Cord's fingers stuttered as his lips moved over the lovely face. A soft moan sounded and then Cord continued his own explorations, fingers still careful.

"I will keep you close to me forever. We will know every inch of each other." He whispered the words, the promises.

"As you wish, Master. I will do anything you need of me."

"I need you to love me, Cord, to be my own."

"Oh, I do, Master. I think I have since that first day when you touched my hand and it was like fire."

"The gods blessed us, bringing you to me."

Their eyes met, held, the love and need and heat blazing between them. Cord cried out and pressed their lips together, joining their breath. Their tongues slid together, moving, dancing together, bodies pressed together. Cord's prick was hard and leaking already, the dear boy so eager. He stroked a line down Cord's spine, petting, stroking, fingers ending at the base of Cord's spine. Cord shivered, cock throbbing against his belly.

"You and I will climax together, wait until we cannot bear it and then share our love with the gods."

"Oh, Master, I already cannot bear it."

"You will for me." He took Cord's hand, placed it over his cock.

"Yes, Master, for you." Cord nodded, hand moving over his cock, exploring it carefully.

The touch of the big hands was gentle, almost maddening. He considered demanding more, then relaxed, allowing Cord to have his will, his way. The gods would show them the way.

Once Cord had thoroughly explored his prick, the large hand cupped his balls, weighing them, playing gently with them. "So hot, Master."

"For you, for your touch, for the service you offer the gods."

"I would do anything for them, for you, Master." Cord's hand wrapped around his cock, engulfing it.

"Yes." He moaned, body arching, pushing up into the touch.

"I'm making you feel that," said Cord, voice full of wonder as his hand worked.

Lux nodded, moving under the sensations. "You bring me such pleasure."

"Good. Oh, good." Cord's face shone, his stroking increasing.

"Tell me. Tell me what you feel, why you serve." His hands searched Cord's shoulders, face.

"For you, Master, I serve for you and the gods." Cord gasped, hips moving against him. "I feel, oh, everything is so hot, so big. I will spend soon, Master, I must."

"Yes. Together. Both of us as one." He arched, hips bucking, rocking.

"Oh, yes, Master. Thank you, Master." Cord's cock slid along his hip as the hand around his prick tightened.

His own fingers dug into Cord's ass, tugging them together.

"Master, oh! Now, please." Cord's eyes rolled, and heat sprayed between them.

His own pleasure answered Cord's, the heat and passion between them doubling, tripling. Those blue eyes looked into his own, so wide and full of pleasure and happiness.

"You will be my right hand, my heart, my own." He made the promise, the vow. "You will wear my collar."

"Oh, yes, Master. I have so much to learn." Cord's mouth pressed against his. "I want you to teach me to be perfect for you."

Lux tilted his head, thought. This is what Brash meant, what the dangers were in denying the gods. He had made his novitiate feel less than worthy. "I do not need perfection, Cord. Only your best."

"Oh. Oh, Master." Cord wrapped his arms around Lux, pulling him against the long body, face buried in his neck. "I love you, Master."

"As I love you, Cord. Never doubt it, not even for a moment." Not for a heartbeat.

The smile he got lit Cord's entire face.

In return, it lit his spirit.

Praise the gods.

Cord worked hard to do everything Lux asked of him. A soft touch, a word of praise, even just a favorable look from those amazing grey eyes was enough to have him redoubling his efforts. The days were filled with learning how best to be of service, hours of being still, of honing his body so that he could be whatever Lux needed of him.

The nights were filled with loving, the small master making him feel amazing; together they sent many prayers to the gods.

Today Master Lux was entertaining some of the other Masters and it would be his first time serving for his master in public.

He was very nervous.

He didn't want to disappoint Master Lux.

Of course, his master didn't appear worried or concerned, simply smiling at them all. The youngest and least experienced of them had been sent to practice, to relax, to keep from catastrophe.

"Are you sure I'm ready, Master?" All the other Curates had been invited. All of them.

Those eyes, so grey, so warm, so focused, landed on him. "I am sure, Cord. You will do your best and we will have a wonderful meal."

"Yes, Master." He nodded. He would not give Lux a reason to look disappointed. "What do you wish me to do, Master?"

"You will serve me, help if another needs it. Get to know the other Curates' needs, for some will be frequent guests and often you will be the only one serving."

"Yes, Master. Will you need me to be your seat, Master?"

"No, Cord. I will need you mobile. Have one of the triplets serve me."

He bowed his head. "As you wish, Master."

His cheek was given a warm caress, eyes warm. "I love you, Cord."

He nuzzled into the touch, heart beating so hard. Master Lux's love made his life complete. "I love you, Master."

"Then all will be well. Oh! Make sure Bron and his little one have enough room. The boy is amazing."

"Amazing, Master?" He had yet to meet the other Curates and their novitiates.

"Clumsy. The boy can break something by looking at it. It's insane." Lux rolled his eyes, sighed. "I had a deep moment of fear that Pan would give him to us, love. It would have been catastrophic."

"I always worry that I will be clumsy," he admitted.

"It is your awareness that makes you graceful, Cord."

"Thank you, Master." He was vibrating, so pleased.

"Come, now. It is time. Here are Pan and Brash and Ton'al." Lux smiled, nodded.
"Brothers! Come and meet my novitiate."

Cord was nervous, but if Master Lux said he was ready then he was and he would make sure that he did nothing to embarrass his master.

He bent before the newcomers, Pandreas' eyes making him stare, as did the collar around Ton'al's neck -- love marks, bite marks, all the way around. He looked at Ton'al's master with wide eyes.

Brash smiled, the look sincere, joyful, but it was Pandreas who came forward, looking drawn and shaky. "My dear boy. I am so sorry that I haven't greeted you sooner. I have been ill. Welcome. Welcome."

"Thank you, Curate, but Master Lux was there to greet me and I never doubted my welcome." He beamed over at his master.

Master Lux offered him a warm smile, then touched his elbow. "Find a sunny spot for Pan to sit and have another bring him tea and a blanket for his shoulders. We want to help him be well."

"Yes, Master." He turned to the Curate. "Do you need to take my arm, Master?" The Curate had found him easily enough, but he didn't know if Pandreas could see or not.

"Yes, thank you. Have you settled in well?" Pandreas' hand slipped around his arm, a wave of serenity covering him.

"Yes, I love it here. My Master is just wonderful." He led Curate Pandreas to one of the triplets. "This is Adin. He'll be your seat today."

"Hello, lovely one. Thank you." The dark head was stroked as Pandreas sat, the man purring, pleased.

Cord nodded his head in a quick bow and went to get Pandreas a blanket, placing it over the man's shoulders before pouring a cup of tea from the tray Havva held and offering it to the Curate. "There is honey or milk if you wish."

"Milk, please." Pandreas smiled, looking healthier, more comfortable already.

His own master beamed at him. Cord felt about ten feet tall, so happy to have pleased his master. He put the milk in the tea. "There are little sweet pies, Curate. They're delicious."

"Thank you, Cord. Have you met Ton'al? He belongs with Brash." The tall man was given a nod, and he received a smile.

"Pleased to meet you Ton'al. Would you like a seat and some tea, Curate Brash?" Ton'al bowed to him, helping Brash to a pretty, muscled blond chair.

"Ton'al serves his master. He is quite... determined to." Lux smiled, winked. "Ah, the Ruby Shard. Welcome."

Four came from the Ruby Shard and Cord knew there were three more shards to come as well and he tried not to panic at the thought of all the people. He could do this. His master had faith. He bowed to the beautiful twin Curates, tried not to stare at their initiates.

Each Curate that entered greeted him, seemed pleased to meet him. Each was seated, served, Master Lux smiling at him.

Soon they were all there and Cord led his own master to the last chair available, feeling so big beside his graceful master, but not feeling awkward or clumsy, not anymore.

Master Lux kept him close, feeding him from the large plate, the pride in him growing, blooming. Cord felt as if he shone, as if each look from Lux made him more than he'd been the moment before.

He sprang into action each time a Curate made a request, making sure everyone had sufficient tea and sweets, ensuring their guests' comfort.

Finally, Master Lux drew him near, settled him onto a stuffed wooden chair and cuddled into his lap. "The others may serve now, Cord. You may serve me. You have pleased me well."

He beamed at his master, holding the slender body close. "Thank you, Master."

It stunned him, how touching and holding Master Lux made him feel, how it made him strong. How it gave him power and peace.

Curate Roko smiled over, the green eyes laughing. "You look most comfortable, brother."

Lux nodded, grinned. "Perfectly, Curate. Perfectly."

He blushed a little, but not a lot because he was comfortable and happy himself. He wished suddenly that everyone would leave. As much as he had wanted this day to come, to prove himself to his master, he now wanted to be alone, to learn more about their bodies and touching and loving.

His master had that effect on him as well.

The lamps dimmed, Lux's hands moving, petting him carefully and making him twist and turn. The others had begun to touch their own initiates, Roko going to Pandreas and simply holding the pale man, speaking softly.

Oh. He had not expected this and for a moment he was shocked and then he truly watched the others and saw the love and pleasure they took in each other, realized how this pleasure shared was made bigger, such an offering to the gods.

He relaxed then, moving into Master Lux's touches once more, gazing adoringly into the grey eyes.

"Are you happy, Cord? Are you home?" Master Lux smiled at him, face calm, serene.

"Oh, yes, Master. So happy and most definitely home." He smiled shyly and put his hand over Master Lux's heart. "I always thought home was a place, Master, but I've discovered that it is not."

"No, most loved. It is formed between hearts. Yours and mine, ours and our brothers, the Iro and the gods."

He nodded and put his lips to Master Lux's. "I love you, Master."

"As I love you." Master Lux opened, tongue pressing into his lips before retreating.

He followed Master Lux's tongue, moaning into his Master's mouth, cock filling as need made him want.

Master Lux rubbed against him, rubbing and rocking, teasing him unmercifully.

He gasped and moaned, hands wrapping around Master Lux's shoulders as he held on. "Oh, Master, please. Please." He wasn't even sure what he begged for, only that he wanted more than just rubbing and hands.

"Do not spend 'til I give you leave." Lux opened his robe, and slowly, impossibly sank down onto his shaft, taking him into perfect heat.

"Master!" His eyes shot wide open and he keened softly, the sensations unbelievable. Master Lux was so hot and tight and amazing around him.

"Oh, Master."

"Yes. Inside me in all ways. Most loved." Those eyes shone.

He beamed into Master Lux's eyes. "You make me feel so good, Master, inside and out and in my heart."

"Yes." Master Lux moved, riding him, hips going up and down, lips parted. Not spending was the hardest thing Cord had ever done since coming here.

His hands found Master Lux's waist, holding on, helping as he got used to the rhythm. It filled him, buoyed by the sounds filling the room, low and deep and wanton.

His hand found Master Lux's prick and he wrapped around it. "Is this right, Master?"

"Yes. Yes, Cord." Those slim muscles bunched and jerked, hips pushing into his hand, onto his shaft.

He could feel them joining, their hearts beating together, the pleasure blurring the edges where he stopped and his master began. He kept looking into Master Lux's eyes, holding on to his Master.

"Now, my own. Pray with me. Now." Master Lux bucked, cock throbbing in his hand.

He cried out to the gods, his prick shooting heat deep inside Master Lux's body as the pleasure moved inside him. Master Lux's pleasure splashed over his hand, his wrist, the tight body milking him.

The smell was incredible and beyond it was the scent of come from the other Curates with their novitiates, the scent rising up to the gods, such beautiful prayers offered freely together.

It was why he was here. Why he was called.

His eyes filled with tears, his fingers sliding across Lux's face. "I love you, Master."

"Yes. Love." Lux gathered each tear that escaped, kissed them away.

"I'm sorry, Master. It's just all so big."

"No apologies. It is the biggest thing I have ever felt."

"You, too?" Oh, could Master Lux have felt it as well? Were they truly so connected?

"Yes, most loved." Those eyes were... they told the truth.

He wrapped his arms around his master, holding on. Master Lux melted into him, against him, loving him as none other. Ever.

Chulu Sleeps and Wakes in Pan's Arms

"See, my dear? All paths have their place."

Chulu nodded. "I do see. It's beautiful the way it all works together. I'd like to meet Master Lux and Cord, to understand their service more personally."

"Of course. We should have them over for a meal. Cord is a charming man."

"Whatever you wish, Master." Chulu smiled, a soft, teasing note in his voice.

Pandreas laughed, pouncing his beloved one, rolling Chulu underneath him on the bed. Chulu's laughter was sweet, the way the slender body responded to him sweeter still. They touched one another, kisses sometimes soft, sometimes needy, lips clinging and fingers pressing in, exploring.

"Master, will we try any of the things you've told me about?"

"Hmm?" He rolled the velvet-soft sacs in his fingers, petting, panting over one tight nipple.

"What the other shards do." Chulu spoke the words, but they were distracted, the lovely body pushing up, hard nipple touching his lips.

"We can do all we wish. All or none or anything between." He reached down, touching and tapping the tight little ring of muscles.

Chulu gasped, legs spreading for him. "Oh, Master."

"Yes." He reached for the little pot of cream, slicking his finger to ease the way, slipping one finger inside Chulu's body.

Chulu moaned, legs spreading further. "Oh, Master, yes, I want to feel you inside me. Please."

"Yes. We will be joined for always." Another finger joined the first, stretching, spreading his Chulu.

So hot inside, such silk, squeezing around his fingers as his Chulu writhed and moved on his fingers. He breathed in the passion, the heat, the need pouring through his lover. Chulu's fingers moved over him, finding his nipples and teasing, squeezing gently.

Pan gasped, hips rocking, pushing against Chulu's thigh. "Oh. You will make me hurry..."

"Is that not all right, Master?" Chulu asked, hands resting lightly against his skin.

"Oh, that is most right, Chulu. Most luscious." He shifted, slid his fingers free. "Let me inside you?"

"Oh, yes, please, Master." Chulu's body opened for him, legs sliding along the outside of his thighs as Chulu moved restlessly.

Pan slicked his cock, pressing in, so slowly, so gently, taking his Chulu with tiny pulses of his hips. Each push earned him a little gasp, Chulu's hands wrapping around his shoulders, holding on and pulling him closer.

"Are you well, my love? Is it good?" He didn't want to stop, but he would. He had no wish to hurt his beloved.

"Oh, yes, Pan, good. Good." Chulu continued to move, body so eager and ready.

The heat between them blossomed, lights flashing behind his eyes. Oh. Oh, he could see Chulu. He could. Chulu's face was a study in bliss, his mouth open for the soft gasps that left him on every breath. "My love. My own. The gods have blessed me."

"Both of us," murmured Chulu. "Both of us, Master."

"Yes. Both of us." He arched, hand reaching for Chulu's shaft.

"Master!" Chulu's bliss became deeper, stronger, and the sweet body undulated beneath him, rippled around his cock.

"Come for me. Come." He arched, pushing deep, his cry filling the air.

"Master!" Chulu bucked and cried out, body squeezing him tight as the scent of his lover's joy filled the air.

His own seed poured out into the perfect vessel, his vision going dim again, distant.

Chulu's arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him down to bring their lips together. "I love you, Pandreas."

"Good, sweet one. For you are home and I will not do without you."

"You don't have to, Master Pandreas. I want only to be with you, to help you welcome the new ones and find out who they belong with."

His heart soared and he nodded, cuddling down into the slender arms which held him. Yes. Yes, please.

"Thank you, Master. For such a wonderful beginning."

"Thank you, Chulu. For the same."

It was the perfect end to a perfect day. The first, he hoped, of many.

Chulu woke with the sun, curled against Pandreas length. The warm rays came in through the window, almost as warm as his master's body. He hummed happily and pushed closer, the events of the day before, the things he'd learned, all flooding back to him.

It made him hot all through and his shaft grew hard, throbbed. Each shard was so different, so beautiful in its own way and he was glad he didn't have to choose one over another. No, he was very glad to belong to Pandreas.

He found himself rubbing instinctively against Pandreas and he whispered, "Master."

Pandreas purred, moving toward him, against him. "Bright morning, my dear one."

"Oh, it is, Master. A beautiful morning." He wrapped his arms around Pandreas' neck and his eyes half-closed as they rubbed together.

Pandreas kissed him, the soft caress slowly deepening, growing in heat. He opened his mouth to his Master, tongue sliding carefully along Pandreas. It felt so good, the way they rocked and touched and tasted, the joy they shared.

He reached down with one hand, finding Pandreas' cock and exploring it, moaning at the way drops of liquid heat leaked from the tip. This had been inside him last night. Such a wonder.

"Mmm... Your touch..." Pandreas moaned softly, undulating, the pleasure visible. Those long fingers returned the favor, petting and stroking, adoring him.

It made him shake with pleasure, with such big pleasure. "I could get lost in this, Master. Get lost in you."

"We always come back to home, Chulu. Do not fear." Pan panted, tongue sliding into his lips.

"I could never fear with you, Master." He pressed closer, opened wider, wanting to give his master simply everything, all that he was. The pleasure between them was pure and rich, warm as the sun pouring through the window.

He moved instinctively, pressing faster and faster against Pandreas, bringing their shafts together in his hand, squeezing them. Pandreas' cock was longer than his own and so hot and hard and at the same time the skin was soft as silk. Pan's fingers twined with his own, stroking them, loving him. His tongue slid along Pan's, twisted with it and he could taste

Pan in his mouth, he could smell them together, the scent earthy, sexy. Everything all worked together to send him flying into the sky, his whole body eager and full.

They came together in a rush of heat, their songs offered up to the gods.

He felt as if he were floating afterward, lying in Pan's arms, warm and boneless. Pan petted him, soft, happy sounds filling the air. He rubbed his cheek against Pan's cheek. "I love you, Master."

"As I love you. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, Master. I dreamed of you and when I woke, there you were."

"Yes." His nose was kissed, the blank eyes somehow warm. "It is a good thing, coming home."

"Oh, yes, Master." He nodded and pressed closer. "Will you teach me more today? Teach me how to help newcomers to know where they belong?"

Pandreas nodded. "We have three here -- a set of brothers and a young man who is very timid. We should see to them today. Introduce you."

"I would like that, Master. I'm eager to help you. To contribute." Though there were still a few shards he knew nothing about.

"You will. I believe the brothers will go to the Lapis Shard; they are well-matched, well-suited."

"The Lapis Shard, Master?" Just the name seemed huge, large in his mind and he thought it must be similar to the Ruby Shard.

"They are a very specialized shard. They use pain, blows, to achieve prayer."

Chulu shivered. "Really?"

"Really. Some employ spankings, some use canes, whips, hairbrushes. It is a fascinating study."

Chulu considered that and thought about how strange some of the other shards had seemed before Pandreas had explained. "Do you think we could bring these brothers to the master there and... watch?"

"We could. The Curate there is very focused, very intertwined with his novitiate, but there will be a priest who needs someone to pray with." Pandreas smiled, nodded.

"Does that mean he doesn't have time for the others in the shard, Master?"

"It means that..." Pan tilted his head. "He and Karas worship most intensely and more by example than by being involved."

"What was it like when they met, Master?"

The Lapis Shard

Veras enjoyed participating in Bron's exercise routines in the main courtyard; there was a peace and tranquility inherent in them that he could appreciate. Even when the quiet and routine were interrupted by Bron's novitiate. The poor boy was all hands and feet and they were constantly getting in the way.

He rather liked the unfortunate novitiate, felt an affinity for him. Not that he himself was graceless or clumsy, but he knew there were people who looked at him the same way they looked at Turik, wondering if he really belonged at the temple. And just like Turik, Veras belonged.

The assembled crowd dispersed, leaving Bron and Turik cleaning up, and Veras joined them, offering the red-faced boy a smile.

Turik nodded, smiled back, offered him an embrace. The boy was completely unafraid of him -- skills or scars. "Master Veras! Happy day to you."

He hugged Turik warmly. "And to you, Turik."

He offered a hug also to Turik's master. "Thank you, Bron. For the exercises this morning. I never fail to find peace in them."

Bron bowed, smile bright in the dark face. "My pleasure, Veras."

Turik beamed at his master, the look in the bright eyes adoring. "Oh. Oh, Master Pandreas asked to see you, Master, and Master Veras, also. He said he needs your help."

"Well, we have cleaned up adequately, have we not? Let us go see what our dear Ivory Curate needs of us."

Bron nodded in agreement and the three of them made their way to the Ivory Shard together.

Pandreas looked more than slightly disheveled when the door opened. "Oh. You're here. Thank the gods."

Veras reached out to touch the Ivory Curate. Pandreas was usually so calm and peaceful. He had not seen the man so unkempt since Turik had first come to the temple.

Pandreas came to him, cheek soft and smooth on his bare chest. "There is one here, brothers. He has made his way by angering others, pushing them into violence toward him. I cannot... I do not... I require guidance."

"Violence? That sounds more my bailiwick than Bron's, Curate. And I do not think that Turik should be here; he has such a gentle soul."

Bron nodded and bowed. "Thank you, brother, that was my thought as well."

When they had gone, Veras turned back to Pandreas. "Come, brother, show me to this man who has shaken you so."

Pandreas nodded. "I thought of Bron only in terms of confining him. Keeping him still."

He was led down the bright hallways and toward a small room where Pandreas motioned toward a tiny window in the door. Therein, a lean, tanned man paced, nails scraping his skin as he muttered.

"Karas is his name. He says demons led him here."

"They only seem as demons to him because he cannot find what he needs. He has found his way here now though, and I know what he needs." Veras put his hand on Pandreas' shoulder. "Thank you, my brother. I can take it from here."

"Oh. Bless you." Pandreas kissed him, offered him a smile.

He smiled back and petted Pandreas' cheek and then all his attention was back on Karas. He opened the door.

Bright, sharp, desperate eyes met his, the man's skin marked by those nails. "He locked me in here. I want out."

"Yes, well you were behaving rather badly from what I understand. You may come with me." He turned and led the way out.

The man followed, quiet, eyes seeing everything, darting constantly. Veras led Karas to the Lapis Shard, ignoring the people around them who turned to watch them pass. He was focused on the man who walked behind him, hands itching for a whip, a cat 'o nine tails.

The man muttered softly, tugging the furs and handmade clothes around his lean body. "I wasn't behaving badly. I wasn't. He kept asking questions, treating me like I was mad. I'm not mad."

"Curate Pandreas is a man of peace and order. Your behavior seemed, to him, to be quite mad." He smiled gently. "I however, understand it."

"You do? Honestly?" Those eyes searched his, the desperation visible, then the man shook his head. "I... I'm not mad. I don't care what anyone says."

He slid his fingers gently along Karas' cheek. "I do. And I know how to help you. You'll come with me and I'll chain you up and beat you until you bleed."

Those bitten and torn lips parted, eyes wide. "And if I say no?"

He grinned, even chuckled a little. "You will not."

"I... I could. I might." He could smell the need pouring off the man; it filled the air.

He didn't laugh. The poor man was desperate and confused and so needy, he would not tease. "Go ahead then, say no and leave."

"I..." He could see the struggle inside Karas, see the muscles jerk, the long fingers jerking and squeezing. "I..."

"There is strength in submitting to your needs, Karas." His fingers were almost twitching and he could feel the cat in his hand, it called to him, called to mark Karas' back.

"I do need. I do. I cannot make it stop. It drives me."

"Then come with me."

He turned and led Karas into the center of the Lapis Shard, to the room where he did his best work, where he shone. Karas followed, steps tentative on the stone behind him.

Once they were in the room, he lit the incense and turned to Karas. "Remove your clothes, Karas. I will help you find your center."

Karas looked around, eyes wide, but the furs fell to the ground, the laces of the tattered trousers slowly worked open.

They would bathe together after. Veras enjoyed all aspects of his discipline, of his worship.

"Are you sure I should be here? I... I'm... I mean..."

He walked around Karas, admiring the strong form. Karas wasn't heavily muscled, but he was fit, strong. "I'm sure."

He took one hand, leading Karas over to where the chains hung from the ceiling in the center of the room. The man tensed, but the heavy cock jerked, began to fill. Veras could feel the gods begin to hum between them, his own cock growing hard, strength and peace filling him.

Karas' eyes went wide, worried. "Do you hear them? The demons?"

"Not demons, my pillar, they are the gods and we will offer ourselves to them." He took one of Karas' hands and raised it over the man's head, attaching it to one of the chains.

"But you hear them?" The scared eyes rolled. "You hear them, too?"

He stopped and stroked the finely muscled belly. "Yes, Karas. They can tell what we are about to do, they are binding us together."

"Oh." The look he got transformed Karas, made the tan face suddenly beautiful. "What is your name?"

"I am Veras, Curate of the Lapis Shard."

"Veras." The chain was tugged. "I... I am frightened. I run and run and they find me."

"You are not meant to run from them, but to them, Karas. They are gods, you cannot lose them."

The second hand was bound, lean body stretched for him, for their worship.

He leaned in and kissed Karas on the lips and then went to the small wooden cabinet and took out the cat 'o nine tails. It was his favorite; it left such beautiful marks, made the initiate bleed. He rarely used it, rarely was anyone strong enough for it.

Karas was. He could tell.

The gods clamored, the energy on the room building, growing wild.

"We will begin." He let the cat tails trail over Karas' shoulders and back, and then he let it fly, the sing of the tails drowning out all other noise except the sound they made as they landed on the beautiful back.

Karas' cry echoed, sharp, needy, beautiful.

He took a deep breath, smelling the sweat of Karas' body, the musk of need and that unique scent of abused flesh. He found a rhythm, settling into it quickly, the tails leaving the most beautiful marks upon Karas' skin. Karas cried out over and over, then fell quiet, muscles bunching with each blow.

He cried out himself when the first split opened along Karas' back.

The air was thick, heavy, the songs of the gods vast, making such promises that he had never before heard. He walked around Karas' body, dancing and letting the cat fly, his motions building to a frenzy. Karas panted, skin marked and split, eyes closed, an instinctive prayer filling the air.

Veras marked Karas' shoulders and back, his chest, his thighs and arms. The last two stripes landed on the man's ass and one gentle flick went across the large cock. Seed poured from Karas, splashing to the floor, the scent heady and fine.

Humming happily, Veras moved forward and took himself in hand. It only took a couple of strokes and his come sprayed out over Karas' skin.

Karas slumped, covered in sweat and blood and tears, simply dangling from the chains.

He undid one wrist and then the other, bracing himself to take Karas' weight. Karas whimpered as he landed against Veras, head lolling. "There, Karas, are you not calm now?"

Karas nodded, passive and quiet against him, heartbeat steady, sure. "Home. Please."

"Yes. Yes, my pillar. You are home."

He walked Karas out into the bathing room, noting with pleasure that someone had anticipated his needs and the copper tub was steaming with warm water, oil with healing herbs scenting it.

Karas clung to him, sinking into the water with a cry. "Oh... Home..."

"Yes, yes." He whispered the words, mouth sliding over Karas' face. Salt and bitter sweat, but underneath there was something sweet, addictive. Powerful. Moaning, he climbed into the tub with Karas, continued to lick and nuzzled the warm skin.

Karas' eyes watched him, entire body shivered, shaking. "Wh...why am I here?"

"That is the question everyone has, is it not? The simple answer is to praise the gods."

"I don't believe in your gods."

"And yet you followed them here." He slid around in the tub until he was behind Karas, pouring water over the abused back.

"Oh..." Karas whimpered, gasped for him. "I had to."

"Why?" he asked softly. "Why did you have to?"

"They won't leave me alone unless... I know it's wrong, but I need to... I need to feel it..."

He shifted again and turned Karas' face so he could look into those eyes. "It's not wrong, Karas. Not wrong at all. What I do, what we do here is praise and worship and beautiful."

Karas moaned, eyes searching his. "You... But... Honestly?"

"I never want a word from you that isn't honest, Karas."

Those eyes filled. "I'm frightened."

"Oh, my pillar." He held Karas tight. "There's nothing wrong in being scared."

"You don't think so?" Karas shivered, leaned into him. "Please don't send me away. Please. I'll give you all I am. Don't send me back into the forest."

"I'm not sending you anywhere, Karas. You are mine now." A shiver went through him, those words so right and true, he could feel it.

"Yours." The tremors started in earnest, Karas pressing closer.

"Oh, yes, Karas. I do believe you are." He took Karas' mouth, tongue pushing in. Karas gasped, let him in with a sweet cry.

Oh, Karas tasted good, right and he plundered that mouth. It was an addiction, the way Karas twisted, moaned, gave and gave. His fingers slid over Karas' back, the oil making them slick, making it easy.

"Burns. Oh, it burns." Karas' shaft was tight, full, begging for him.

"For me. You burn for me." He slid his free hand down, wrapped it around Karas' cock.

"Yes. Yes, help me. Been lost. Looking. Running." Karas moved furiously, bucking and jerking.

"Straight into my arms." His hand tightened on Karas, moving with the beautiful body, the fingers of his other hand dancing over welts.

"Yes!" He heard the joy, the pure bliss in that voice, given all over for him.

"Come for me, Karas. Come for me."

Seed poured over his fingers, hotter than the sun, Karas arching for him.

"Oh!" Veras cried out as it happened, pleasure slamming through him, his own cock throbbing and spending. He'd been so focused on Karas he'd not even realized how close he was to coming himself.

Karas slumped, eyes rolling, lips parted and swollen.

He licked at them, moaning softly. "Welcome home, Karas."

"Oh, home... Master."

He purred at that, the mantle settling on his shoulders, completing him.

"Yes, my pillar. Yes."

He woke in a strange place, in a strange bed, every inch of him aching and burning and raw.

That really didn't concern him much, it was a situation he found himself in more often than not. What concerned him was the silence. No demons whispered, no songs or tales or cries. Nothing.

Pure silence.

Karas slid from the bed, trying to listen, to focus, to find his good sense.

Veras was on a mat at the foot of the bed, sitting with his legs crossed, his eyes closed and breathing slowly.

"Join me, Karas," Veras said softly, eyes remaining closed.

"I..." He stepped closer, looking around. "What are you doing?"

"Meditating." Veras' eyes popped open and the serious face lit up as he grinned suddenly. "Trying to patiently wait for you to wake."

"Oh." He smiled, the action unfamiliar and immediate. "I... I don't sleep much."

"No? You slept well this night." Veras held out a hand and encouraged him to sit. "Join me."

He sat gingerly, aware of every ache, every cut. "I... I did."

Veras took both his hands, simply holding them. "And how do you feel today?"

"Quiet. Sore. Nervous." He watched their hands, watched the way their fingers looked together.

"Why are you nervous?" Veras' voice was low, soft, mesmerizing.

"Because I... Because they're not looking for me, the demons. They're quiet."

"You would rather they were looking for you?"

"No. No, I wouldn't. I just... it's unnerving, the sudden silence."

"Get used to it, Karas. We will work very hard to make sure they are mostly quiet. Except when we offer our prayers to them." One of Veras' hands slid along his cheek, touched his lips.

It was odd, to be believed in, to not be ridiculed. He leaned toward the touch, so warm.

Veras leaned in as well, bringing their lips together in a gentle kiss that held the promise of becoming more. "Are you hungry?"

"I don't know." He blinked, fascinated by Veras' eyes.

"Then we will make love first."

Veras' mouth returned to his, tongue exploring the contours of his lips and then pushing in between them.

Make love.

With him.

No one wanted to love him.

He leaned into the kiss a moment, blinking, thinking, feeling. Veras hummed softly, the sound vibrating, tickling against his lips.

"Oh..." His belly tensed, the sensation amazing.

"You taste like my own," murmured Veras, tongue pushing into his mouth.

He opened, letting Veras in, offering... something. Veras deepened the kiss, tongue pushing in and sweeping through his mouth, taking everything he offered, demanding more.

Oh. Oh, so hungry. He didn't know whether to push closer or pull away.

Veras decided for him, one hand landing in the middle of his back, heedless of his welts, his wounds, and tugging him closer. Everything inside him shook and his shaft hardened. Those marks belonged to Veras. Veras knew what he needed and gave it to him.

And didn't send him away.

He groaned, pressed closer, rubbing. Please.

"Have you ever been fucked?" Veras asked him, free hand sliding down to stroke his belly and then his cock.

"Not... not willingly. Things... things happen sometimes, but I'm not there for them."

"I would like to take you, to fill you with my essence, but I would need you to be there for it, Karas. You must always be present when you are with me."

"Need me? You... You will need me?"

"I *do* need you, Karas. You complete me. Can you not feel it?" Veras' hands slid on him, the touches softly arousing.

"I... Is that what this is?" He wanted so badly, the heat inside him perfect, right.

"Yes," murmured Veras, mouth moving over his face, fingers petting him, stroking his cock in front, sliding over his welts in back. "Yes, I feel the rightness of it, the way we fit. I have been waiting for you."

"I... I don't want to leave. I want to be here. For you." He groaned, starting to rock, moving into Veras' touch.

"Yes, it is what you were made to do. You believed you followed demons to this place, but really you followed your own heart."

Veras' mouth closed over his, tongue pushing again into his mouth. Karas submitted, opening easily, the feelings of being wanted, being loved so odd, so unusual. As they kissed, Veras pulled them both up, standing and moving him toward the bed. All the time, Veras' hot tongue moved in his mouth, made him feel so much.

His hands explored, Veras' body fine and strong, the scars fascinating. Veras responded to his touches, moving into them, moaning, increasing his own touches.

"You... You want this, want me. Honestly." The thought astounded him.

"Oh, yes. Yes." Veras took his hand and brought it to the hard, leaking cock that jutted from Veras' body. "I do. I want you."

"Oh..." He nodded. "Anything. All of me. Please."

Veras nodded. "I wish to be inside you. Hands and knees on the bed and I will prepare you."

He moved carefully, offering himself, trying not to be anxious.

Veras hummed and slid a hand softly along his ass. "Would you be happier to see my face, Karas? I don't want to abrade your welts, but if you would be more comfortable being able to see me..."

"I... I'm afraid I'll get lost." He didn't want to, not this time.

"You won't. Lie on your back -- unless I am wrong the pain will only enhance the experience for you." Veras' hands slid over his body, moving him on the bed.

He moaned as his back hit the sheets, but the sensation excited him, heated him. "Oh. M...master? That is who you are, yes? My master?"

Veras nodded, hands sliding warmly over his skin. "Yes, my pillar, I am."

"I... Oh, I have needed you." His body ached, burned for a touch.

"And I have waited for you."

Veras bent to kiss him again, a finger, slick and hot, pushing inside him at the same time. The need within him grew and he moaned, body and lips and spirit opening. In and out, Veras' finger slid in him, owned him.

The blankets rasped against him, his heart pounding. "Master."

A second finger joined the first, stretching him open as Veras gazed down at him, watched him.

"What... what do you see?"

"You, my pillar. My very own novitiate, my heart. He who completes me."

"They say I'm mad, but I'm not. I swear to you."

"You aren't mad. And none here would say it. We follow different paths here at the temple. The Lapis Shard is not even the most extreme of those paths. One day I will take you to the Ruby Shard and you will see what lengths some must go to in order to make their prayers." His new master's words were punctuated by soft kisses along his chest, the long fingers moving continuously inside him.

The sensations were deep, bright, almost like fire. Karas held the words to him, heart pounding, world aflame.

"Your body is made for mine, for my craft. Your skin and muscles and blood and bone crave my art, the blows from my arms." Another finger pushed into him, Veras stretching him carefully.

He twisted, arching, nodding. Yes. Yes, please.

"My pillar of strength. I will take you now." Veras' fingers slid away, the blunt, hard heat of his cock pressing against Karas.

He gasped, watching, eyes wide. "Big. In me."

"Yes. And bigger because we join." Veras' cock pushed into him, huge and hot, stretching him wide. "Stay with me, Karas. I need you in this."

"Need me. Oh." He nodded, legs wrapping around Veras' hips. "Yes."

Veras purred, eyes heated as they gazed down at him. "Yes."

Then Veras started to move, pushing in and out, long, deep thrusts that took him over and over again.

"Yes. Master." Oh, he was there. Caught. Held.

Another thrust and then another, each one filling him, sliding his back against the sheets. Pleasure and pain mixing. His fingers tangled in the sheets, his cries beginning to fill the air. Veras shifted, cock sliding past something inside him that made the pleasure flash hard.

"Master!" His shoulders left the mattress, the voices that haunted him growing close.

"Yes, Karas. Yours. Yours." Again and again Veras' cock slid past that place inside him, drawing them tighter together.

"I hear. Oh. Oh, I need."

"And I give you what you need and you are mine. Karas!" Veras' thrusts came harder, came faster.

"Yes. Yours." He reached down, grabbed his own shaft and tugged.

"Yes! Yes!" Veras nodded, eyes full of passion and need as they gazed down at him.

He arched, body squeezing tight, heat pouring from him. Veras' eyes rolled and he was filled deep with heat.

He slumped to the bed, heart pounding. "Yours."

"Yes, yes, mine." Veras leaned down onto him, still buried deep inside him.

He held on, eyes closed. He would stay right here forever. He would.

"You are mine now, Karas," whispered Veras. "You are mine."

"No one else can have me." It was a prayer, a promise.

"No, not ever." A soft kiss pressed against his lips, against his cheeks.

"Oh." His tears came, cleansing and warm, soothing him back into sleep.

Veras had never been so fulfilled, so happy.

Having a novitiate of his own was... made him whole. He and Karas grew closer every day, their prayers offered often to the gods, the need sparking between them with only a touch, a glance.

Today he and Karas were in the main courtyard, following Bron's lead through the exercises. He enjoyed moving in sync with Karas, their bodies following the same movements. Karas moved easily, confidently, eyes on him instead of Bron. He met Karas' eyes and smiled before returning to the movements, body stretching, reaching.

Pandreas and Brash joined them, Karas tensing, breath coming a little faster as the others came close. He looked into those eyes again and hummed softly, reminding Karas where his focus was to be. The fact that Karas did relax, did focus, warmed something deep within him.

He smiled serenely at Pan and Brash and turned his focus back onto Bron, following the movements, feeling a part of the whole as they all worked together, stretching and moving. Karas though, was a bright heat at his side in this sea of movement.

The exercise slowly came to a stop, their joined energies sent to the gods.

He reached back for Karas' hands, loathe to lose the closeness the exercises had brought. Karas moved close, pressing against him. His novitiate was frightened of the others, becoming snappish and odd in company. The group exercises were helping, though, every day a bit easier.

"Would you like to invite Curates Pandreas and Brash to join us, my pillar?" And he was pushing, always pushing his dear one.

"Me?" Those eyes searched his, always searching for acceptance, for acknowledgement that he was not mad.

He smiled and nodded. "For tea and some of those little cakes." Those little cakes were one of his weaknesses. Especially if they were fed to him by Karas' hand.

"I... I... Yes, Master." Karas held his fingers in a tight grip, moving over and looking at Brash. "We have tea and cakes. They're very good, if you want some."

Veras bit his lip to keep from smiling, or worse, laughing.

Brash, bless his heart, also did not laugh, though the man smiled wide and clapped Karas on the back. "Indeed. That sounds lovely."

Karas winced, squeezed his fingers, but just nodded, looking over at Pandreas. "I... You, too? You can come, too."

Pandreas nodded, smiled over at Karas. "Of course. I would love to."

Veras squeezed back gently, pleased with Karas' effort. "Excellent. I have worked up quite an appetite."

"Me, too," agreed Brash, falling in step with them.

Karas pressed close to him, the heat from the lean body intense, wonderful.

"How are things, Pan?" There was no better gauge of how the temple was doing than this man.

"All is well, we grow and fall. I believe the eldest submissive in the Amber Shard is close to joining the gods and his master, which is both a blessing and a sorrow."

"He has mourned the old Curate for many years now; perhaps it is for the best."

He tugged Karas a little closer. Now that he had tasted this joy, he would be devastated without it and the habit of master and novitiate following each other quickly into death had taken on new light. It made him respect men like Ton'al, who continued, who thrived despite his Master's death, all the more.

Pandreas nodded as Karas snuggled in. "Yes, he is not mourning his life. He... he is at peace."

Veras nodded. "Well come into the Lapis Shard, my friends and let us celebrate life. I thought perhaps after we had eaten, my novitiate and I would show you how far we have come together."

Karas' eyes went wide and he felt the tremor from his pillar.

"That would be an honor, brother." Pan nodded, smile. "Thank you."

He smiled at Karas. "You are ready," he said softly. "And I would have all see your glow as we send our prayers to the gods."

Karas nodded, eyes watching him, holding him. "For you."

"Not just for me, Karas. For yourself as well." Such devotion. He was a very lucky man.

They entered the shard, the dark indigo warm and welcoming. They sat at the heavy table, one of the initiates bringing tea and cakes.

"Karas, you may serve our guests."

Brash chuckled and Veras raised an eyebrow. "Brother?"

Brash shook his head. "Nothing, nothing. You just always did like pushing people's boundaries."

"It is the nature of the Lapis Shard, is it not?"

Brash nodded. "You're well-suited to your place in life, that's for sure."

Karas tried, the dishes clattering on the table, his lovely one unwilling to stand too close to Pan or Brash. The teacups were overfilled by shaking hands, but no one got wet. Overall? It was a successful.

He smiled, letting his pride show. Karas was indeed ready to perform for his brothers. In fact he wondered if it wouldn't help matters, wouldn't make Karas feel a little closer to the two men.

Karas pressed close, settling beside him, cheek on his thigh. He stroked his hand through Karas' hair, feeling peaceful, but also that hum, the vibration that began between them whenever the time to work together drew near.

Pandreas tilted his head. "Your joining is most beloved of the gods."

He bowed his head. "Thank you, Pandreas. We offer ourselves to them, our best."

Karas blushed, cheeks heating against his thigh.

"And you, my pillar, are so beautiful as you give. Like nothing I have ever seen."

"Master..." Karas hid his face, hair soft and silky as it fell around him.

"Yes, my own." He stroked Karas' head, watched as his friends ate and drank. Veras began to prepare himself for their worship.

Karas' hand as wrapped around his ankle, holding on. He hummed softly, hand beginning to stroke rhythmically along Karas' back. Soon it would be painted with his marks. Karas relaxed, eased, eyes closed, melting against him.

Yes. Here Karas knew his place, was growing more comfortable. For Veras himself, nothing had ever felt so right as when he performed in the Lapis Shard's rooms.

Pandreas smiled, the look sweet and wistful. "Beautiful."

"Have you ever indulged in the ways of the Lapis Shard, Pan?" He knew Brash had, the Onyx master had at least dabbled in all their arts, their ways of worship.

Pan pinked and Brash laughed. "No. No, Brother. I have not."

"Never?" He was surprised. He'd thought Pan, like Brash, would have tasted from each shard.

"I tend to observe rather than participate. I... Brash shows me what I need to know."

He turned to look at Brash, who was chuckling. "Always my pleasure."

Oh. He looked between them again, wondered how long it had been that these two were... together. Why had he never noticed before? Pandreas' hand reached for Brash's fingers, twining together.

He smiled. "Well perhaps Karas and I may teach you a thing or two new to try..." He winked.

Karas and Pandreas blushed in unison. Oh, that milk white skin would mark beautifully. He imagined Brash was thinking the same thing, the Curate wriggling just a little. Pandreas' blank eyes closed, the air suddenly electric, heady.

Veras moaned, hand tightening in Karas' hair. Brash's nostrils were flaring, his eyes on the Ivory Curate.

Karas' head turned, lips kissing his thigh, adoring him.

"Are you ready, my pillar?" he asked, needing to do something with the arousal that was shared between all four of them, growing with every breath.

"Master. Yes. Anything for you."

"Are you ready, Brash? Pan?" The heat between the two men was growing.

Pandreas nodded, almost panting. "Yes. Yes, we are."

"Then come and join us." He stood and took Karas' hand, leading the way to the small, contained room where he practiced his prayers and his art on Karas. The passion seemed too large to be contained by such a small room. "If you would like to work beside us?"

Karas' eyes lifted to his, Pandreas' face turned to Brash.

He stroked Karas' cheek. "In tandem, my pillar. No one touches you, but me."

He was surprised to have made the offer -- he worked alone, but it had been honestly made and heartfelt. It would be good, he could feel it.

"It is up to Pan," murmured Brash, "Whether we observe or participate." Pandreas leaned into Brash, lips moving, soft whispers shared between them.

He began to prepare Karas, slipping into the place where they were joined. Karas watched him, shaking, the scent of need beginning to fill the air. He stripped his novitiate and then he attached the chains to Karas' wrists and raised them above his head, stretching the beautiful body out.

"Brash?" He pointed to the set of chains next to the ones Karas was bound in.

"What happens here, in this space, is inviolate." Pandreas placed his hands in Brash's.

"Of course," murmured Veras. "It is always so."

"I would offer you what I would give none other, brother of my heart."

Brash stroked Pan's cheek. "I would take it from you and offer myself in return." Veras felt the power of their words vibrating through the room.

It was beautiful, but the call was nothing compared to his sweet Karas, his needy one. That call drew him like a moth to the flame and he would dash himself on Karas until their passion burned them all up.

He stroked Karas' cheek. "A simple whip today, my pillar." Karas' eyes searched his, the desperation beginning to show. "Yes, Karas, it will be enough. It will be right."

He went to the cupboard and pulled out a leather handled whip, sliding it along his palm. Karas moaned, chains rattling, shaking.

He turned, the sight of Brash removing Pandreas' robes beautiful. Veras was nearly vibrating with anticipation, with pleasure, the passion pushing at him, demanding release, the gods demanding their due.

He let the whip slide over Karas' skin, making sure the tip slid over the hard cock.

"Master..." Karas shuddered, shook. "Yours."

"Oh, yes, my Karas. You are indeed mine." He let the whip fall to the floor and then cracked it in the air. "Are you ready?"

A soft cry filled the air, the gods beginning to sing for him. "Yes. Yes, please."

"Yes, as am I." He glanced over noting that Brash too had out a whip, the leather very dark against Pan's skin. It was shocking, almost as much as the raw hunger in Brash's eyes.

He reached out and Brash reached back, their fingers touching. It felt as if lightning had passed through him, so hot and wild and he met Brash's eyes and smiled. "We begin."

They lay down their first stripe together.

Karas' cry rang out, so sweet, so needy. Pandreas made not a sound. Veras took in a deep breath, feeling the power in the air, the passion. Humming, he let his whip fly again, feeling the hit to Karas' back all the way through the leather to his hand.

The line of skin beneath the whip went white and then a deep, dark red, marking Karas as his own. It might have occurred to him to glance over at Pan and see what effect the whip would have against that pale skin. It might have, had he not been totally focused on his very own Karas.

He laid down another welt onto Karas' back, this time letting the tip of the whip curl around Karas' shoulder. The rhythm started, Karas singing for him, for the gods, louder and louder. Brash and Pan's song joined their own, a harmony to their melody and it was different, but also very good and not at all intrusive or disturbing.

The whip landed again and again, Karas' skin splitting at the shoulder, the waist.

The scent of blood was intoxicating and he continued hitting, breaking the skin on Karas' ass, the back of his thigh. So beautiful, each line a devotion, each drop of blood a prayer.

Karas started shaking, tugging at the chains, body arching beautifully.

On the next hit, the whip snaked around Karas' waist, making them both moan loudly.

"Master!" Karas jerked, the sound mingling with Pan's cry.

"Soon," he murmured. Brash was panting, arm not used to wielding the whip the way Veras' own was.

"Please..." Karas' eyes were wide, unfocused, the gods' song pouring between them.

"Yes. Yes." He whipped Karas three more times, high for his mind, in the middle of his back for his heart and across his buttock for his body.

Seed sprayed over the floor, Karas' offering well-received, welcomed.

And as always, the scent of Karas' devotion, the knowledge that he had drawn that from Karas' flesh with his skills, that pulled his own offering from him and his come splashed against Karas' back.

Karas slumped, panting, swaying in the chains. "Home..."

"Yes, my pillar. Home."

He put his hand on Karas' arm, giving the man something to hold as he turned to check on Pan and Brash. The two men were holding each other, Pan already loosed from the chains. There was a line of blood on Pan's back and he could feel their need for privacy, to explore what they learned together.

He touched them briefly, just a gentle caress with his fingertips and then he turned his full attention back to Karas, felt everything slip back into place. He undid Karas' bonds and, supporting his very own, he led Karas from the room to their bedroom. Karas leaned, panting, blood and sweat painting his skin.

"How do you feel, my pillar?" he asked as they entered the cool darkness of their room, just as he always did.

"Quiet. Home. Like your own." The answer was the same as always.

"Excellent. Yes." He nodded, bringing their mouths together, the kiss warm and sensuous, their need banked, leaving them to explore.

Karas shook, so slightly, lips parting and letting him in to taste. His hand stroked down along Karas' breastbone, slid over the lovely abdomen.

"Master..." Karas' skin burned, so hot for him, moving under his touch.

He found Karas' cock, wrapping his hand around it, pumping gently.

Karas relaxed against him, moving slow and easy. "Why did Curate Pandreas allow Curate Brash to whip him, Master?"

"Why do you allow me to whip you, Karas?"

"I... I need it. Need you."

He nodded and kissed Karas for his honesty, his truth. "I imagine the answer is the same for Curate Pandreas."

"Oh." Karas let it go, focused on his eyes, his kisses.

He purred and stroked Karas, led his novitiate into pleasure.

"Love..." Karas arched, legs stretching out, trembling.

"Yes, my pillar. Oh, yes." He felt Karas' heat in his hand, such soft skin over hard, needy heat. He let go and backed slowly away. "On your hands and knees, my pillar. I will take you so I can see my marks on your skin."

"Yes. Master, yours..." Karas moved onto the mattress, ass offered to him.

He would spread healing oils over Karas' back, ass and thighs later, but for now, the pain would mix with their pleasure, would enhance it. He climbed onto the bed, fingers sliding along Karas' crack.

"Please." So hot, so wanton. Karas burned for him.

He slid a finger into Karas' body, slick with sweat, hot with need. Karas moaned, rocking, fucking himself eagerly. Veras pushed in a second finger, groaning at the tightness, the heat.

"Oh. Master. More. I feel you." Karas squeezed him, moaning, begging.

"Yes, my pillar." He nodded, pushed in another finger, fucking Karas with them.

He got a low groan, Karas groaning, pushing back against his fingers, taking more and more. He stretched Karas open, and pushed deeper, searching for that little spot, finding it.

"Oh. Oh. Master. Master, please. More. I need." The soft song filled the air, pure hunger.

Purring, he slid his finger across that spot again and then again, his whole body rocking, cock pressing against the back of Karas' thighs. Karas simply took him in, accepting him, spreading for him. He could wait no longer to feel that tight heat around his prick and his fingers slid away.

The whimper he received honored him, echoed within him. He didn't make either of them wait. He pushed in with his cock, feeling Karas open up around him. They pushed together, the need and pleasure and pain driving them, pushing them now before the energy dissipated.

Faster and harder, they came together, rocking, wild.

Karas' cries grew, so sharp, so wild, so needy. "Master!"

"Yes! Yes, my pillar! Let me hear you." He slapped Karas' ass, hard.

Karas bucked, slamming back. "I need!"

"Me. You need me." Veras pushed in harder, giving Karas everything he needed.

"Yes. Yes, I love you. Need you. Master!"

The scent of Karas' seed filled the air.

"My own!" He shouted, jerking, filling Karas with his own pleasure, their prayers rising to the gods.

Karas slumped forward, moaning, almost sobbing. "Master."

He pulled out carefully and lay down next to his Karas, fingers stroking the warm, damp skin of Karas' side. He would find the salve and use it on Karas' back soon, for now he wished to lie close, no, he needed to lie close.

"I love you," he whispered.

"Yours." Karas whimpered, nodded. "All of me."

"Oh yes. All of you." Yes, every bit of Karas was his. Their needs matched, their hearts matched. It was as if they were two parts that made a whole.

"Yes." Karas smiled for him, eyes closing.

He pressed a kiss to the corner of Karas' mouth and got up to get the salve. He would save that beautiful skin so that he could mark it, make a prayer another day.

Chulu's Question

Pandreas rocked Chulu, cheek on the soft hair. "Karas and Veras are as one, heart and soul."

His dear one pressed close and he could feel the questions making Chulu even nearer.

"What are your thoughts, dear one? What is it you wish to know?" He knew that the closeness he and Brash shared would give Chulu cause to question.

Chulu moved in, hands touching, holding onto him. "Why did you and Master Brash join Karas and Veras in their prayers, Master?"

He considered the question. "For many reasons. Because the gods asked it. Because I trust Brash and his control. Because it drew my brother and I closer."

Chulu wriggled a little, clearly not entirely comfortable. "How do you mean, Master?"

Ivory and Onyx

Pandreas shook, body burning, sight diminished completely as he followed Brash through the halls of the Lapis Shard. Brash was large in front of him, heat and need. As they hit the sunlight, Brash's hand took his, large fingers wrapping around his hand.

He held on, heart pounding, breath beginning to slow. "Brother..."

"I am taking you to my shard." Brash stopped suddenly, turned to him. "Unless you would prefer your own."

"No. No, I will come with you." He would be safe, close, protected there.

Brash purred softly and put an arm around his waist, walking with him. "The walk home has never seemed so long," Brash murmured.

Pandreas nodded. "I need to be with you, to... talk about what we have done."

"Yes." Brash nodded and led him quickly, quietly. "It was... yes."

He nodded, face hidden in Brash's shoulder, trusting in Brash's guidance.

They were soon in the Onyx Shard, Brash drawing him into the Curate's bedroom. "We will not be disturbed here, Pan."

He nodded, body trembling, shaking now. "I... I have never..."

Brash pulled him down onto the bed, holding him close. "Never what, my friend?"

"Never allowed someone to mark me. No one but you."

"I am honored, Pan. Why did you allow me to?"

"Because the gods seemed to wish it, because my heart urged me to." He closed his eyes.

"Because it was you."

"Yes. I felt the urging as well." Brash's fingers slid over his face, through his hair. "I did not do it lightly."

"No." The burn had rocked him, chased him still, flames on his skin.

"It was.... intense."

He nodded. "Tell me what you saw."

"I saw..." Brash shook his head. "I felt it first."

He nuzzled Brash's jaw, encouraging his brother to speak, to tell.

"The connection between Karas and Veras. It... vibrated. Entered me."

"They are close to the gods, are they not?"

"Yes. I have only felt its like in the Ruby Shard." Brash's fingers slid over his neck and along his shoulders. "But I have never participated there."

Pan shook, lips parting on a low groan. Oh, he ached, entire body alight. Brash's mouth pressed suddenly against his, tongue pushing in between his lips. Pan arched, opening, needing suddenly, badly.

"We will talk after," murmured Brash, pushing him down onto the bed, mouth devouring his.

He nodded, hands holding Brash to him, hunger flaring. Those strong fingers slid down his side, curled around his hip. His body ached, so hard, so needy, cock wet-tipped and throbbing. Brash's mouth slid away from his, moved on down, his throat licked, nipped. He could feel the marks upon him, burned for them.

"The whip felt good in my hand," murmured Brash, teeth scrapping. "Marking you was... necessary."

"Brother... I feel you. Deep inside me."

"Yes, I am there." Brash's hand tightened on his hip, hard enough he would have bruises. "I am here."

"Yes. Here." His thighs parted, trembling with need.

Groaning, Brash's hands slid to his inner thighs, pushed them further apart, heat pressing against his ass.

"Brother..." He needed -- needed to feel, to be felt.

Brash's cock pushed into him, his Brash's need huge, matching his own. He spread, eyes rolling, the burn sweet inside him.

"Pan. Oh, love." Brash sank in all the way, panting above him.

"Yes..." His sight was empty, but his heart, his body was full.

"Joined," murmured Brash. "Joined."

Brash began moving, sliding into him again and again. So full, so very full. He whimpered, feeling Brash in every inch of him, every breath of him. The heat built between them, the sense of fullness and rightness expanding, the pleasure enormous.

"Brother. Sweet Brash..." He shook, trusting himself to Brash's hands.

One of those hands wrapped around his cock, pulling as Brash pushed into him, their bodies moving together, flying together. His pleasure poured from him, wet and hot and necessary, his body taut. He was filled in equal measure, Brash's heat burning inside him. His tremors started as he relaxed, everything inside him shaking.

Brash wrapped around him, held him, whispered into his ear, soft words of love and care. He offered himself easily, allowed his brother in all things to support and care.

"I feel as if I can see inside you," Brash murmured.

"And am I marked by you within?"

"Yes. Yes, my Pan. You are. I... I have never seen anything like it."

He reached up, cupped Brash's jaw. "My heart."

"My soul," whispered Brash, turning to kiss his palm. "Joined through the ages."

"For eternity." He was the light to Brash's darkness.

Brash moaned softly, tears wetting his cheeks. "The gods have blessed us, and we have found each other again."

"Yes." Pandreas reached up, light seeming to pour through him, too bright to be borne.

"I have you," Brash told him, fingers sliding on his skin.

"Yes. You are within me."

"I always have been."

"You always will be." They floated together, quiet, gentle.

At peace and whole.

Love Expands

Chulu thought carefully about what he'd been told and then he looked up at his master. "So you and Curate Brash are... soulmates through the ages?" He shivered a little, wondering where that left him.

"We are two halves of the same soul. The light requires the darkness. He is my brother, my partner, my friend. You? You are my chosen one."

"Chosen one?" He did like the sound of that.

"Yes, my dear one. You are my right hand, my lover and friend and support. Brash and Ton'al will be as family for you." He received a long, soft kiss. "You have no reason to doubt your place with me."

"You and Master Brash just seem to... be so complete together. Like you make a whole together. And yet your words ring true, Master, more true than anything I have known. And I feel so good in your arms, in your presence."

"That is because you are home. Love is an amazing thing, Chulu. It grows and grows."

"Oh! I get it! The more you love people, the more love there is. It's not a matter of me or Master Brash, but of me *and* Master Brash. And perhaps others?" He thought hard, trying to figure out from the stories Pandreas had told which others his master might have loved best.

"Yes. You begin to see, sweet love."

"Yes, Master." He hugged Pan tight and rubbed against him, body quite aroused by the tale of his master and Master Brash.

Pandreas drew him even closer, holding him, fingers petting.

"Oh..." He pushed into the touches, each one making him feel so good.

"Yes." Pandreas nuzzled him, smiled, those empty eyes somehow warm.

"Would you be inside me again, Master? That was... oh, I don't have the words."

"Are you not too sore, sweet one?" Pan's fingers brushed against his body, his entrance.

He gasped, so sensitive. "Not sore, Master."

"Mmm..." One finger pressed against him, gentle as a breeze, slipping inside him.

It felt so good, better than it had the day before and he pushed back onto Pan's finger, moaning, hands holding onto his master.

"Beautiful..." Pandreas took a kiss, tongue pressing in.

"Me? Not as lovely as you are, Master. You are breathtaking." Even his master's strange eyes were amazing.

"Thank you, most loved." Another finger joined the first inside him.

He cried out as the stretched and slide of Pan's fingers brought him such pleasure. He pushed close, pushing up against Pan's warm, smooth skin. They rocked and moved together until the pleasure was almost too much to bear. Then Pan slid against him, shaft pressing inside, filling him.

"Master! Oh, you fill me." He rocked back onto Pan's shaft, so full, so happy. His master made him so happy.

"And you surround me." Pan was beautiful with the light pouring down on the pale face.

"It is like magic, Master," he murmured with what little breath he had. They moved together, the feelings between them building and building.

"We are..." Pan's body sped, pushed deeper, harder.

His own eyes rolled in his head and yet he could still see Pan's... aura, he could see the way they were joined together, the way they fit and merged, the way their prayers were as one.

They climaxed together, the gods blessing them, loving them both.

He collapsed onto the mattress, feeling utterly boneless and entirely rejuvenated, like Pan was the best thing to ever happen to him. Which Pan was.

"Mmm..." Pandreas nuzzled him, purred. "What a lovely day."

"Yes, Master." He would have agreed no matter the weather or what waited for them, because any day that started as this one had, could be nothing short of lovely.

What shall we be doing today, Master?"

"We should wake the new initiates, make sure they are welcome, fed, loved."

"Do we love them as we love each other, Master?"

"I tend to let their new master love them as they will. It is a special joining."

"And how is it you know again?" He was worried he wouldn't be very much help to Pan in this.

"You will learn to know. The gods tell you."

"Through you," murmured Chulu, smiling and nuzzling into his master's warmth.

Pandreas laughed, the sound rich and warm.

"Your laugh is warmer than sunshine, Master."

"It pleases me you think so."

Chulu just beamed and pressed closer, holding on, thinking that this new life of his was pretty special.

Pandreas' heart beat, strong and sure. Beating under his ear.

"There is one shard still you have not told me about, Master."

"Which have I forgotten, dearest one?"

"The Amber Shard, Master. That one is devoted to... penetration?"

"Oh. Oh, yes. Our dear Padin." Pandreas chuckled, squeezed.

"You are fond of him, Master?" He settled in comfortably.

"He is as joyous in his work as Bron. Who could not be fond?"

He giggled. "Tell me about him, Master?"

Pandreas beamed, held him, voice low and deep in his ear.

The Amber Shard

Padin's fingers slid along the arms of his chair, the cool amber remaining that way despite his own warmth. An amazing thing, amber, pliant until time itself hardened it into whatever form the priests demanded from it. He knew it took hundreds of years to make each piece of furniture in the Amber Shard, the liquid sap slowly harvested from the trees, fingers waiting patiently until it had hardened enough to work into forms.

The walls of the Amber Shard were painted in the variegated yellows and almost browns of the stone itself and from the ceilings hung hundreds of beads, crystals and pendants formed from the amber. One for every person who had passed through the doors here. Each one caught the light and reflected it in the warm hues onto the floors, the walls, the people within.

Padin waited.

His meditations had, for months, promised him his novitiate was coming soon to him. And yet every new initiate Pan brought to the doors of the Amber Shard was welcomed, without a special soul among them.

Oh, not that he turned them away. Padin chuckled. His closets were full of dildos and plugs, toys of all sizes and shapes, made from amber and wood and stone. His own stamina was the stuff of legends. He never turned an initiate away from the Amber Shard.

Their orgies were legend.

And yet he remained, essentially, apart, alone. One waiting.

Still, he did not believe the gods would not honor their promise to him. And if he were to truly look at their promises, he would admit that soon to the gods, and soon to mere mortals, even the special mortals who followed the Path of Iro, were two entirely different matters.

Pan had mentioned a new initiate was ready to move into the halls of the Amber Shard and Padin had allowed that today would be a good time to welcome the new one. He'd spent the previous day fasting, eating only after the sun had set for several hours and then his choices had been oysters and the heart of the passion fruit, chocolate boko berries and other delicacies that were aphrodisiacs. The rest of the night had been spent in meditation and today the impressive tenting of his robes gave proof of his readiness to take a new lamb into the fold.

Indeed, his member throbbed at the thought. Many of the initiates came to him no longer virgins, but occasionally one was called from their state of purity. Oh, he longed to again be the first to mold an amber drop into the perfect receptacle.

His breathing sped, his fingers rubbing the arms of his chair more vigorously as he remembered the last boy he'd molded in such a fashion.

The first thrust, the burst of pain, the unbearable fullness. The scream.

The second plunge. The scream turned to gasp, the pain dulling.

The third stab and the initiate would feel that promise of pleasure.

The fourth stimulated the bundle of nerves buried deep inside every initiate. And that was when they were his.

Araci and Donl came running to him, eyes hot, nostrils flaring. "Do you need us, Curate?" Such good boys, their instinct and need always served him, and themselves, well.

He shook his head. "I await a new initiate."

"Oh, Master." Araci trembled. "To be born again that it might be me walking through the amber doors for the first time."

He laughed. "Go, bounce upon the statues in the courtyard."

He tsked at himself as they went. His thoughts had caused him to moisten his robes, just a spot, but a Curate should have more control than that.

He changed into new robes and sat again in his chair. Waiting.

Pandreas' knock upon his chamber door was soft, quiet, the gentle man offering him a smile when the door opened. "Padin. The gods have sent one for you."

A beautiful man was presented, square and solid, most strong, with bright eyes the color of dark honey. Long dark blond hair cascaded around him, longer even than the homespun tunic, and the light seemed to adore him.

Padin's breath caught and he went to the man, circling him slowly, cock throbbing in time with his heartbeat.

"Welcome to the Amber Shard. May I know your name, beauty?"

"I am Lorenz, Master."

Pandreas came close, fingers soft on the long hair. "Lorenz is untouched, brother. A prince who defied his father to follow the gods' will."

Oh. Padin put his hand over his heart and closed his eyes for a moment, thanking the gods for hearing his prayers, for honoring him with one of his own.

"Your strength will serve you well in the Amber Shard, Lorenz." He held out a hand to Lorenz.

"Thank you, Master." A heavy hand settled within his own, the man's will strong, fierce, near shining from him.

Padin could feel how well they were matched just from this touch, knew that together they could sing to the gods with their bodies, worship so beautifully, so fully together.

"Pan, will you take some tea with us?"

"I would, my friend, but Lux has initiates in training to serve and I promised to stay near them, soothe their nerves."

"Very well -- anytime." To be honest, he was quite glad, eager to begin to know Lorenz. He offered Pan a bow of friendship and then led Lorenz deeper into the welcoming room of the Amber Shard.

Lorenz walked with an addictive grace, evidence of years of swordplay.

For Lorenz to be even dressed was a crime. "Please remove your tunic, Lorenz."

The pale gold skin pinked, but the man obeyed, exposing a perfectly formed body -- strong shoulders tapering down into a tiny waist, a sweet backside.

Padin purred, his eager prick again beginning to leak. "I would not ask you to be naked on your own, not on your first day in the Amber Shard, my beauty. Please, undress me."

"Yes, Master -- should I call you master?" Those sure hands reached for the fastenings of his robe, carefully unfastening them, beautiful eyes keen and watchful.

"Master will suit beautifully, Lorenz. Tell me. How much of a virgin are you?" Would he be the first to introduce every pleasure to this man?

"I was betrothed to a princess upon my birth, Master. I had not begun my training to please her. I... This place called to me, haunted me." His robe was removed, draped over a chair, Lorenz's eyes carefully focused on the floor.

"Look upon my body, Lorenz, please. There is no place for shyness on the Path of Iro." He stood proudly, his cock, hard, leaking with its need for Lorenz's sweetly curved ass.

Those sweet red lips parted on a gasp, eyes wide as they lingered upon his shaft. "You... you have been most blessed, Master."

He chuckled. "I have indeed, Lorenz. As have you, for what is my pleasure will be yours."

There was a healthy dose of worry in those eyes, as well as a fierce determination. "As you will, Master."

"Come closer, Lorenz. Let me taste your innocence."

"Does it have a taste of its own?" Lorenz stepped closer, eyes searching his own.

He tilted his head. "Not of its own, but experience changes the taste of each of us."

With his fingers he tilted Lorenz's chin up, his other hand sliding over the bright hair as his mouth pressed to Lorenz's sweet lips. Untutored, unsure, those lips parted on a gasp, offering him a taste of that bounty.

Humming, he licked his way in. Oh. Oh, such purity, such sweetness, and yet so male and strong. The dichotomy was addictive. He deepened the kiss, tongue sweeping eager through Lorenz's mouth even as he stepped forward, his prick painting Lorenz's belly.

Lorenz's hands found his shoulders, holding on as the man attempted to keep his balance, his control. He reached for Lorenz's prick and wrapped his hand around it. Lorenz's eyes went wide, entire body going still except for the throbbing of the flesh in his hand.

"Your body knows what you need, what you must offer me," he murmured. "Let go of your false notions of modesty and of your fear, I will not let you fall."

"Master." The words heated Lorenz's skin, the nod he received eager and wanton, focus only on him.

"Yes."

He took Lorenz's mouth again, moaning as their bodies brushed together. Oh, yes, indeed. Lorenz pushed into the kiss, stepping even closer as if drawn to his heat, his need. Their cocks slid together and he wrapped his hand back around Lorenz's prick, pulling firmly. Penetration would be easier if Lorenz had already come.

A sweet cry filled the air, Lorenz's head falling back, entire body bowed toward his touch. He wrapped his lips around the sweetly offered neck, pulling up a mark even as he pulled up Lorenz's pleasure with his hand.

Heat splashed upon his fingers, his own one offering himself beautifully.

"Oh, sweet Lorenz, my beauty. I cannot wait to show you the pleasures the Amber Shard has to offer you, my own one."

Those eyes -- those bright warm eyes -- fastened on him, shining and stunned. "Yours. Your own."

"Come to my bed, Lorenz. I have much to show you."

"Yes. Yes, Master. Whatever you wish."

"Yes, Lorenz. And as the gods are infinite in their wisdom, my wish is your pleasure." Smiling, he led his new novice to his private chamber.

Lorenz had done many unnerving things in his lifetime -- he had faced battles, he had defied his father, he had traveled to an unknown land and begged for entrance with only the will of the gods to help him. None of these had been as worrying as the walk from the ivory walls of Master Pandreas' home to the Amber Shard.

His master was stunning, energy and need seeming to pour out, fill the room. Lorenz followed quietly, eyes taking in his surroundings. Everything was warm, catching the light and reflecting it back, shining on his own skin, on his master's. The room they walked into was as warm as the rest of the house, dominated by a large bed.

The coverlets were luxurious, the pillows strewn about. "It... it's beautiful."

"Almost as beautiful as you." His cheek was cupped, a soft kiss placed on his lips.

He blushed from the compliment, leaning into the touch, trusting this man more than he had any other, ever.

"Come to bed." He was tugged onto the large bed, his master settling among the pillows, cock large, wet-tipped where it sat against a muscled belly.

He didn't know where to look, where to put his hands, what to do. It was an odd situation.

Master Padin chuckled. "Fascinating, is it not? Come closer. Touch, taste."

Lorenz moved closer, hand stroking the rippled muscles.

Master Padin seemed to purr at his touch. "Yes, my beauty. Yes."

It amazed him that Padin wanted him. He had been here for weeks and had seen so many lovely men, so many more lovely than him.

"Touch me as you would touch yourself, Lorenz."

He blushed wildly. In his homeland, such things were forbidden. Sexual touches were meant to create life, heirs. "I... I come from the Perdantalle, Master."

"But you came *here*, Lorenz."

"Yes. Yes, Master. I have not..." He took a deep breath, silenced himself. He would simply touch Padin's body and pray he did it correctly. He stroked lower, fingers petting the heavy shaft, careful not to hurt.

Padin purred beneath his touches. "Learn it, Lorenz. I want you to know every inch when I take you."

"Yes, Master." He thought perhaps an organ so big would ruin him, tear him, but if that was the fate the gods chose, that was his fate.

"Fear not, beauty. You will be well prepared." His Master seemed to know what he was thinking.

He blinked over, surprised. "Will it hurt?"

"The first thrust will. Perhaps even the second, but soon you will be begging me for more. And each time it will be easier until it is all you want."

He swallowed hard, not understanding how his master could be speaking the truth, but he nodded, trying to believe.

"Put it out of your mind. Concentrate on my pleasure, you will be able to feel it as if it were your own."

He nodded, daring to move closer, to rest his cheek on his Master's chest, touching and stroking the heated skin. The textures were fascinating, the scents and sounds luscious and he lost himself in them.

Padin began to stroke his hair, fingers sliding through the length, the touch soft, sexy. It relaxed him, eased him, and he hummed, almost meditating, rocking with the touches. "So sweet. Your touch fills me with such longing, such need."

"You're beautiful. I dreamed of you, night after night. You haunted me."

"Did you, beauty?"

He nodded, cradling the heavy sacs, enjoying the velvety softness. "Again and again."

"Did you dream of this? Of the heat and the girth of my prick? Did you imagine how it would feel when I loved you?"

"I... I dreamed of being so full, of being full of you, your love, your touch."

"And you will be, my beauty. I will fill you with this," Padin's hand circled his own cock, stroking twice. "And I will fill you with my love and my heart and my soul. We will make the Amber Shard truly honor the gods."

"It is hard to imagine, that you would fit inside a man."

"I do. I promise." He was given a smile. "If you take me in your mouth you will begin to see."

In his mouth... Lorenz nodded, sliding down, kissing the tip with a careful touch.

Padin made a soft noise. "Oh yes, Lorenz. Follow your instinct. Let me penetrate your mouth first, teach you the act this way."

"Yes, Master." He wasn't sure what to do, so he kept kissing and licking, touching the base of the shaft with his fingers.

Padin's hips shifted restlessly, and his master's soft fingers moved through his hair as if fascinated by it. That odd relaxation took him again, and he took that wide head of Padin's shaft in, sucking carefully.

"Oh, yes, Lorenz, your instincts are a credit to you." Padin's voice had grown husky, and the cock in his mouth was leaking a bitter, salty fluid.

His tongue licked at the drops, curious, a rare hunger taking him.

Padin moaned, whispered, "Oh, yes."

The hands in his hair fisted, not hurting, but proof his Master was affected by what he did. Lorenz purred, pulling a little harder, needing a little more.

"Yes!" Padin's obvious pleasure was heady, the drops of liquid more plentiful now.

His eyes closed and he gave himself over to the act, head and tongue moving, sliding. Whimpers and moans, soft groans filled the air, blessed his efforts. The hands in his hair grew tighter, almost tugging now, seeming to encourage the movement of his head up and down. He tried to follow the direction of those hands, slowly bobbing his head.

"Lorenz!" Such pleasure in his Master's voice and he could feel that pleasure echoed against him, almost as a caress.

He shivered, cuddling closer, needing to feel his Master, there and present. One hand slid from his hair and grabbed his shoulder, holding on. "Don't stop, my beauty."

No. No he wouldn't stop. He wouldn't. The noises continued, the hand on his shoulder tightened, and Padin moved, pushing the thick cock in a little deeper. Lorenz tried not to pull away, sucking harder.

"Yes. Yes, Lorenz. So good." A long shudder rippled through his master's body. "Stop now, my own. Stop or I will come."

He lifted his head, confused. "Is that not my goal, Master?"

"No. Your goal was to learn my shape, so that it is not so intimidating as I take you." He was drawn up, Padin's tongue pushing into his mouth. "Your goal is to become mine."

He shivered, holding on tight, praying that he was the right man, that he might be Padin's.

"Do not fear, beauty. You are mine. The gods have told me. And our joining will be a great joy."

"Yes, Master. Will you love me?"

"Yes, Lorenz. For as long as the gods grant us breath and life."

"Oh." He reached up, held his master's cheek. "Thank you."

"We must thank the gods, Lorenz, make our love a joy to them." Padin turned and kissed his palm.

"Yes. Show me what I need to do."

"You need to let me in, my own. That is all. That is everything."

Padin's mouth covered his and he was pushed down onto his back, Padin following, passion flaring between them. He held on, willing himself to trust, to relax. Padin's hands moved on his skin, warm and gentle, awakening his nerves. Padin's skin was warm and he stretched, luxuriating in it.

"Yes, my beauty. So sensual. So lovely." One of Padin's fingers slid past his nipple, and then again.

He hummed, cheek rubbing against Padin's shoulder. Padin's mouth nibbled on his earlobe, the finger at his nipple beginning to tug, pinch a little. The sensation was sharp, like lightning along his spine. Then Padin's hot mouth was soothing the pinch, tongue sliding hotly over his skin.

"Oh..." He arched, licking his lips, sliding on his own hair.

"Mmm, you like that." The touches were repeated on his other nipple, a pinch followed by that hot tongue.

"Yes. Yes, my Master." He reached down, stroking the strong shoulders.

"Good."

Padin continued to explore him with tongue and lips and fingers, touching his ribs, his sides, his navel, all of him. There were touches that made him laugh, made him gasp, made him moan. And then Padin's mouth slid over his cock, tongue sliding back and forth across the tip. Everything inside him jerked, the pleasure so big it was almost painful. Padin hummed and then swallowed him right down.

"Master!" The heat and shock and need seemed to drown him, his entire body shaking.

The hum continued as Padin's mouth slid up and down along his prick. His legs spread, eyes wide and unseeing as the pleasure crashed over him. As the amazing pleasure continued, Padin's fingers slid over his balls and touched behind them lightly. His heart pounded, his need filling him, hips rocking.

Padin's fingers suddenly slid back up his body and pressed against his lips, clearly wanting in. His lips parted, sucking the fingers in as he'd sucked the heavy shaft. The humming around his cock increased as he sucked.

Oh. Oh, such pleasure, such heat. Nothing could prepare him for this. Padin's fingers tugged free of his mouth and then slid beyond his balls again, wetting his skin, his most private places being gently probed. He tensed for only a heartbeat, then relaxed, the gentle touch easing him.

Padin's lips tightened and slowly pulled off him, as one of Padin's fingers pushed right into him.

"Oh..." His toes curled, sacs drawing tight.

"Oh, my beauty you are so tight."

"I feel you..." His heart was pounding, thighs trembling, just a bit.

Padin purred softly, kissed his belly. "Just relax, beauty."

He took a deep breath, nodded, tension easing. "Yes, Master. Yes."

"Yes, beauty. Lorenz. Yes."

The finger inside him began to move. Just little pushes in and pulls out, sliding inside him. His body stretched, began to move, hips meeting each thrust.

"I knew you would love this."

"Yes? Who would not need your touch?"

"Oh, Lorenz, you are just what I needed." A kiss dropped onto his balls. "Another finger my beauty."

He nodded, spreading wide. "Yes, Master. Yours."

That second finger teased at his hole. "Can you reach the oil, my beauty? It's on that little table beside the bed."

He reached out, body squeezing the finger inside him as he stretched.

Padin moaned. "Oh. Lorenz you will make me come before I even have you."

"You will have me always."

"Yes. You feel it, too." Padin smiled at him, took the oil from him and coated his fingers.

"I feel you. Everywhere."

"Yes. Yes. I will be the air you breathe." Two fingers slipped into his body, warm, insistent, the stretch burning a little.

Lorenz bent his knees, hips shifting, sliding, body spreading.

"Yes. Yes, follow your instincts. So good." The fingers inside him spread, slid. In and out and moving.

It was like breathing, following Padin's will, hips shifting and sliding, taking his master in. Then Padin's fingers curled and pushed against something inside him.

"Master!" His head left the pillows, eyes shocked.

Padin beamed up at him and repeated the motions.

"I. Oh. That. Master..." He twisted, gasping. "Thank you. Please."

Padin kissed his belly. "You are most welcome, my Lorenz. There is so much pleasure to be had."

Again and again the pleasure spiked through him. He lost his words, his nerves, his worries -- all he knew was pleasure.

He hardly even noticed as two fingers became three, the pleasure increasing. Anything, everything. He would offer all of himself.

Padin continued to make him soar, fingers stretching, opening him. Soft kisses made their way up along his belly, Padin's mouth eventually meeting his own. He poured himself into the kiss, moaning, legs spreading wide.

"Are you ready for me, my beauty?"

"Please. I ache. I ache for you." His spirit burned, he needed.

Padin settled between his legs, spreading them wider. "I will not make you ache any longer."

"Master..." He held that gaze, wrapped himself in it.

"You are mine." Padin's cock pushed into him, the thrust hard and sure, filling him.

The burn stole his breath, stopped time itself. "Yours."

Padin nodded, his cock disappearing. "Mine." It pushed back in.

"So full..." He whimpered, stretching, trying to make room inside him.

"Trust me, my beauty." Padin thrust again.

"W...with with all I am..."

"Good." Another thrust and then another, the way easier now.

He moaned, body rippling, toes curling. "More..."

"Yes." Padin started down at him, watching him as the thrusts kept coming.

Lorenz met each thrust, adding his strength to the motions, pleasure and ache twining inside him. Harder, faster, Padin's cock pushed into him over and over.

"Master. Master. Please." The pleasure, the passion swelled inside him, demanding release, frightening, overwhelming.

One of Padin's hands wrapped around his cock, pulling in time with the thrusts. The world went sweet amber, his pleasure pouring from him.

"Yes!" Padin's cry matched the heat that filled him.

He floated, shuddered, panted.

His master. Oh.

Padin's fingers stroked him, kept him floating.

He lifted his face, begging a kiss, reassurance. Padin's mouth dropped over his, the kiss deep and full. He hummed, settled deep inside. He had defied country and family. For this man and foreign gods.

He would do it again.

Padin woke at the soft knock to his door. He was warm and cozy, wrapped around his novitiate, Lorenz, the man's beautiful hair like silk against his skin.

"Come," he called lightly, knowing it would be one of the seven initiates currently serving the Amber Shard, perhaps even all of them. His bed was enormous and for good reason -- while everyone had their own bunk, most chose to sleep with him.

It was Araci's sweet face that peeked from around the corner of the door. "Curate? Will you take latemeal with us this night?"

"No, my lovely, I have taken a novitiate -- have something sent in when it is ready."

"Does that mean your bed is not open tonight?"

He considered a moment and then shook his head. His novitiate would have to get to know the others, would need to know how things were here. "My bed is big enough for us all, Araci. Come at latenight bells and bring enough plugs for everyone."

Araci bounced, eyes alight, red curls springing against the sweetly freckled face. "Thank you, Curate!"

He chuckled as the door closed, turning to his novitiate, to the man who had his need rising through his blood again.

Lorenz slept deeply, lips swollen and red from their earlier games, skin silken and perfect.

He was a very lucky man, to have been gifted such a beauty as his novitiate. Together they would lead the orgies of worship and the Amber Shard would praise the gods as no other ever had.

He reached down, stroked the tight, pale buttocks, the hint of his seed still there. He could imagine the tiny hidden hole, swollen and red, stretched. This was perhaps one of the last times Lorenz would rest with it empty.

His thoughts made his cock throb, his need rising hard and fast. His hands carefully parted Lorenz' buttocks and indeed, Lorenz's hole was as he had imagined. He stroked the hot skin gently. Lorenz whimpered softly, thighs parting, body stretching out on the sheets, the ring of muscles tightening under his touch. Beautiful man.

He reached for the oil and coated his fingers, letting them slide along the tight hole. It felt so hot, so silky. He wished to be buried inside it again.

"Lorenz," he murmured softly, fingers sliding with more pressure against Lorenz's skin.

"Yes. My master. My heart." Oh, even asleep, so new, so untried and Lorenz knew him.

It filled him with pleasure, with love for his own sweet beauty. "Wake, dear Lorenz. You do not wish to miss a moment of our pleasure together."

Warm eyes blinked open, focusing on him, a happy moan sounding. "Good... morning?"

He chuckled. "No, my beauty. We have only slept a few hours. It is nearly time for late meal, which we will share together. But first I have a need." He rubbed the tip of his cock along Lorenz's crack, rubbing it against the swollen flesh.

Lorenz gasped, shivered, the tiny ring of muscles so sensitive, so tender. His.

"Are you sore, my beauty?"

"I... it is an ache. An unusual feeling."

"Then I may have you again. Most excellent." This one was indeed made for him.

Leaning in, he moved Lorenz's hair and pressed a kiss to Lorenz's neck. Lorenz purred low, body rippling and stretching, the low sounds sweet.

"I will take you from behind this time," he murmured, settling close behind Lorenz, his chest pressed against Lorenz's back.

"Oh. You warm me..." Lorenz groaned, hips moving restlessly.

"Heat is most good, my beauty." He reached around and circled Lorenz's cock.

"Oh. Yes. Yes, Master. It is most wonderful."

He purred, rubbing his prick against Lorenz's ass as he stroked the cock in his hand. His lips nibbled at Lorenz's neck, his shoulders. It was no time at all before his wanton one was moving, shifting, body beginning to beg.

And such joy and pleasure taken and given untutored. Lorenz would be absolutely delicious once he knew the ways of the Amber Shard.

"Do I please you, Master? Will you keep me with you?"

"You please me more than anyone ever has. I will keep you until the end of time."

"Oh!" That sound was pure pleasure, joy. Happiness. His. "Love!"

"Yes, Lorenz." He shifted and pushed his cock against Lorenz's hole. "Take me in."

Lorenz gasped, wincing for a moment as heat surrounded him, seemed to tug him inside.

"So beautiful, so hot." He kissed Lorenz's neck again, tugged on the sweet cock, distracting from the stretch as he helped, pushing his length into Lorenz's ass.

"Yes. Your own. Please." Lorenz sang for him, the cries deep and rich and sweet.

"Such heat. Such tightness. Such silk. And all mine."

"Yes. Yours. All of me." Lorenz arched, meeting his thrusts, fingers reaching back to slide on his shoulders.

"Yes. Mine." He kept one hand wrapped around Lorenz's cock as he brought his hips against Lorenz's ass over and over, the long hair moving between his chest and Lorenz's back, like strands of silk.

Lorenz's body went tight, shaft jerking in his touch. "So full!"

"You will spend most of your time filled, by me or my proxy, my very own." He thrust again and again, shifting until he was hitting Lorenz's gland each time he entered the lovely body.

"Prox...proxy? A priest, master?" Lorenz twisted, groaned.

He chuckled. "No. No other will touch you, my Lorenz. I speak of a plug, an imitation cock fitted into you, keeping my seed in your body, keeping you stretched for my need that we may glorify the gods at any time."

"Oh..." His cheek was stroked, the tight body clenching, eyes wide and wondering.

"There is so much to teach you -- such pleasures to share." He moved faster, harder, filling Lorenz over and over again.

"There is more than... more than this?"

He laughed, the sounds as happy and joyous as he felt. "Oh, my beauty. There is enough to fill tomes."

Lorenz arched, smiled. "Your laugh!"

He continued to make the sound, joy and need and pleasure all twining together, filling the air around them with their offering to the gods. Lorenz pushed against him, ass squeezing and milking him. So eager. So open for him.

"Soon, yes, my beauty?" He pushed harder, thrust into Lorenz with all his pleasure.

"Yes. Yes, master. Yours." The prayer winged up, offered to the gods, to him.

"Come with me, my own." He held onto his own orgasm, waiting for Lorenz to come with him.

"I... Yes! Master. Master." His novitiate went stiff, heat pouring over his fingers. Lorenz's sweet ass milked him and his own pleasure poured from him, filling Lorenz.

"Yes. My sweet beauty."

Lorenz shuddered, moaning low, hips still sliding. "Yours..."

"Oh, yes, Lorenz. Mine. Mine." He continued to move as well, the pleasure soft, quiet.

Lorenz hummed, lips parted, face blissful. "Home."

"Yes, my own. You are home."

He remained buried inside Lorenz's body as he settled close, their skin pressing together.

And he too had found home, though he'd not known he was without it.

The Ivory Shard Is Whole

Chulu had been at the temple for almost a week now. He'd met all the Curates and their novitiates, as well as many of the priests and his Master had explained how they all met. Each tale had been a magical love story and Chulu was quite taken with each shard, the tiniest bit nervous about one or two of them, and very glad he was with his master, the Curate of the Ivory Shard.

Speaking of the Curate... Chulu hurried from the kitchen, tea tray in hands, Master Pan's breakfast all laid out.

"Are you awake yet, Master?" he asked softly.

Pandreas stretched, the slim form arching and beautiful. "Yes, my love."

He beamed and put the tray down next to the bed before climbing in and offering Pan a kiss. Pan's mouth was sweet, open, eager for him. He settled on Pan, taking one long kiss after another, feeding his heart and his soul. There were times, like just this moment, when he believed he needed no other sustenance.

Pan's hand was on his hip, on his thigh, fingers moving in slow circles. He was growing bolder in his own touches, fingers discovering the planes of Pan's body, the way the small nipples responded to even the lightest touches.

"Chulu... " The pale skin colored, flushed where he touched.

"Do I please you, Master?" he asked, fingers sliding over the smooth skin.

"You do, you make me ache with pleasure."

"That makes me so happy, Master." He rolled against Pandreas, their bodies rubbing.

Pandreas beamed, eyes alight, warm. Chulu moaned softly, enjoying his master's body, the connection between them. "Tell me, what do the gods sing to you?"

"That I am home. That I was made for pleasure. That my master is most precious and I am to keep him close to my heart."

"Oh..." Pandreas drew him closer, held him. "My dearest one."

"And you are my..." he searched for the word he needed, the word that would sum up all that Pandreas was to him. He could not find one and so he searched his heart.

"Everything."

Pandreas leaned close, whispered softly. "I love you, too."

"Oh. Oh." He flung his arms around Pan and held him tightly. "Sometimes I feel as if I will explode into an infinite number of pieces, my feelings are so large, Master."

"I will be your glue, beloved."

"Thank you, Master."

He leaned in and brought their lips together again, touching Pan's softly and then with growing passion. Pandreas groaned, tongue sliding against his own, body rocking.

He wondered if this would ever go away, this eagerness and need. He hoped it wouldn't, he hoped it would always be like this with his dear master.

The gods sang for them, loud and strong.

Chulu wrapped his hand around Pandreas' shaft, stroking firmly, loving the heat and silk. And the noises that Pandreas made. His master spread for him, hips rocking up, sliding that hard shaft over his palm.

"So good," he murmured, looking up into the sightless eyes.

"Yes. Good. So very good."

He kissed Pandreas again, moving against his master, hand stroking, pumping. It was heady, the way Pan offered his pleasure, his need, not holding anything back. Whimpering, he tugged harder on Pan's cock, wanting to make Pan come.

His master arched, lips parted, heat spraying over his hand.

Oh, he'd done that. Him. Whimpering, he pushed harder, rubbing himself against Pan's hip until he was coming with a cry, the scent of his master's pleasure carrying him there.

His master hummed, eased back down onto the bed. "Oh. My love."

He went with Pandreas, cheek rubbing against Pan's chest.

"I love you, Master."

"As I love you." He received one of those smiles, warm and welcoming. "As I love you."

He smiled and lay against Pan, the rest of his life spreading out in front of him like a rainbow.

end