

Worthy

By Doran Eirok

Rhiroo Sparkclaw's life of late had been anything but easy. Not that this marked a particular change from normal circumstances; survival had been an uphill battle for most of his life, even more so than for most Charr. However, it was hard for him to think of many places lower than the loss and aimlessness that followed in the wake of one's entire warband being killed in battle. Charr were, by nature, social creatures. Once members of the large, catlike race came of age, their warband became everything. For some, even the fanatical devotion to one's Legion that was expected of any Charr warrior could pale in comparison to the battle-forged loyalty to one's warband.

This intense bond with the warband made losing any member, let alone the entire band, a crippling thing for any Charr. For Rhiroo it had been particularly bitter, as he had fought long and hard to find a warband that would accept him and earn his way into it. Having been the runt of his litter, Rhiroo was about as small and lightly built as Charr came. His small stature and muddy brown fur awarded him his name, which by Charr standards was rather diminutive-sounding and lacking in ferocity, and he had not been expected to survive long past his birth. He had also been gifted with a great deal of stubbornness, however, so he defied the expectations of his parents and pushed through. Negative expectations followed him into his fahrar, the school where cubs are taught to be loyal and capable warriors, and he had to constantly be on his guard to avoid the bullying of his larger and stronger peers. Rhiroo suffered many intense beatings and humiliations as he grew, but he learned to give as good as he got. He slowly developed an agility and wit to slip out of holds and avoid situations before they turned volatile that set him well apart from the others. When he was forced into a fight, the diminutive Charr fought with the ferocity of one who had nothing to lose and didn't hold back, a fact which eventually caused some considerable injury and lasting scars on several of the largest bullies in the fahrar and earned Rhiroo a measure of grudging respect from the others. The Charr are a fierce and determined species, and in this regard Rhiroo proved himself to be no exception.

Unfortunately, the Charr are also an intensely war-hungry species. As he glanced around the busy common room of his barracks, Rhiroo allowed himself a grim chuckle at this particular thought; most Charr took to the thrill of battle with great enthusiasm and passion, and finding anything 'unfortunate' about the way his species seemed constantly drawn toward conflict was unusual. For that matter, the Charr took to most things with great enthusiasm and passion. The loud party that was currently filling the common room was ample evidence in support of this. The Charr celebrated battle frequently during the times when they were not directly involved in one. In victory, they celebrated victory; in defeat, they celebrated having survived it. Many aspects of Charr society filled the periods between battle with things that still reminded them of battle, as though awkwardly and impatiently filling the time until the next one.

Across the room a table's legs gave way, collapsing loudly to the floor under the weight of two warriors engaged in a friendly wrestling match. Most of the room responded in laughter. Rhiroo just started, the fur on the back of his neck raised with tension. To his ears, every sudden loud noise was still the nearby impact of a mortar shell.

The Charr were in luck, at least, as the world of Tyria was a turbulent place and had been for centuries, constantly plagued by hostile beings both natural and unnatural. It would be a long time yet before the Charr ran out of things to make war upon. Even in Ascalon, on the very doorstep of the Black Citadel that acted as the Charr's seat of power, they were fighting a war on two fronts. The

Flame Legion, a renegade faction of Charr that had kept the rest of their race enslaved until fairly recently, still had great numbers, clever spies, and a sadistic ferocity that was more than a match for their enemies. To compound matters, restless ghosts of the human civilisation that had once occupied Ascalon before the Charr conquest were constantly and inexplicably rising from the grave to wage a surprisingly damaging war on the Citadel as well.

The wrestling match continued. Just an honest brawl between friends, but Rhiroo only heard the shuffles and grunts, not the laughter and friendly taunts. And in his mind those sounds still overrode his visions of swords, axes, and blood.

Rhiroo had never taken to war with the same relish as most of his colleagues. Ever since he'd been an abnormally small cub in the fahrar, when the others had charged in to any fight roaring, Rhiroo had always preferred to be more tactical and thoughtful. There was no avoiding battle, of course; every Charr, even the loneliest outcast gladium and the gentlest craft worker, was a soldier first. But when he had to go in to combat, Rhiroo had focused on ways to handle his enemy from distance and maintain some control over the engagement. This preference had naturally led him down the path toward becoming one of the many Engineers who kept the Iron Legion's war machines moving. His relatively small and nimble fingers had helped him develop a good working relationship with machines and artefacts, and his cool head and sharp eye had helped refine him into a very capable marksman. While most Charr would discount him at first due to his small stature, they'd give him a second look when they saw how deadly he was with his rifle.

That was how he'd been recruited into the Ironclaw Warband. He hadn't exactly become fast friends with any of his comrades in the four months they'd fought together, but they'd respected his abilities and he solidly proved his worth time and time again by providing the more hot-headed warriors with sniper support and various helpful gadgets. He might not have anyone to discuss the deepest secrets of his soul with, but he had a warband, and to a Charr that meant he was more or less complete.

Another friendly brawl, inspired by the first, broke out near the table Rhiroo was sat beside. Someone's tankard was knocked over, splashing the warm ale that remained at its bottom into the air. Some of it landed on Rhiroo's arm. He flinched; once again his instincts were taking him back to the battle, and it took more willpower than it should have to remind himself that the fluid was only ale.

The ambush had been a harsh reminder of how brutal life could be in Ascalon, and to Rhiroo's grim analysis it had also made clear to him how perfect his warband had, in fact, not been. During the long march home, he'd had plenty of time to reflect on the makeup and tactics of his now-dead companions, and he was forced to realise that the warband had suffered some severe shortcomings. There had been two starkly opposed types of soldier in the band; aged veterans who had plenty of experience but whose bodies weren't as quick or as strong as they used to be, and very young warriors fresh out of the fahrar who were enthusiastic and capable, but lacked any discipline or experience. The Ironclaw Warband had once been a proud one, but the original members had aged too much and become too few. When they saw the problem and acted to fix this, they overcompensated and recruited only the youngest and freshest of warriors. The principle was good but the result lacked cohesion and balance. When the Flame Legion ambush hit their column, his was not the only warband to suffer, but it was one of the first to break completely. Panic set in, his companions scattered in all directions, and were picked off with brutal efficiency by the better-organised attackers.

The brawl was harmless and friendly, but the good-natured laughter of its participants took Rhiroo back to the sadistic chuckle of a Flame Legion soldier whom he'd watched impale his former Legionnaire just downhill from him, while he'd scrambled to reload his rifle. Rhiroo's next shot had ended that soldier a couple seconds later, but it had been too late for his Legionnaire.

The entire column, of which his warband had made up a small part, had been badly outnumbered anyway, and some hundreds of Charr of the Iron, Blood and Ash Legions lay dead on the field by day's end. The survivors had managed to rally and organise a retreat, and rear guard actions including a few of Rhiroo's own turrets and land mines had convinced the Flame Legion renegades to keep their distance. They had survived but the force's numbers were severely diminished, the Flame Legion had won a solid victory, and those who were left faced a hard and grim march back to the Black Citadel to tend to their wounded and report their failure.

The march took three days, and at times came to feel as hellish as the battle itself had been. Flame Legion raiding parties continued to harry them constantly, killing dozens more during the trek, and the human ghosts of Ascalon rose during the nights to force more battles. There was little rest to be had and morale seemed to fall further with each step. When the upper surfaces of the Black Citadel finally came into view over the hills and the ragged force dragged itself to the gates, weary relief was etched on the face of every soldier in it.

Thus the eagerness with which the Charr filling Rhiroo's barracks now celebrated, keen to remind themselves as forcefully as possible that they, at least, still lived.

For Rhiroo however, there had been one ray of light during that horrible march. The messy aftermath of the ambush had thrown together Charr of all Legions and backgrounds, with remnants from many broken warbands who had never before met guarding each others' backs. By chance, Rhiroo several times found himself fighting beside the same massive Charr from some other warband. He never caught his full name, only heard another calling him 'Kev' a time or two, and the constant battles meant there was never a chance to speak with one another properly. Each time they met in combat however, they seemed to fall into a natural rhythm together, playing off one another's strengths and bolstering their weaknesses.

This 'Kev' was a Guardian; one of the soldier classes who chose to work with the heavy armour and weapons of the more direct Warriors, but, rather than pouring all their energy into developing finesse and precision with every type of weapon known to creation, augmented their combat prowess with a study of healing and protective magic. His size, strength, heavy armour, and impressive proficiency with a greatsword meant that Kev was well-suited to close-quarters combat, leaving Rhiroo free to support him at range. The Guardian was maybe five to ten years Rhiroo's senior and seemed to possess the balance of experience and youth that had been lacking in his old warband. He was good at knowing where he was needed on a battlefield, and several times managed to save Rhiroo's skin from an attack with a quick sword strike or protective spell. For his own part, Rhiroo returned the favour with a number of well-placed shots. By the time the force made it to the Citadel gates, the two soldiers had formed a notable bond with each other despite never having the chance to exchange a word outside of the shouted warnings and commands of battle.

When they at last reached the Black Citadel, Rhiroo lost track of his Guardian friend in the chaos. Countless soldiers required medical attention in varying degrees of severity, and everyone ranked Legionnaire or higher who wasn't on death's door was dragged to the upper chambers of the Citadel to give their explanations of how things had gone so catastrophically wrong. For once Rhiroo was quite grateful to be a mere soldier, able to simply seek some downtime in the barracks.

It took a few days for things to calm down to a state that felt vaguely normal again, albeit through the surreal haze of what they had all suffered through. A final few soldiers died from their wounds in the infirmaries, but for the most part the hellish march home had already weeded out anyone with severe injuries. Those who remained were given recovery leave, and the entirety of the Citadel fell under a grim and eerie sort of quiet. The survivors of the ambush were generally somewhat lost in their own trauma, moving through the motions of recovery and day-to-day life in a daze and spending long, quiet moments staring intently at some distant nothing. The Charr who hadn't been there battled with a mix of emotions; sympathy for what the shell shocked warriors had been forced to endure, and a culturally-ingrained imperative to think less of them for having lost a battle so completely. Most had sense enough to simply keep quiet when any of the survivors were present.

The uniquely militaristic stages of grief the survivors were moving through meant that after a couple days the parties began. To an outsider they might have seemed odd, but Rhiroo knew his race well enough to perceive the undercurrents of hysteria and desperation that were the true reason for them. The drinking and shouting and sparring were all being done under the guise of celebrating the life they still had and toasting lost comrades, but to any observant Charr it was apparent that the boisterous activity was a poor and hasty bandage over the intense loss and confusion they all struggled with. It didn't surprise Rhiroo, but the way everything kept reminding him of the ambush was making it clear to him that it wasn't how he himself needed to deal with it.

The common area would be alive with the loud and desperate partying of his comrades until long into the night. Rhiroo had earlier allowed himself a couple drinks to try and take the edge off that nameless emptiness that haunted them all, but it wasn't helping. Edging his way around the nearest wrestling match he finally excused himself, making his way up to the higher floors. He found his way to his bunk in the otherwise unoccupied sleeping room and sat, after lighting a single small lantern and leaving it on the table in the room's centre. He didn't want to sleep, and he didn't even particularly want to be alone, but he knew the party was not for him. All that seemed left to him was pensive solitude.

Rhiroo lost track of time, and wasn't sure how long he sat there on his bunk staring into space and trying not to remember. The sound of heavy footsteps finally brought him out of the daze, once he distantly realised they were getting closer. He blinked a few times and turned his head to see a large Charr in full armour stepping into the room. He blinked again then, as he recognized his Guardian friend from the march and his brain struggled to process this.

The Guardian treated Rhiroo with a small smile, closing the door behind him and wandering in. He took a chair from the table and positioned it facing Rhiroo before sitting.

Neither said anything for what must have been a few minutes, simply regarding each other silently. They'd developed an odd but important friendship through their battles together, and actually speaking to one another would change that friendship.

Nevertheless, the Guardian eventually took the initiative. "Rhiroo Sparkclaw. That's your name, is it not?"

Rhiroo's left ears gave a soft twitch, and he nodded. The Guardian's voice was deep and resonating, but struck Rhiroo with a warmth and gentleness that surprised him coming from such a large and muscular Charr. He waited a moment for Rhiroo, giving him a chance to speak, but the Engineer kept silent for the moment. Rhiroo's mental state was still taking some time to keep up

with things, and it was hard to shake the odd sense of being more of a spectator than a participant in his own life.

The Guardian seemed to understand somehow, and continued. "I've been going over the records and rosters, and I recognised you from the march by your description. I'm deeply sorry about your warband." A brief look in his eye convinced Rhiroo that he meant that truly, and knew something of that pain himself. "I am Karkev Thunderpaw." He then extended a gauntleted hand, which Rhiroo reached out to clasp gently.

"Rhiroo Sparkclaw," he answered automatically, momentarily forgetting that he'd already been identified a moment before. His brain was beginning to catch up with the conversation a little bit, and he started to actually take in the other Charr more and notice details beyond simply his size and build. Karkev's fur was a very deep black with a blue-purple sheen to it. Coupled with the broad, angled horns that spread out from either side of his skull, it gave him quite a striking profile. The imposing presence was somehow softened by the warm silver-grey of his hands, paws, and muzzle. It seemed to be natural to him, not a sign of age, but lent him a distinguished sort of bearing all the same. The armour he wore was clean and in good repair, no doubt having been seen to since the march. Most of the heavy steel plate had been finished in a deep violet that matched his fur, while the edges and details were accented in a vibrant cyan lacquer. Both colours were rare and exotic; the sort that experienced warriors sometimes found dyes and paints of on their travels and applied to their gear as a sort of trophy. The quality of the armour spoke of rank as well as experience, and Rhiroo's eyes eventually took in the silver and gold chains of rank that looped out from under one pauldron. He stiffened slightly and widened his eyes, starting to sit up straighter. "Legionnaire..."

Karkev quickly held up a hand and shook his head. "No no, at ease. I'm not here for an inspection." He chuckled softly, glancing down at himself. "The armour makes my visit look more formal than it is. I've just been dealing with the trappings of my rank all day, is all."

Of course, being a legionnaire Karkev had probably spent most of the time since their return in the high offices of the Citadel reporting to the Tribunes, and he'd have appeared to them in full armour. Rhiroo himself was simply attired in soft brown leather breeches and a simple tunic. He nodded to the Legionnaire, forcing himself to relax against military instinct. "To what do I owe the visit then..?" Again he warred with instinct, wanting to add "Legionnaire" to the end of the question, but did his best to comply with Karkev's urgings.

"Mostly personal reasons. I wanted to properly meet my comrade from the march. We fought well together, and you saved my life more than a few times."

Rhiroo smiled a little. "You did the same for me, Legionnaire. I owe you my life many times over, and was disappointed we didn't get the chance to actually speak more than a few words during that... time."

Karkev nodded softly, a shadow seeming to pass over both of them briefly at the memory of the ordeal. "Against all sense, you and I at least survived and are here now. I don't expect you wish to dwell on what we have endured any more than I do, so I'll hurry on to the point. The ambush took my warband too. All of them, out from under my command." He gave a pained sigh, leaning back in the chair. After a moment of pensive silence, he continued. "I believe I led them the best I was able. Sometimes soldiers owe their deaths to poor command decisions... and sometimes your warband is simply in the wrong place when a mortar barrage comes down. I've spent the last several days in my Tribune's office reliving every move we made, every command I gave, and I think I've managed to convince both her and myself that it was beyond my control... but that doesn't make it much easier."

Rhiroo frowned as he listened, nodding softly in sympathy. He knew too well the pain of losing his entire warband, but he hadn't been its Legionnaire and didn't have the sense of responsibility on top of that crippling loss. "I'm sorry..." he murmured.

Karkev gave another small sigh, then shook his head. "I've been bathing in the pain of that loss for days now, as I imagine you have too. We can't stay victims of it forever." He shifted in his chair, sitting forward again. "Rhiroo... I am a Legionnaire without a warband. The reports I was able to find of you are very favourable, and more to the point, you proved your ability to me time and again during the long march. We fight well together, and if you're interested I would like to offer you a place in my own warband."

Rhiroo blinked and stared at the Legionnaire stupidly. This was something he had not expected. "I... are you serious?"

Karkev nodded. "I have just given you my reasons," he said simply.

The Engineer kept staring, hoping his brain would properly catch up with the situation soon. His experiences had made him so unused to actually being wanted in a warband that it was hard to process this, and yet Karkev's simple reasoning was difficult to argue with. His past just wasn't something that let reason through easily.

Karkev must have seen something of this in his expression, for he gave a small, lopsided smile. "Rhiroo, listen to me. I've done my research on you and read what reports I could find. I know you've had a hard time finding a place to belong, and I can only try to imagine what it must feel like for one such as you to lose their warband. You've had to endure more than any Charr should, and you've faced it with incredible bravery. I both sympathise with you and admire you. But let me be clear; I'm not offering you this out of pity. In those reports, and in my own recent experience as I've said, I've seen your ability in battle. You have quick hands and a quicker mind, and you're brilliant with that rifle. You knew what support and assistance I needed without my having to say a word, and that is exactly the kind of capability I want at my side in battle."

Rhiroo looked up and met the Guardian's eyes, swallowing softly. "You did the same for me... you kept our enemies off me. You gave me the space and time that I needed to do what I had to do myself in those engagements. You... kept me safe. You protected me. And that... that's stuck with me, these past days."

Karkev leaned forward, his expression serious. "Rhiroo, if you join with me and give me your support and your loyalty, I will give you solid leadership, a place to belong, and I will protect you to my last breath."

Rhiroo's emotional state was probably not at its most resilient, but even so those words somehow seemed to be exactly what he'd needed to hear. Perhaps right then, perhaps all his life. they cut right to his core and deep within him, beneath all the stubbornness and armour he'd built around his heart over the years, something broke.

It was more than just the words. There was something about Karkev that just felt *right* to Rhiroo. The warmth and depth in his eyes seemed to convey that this legionnaire understood him, saw past the societal hang-ups he'd struggled with his whole life, and could see clearly the young Engineer's potential and quality. And in those eyes, Rhiroo saw a simple, profound acceptance that he'd never before had the opportunity to experience.

As un-Charr-like as it seemed, his eyes filled with water and a few tears spilled out, soaking into his muzzle-fur. Trembling, he met the other's intense gaze and reached out to clasp his hand. "Legionnaire Karkev Thunderpaw... I give you my loyalty and my support, and I will proudly serve you in all things to my own last breath."

Karkev smiled widely, giving Rhiroo's hand a firm squeeze. "Then let it be so. We are each other's warband now, and our names should reflect this. I name you... Rhiroo Sparkpaw. If it agrees with you."

Rhiroo grinned, nodding eagerly. "It does, Legionnaire... it does very well."

"Then tomorrow we'll ascend the Citadel and have your new assignment registered. Tonight... please just call me Karkev, will you? We'll have plenty of time to fuss over rank and such later."

The Engineer gave a soft chuckle, nodding. "You honour me far too much with all of this... I'm delighted and grateful beyond words, but it's making my head spin a bit too. Karkev... what do you want to do? You must have had quite a long day. Is there anything I can do for you?"

The larger Charr raised an eyebrow, smiling softly. "I'm not about to start hurling orders around, so you can relax. It has indeed been a long day though, and mostly I'm looking to wind my evening down quietly, probably right here if you've no objection, and catch up on some sleep."

"Doesn't surprise me... if I may be honest with you though, Leg... Karkev... whether it's orders or simple requests, I'd actually... like to do anything I can for you. My gratitude demands it of me, and... with all that's happened lately, I think there's something to be said for the comforting structure of just being told what to do."

Karkev tilted his head a little, still holding that small smile. "Well, alright then..." He stood up from the chair, stretching out his arms and grunting as a few joints popped. "As a *request*, from your friend rather than your legionnaire... might you be willing to give me a hand with my armour? I'm about ready to be out of it for the day, and it goes easier with two."

Rhiroo smiled, rising to his feet and reaching start unbuckling one of Karkev's armoured gauntlets as he offered his arm. "It would be my honour, Legionnaire."

Karkev chuckled and rolled his eyes. "Ugh, please Rhiroo... you really don't need to start with the bowing and scraping. At least give it until tomorrow." Rhiroo grinned and gave a small wink; both Charr knew it wasn't meant seriously.

Rhiroo undid the straps that held the leather and steel around the Guardian's hand and arm, and found himself admiring the construction. It was fine work; Rhiroo was no armourer but he'd dabbled in leathercraft enough to recognise good workmanship when he saw it. The leather was well-worn but cared for, bearing the marks of many cuts and blows and having been carefully oiled and repaired after. The steel that made up the bracers attached to the fingerless gloves was similar. The longer he observed these details, the greater his appreciation grew for the numerous battles Karkev had obviously seen. Battles this armour had seen him through, with cuts and blows taken by the sturdy armour rather than the Guardian himself.

With the straps undone, the gauntlet pulled off smoothly. Karkev flexed his newly freed fingers, claws extending a little bit. Perhaps it was the effect of Rhiroo's happiness over the legionnaire's acceptance of him into his warband, but he found himself admiring more about his new superior than just his armour. He was tremendously well-muscled; this much was apparent from his forearm alone. One didn't develop Karkev's skill with the greatsword and stay thin or weak. His fur too had a healthy sheen to it. Like his armour, he bore the signs of many battles and much hardship but put visible effort into caring for himself. And he'd clearly taken the time to properly bathe himself since the march, as Rhiroo had seen him well-covered in mud, dust, and their enemies' blood during their battles together.

Rhiroo realised then that he was lingering; holding Karkev's gauntlet in one hand while still holding his arm gently in the other. He wasn't sure how long he'd been doing that. He glanced up at Karkev, finding the older Charr once again watching him with that small, subtle but knowing half-smile that seemed to be a trademark of his. The fur on Rhiroo's cheeks fluffed out a little in the Charr approximation of a blush, and he moved to set the gauntlet on the table in the centre of the room. "Erm, sorry. Mind's wandering a bit. Your armour is very admirable workmanship." He hurriedly moved to start unstrapping the other gauntlet, avoiding Karkev's gaze.

Karkev's smile widened slightly, giving Rhiroo the unsettling sense that the other was reading him well enough to know he'd been distracted by something other than the armour. The Engineer busied himself with the other gauntlet, removing it and then skirting around behind the Guardian to start undoing the straps of his pauldrons with the added benefit of avoiding his gaze for the moment. While he worked, Karkev eventually replied. "Thank you. I'm quite proud of the armour, and have had it in my care for some while." He was silent a moment longer, before Rhiroo spotted his grin widening, even from behind him. "You looked to be admiring more than just the armour, though."

Of course. Like all good Charr, Karkev was not only a warrior but a hunter as well. And a hunter couldn't help but pounce when the prey revealed itself so carelessly as Rhiroo had. At least the Legionnaire still had his back to Rhiroo, so he couldn't see the deepening fur-blush or the embarrassed twitch of his ears.

He had to swallow and take a moment before he trusted himself to respond. "...Your fur seems very well cared for. Much like your armour, there are the signs of many battles but you've made a visible effort to keep both in the best condition possible."

Karkev glanced over his shoulder at Rhiroo with an appreciative smile. "Thank you. I do try. A proper warrior knows the importance of caring for his weapons and gear. And that the most important weapon is his body, not his blade."

Rhiroo seized the opportunity to change the subject slightly, giving a soft huff of amusement as he began to help ease a heavy pauldron from the Guardian's shoulder. "I imagine that's easier for you to say than it is for me."

Karkev chuckled. "I can understand why you'd think so. But give yourself credit, Rhiroo... your true weapons aren't your rifles and grenades. They're your brain and your fingers. I was given the blessing of a large build, sure, but I've still seen what the fahrar can be like for runts and other smaller Charr. And I'm guessing you didn't have a rifle for most of that time."

He made a fair point, which Rhiroo acknowledged with a small grunt as he set the first pauldron on the table, then began unstrapping the other. He was grateful for the moment to have

passed, and a little surprised that the Guardian hadn't teased him. His eyes flicked briefly over Karkev's bare arm and shoulder, quickly confirming that yes, his muscles certainly were impressive. He thought he spotted a few scars showing through his thick fur in places, but tried to keep his eyes from lingering too long.

The second pauldron came away easily and Rhiroo moved on to the chest plates. Beneath them, the Guardian wore a simple but sturdy padded leather gambeson to cushion him from the armour and absorb the blunt force of blows to the plate. Rhiroo found himself appreciating the soft feel of the leather as he removed the heavy plate from his Legionnaire, setting it carefully on the table with the rest of the armour. It struck him much like the gloves had; worn from years of hard use, but to a comfortable and serviceable blend of softness and sturdiness to the exact fit and shape of its wearer.

Rhiroo was feeling slightly emboldened by Karkev's regard for him so far, and the way he hadn't chosen to mock him over his earlier distraction when Rhiroo had expected him to. He swallowed softly, then voiced his thoughts. "Your gear really seems to have worn well on you. It suits you, if you don't mind my saying."

Karkev smiled again. Rhiroo still wasn't used to how genuine the larger Charr's smiles felt; he was too familiar with the bravado and bluster of most heavily-built warriors he'd grown up with. "As I say, it's served me well for many years and come to fit me perfectly. I take good care of it because I don't fancy having to break in new, uncomfortable gear I don't know or trust if I don't have to."

Rhiroo nodded, thinking of the thick leather coat he himself trusted his life to in the field. "I feel the same way, though I haven't been in battle quite as long as you have to wear in my gear so perfectly."

Karkev narrowed an eye at the Engineer. "You're not saying I'm old, are you?" Rhiroo just grinned, unbuckling the Guardian's gambeson and easing it off his shoulders. While Rhiroo kept finding himself easily shy and flustered in his admiration for Karkev, the rapport between them had grown quickly enough that he easily spotted the humour in the remark. "Just admiring your superior experience, Legionnaire."

The Guardian laughed, shrugging out of the gambeson to allow Rhiroo to remove it, fold it, and place it on the table with the rest of the armour. When he turned back, he found himself again distracted by the sight of his Legionnaire. Firm muscles and thick fur covered his now-bare back, while below the waist his leg armour and boots contrasted the look. Taken all together, Rhiroo found himself staring for a moment and finally admitting to himself that he found the other rather attractive.

Charr were an openly sexual species, as passionate in their mating as they were in battle, and couplings between the same gender were nearly as common as those between opposing ones. The way they saw it, life was too short and uncertain to fuss over some notion of how warriors should or should not experience love. Love, or just casual shows of friendship and trust, or simply blowing off steam and relieving what needs battle didn't. So there was nothing outwardly odd about a Charr like Rhiroo finding his new Legionnaire attractive; indeed, any Charr would readily admit that Karkev was a fine and admirable specimen. It was odd to Rhiroo though, who before that point had never given much thought to sharing intimacy with anyone, let alone what gender or type he might prefer. The feelings took him by surprise, awakening strange and previously unknown fires within him and quickly merging with the strong feelings he already had toward Karkev. His legionnaire. The one Charr who had ever told him plainly that he was wanted, and that he had a place to belong.

The result was a sudden, intense desire that hit him all at once and threatened to overwhelm him, as if the realisation of its existence had opened a floodgate. He was grateful to Karkev. He trusted him. He was loyal to him. And he found him attractive in a way that was uniquely powerful and made him feel weak in the knees. Which was emphatically not common in the usual ways of the Charr.

All of this hit Rhiroo like a blow and left him stunned; badly enough that he again seemed to lose a moment of time. When he returned to himself, Karkev had turned to face him. The sight of his bare chest only served to confirm Rhiroo's attraction, and the Guardian once again bore that gentle, knowing smile. This time he seemed to simply be waiting patiently for Rhiroo to find his words and say something.

The look in his eyes was so disarming. So genuine, so warm that Rhiroo could do nothing but trust in him completely. Karkev already knew all that was going through the Engineer's mind, he was sure of it, and the Guardian was merely waiting for Rhiroo to find the words to say it out loud. That look dissolved his fear and nervousness, all the caution and shyness he'd cultivated as he grew up as a way to protect himself. All of that was stripped away, leaving Rhiroo with nothing to do but speak his heart and mind in simple, blunt truth. And Karkev simply waited patiently for him to do exactly that.

"I... I cannot help but find that I am... I am greatly attracted to you, Leg..." Rhiroo hesitated, seeing Karkev's eyebrows shoot up in something like amused exasperation as he began the word. So he swallowed, and altered his words before continuing. "...Karkev." The Guardian smiled, seeming more satisfied by the use of his name than his title. Rhiroo couldn't help but return the smile. "I don't really... have much of anything to offer by way of knowledge or experience, but... I find myself very, very drawn to you. Both in physical attraction, and in... in overwhelming gratitude and delight for your acceptance of me and my loyalty."

Karkev advanced on him slowly, and before Rhiroo had time to wonder what was coming he found himself wrapped in a warm, strong embrace. Muscular, dark-furred arms encircled him and held him close. The scent of leather, steel, cleaning oils, and underneath it all the intoxicating spicy scent of Karkev himself flooded over Rhiroo. Scent being a particularly powerful thing to the Charr, he couldn't stop himself from gasping softly; his scent, especially coupled with the embrace, suddenly seemed the most comforting thing in the world. He smelled of all things safe and strong and trustworthy. And after a moment, Rhiroo realised that he also smelled arousal.

Rhiroo was not alone in his attraction, it seemed.

The realisation that Karkev felt the same way, at least in part, was enough to make Rhiroo shudder with excitement. Karkev squeezed him tighter briefly, then pulled back enough to meet his gaze. "Rhiroo Sparkpaw. It would be dishonest of me not to admit that I am feeling the same way toward you. I have already spoken of your strength, skill, and determination... qualities that I greatly admire in you... but you are tremendously attractive, also. I have thought so since we first fought together. If other Charr have overlooked you and written you off based only on your small stature, that is a crime. You deserve so much better than you have been given, and I want to start righting that."

It took great effort for Rhiroo to find his voice through all the emotions that were overwhelming him. Even then, he was unable to keep it steady. "To have a place to belong in your warband is enough and more, Karkev. To have your acceptance, and your strength to lead me and

support me. You have my loyalty in all things. If there is anything you would ask of me... as a soldier, a friend, or as... something more... it would bring me joy to give it you." He held Karkev's gaze pointedly, wanting to ensure the legionnaire took his full meaning.

He did, and even as stalwart and unshakable as the Guardian seemed, he shuddered softly. He was controlled, but it was clear that strong passions were growing beneath his surface too. "Rhirroo... are you absolutely certain? I desire you, but I would not have you offer yourself out of gratitude or loyalty alone. However much you may feel you owe me, you will never owe me that. I would never take something from you that you do not truly wish to give."

The Engineer smiled, leaning forward to rest his muzzle against Karkev's chest. "I can tell you without any shadow of doubt that I do want this. Karkev... I want you to have me. I give myself to you, willingly and completely."

The Guardian gave another shudder at his words, his own voice lowering to a soft, husky growl now. "Then I would have you... what I promised you for battle holds true here as well. I will care for you, I will protect you, and I will not allow you to come to harm..." He gently cupped Rhirroo's chin in a hand then and lifted it, looking into his eyes and parting his lips in a fierce, toothy grin. "...But if you truly wish me to dominate you, I will be very, very happy to oblige."

Rhirroo surprised himself by responding with a soft moan before he could bite it back. The feelings that shot through his body at Karkev's words were something he hadn't anticipated. He'd never thought of being with another like this, especially not with that sort of power dynamic, but when the Legionnaire phrased it that way Rhirroo knew immediately that that was what he wanted. What he needed. Trembling softly, he nodded to Karkev while his ears laid back against his neck in an unmistakable show of submission.

Submission. That was what Rhirroo realised he'd been craving, and was finding in this beautiful, impressive Guardian. Someone worthy of his submission. Someone he could truly trust it to.

Karkev's face remained split in that grin that both intimidated and thrilled Rhirroo. "Then I guess you'd better hurry up with the rest of this armour."

Rhirroo smiled eagerly, nodding his agreement and lowering to his knees to undo the belts that held the Guardian's leg armour secured to him. It came away without too much work, and after adding it to the rest of the armour on the table Rhirroo knelt again, turning his attention to Karkev's boots. He now wore only those and a pair of rugged leather breeches, the latter of which were not doing much to hide his interest now that the armour was removed.

The Legionnaire seated himself in the chair again, lifting one of his booted paws to rest it on Rhirroo's leg as he knelt. Rhirroo trembled softly, finding that the weight of the boot resting on him only seemed to intensify his growing feeling of submission. Again his sense of smell seemed to intensify his feelings; oiled steel and leather, a faint earthy scent from what traces of the road the Guardian hadn't fully managed to clean from the boot, and beneath all of it a subtle yet complex mix of scents that must be his paw within. The Engineer's hands trembled as he carefully unbuckled the leather straps one by one, allowing his fingers to trace over the sculpted curves of the steel and the worn softness of the leather. Underneath all of it, he felt Karkev slowly flexing his muscular leg and paw. Rhirroo couldn't help but whine softly at how all the sensations made him feel; how powerful and commanding the other Charr seemed to him, somehow especially through that armoured boot.

He held it steady while Karkev pulled his leg upward, his paw sliding out of the boot without difficulty now that the straps were all undone. As the paw came free, Rhiroo was hit by the scent of it that had only teased him earlier. He was surprised to not find it unpleasant; rather the opposite. The paw was clean and its scent was a natural thing entirely of itself. Not the reek of an unwashed body, not the unpleasant odour of careless and ungroomed warriors that was all too common to some parts of the barracks. Instead it was something incredibly complex and rich and deep, and Rhiroo found himself lost in fascination with it. Like his hands, there were the lingering scents from the armour and the oils and polish used to care for it, especially after such a long day in those heavy boots. But the paw itself smelled of so much more. That same spicy scent that defined Karkev so well to Rhiroo's nose was foremost, but underneath that was a host of different earthy scents. Much more than a single one, somehow a mix of different soils and muds and types of stone, as well as grasses, leaves, pine needles... all of these scents were there somehow, just barely, merging with one another yet never being anything like what Rhiroo would be tempted to call 'dirty.' They weren't the scents of a paw that wasn't kept clean. They were the scents of a paw that was extremely well cared for, but had spent many years marching over the far reaches of Tyria and treading over things he hadn't even imagined.

The longer Rhiroo breathed in the scent, the more he was convinced he could perceive. Karkev had spent much of his life in combat, so the Engineer became convinced that layered among the other scents were smells of battle. Fire, ash, blood... all the battlefields this Legionnaire had ever walked. The complexity and depth of the scents all taken together made Rhiroo feel as though his sense of smell were woefully inadequate to appreciate what was there. As though the entire life history of Karkev Thunderpaw were written there somehow in scent, if only one had a nose subtle and trained enough to read it all.

Once again, Rhiroo came back to himself and realised he'd gotten lost for a time. Karkev was watching him, and seemed to have realised what it was that captivated Rhiroo so. He was obligingly holding his bare paw up in the air, his dark grey paw pads a few inches from the Engineer's nose, his silver-furred toes slightly splayed to help expose the scent.

Rhiroo's blush was rather extravagant this time.

Karkev's smile was, again, accepting. "That appeals to you, does it?" He gave his toes a slow wiggle, in a gesture that seemed strangely cub-like from the large warrior. Rhiroo couldn't help but smile in response.

It took him a few tries to find the words to explain, and when he did his voice still hesitated periodically. "If you were less concerned with keeping yourself clean, it wouldn't appeal. But... your scent isn't anything like the warriors who don't bother to care for themselves. It seems so much more natural, like... what I'm smelling is really *you*, your deeper essence, made up of all that you've experienced in your life. All the places you've marched, all the battles you've seen. There's so much complexity there. And so... yes, I have to admit I do find it quite captivating."

Being able to shape the feeling into words, at least in part, helped Rhiroo feel mildly less awkward but it couldn't stop his blush. Karkev smiled though, still seeming utterly unshakeable in his simple acceptance of any oddities Rhiroo revealed. "That's fascinating. I'd never really thought of it like that, but I can understand what you mean. I'll have to sample yours sometime." Whatever Rhiroo might have said in response was silenced then, as Karkev extended his paw those few inches and curled his toes around the tip of the Engineer's muzzle, clasping it softly. The feeling made Rhiroo shudder again, filling his nostrils with that captivating scent and now pressing the surprisingly soft texture of Karkev's grey pads against his lips. He quickly found that feeling nearly as captivating

as the scent; The pads were firm from long years of hard use, but the care the Guardian showed them kept them soft like fine leather. It was a combination that didn't seem possible to Rhiroo, but the evidence was difficult to ignore when pressed against his face. As captivated as he was by the scent and proximity of his legionnaire's paw, the feel of it pressing against him and handling him lightly triggered another rush of submissive feelings. The notion of being somehow forced or pressured by this beautiful but lowest part of Karkev's body struck him as a particularly dominant action in a way that he found irresistibly thrilling.

He could not help but answer that feeling with a show of submission. Lidding his eyes softly, he raised his hands to hold the paw gently while parting his lips and extending his tongue to stroke it gently against the soft pad. Karkev gave a pleasant growl at the feeling, which was all the encouragement Rhiroo needed to continue the action more firmly. The taste of the paw pad had the same richness as the scent, and the soft texture and subtle contours amidst the smoothness of the hide were incredibly compelling. Again he lost himself for several long moments as he tended to his Legionnaire's paw, putting all his love, loyalty and submission into the gesture.

He was only distantly aware of Karkev shifting a little, probably getting more comfortable. Rhiroo trembled slightly in pleasure as he felt the weight of Karkev's other, still-booted paw moving to rest in his lap, but wasn't prepared the feeling that followed. Despite the heavy armour that covered the leg and the top of the paw, the boot left the toes free and the sole was made of supple leather to allow the wearer the advantages of grip and balance that a Charr's paw naturally supplied. In this instance, it left Karkev with the dexterity to curl his toes around the considerable bulge that now existed in the front of Rhiroo's leather breeches, and give a slow squeeze.

The younger Charr gasped sharply and cried out in surprise and pleasure, the noise muffled against Karkev's paw pad. The Guardian grinned widely and kept Rhiroo captive with his toes, mercilessly squeezing and kneading his arousal slowly through the soft leather. Rhiroo panted heavily and moaned softly, shuddering. He was dimly aware of Karkev speaking, though it took him a moment to process what he'd said. "You seem to approve of more than just the scent of my paws..."

Karkev was working to give Rhiroo pleasure and happiness. Slowly, deliberately, intensely. He'd never felt anything like it before, and it was amazing to him. The intense physical feelings were obviously overwhelming to the inexperienced Charr, but beyond that the simple knowledge of it was staggering. Karkev was doing this to make him happy, and that was new and incredible.

The fact that he was using his paw to do it, through his armoured boot no less, heightened the feelings of submission he'd earlier felt toward these things considerably.

He was entirely at Karkev's mercy. Completely in his power. He was a helpless prisoner, but Karkev was using this great power to care for him and make him happy. It turned the conventional Charr mindset completely on its head; he'd been raised a warrior and learned hard lessons about never surrendering, but here and now with this wonderful companion, surrendering was all he wanted to do.

So he did.

Rhiroo closed his eyes and gave himself completely to the feelings Karkev was forcing on him, trembling softly as the sensations overwhelmed him. Shakily he continued to lick the pads of the legionnaire's paw, eager to show his gratitude however he could. The pair continued in that manner for a while, both happily losing track of the passage of time and focusing on the feelings they were giving each other. And themselves; when Rhiroo opened his eyes some time later he saw

one of Karkev's hands had lowered and begun to stroke his own arousal, massaging it through his breeches. Rhiroo squirmed at the sight, and in his desire to please the Guardian he grew bold. He gave one final kiss to the sole of Karkev's paw, then gently lowered it to the floor. Without moving enough to dislodge the still-booted paw from between his legs, he shifted forward slightly and reached to undo Karkev's breeches. The Guardian smiled, growling quietly with excitement and moving his hand to make room.

Rhiroo's normally deft fingers fumbled with the fastenings, but eventually succeeded in undoing them. Karkev shifted his weight to the bare paw that was on the floor and stood, allowing Rhiroo to pull the breeches down. From his kneeling position, this left Rhiroo suddenly face to face with the legionnaire's arousal.

Inasmuch as he'd never reflected much on his own sexuality before, Rhiroo had never given much thought to male sexual parts as objects of desire. But as before, as with seemingly everything about this wonderful Charr, Rhiroo suddenly found his irresistible and perfect. He had no experience in these matters, but a combination of overheard conversations of his fellow soldiers and his own instincts gave him all the guidance he needed.

He leaned forward and nuzzled gently at Karkev's arousal, trembling softly and beginning to stroke it with his tongue. The Guardian shuddered and moaned quietly, which Rhiroo took as a sign that he was doing acceptably.

The Engineer continued, finding himself fascinated as before by the new scents and tastes he was now experiencing. He learned quickly, learning where to focus his attention based on how Karkev's pleased noises changed. He wanted to make his friend and legionnaire feel as wonderful as he could. When he tasted the salty fluid that Karkev was beginning to leak from his tip, Rhiroo shuddered at its intensity and, almost without thinking about it, parted his lips and took the Guardian into his maw.

Karkev gasped, shuddering more intensely now as Rhiroo began to explore him with both lips and tongue, taking him deeper into his muzzle and continuing his efforts to pleasure the other. Karkev clearly seemed to be losing himself in the feelings, resting a shaky hand atop Rhiroo's head as he uttered the Engineer's name in a voice that had fallen to a husky, desperate growl. Rhiroo shivered at hearing his name spoken with such desire, and began to work harder and faster. He knew he had no experience with this, so did his best to take care with his teeth, but Karkev seemed to be happily overwhelmed by the feelings he was giving him and Rhiroo was eager to see just how wonderful he could make it for him.

The Guardian was beginning to take his breaths in ragged pants and his hips were beginning to buck slightly, thrusting into Rhiroo's muzzle. The smaller Charr gave a soft whine, his ears flat in happy submission at how it all felt, and tasted, feeling somehow more complete and valued than he'd ever known before by the way he was being used, entirely willingly. He worked his tongue against the underside of Karkev's hard arousal, spurred on by the way his motions and noises seemed to be growing more intense and uncontrolled. Knowing he was getting close to something wonderful.

Karkev finally gripped Rhiroo's head and gently pushed him back slightly, coaxing him to stop his motions. Curious but obedient, he pulled back and released the Guardian from his lips, lapping up a thin streamer of fluid that followed him stubbornly and stuck to the fur on his chin. He looked up expectantly at the legionnaire, eager to continue pleasuring him however he preferred. Karkev

looked down at him, looking more overwhelmed and off-balance than he'd seen the seemingly unshakeable Charr so far.

"Mmmnh... Rhiroo... that feels amazing... you have a natural gift." Rhiroo smiled broadly, pleased to know this was the case. He tilted his head curiously though, his eyes asking the obvious question of why he stopped him then. Karkev grinned. "I have absolutely no objection to the idea of climaxing in your muzzle... however for this, sharing this with you for our first time... if you're willing, I'd like to share it more intimately with you. And make sure you get to feel that release as well. Would you be opposed to the idea of my... mating with you?"

Rhiroo was a bit surprised then to see the powerful and mighty warrior looking a bit sheepish then. He smiled though, thrilled and intrigued. "You mean... like... under my tail?"

Karkev somehow found it within himself to look a little more sheepish still. "Only if you are willing. I just... I think it would feel closer and even more special. I give you my word, I will be gentle. You have never felt that before I take it?"

Rhiroo shook his head. "Never. But... Karkev, I would be delighted and honoured to share it with you. To give you my body in that way."

The legionnaire again shivered softly, releasing a soft growl of anticipation. "Mmmnh... then turn around and make yourself comfortable against the bed... and for Flamesakes, take off your breeches."

Rhiroo chuckled and hastened to do so, nearly tearing off the leather garment and flinging his tunic aside, only by sheer luck managing to avoid tearing it on his horns. Karkev quickly removed his last boot that Rhiroo had never made it too, tossing it aside with a thud and following it with his breeches. The two Charr now wore nothing but their fur, and Rhiroo savoured the long moment of anticipation as he rested over the edge of his bunk, paws and knees on the floor, while Karkev slowly approached him from behind.

The Guardian crouched down behind him, spending another long moment slowly, almost reverently stroking a hand down Rhiroo's back, claws combing through his fur, and continuing down past his waist to gently cup the curve of his rump. "Rhiroo Sparkpaw, you are beautiful."

Rhiroo gave a soft, happy whine at the statement. Not a particularly Charr-like noise, but he didn't much care in that moment. His breathing was heavy with excitement for what was to come, and turned to an eager moan as he began to feel the legionnaire's weight settling over him, muscular legs nestling in between his own and one hand gently stroking the underside of his tail, lifting it. Taking the hint, Rhiroo quickly raised his tail higher and spread his legs apart a bit more, offering himself to his lover.

With another shudder of anticipation, Karkev began to push against him, guiding himself to Rhiroo's opening with a hand. Rhiroo gasped sharply, caught off guard by how sensitive his tailhole seemed to in fact be when used in this way. The Guardian was gentle though, true to his word, and his length formed a sharp, natural taper. This along with the slick residue of Rhiroo's maw was enough to allow him to begin to slip inside without too much difficulty.

Again Rhiroo gasped, the noise turning to a moan. It began as an odd feeling; hard to describe as exactly 'good' but certainly not 'bad' either. It was simply overwhelming, in a very absolute sense. Far too much to allow for any sort of value judgment. Karkev took him slowly,

inching deeper and giving Rhiroo time to get used to the strange new feeling. By the time he felt the Guardian's hips pressing against the back of his own and realised he must be completely inside him now, the Engineer realised he was moaning rather desperately. He took that as an indication that the feelings were indeed more toward 'good' than 'bad.'

It struck him also that Karkev was moaning at least as loudly, and trembling atop him. He realised that he must be feeling quite good to his legionnaire; a thought which he found filled him with a tremendous sense of pride somehow.

Once more the tenderness of the mighty warrior moved Rhiroo, as he felt Karkev's muzzle gently nuzzling his left ears. "Feeling alright so far?" he murmured softly. Rhiroo could only offer a shaky but eager nod in response. "Good..."

And then Karkev began to move inside him. Slowly pulling back partway, not enough to pull out, before easing deeper again. Rhiroo could not stop himself from moaning repeatedly at how wonderfully overwhelming the feeling was. His whole body shuddered, causing him to clench slightly around his mate. From the way Karkev gasped and jerked, that apparently surprised him and felt good to him; knowledge that Rhiroo eagerly filed away and began to abuse immediately.

This had the effect of causing Karkev to lose some of his control it seemed, his movements speeding up and getting a bit more ragged. His thrusts became harder, and Rhiroo was again delighted that he seemed able to have such a pleasurable effect on the other. He was caught off guard by Karkev's retaliation however, as his hand slipped down and curled around Rhiroo's own hard arousal and returned the favour with a firm squeeze.

Feeling those soft pads touching him directly and holding him so firmly became one more new feeling that completely overwhelmed the small Charr, forcing another ragged moan from him. As their passions both grew Karkev seemed to be losing the ability to keep things slow and gentle, so without much in the way of warning he began to stroke his hand up and down Rhiroo's length, keeping him held tightly. The Engineer cried out with pleasure and struggled, not in protest but as the feeling seemed to overwhelm his body's motor control.

Karkev seemed to be in a similar state, beginning to thrust harder and faster still inside Rhiroo even as he stroked him. Alone, either feeling was astonishing and completely overwhelming. Together, they felt like they were dissolving his entire perception of reality into a sea of colour and light as his tiny, inadequate brain failed to process the incredible pleasure he was being subjected to. He felt something building, swelling, deep in his core, and he understood the noises that Karkev was making earlier when he was using his muzzle to pleasure the larger Charr. Rhiroo was now making those same noises himself.

Karkev's thrusts became firm, fast, and smooth. His breaths had long since turned to ragged pants, and they now turned to feral growls, powerful and close together and muffled by the thick ruff of fur at the back of Rhiroo's neck as he buried his muzzle there. Rhiroo knew it was building and that he was close. He felt something powerful building higher and higher himself, down between his legs and nestled deep in the soft paw pads of his legionnaire. They were both about to go over, and Rhiroo opened his eyes and mouth wide in disbelief and amazement as the feeling seemed to loom over him like a tidal wave seen from the beach it was about to break upon.

Karkev came first. He did so with a mighty roar of release and joy, his body bucking powerfully against Rhiroo's. Rhiroo cried out at the thick feeling of warmth that surged deep into his body, and he shuddered uncontrollably at the knowledge of what was being done to him.

This wonderful, beloved Charr was mating with him. He was pouring his seed deep into his body, gifting him with the most intimate thing his body had to offer, and sharing that incredible pleasure with him. Rhiroo, the diminutive little Charr that had spent most of his life thinking no one wanted him.

The emotion that accompanied this realisation was almost more intense than the physical pleasure. Together, they were enough to sweep him away.

That tidal wave broke. Rhiroo joined his legionnaire only a moment later, coming hard into the soft pads of his hand and adding his own roar, almost a squeal of intense ecstasy and bafflement.

He had no words. Only that metaphor of the massive wave. He felt as though his awareness and sense of self was being obliterated and completely swept away, replaced only by the overwhelming pleasure that became his entire world. That was all that existed.

That, and his love for Karkev. His love, loyalty, and absolute joyous submission. These things were all that creation held in that moment, and they were all that Rhiroo would ever want or need.

It took a while for the two Charr to come down from the high. Awareness trickled back to both of them slowly, finding them collapsed over one another against the edge of Rhiroo's bunk. Karkev's weight draped over the smaller Charr and seemed to envelop him, which he found immensely comfortable. He could still feel his mate's length buried in his body, softening now but still there. And the thick coating of warm, sticky wetness he'd delivered all over the side of the bed and the fur of his stomach.

Both Charr remained silent, both trembling slightly in the afterglow. Karkev wrapped his muscular arms around Rhiroo and held him tightly. No words were needed, but the message was clear. You are mine, you are beloved, and I will never ever let you go.

Rhiroo closed his eyes and remained completely relaxed, hugging Karkev's arms around himself and sending the very same message in return.

They stayed that way until finally the physical discomfort of Rhiroo's knees being pressed into the floorboards by his and Karkev's combined weight became too much to ignore. Karkev eased himself gently and carefully out of Rhiroo's hindquarters, before flopping gracelessly onto the bed and coaxing Rhiroo to join him. The smaller Charr did so eagerly, climbing in beside him. Karkev pulled him close and quickly encircled Rhiroo in his arms again as the two got comfortable, not caring about the mess they'd left on the bed and on each other.

They could wash tomorrow. Tonight belonged to them, and their exhaustion was too great to resist any longer. As Rhiroo cuddled into the warm fur of Karkev's chest and breathed in his wonderful scent, his final thoughts before sleep flowed over him were of happiness and gratitude beyond anything he'd ever known. He'd spent his life fearing he'd never find a place to belong, but now that he was nestled in the strong, loving arms of Karkev Thunderpaw, he knew that those worries were at an end.