

From The Ashes  
by S.A. Payne  
Sequel to Blurring The Lines

Finding each other was just the start of things for Toshi and Mick. Happily ever after doesn't always work out so easily and there are no sunsets left to ride off into. While Toshi struggles to cope with his own addiction, Mick has to face his own fears of rejection and troubles. Never easy tasks to start with but combined with trying to wrangle some order into the chaos of the train yard buffer lands between the human city and I/S camp, gaining some freedom and security for the I/S people, and building their night club all under the bright glare of too much attention it becomes almost impossible.

Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter One

The cranes and bulldozers were, for a change, silent. No dump trucks moved across the spring sun warmed train yards. A small portable trailer was set to the side of the construction site and workers moved around it with hard hats in place and for some, long colorful hair pulled back. Behind the trailer serving as the project's central office, building supplies had begun to arrive and that had only been one more headache.

It didn't seem to matter how much Toshi or Alec tried to reassure the project foreman, the man was convinced that every night the wild addicts and whores of the train yards would rob them blind. It didn't matter that every morning proved him wrong, the man was conditioned to expect certain things and no words could change his mind. The same had been true of Toshi's desire that a certain percentage of the workers hired be I/S.

That had nearly forced them to hire another construction firm, until whispers began to spread about how displeased Luke Henri would be at the snub. That had made the owner of the local company more than willing to take the time to instruct I/S workers in how to do jobs his normal crews already new. That turned into an easier sell. By the time the demolition was almost done on the burned out husk of the Pony Club, the company owner was seeing the I/S as two different groups; his workers who were dependable and fast learners and good workers and all the rest which were lying, thieving, drug addicted monsters.

It was a very small step but one Toshi found pleasure in. The small change in attitude had started to seep over to the workers and while lunchtime and breaks still had both groups separating into their own areas, it was still progress. It was the small changes, the small steps forward that moved them toward real progress and it was spreading. For the first time, there were whispers inside the camp that maybe they were more than mere horrors to the outside world. With that came something new, a growing sense of pride, culture and self-respect. Which wasn't a bad start for little over a month of interactions.

The late morning sunshine was warm on Toshi's shoulders; he could feel it heating up his hair. He couldn't quite bring himself to wear jeans but the new pairs they'd bought Mick looked fine covering his lover's hips. In typical Mick style, he'd picked out black jeans, classic slightly faded blue and a dark blue, all in classic five pocket cuts but they still hugged his ass in a teasing way

without being as blatant as his previous pair. That pair was so tight it was distracting, not just for Toshi but most of the I/S crew as well and some of the human workers.

A touch on his elbow snapped Toshi's thoughts from how good Mick looked, the sunlight turning his hair from dark auburn to copper penny red and he followed Mick's nod to glance to their side. It was six motorcycles, moving steadily but speeding, and coming directly toward them.

"Yasun?"

Toshi had to squint behind his sunglasses but he nodded. "Yes." He wasn't sure he was grateful his uncle was going to do this with him, or upset to stir such bad memories for the man. "Should have known he'd make an appearance."

The motorcycles drew the attention of the workers. The I/S in the crew knew just who was arriving and they exchanged whispers and looks but the humans milled about, uncertain and very much the outsiders. They slowly started to group together as the motorcycles grew closer, the fears of working on disputed land where a body could go missing with little to no investigation, returned sharply.

It didn't matter how often Mick saw Yasun, he somehow forgot the man wasn't that tall. His personality was so strong, so intense, that once he was gone from sight Mick just pictured him taller than he was and always was a touch surprised at being faced again with reality. Yasun handed his helmet to one of the guards that followed him everywhere and shook out his long, lavender hair. As always, it hung loose to his waist before being gathered into a braid that reached his knees, a long shower of soft, blue lavender that matched his lavender eyes. Eyes still noticeably Asian in shape but twice the size of a humans and unmistakably those of an Incubus.

"Uncle." Toshi greeted with a carefully inclined tilt of his head.

That made Yasun smile, as always, and he pulled his nephew into a hug. He patted a shoulder that felt thinner than it had the a few weeks earlier before he pulled away to hold Toshi at arms length. "You look tired."

Toshi shrugged and glanced away from his uncle's appraising eyes. "I'm fine."

"Not sleeping?" But Yasun glanced to Mick knowing that Toshi would never admit to it. The human quirked an eyebrow in a look that told Yasun that no, Toshi wasn't sleeping well but he was okay.

"Sleeping when I can."

Yasun accepted that and released his nephew without further fuss. He turned and offered his hand to the human that he knew was making sure Toshi took care of himself. "Mick, still in a sling?"

The handshake was firm and strong and Mick took it, knowing the man across from him was more than capable without his bodyguards' help, of putting him flat on his ass in the dirt. He shrugged the still sore shoulder a little. "Mostly healed, just still weak, slings supposed to come off in a couple of days."

"Good! So, how long until we can go inside?"

"Uncle."

"Don't uncle me, I got a call from your father last night. He was all upset about not being in the country to come over here himself. Made me promise to show up today, not that I needed his

scolding, I had already made the plans. Did you really think we'd let you do this alone?" He cuffed the back of Toshi's head the same way he had when the half-breed was small.

"I'm not alone." He motioned lightly to where Mick stood and where Alec had poked his head out of the office to see who had arrived. "I wanted to spare you this." He confessed.

"That's kind of you but..." Yasun glanced to the hollowed out husk that had once been perhaps the most famous sex club in the world. "I think I need to do this as much as you do." He glanced back to his nephew and again worried over him looking too thin, too stressed, too tired and far too careworn for a man of his age. "So, how long until we can go in?"

"The foreman is confirming that everything is braced up. As soon as we have his say so." Under the large club had been three basement levels. The fire hadn't reached the bottom two but they'd been sealed off with the collapse of the upper building. When they'd removed the debris and gained access, their first task had been removing the dead found there. The fire had driven many to try to escape out side doors accessed only from the basement levels. They'd gone underground and been trapped, some of the doors were sealed with key pads and none of the workers had the combination to unlock the secured doors. It was underground they went and underground they stayed.

"Where was your father heading?" Yasun asked more to fill the painful silence of waiting than out of concern.

"Bolivia I believe. I know he means well, but frankly this whole effort to be a better father has me a little unnerved."

Mick chuckled. "It's creepy."

"I didn't expect him to continue, thought he'd lose interest after a few weeks."

Yasun nodded. "It's good he's making the effort. Our time with our fathers is too short." Which was far more melancholy than he wanted to sound. He caught himself and squashed the uneasy nerves at walking back into the Pony Club and told himself he had to keep it together if only for Toshi's sake. The breath he drew was steadying and he surveyed the construction site. "You really want to do this? Re-build on this spot?"

"Without a doubt, you should see the blueprints. I brought down Bill Covington to work with Andy, they went above what I'd hoped for."

"Bill did, Andy just makes things pretty." Mick corrected.

"Covington?" Yasun frowned as the name tickled at his memory.

"He's an architect, from Canada. He was cut from his firm because his wife is I/S, they have three half breed children. Come by the barracks and I'll introduce you, he's got some ambitious ideas about things that I'd like to run past you." Toshi glanced around but of course the man wasn't in sight. He'd expected the human to be tall and handsome and imposing from how steadfastly he'd stood up to unending harassment because of his love. Instead he'd found a small, slender, homely man with large glasses and little hair that bounced around with laughter and energy and filled with hope and life.

"You know you don't need my approval for anything you want to do with the train yards."

"Toshi?" Alec called, slipping from the office with a walkie talkie in his hand. "We got the all clear, they say it's okay to come down in if you want."

"Thanks, Alec." He glanced to his uncle and the tight lines of tension that had formed around his

mouth. "Come by and look at the plans anyway, I'd value your input. Still want to do this?"

He only nodded and squared his shoulders, ready to face his own memories and maybe find some measure of peace in letting them go.

The Pony Club had been famous. At it's height of popularity it had stood over three stories tall, with another three levels underground. Most people rarely saw beyond the bar, dance floor and the gallery filled with small, functional rooms. With the right bankroll, a guest was invited further inside and taken to smaller, more private areas that ranged from sadistic dungeons to posh lounges. The club had prided itself on offering something for everyone, no matter how much cash they had to spend, and everything for those few where money wasn't an issue. Anything could be obtained for the right price and it was rumored that anything actually, literally, meant anything, any perversion, any fantasy, any desire, and taboo and once their fee was met, the Pony Club fulfilled fantasies.

The fact that they did it with slave labor meant nothing. The fine line in the train yard sex clubs between willing prostitute and slave was often impossible to determine. Shine made slaves of anyone and addiction was a heavier chain than any metal links. Once in their hands, it made little difference if the first hit of Shine had been taken willingly or not. It didn't matter that no one actually ever quit, no one ever simply stopped working for a club unless they stopped breathing as well.

It was something Toshi knew first hand and a fact that he was trying to find a solution to now that he was in charge of the buffer zone between the I/S containment camp and the human city that surrounded it. It was a problem for another day, people were on edge enough with him stepping in to take control, a cooling off time was needed. He'd tear the Pony Club's burned out husk down and build his nightclub in it's spot and then, only then, would he approach the other clubs in the Train Yards.

"It doesn't look like a place of ghost stories now, does it?" Yasun asked softly as they grew closer. Much of the upper stories that had stood after the fire had already been torn down and it left little more than debris and bare support walls to stand like skeletal fingers pointing to an empty sky.

"It was surprising the things we found. I've kept some, a bit of stained glass from one of the windows, a plank from the dance floor." It never failed to put a shiver into his spine when he stepped that last step from outside the club to inside it's torn apart walls.

"Whatever for?" Yasun nodded to the guards that followed him and they quietly fanned out, some moved to disappear down into the now opened and lit lower levels, checking and securing the area.

"I'm going to have it framed and placed in our office, as a reminder."

"A reminder of something best forgotten."

"No, of something unable to be forgotten."

Yasun shook his head and Mick shrugged his good shoulder. "I said the same thing."

And then they were there, standing at the top of the wide main stairwell to the basement levels. The work's changing room and showers were directly below them, a place Yasun didn't know but Toshi did well. Yasun had only seen it while being dragged down to the lowest floor to be tossed into a darkened room and only let out to be tortured. Both men paused at the top of those stairs, uncertain about continuing.

"Sir?" One of the guards said softly, breaking the spell of the moment. "The lower levels are secure sir."

Yasun drew a breath and nodded. "Thank you." He glanced to Toshi and beyond to where Mick hovered slightly behind. "Well, can't linger like frightened children." He grinned and it was all bravado and it didn't matter because it got his feet moving.

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Chapter Two

It wasn't as simple for Toshi, he glanced over his shoulder and fell into the crisp sense of beautiful winter that was Mick. That was what he needed, that sharp sense that had grown to mean so much to him and that smirked half smile Mick always offered when he needed it the most. He followed his uncle's echoing footsteps without another second's hesitation because he knew Mick was right beside him.

"So, what's on this level?" Yasun asked, glancing down the corridors, uncertain of which direction to head.

"Kitchens, bar storage room, locker room, some holding and work rooms." Mick pointed in the proper direction for each.

"You've that memorized?" Yasun asked with a grin, ignoring how pale Toshi looked.

"I like to know floor plans."

"Well, lead on, I shall follow."

When Toshi didn't protest, Mick did just that. He took them to the kitchens and storerooms first; the harmless rooms that he was pretty sure would trigger few memories, good or ill, in either man. If he'd had his way, that was as far as Toshi would go until he'd had a chance to bring a crew in and gut the levels to the bare walls. Neither Toshi nor Yasun had wanted that, both wanted to see the lower levels just as they'd been when the building above had collapsed down upon them.

He wished he'd been a little firmer with his protests when they turned a corner and found themselves in a poorly lit, long, locker room. The work crews had braced the ceiling liberally and strung lines of lights but still the lower levels held shadows, they just seemed darker and deeper in the long, empty, room. That darkness jumped from the unlit corners to Toshi's eyes the

moment he glanced into the echoing, low ceiling space.

"So many." Yasun found himself whispering as they stepped into the room. Rows and lines of lockers covered every free space, long slender metal spaces each baring a metal plate with a number.

"One for every worker." Toshi answered but he was drawn into the room, down past U shaped rows and the low wood benches that were bolted to the floor between them. He went down, past the large open shower, the clinging smell of the industrial soap still lingered. One of the dispensers on the shower wall was still coated in the thick, cheap blue soap and the sight and smell made him a little nauseous.

"Toshi?" Mick questioned as he followed a couple of paces behind.

"I'm fine." But even to his own ears, his voice didn't sound fine. "Just, ghosts." He turned down a row and stopped at one locker, almost in the middle. There were no locks on the lockers, none of the workers were given even that level of privacy and Toshi lifted the latch on the metal door. It swung open with only a little rusty whined protest.

Mick moved a little closer. "Yours?"

Toshi only nodded. Yasun's return to punish the men that had tortured him and allied to his traitorous brother had been violent and sudden. It had frozen that day in time, the rubble had locked it all away and nothing had been touched since. He reached into the locker and up high on one of the welded ledges and his fingers slid across the small plastic pouch. His hand was shaking when he brought out the hit of shine.

It sat there, in the palm of his hand, just as if it had been waiting for him. The pink powder wasn't even clumped up or been damaged from the wet or heat. He could almost smell it, as if the plastic wasn't even there. That sweet, teasing smell that made his heart beat faster and his stomach clench up, that set off all the deep cravings of want and need and all the memories of how good it could feel.

Until Mick's hand closed over his own, covering the shaking fingers and hit of the drug that he was again struggling to withdrawal from. When Mick's hand slid away, Toshi felt the plastic bag go with it. He knew he should thank Mick but he wanted to demand that he give it back.

"I had that hidden." He licked his lips and cleared his throat a little. "A client, was drunk, hits were all over the table, I stole one. Thought if I tucked one aside, when they punished me by not letting me shine, I could sneak some to keep the pain away. It was comforting to know it was waiting there, if I needed it."

"Do you want it back?" Mick asked carefully, knowing there was nothing Toshi could do to make him give it back but also knowing that the otherwise silent man needed to face some of the truths he'd rather not.

"No, not really but yes, I do, I... god." He stepped to the side and pressed his forehead to the cool metal of a near by locker. "This is just so difficult."

Carefully, Mick slipped the hit of Shine to Yasun before he moved to drape an arm across Toshi's shoulders. "Shhh, baby, shhh, I know. You've made your point, we should get you out of here."

Toshi shook his head and concentrated on the feel of Mick so close by and his own breathing. That was all he could do until the cravings retreated a little and he knew he could move without begging for the drug that he hated.

"We need..." He had to swallow hard to keep from becoming ill. "We need to have Alec bring in some drug dogs. I want every inch of these levels swept for drugs before any of the workers start clearing out down here."

"Will do." Mick rubbed little circles on Toshi's back but he could feel the half breed's breathing starting to steady and slow and knew yet again another rough wave had been ridden out. "Better?"

"Getting there." Toshi sighed and pulled his head from where it was propped on the cool metal.

"I didn't know you were still having such strong cravings." Yasun's voice was flat but he knew that Toshi didn't want sympathy.

"They're getting better." Toshi sighed out but he knew his uncle would look to Mick to confirm the words as truth. "But still, they hit sometimes, it's the smell down here." Leather and soap, lube and shine, mingled with smoke and fire, death and mold; it was almost too much. He drew a slow breath and sat down on the wood bench. "That hit harder than I'd expected."

"When's it supposed to get easier?" In a full blooded I/S it was virtually impossible to get clean and stay clean, the first six months became one long struggle against the physical need to use. After six months, the cravings reduced, became manageable, acceptable as the bodies addiction was slowly leached out of their system over the next few years. Toshi was a half breed, a freak that shouldn't exist, and his biology often acted like neither I/S or human.

When Toshi didn't answer, Mick petted a hand across his hair. "They think the first year will continue to see spikes of really rough cravings with diminished lesser cravings as the months pass but there should be a faster tapering off period. Papa Mike says that his body already knows how to flush the toxins out so it should move pretty quickly after that."

"It's getting better." Toshi admitted but didn't say that those first weeks had him facing bad cravings a dozen or more times a day and he hadn't been really sure he'd make it through it. It took a several slow, steady breaths for him to stand again and face his old locker. This time when he reached into the locker he found the fabric he'd hidden up inside.

"A sock?" Mick asked and was surprised at how small the sock was. It wasn't easy to think about what had been done to Toshi, but it was even more difficult to remember how young he'd been.

The sock was simple, nothing at all fancy and dirt scuffed the sole of it and blood stained the cuff. Toshi clenched a hand around it. "The only thing left on me when they were done with me that first night. I kept it because it smelled like home." He raised it tentatively to his nose but it didn't have to get too close to tell it didn't smell like home any more. "Smells like smoke now." He placed the sock on the bench. "Don't think I could get my toes in that now."

"You were a scrawny thing, like most of the men in our family. Didn't fill out until you were in your twenties." Yasun smiled gently. "Luckier than me, I still looked seventeen when I was thirty."

"Anything else in there?" Mick wanted to get Toshi moving, away from this spot at least.

Toshi just shook his head. "No, nothing I want." He shut the metal door and locked inside the leather head harness he'd worn, the bit a leather covered rod that fit in the space where a set of his molars had been pulled. He shut the metal door on the butt plug that he'd been forced to wear that had the streaming pony tail attached and the gloves that made his hands useless and trapped them inside leather mittens. They hadn't been allowed personal clothing, outfits were assigned and showed up in their lockers, at the end of the day they all had almost industrial standard issue simple cotton pants and shirts and sandals to wear to sleep in. Since he'd been wearing that night's outfit when the raid had occurred, there was little else in the locker. "I don't even want that." He waved to the abandoned and sad looking sock before he drifted, empty

handed, from the row of lockers.

Mick exchanged a look with Yasun and the powerful Incubus carefully secreted the sock away into his own pockets. It earned him a grateful nod from Mick, both men knew that Toshi might not want that reminder today, or next year, but one day he might and it was a small enough thing to preserve for him.

"That's about it for this level, next one down is mostly offices." Offices and a few specific hardcore dungeon rooms where even the sound of screams couldn't escape.

They moved quickly across the next level. The offices did hold some interest but it was mostly files and records which Alec was going to shift through and nothing that Toshi or Yasun had ever seen before. The few dungeon rooms were clustered together down one hallway but while Toshi paused in front of one or two doors, he didn't enter any of them.

The lowest level was smaller, a few narrow corridors and a dozen or so rooms, all had heavy doors that latched firmly from the outside but none had locks. Which wasn't entirely true, Mick had made sure the locks were removed and the bodies found inside as well. Yasun wasn't the only one held captive so far below ground.

The older man was silent as he walked down the corridors finding with as much certainty the room that he'd been locked away in as surely as Toshi had found his old locker. He pushed the heavy door open and stood in the doorway of the small room.

"It's smaller than I expected." Toshi spoke gently but the room was tiny. Not even wide enough to lay down in, a small square of a room that was dark and cold. One corner had a stainless steel industrial toilet and that was it. There was less smell of smoke and fire so far below ground but the dank musk of mold did nothing to cover the smell of his uncle's blood that still lingered in the tiny space.

Yasun just stared into the small dark space that still haunted his memories and nightmares. "The only saving factor was that Shine would have muddled my mind too much and they'd never gotten the information they required from me." He squared his shoulders. "What were you planning on doing with these rooms?"

"Tearing them apart." Mick answered instantly. When they were done, there would be little more than memories of the old Pony Club.

"Keep this one as it is." He glanced over to where the human stood, looking so set and stubborn. "For me."

"Of course." Mick nodded his head slightly and knew better than to argue. It was like the little scraps of rubble Toshi had wandered around and collected and while he didn't agree, he could understand.

"They'd haul me out, down the hall, to the interrogation room." Yasun turned and walked with steady feet down the hallway and to the left. He'd always tried to make that walk on his own feet, a small sign of stubborn defiance that he was often too weak or injured to manage. It took a tight breath to push open the next door and a force of will to step inside.

Nothing much had changed. The room was bare walled and tiled, a drain placed in the center of the floor. Strong metal shackles were deeply secured to the wall and ceiling in several places and a pair of spigots sprouted from the wall. Pressed into a corner was a shiny red metal toolbox that looked harmless but Yasun knew differently. Each section continued a new horror, a new means of inflicting pain from simple to complex, and he glanced away from the memories stored there.



The room was large enough to work on several people at once, and he'd been shown some of the more gruesome skills his captors possessed as a means of frightening him into telling all the secrets his father had placed in him. He crossed the barren space to a set of shackles that hung almost over the drain, his fingers traced them just to solidify that they were real and as cold as he remembered. The things that haunted him weren't mere shadowy figments but solid and had simply remained hidden.

"I killed him too quickly." Yasun whispered but the room echoed the sound. He turned and placed a hand on Toshi's shoulder. "Sadly, the dead can not be woken just to be killed again so his death will have to suffice as justice." He glanced to the human that had lingered by the doorway. "Tear this room apart, Mick, tear the tiles from the walls."

"Yes, sir." Mick answered softly and hoped the pair had prodded at their wounds enough for one day. He was grateful when Yasun turned from the room and moved with single-minded steps back up from the sublevels to the bright sunshine of the day outside.

Alec hovered outside, clutching his clipboard like a shield and trying too hard to not look nervous. The tight line of his forced pleasant expression softened into relief when they emerged back up into the daylight. He hurried over not to Toshi but Mick and left the nephew and uncle have a few moments alone together.

"Well?" He demanded. It had been his idea to limit who went down into the basements with Toshi and Yasun, knowing quite well how private both men were, but it about killed him to stay behind.

Mick nodded. "Better than we'd feared. We're going to have run some drug dogs down there though, get it secured before any more work is done. Structurally, it's way better than we'd feared. Even with the reinforcements, the work should stay on plan."

"Will do, good...." He made notes on his board. "And everything is okay?" He asked and knew that Mick was well aware he wasn't asking about the foundations.

"As close to okay as can be expected. Yasun wants the room he was held in saved." He kept his comments to himself. "I'm going to take him home, some of it hit pretty hard. Don't forget your date tonight."

That made Alec grin. "I won't. Not much more to be done here today anyway."

"Take her flowers, women love flowers."

"What do you know about women?" Alec laughed.

"I've sisters." He grinned. It did take an effort not to tease Alec more. The man was so quiet about his love life that Mick wasn't even entirely sure it was the same woman he saw every time. He moved away to drift closer to where Toshi stood to the side with Yasun.

"I appreciate the offer, uncle, but some of Mick's family is in town. They're supposed to come by for a visit."

"Hmm?" Mick questioned.

"I just invited you over for dinner."

Which hadn't been all that uncommon in the last weeks and Mick had really liked seeing Toshi spending more time with his family. "Thank you, actually, if we could get a rain check? My Papa Mike is nagging me to introduce him to you."

Yasun quirked an eyebrow. "The father of yours that treated Toshi so well?"

"He's a good man." Toshi agreed.

"I'd be honored to have your family as a guest in my home Mick, say, tomorrow night?"

Mick blushed and hated to push so he kept his mouth shut.

"He's too worried about being rude. His Mama Ruth and Grandmother Rose are in town as well."

"Of course they should come."

"Thank you. They can be a bit... near sighted, but they honestly want to learn more of your people." In fact, Papa Mike had been simply giddy when it became clear that Mick's relationship with Toshi wasn't just a passing fling. "Tomorrow night, then."

Yasun put a hand on his nephew's shoulder. "Go home and get some rest."

He nodded. "I will, uncle. Thank you for coming out."

"Welcome." He inclined his head a little and moved away. Within a few paces his guard had gathered to follow and keep watch around him and a few moments more had the powerful man leaving as suddenly as he'd arrived.

It didn't take much prodding to get Toshi to agree to go home and the guise of getting ready for Mick's family to come over allowed him to agree without worrying about it making him look weak. Not that Mick or anyone else would have thought that but Toshi could be oddly stiff necked about pride over the silliest of things.

Home wasn't the fancy penthouse apartment, not any more and there was little of the sleek apartments elegance in their new place. It didn't matter to the Containment Committee that Toshi was half human, the half Incubus side out weighed that and forced him to live by the same strict and unfair rules of every I/S. It had been fine so long as he was willing to be controlled by their invasive restrictions and wear the inhibitor that disrupted his nervous system enough to shut off the low level I/S empathy that was his birthright. The day he rejected all of that he was tossed from the human city, even with all his father's power and money.

That had begun Toshi's plan to tear apart the discriminatory laws that had caused so much pain and suffering for generations. His first step was to enforce the stand down order that had been placed on the Committee. Their authority to occupy the borderland between the camp and the city had been dismissed, as well as their right to simply kidnap and use I/S at will. While the random murders and experimentations may have ended, the continued presence of their occupation didn't and there was always the quiet worry in the back of every whisper of the old days returning.

So Toshi tossed them out and took control and authority over the disputed buffer zones, the wall, the warehouses and barracks around the Camp. He'd given them a deadline and the last Committee member was walking away as the deadline expired. It saved Toshi from having to let a small riot swarm in and drive them away like unwanted rats. It left him with four barrack buildings set partially into the containing wall that circled the Camp and it was into one of them that Toshi had moved his household.

Which sounded really impressive but was, in actuality Mick, Alec and a couple of weeks ago Andy, so it was a small household. Even though Yasun had gifted Toshi with body guards and support staff, they lived on the lower floor and it really hadn't sunk in yet to Toshi that they were part of his home. In truth, they weren't, just on loan to keep an eye on the Trainyards and the buffer zones. They still reported to Yasun too and took orders from them both but one day, sooner than later, Toshi would have to fully claim them as his own and take full responsibility for

the wild, chaos of the area he was trying to govern. An idea easier to accept when he was angry and distracted and now churned his stomach with worry.

At least, for the time being, he didn't have to worry about it. The loaned guards stayed in the bottom two thirds of one of the barracks and Toshi, Mick, Alec and Andy had the top floor. Alec received reports from them, which was mostly observations with no real policing of the yards yet, and Alec passed them on to him. They were there, mostly, to make sure that the less secure area of the train yards wouldn't turn into a death trap for Toshi and because no man of his rank and position was supposed to move about without some form of guard.

Luckily for him, Mick had spent days, weeks even, convincing the I/S guards that he was more than capable of keeping Toshi safe. It earned them a little leeway and meant that so long as a pair of guards was at the construction site, they stayed out of the way and let Mick do his job. They also had learned to follow them home at a discreet distance so Toshi barely noticed it when the pair broke off and moved toward the bikes while he was pulling on his own helmet.

Mick noticed the worry in Toshi's large ice blue eyes and was glad they were going home. "Want me to drive?"

"Thanks." He didn't want to have to think that much. The craving had left him with a headache and the memories had left him shaky. All Toshi wanted to do was get home and behind a quiet closed door. He just felt awful but he had to admit, as he climbed on the back of the motorcycle, it felt pretty good to wrap his arms around Mick's waist.

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Chapter Three

Seeing the barracks was becoming less and less a sight of gloom to Toshi. The Committee owned buildings and an almost epic legend around them with his people, a quiet unspoken of terror. Those taken in there rarely returned and never as they'd been and even now with a generation passed those times, it still wasn't a place anyone went to willingly.

Except, he had, more than that, he'd made it his residence, if only temporarily. Plants growing in containers now covered the wide flat roof, the work of the guards his uncle had loaned him. I/S decorations lined the lower floors, bits of sparkly broken equipment, torn fabrics, splashes of paint, nothing was ever thrown out in the camp if it could be tied together and hung from a wall or ceiling to liven a space up. It was just their way and it lightened the look and mood of the inside of the stark building.

In contrast, the space he shared with Mick, Alec and Andy seemed almost barren. Only what had

been needed had been unpacked. The kitchen was bare bones, the living room was barely a sofa and television. Alec had insisted on a dining table because he liked to spread his paperwork out and the single office they all shared was too small for that. Three bedrooms and none were large, they'd opted for futons on the floor to save space and no one had a private bathroom. Instead they shared a common space, toilets in small stalls, sinks lined up in a row and a small shower room with six shower heads and tiled in what Andy called vomit yellow. The space was functional but they were literally tripping over each other.

It was a closeness that Toshi actually was enjoying. At least most days, excepting the touch of chaos Andy had added to the small space. It had been an odd adjustment, one Toshi had been a little edgy about. He liked Andy, quite a bit really, and Mick loved the flamboyant man but his nerves had been more than a touch raw of late and he'd worried Andy would drive him nuts. Turned out not to be an issue, Toshi retreated to the rooftop or his room when he needed to be alone and Mick had an innate sense of when to step in. Even Alec had grown fond of the artist, laughing off his drama and shaking his head while muttering about being back in his dorm room.

One of the guards took their bike for them and they slipped into the building, past guards and up the steps to the floor they'd taken over. There was a lift but it was hardly used and required keys to operate. It made more sense to just walk up but today Toshi almost gave into the lift, it was tempting.

Andy was on them the moment the door opened. "Good God where have you been?"

"At the site, what's wrong?" Mick felt the way Toshi moved a little to the side, pulling away a bit as Andy rushed across the room.

Fabric swatches flapped as Andy shook them violently. "These are not the colors I ordered! This, this is shit! There is no harmony, no balance!"

Mick squinted. "Looks the same to me."

That made Andy toss up his hands and yank on a pigtail. "They're not!"

"Andy..."

"He's right." Toshi added in carefully. "What they sent is too sharp, the color he picked was more mellow."

"Thank you, at least not everyone around here is blind!"

He shrugged. "Looks the same to me."

"God, Mick, look at it like an I/S, Toshi can see the difference." The swatches flapped again in angry frustration.

"So call them and have them redo the mix."

"I tried! They said it's the same shade, it's not and they've been running me in circles all afternoon and I want to start dinner for your family and no one believes me and it's important damn it!" He'd been so angry he'd had to hang up, curse at the empty apartment and then cry before he could call back and try again to make the company understand why the color was different. The angry tension drained out of him and he tried not to pout. "I'm just the designer, no one is listening to me."

Mick glanced over at Toshi and something unspoken moved between them before Toshi nodded. "Get them on the phone while I run to the bathroom." He didn't wait for Mick to fuss or Andy to worry but moved past them to steal a moment alone. When he'd settled himself a little he

returned to the main room and Andy's frustrated attempts at explaining the shade variation again.

He didn't ask, just snatched the phone from Andy and held it to his ear. The man on the other end sounded long suffering and angry. His tone wasn't the tiniest bit helpful and Toshi frowned and made sure the frown echoed in his voice. "Enough of this nonsense, this is Toshi Ranvier and I don't care who you are. If you're not someone with authority you're wasting my man's time." He snapped and heard the voice on the line sputter off and try to apologize. "Stop. I'm spending an ungodly amount of money with your company and if you wish me to continue to sign the checks you will get one things straight. I will be as clear as I possibly can, Mr. Fendle is a member of my house. He has final say on purchasing, if he says it's two drops too blue, he's right and you will fix it. If I find out you've insulted him or made his job any more difficult than it has to be I will consider it a direct insult upon me and my family. Have I made myself clear?" He waited until the man agreed and tumbled into apologies again. "Now, you're going to spend the night figuring out how to correct this mistake in the dyes, Mr. Fendle is occupied for the rest of the day. Tomorrow, when he has the time to deal with your stupidity again, he will call you, I would hope you have a solution to offer him." He didn't wait for the man's answer, he just hung up and tossed the phone back toward Andy.

Andy who was trying not to snicker and who almost caught the phone with his face. "Oh my god that was good to hear."

"Don't call right away, make them wait and make it sound like I'm very unhappy when you do."

"Oh you're a doll, no wonder Mick's crazy about you." Andy teased and leaned in to place a soft kiss on the side of Toshi's face. "Thank you."

"Don't let them harass you, demand what you want and don't back down until you get it. Okay?"

Andy nodded. "They just... and I'm just..." He sighed and bit his lip. The project was larger than anything he'd attempted and it felt overwhelming.

"You're not just anything, you're lead designer and a vital part of this project. Don't let them bully you into forgetting that. Now, please, excuse me." Toshi bowed his head a little and slipped past the artist, escaping back to his bedroom and solitude.

"Is he okay?" Andy asked of Mick who stood silent and worried.

"Rough day. Yasun wants the cell he was held in kept as it stands."

"I'll make note of it, now, sweetheart, go be with him."

"But, dinner..."

"Hush you can't cook anyway, go on with you."

Mick brushed a quick kiss to Andy's lips before slipping past to follow in Toshi's wake. He found his lover in their bedroom, crouched down in a corner, knees pulled up to his chest and head propped against the wall. It made Toshi look young, vulnerable and made Mick feel protective.

"Hey."

Toshi lifted his head up and cracked his eyes open but he didn't need to see to know who had opened the door. "Hey."

Mick crept into the room and sat near the half breed. "I can cancel tonight if you want."  
"I'm fine."

He shrugged. "Didn't say you weren't."

"It's just been a long day and Andy catches me off guard. He's like fireworks, all dark still blackness then boom light, color and noise from nowhere." He rubbed at the back of his neck. "Still not used to filtering all this out."

He didn't know if Toshi meant to rub at the spot that was still pink and newly healed. The implant hadn't been removed gently but he was healing well. Mick didn't need to know, he batted the other man's hands away and rubbed at the tense muscles.

"Oh, God." Toshi sighed and half turned to encourage more of the touch.

"I know Andy can be a difficult person to live with, even without an I/S sense of things, but I'm glad you invited him." He'd been surprised at how much more complete he felt with Andy under the same roof again. They'd been roommates for so long that any place just felt too quiet without the drama and energy Andy brought with him.

"So am I, I like him, a lot, he's a good man." He sighed and would have purred if he could have as the hands worked up his neck into his hair. "It's not him, I just get caught off guard. That's nice, oh right there."

Mick smiled to himself and worked at the tense spot a moment longer before he slid his arms around the slender shoulders and pulled Toshi back to rest against him. "We've time before dinner, want to take a nap with me?" He'd been trying to get in some naps and quiet moments where Toshi could drift off as much as possible because the man wasn't sleeping well at night.

"No, I..." He nuzzled into Mick's shirt and let the scent of the man fill his senses. "I like it here."

"Here then, hang on." Mick squirmed and stretched and managed to get his back against the corner, Toshi cuddled against him and a blanket tossed over them both. "No naps, just snuggled in." He kissed the top of the dark head and stroked the long black hair. It wasn't long until exhaustion pulled the slender man down into sleep and still Mick held him close.

Toshi startled awake when his shoulder was shaken gently and woke up snuggled against Mick, both of them mostly sitting up and tucked in the corner. "Hmm?"

"If you wanted to shower before they get here, you need to wake up."

"I slept?" He yawned, groggy and confused.

"Yeah, cause you're too stubborn to lay down."

"How long?"

"Not long." He stroked the thick hair and Toshi leaned into the touch.

It made Toshi sigh and he kissed the first patch of bare skin he found, the hidden spot behind Mick's ear. "If you want me to get up you have to stop that."

The rumbled voice so close to his ear made Mick shiver and think about things other than showering. It didn't help that Toshi stretched against him, his body sliding in friction causing contact against him before he somehow managed to slide forward and straddle Mick's legs. There was a playful, naughty glint to Toshi's blue eyes, one that Mick was learning meant trouble.

"I should call them and cancel." Demanding lips pressed to his and stilled his words briefly. "Tell

them I'm too busy erotically tormenting the sexiest man I've ever met." Another kiss found his mouth; this time demanding enough that Mick's eyes went shut and his hands pulled Toshi's hips closer to his own. "Ask them to come back tomorrow when I'm done making you moan." He leaned forward, ready to ghost soft kisses across Toshi's hypersensitive neck and seal the teasing into a full out romp but before his lips found skin Toshi leaned away.

"Shouldn't have let me nap so long." His eyes danced and he slipped away from Mick's lap. "Now we'll both have to wait until later."

It left Mick sitting there half turned on and with his mouth open in a protesting gasp. "Cruel!" He teased and turned the shock into a happy smile. It had been days since Toshi had felt up to teasing and seeing some sparkle in the wide blue eyes made up for being tormented.

Almost but not quite because it meant stripping naked and taking a shower in the wide open room with a naked, wet, soapy Toshi and having to keep his hands to himself. He'd been surprised that of their group it had been Andy that had been most shy about the communal shower. It didn't bother Mick, he was used to having little privacy from growing up in foster home after foster home and ever after going to the commune where boundaries were placed and respected there was no shame over being nude. He'd never had a problem with the common bathroom at college, small stalls wrapping around toilets and showers or with the far more open showers while a cop. Toshi didn't even bat an eye at the open showers, he'd just shrugged and said he felt safe with his roommates.

Mick had thought Alec would be the one to be touchy about the open room shower situation but the blonde hadn't even hesitated. In fact, the first day Mick had glanced up and seen him striding in with a towel over his shoulder not around his waist, with no sense of worry about being butt naked, it had been Mick that was vaguely ashamed and startled. Alec had laughed at him and reminded him that he'd grown up in foster care as Mick had, then hospitals and once his health had recovered he'd always been in some sport or the other. Worse, the first day Andy had spotted the only straight man naked, he'd teased Alec about being the big boy and Alec had just smiled happily and teased back.

So it had really surprised Mick when of them all it had been Andy that had been and was still the most shy about being nude in the open shower. Andy who had gone to Sleaze once wearing body paint and a thong, now wore his frumpy pink bathrobe right up to the shower before taking it off. In fact, as time had gone by, he'd even noticed that Andy was slipping in to shower when he'd know the room would be empty. It had surprised Mick, not that he could blame the man, he'd prefer to shower in private too. Or, well, in semi-private with a certain half breed.

Which made him glance over and that was a bad idea. Toshi had his head tilted back into the shower's spray and looked like something from a dirty dream. Long tendrils of black hair clung in wet curls to golden skin, drawing Mick's eyes to the strength in Toshi's arms, the long graceful line of his back, the beautiful curve of his neck. It made his breath catch in his throat and all thoughts of washing quickly fade away.

Hands, warmed from the hot water, slid onto Toshi's shoulders. "Here," Mick whispered softly. "I'll wash your hair."

That made Toshi smile a little, unsure if it would be another tease or not and liking the touch too much to protest either. He tilted his head back into those strong hands and let Mick soap up his hair. It wasn't long until those slippery hands traced down the side of his neck, sending shivers across his body.

"Mick..." He wanted to warn about fooling around in the showers but the slick fingers ghosted down over a collarbone and were stroking his chest. "Oh..." He heard himself moan instead and leaned back a little. There was no doubt what was on Mick's mind, water and soap suds made the hot length slick against Toshi's ass and it set him to shivering again. He gasped at the feel

and dropped his head onto Mick's shoulder. Any thought to protest faded into fluttery moans when those skilled hands slid lower.

"God, I love feeling you get hard in my hand." Mick whispered against that oh so sensitive neck and made Toshi shiver and moan some more. He'd learned one thing since Toshi's implant had been ripped from his body, if he wanted their play to be quick and fast, he had to come first. So long as Mick was turned on, it didn't matter how many times Toshi came, he'd get hard again almost instantly. It let him spare a hand for himself without feeling guilty.

His mostly healed arm ached and Mick sighed and kissed Toshi's neck. "Here, turn around."

Toshi whimpered and slid his ass tighter against Mick's cock.

It made Mick's heart stop. "Oh, baby, later, I promise." It took a force of will to turn Toshi around but he needed those lips desperately. The mouth parted as soon as he claimed those wonderful lips and Mick pulled Toshi tight along his body. He didn't have to encourage Toshi to grind against him and the half breed's eagerness thrilled him. Luckily, he didn't have to ask or prompt, before the first kiss had broken Toshi's hands had slipped between them and they didn't search randomly.

Graceful, elegant fingers were hot and strong and not the least bit shy any longer. Mick sighed a silent moan and brought his lips to Toshi's neck and teased as much as he was being teased. His hands had found Toshi's ass, they kneaded and stroked and tickled and made the hands tormenting him grow more demanding.

It didn't take much, once Toshi got demanding. Especially when Mick wasn't making any efforts to hold himself back. Arms full of Toshi was heaven, arms full of a hard, horny, lusty Toshi was indescribable. He moaned softly against the ear he'd been nipping and gasped, his entire body shuddering as he slipped from his control and came. He clung to Toshi, trembling, shivering, holding the warmer body with desperate hands as pleasure filled him and softly faded.

"Oh, baby." Mick sighed a moment before giving into the weakness in his legs and sliding down his lover's body to kneel before him.

"Mick..." Toshi gasped but his protest ended with a long, deep moan as Mick swallowed him whole. "Oh... oh god... oh..." He still wasn't entirely comfortable with letting Mick pleasure him like this, some part of his mind still connected it with something degrading and forced, but Mick loved it. Frankly, Toshi wasn't able to lie well enough to himself to pretend he didn't love it too. He closed his eyes and let the scent of lavender soap and Mick fill him as he tumbled into sweet pleasure and moaning release.

He was barely standing, propped against the tiled wall and Mick was still gently licking at him as he came down, gasping, panting, shivering from their quick play. His eyes were shut but that was no excuse, Mick just literally blew all thoughts and sense from his mind when he did this. So Toshi was caught as off guard and as surprised as Mick when a voice echoed into the shower room.

"Jesus Christ you two! You have a fucking room!" Andy snapped, standing in the doorway in his fuzzy pink bathrobe, towel held in front of his groin in a too obvious effort to hide his own arousal.

Mick pulled away to glance over, refusing to be embarrassed by Andy walking in on them. Alec? Maybe. His parents? Without a doubt but not Andy. "Hey, sorry." He glanced up and wasn't surprised to see the blush on Toshi's face but the man looked too sated to overly care.

"Sorry! Fuck you!" Andy snapped again and hurried away.



The cussing made Mick sigh a little and sit back on his heels. He glanced up to where Toshi was pushing wet hair back from his face. "I don't know what's gotten into him."

"Well, we were being... obvious in a public area."

He stood up and stole a quick kiss from Toshi's parted and half smirking lips before he slipped under the still running water. "Yeah but this is Andy. He shouldn't be shocked, he should tease about joining in." He started quickly washing off. "It's just not like him."

"Well, then you should go find him."

Mick shut off his water and nodded. As he towed off he stole last looks of Toshi all wet and almost glowing from their quick play and it almost made him change his mind and stay. Instead he pulled on a pair of boxers and a plain t-shirt. "Thanks." He added with a grin before leaving and caught the wider smile that came across Toshi at the word.

"Happy to oblige."

Next Chapter

Story Home

Home

Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Four

He didn't have to look long to find Andy, the hint of pink slipper tufting out from under the toilet stall door betrayed him. Mick knocked gently on the door. "Hey."

"God, go away!"

Mick tried not to sigh when a gentle push on the door proved it was locked. Sure he could have it unlocked in about twenty seconds but that would be rude. "Will you come out?"

"No."

"Come on Andy, don't be such a drama queen. It's not like you've never seen me blow someone before, including you as I recall." He tried to joke but heard a snuffling sniff from inside.

"That's not helping any!" Andy snapped back.

"Open the door."

"No."

Mick sighed a little and unlocked the door. Andy sat on the toilet, still in his fuzzy robe and

blowing his nose with a little scrap of toilet paper.

"Not fair." He sighed and tried not to pout.

"You wouldn't come out and I'm not talking to a door."

He blew his nose louder.

"Tell me what's wrong." It wasn't a question and even Mick heard and cringed from the interrogation tone of voice.

Andy just raised an eyebrow but didn't feel like being a bitch about Mick's lack of social skills. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not." His forehead crinkled together. "I'm sorry, we both are. It's my fault, I knew I shouldn't but he was just so... so..."

Andy tossed his hands up into the air. "Fuckable? God, Mick, you both are, don't be dense! This isn't about the sex."

That made the crinkle deepen into a frown. "What is it then, just tell me and we'll make it better okay?"

The look Andy gave him was the one he used when Mick was being especially clueless. "I'm happy for you, really, sweetie, I am. I just..." It was his turn to sigh and glance away. "I miss you, I miss us. I miss that stupid little apartment and cuddling on that horrid sofa. I'm used to you getting more action than me but this, well, I'm happy you've found someone, really I am."

"Andy, nothing has changed between us, you're still welcome to cuddle on the sofa." He had noticed Andy hadn't been but the man had been so busy lately between moving and designing and still working on his art that he'd been curling up under a blanket at night in one of the chairs instead of sprawling with Mick and Toshi on the sofa.

"Oh, sweetie, of course things have changed between us. It should, it's okay. I know I don't mean as much to you as Toshi but I'm human, I'm going to pout a little about it until I get used to it." That was the kicker, Mick was happy, happier than Andy had ever seen him and he knew that meant their relationship was going to become very back burner.

"Now you're being absurd. Listen to me and stop being stupid." Mick crouched down so he could look into Andy's eyes. "I do care for Toshi a lot but nothing and no one will ever change us. You feel like cuddling, come over and cuddle."

He grinned a little but it felt bitter. "And risk Toshi ripping my nipples off and handing them to me?"

"He wouldn't."

"Oh, he's thought about it! You don't see the looks he gives sometimes, he's possessive of you, I'd be blind and nippleless to not notice."

"Is that why you won't shower with us, because you think Toshi's jealous?"

"And it's damn sight embarrassing to pop a boner in a public shower, yes." He sighed and folded his arms across his chest. "I don't want to cause trouble between you two."

"You won't." But Andy didn't look convinced. "And besides, Toshi's figuring out a lot of things right now. He likes you but he has very little real experience dealing with people. Just, give him

some time to get his footing. If you could get me out of my shell, you'll do fine with him."

"Well, I do believe we became as sexually active as a pair of spring bunnies to bring you out of your shyness. I doubt that would work with Toshi."

"Well." The words were acidic but Mick had to rub at his lips with a hand to hide the grin that threatened to form. If Andy only knew some of the things Toshi had mentioned about him, the thought of spring bunnies might not be too far from the truth. "I'm just saying, give him a chance but don't think for a moment he resents you being here. It was his idea, he considers you a friend."

"God, you're a bitch." Andy pouted.

"Why now?"

"Because you say shit like that and make things so much more complicated. I wrote up my letter of resignation today."

"You're quitting? Why?" It caught Mick totally off guard, Andy had seemed enthusiastic to tackle the project.

"I don't belong here!" Again the slender hands waved out and seemed to encompass the bathroom, the building and maybe even the entire of the Yards.

"Of course you do."

"No, I don't. Last month, I had ninety eight dollars and fourteen cents in my checking account. I was proud of that, the month before I had ninety two twenty six."

"Well, if you'd stop buying shoes...."

He reached out and smacked a hand against Mick's shoulder. "I'm being serious!"

"Ow!"

"Pussy." He sighed and frowned. "Do you know what Toshi's paying me?"

Mick rubbed the spot Andy had whapped and shook his head. "No, but knowing Toshi it's quite a lot."

"It's a ridiculous amount and worse, Alec is demanding any art supply I purchase I get reimbursed for. He says its part of the design creative process which is bullshit."

"So? You used to whine about being a starving artist."

"God, you don't get it. Bless your simple heart."

"Do you really know how much money Toshi has? I mean I thought I did but I didn't and that's his own fortune. When he inherits..." The numbers had been staggering. "And it doesn't mean anything to him, he couldn't possibly spend it all in his lifetime if he set out to try and it makes him happy to pay people well."

"It's not about the size of the paycheck. I don't belong here. I... everyone is so important and proper and normal and I'm just... I'm just me. I don't want to be rich or important, famous maybe, adored? Why not but I don't belong here. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know the first thing about designing a club. I'm just a silly, flighty man that tries to make things a little more beautiful." He felt like crying again. "I'm going to screw this up."

"So what if you do?"

He snorted. "Do you have any idea how much that fabric is going to cost to have dyed? If they'd mixed the wrong shade and it had to be done again? It would have been my fault!"

"Than it gets re-done. It's in every contract to every supplier that they don't get paid until you sign off on the samples. If you want them to make fifteen versions of each shade, they'll do it."

"I didn't know that."

"Toshi believes in you, I do to. This club isn't about money, spending or making it, it's about making things a little more beautiful." He reached out and gathered up Andy's hands and pressed a kiss to their knuckles. "Neither of us can think of anyone better suited to that than you. We'll hire you an assistant or three, just don't go."

"I don't know."

"And you're not just anything, you're Andy Fendle, world traveled, nearly famous artist and simply fantastic." He gave the slender fingers a light squeeze. "Don't give up."

"Mick..."

"Just give it a couple more weeks, see if things level out some? You're just taking this too seriously and working too much. Take tomorrow night off, get Ryan to take you out."

"Can't, I've a meeting."

"It's going to be cancelled." He grinned. "Besides, we're going to be taking my family to have dinner with Yasun anyway. Which means Alec is going to take the night off you may as well too."

"Well, seeing you two being all smug and smutty is unfair. Could use a good night out." He grudgingly admitted and refused to think about how many days had slipped by without him being happily laid.

"So you'll give it a couple more weeks?"

"Yeah, a couple more."

"Good. Wouldn't want to do this without you. And I promise we'll behave more, it was thoughtless of us, I'm sorry."

"Just be glad you're too cute when begging, now shoo and let a man get clean in peace."

But Andy's voice, while teasing, lacked a lot of the happy light-hearted bounce it normally carried. It felt forced but he didn't think to say some words and have what was bothering his friend simply disappear. Mick nodded and stood up, moving to give Andy the privacy he'd asked for but while he dressed and got ready for his parents to arrive he worried over it.

"I should wear a tie." Mick sighed and held two different plain, sedate, boring ties up to his plain button down dress shirt. He hadn't worn a tie since being bounced from the police force, not that he minded them much but they gave someone something to grab a hold of in a fight.

Toshi sighed and tried not to grin as he reached around Mick and plucked both ties from his fingers. "No, you shouldn't."

"But..."

"No, you shouldn't. You look fine." It wasn't a lie, the dark dress slacks fit him perfectly and even the simple button down shirt hung on his shoulders well. To match the same level, Toshi had opted for dark tan khakis and a black dress shirt, no tie. That was something he was growing more and more comfortable with, slightly more casual dress than he'd worn most of his adult life.

"I want them to know how seriously I take this visit." He met the overly large blue eyes in the mirror and frowned a little deeper at the teasing light in them. "They don't visit children outside the commune often, it's very rare."

Toshi raised an eyebrow.

"I know, I know, they're here to meet with you and your uncle, I know but still, this is very rare and well, it's nice. I..."

He kissed the back of the nearest ear. "You just want them to know you respect them. I know, but the tie doesn't matter, welcome them into our house as you would anyone. Now, no more fussing, they'll be here soon and Andy might need help in the kitchen."

Andy didn't need their help, it turned out. He'd made a simple meal of pasta with fresh cheese, basil, diced tomatoes and olive oil, opened a nice bottle of wine and had tossed together a pretty salad and a fresh loaf of crusty bread. The simple, small, but industrial looking kitchen smelled of rich foods and Andy stood in the center of it all wearing white boat length pants, canvas shoes and a sailor girl shirt. His hair was pulled back into a tail at the nape of neck and tied off with a big, floppy red bow. When they'd popped in to see if he needed help, he'd shooed them off. Which left Mick to fuss at the already set table and Toshi to sit and watch his lover fuss.

When the door buzzer finally rang Toshi saw Mick actually flinch a little before the other man shouted to the kitchen. "There're here!"

Toshi rose and went to answer the door before Mick could fuss with that too. On the other side was an impossibly tall Succubus with hair the color of gold and eyes a clear violet purple. She was nearly a foot taller than Toshi, slender and able to take down men twice as strong as she was.

"Sakura-sama?" She bowed.

"Yes Eve."

"McKale-san's family has arrived." She bowed again and stepped to the side to let the trio pass, an Incubus named Jones stood behind her, looking as dower and serious as always.

"Thank you, Eve."

She bobbed her head again and stepped uneasily aside to usher the humans into the private rooms. Toshi watched her closely, none of the I/S sent to him had much experience with humans, not, quietly, were slightly afraid of his own mixed heritage. They'd grown comfortable with Mick fairly quickly but that was a knack Mick had but even with Alec they seemed edgy and uncertain. It was that fear of interaction that he wanted to cure, on both sides of the camp's wall.

So it was that he didn't miss the careful way her eyes flicked to Jones and back to the floor as the humans came in. That was all he had a chance to see because Mick's Grandmother Rose came forward and tossed her arms around him. He tensed a little and she chuckled and patted him before pressing a kiss to the side of his face.

As soon as the shock of the contact slipped away a little he was smiling, the soft cloud feel about the older woman was too comforting to keep from smiling over. "Grandma Rose." He nodded a

little and caught the shocked, horror filled expression on Eve and Jones' face in the hallway.

"Handsome as ever!" She declared and patted his arm as she pulled away to toss her arms around Mick next. "Oh Amun!" She laughed and hugged him vigorously, tossing him a little side to side and pulled away to cup the sides of his face. "You look like you're working too much."

"I'm fine." He grinned and let her fuss. When she released him he offered his hand. "Papa Mike, Mama Ruth, I'm glad you could come by."

Mike took the offered hand and pulled his adopted son into a back slapping hug. "Glad to be here." He stepped back and offered his hand to the half breed, knowing better than to try to hug him as well. "We've much to talk about, much."

"Mike." Ruth warned as she smiled prettily, her fading blonde hair pinned up in it's normal controlled bun. She tilted her head a little as Mick leaned down to kiss the side of her face.

"Sorry, was warned not to get all work fussy at you two right away. Not like this woman isn't going to be poking and prodding you before we eat. Ow!" He huffed when Ruth smacked his arm a little.

"I would like to look you two over, make sure your doctors are treating you properly."

Toshi nodded. "I even have copies of Mick's latest x-rays on his collarbone. Thought you might want to see it."

She smiled softly and nodded. "Good."

"Now where is Andy and that other boy Alec?" Rose called out looking around.

"Andy is fussing in the kitchen and Alec has a meeting and than a personal errand to run tonight. Please, come in, I'll show you around." Mick moved to get them inside, excited and nervous at the visit.

"The layout already is impressive, the security is quite solid. That you're doing Amun?" Mike asked.

"I can't take credit for that, the I/S security force are amazingly well trained."

And speaking of them Eve and Jones still hovered in the doorway, waiting, uneasy and Toshi frowned. "Was there something more?" He asked of them and all sets of human eyes swiveled to them.

Jones blushed and dropped his eyes but Eve stepped forward and bowed again. "Sir, with permission, sir, I'd like to address McKale-san's parents, sir."

Toshi glanced to Mick and his parents but they didn't seem worried or bothered by the idea. "Of course, please."

Another nervous look slipped between the two guards before Eve bowed again, deeper. "Please, McKale-san sir, we've heard stories of your parents, sir." She couldn't quite bring herself to address the strange humans directly. "We've heard word, sir, that they have a drug, a sedative, that's safe for us. Sir, we've, all of us of Sakura-sama's house, we've discussed this and if it would be allowed, volunteer for any experimentation that may be required, sir."

"Experimentation?" Mike questioned and looked to Toshi but the half-breed was still and silent.

Eve bowed again, deeper. "Any risk would be worth gaining such a drug, sir. Please, allow us this

sacrifice.”

“It was the practice of the Containment Committee for too many years to simply take anyone they wished for whatever use they wished.” Mick added softly. “It’s made most of the camp wary of human run medical care.”

Ruth looked horrified, Mike frowned but it was Rose that moved forward. She smiled in the way she had and before Eve could react, gathered the tall woman’s hands up between her own. From the way Eve’s eyes widened the gesture both repulsed and fascinated her and Jones startled a little, reaching for a weapon he wasn’t carrying.

“I haven’t had an opportunity to meet very many I/S, my dear. In fact, outside of Toshi here I can’t say I’ve ever even spoken with one of your people directly. How about you, dear? Have you had much contact with humans?”

Eve looked to Toshi for direction and it wasn’t until his nod that she answered. “No, ma’am.”

“Ma’am!” Rose hooted a little. “Please, dear, everyone calls me Grandma Rose, you must too.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She patted the strong hands. “Yes, Mike and his group believe they have a sedative that should work on your people but no one will be using anyone for test subjects needlessly. There are plenty of folk hurt who could use it, no need to make any sacrifices. Now, ignorance is a vile creature, what say you to joining us after dinner for tea and desert? Surely there is a bakery about that we can call, order in some cakes or such? Why not get all of you here together and you can ask us anything you want of humans. Mike has spent his life studying genetics and I/S biology, Ruth here is a medical doctor and I’m, well, I’m a grandmother. We’d love to get to know you, if you’d like a chance to get to know us, we’d be highly honored.”

“I…” Eve glanced, uncertain and a little frightened to Jones before looking to Toshi. “I can’t speak for everyone.”

“Nor should you child!”

“If it would please Sakura-sama, I think many of us would like that.”

“I’ve no objections. How about on the roof? That should provide plenty of space.”

Eve nodded. “We’ll see to it, sir. When you wish, we shall be waiting.” She met Rose’s eyes for the first time and bowed. “Thank you, we’ve heard much of your commune.”

“No, dear.” Rose patted the hands she still held. “Thank you, you’ll make us the envy of everyone back home.” With another disarming smile she let go of the woman’s hands and Eve pulled them back, still a little startled before bowing and hurrying to escape.

“I think you frightened her and she’s not one easily disturbed.” Mick teased.

“I’ve been known to have that effect on people. Oh there’s my darling boy! Come out of hiding there and give Grandma a hug!” Rose called out and hurried over to where she’d spotted Andy lurking out of the way. At her greeting his face lit up and he came to deliver the hug.

“And both of you…” Ruth shook a finger. “No stalling.”

“Pish, Ruth, let them catch their breath. Amun offered to show us around, then you can prod at them.” Mike clapped his serious son on the shoulder and saved the pair from an instant exam. “How much of this floor do you actually occupy?”

That let Mick escape back to safer ground and he started showing his family around the cramped space. He'd memorized all the important fact, the size in square feet, meters, the density of the reinforced building material, the construction techniques, anything they might want to know. It was in the solid, clear answers of fact that he found stable footing again, even if Andy and Rose hung back, Andy with his arm looped about the old woman's chatting softly about the current drama over the mismade dye batch. By the time the tour was over and Ruth got her way to look over their mostly healed wounds, he wasn't feeling nearly as nervous.

So with mostly clean bills of health, Mick still winced a little when Ruth prodded too roughly at his mostly healed collarbone but it could have been her sharp words on not getting shot again as well, they sat down to dinner. Many compliments on the prepared meal made Andy smile and laugh and seem more like himself to Mick's now watchful eyes and the conversation stayed light and comfortable. Both Andy and his family were used to his more silent ways and that acceptance seemed to blanket over Toshi as well.

"So word of our sedative has spread has it?" Mike finally brought up when most of the meal had been eaten.

Toshi nodded. "When over five hundred thousand people are crammed into a space made for two hundred, nothing goes unheard."

Mick put his fork down. "What is it that was on your minds that couldn't be spoken of over the phone?"

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Chapter Five

His parents shared a look and Mike fished a small round, metallic disk from his pocket. It spun a little when he skidded it the few feet across the table toward Toshi. "I thought you'd might like to see that."

Toshi picked up the implant. It was smaller than the one he'd worn, more compact, but there was no mistaking the design. It was a choice he'd never wanted to be presented with again and he shook his head and placed it back on the table. "I won't wear one again."

"Oh, no, not sure it'd be safe for you even with the new design." Mike smiled. "That wasn't my intent. We, Ruth and I and our teams, we got to thinking and talking after meeting you. That there is, we hope anyway, a real chance to get clean of Shine."



"What?" Toshi glanced to the small disk again and the table around him had grown silent.

"It's not a cure but we sat down and started going over the science. An I/S brain is so vastly different than a human one, you've neurotransmitters we haven't even identified yet let alone figured out what functions they hold. It's these higher levels that cause Shine to be so addictive, that allow it to be reinforced with an emotion. A human on Shine has the chemical addiction the same as an I/S but for the I/S brain, a strong emotion cascades an array of neurotransmitters at such a high intensity that they become more addictive than the actual chemical drug. Worse, once clean, once those neuro-chemical levels return to a more normal level, if the chemical returns and that flood of neurotransmitters returns, their levels are, we believe, absorbed more readily. Like an anorexic that suddenly eats fully again, their metabolism has slowed to the point where food goes to fat much more readily. This makes it virtually impossible to get clean a second time."

"I'm aware of all of this already."

Mike nodded and picked up the implant. "So we got to thinking. With this sedative, we can do to someone else like we did with you. Put them under for three, four days, in a control monitored setting, while the worst of the early withdraw fades. Then with an implant in place there's no way for that cascade of neuro-chemicals to be set off."

"It's a good theory but I can tell you most people would rather die of their addictions than accept the blindness of an implant." The idea of forcing implants onto addicts had been considered before. The small test group that the practice had been tried on hadn't gone well. Several of them removed their own implants but the majority simply killed themselves.

"We discussed that, which is why we came up with this little beauty." He flipped the new implant across the back of his fingers like a coin. "This isn't a standard implant. It has it's own chemo-receptors built into it. It remains inactive until it senses Shine in the wearers system, that triggers it to turn on, blocking the reinforcement of the addiction. When the chemical levels drop below an additive level, it turns back off."

"A safety net."

"That only works when needed and it's small enough that it's virtually invisible under the skin."

The idea set a small flutter of hope in Toshi's stomach. "Could I wear one?"

Mike looked to Ruth and she glanced down before speaking. "We'd have to look more closely but, Toshi, it'd be a real risk for you. The damage you sustained, it isn't the sort that really heals."

"But it could work for hundreds, thousands, of others. People without hope right now, it's a theory that could work." Mike added.

"Theory?" A theory was a thin line to pin hopes onto.

"We haven't had a chance to try it in practice yet. We'd need a volunteer, someone who wants to be clean, who'd be willing to take some Shine once the implant is in place. We'd need your help finding someone."

"Beyond that," Ruth looked up. "Yes, we know it's course and rude of us to so impose on your relationship with Amun this way but until now the only access to your people was through the Containment Committee. They weren't known for granting access to anyone but their sanctioned staff. We'd like to establish a medical clinic here, for anyone seeking treatment. There is so much we need to learn of your people, so much that has to be garnered with co-operation not force. With minimal space and effort, we could create a small hospital, be capable of handling nearly any medical situation and we'd gain so much knowledge from the opportunity."

"Why, just the study of venom alone could occupy the rest of my lifetime." Mike added in. "Its chemical interaction with human physiology is virtually unknown. I'd love to get a blood sample from you Amun, while we're here, and to know how often venom is introduced to your system."

Toshi felt his face start to blush bright red and knew that he wouldn't be able to stop it.

"Papa!" Mick scolded and Andy snickered a little behind his napkin.

"What?" He glanced around the table where Ruth looked as clueless as he was and Rose seemed as amused as Andy.

"Venom is a taboo subject. You can't just drop it at the dinner table. It's like asking about our sex life."

Mike waved the complaint off. "Taboos hold no purpose but to protect ignorance. As to your sex life, you're both young, vital males, I'd imagine it's frequent and varied so there should be some introduction of venom."

Andy outright laughed. "You forgot loud as well."

Toshi shut his eyes and told himself he wasn't about to die of utter embarrassment. He refused to let the frank conversation make him appear the stuttering fool. "We've elected to avoid any venom for now." He forced out, blushing brighter he knew. "We've both still been recovering and felt it better not to tax things further."

Mike raised his eyebrows at that but nodded. "Logical, when you do cross that threshold, I'd like to be made aware. I'd love to be able to monitor the entire physiological response to venom from introduction to depletion as well."

Which was basically asking to watch their sex life as well as being made aware of it and Toshi revised his earlier belief that he wasn't going to die of outright embarrassment. "Well, we'll take it under consideration." He took a sip of water and a long slow breath. "As to this new implant, do you really feel it's safe enough for a living subject test?"

Mike nodded. "If I didn't, I wouldn't have brought it to you."

It was easier to get the blush to go away when he was thinking about something other than how sexy Mick was with venom in his system. "I think it's well worth the chance. I'll find you a volunteer. The medical clinic, however, will need to be discussed with my uncle. It's a choice that effects inside the wall more than out." He judged what he knew of Mick's family and the only negative thing he'd noticed was how often they became blind to anything beyond their research and study. "I'm not opposed to the idea."

That must have been more than they'd been hoping for because both Mike and Ruth smiled brighter and relaxed. "Thank you." Mike nodded. "When your uncle has the time, we'll be ready to meet with him, just give us a call."

"Actually," Mick interrupted. "Toshi already set up a meeting for you, tomorrow over dinner." And he saw something that he'd never seen on his parent's faces, awe at meeting someone important.

"Over dinner?" Ruth asked carefully. "In his home?" She glanced to Toshi to deny it but when both younger men only nodded she glanced to Mike. "I... we're... that's an unheard of honor."

"My uncle thinks very highly of Mick."

Rose patted Ruth's hand and smiled warmly. "We'll try not to be too much of an

embarrassment.”

Toshi led the small group up to the roof with a touch of trepidation churning in his stomach. Gathering as a community was common for his people, he'd seen it growing up all the time, but his place in the Sakamoto family had placed a distance between him and other people. That distance was breachable, he'd seen his uncle do it, his grandfather and grandmother, he knew it was possible to step into a celebration and just be accepted. It was his mixed blood that had always made it ultimately impossible. He just made people uneasy and he'd never been blind to how even the smallest member of his family's house had recoiled from him.

Things had changed since he was a child. He knew that, logically. The story of his involvement in the coupe of his family had spread across the camp and somehow instead of becoming an object of scorn for how low he'd been brought down, he'd been embraced. His addiction and following years sober were held up as a beacon of hope to other addicts. Worse, now his family was viewed as far stronger, far more approachable. They'd been taken from the top rung of I/S society to the lowest and emerged stronger than before. Toshi didn't see it but somehow, even living in the human's world, had made most of the camp awed and fond of him.

It still wasn't a change he was used to. When the guard his uncle had sent to him arrived, Toshi had questioned them harshly about their feelings. He'd made it clear that no one had to serve his house if they weren't comfortable doing so and he'd been shocked by the sincerity in their reply. Every member of his guard had volunteered to serve his house, which shocked and humbled Toshi deeper than he'd even been able to express to Mick.

He knew that the small unit occasionally gathered on the roof, inviting family from within the camp over for whatever celebration they were holding but they'd never directly invited Toshi and he hadn't imposed. So he had as little idea what to expect as Mick's family when they climbed the last steps to the roof and stepped out onto the flat surface.

Long strings of light bulbs were strung from pole to pole and hung around each light were paper lanterns that turned the harsher light into soft glows of red, yellow, blue and green. The long deep bedding pots were deep enough to grow flowers and vegetables and both were twining up in green tendrils. They tended to be laid out to form borders around an open area to sit where chairs were set up and a table laden down with punch and cookies was heavy and waiting. A radio played old rock songs softly in the background but the music seemed loud since everyone on the roof had instantly gone silent when they'd joined them.

The tension would have been unbearable if Mick hadn't grinned widely and looped an arm around Rose's. He led his parents over and introduced them, knowing everyone of the almost two dozen names by heart and something little about them. If most of what he knew was about their guarding style or fighting skills, well, that was forgivable since most of his time was spent interacting with them on a security level. They just seemed generally pleased to be remembered and complimented so warmly.

The punch was spiked, which turned out to be a good idea because as soon as cookies and glasses of the liquored up drink were in hand, everyone seemed to relax a little. Toshi could tell that Mick's family was trying really hard to be friendly but under their social exterior he could feel the hunger to learn more brewing and if he could feel it, the full bloods surely could as well. Conversely, if the I/S groups fear and uncertainty around the humans was obvious to his eyes, it had to be screamingly obvious to Mick's family.

The questions were slow at first and they tried to keep it balanced one for one but for the most part the I/S tended to ask about the care and keep of a human, what to do in case of injury and the like.

“They're asking in case someone tries to kill me on their watch.” Mick teased and chuckled and nervous laughter spread out across the group.

But as the punch disappeared the conversation became more open and less formal. The group broke into smaller clusters and it made Toshi happy to see how both sides soon forgot that the other was something different, something fearful. As he watched them, watched the easy way Mick and Andy moved around the I/S and how the group was so much more at ease around them, it set a spark of melancholy in him and he found himself wandering away from the strings of light to a darkened corner of the roof. He liked it better out here, close enough to watch and have drifting hints of voices and music reach him but safely away.

"Well, not much of a get together when the hosts fades away into the shadows." Rose spoke softly as she came down one of the more narrow walkways, drink in hand, not wanting to intrude or ignore.

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged and came so sit on the edge of a low wall near Toshi. "Don't be. Things look so pretty from here." She kept her eyes off of Toshi and on the glittering lights of the city, both inside the camp and out. "Isolated but pretty..."

"I'm not brooding."

She raised her eyebrows in the darkness but refused to scold.

"I'm not." He protested but it sounded weak even to his own ears.

"It'd go a long way for this idea of integration if you'd learn to be comfortable with your own mixed bloodlines." She smiled. "Or should an old lady keep her mouth shut and her nose out of it?"

"I..." Toshi stopped, sighed and sat on the roof, back to a planter and green young plants spiraling over his head. "No, I don't mind the company."

"The club plan is going well?"

He knew Rose was a psychiatrist, a profession he'd always been wary of but she felt like a grandmother and Toshi's heart needed that. He didn't want to be silent and cautious right now. "Physically? We ahead of schedule, it's going well."

"But?"

"But I worry that the very concept is asking too much. And once construction is close to being finished I have to rein in the other clubs before we open. I need to gain tighter control, lay out laws to be followed, enforce them."

"Doesn't sound easy."

"It won't be. It's not impossible, I'll have total support from my uncle but I'd like to keep it as bloodless as possible."

"You're a smart man, I've no doubt you'll find a way."

Toshi nodded but remained silent.

"How are things? Between you and Amun I mean." She asked carefully and didn't miss the subtle way Toshi sat a bit straighter. "You know, anything you say to me will never be repeated, I'd be honored to act as your sounding board."

"Mick listens to me."

"He's good about that but sometimes a lover is too close to the situation."

He sat torn between wanting her advice and keeping his thoughts to himself. In the end he spoke because once Alec had been upset that they'd never found someone trained and understanding enough for Toshi to talk to. "Mick, he's my first, really...well not my first but...the others weren't really consensual."

"I'm sorry, Amun knows this?"

Toshi nodded but wasn't sure she could see the motion in the dark. "More so than anyone else alive, I've hidden nothing from him."

"That's very brave of you, and a good idea."

"I really care about him, I want him more than I've ever wanted anything, he's vital to me." And he worried that sounded like a stalker and tried to think of a way to amend it. "I...I mean..."

Rose chuckled a little. "I understand."

"So I don't have much in the way of experience with this, I just, I'm not sure what to do." He folded his hands into his lap and tried to straighten out his thoughts. "I don't have a good example of healthy human relationships to go by."

"How many times has your father been married?"

Toshi grinned. "Too many, he's on wife nine."

"Your uncle is married, isn't he?"

"But an I/S marriage isn't a human marriage, it's more of a treaty between families. Neither my aunt nor my uncle are monogamous to each other, the only requirement is parentage and support of the common household. Monogamy isn't a concept we I/S do well." His hands were clenched together now.

"Has Amun asked for monogamy?"

"He's asked little of me. He isn't an Incubus, I want him to be happy."

Rose sat silent for a moment and let the quiet, uncertain voice fade into the night. When it became clear Toshi wasn't going to continue she prodded. "But?"

Toshi sighed and glanced up to all the stars above. "But, I'm not Incubus or human either, I don't know, I...some days I feel like I'm being torn in two. Split between both and belonging to neither, unable to fully claim either side."

"And with Amun?"

"I don't know."

The words were too quick and she shook her head. "Of course you do, you've been thinking about this for far too long."

That made him frown and some truths sunk in. "Mick asked you to come didn't he? To speak to me?"

"He asked me to come yes, but because he wished to speak with me and he may have mentioned that you've been brooding about something you've been reluctant to talk about."

Which is understandable given how much your life has changed and how suddenly."

He should have been angry but really he just felt a sense of relief. Mick knew him so well that he knew not to pry but also to give him the chance to let some of it go if he wanted. "Mostly for the better, it's just, every solution has brought new difficulties. I feel crushed by them some days, turned around and lost."

"I won't pretend to have any clue about all of this." She waved to the night air taking in the I/S and the Yards and the club. "You're trying to do something that no one, not your father, not your uncle or grandfather have done. I can't begin to conceive of the difficulties of that. However, I can listen and I know Amun pretty well and I've heard everything about relationships over the years."

"Sometimes," Toshi forced out slowly, grateful for the darkness. "I get so jealous of him. If someone touches him, I want to break their fingers. I get so possessive it scares me. I don't want anyone even looking at him or him at them or flirting or at me either for that matter." Just thinking about it made him feel like he couldn't breathe and he stopped to slow his breathing down. "It's absurd."

"But you haven't acted on any of those feelings?"

"No!" He snapped back. "I'd never tell him what to do. I don't like feeling this way. He's had enough people hurt him, I would never..." The words tumbled out and Toshi sighed them to a halt. "It's not always like that, some times, some days, it's the opposite."

"Opposite?"

"I think how stunning he is, how..." he tried not to blush. "How erotic it would be to watch him with someone else, or to have him watch. That's not right."

Rose shrugged. "I don't know, I think it's healthy. Especially if Amun is your first, goodness, if I'd stopped thinking about other men after my first." She chuckled a little in a warm open way. "I wanted to know every variety of partner and situation out there. I think it's natural to be curious and healthy to admit it to yourself."

"Some times, I go from that terrible jealousy to the opposite extreme in the same moment. I... I don't know what to do, it feels like I'm being torn in two and with all the struggle with the Yards and the cravings and building the club and my father I..." He couldn't breathe, he felt how short his breath was but he couldn't get a deep one to settle into his chest.

Not until steady hands pulled him close and Rose pillowed his head against her shoulder. She stroked his hair and whispered soothing hushing sounds and Toshi fell into the soft cloud comfort of her feel and the warmth of her concern. It reminded him of his mother, on the few times they had spent alone together or more, of his grandmother who had quietly disagreed with her husband's acceptance of him but had been kind to him. It worked and settled him down and leveled out his near panicked breathing.

"There now, that's better." Rose said softly but continued to pet across the long dark hair.

"I just feel like I don't know what I'm doing." He sighed and pulled away a little, not wishing to be rude but uncomfortable with the prolonged contact.

"Welcome to life, my dear, no one has any real clue what they're doing half the time. Stop being so hard on yourself. Promise me that much?"

"I can try."

"Good, that's all you can do!" She patted his shoulder. "Now, Amun is many things but he was always a sensible boy and he's a solid, good man. Talk to him, tell him what you're feeling. I'm betting he'll understand, you'll feel better for telling him and you'll work some of it out. At the least, you won't feel so twisted up over it." She brushed some of the stray thick hair back from Toshi's still twisted up and unhappy face.

"I warn you Grandma Rose, you'll have to fight me for him." Mick teased as he came within earshot. The darkness hid Toshi's slight flinch at how close the random comment was to his own conversation.

"If I were younger..." She teased and smiled at the growing form in the darkness. "Alas, I'm too old!"

"Papa Mike was looking for you."

"Is it important?"

"Jones has a notebook filled with mathematical equations, Papa Mike thinks he's solved the second part of the Weffenschdtedt theory of stranglet occupation."

Toshi raised an eyebrow but Mick may as well have been speaking another language. Whatever he said it made sense to the woman beside him because she sat straighter and her eyes went wide.

"Really?"

Mick nodded. "On his own, from a textbook that someone smuggled in twenty years ago. Papa Mike is beside himself, wants to get one of our people in to look it over."

"Well, he's been pushing for years to get some of us in here as teachers, maybe we aren't needed?"

"We've schools, but little in the way of experts." Toshi added softly. "Pretty much whatever the alphas knew has been handed down and when we can get textbooks and the like but little in the way of formal teachers."

Rose glanced from one young man to the other. "You're telling me one of your guards has worked out a supposedly unsolvable advanced mathematical equation with no formal education? From a textbook only? That would be amazing, we really must get someone here to help him, work with him..." Rose was talking more to herself now and she patted Toshi and patted Mick and wandered back to the party, most likely to pounce on poor Jones.

"Sorry to break in like that." Mike stood a few feet away.

The distance was obvious and Toshi patted the section of the roof next to him. "We were just chatting."

He lowered himself down with a sigh and sat, shoulders just touching lightly. Mick found one of Toshi's hands and took it in his own. "Hey, want to get out of here?"

"Hmm?"

"Well, Andy's sketching, my parents can find their own way back out, and the apartment is empty." He kept the grin off his face but not out of his voice.

Empty meant they didn't have to try to be quiet and as it sunk in Toshi shivered in anticipation. "I am rather tired."

Mick was grinning now. "Very tired, let me take you to bed."

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Chapter Six

They took full advantage of the empty living space. So much so that Toshi collapsed onto their futon as a quivering, shivering, naked, sated puddle that had ambitions of being a person. His hair stuck to his body in tendrils and knots, scattering out around his skin like a mussed up blanket and he was too exhausted, too warmly pleased, to care.

Mick groaned and dropped beside his lover onto the futon, exhausted but grinning madly. "God, it's true, I/S are insatiable." He sighed happily and slipped over to brush long dark hair back to find and claim Toshi's lips in a soft kiss.

The kiss just made Toshi sigh and he was too busy trying to remember how to speak to protest the insatiable comment. His entire body was tingling and he was buzzing happily on the double sensation of Mick's pleasure. When the kiss ended, he managed a soft, peaceful murmur of agreement.

"I didn't know you could come from just having your neck teased." Mick sighed and stroked the damp, tangled hair out into neat lines across Toshi's shoulder.

Toshi groaned and shivered under the light touch. "Neither did I." His breathing was starting to slow and some of the high of really great, prolonged, sex was starting to fade. "No one's ever spent so much time teasing me like that." His eyes opened, small slits only to peer through and he was struck by the sight of Mick laying so close to him. Mick was never more attractive than when he was wearing his happily sexed grin, it felt secretive and private, like some joke they shared together.

"I'd spend all day if you let me." He sighed at the thought and it turned into a wide yawn. "I miss a private bathroom. Wiping off isn't the same as a hot shower." They had to compromise with pre-moistened hand wipes because the shower was too far away when so exhausted and it really wasn't fair to Alec or Andy to be caught reeking of sex, yawning and sticky halfway to the bathroom.



Toshi just gave a happy groan because Mick had pulled the blankets up over them. The air wasn't cool but as his body relaxed he had started to feel chilled. Before he could even think about becoming cold, Mick had taken care of him. Better, Mick snuggled close next to him as soon as he was settled and Toshi closed his eyes, lost in the scent of his lover.

"That was nice." Toshi sighed into Mick's rumpled hair. "I needed that." And it was the truth, a lot of the tension, the near panic nerves that he'd been trembling on since seeing the club's basement, had vanished under the assault of so much pleasure, so much safety.

Mick muttered sleepily and snuggled tighter. "m was nice."

Sleep wasn't so quick to claim Toshi, his body felt relaxed but his mind was swirling, lost in thoughts. He wrapped an arm around Mick's waist and pulled the half asleep man closer, tighter, with an almost desperate need to never let him go.

They would have slept peacefully until morning but the sound of the door being opened woke them up. Both men scrambled for weapons hidden under the futon, Mick pulling his handgun free and aiming, still sleepy eyed, at the door before Toshi could get a knife out.

"What the hell Papa!" Mick cursed, the gun lowered and he dropped back onto the futon. "I could have shot you!"

Mike raised an eyebrow at the swearing but figured it was a bad time to scold. "We're heading back to the hotel now."

"Whatever." Mick pulled a pillow over his head.

Toshi still sat, eyes wide and startled. When the initial rush of panic left him it sunk in that he was sitting, obviously naked, in bed, with their intruders son. Worse, the room most likely still smelled of sex. Toshi felt himself blushing.

"Just wanted to let you know, we'll be by tomorrow like you said, ready to ride those motorcycles." Mike added.

Mick pulled the pillow from over his face. "No, there isn't any blood samples for you, Papa, now go away!" The pillow sailed across the room and fluffed into the edge of the door.

The older man shrugged. "Just saying goodnight." And he pulled the door shut behind him.

Mick draped an arm across his eyes, the gun still in his hand. "I should have shot him. Teach him a lesson." He grumbled but he peered out from under his arm to see Toshi sitting, shocked, embarrassed and looking horrified.

"You think he was... that he knew... I...." He shook his head. "He wanted..."

"To see if we'd crossed the threshold and experimented with venom, yes." Mick groaned as he tucked the gun back into its place. "Damned, near sighted, obsessed researchers. That was Papa Mike's attempt at being subtle."

"But....he....."

"I'm sorry." Mick sat up and kissed the side of Toshi's still red face. "They're an odd bunch, harmless really but they don't think sometimes." Gently, he tugged the blankets higher up Toshi's lap, covering him fully before he noticed he'd been half exposed while Mike was peering into the room. If Toshi knew how close he was to flashing Mike, well, the poor man wouldn't stop blushing for a week.

"Oh God." Toshi groaned and rubbed his eyes.

"He's..." Mick had to pause to yawn. "He's going to keep being a pest until we give in. Now you know..." Another yawn broke into his words. "Oh, you know why it's better to keep them on the commune." He tugged at Toshi and got him lying back down. "Sleep." He sighed and settled back in as if nothing had happened.

Toshi gave in and lay down, expecting to lay awake but was quickly pulled down into sleep almost as easily as he was pulled into Mick's arms.

They were ready to go before Mick's family arrived. Toshi had pulled on one of his well made and styled suits, complete with tie and Mick had put on his black suit and jacket with a stark white shirt and narrow black tie. It made him look like a thug and made Toshi grin softly at him. He liked Mick in that stark contrasted suit and he liked seeing the other man wearing the tan leather shoulder holster again.

"What?" Mick asked when he caught Toshi staring.

Toshi did his best innocent face, which the big blue eyes did well if he did say so himself, and shook his head.

It made Mick grin. "Evil man, don't give me that look when we're leaving in a few moments."

"What look?"

"That look, that too cute for words look."

Toshi sniffed a little. "Cute?" He raised an eyebrow in protest but he knew how Mick meant the word and it set a warm feeling inside his chest.

"Okay, dead sexy, better?"

"Here I thought I looked dashing." He smoothed out his flawless suit.

"Dashing it is." The smile the light banter had drawn out of him quickly faded. "You know, this is going to be a disaster."

"No it won't."

"Yes, it will. My family mean well and they understand manners but well, they can be a touch dense." And I/S society was built on subtle distinctions and variations, subtle graces he knew his parents lacked.

"Uncle Yasun isn't so closed off to the outside world as my grandfather was. He understands humans a little better. Aunt Hope may be horrified but she'll get over it."

He hadn't thought about the graceful, quiet woman and her deep concern for welcoming a guest. "Oh, she's never going to speak to me again."

"Don't borrow trouble, it'll be fine." He straightened Mick's tie a little even though it didn't really need to be. It was just an excuse to get his hands on him. "Andy going out tonight?"

Mick nodded. "He was all giddy, Ryan said he had something important to tell him. He's thinking it's about becoming more serious, only dating each other or something like that. He was almost floating he was so happy. What about Alec?"

"You know him. He's off to visit one of his lady friends so he was silent and twitchy about it. Last

night went well, I thought.”

“Better after we left.”

Toshi grinned softly but nodded in agreement. “If your parents could keep from scaring the guard half to death, they’ll do fine tonight.”

“I’ve such a bad feeling about this.” Mick muttered as he turned to leave the room, silently checking the weight of the gun tucked against his side.

Outside the sun was low in the late afternoon sky and the motorcycles had been lined up ready to go. Guards milled around, most looking about the still empty yards just to be alert and safe. Mick scanned across them but could find no fault in their work, aware of their surroundings without being tense, ready without being edgy and all of them armed.

When he’d first met them, they’d been edgy about wearing a small handgun as well as the long, sword like blade they used inside the camp. It was only by convincing them that they were on the yards now, and may have to deal with human attackers did they agree. Even if they felt it dishonorable somehow, they’d all accepted the logic of the reason and he’d made sure each one knew the care and use of the handguns. The idea for them to wear them in shoulder harnesses the way he did was entirely their own and after a few weeks the harnesses adapted to carrying their swords on their back as well. It made them look like some punk biker gang but it made Mick feel better knowing that they wouldn’t be outgunned in a fight.

Toshi pushed his sunglasses further up his nose and nodded to where a car was approaching. “Right on time.”

“Of course.” He glanced to the line of motorcycles, one for each of his parents, two to carry four guards and one for himself and Toshi. As much as Mick wanted to drive, he knew Toshi would, he always did when they went inside the camp.

The hired car pulled up and before the driver could hop out to open the door as was his job, one of the I/S guard had hurried over to do it. It was as much from a need to make sure it was secure and safe as out of respect but it was no trap and only the three humans slid out from inside. Rose, who Mick had never seen in anything but her long, flowing comfortable skirts, now wore a pair of wide legged pants that almost looked like her skirts when she held still. Ruth and Mike had done little to change what they always wore. Simple, non-fussy, practical clothes but Mike did have on a tie, out of style and not tied properly, and Ruth wore a small strand of smooth round beads of agate.

Mike grinned his spacey, goofy smile and came over to them. He made it two steps before the guard stopped him and quickly frisked him. His smile never faded, not even a little. “Amun, Toshi, we’re still on for tonight?” One of the female guards was carefully checking the two women for weapons behind him.

Mick glanced to Toshi and stepped forward. He caught his father’s arm. “I need a word with you first.” He pulled the older man back toward his adoptive mother and grandmother and all three turned pleasantly interested expressions toward him. “Look, I know you take this seriously.”

“Very.” Ruth nodded.

“There’s some things you need to know. Don’t mention sex.”

“But...” Mike protested but stopped when Mick raised a hand.

“I know, polite I/S society will not mention it to an outsider. There are few cultural moral taboos about it but it shouldn’t be brought up. Okay?”

A look was exchanged between Ruth and Mike and it was Mike that nodded. "Okay."

"Also, remember, most of the folks inside this wall haven't even spoken to a human. Yasun and Toshi are trying to change things but it's slow, there's still a lot of fear and they are sovereign in there. I doubt anything will happen to you because of being connected to me and Toshi but don't do anything stupid." Which wasn't what he wanted to say because his parents were brilliant people, their idea of stupid and his were different.

"We wouldn't." Mike protested.

"No asking to exam anyone, no touching anyone without permission, no touching anyone's children, don't mention venom, don't try to shake hands, remember their manners are loosely rooted in old Japanese culture and try to be a little more... reserved."

"Amun, dear, you sound like you're worried we'll embarrass you." Ruth asked and didn't see Rose's smirk.

"I just want this to go well. They'll be Genta too."

"Genta?"

"Like Geisha but different, men and women, they act as social lubrication and food tasters. They'll take the first bite and drink of the meal, just watch me, okay?"

Mike dropped a hand onto his son's tense shoulder. "Relax already, we do occasionally get some contact with the outside world."

"I know...it's just..." He glanced over his shoulder and didn't know how to put what he felt in words.

"What Amun is trying to say," Rose spoke slowly. "Is that we're his family and we're meeting his lover's family and he wants everything to go well."

"Oh!" Mike glanced to Ruth who shrugged and acknowledge that they'd both missed that concept totally. "Oh, alright, totally, yeah, we'll behave, I swear. This is kind of big thing isn't it?"

Mick just clenched his jaw and nodded. "Come on, we don't want to be late."

It was kind of odd to see how relaxed his parents were about climbing on the back of a motorcycle, Rose seemed far too comfortable. So comfortable that Mick began to suspect that she'd done it before, and often which was an odd thought and one he didn't want to linger on.

If they were relaxed, the guard weren't. Quick looks and sharp words in their slang were tossed about which meant they didn't want Mick to understand. That told him they were struggling with a human riding with them and the responsibility of their care. They were so worried about Mick's care that they often made him feel like some fragile caged bird that would drop over if exposed to the wrong air. Eve was the squad leader on duty and she moved around the group checking things before giving the order to leave. Oddly, she'd chosen to drive Rose herself and Mick wondered what kind of conversation had occurred at the get together after he'd snuck off with Toshi.

Mick had been inside the camp often enough now that it did little to faze him but he noticed his parents looking around, helmeted heads swiveling to take in everything. It started out simple, clustered buildings close to the wall that catered to humans mostly, those bold enough to actually enter the camps for what was perceived as the better class of brothels run by I/S and not humans. A few restaurants were tucked in, a bar or two as well but these were places humans

didn't go. They fed the workers that were lucky enough to have some employment on the other side of the wall and came and went daily, the locals and those in the brothels with freedom of movement. The neighborhoods were tougher here, more cynical from closer contact with humans and viewed as ruffians by the more sheltered neighborhoods deeper in.

They garnered looks as they rolled by, stares even and some people even hurried to get out of sight when they spotted the humans. The further from the wall they went, the more people watched them with suspicion, the more children were tugged back and tucked away. Mick didn't know if he parents would see that, distracted by the street vendors, the rickshaw taxis, the people on bicycles and walking about on foot. He still felt overwhelmed being surrounded by hundreds, thousands of too large crystal colored eyes and wild rainbow lengths of hair. The sheer raw, vibrant life inside the camp was shocking to outsiders and even Mick's closer contact hadn't dimmed that spark to his eyes. It still astounded him to be surrounded by so many I/S.

The advantage of being a string of motorcycles was that everyone knew or suspected, without looking, who they were. That cleared the way for them but they still moved at a slower pace across the most congested of streets. Mick joined in with the other extra guards, scanning buildings and side streets, keeping alert to ambush and trouble. It was unlikely. Yasun was popular and Toshi more so but it was always better to be safe and not assume anything.

They arrived to Yasun's building and Mick's family was carefully frisked a second time. It made Eve and her guards frown a little and Mick made note to figure out a way to squash any interfamily rivalry if it seemed like it would get out of hand. Some competition between units was good, healthy even, but too much caused trouble. A compromise could be reached and one that didn't entail either guard doing a half-way job.

"This is amazing!" Mike was talking too loudly, excited and forgetting he wasn't in his lab. "The variation is stunning, far greater than we ever expected. Our predictions on the advancement of alpha breeding mutations never came up with such diversity."

"Papa!" Mick hissed under his breath at the looks they were getting. "Stop."

"What?" The man blinked innocently and finally noticed the uneasy looks he was getting. "Oh, sorry, no offense intended with the whole mutant thing, it's just..."

"Not helping!" Mick broke in. "Please." They were almost to Yasun's private rooms. He was running out of time to get his father calmed down. He had a really bad feeling about this dinner.

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Chapter Seven

Toshi wasn't sure Mick was going to make it past the introductions, let alone dinner and he half wondered if his parents were that dense or just messing with him. He wasn't worried, he knew his uncle and knew there was little that the other man would find unforgivable. Yasun would make allowances for humans and their stupidity about common manners in an I/S home far more easily than most of the people inside the camp. That was partly why he'd been so impressed with Mick, the quieter man had spoken little and always politely, yet never compromised Toshi's own safety or Mick's own standards.

It didn't hurt that Toshi had warned his uncle, at length, about Mick's parents. Warnings that Yasun had chuckled over and found amusing but amused or not he'd also promised to behave. If they couldn't trust Rose to keep Mike and his obsessive scientific look at I/S or Ruth's just near sighted bluntness under control, at least Yasun would find it entertaining.

Inside the main house, with the doors closed and slid shut behind them, Toshi found his aunt and uncle waiting. Both were dressed nicely but not impressively. Hope was wearing her casually simple pale pastel sweater sets with nicely tailored dress slacks, her dusty cherry red hair was pulled back into a simple tail that hung long and loose down her back. Yasun still wore a tie and slacks with his dress shirt but the jacket had been set aside. His hair hung as it always did, long and free to his waist where it was gathered together and braided from there.

Toshi paused and bowed, Mick following his action on habit. "Uncle, Aunt."

They returned it, Hope staying silent. "Nephew."

"Thank you for inviting us into your home." Toshi finished and bowed again.

With a final silent wish for things to go well, Mick bowed. "Sakamoto-sama, if I may introduce you to my family?"

Yasun bowed and tried not to chuckle at the nerves radiating off of Mick. He'd never even sensed mild uneasy from the human and he wondered just what Mick expected to go wrong to have him so tightly wound up. "It would do me great honor to meet your family, McKale-san."

Staying with I/S tradition, Mick moved to Rose first. "My grandmother, Rose Spiers, my father, Michael Spiers and my mother, Ruth Spiers. Ranvier Toshiharu's aunt, Sakamoto Hope and his uncle Sakamoto Yasunari." The introductions were made and he held his breath.

They bowed, which Mick wasn't sure they'd remember to do and Rose hardly had to pinch Mike to get him to remember. That kept his father from staring at Yasun and Hope and kept Ruth from gaping like an overawed school girl.

"We're deeply honored to be invited into your home and for the opportunity to meet you, Sakamoto-sama. Amun speaks of you often and always with the highest of regards." Rose spoke for them, smoothly.

"My husband and I are quite fond of Mick-san and consider him part of our house, it's a delight to meet you at last." Hope said softly, respectfully.

Yasun nearly ruined the effect by out right laughing. "Please, we never have outsiders to our home." Which was as nicely as he could say humans without saying it. "It has most of the house nervous. We thought to prepare a formal dinner for you but my wife is a wise woman and at her suggestion, if you would find it acceptable, please, we'd like to set aside formalities and just share a meal." Which would leave a great deal more room for mistakes to be overlooked or forgiven and he saw Mick's breath rush out in a barely hushed sigh of relief.

"That would be wonderful!" Mike declared and reached to shake Yasun's hand, stopped and

laughed. "Sorry!"

Yasun did laugh now, Mike's eager delight at simply meeting them was infectious. "Quite all right, please, you must be hungry, how was the ride in? I'd be interested in hearing your impressions of our small little camp."

As Mick's family followed Yasun and Hope into their home, Toshi caught Mick's hand and gently gave it a squeeze. "Breathe." He teased and led his lover back to the casual, informal, day-to-day dining room his family used and never entertained guests in.

"Truly we are crowded here." Yasun nodded at Mike's impressions. The table had been set as it would for a normal family dinner, one he often had to miss because of duty and work, the only difference was the lack of his children. Hope's idea that Mick's scientist researcher parents would rather see a normal social situation instead of a formal one didn't extend to risking her children with such close contact with strange humans. They sat around the low table on the floor cushions, forks as well as chopsticks sat ready for use and bowls of steaming, fragrant food waited to be uncovered and served out family style.

"We've never heard a population count, even the Committee's rough surveys are less than it appears to be." Ruth added to the conversation.

"True, the Committee has never had a valid tally of how many of us there are. Even when we were occupied by them, fear of abductions and disappearances made gaining a true head count impossible. However, my family has maintained one from alphas on forward. The camp was only built to contain, at most a hundred thousand alphas, they delivered closer to a hundred and fifty." Yasun nodded, overcrowding was becoming a real problem and one he was happy to discuss with outside minds.

"The official tally was eighty thousand." Mike contradicted.

"Officially, yes, but that wasn't what arrived here. Things grew a touch chaotic in those first years but we've the names of over a hundred and forty thousand alphas, of which, ten years after containment, a hundred and two survived. Unstable mutations, illness, violence and the Committee too nearly the rest."

"And your population now?" Mike leaned forward, he'd been working on a theory from information about other containment camps.

"As of the last survey five years ago we numbered three hundred and seventy thousand. We're desperately overcrowded."

"You've tripled your population in less than three generations? That's..." Ruth shook her head and glanced to Mike but saw him nodding.

"Well, no one expected the alphas to be fertile." Yasun laughed. "Turned out to be quite the opposite. Large families are prized as unstable variations still occur, and illness and violence and until very recently the Committee was still making too many of us disappear."

"I've been working with a theory about a direct connection between I/S fertility and reproduction and caloric intake." Mike started to dive in.

"Papa." Mick scolded lightly.

"Eh?" It sunk in slowly and Mike grinned wider. "Sorry!"

"We can be a touch single minded." Rose explained gently. "This food is very good, such an interesting mix of flavors and styles."

That made Hope smile softly. "Thank you, I'd imagine it's different than your normal meals. There's such a mix of heritages for us and we've had to be creative in finding ingredients. I'm pleased you like it." She paused and glanced to her husband before continuing. "I must confess, we've been very curious about Mick-san's family and home."

"He's been rather tight lipped." Yasun teased.

"Uncle." Toshi warned.

"What? It's the truth! We hear rumors of the Inkie Communes but only rumors."

"We don't mind the questions." Rose smiled warmly. "We're a research community founded by Abram and Julia Spiers a hundred and twenty years ago. They created the Spiers Independent Study Family for the Advancement of Human Knowledge, which is a mouthful to say. Their theory was simple, to give a place for dedicated scientific minds to pursue research without bias or agendas in a socially fulfilling way. They believed, as we all do, that some of our brightest minds are lost in the foster care system and began adopting children and giving them a superior education. As the families numbers increased, so did our home campuses, we've fourteen now across the globe and dozen more satellite branches. Most of researchers are adopted children, myself included and there are thousands more like Amun that we've raised but who didn't join the family. Our children are our proudest achievements."

"Something both our people share." Hope added.

"Indeed! When the plagues came, we hunkered down and waited for things to settle, preserved as much knowledge as we could and as many minds as we could. It was our fascination with the Alpha mutation that stigmatized our family and it was the papers and statements of the potential for a new successful society unchained to the old ways that gave our family the nickname of Inkies, Little Incubus the original cartoons and editorials called us. We'd hoped that cut away from human ignorance, your people would find a better way but we were only half aware of the facts of the situations."

Yasun smiled wide enough that his large eyes crinkled half shut. "Tell me, what was Mick like as a boy? Was he as serious and silent?"

"Uncle!"

"He was worse." Mike laughed. "He didn't ease up on himself until he was in college. Rose do you have pictures with you?"

"Of course."

"Oh god." Mick groaned. He glanced over and Toshi was struggling not to smirk.

"Wait until dinner is cleared and I'll bring out pictures of Toshi."

"What?" That made Toshi sit up straighter.

Mick snickered.

They ate in far more relaxed ease, discussing social troubles and some of the more creative resolutions the camp had to enact because of their far more limited resources. Both Toshi and Mick now sat in dread of the end of the meal, hoping, praying, that their families had forgotten the dreaded promise of sharing photos.

"So your medical care is limited." Ruth nodded, glancing carefully to Mike and Rose as she



approached their desire carefully.

"Our medics are quite skilled but anything advanced, well, we've no training for that. A dozen of the alphas were medical doctors and their training has been handed down to our current medics but we know as much about I/S medical care as you are likely to. Fortunately, if supported, we recover from most things eventually. Toshi's told me of this new drug you've invented, it would be amazing if it works in a broader scale."

"About that..." Mike began and between him and Ruth quickly explained both the new implant and their idea of a medical clinic.

Yasun listened with no comment until their words ran dry and then he sat back, arms folded across his chest and the weight of who he was returned heavily into the room. After a long, tense silence where no one said anything he nodded to Toshi. "What are your thoughts on this, nephew?"

The formal address only added the layer of authority. Yasun moved between normal man and father to leader with breathless ease, it was a trait that Toshi envied. He thought carefully how to answer before he opened his mouth. "Both Papa Mike and Mama Ruth treated my wounds with the utmost of respect and attention. This new implant I will be finding them a test subject for, it's too important of an issue for an attempt to be turned away."

Yasun nodded. "Agreed. And this clinic?"

He glanced to his plate. "I believe we've as much to learn from them as they from us. With proper regulation and oversight it could prove a nice return of investment both in knowledge and profit for all parties involved. It would take an endorsement from you to make it work. The question becomes if it is the proper time to attempt something like this."

"Hmm." Yasun nodded, pleased at Toshi's grasp of the situation and his careful word choice. He glanced to Mick but the man sat silent, neither endorsing or denying the idea and then to the scientists looking like barely stilled children on the morning of a holiday. "Leave your proposal and I'll give it full consideration. Is that agreeable?"

Mike nodded. "Completely, thank you, thank you so much for considering the idea!"

"Now, let's get this table cleared and some wine poured. I want to see pictures of Mick-san as a boy! I won't believe he was ever small until I see it for myself."

It wasn't long until Mick was happily downing wine and shaking his head. "You didn't bring my graduation pictures."

"I most certainly did!" Rose teased back and Yasun laughed. "Look how young he looks! Just a baby, but his head, I swear that boy has the biggest head. When they ordered the graduation caps, he was wearing the same size as the big burly football players."

Toshi quickly sipped his wine to hold back his own laughter.

"You'll get yours." Mick reminded him.

"Your hair was almost like an Incubus." Hope passed another print photo to her husband.

"You brought pictures of me as a kid?"

"Just a few." She shook her head and passed another one to Hope. "This one we didn't take, it's his foster system file photo. The earliest we have of Amun, he must have been five or six here."

"Oh so serious looking!"

"Wait, let me get Toshi's photos."

"Please, Uncle, I'm begging you." But Yasun was already on his feet and out the door, long hair swirling behind him. "Can't you stop him?" Toshi asked of his aunt.

"It's only fair, if I have to be embarrassed so do you." Mick complained. "Besides, I want to see them."

"Uncle..."

"What? I can't be proud of you?" Yasun moved and dropped himself down near his guests with no formality and nothing like the warlord and head of state he really was. "Here now." He flicked on the computer pad and it loaded up the family photo files. "Ah here now, his red egg photos. One a week until his red egg day."

Toshi sighed.

"I was there the day he was born, the midwife told my sister her child was deformed and was taking Toshi away to kill him. This wrapped up, wailing bundle was carried by and sticking from the cloth was this shock of black hair. I took that baby from her and as soon as I cradled him in my arms he stopped fussing. Even if it was unnerving seeing my nephew was a half breed. All of our children are born looking like alphas, white hair if they have any and pale albino pink eyes, it's not until weeks later, sometimes months later that any coloring comes in. Oh and here, Toshi at five and this is the day he first defeated me with a sword and here...."

"You were right." Toshi whispered softly to Mick. "This was a very bad idea."

Mick laughed now, feeling better than he'd had since he heard his family was coming for a visit. "I don't know, I'm having a good time. You were a cute little kid, all round faced and wide eyed."

If looks could kill, Toshi's would have at least stunned Mick's laughter away. He sighed and for all the embarrassed cooing over photos and worse the threat of shared stories, couldn't be too upset. It was good to see Mick relax some about his family and it was even nicer to have a normal night with his uncle, even if he couldn't shake the idea that Yasun was plotting something he hadn't spoken up about yet.

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Chapter Eight

"Oh, God, was that as painfully awkwardly uncomfortable for you as it was for me?" Mick laughed but that was the wine and the comfort of reaching their building and knowing both their families were far away.

"That was pretty awkward and uncomfortable."

"I actually was afraid they'd start talking about potty training next."

That made Toshi laugh. "I think they did an adequate job of humbling both of us. I still can't imagine you as a child."

Mick shrugged. "I was an unpleasant brat."

"I was quite sullen and unpleasant as well. If my grandfather hadn't been so willing to see to it I got a solid spanking when I needed it I would have been an absolute monster." It had been Yasun that had been in charge of his discipline but when he really got out of hand, a worse punishment than scrubbing the floors or being swatted was having his grandfather chew him out and give the lecture on honor and responsibility.

Mick yawned. "Here's to being gay and not worrying about spawning offspring."

Toshi grunted a little in agreement but it wasn't something he could agree with. He'd have to have children, one day, sooner or later and several of them. His father would insist on it and there was no getting around that. The Ranvier name had to live on, an heir had to be produced and given the oddities of their mutations, as many heirs as possible, with several different women. It wasn't a thought Toshi wanted to linger on before he had to.

When they opened the door to their floor, the sounds of crying stopped their teasing laughter. Since Alec would still be away and would rather drop over dead than be caught crying, it left only one source for the sound. They found Andy sitting on the sofa, surrounded by used tissues with a half drunk bottle of beer on the table in front of him. It was a sight Mick had seen countless times in the past.

"I'm sorry." Andy snuffled, mascara smeared around his eyes and started to gather up the tissues. "Didn't think you'd be back so soon."

Mick moved to sit down beside his friend and started to rub his hand in a circular motion on his back, which wasn't easy given the number of sequins on the shirt he was wearing. "What's happened? Are you okay?"

"I...I... Oh Mick... Ryan..." He had to stop to snuffle again and blow his nose, loudly into a tissue.

"What about Ryan?"

"You know I thought he wanted to talk about really becoming a couple. He was making such a big deal about needing to talk...."

"Did you two have a fight?" That was always the best place to start.

Andy snagged his beer bottle and flopped back onto the sofa. He took a swig before dropping his head back onto the cushion and throwing an arm over his eyes. It made his short, tight shirt ride up and show off his stomach, a sight Toshi was startled to find very erotic. He sat down quickly to keep from staring.

"No, well, yes, but God what's a relationship without a few fights? I just... I liked him Mick... I did

and I thought he liked me.” The thought had him crying again and he hated crying, for all his love of drama, he hated crying.

“Liked? Did you two break up?”

“Break up? Fuck no! I dumped his sorry ass.” The words were defiant but Andy’s voice was quivering. “I liked him too, the bastard, he was real nice to me.”

“If you liked him why’d you dump him?”

Andy snuffled hard and rubbed a tissue across smeared eyes. “God I must look a mess.”

“Don’t worry about that, we’ll get it washed off later. What happened?” Andy was never one to be reluctant to tell of a break up, it wasn’t like him to have to be convinced to share.

“It was nothing.”

“I doubt you dumped him over nothing.”

He glanced from Mick to where Toshi sat silently near by and felt his chin quivering a little again. “It’s not important.” He forced out.

“Andy, you’re crying into your beer like some clichéd song, of course it’s important.”

He dropped forward, bent over his knees, and wanted to fall into Mick’s arms like he always did and just sob like a child.

Toshi struggled to get Mick’s eye but when the other man glanced up, giving him a confused and worried look over Andy’s bent head, he caught and held the gaze. Very deliberately, so there was no chance of it being mistaken, he raised an eyebrow at Andy and tossed his head a little in their general direction. It was a don’t be stupid because of me and do what you’d normally do with him when he’s upset look. He didn’t have to repeat it, Mick understood and mouthed the words ‘you sure’ back to him. Toshi nodded, not feeling the least possessive or jealous in that moment and knowing what it was to cry alone far too well.

Mick smiled softly, pleased and proud all at the same time. He gathered up Andy’s shoulders and tugged at them. “Come here, you.”

Andy shook his head and tried to pull away. “I..I’m f..fine.”

“Bullshit, come here.” Mick kept tugging and pulling until he’d almost physically lifted Andy up to pull him against his chest.

“But... To..Toshi...” Andy protested and tried to pull away again but a hand petted across the back of his neck and it couldn’t have been Mick’s cause Mick’s were around his shoulders.

“It’s okay.” Toshi whispered, hesitantly petting the flushed and upset body again.

Toshi’s permission seemed silly and wonderful. Andy sobbed, one long heart wrenching sob and fell apart against Mick’s shoulder. He was crying because he’d done the right thing even if he hadn’t wanted to and because it wasn’t fair that he always ended up the one alone. He was crying because he was stressed out and overwhelmed and lonely. On he snuffled and sobbed and both men sat with him, soothing his hair and holding his hand and it was really nice.

He could only cry for so long, no matter how upset he was and eventually the tears dried up and he just sat there, like a lump, on the sofa, curled against Mick’s chest. He was blowing his nose and trying not to sound like a honking goose when Toshi stood up from beside them and left the

room. Andy glanced around and followed the swish of long dark hair as he disappeared away.

"I'm sorry!"

Mick shrugged. He'd seen nothing to cause alarm or worry on Toshi's face or eyes or in how he moved and he'd become a pretty good judge of Toshi's body language. "Nothing to be sorry for." Mick soothed and put a kiss on Andy's forehead. "Feel better?"

"No, I feel like shit."

"So what happened? You were all excited."

"He kept saying he wanted to talk, that it was important and had to be done in person. I just, I mean, I'm slow and stupid, I thought it was about us." He carefully wiped at the smeared make up under his eyes.

"It wasn't about the two of you?"

"It was but it wasn't. He has this stupid idea for some dumbass restaurant. He wanted me to tell Toshi about it and I kept telling him that it doesn't work like that. Ideas, projects for investment, they all run through Alec's office and I even got him Alec's number."

"You two broke up because of that?"

"No, I dumped him because his big important conversation was him saying I needed to prove I cared for him more enough to stand up for him. That if I didn't take his idea to Toshi he'd leave me." He was getting angry again. "I told him I wouldn't, again and he got pissy."

"All because you didn't want to bring it to Toshi? You know he wouldn't have minded if it would have made Ryan happy to have been heard."

"I know that but that's not the point. He didn't respect me when I said I wouldn't abuse my friendships that way. He got mad, we fought, things were said."

Which was way to glossed over. Andy normally could recall every word of a fight, ever insult and turn of phrase. "What kind of things?"

Andy sighed and glanced around to make sure Toshi wasn't lurking somewhere near. "He called Toshi names, not nice ones, he started saying awful things. That's when I dumped him."

"You broke up with Ryan because of me?" Toshi asked from the doorway. He clutched at the cold, damp washcloth he'd gone to fetch.

Andy frowned but couldn't be mad at Toshi for having sharper hearing. He turned and glanced back over to where the I/S stood. "No, I dumped him for being an ignorant, stupid asshole. No one talks about my friends that way, not without my putting a heel up their ass. He was just lucky I was wearing clogs." The anger drained away and left him exhausted.

The truth left Toshi stunned silent. He moved into the room and sat back down beside Andy. The washcloth folded nicely and he draped it's cool length over the back of Andy's neck.

"Oh, cold!"

"Sorry."

"No, it's nice." Andy sighed and drooped back like a wilted flower against the sofa and into Mick's arms. "I just liked him, I mean, I've been busy but he was nice. I just thought, it would be nice,

you know?" He sighed. "I just thought, maybe, with him, I could have what you guys have. Maybe just a little bit..." Andy yawned and let his words die off. "I know you guys are tired but could we, just, sit here for a while?"

Mick glanced over Toshi's head but the look he saw there was odd and he wasn't sure how to answer. As he watched the odd look deepened until Toshi started to shake his head no.

"I..."

"No." Toshi cut Mick off. "I'm not stupid, that apartment, it had only two bedrooms. You two used to sleep together."

There was an icy chill to Toshi's voice that worried Mick and down right frightened Andy. "I slept on the sofa a lot." Mick confirmed because it had really been Andy's bedroom when he'd moved in with them. The sofa did pull out but with the odd hours he'd kept, it was just easier to stagger home and crash on the cushions.

Toshi frowned and waved off the half-truth. "I'm not stupid."

"You've always known that Andy and I have been lovers, as friends, for a long time."

The line between Toshi's eyebrows deepened and he shook his head. "I don't mean sex. The two of you used to sleep together." Which seemed oddly more intimate to Toshi than mutual physical pleasure between friends.

There was no point to lying. "Often, yes."

"If I wasn't here, you'd sleep together tonight." It was a statement not a question.

Mick nodded in agreement anyway. "Yes, but that was before."

"I was raised in the camps." Toshi said with a tone of voice that made it sound like that alone should have explained everything.

Andy glanced up to Mick to see if he was being dense and missing the point or if they both were clueless. "Am I going to get my nipples ripped off?"

"Hush." Mick shushed and turned his attention back to Toshi. "I don't understand what that means."

"Space is limited, even for my family. No one sleeps alone, kids are piled together, adults, friends. The idea isn't foreign to me." Tam had been the only person not frightened of sharing space with him but he knew how things were supposed to have been.

Mick shook his head. "I still don't understand."

"I'm tired, you're tired, Andy has to be tired." Toshi sighed and tried to get the words out. "Let's just go to bed."

"You mean that?" It was a big step and one Mick hadn't expected Toshi to be ready for.

"Yes, that is, if you'd like to join us, Andy. I'd understand if you wouldn't. I know you humans aren't raised with that concept or if you'd rather be alone tonight."

Andy sat silent and awed by the offer, frightened he'd heard wrongly and it would disappear if he questioned it. He pulled from Mick's arms and leaned over to quickly press a kiss to Toshi's lips. It was chaste and shy and the same way he'd kiss Samson or Oliver or any of his friends. "You'll

make me cry again." He warned.

Toshi glanced over Andy, his lips still buzzing from the quick, stolen kiss, to Mick. "Is that a yes?"

"That's a yes." Something frightened and worried in Mick disappeared. He wanted, no, he needed for Toshi and Andy to get along well together. The idea of the two of them fighting was his vision of a nightmare. He loved Andy, the crazy, drama queen was his best friend, the one person that he'd always known he could count on but Toshi, well, Toshi was his life. Both men were vital to him and his happiness. Having to give up one to be with the other would be like cutting off one of his own legs. He kissed the side of Andy's head, the artist still stunned silent by the offer. "Come on, let's get that make up washed off you."

Andy nodded mechanically. "Can't sleep with it on." He slid to the edge of the sofa and glance to Toshi. "You're sure, cause I don't want to... I don't know... I don't want to cause trouble."

"I'm sure."

"Well, I should go change, get my pillow and the like." Andy stood and finished the last swallows of beer in quick order before disappearing to get ready for bed.

Mick waited until Andy was out of the room before he slipped over to sit closer to Toshi. He brushed a stray lock of hair back and smiled softly. "Thank you for this."

The sincerity made Toshi uncomfortable and he shrugged it off. "It's nothing."

"Not to me, or to Andy. He gets clingy when he's upset. He bounces back from breakups better if he's held for a little by friends."

"We all do."

"True." He took Toshi's hand and squeezed it. "Let's get ready ourselves, hmm?"

It was worth any risk to see the warmth in Mick's eyes. Toshi paused before he leaned forward, inhaling the scent that had come to mean so much to him. "You smell good to me."

"You smell good to me too, baby."

Toshi glanced up from where he sat braiding his hair back when their bedroom door opened a crack. He almost didn't know the man that stepped shyly inside. Andy clutched his pillow to his chest and had washed his face well. With no make-up or crazy clothes, his hair brushed out and loose around his shoulders and his eyes still red from crying, he looked ordinary. The t-shirt he had on was bland, a faded navy blue that was too large for his frame and hung over loose cotton pants. His feet, however, were still shoved into the pink furry slippers that he loved so much but otherwise he looked very un-Andy like. Andy always commanded attention; the man standing in their bedroom door was easily overlooked.

"This still okay?" He asked, trying not to cry again, wanting to curl up and pretend the day hadn't happened.

Mick pulled back the covers and patted the futon. "Of course it is." Just to be safe, Mick put himself between the two men, not sure Toshi was up to snuggling against Andy and Andy would need snuggled.

On shuffling feet, Andy came into the room and shut the door. Lights were turned out and his kicked off his fuzzy slippers to lay down, curled against Mick's body. He'd missed this so much,

the warmth of another person in his bed, the physical comfort of being held and he had to sniff back more tears.

"Neither of you better not try to hump me in my sleep." He teased but even he could hear the unshed tears in his voice.

Mick tugged on a lock of brown hair and snorted as Toshi slipped in on his other side. "You wish."

Andy woke up from a dream and found himself tangled around Mick. That woke him all the way up, frightened they'd gotten drunk and did something stupid that would result in a jealous fit from Toshi. The truth was better and it sunk in with a happy weight that felt a lot like Mick's leg holding him down. The position he'd been pulled into wasn't at all comfortable and Andy did what he always did when Mick got too much like an octopus, he lifted limbs, elbowed and pushed until the other man rolled away.

"Bed hog." Andy muttered and tried to turn and get comfortable again.

Low chuckling stopped him from rolling over and falling back to sleep. He half sat up to look over where Mick had flopped onto his back and taken up most of the bed to find Toshi, awake, sitting up and laughing lightly.

"He really is." Toshi smiled softly in the very dim light of a notebook computer he was working with. The screen's light was turned down, dim, to keep from disturbing the sleeping humans but it was plenty bright for his eyes.

"What're you doing up?" Andy whispered and sat up as well.

"Paperwork."

The answer made Andy blink, speechless for a moment, unsure if he'd been told the truth or teased. "You're in bed with two of the hottest pieces of ass around and you're doing paperwork?" He raised a well-shaped eyebrow and tried to look teasing.

"You snore."

"I do not!"

"Go back to sleep."

"What about you?"

Toshi shrugged. "I'm not sleeping well of late, it's okay."

Andy lay back down but propped himself up on an elbow. "Thank you for this."

The sincerity in the normally teasing voice made Toshi glance up. "You're welcome."

"I love him." Andy confessed.

There was no doubt that they were talking about Mick. Toshi nodded. "I know."

"But not like that, he's like a brother." That made him smile. "We're a rather incestuous family it seems."

"I'm sorry about Ryan." The words made Andy glance down. "I'll listen to his proposal if you'd like



to get him back.”

Andy shook his head, his hair falling into his face. “No, it’s not about that. He...when we fought? He said he’d only been nice to me to get you to invest. He called you names but he said awful things about me too. I wouldn’t want him back, it’s just... you two are cute together... I just...I’m jealous of that, not that you have Mick.”

He wanted to tell Andy that he’d find someone, eventually, but that was a lie. There were no promises and life rarely came with a happy ending. “I’m sorry he was cruel to you, he didn’t deserve you.”

“Thanks.”

A moment hung awkward and vulnerable between them. Toshi glanced down to the screen he held in his hands. “Want to look this over? I’m trying to plan out a better system for the yards.” He’d intended to just hand the computer over to Andy but before the words were fully out, the slender man had slipped onto Mick’s other side, over eager for the distraction.

“Sure!” He settled in and glanced at the screen. “You’re thinking about putting in buildings?”

Toshi nodded. “We’ll never stop the drugs or sex trade in the yard, never, but real solid buildings would provide some measure of shelter for those that have to work there. Keep the rents low, set up a low fee license to keep track of who’s there in case something happens? See? We could even put in public washrooms, have space for the dealers, cut down on the violence.”

“Make things a little more human...” He snorted a little. “As it were.”

“There are humans there too.”

“You’d turn this into a little tent city. It’s not a bad idea. Better if you centralize it, break it into little communities like this.” He tapped at the screen and reordered the layout, turning Toshi’s artificially made streets into small clustered communities.

“Huh. You’ve a good eye for this.”

Andy shrugged. He was saved from answering by Mick flopping about a little and kicking some of the blankets off of him in his sleep. It made Andy smile a little but his eyes fell on the scar on Mick’s ribs and the smile disappeared.

“He saved my life that night.”

“Hmm?” Toshi glanced up and followed Andy’s eye to the thin, faded scar on Mick’s ribs.

“I mouthed off outside a club. We got jumped. That knife would have gone right through me if Mick hadn’t knocked me down. There was blood everywhere but he laughed it off, screamed at them when they ran off. Called them pansies because they wouldn’t stick around so he could keep beating them up. I’d never seen so much blood before but he didn’t even seem to notice it. It hadn’t sunk in, really sunk in, how rough his childhood had been until that moment.” A smile flittered across Andy’s lips. “It’s good to see him happy.”

“Has...” Toshi started, stopped and knew he had to ask. “Has Mick told you about me?”

That brought Andy’s gaze around to study Toshi’s serious face. “Not a word sweetheart. Mick’s close with his own secrets, he’d never breath a word of someone else’s, even to me.”

“I wasn’t... I wasn’t held like my Uncle by the club.” He glanced down. “Most of the I/S community knows that but it’s not common knowledge to the rest of the world. My father isn’t

fond of hearing me called the whore that I was.”

“I’d heard the gossip.” Andy admitted.

“Mick’s the only one who I’ve ever, I just, I ...” He drew a long slow breath. “I don’t mean to be possessive of him.”

The honesty made Andy ache. “You aren’t possessive, you’re protective. I can’t blame you for that, not one little bit. I can respect that, even if I miss knowing if I’m horny I can go convince Mick for a good tumble.”

“My being jealous won’t keep him with me.”

“It never does with anyone, sweetie.”

“I want him to be happy.”

“He is.”

“And... and I think about it too.”

That made Andy frown, wondering if he’d been having a different conversation than the one Toshi had been having. “Think about what?”

He hoped he wouldn’t blush. “What it would be like with someone else. Or watching him with someone else, it’s just, I don’t trust easily. This isn’t easy for me. I envy how you can care about people, trust them so fully.”

Andy snorted. “Don’t, all it gets me is a broken heart.” And he told himself to not get excited at the idea of Toshi being sexy where he could watch. The man was sexy as hell and Andy had always wondered about I/S.

“For a long time, the only friend I had, the only person I trusted, was Alec. Now I’ve Mick too and from him you. I do consider you a friend Andy, someone I trust.”

“Thank you.” He’d ridden a roller coaster once and the feeling of soaring down that first drop with his stomach in his throat, convinced he was about to go off the rails and die, suddenly returned.

“If it would be okay, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to kiss you.”

Andy’s mouth hung open in startled surprise and he was certain the car had just flown off the track.

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## Chapter Nine

Andy's mouth hung open in startled surprise and he was certain the car had just flown off the track. "I..." He glanced to where Mick was laying, asleep so close by and wondered if he was having some oddly vivid dream. "What about Mick?"

"It was his idea. He said you'd understand." Toshi shrugged and grinned. "And well, that you'd most likely be willing, it's okay if you're not, I'd fully understand."

"No." Andy almost squeaked. "No, no, no it's just, I'm honored!" He nudged Toshi's shoulder. "We can pretend we're at a sleepover and being naughty."

"Andy... I...it's..." He wasn't sure what he was trying to say and suddenly faced with eager agreement he was nervous about how to go forward.

"Shhh." Andy whispered and slipped forward. He tilted his head and leaned in. The only point of contact between them was the soft brush of lips to lips, chaste, shy, sweet and it almost made Andy smile. It was like a first kiss, uncertain and innocent and he felt like a lecher taking advantage of the good opportunity. Well, Mick did want him to help draw Toshi out, it was only the friendly thing to do.

Until a slender hand traced across Andy's face in a touch so tender and gentle that it surprised him. There was no innocent uncertainty in that touch but it spoke of confidence and knowledge. The lips he was gently teasing parted slightly and teased back with a skill greater than he'd been expecting. When a second hand rose up to cup the other side of his head, Andy wondered just who was in charge of this kiss. Sharp teeth nibbled at his lips and he moaned softly, happily knowing he wasn't the one after all.

There was a focused intensity to Toshi's kiss that surprised him. Not that the other man was trying too hard but more like he was locked with every sense and fiber of who he was on the single moment they were sharing. It just seemed unfair, that someone who was as dead sexy as Toshi was, as rich too, should be able to kiss so wonderfully. At the moment, Andy couldn't bring himself to even be envious in mocking tease because he was the center of such sexiness. He parted his lips and gave into the softly wanting kiss that was quickly growing far deeper than he'd expected.

Andy liked to play and tease but something in the gentle way Toshi brushed his hair back chased that away. He felt as vulnerable as the Incubus had sounded, oddly so because he'd never felt so vulnerable before, even as teen. When he was gently pulled closer, he muttered a little moan and slid into the feverishly warm body, chilled by the hands that stroked down his spine.

Somehow, he found himself being lowered down and he melted under the soft demand. He hadn't expected Toshi to be so quietly dominating, not demanding but just, controlled. Mick, as he well knew, liked to top, liked to be the one calling the shots most of the time and he'd just naturally pegged Toshi as the more submissive of the two. It wasn't until now, as he was lightly pinned to the futon, that it sunk in how quiet could be very commanding.

One of Toshi's hands slipped just under the hem of Andy's shirt and the warm, graceful touch made his spine arch. He moaned and gasped for air as Toshi started to kiss his way across his jaw line, down to his neck, back to an ear. It sent shivers across him, he'd offered a kiss and like grabbing a tiger by the tail, hadn't really known what he was getting into.

"Sweet God...." He sighed, eyes shut, hands digging into strong shoulders. "Where the fuck did you learn to kiss like that?" Lips brushed across his and Andy kissed back, but it took a second to sink in that Toshi was still nibbling on an ear.

"From me of course." Mick answered as Andy opened his eyes.

Toshi surrendered his ear and glanced to where Mick was looking smug. "From you?"

"Well, with help from natural talent of course."

Toshi snorted.

"And Mick learned from me so both of you shut up and kiss me." Andy whined and arched against the lean, warm body he was pinned under.

"Is this okay?" Toshi asked, suddenly nervous about being caught kissing his lover's best friend.

The worry quickly fled as Mick smiled softly. "If it's okay with you. I think it's perfect."

"Do I get a say in this?" Andy asked.

"No." Both men answered.

"Well, I never!" He tried to sound put out but it was difficult with a hard on and a front row seat to a voyeur's fantasy when Mick leaned in to steal a kiss from Toshi. There was no quiet dominance this time, no submission, and both men challenged the other. The sight stole Andy's breath and he wondered if he'd be allowed to watch them do more than kiss one day. He was starting to wonder if they'd forgotten about him when the kiss finally ended, not that he could blame either of them for getting lost in each other.

"Mmm..." Mick sighed when the kiss finally ended. "What did you think of kissing Andy?"

"Different, pleasant. He tastes different."

"Cinnamon toothpaste." Andy provided.

Mick brushed some of Andy's hair back and shook his head. "Brat."

"Truly, properly accused."

"What did you think of the fangs?"

That made Andy blink. "Fangs?" He'd heard stories, of course but hadn't really connected it to Toshi, he didn't know how much of the I/S stories would apply to a half-breed.

"The bottom canines are just a little more pointed but the upper are dull but fangs actually come down, how neat is that?"

"Thank you Mr. Science." Toshi shook his head.

"No, really, actual fangs? I'd heard stories but thought they just meant like sharp teeth."

Which made Toshi sigh and carefully curl his upper lip back to show the slender pointed hollows that were extended down. He knew it was just Andy but he braced himself to be teased.

"Wow, that's really cool." Andy whispered and surged upward a little, claiming another kiss only this time he took control of it. Sure enough, he could feel the sharp drag of those small points

and the contact left a slightly metallic lime taste on his tongue. It was exotic and yet so humble because of how obviously awkward and shy Toshi was about them. He broke the kiss and licked his lips. "Venom?"

"Don't worry, you can't absorb it from a kiss."

"Who was worried?" Andy grinned back.

"Sexy, isn't it?"

Andy nodded and agreed with Mick. "Just never thought by fangs they meant actual fangs, very sexy."

Toshi glanced between the two humans and saw no hint that they were deceiving him. Some small part of his mind finally understood that it really was okay and he started to relax.

"And an I/S? Their necks are super sensitive." Mick's grin took on a lewd echo a moment before he leaned over the nuzzled against Toshi's slender neck.

That chased all worry about being mocked or teased out the window as pleasure blossomed across Toshi's nerves. He heard himself moan softly and even that small contact, from Mick, made him arch and display his neck, begging for more. "Oh, so not fair..." He sighed and wasn't sure if he was protesting Andy learning all his vulnerabilities or that Mick had stopped the light teasing kisses.

"No wonder most I/S wear such high collars, does it really feel that good?" Andy asked, shocked at how such a little contact had instantly melted Toshi's nervous worry into smooth lust. There was no denying the contact had turned the other man on, Toshi was still half laying against him.

Toshi managed to nod since he didn't seem able to form intelligent words.

"Huh." Andy raised an eyebrow, checked with Mick and at his friend's nod, leaned up to claim the other side of Toshi's neck. The flesh was too warm under his mouth but smooth and the soft, hushed moans that he drew out were heady wine.

"Oh!" Toshi gasped as Mick took up the other side of his neck. He was shivering now, worried he'd come from just this light tease. Andy's gentle kisses to his hypersensitive neck only caused pleasure, which surprised him, because while other's had been able to make his body respond, he'd never enjoyed anyone else touching his neck other than Mick. Now with both men torturing him, he was starting to see advantages of not being so jealous of Mick and letting someone else join them occasionally. "Not fair..." he gasped out. "So....not fair....you've....god....you've paired up like this....oh....yes....before."

Mick chuckled into the shell of an ear. "On occasion."

"Mick's a little slutty, didn't want him going out alone, buddy system, you understand..." Andy sighed into the other.

It made Toshi shiver more and he pulled away. "Stop." He was gasping both men instantly stopped and pulled back a little.

"You okay?" Mick checked, his voice gentle and his eyes worried.

Toshi nodded. "Yes, just, too good....I don't want to...." But he blushed and didn't finish the sentence, they'd both only very recently learned how powerfully erotic teasing his neck could be.

"Only fair to spill more secrets. Did you find his nipple ring?"

The tone to Mick's voice was thick and dark like sticky honey and promised, bad bad things in a good way. Andy shivered and shook his head. "Not fair!"

"I've seen it..." Toshi had wanted to ask about it, body piercing wasn't a popular thing in the camp. Tattoos were to mark rank, position or ownership, but piercings tended to heal too quickly and felt too much like the mutilations that the Committee had forced on their people for too long.

"Off with the shirt." But Mick didn't wait, he tugged and pulled until Andy helped and the t-shirt got stripped away. It didn't miss his notice, or Andy's he was betting, the look of hungry lust that darted across Toshi's large clear blue eyes.

Andy liked the way both men looked at him. His idea of paradise was being the center of attention of every hot man in the room, not something he got too often. Sure it was only two other men in the room but that counted, they both were focused on him. A gentle, barely there touch stroked across his left, unpierced nipple and Andy sighed and forgot about paradise.

"He's super sensitive, start out soft, tease him, until he starts to writhe a little, then get a little rougher." Mick spoke in a lulling, instructive way.

"Bastard!" His already hard length was aching now, painfully and if either of the pair decided that this was going to stay at tease, he'd cry or hurt them or something.

"He means that in a loving way." Mick grinned and bent down to draw the flat of his tongue over the nub of flesh he'd been teasing.

"Oh, god!" Andy panted but the body his hands clung to turned out to be Toshi's. That broke the half-breed from whatever uncertain thought. He watched in delight and dread as Toshi cautiously slipped a fingertip around the juncture where the gold ring slipped through flesh and having them both toying with him was nearly too much. "Nhh...no fair....god..." He closed his eyes as Toshi grew more bold with his touch, teasing, tugging a little on the cool metal and Mick caught the other side between his teeth. The only thing left in his world was to arch his hips up and slowly rub against the warm flesh pressed to him.

"Did it hurt?"

The concern in Toshi's voice broke across his lust and Andy opened his eyes. "Yes but it was a pain I liked."

"Why?"

"Why did I like the pain?" He shrugged as best he could and swallowed a moan as Mick began dragging kisses across his chest. "It proved I had done something."

"No, why'd you pierce it?"

That made him grin softly. "Because it's like always being hard, it feels amaz....oh fuck...amazing." He'd had to stutter because Mick had lapped a tongue around the pierced nipple, stroking gold and flesh and Toshi's fingers in a long lick.

"Why only one?" Toshi was watching Andy, watching Mick kiss and lick across the slender chest like some hungry feral cat and it surprised him how little jealousy he felt. It almost felt like Mick was showing off for him and that felt very sexy and good.

The question made Andy sigh and he shut his eyes. "That one? That one was for me." He let a hand lightly touch the left side of his chest. "This one? Over my heart? That's for him."

"Him?"

"Andy's a romantic." Mick whispered against flesh.

"When I meet him, the one, you know? Him. Like you have Mick and Mick has you, my him. I'll get this one pierced for him, it'll be his, over my heart."

That made Toshi lean away a little. "That is oddly romantic."

"In a painful, high chance of infection kind of way." Mick agreed, not surprised that Andy stuck his tongue out at him. "But, romantic."

"How will you know when you find him?"

Andy shrugged. "I'll know, now, if you two gentlemen have no plans to play with what's developed inside my pants, I will play with it for you." He didn't want to talk about romance and love and the one, the One with the big capital letter because right now, with his heart bruised from Ryan's sharp, mean words, he was doubting there was a One. He just wanted to feel good, just wanted to be warm in the arms of his friends and if they needed a little nudge, well, he'd nudge.

He was just glad his pants had an elastic waistband, it made getting his hand under the cloth super easy. It was a little more of a tight squeeze, even with Toshi laying half off of him, but he managed to dip his hand down and wrap it around his own length. "Mmmm, that's better...." He sighed and started to stroke himself lightly, watching Mick's knowing glance and Toshi's stunned hungry look from under half lowered eyelids. "I'd rather it be you, either or both but god helps those that....well...mmm... you know."

Mick leaned across Andy and gently kissed Toshi's lips. "What do you want Baby? Anything you want?" Blue eyes, wider now in lust and surprise, glided between Mick and down to where Andy was slowly teasing himself. "Want to touch him? Kiss him? Want me to? Want to suck him off? Have him suck you off? Or watch me go down on him? Want to take him?" Andy moaned at the ideas. "Want him to take me?"

"Oh, teases, horrid, horrid teases!" Andy whined.

"Anything you want baby."

When Toshi sat up and pulled away, Andy grunted a protesting groan but that quickly became a moan when the too warm fingers traced across his chest, teased the base of his neck, stroked over his shoulders in long caresses. The fingers lingered, almost unwilling to leave Andy's flesh and he forced open his eyes to see Toshi sit back a little.

"I want to watch."

The serious blue eyes made Andy feel smutty. "Dirty, dirty boys, I'll star in your show." His hips arched up into his own hand but Mick was quick and moved before Andy could even notice. His pants were stripped down to his knees before he could finish the teasing thrust. The air was cool on his warm skin but he liked the way Toshi was watching him and he kicked the pants the rest of the way off. "Whatever you dirty boys want, I'm game." But he spoke to those blue eyes, he knew Mick already was willing.

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Chapter Ten

Mick looked to Toshi as well but his lover's eyes were lowered, studying Andy and the display he was putting on for them. There was no sense of stop or don't or warning to how Toshi sat, just shy, awkward uncertainty mixed with unexpressed curiosity. It was an experiment, he could see it in the carefully judging and well weighted manner in which Toshi was picking his words and actions and it was one Mick was glad for. Even if it turned out Toshi couldn't stand the thought or idea of anyone else, even Andy, playing with them he'd at least know and some of the gnawing what ifs and could be questions would finally be laid to rest.

With no refusals spoken or unspoken from Toshi, Mick stripped off his shirt and pulled Andy's hand away from himself. It earned him a whine of protest and a look that was almost trying to hard to be a challenge. He leaned over and very lightly kissed Andy before he brushed hair back from where it had tangled against his friend's face.

"It's okay." The softness in his tone stopped Andy's teasing flirtatious look and froze his expression with some of the heartbroken sadness clinging to his eyes. "Toshi's family, you don't have to pretend in front of him."

The words, so softly spoken and delivered with another gentle kiss, caught Toshi as much by surprise as they did Andy. The artist glanced from Mick over to where he sat and his eyes were wide and sad, glossy with unshed, vulnerable tears. Andy was still sexy, still delightfully showy and attention seeking but something had melted away or been stripped off with Mick's words. It was like when he'd walked in without make up or odd clothing and Toshi had to look twice to know that the man before him was the same one he knew.

"I..." Andy started and stopped when he saw understanding and warmth in the ice blue eyes across from him. Suddenly trying to be sexy and not to feel sad and in need of being warmed and comforted seemed to be a cheat and the violation of some promise or growing friendship. Toshi had trusted him with his secret, his buried, hidden scars and he'd done it without shame and Andy felt cheap to try to hide his own.

He turned back to Mick and gently rested a hand on his friend's arm. "I don't want to get laid, I just want to feel better." He admitted to Mick because he could, because he'd always been able to.

Mick nodded and smiled with a bittersweet tint to it. He knew Andy and knew that it was rarely about getting laid when he was sad. He just needed to be touched and comforted and not in a sooth his head while crying way. Andy didn't allow many people to see him sad or melancholy and Mick hadn't really been sure he'd be willing to let Toshi see him that way either but it made him feel good that he did.

With a knowing little smile, Mick kept his pants on and stretched out a little next to where Andy was laying nude and still very much aroused. Toshi watched as they kissed, as hands teased



across bare skin, sliding across shoulders and backs. The two seemed to know each other very well, which was to be expected but caught Toshi off guard. Knowing a truth and really, truly, knowing it were two different things and seeing how comfortably the pair fell together startled him.

It spiked a sharp pain into Toshi's chest. His hands clenched up at his sides. Yes, it was erotic to watch them together and yes he'd had a few fantasies about being allowed to watch, but it made his breath feel short. It wasn't anger, not really, or even truly jealousy, which was an emotion he'd been learning to identify quite often of late. He had no sense that he needed to stop them, to pull them apart as he often felt when he thought of Mick touching or being touched by anyone, it wasn't like that.

Slowly it sunk in that it hurt like when he'd been shot or when he was going through withdrawals, a deeply rooted painful agony of longing. He was hurting because Mick wasn't as comfortable with him, he didn't know every spot to make him sigh or moan as he did with Andy. He was hurting because he could feel sharply the difference to the depths of the relationship the pair had compared to what he shared with Mick. There seemed little he could offer the other man that he didn't already have with Andy and it hurt to know that Mick could be just the same with someone else as he was with Toshi, tender, careful, passionate and so wonderful.

As he sat, silently tormented by the ease between the two friends, he wondered if he should go and leave them alone. He had no place, really, in the circle of their warmth and concern. Mick was what Andy needed and as he'd said, Andy was a friend. How could Toshi refuse him what he needed and still claim him as a friend? Even if it meant that Toshi now saw and understood that what he had with Mick wasn't something uncommon or rare but easily reproduced with others. It was only his lack of experience that had made him think that the gentle passion that darted across his nerves every time Mick looked at him was something they only shared together.

Just as he was about to leave, to slip silently away while they were distracted. Toshi noticed something he'd over looked. He stopped trying to see like a human with just his eyes alone and looked around the sharp stinging pain to his ego and took in Mick as an I/S would. Mick felt as beautiful as he always did, cold, crisp winter snow and ice, sharp and lovely but with Andy it was like soft warm sunlight on winter coldness, gentle and soothing. That was something he'd never felt from Mick and his mind categorized it as Mick with Andy but instead of making him jealous or making him feel more excluded it gave him understanding.

With him, Mick was all sparkling, sharp, crisp edges. The beauty of a snowflakes defined crystals, of frost growing on a window and breath puffing into night air. With him, Mick was sharpened into clear focus, intense and direct and the best and most beautiful he could be. It was like a fire gone from gold to white hot, or refining impurities from gold, when Mick was with him, thinking about him, having sex with him, he felt pure and beautiful and perfect. He felt different, special, rare, when they were together and it wasn't until Toshi had a chance to see how Mick felt and looked with someone else, someone he admittedly loved dearly, that he saw the difference. If Andy was 18 kart gold, what they had together was 24 kart, if Andy was the sun rounding the edges from winter, what they had was winter at it's most spectacular.

He couldn't be hurt by that, or jealous, or excluded. Mick had a special, different, most wonderfully stunning feel to him that he only got around Andy, his dearest and oldest friend but that feel paled into muted colors and blunt edges compared to how Mick felt with Toshi. There was no lying about that, no pretending otherwise, it was raw truth and it made Toshi's chest hurt again only this time from how shocked and stunned he was at being so lucky to have found someone that felt they were at their best, the brightest, around him. It humbled him, awed him, and made him want to weep with the sudden shattering of his heart.

It wasn't from his eyes that tears slipped from. Even as he moaned softly and writhed under Mick's touch and kiss, Andy hiccupped small little sobs and tears slipped from his closed eyes. It surprised Toshi but Mick just whispered something into an ear and at Andy's small nod, went

back to teasing his friend, working his way down to nibble and tease his exposed chest. It wasn't the sobbing pain filled crying of before but a gentle soft weeping that was so intermingled with his gasps of pleasure that it all sounded like one thing.

Down Mick slipped, slowly, teasingly, and with exceeding care until he was kissing and teasing a slender hip. Lower still until with a gasp from Andy and wide eyed voyeuristic surprise from Toshi, Mick swallowed his friend whole. Tears still escaped the corners of Andy's eyes and his hands were clenched around the sheets but there was no doubt he was also lost in pleasure.

Toshi knew first hand how skilled Mick was and how completely the other man enjoyed pleasing his lover with his wicked tongue. It had taken him a little to get used to, that this would be something Mick actually deeply craved and often preferred to outright sex but once it sunk in that he wasn't taking advantage of Mick and it was okay to be so thoroughly pleased so often, he stopped protesting. Andy, it seemed, had never gotten the memo about protesting Mick going down on him and the two of them were shockingly sexy to watch, even with the wet trails from Andy's escaped tears.

It became too much to simply sit to the side and watch. Andy looked and felt like he needed to be touched and Toshi understood that it went deeper than just sexually. He needed that feel of a connection to other people that skin to skin gave. It was so raw and apparent that he couldn't miss it or deny it.

Very carefully, uncertain if he'd be welcome or wanted, Toshi eased closer and when neither man seemed to mind or notice, he slipped in closer. He stopped near Andy and when he brushed the slender artist's arm with the back of his hand, he was surprised when Andy let go of the sheets and clutched Toshi's hand instead. It was sweet and touching and made him feel welcome and wanted. Gently, he bent down and kisses on the escaping tears away and it made Andy hiccup and moan again.

That's how they stayed, Mick with his eyes squinted shut and softly moaning a little himself as he pleased Andy and Andy with tears still escaping, clutching onto Toshi with both hands. Toshi stayed there, touching Andy softly, gently kissing him as he grew more bold and stealing glances to watch Mick, lost in the beauty of the man he'd grown so close to. It was stunningly wonderful moment and when Andy's sobbing moans peaked and his body arched up from the futon, Toshi held him as he came, soothed his hair, kissed his face and neck as the slender artist grew limp and gasping in his arms.

Toshi was still holding Andy as the other man was panting for breath and still weeping gently when Mick slipped up to sit beside him. He turned to look at his lover when Mick gently touched his arm and was surprised to see the soft, knowing smile still on Mick's face.

"Thanks." He whispered barely louder than Andy's gentle sighs and tears.

He nodded, uncertain he trusted his voice to speak and Mick leaned in to kiss him. Only he placed the kiss on the side of Toshi's face and Toshi didn't need to ask why. Mick smelled of Andy and sex and it was a smell that was like instant fire dumped into his veins. Instead of unnerving him or making him jealous, it made him instantly, painfully, hard again. Before Mick could escape he caught the back of his head and pulled the other man into a firm, deep kiss and he moaned at tasting their friend in his lover's mouth.

In his arms, Andy moved, twisted and when Toshi finally let Mick go he glanced down to find Andy watching them with reddened but no longer tear filled eyes. In fact they seemed settled and peaceful and no longer so painfully sad. Toshi glanced over to Mick wasn't surprised to see Mick still looked a little concerned.

"Feel better?" He asked his friend, reaching to stroke a hand across Andy's tear and kiss dampened face.

Andy nodded. "Thank you." He nuzzled his face against Toshi's chest. "Thank you both."

"You're welcome." Andy was often cuddly when recently dumped but there was something teasing, something hidden in his voice that said he might not want to just curl up like innocent kittens and sleep now.

Andy nuzzled again, sliding up to ghost a kiss at the base of Toshi's neck. He could feel how aroused the I/S was and how much more so he'd become when he'd kissed Mick and he wanted to play some more. The light kiss caused Toshi to gasp but he didn't pull away from the contact. Up Andy went until he could whisper in an ear.

"May I return the favor?"

The kiss and the words made his nerves buzz and the idea of watching Andy pleasuring Mick made his blood feel like fire. He nodded, giving his permission when he wasn't sure he could speak, only Andy didn't pull out of his arms. Instead he slipped over and claimed Toshi's mouth, kissing as deeply and fully as any they'd shared. Hands slid across Toshi's body, across his chest, his back, down to his hips and one boldly pressed fabric tight into his hard length.

"Oh!" Toshi broke the kiss to cry out startled. "What... what're you...god..." Andy had taken his freed mouth back to Toshi's neck and even alone, without Mick teasing the other side, it felt safe and warm and very, very good. "God... what're you doing?"

Andy stopped long enough to pull away and lock onto those lust fogged blue eyes. "Why..." He tried to look innocent. "Returning the favor. Mick's a dirty boy, he'll enjoy watching more and really, I'm not stupid, you're the one who should be thanked. Mick, slutty wonderful dear Mick will happily swallow anyone he can. It's you I want. Please tell me I can? Please?" He batted eyelashes that didn't have the same effect without the fake extensions on them but still seemed to get the notice of one shocked and oddly innocent half-breed.

"I..." Toshi forced out and looked to Mick for advice but his lover only looked distracted and pleased and he didn't seem against the idea in the least. Which left it entirely up to him and what he wanted. Toshi closed his eyes. "Please." He heard himself whisper.

"Don't worry." Andy whispered again as he worked hands under Toshi's shirt and got the fabric stripped away. "I won't make you beg for it sweetheart."

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Chapter Eleven

The air in the room felt cold against his fevered skin but it just was a counterpoint to the feel of Andy in his arms and made him shiver in small erotic desire. He'd joked about his attraction to Andy in sometimes not so serious words but for all the teasing of midnight hushed whispers shared with Mick he'd never thought to actually have Andy pressed to him.

Before he knew it, lost in the teasing kisses on his neck and lips, Toshi found himself being lowered down to the futon. He was placed so gently, with such surprising care that he wasn't even aware he'd been moved at first. It wasn't until his back eased into the springy softness that it sunk in that Andy was now half laying on top of him. It was a comfortable weight, more languid than Mick but nearly as pleasant.

There was a single minded nature to Andy's touch and kiss and a demanding onslaught that left Toshi dizzy and burning with want. He wasn't sure what surprised him more, how little the situation made him feel possessive or how desperately he wanted to take a hold of Andy's hips and slip inside of him.

Mick chuckled, low from the back of his throat and the sound made both men tremble. "Careful, Andy, he's got that look in his eyes."

"Hmmm?" Andy questioned as he nipped a collarbone and moved lower to torment Toshi's chest.

"Wha...?" Which was as close to intelligent words as Toshi could manage.

"That's his 'I want to top, brace yourself' look."

Andy chuckled but didn't seem the least bit worried.

"I do not... oh god...I don't have a..." his words died with a whimper when Andy's slender and very dexterous hands slipped under the plain cotton of his sleeping pants. The fabric was quickly and gently slipped off his hips and all thoughts froze. Some worry, some hidden fear wiggled its way up into his mind. Hands he knew became ones he didn't and they were stripping his clothing away. He tossed an arm up, over his eyes, hiding as he'd always done when given the chance and struggled with the sudden uncertainty.

Hands, strong and certain, lifted his arm and took away his place to hide. It took a second for it to sink in that it was Mick and Toshi opened his eyes and pushed the sick feeling away. He wasn't with strangers, he wasn't going to be hurt and it was okay to feel good with someone other than Mick because Mick was right there and he'd never let anything bad happen.

"You okay, baby?" Mick whispered and brushed the back of his knuckles across Toshi's face. Andy had sensed the change in Toshi's mood almost as instantly as Mick had and he'd frozen and given Mick the space and time to check on the half-breed.

"What... what should I do?" Toshi managed to ask and knew that didn't make any sense. He glanced from Mick to where Andy sat and was surprised to see no confusion or anger on the artists face.

"Whatever you want to do." Mick answered. "Want to stop? We'll stop."

The spurt of fear and dark memories had done little to chase away the aching pain of need and even his embarrassment at being so awkward and strange with Andy there to witness it didn't lessen his want. Toshi shook his head and reached out a hand toward Andy. The artist didn't pause, he wrapped one of his own around Toshi's hand and softly gave it an encouraging squeeze.

"I..." the words felt sticky and didn't want to come out easily. "It's not easy for me...." He glanced from Andy to Mick and back to the artist. "To just let someone...I..." He glanced to Mick again and finally his lover got the hint.

"He has troubles with being pleased." Even together when Mick was feeling playful and unconcerned of his own pleasure, Toshi still sometimes grew edgy and had to struggle with old memories and learned fears.

Andy raised the hand up and kissed the side of it. "Sweetie, it's okay to stop. This is supposed to be friendly and fun."

Toshi pulled his hand away from Andy and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "I'm sorry..."

Andy was too but he understood and at the softly muttered words he told himself that the delightful arousal wasn't his to play with anymore and he needed to back away and get off of Toshi. Only, as he started to slip back to move to a less occupied part of the futon, Mick's hand on his elbow stopped him and at the shake of his friend's head he stayed in place.

"Mick's right." Toshi finally confessed. "I do want to take you Andy, I do, I... Mick and I...we mention it often....I'm sorry."

It was the last thing Andy had expected to hear but when he glanced to Mick he saw the smug truth in the other man's hazel eyes. He wasn't sure how to answer that confession, it went so much beyond the entire experimentation with kissing someone and being picked because he was the safest choice. He wasn't sure if he should speak up or not but at Mick's gentle shake of his head he held his tongue and let Toshi finish.

"I'm just... I'm not there yet." Toshi continued to confess. "I still get...uneasy." He wanted to say frightened but the word wasn't willing to be spoken. "I'm sorry." He forced out again and dared to uncover his eyes to see if Andy was looking at him like the freak he was.

The wide, too large blue eyes were heart breakingly vulnerable and if Andy had been feeling denied before he wouldn't have been able to maintain that feeling with those eyes watching him. Andy leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss, friendly and chaste, to the side of Toshi's face.

"Sweetheart, don't be sorry, I'm all broken and vulnerable tonight too. It's okay. I'd like to finish what we started but it's okay not too. I promise, either way, if you get Mick's permission, I'll be your slutty little boy another night." He smiled gently and glanced to where Mick sat. "If you ask nice I'll be a slutty little boy to both of you."

The softly whispered promise struck Toshi as a little funny because Andy was about a year older than he was and several years older than Mick but he saw Andy wearing short pants and a schoolboy outfit. He shook his head a little but the idea of Andy being willing was thrilling. He opened his eyes and glanced between the two humans and all he saw there was understanding.

"I'm sorry."

"Stop that!" Andy scolded. "God you're as bad as Mick used to be."  
"Andy..."

"Hush!" He shushed Mick and leaned back down to softly place kisses on Toshi's worried face. "Mick? He used to apologize every time he came. As if that wasn't the goal of the whole venture." The words were mixed with teasing kisses as soft as he could make them. "Took months to get it past his thick skull that being turned into a sated puddle was not a thing to be sorry for."

When Andy's mouth brushed his own the teasing softness was like a sudden lightening strike from a clear sky. Any interest that he'd lost to his embarrassment and fear sparked in sudden return and he found his hands back on the lithe, naked body above him. He pulled a little and brought Andy down to kiss him with a little more demand and instead of pushing for more or being worried about sparking another flicker of fear, Andy just moaned and let Toshi kiss him however he willed.

He didn't protest when Toshi dropped his head back down. "Mmmm natural talent indeed." He slipped his hands over the golden skin and was again awed by his friend's beauty. In his mind the idea of Mick and Toshi together and passively just watching became something he desperately wanted. Better, to be able to sketch them, tangled together and exquisite, that would almost be as good as being the slutty boy he'd promised to be.

Down his hands went, over ribs and across the strong hitching stomach. Down over the curve of a hip bone and the lean waist and still Toshi hadn't stopped him or protested. Wide blue eyes opened and locked onto Andy and in them he saw desire and want and a touch of vulnerable fear but nothing that asked him to stop. It was easy to trail those fingers over and as he found and wrapped his hand around Toshi's length he was able to watch the pleasure wash over the man and fill his clear blue eyes.

The touch sent shivers of delight across Toshi and he arched into it. His eyes fluttered half shut. It wasn't just okay or good, it felt wonderful and when he opened his eyes he saw only warmth and safety in Andy. He had been right, it was friendly and fun and okay, really, deeply okay and he understood now why Mick had been casual lovers with the artist for so long. There was no demand there, no possessiveness, just pleasure in the moment and friendship.

A hand stroked across his face, brushing strands of hair back and Toshi followed it to where Mick was sitting at his side. There was no jealousy in his lover's face and the look he found there was very similar to the happy, private one they shared. Andy may have been there but this was as much about them as always and it warmed him when he saw the smallest of smiles tug at Mick's lips.

"So beautiful." Mick sighed and leaned in to press quick kisses to both men's mouths before he retreated back again to sit several feet away. He stayed in easy line of sight of Toshi and he waited until the large blue eyes were watching him to slip the fabric of his pants down over his own hips. The timing was perfect because it made Toshi shiver and arch into Andy's hand and Andy, who wasn't the least bit aroused shook his head and wondered if he might not be too tired to get hard again after all.

"Show off." He teased and laughed. "Well, I can play that game too." He grinned with a naughty air and slipped down. Lips and teeth and tongue teased and tormented as he slid lower across Toshi's body but the spots he found were just side attractions to what he sought. Still, Toshi shuddered and gasped at every nip. Down he went until he was nestled between Toshi's legs and let his mouth torment the neglected length he'd been certain he couldn't toy with a few moments before.

Andy liked sex, he liked the pleasure and touch and contact. He'd be lying if he said he didn't like to come too but what he really loved, what he craved sometimes more than the actual sex, was the attention. He knew, he'd always known, he was an attention slut. It was partly why he dressed so outrageously, because he was ordinary with out it and people noticed him with it. Sex wasn't just about finding pleasure, not for Andy, that was just a happy, delightful side effect but what he really enjoyed was the attention.

Now, comfortably settled between Toshi's thighs, he felt like the show off. Both men were watching him, the shivers in the strong, proud, beautiful half breed were because of him. It was erotic and sexy and wonderful and he knew he was being even more showy than he had to be just to pleasure Toshi. His body was too spent and tired to get hard again but his heart devoured

the focus and attention the two men lavished on him. It was just what he wanted, what he needed and every time he glanced up to one or the other of them he felt like smiling in a smug, happy way.

It still didn't seem quite right to Toshi and part of his mind huddled away, whispering fear and doom certain that the happy moment he was caught in had to be shattered. When that voice grew too loud, all he had to do squash it was glance to where Mick sat and the sight of his lover soothed him.

Glancing over to watch Mick made the experience a double pleasure. Andy was as talented as Mick had hinted and with his horizons now expanded to two men he'd enjoyed sexual contact with, he was starting to wonder if sex in general was just a really wonderful thing or if these two men in particular were especially good. It was sheer pleasure and delight and left him laying limply on the futon, shivering, moaning in pleasure. Only the sight of Mick, so close by but out of reach, stole his breath and made everything better.

Mick was watching them, watching him. His eyes raked across where they lay and sometimes the expression in those eyes was so awed and wanting that Toshi found himself glancing down to see if it was them or something else in the room that had inspired such a look. That caught him in the stunning sight of Andy happily showing off and he swung between the two sights. There just wasn't a way for him to make a choice of which was better. He liked seeing Andy, the source of the shivering ecstasy that was consuming him but being able to watch Mick pleasuring himself because he was so aroused at watching them was rare and wonderful too.

A shortened hitched breath made the choice easier. There was no way Toshi could not watch Mick as he came. It was physically impossible to look elsewhere and suddenly Toshi understood another advantage to a third party in their bed. Watching Mick was additive, watching him so enjoying being a voyeur was even better. As always the tense build up and sparking flare of Mick's release tumbled along his own nerves and filled his mind. It became too much. He'd been teased too long, worried and stressed and desperate too long and it stopped mattering who's mouth was on him and who's eyes.

It was good and safe and right. He was safe and with that thought, with Mick's pleasure tingling like a low electrical current along his nerves, Toshi closed his eyes and gave in. His spine arched but strong, lean hands held his hips in place and he whimpered and moaned and didn't care how it sounded.

Then the pleasure began to fade and without the need and want driving him, Toshi suddenly released what they'd done. It had to change everything. It wasn't fair to Andy to just invite him in occasionally. He was already very attached to Mick and as Toshi lay there, his eyes shut while he struggled to catch his breath, he worried that Andy would be hurt staying just the friend. And while he no longer felt the worry that Mick would change his mind and pick Andy over him, now that the door had been opened would Mick want this to be a nightly thing? If he was being honest with himself, Toshi was willing to admit that he'd like to try inviting Andy to bed again but he still felt jealous of his time alone with Mick. Everything would change now and change rarely was for the better.

Worry was starting to become a tight knot in his stomach when he figured he shouldn't be a coward any longer. He had to open his eyes and see, to try to figure out how badly this romp had screwed things up. Bit by bit he forced his eyelids upward, braced for the worst and the first thing he saw was Mick. The other man was flopped down on the bed, eyes shut to mere slits, panting for breath. When he saw Toshi watching him he grinned happily, the smile warming his eyes. That was a look he knew, that hadn't changed and carefully Toshi glanced to where Andy still sat between his legs.

The artist was watching them with his quick, appraising eyes but there was no possessiveness in them. He seemed content and settled and almost proud. When Andy noticed he was being

watched he gave Toshi a come hither look and winked at him, his normal, teasing, playful self.

"Am I still allowed to spend the night?" Andy asked around a yawn when neither man looked ready to move anytime soon.

Toshi glanced to Mick and Mick obviously was waiting for Toshi to give an answer. It sunk in that in spite of what had happened, nothing really had changed. He nodded but didn't bother to lift his exhausted head from the futon.

"Good, now, both of you, get your happy naked asses under the covers so I can snuggle. And so help me Toshi, if I wake up to find you doing paperwork again....I'll....I'll..." he yawned before he could come up with a threat. "Do something naughty again."

Mick chuckled and slowly crawled his way back to get under the blankets.

"Wouldn't want that." Toshi sighed and slipped in beside Mick, actually tired enough that he thought he really would sleep. When Andy slipped in and he found himself in a pile of legs and arms and warmth, he knew he'd sleep.

"Shut up, both of you, I need beauty sleep."

Mick snorted and Andy smacked what he thought was Mick's arm but hit Toshi instead. Toshi just sighed and caught the hand and held it gently. Andy paused, surprised before the slender fingers eased and then lightly curled around Toshi's warmer hand.

"Seriously, guys, thank you." Andy muttered as he burrowed into his friends warmth and closed his eyes but he couldn't swear either of the men were still awake to hear him.

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Chapter Twelve

Alec crept back to the building around dawn and grinned easily at the knowing looks of the guards on duty. None of them were comfortable enough to make any form of comment but he knew they were amused that Alec acted more like an I/S than Toshi did. They'd all been guards to other powerful I/S and were used to the people they protected slipping away to meet a lover over night and slipping back home so early in the morning. He was only grateful that they didn't insist on sending someone with him into the city, his casual girlfriend wasn't what he'd call comfortable around I/S.

He was used to returning home to the silent apartment. It made him feel sneaky and covert and



far more dangerous than he knew a lawyer secretary should feel. It was a small conceit and it always made him grin. Only this time, the apartment wasn't silent. He heard rattling from the kitchen followed by softly muttering cursing and curiosity drew him to peer into the room.

"What're you doing?"

Mick jumped a little, startled and the spoons he was balancing in the stack of bowls rattled. "God! You're worse than Toshi, don't do that!"

It made him laugh a little. "Sorry." Mick stood in the kitchen wearing a white sleeveless cotton shirt that hung loosely on him and was untucked over baggy cotton pants. His hair was messy and it looked like he'd just rolled out of bed. "Still, what're you doing?"

"Are you just getting home?"

He shrugged and grinned.

"I'm trying to get us breakfast. Hey, your timing is perfect, you should join us."

"You're cute, Mick but you've parts I'm not interested in and are completely lacking parts I am interested in."

"Not like that you perve, besides, blondes aren't my thing. We're sort of having a breakfast meeting in bed and they elected me to go fetch food."

"They?" He raised his eyebrows. "You got Toshi to seduce Andy?"

"Well, it was a little more complicated than that. Ryan dumped Andy, he was a dick about it too."

"God, I knew he was bad news. I hate being the one to have to run background checks on everyone." He sighed and shook his head. "Andy okay?"

"He's doing better. He wanted cereal, Toshi of course said he wasn't hungry. I was wondering if I should cook something. Are you hungry?"

"Not too much but here, I'll help you carry the bowls."

Together they juggled the three types of cereal, two sugared kids crap and one grown up kind, soy milk, bowls, cups, juice and spoons back to the bedroom. The small space was cozy with three, with four and food it was crowded but Alec didn't mind. Toshi was sitting on one corner, Andy pressed against him half draped across the normally touch shy man and they were muttering and pointing at different points of the computer's screen. Neither one glanced up when the door opened and Mick grinned.

"Lookie what I found sneaking back in after dawn."

"I wasn't sneaking." Alec protested but he couldn't keep the happy grin from his face. It wasn't just from the night before but seeing Andy being his comfortable touchy feely self with Toshi and Toshi letting him made him happy. "I was just being respectful of anyone who may be asleep."

"I wrangled him into the meeting." Mick made a careful balance of the foodstuffs in the center of the futon and hoped that the milk or juice wouldn't get spilled. He didn't wait, but poured cereal and milk into a bowl and pressed it at Toshi. If he didn't, he knew the man wouldn't eat. "We're kicking ideas around about the clubs and what needs to be done."

"I had no idea there was so much to consider." Andy sighed and at his stomach's growl reached for his own breakfast.

"Are you seeing someone new?" Toshi asked, surprised that Alec had found the time to find a new lover.

"No, why?" He kicked off his shoes and peeled off his coat. Andy was only wearing pink boxer shorts and Toshi had pulled on a t-shirt and pants like Mick but that left him far too over dressed.

"It's a different perfume."

"I showered."

"I can still smell it."

"No, I've just been busy so, she mentioned this new scent a bit ago so I bought her a bottle."

Toshi wrinkled his nose a little. "It's nice."

"I'm glad you approve." He teased back. "Is that a hickey on your neck?"

Andy snorted in repressed laughter so hard he choked on his juice.

Mick peered across the futon, stretching to brush a stray length of hair back and soon was smirking too.

"I do not have a hickey!"

"Baby...."

"Don't fuss, it'll be gone before anyone else sees." Alec laughed too at the shocked look on Toshi's face. "I have a few myself but fortunately the clothing covers it."

"Eeeww no mental images of straight people sex before noon!" Andy protested.

Alec thought they'd teased enough because Toshi's relaxed comfortable manner had quickly dissolved. "So, what did I miss?"

"Andy wanted to know why we can't simply annex the clubs. Or pass some decree saying only an I/S can own a business in the Yards or camp." Toshi explained.

"Won't work." Alec answered right away.

"I don't see why not? There's a small army of guards inside the camp, plenty of folks to enforce it and it'd make things so much easier."

"Because it wouldn't work. For one it wouldn't be legal to simply do that for another they'd just slick some poor fool up to their ears in Shine so they'd barely be able to think let alone function and transfer ownership to them. That would make gaining any sort of order twice as difficult."

"It just seems like rolling in and taking it over would be so much easier."

"The drugs are coming from the club owners, they're bringing it in, the pushers sell it the profits are going to them. There's too much money there, they'll fight tooth and nail and a lot of people will die before they give that up."

"We can't risk a war." Toshi added in, that had to be their mantra. It maybe within his right to push every human out of the Yards but he wouldn't start a war if he could help it.

"So, nothing can be done?"

"Rules need to be put in place."

Alec nodded. "And they need to be monitored and taxed. Yasun's let them get away with not paying into the pot because of being on the other side of the wall but that needs to stop."

"That's going to be a difficult task on it's own."

"Well..." Mick added around a mouthful of cereal. "Not if they don't know you're not willing to go to war. A fight will kill their profits, humans aren't going to come to the clubs if they risk getting killed to do so."

Toshi glanced to Alec and the man only raised his eyebrows in return.

"Push them, but not too hard, or push one that is the most offensive and make them an example and be merciful to the others." Mick liked that idea, he itched to hurt the owners of the Pony Club for what they'd done but they were dead. He'd just as happily take that anger out on another one of the sex clubs instead.

"Might make them more willing to accept the new rules."

"New rules?" Andy questioned. It was slowly sinking in that while he'd been biting his nails over paint colors and themes, the three men around him had been trying to do far, far more.

Toshi glanced to where Andy sat cross legged in the silly boxers he'd pulled on and wondered just how much the artist wanted to know. "For the clubs."

"Okay... I am smart enough to have figured that much out."

"No I/S working in the yards should be there by force, all must receive a fair wage, none shall be required to use drugs, no worker would be forced to take a client, it would be required that all injuries be medically treated, no one can be sold to a client simply to be murdered." Mick recited the list they had so far because he knew Toshi wouldn't.

Andy looked to the other men to see if it was a joke. "They don't really do that, do they?"

"Not as often now, no, but it still happens." Alec answered as gently as he could. "And if you're hurt, as likely as not they just leave you in a room to see if you recover or die."

"That's barbaric!"

"It's from when we were thought of as little more than cattle. Many still do, most of the club owners only see it as profit and loss." Toshi had to lower his eyes, he'd seen it all first hand and dealing with it again wasn't going to be easy.

"What about setting up a guild or union for the workers? So they can have an outside chain to report abuses too?" Andy added. "There's an artist guild just for that reason and god getting us flakes to form a guild is like herding cats so if we can do it you should be able to."

"That's not a bad idea." Alec said slowly, mulling it over.

Mick grinned and Andy smiled around his sugar coated cereal at actually being able to help. "So, it would be cool to offer that new implant thingy to them too, give them the option to be clean too. If it works."

"You've decided to let them try?" Alec hadn't wanted to ask or push the subject too soon.

Toshi nodded. "I'd like to, yes. Sooner than later too and I'm fairly sure Uncle Yasun will green

light the clinic which means we'll all have to make a public showing of going to it, the house guards as well."

"And we need to find someone for Papa Mike and his team to test on."

"I'm sure someone in the yards would volunteer." Alec shrugged it off, finding someone didn't seem like the most difficult part of the problem.

"And what? Congratulations you're sober, we're proud of you, now go suck off some dirty old man without the drugs to get you through." Andy shook his head. "They may be selling themselves in the yards for the money to get the drugs but if sobered up what are they going to do? Become someone's maid in the city if they're lucky enough to get the work permit from the Committee which won't give it to them since they were an addict? Doesn't seem like a fair trade off." Andy spouted off and stopped when he noticed them all staring at him. "I'm sorry."

"No, don't be..." Mick glanced to see if Alec had thought of that and knew from the look in the man's blue eyes that he hadn't.

"Mick's right, don't be sorry, you're correct." Toshi nodded and pushed his soggy cereal about his bowl. "I've been thinking about it and I have an idea."

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Thirteen

"What are we doing here?" Mick asked when the bike rolled to a stop outside of one of the buildings close to the wall. He didn't need to have a rough map of the camp's layout memorized to know it was a sex club. It was too close to the wall, had a well lit and maintained road from the entrance here and it had a small stream of small cars, virtually unseen in the camp, moving clients from club to wall and back again. He knew the line of buildings were I/S clubs that catered to a special sort of client but Toshi had been tight lipped about explaining them. It was the last place he expected to be taken.

"We're going to get your family someone to test the new implant on." Toshi hung his helmet on the bike and waited for the guard to move around him. It was odd how quickly he was getting used to it, to knowing they would enter a building first and be the last to leave. They didn't seem shocked or surprised at his choice of locations and they had to be assuming the reason for his visit was the obvious.

"Toshi..." Mick paused and glanced to the plain building and its discreet entrance for the cars to reach. "This is the idea you mentioned?" Toshi had dropped that he had something planned but

not what and over the days that followed from the breakfast in bed meeting, things had gotten hectic and he hadn't asked.

Toshi smiled a little, softly, with a bitter distance to it and slipped his sunglasses off. "Trust me."

He sighed and shook his head. "You told Papa Mike you had someone in mind, right?"

"I sent him word to maybe be ready, yes."

"Sneak."

He raised an eyebrow. "It's just a maybe." Near the more obvious door one of the guards nodded and Toshi started toward the entrance. The club wasn't anything like the one he'd worked in, there was no dance floor, no bar, no sign at all of what the place was. The door opened into a plain, simple but still elegant reception area.

Other than the pair of guards, there was a single Succubus woman standing, waiting for them. She was young, fair skinned with wide yellow eyes and a long shower of stunning dark green hair. A silk dress floated about her body, curving around breast and hips in all the right ways and flaring out to add softness and movement elsewhere. She smiled brightly at seeing them and bowed.

"Sakura-sama, you do us great honor with your visit. How may we serve you?"

He bowed but it was only slightly. "I wish to see the manager."

There was no delay, no stalling. The slender woman bowed again. "Very well, please, feel free to sit and browse the book."

Mick waited until she'd slipped away through a well concealed door before asking. "The book?"

Toshi waved to the stylish coffee table and the plain notebooks in black covers that sat on them. "Have a look."

Uncertain but wanting to know, Mick carefully sat down and flipped open the cover. Inside where pages of photos, each page dedicated to a different I/S. A name was attached to each one and there were several shots, some making them look formal and proper, some more sultry but they all were stunning. Beside the names were numbers, some were 10/10 some where 7/10 and he didn't know what that meant.

"What is this? A rating?"

"It's how much of their time is available for purchase." Toshi sighed and sat down. "The clubs on the outer side of the wall deal in quick encounters, a few hours at most, a good time only. For those that wish to own an I/S they're sent here. Everyone in that book is owned by this club, for enough money you rent them for one day out of every ten, or two days or five or whatever you can afford. You're leasing them from the club for as long as you wish it and on that day, your tenth, they are yours to do with as you please. Here or at your home or out in a human club or party, on the tenth you've bought you own them."

"If all their tenths aren't purchased?"

"Then they're open for clients to come visit them here, during that free time. That's how most start out, a few hours with one, then they upgrade to purchasing a full day."

"So these numbers are how many days out of a ten day cycle some human has purchased?"

Toshi nodded.

Before Toshi could say more the door opened once again and an older woman sailed in. She was dressed in a very proper business suit, proper for any boardroom or meeting. Her hair was pulled up into a twisted, elaborate style on the back of her head and it's pale blonde yellow still shimmered in spite of the age lines on her face. Her eyes were a bright, clear sapphire blue and if they'd been normal sized she almost could have passed for human. It made Mick wonder if she was picked to be in charge because she looked so normal and less like an I/S to help set her clients at ease.

"Sakura-sama, truly, it's an honor." She bowed deeply and waited for Toshi to return the bow before rising. "Please, forgive the wait, I wasn't informed of your arrival until a moment ago. How may we be of service to you?"

"Someplace more private would be welcome, say, your office?" That would be the only room not monitored and watched.

Her pause was only for a moment but there really was no way she could refuse. "Of course, please follow me." Even though she didn't want to, she smiled and agreed.

The guard that followed made them into a small parade. Down a plain hallway behind the concealed door and through another well hidden door and finally back to a softly lit office that was obviously made for I/S eyes. It was simply decorated with a nice sized desk dominating the room. They had to wait a moment for his guard to search the space and confirm that it appeared safe before they were willing to retreat outside the door and leave his protection in Mick's care.

She smiled softly again. "Please, allow me to be of service."

"Rabin Rez."

That earned him the slightest of reactions from the woman. "He's on break at the moment, I'm certain there are many others, younger and far more attractive, who would be delighted to serve you."

"I'm not asking your permission, tell me more about him."

There was a moment where he jaw clenched and Toshi knew she wanted to balk at obeying the orders of a half breed but she didn't dare. "I purchased him at age nine, he worked as an apprentice to the house from nine until fourteen when his tenths were sold. He's worked regularly since, he's still popular in spite of his age. There are many clients wishing for experience over youth and Rez is quite profitable still."

"I wish to see him."

"He's just finished with a client and is on break at the moment. Any of our other offerings would be more than willing to entertain you and your lover in his stead."

"Was I unclear in my request?" Toshi asked, sounding generally confused as he glanced to Mick.

"It was pretty clear to me, but I'm just a human."

"I will go to where he is but I will not ask again."

The cold, command in Toshi's voice made the older manager bow again and Mick shiver. That tone Toshi only used when dealing with people he had to work with always made his knees feel a little weak. He was still trying to figure out how to get Toshi to use that tone in a more private setting, one where his knees going weak was a good thing.

"Very well, please, this way." She led them back from the office out into the hallway and the guard fell in place behind them. She took them down the hallway, obviously a public one and soon doors appeared at even intervals. At one she stopped and bowed again. "He'll be in there. I will accompany you."

"No, you'll return to your office and wait there and you will not monitor this room. One of my guards will see to that."

She floundered again, wanting to disobey but quickly bowed again. "Of course."

Toshi waited until she was out of sight in the hallway, one of the two guards going with her before he spoke to the remaining one. "Please, wait here."

"Yes, Sakura-sama."

"How do you get away with that?" Mike questioned, trying not to grin.

"She has to listen to me, technically my Uncle owns everything and one inside the wall." It was a logical truth but the look Mick gave him was teasing and he felt the underlining lust in the human. He was always surprised at how turned on Mick got when he was being authoritative, he had always assumed it would annoy people. From the look and feel of the guard that stood to the side, Mick's lust wasn't so hidden, that or the man found Toshi's show of power amusing and not intimidating in the least. He wasn't sure which thought he liked better and figured this wasn't the time to discuss it and instead pushed open the door.

Behind the door was a fair sized room, it was elegantly but simply decorated in tans and creams and pale blues. Pressed to one side was a wide bed, the covers were rumpled and disturbed with no effort made to straighten them. Along the opposite wall was a small two person sofa that had the generic feel of a hotel, plain, sturdy end tables lined it and ordinary lamps sat on them. They provided the only real light, beyond the defused glow from inset panels near the ceiling and the lights had obviously been adjusted to I/S eyes. On one of the end tables was a pair of wine glasses, one was drained empty the other only slightly touched and between them was a tiny, empty, plastic pouch. Toshi didn't need to see the pouch to know the scent of sex and shine in the room.

The back end of the room had a mirror and counter top with a sink set in it, beside it was a walled in room, the door open and a toilet sitting waiting for use. Between the sink and the toilet was an open room, deep and wide with plenty of room for two or three or more if they all knew each other well. It was tiled in the same generic tan cream tiles and a single shower head was on. Steam and mist sprayed from the small room that wasn't allowed a door but had smooth vinyl floors around it instead of the sturdy carpet the rest of the space sported.

Toshi gave the empty plastic bag only a slight glance before drawing a deep breath and walking deeper into the room. There was little doubt where Rez was and the sooner he did this the sooner they could be gone, he was just grateful Mick followed, silent and steady as always. It was only proper that he stop and stare a moment when he gained a first clear glance into the shower. A club like this only purchased beauty and Rez, naked and wet, was a pleasing sight, even to another I/S.

It took Mick a moment to place the man in the shower with one of the pages of photos in the book he'd flipped through. Rez had lost weight since then, quite a bit, and now he looked like a strung out, long term, shine addict that he obviously was. There was no fat left on the man, no softness and he made Toshi look almost healthy but even as he was, it was pretty clear why he continued to be popular with clients. Rez was, simply put, stunning to look at.

He was all long, lean lines covered with pale, milk creamy skin that was as flawless as every I/S.

The water seemed to be just an accessory, as if it knew it made him glow and look better under the light that glowed down on him. Lavender hair, bold and pastel like a jelly bean or a child's spring candy, fell in a long tumble to cling to pale skin, shorter eye level bangs had been cut and stuck to the sides of his face as he turned. He was beautiful, shockingly so and he turned slowly, eyes still shut as the water rinsed soap from his body.

"Whoever you are, I'm not working right now, you've the wrong room." Rez's voice was a smooth tenor that held tones of mocking sarcasm.

"We've the proper room, Rez-san." Toshi spoke gently and with respect, knowing how little respect someone in Rez's line of work often received.

Slender hands lifted to wipe water from his face a moment before Rez opened massive, large, bubblegum pink eyes. They widened further at seeing who hovered outside of his shower.

"Sakura-sama, should I bow or invite you and your pet in to join me?"

"Neither, we'll speak when you've finished."

That made Rez's eyebrows quirk. "I'm finished, I was just enjoying the water." He knew better than to make someone like Toshi wait and he quickly shut the water off. From a hook on the other side of the shower stall he pulled a towel free and wrapped it around his wet hair before sliding into a cotton robe and tying it shut around his waist. It was nicer to give the client the option to strip clothing off of him instead of starting out nude, at least with most.

Rez slipped past the pair, brushing just close enough to them to enter their personal space. "Please, have a seat." He tried to make his voice sound welcoming because it wouldn't do to show a client how angry he was at having his break shortened, especially a client as powerful as Toshi.

The still wet and barely dressed I/S very carefully lifted the wineglass from the table to balance it against his hand before he turned and sat on the edge of the rumbled bed. It was so carefully done, so smooth in action, that Mick raised an eyebrow at Toshi. It was more than just an I/S's natural grace, there was an artificial quality to the way Rez moved, as if he had been schooled to be twice as sleek and graceful as he needed to be. Toshi ignored the questioning look and moved to take a seat on the sofa, the one furthest from the empty packet of Shine.

"So..." Rez started carefully while his guests sat down and didn't look at all comfortable. "How may I serve you?"

"You're an addict." Toshi started, bluntly.

"Would you like to join us, Sakura-sama, or did you just wonder what it would be like to see your very pretty human here with another I/S? I'll need a moment to change the sheets, why don't you order drinks?" The wine swirled in the glass and he raised it to his lips but didn't actually take any into his mouth.

"We're not here for sex." Toshi interrupted. "Your manager isn't monitoring this conversation, you can drop the act."

The corner of Rez's lips quirked into a smirk that looked as much grimace as smile. "She's always watching."

"Not when I see that she isn't."

The mocking smile disappeared and pink eyes carefully took in Mick before gliding to Toshi. "What is it you want?" The toying warmth wasn't in his voice any more.



"You're an addict and you're shinning right now."

"I'm supposed to be on break, enjoying the fruits of my labor." The words dripped sarcasm.

"Do you enjoy using?"

"As opposed to doing this cold sober? Yes, at least there is some pleasure in life." Large innocent looking eyes narrowed. "I'm not a child, I'm not dim witted. What is it you want to know Sakura-sama, I doubt you're paying my rates to simply ask if I enjoy my place."

"Do you?"

"Do you enjoy yours?"

"Sometimes." Toshi answered honestly.

"Sometimes not as well, a place is a place and we all know where we born."

"Would you wish to be sober if you could be?"

The offer was the last thing he expected to hear and part of his soul screamed to agree but nothing was ever so simple. "I'm not strong enough to make it." He smiled softly, bitterly. "Haven't you ever wondered why you're so popular in the community? It shouldn't matter who your family is, you're blood is still mixed but everyone admires you because you got clean and have stayed clean." He glanced to the wine and wondered how high he was to speak so boldly. "Those of us who are honest know we aren't so strong."

The honest words shocked Toshi and left him speechless for a moment. He clutched after his thoughts and knew this conversation wasn't supposed to be about him. "There's a new treatment, it should work, you'd be the first."

He wasn't even pretending to drink the wine now. "Then what? Would I be returned here? Because honestly, Sakura-sama, I'd rather keep using."

"No, you would be a member of my house. There would be work for you there."

"A whore to any human that can buy a tenth of me or a whore to you and your pretty human? The same place just for a different house."

"No." Toshi shook his. "No one is owned by any member of the Sakamoto family. No one of my house is required to stay and no, you wouldn't be our whore. At the worst, you'd be a waiter but I promise you, we'll find you work you're both capable of doing and enjoy if you're willing to take this chance."

"Am I really being given the choice?"

"Yes."

"I can say no?"

"If you wish to continue your life here, that's your choice. We want someone willing to be sober, someone who wants to be, not someone forced to be."

"Why me?" He knew he shouldn't question, it was a tremendous offer for someone like him, but he needed to know.

Toshi smiled softly. "Because I want it to be you." That was all he was going to say on the matter,

it was more than he'd been able to explain to Mick even.

Rez shook his head and the wet bangs stuck to his face. "She'll never let me go, not while I'm profitable."

"She'll let you go."

"But..."

Mick sat a little straighter. "Trust him, Toshi always gets what he wants."

It seemed too much to hope for, to much to dream of. He bit the side of his lip and tried to see the trap in the offer.

"So, are you willing to try?"

"And if I fail?"

"You'll still be a member of my house and I take care of my own."

Rez found himself nodding, frightened and coming down from the peak of the good feeling of a solid shine and scared silly. He had to set the wine glass on the carpet to keep from crushing it, his hands curled so tightly around it.

"Good, pack up your things."

"I'm leaving now?"

"Do you want to stay here after she finds out I'm taking you?"

Rez shook his head and the damp hair stuck to him. "...I don't own anything."

"Should make packing easier, just get dressed and hurry about it." Toshi stood and was grateful Mick followed. The smell of the shine in the room was making him ache and he wanted to be gone from it as soon as he could.

"God, you're serious." Rez paused for only a second before he stood and scrambled to the dresser. He pulled drawers out and found his favorite pair of jeans. The robe fell from his damp skin, not the least bit worried about being nude and he quickly jammed his legs into them. It took a bit of digging but he found plain cottons socks and a plain t-shirt but it was a deep scooped neckline and he didn't want to feel like a whore today so he threw a jacket over it and zipped it up. He finished it with a pair of sneakers that he shoved his feet into and didn't bother to tie. Breathless and edgy he turned around just to make sure the pair still stood and waited. "Done." He announced and waited for them to laugh at him, waited for them to tell him it had been some cruel joke.

Toshi saw and felt the look from the other man and knew he was braced to be hurt. "Well then, come along."

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Fourteen

It was how hopefully Rez moved to follow and seeing the man dressed that made Mick understand. Rez was frightfully skinny and looked even more narrow and worn down dressed than nude. Now that he'd stopped trying to be sexy, he just looked injured and vulnerable and in need of saving. But under all of the obvious Shine addiction and the pretty pink eyes that hid so much sadness, Mick saw someone that wanted to be more. If he saw it, some unexpressed and well buried spirit, Toshi surely did as well and Mick suddenly, really, understood why Toshi picked Rez and more, why Toshi had been shy about explaining that choice.

Toshi didn't wait to see if they followed, he knew Mick would make sure the purple haired man stayed close by. All he wanted to do was see to it things were settled and be done with it and home. He back tracked the hallway on long strides and braced his shoulders to be stubborn and demanding. Without knocking he pushed the office door in.

His guard nodded slightly, letting him know silently that his orders had been followed and the manager sat in a chair on the public side of her desk. She hopped to her feet when they came in but her eyes narrowed when she saw Rez, dressed and following them.

"Sakura-sama..." She started.

"Rez is going with me."

She actually blinked a moment in startled surprise. "I'm sorry, Sakura-sama, his debt is not yet paid."

Toshi shook his head. "Inflated charges of room and board, compound interest on the cost of drugs you saw he was addicted to, an honest look at your books will show the years of profit you've garnered from him. If you still feel you've been cheated and I've stepped beyond my rights, send me a bill and I'll see it's paid."

"But his clients, these men are fond of him and will not wish him to be gone."

"He's down to six of his tens, interest in Rez is waning. I'm certain you'll find a kind way to sooth their broken hearts."

"But... I don't have..." She glanced around the room and suddenly her eyes grew concerned.

"I understand your position, I don't care how you list his loss but he is coming with me, today." Toshi knew these clubs were run, quietly, by the humans that ran the clubs on the other side of the wall. The managers were as caught by addiction and ownership as any of the workers. "Do you understand?"

She closed her eyes for a moment but when she opened them they glowed with false friendliness. "I'm pleased to serve, Sakura-sama. Thank you for selecting one who is past his prime and not one of my more profitable workers. Thank you for considering my position." She bowed slightly but Toshi didn't return it.

"Oh, I want his files as well, all of them." Toshi smiled lightly. "Not just the ones you show clients when they ask, and I want them now."

"I..." She paused and glanced to the guards behind Toshi and knew they were more than capable of stopping her house guard, knew that Toshi was as well. Beyond that, it would take one word from his family and her club would be taken apart to the bare walls. "One moment." She agreed and moved to her computer. It took a few seconds gather all the information into one folder and copy it onto a portable drive. "All my files on Rez from the moment he came into my care."

Mick moved forward so Toshi didn't have to move, unsure how stable his lover was. "Thanks." He grinned and it had a malicious tone to it as he pocketed the files.

"We're leaving." Toshi said to the guard as much as the manager. "Thank you for your co-operation."

She bowed again but Toshi ignored her. As they started to file out of the room, Rez paused to glance back his eyes narrowed a little. He wanted to scream at her, throw something, jump on her and hit her or scratch her, something, anything but he was frightened such a display would make Sakura-sama change his mind. The slim, dim, hope of escape from the life he'd been in was too much to risk losing over one petty act of revenge but he tried to show her all the hate he felt with a single look. One he knew his eye color didn't portray well.

Out in the hallway, he had to stop because Toshi had stopped. When the black haired half-breed put a hand on his shoulder, Rez flinched a little. He didn't mean to but he was wound too tightly and it wasn't just because Toshi's bloodlines, but he instantly knew that single flinch might be taken that way.

"Don't worry," Toshi said softly. "Change is coming."

That made Rez wonder how aware Toshi was, how thick his blood was or how obvious his hatred had been. He nodded and stayed silent and let the human pet nudge him out to the entrance. The sight of that door was enough to distract him, he hadn't ever been through that door. It was for those free to come and go as they willed and he'd never had that right.

He followed the line of obviously dangerous guards as they gathered together the small line of motorcycles but he was more distracted by the sunlight. It was bright and brilliant and warm. It made his eyes tear up it burned so badly but he closed them and turned his face up to the sky, soaking in the warmth.

"Here."

Rez dropped his face down and found the source of the word to be Sakura-sama's human pet. The man's hair glowed dark red in the sun and made him even prettier but he stood holding his own pair of sunglasses out. Rez stood, blinking dumbly and without a clue at the offer.

"I need them less." Mick explained and shook the pair a little bit. "Its okay, has to be twice as bad for you with such a light color."

Carefully, Rez took the offer. "Thanks." He answered and it had a sultry tone. A favor had to be acknowledged properly and with repayment in the voice. It was a habit, one, if they'd told him the truth, he'd have to figure out how to break, but right now he was too stoned to care. He slipped the glasses on and they were well made and instantly dimmed the glare without making anything look dark or obscured.

Soon he was shuffled onto the back of a motorcycle behind a woman that sniffed a little and gave him the look. The Look, the one he got all the time from I/S that didn't work in the clubs. The one that said he stank of Shine and sex and humans. The Look that questioned why they

were bothering with him, the same look that said he was right where he belonged. He climbed behind her and shifted a little so the hair would blow his hair out and tangle it in the air when they started moving.

"Don't squirm." She ordered.

The authority made Rez shiver and sparked a little glint of the shine in his system. "Yes, ma'am." He purred back and wiggled a little tighter against her out of habit.

She waited until the first bikes had started to move. "What Sakura-sama sees in you..."

The words scolded but Rez didn't care. The sun was warm and the air cool and they were soon zipping away, into what, he didn't know but it was movement. Instead of being angry, he found himself laughing.

They stopped outside of an ugly plain efficient building that even Rez knew had been owned by the Committee. He would have worried if he wasn't so high and if there hadn't been so many I/S bodyguards wandering around. Rumors had reached him about Sakura-sama moving in to one of the barracks but he didn't ever put much stock into rumors.

"What would you like done with him, Sakura-sama?" The woman he'd ridden behind questioned, letting someone else take the bike away.

Toshi glanced to Mick and knew his lover wasn't going to protest, he was wearing his neutral, 'I'm just hired help' look. "He'll come with us."

The woman glanced to another guard. "You're certain, sir?"

Toshi nodded. "Quite."

"Yes sir." She didn't question again but she caught Rez's arm when he started to walk by and when Toshi's back was turn. "Behave or you deal with us." She hissed out low and soft.

The threat made Rez grin. "Don't worry, sweetie, I won't steal the silver. Though dealing with you maybe amusing."

She snorted. "Shiner whore."

"Mindless thug." He mocked back but moved to catch up with his new owner before she could break his arm at the insult.

"We're not staying here long." Mick explained to Rez as they made their way to their private area. Trying to get the new I/S to relax a little and to see things really were okay. "Just until the club is finished, then we're moving over there. Space is a little tight." He opened the door and held it for Toshi to enter and then motioned for Rez to follow, as much out of manners as a need to make sure the new arrival actually arrived.

"Are you hungry?" Toshi asked but already knew the answer.

"No, thank you, Sakura-sama." He glanced around the space, it wasn't fancy. In fact it wasn't even fancy by I/S wealth standards and certainly didn't even come into the same zip code as fancy for a human.

"Found him, huh?" Alec asked from where he was sitting at the table, paperwork spread out everywhere. He was still wearing suits but had finally caved and only wore a tie if he had a

teleconference he had to attend.

"You knew about this?" Mick tossed a thumb toward Rez as he moved to the kitchen to get bottles of water for him and Toshi, knowing if he wanted to wash the taste of shine from his mouth, Toshi would too.

Alec held his hands up, still never a hundred percent certain he was able to read Mick's moods right. "All I did was find which club he worked at, I guessed the rest."

Mick snorted and disappeared into the kitchen.

"Want me to call the Commune? Have them get ready?" Alec asked of Toshi and tried not to stare at the Incubus that stood dumbly just inside their apartment as if he wasn't certain any of this was real.

Toshi nodded. "Yes, later today and where's Andy, we're going to need him."

"I'll page him, I think he's on the roof sketching."

"Good. Rez-san, this is my house." He addressed his newest member directly for the first time.

He fell on instinct now that he was directly spoken to. The smile tugged at his lips. "A touch more humble than I'd imagined."

There was a tone of sharp mocking honesty under the teasing, light tone and it made Toshi smile. "Truly. This is Alec Orwick, my secretary, lawyer, oldest friend and the one who general runs everything around here. There isn't anything he can't handle and he holds my total trust, you can take anything to him. Understood?"

Rez nodded, he did understand and it meant that troubles weren't supposed to be taken to Toshi but to Alec and he knew the chain of command from that.

Alec nodded. "Nice to have you on board Rez-san."

"A.R. McKale, the head of my security and my partner." Toshi introduced as Mick returned and handed him the water. "Thank you."

"Welcome." Mick saw the way Rez's eyes narrowed slightly at the word partner. "You can keep calling me his pet if it makes you feel better." He teased dryly and heard Alec choking back laughter behind him.

"Can I call you a pet too?" Alec asked.

"Not if you want to keep using your legs." But there was laughter in the threat.

"Aw shucks."

Rez wondered if any of this was real. Maybe he'd passed out and this was just some odd, happy, Shine induced dream. When the door opened behind him and he turned to see who it was, he knew it had to be a dream because there was no way he was seeing what he was seeing.

Andy sailed in, a bag slung over a shoulder stuffed with pencils and sketchbooks. His hair hung in simple pig tails over his shoulders and he wore a wide brimmed floppy bright red hat that had peacock feathers sprouting from it. His shirt was skin tight and the same shade of red as the hat with Uke: working my way to the top from the bottom written in silver on it. Instead of some skirt or anything fancy, he wore relatively normal loose cotton pants in black that stopped just below his knees to show off the black strappy sandals he had on. For a change he wore no make up

beyond a clear lip gloss and his nails were lacking their normal painted fake decorations.

"God, I'm so glad you're back, I had the most amazing idea..." Andy started even before he had sailed into the room but the words ended when he glanced up.

He wasn't sure if he was supposed to drool or be frightened. The man was a full blood there was little doubt of that from the massive bubblegum pink eyes and the long bright pastel purple hair but even dressed in the plain sneakers, jeans and zip up jacket he was yummy to see. Slender and impossibly pale, he looked strung out but under that was a simply beautiful face and body that Andy would kill to sketch, or fuck, or both. Only there was something to the way the man held his shoulders or the line of his mouth that spoke of anger and threat.

"Spank me, who's the yummy Easter egg?"

"Andy, this is Rabin Rez, he's going to try Papa Mike's treatment." Mick explained gently and tried to get Andy to understand that Rez needed a little care at the moment. "Rez-san, this is Andy Fendle, he's designing the club, consider him the artistic director."

"Is that really my title?" Andy grinned a little but his eyes stayed on Rez.

"That's what we have you listed as yes." Alec answered.

"Wow, I've a title. I feel all... special." He tried to see if the lovely man would flinch from the boldness and was delighted to see Rez didn't even look away.

"Behave Andy." Mick teased with just the right level of seriousness.

"Always." Andy grinned. "Now, what can I do for you, dears?"

"I'm sorry to ask..." Toshi began delighted at watching his family's interactions with Rez.

"Those are the best things to ask!"

"Rez has nothing but what he's wearing. Would you be able to take the afternoon and go shopping for him?"

Andy laughed. "You're sorry to ask me to go shopping? Dearest that's my favorite hobby." He caught Rez's pink eyes and told his heart not to flutter. "Well, second favorite."

"Good God!" Alec broke in laughing outright now. "You're giving Andy a credit card and turning him loose?"

"Hey! It's not like I'm not responsible!"

Alec kept grinning and turned back to his paperwork to make arrangements. "I'll order a car too. Just don't turn the poor fellow into a cupcake club boy."

Andy just sniffed. "Let me get my tape measure." He dropped his bag onto the sofa and disappeared back into his bedroom.

"Now, Rez-san, what do you shine to?" Toshi asked a question that was almost taboo in the I/S community.

Rez didn't even blink, he didn't have the luxury of privacy or secrets. "Obedience with undertones of humiliation and sex. That's the standard for the Red Moon, I just took to it better than most."

Toshi had thought it might be something like that and nodded. "You had your last hit of

Shine today, how long will you be Shiny?"

"I don't Shine for long, an hour, a couple maybe if I'm lucky, been using too long."

"It's already wearing off?"

He nodded.

"How long do you have?"

"I'll feel okay for a while, takes hours to start hurting, I can hang on for a bit but it gets rough pretty fast." The fear of the pain of withdrawal drove him to any length to avoid it.

Toshi saw it in the pink eyes and felt it against his senses under the haze of drugs and confusion and he nodded. "Don't worry, we'll have you sedated before then."

"Sedated?"

"I'm from an Inky Commune." Mick explained. "My foster family has developed a safe sedative for your people."

"It works." Toshi added in. "They used it on me."

"We're going to smuggle you out to the Commune, you'll be sedated past the worst of the withdrawals. When you come around, there will be an implant already in place." Before he could explain further, the word implant made Rez's eyes go wide and he caught his breath but he never voiced a complaint. "It's okay!" Mick rushed to explain. "It's not like that, it's a new one. It'll only work if you take another hit. It'll sense the Shine in your system and click on making it impossible for you to ever reinforce the habit and really Shine again."

"At most, you can use like a human but that's an escapable trap if you want to be clean." Toshi spoke softly, trying not to belittle what the man was about to face.

"You won't even notice a difference with the implant in place, we promise but, Rez-san, you'll be the first to try this. You'll need to use again before you can leave the Commune, you'll have to take a hit and try to Shine. If the process works, you won't be able to."

"But..." he glanced between the three men. "I'll be back to where I am now, worse though, because I'm not hurting now."

"That's true." Mick agreed. "But I promise you, we promise you," he added Toshi into that promise because he doubted the man took his word to mean much. "They won't let you hurt. They'll take you back to past the worst of it again and then it's up to you to make it from there."

It was a terrifying idea and Rez suddenly felt very scared. He glanced down a moment, knowing he'd already made his choice but suddenly frightened sick of having to actually do it. When he looked up and met Toshi's eyes. "Do you think I can do it?"

Toshi nodded. "I know you can, it's why I chose you."

Rez drew a breath. "Okay, then I can." And some of that was the Shine in his system nudging him to obey but a lot of it was knowing someone who had already done it believed in him. "I can do this."

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Chapter Fifteen

"Be careful." Toshi warned for the third time. It made him nervous that he couldn't go with them.

"Stop, it'll be fine." Mick flashed a quick grin and tried to get Toshi to understand that his nerves were only serving to make Rez edgier. Alec had called for a car, one with tinted windows, and it was time to get moving. Rez's high was wearing off and he was already getting twitchy and they had a bit of a drive to get to the commune. The trouble was, they didn't have the Committee's approval to move Rez to the commune and Papa Mike didn't want to risk the first attempt at the procedure to a half built and poorly stocked medical facility closer to the camp. That meant they had to smuggle Rez out there and back and if they got caught, it would mean trouble for Mick.

"If you get pulled over?"

"I demand a warrant and call Alec, he'll have the lawyers over the traffic cop before the cop can get a warrant. Don't worry." He glanced to where Rez sat on the edge of the back seat, his legs hanging out of the open car door and his arms folded over his chest. "No one will stop us, it'll be okay."

"I'd feel better if I was going with you."

"What? And get me busted for smuggling two I/S outside of the camp?" He grinned again. "You're too high profile, we can't go into the city for a meeting without someone from the press picking up on it. Trust me, we're fine." He stole a quick kiss, flashed another quick grin and stepped away. "Hop in Rez, lets get moving."

Pink eyes locked onto Toshi's blue and he suddenly felt selfish for being so worried. All he was risking was his lover being arrested, something his lawyers could pull apart and overturn easily, Rez was risking pain and maybe even his very life. He nodded slightly to the I/S and tried to not fret. It was enough, Rez dropped his eyes and pulled himself inside of the car, trusting his new owner if not his own self.

He stood and watched until the car pulled away and it was all taken from his hands. It was up to Mick's family now and Rez's desire to be clean and free and neither things were ones he could control. It made his guard nervous to just have him standing around outside so when the car had pulled from sight, he made himself go back inside.

The apartment was empty, Alec had run over to the build site to take care of something and Andy should have already left to go shopping. Toshi found himself standing behind the plain sofa gripping its back, trying settle his own cravings and wants and fears and not certain he was up to

the struggle. Footsteps behind him startled him and he stood up straighter and half turned around.

"Hey." Andy said softly, uncertain if he was intruding.

"I thought you'd have left by now."

He shrugged. "Wanted to put on some mascara." He took another step closer. "Did they get away okay?"

Toshi nodded.

"That Rez is a sexy beast, horrible of you to bring temptation right under your dear Cousin Andy's nose."

"You showed amazing control taking his measurements." Toshi half smiled.

"I'm a slut but I'm not stupid, I know what he was until a couple of hours ago. They'll be plenty of time to grope him when he's brought back. You are bringing him back aren't you?"

"I've some ideas."

"Good, he's easy on the eyes and I want a chance to sketch him." But there was more in the room than was obvious and Andy dropped the teasing tone he'd been using. "He's a good choice."

"What?"

"To make it, to show it can be done, he's got a stubbornness to him, he'll make it." Andy shrugged. "And he's about at the end of his time, there's not much left of him and he seems smart enough to know the Shine is close to killing him. He'll make it, he'll get clean, it'll give others a full blood to look at and see it can be done with. Very clever of you and I think a grand idea."

"Thank you."

"My father was an addict." Andy admitted on a whim.

"What?" He'd never thought about Andy's family. He'd met his mother, an artist herself but he'd never thought to ask about any other family.

He nodded and came to half sit on the back of the sofa beside where Toshi still stood. "Mom won't talk about what he used and I was too young to really remember but it was rough. He was always in and out, he'd get clean for a couple of weeks and start using again, I just remember never knowing if I was going to see the good daddy or the bad one. He wanted to get clean, Mom says that all the time when she talks about him, he just couldn't do it. He came to my sixth birthday party, higher than a kite but not being mean, brought me these red shoes I'd wanted, had cake, watched as I smashed in a piñata, then went into the bathroom and OD'd."

"Andy..."

"No, it's okay, I didn't find him or anything but he'd left a note, he'd killed himself. It's not an easy thing, I don't need to tell you that, but he wanted to be clean so badly but he couldn't do it. It takes so much more than just wanting it." He drew a deep breath and nodded his head. "It's a very good thing you're trying to do, giving them back the hope of getting clean." He patted Toshi's arm and pushed off from where he was leaning.

"He didn't have a choice." Toshi heard the words tumble out and Andy stopped where he stood and glanced back over his shoulder.

"hmm?"

"Rez. They didn't give him a choice to use or not."

That made Andy smile a little, bitter and soft. "You're giving him that choice now, sweetheart. Hey, come shopping with me?"

It was tempting, he wanted to if only to just hang around Andy when he was bubbly and giggly with the fun of buying things but he shook his head. "I've too much to do here. I'm still working for my father too and I'm a touch behind on things."

"Aw, what's a few hours?"

"Maybe next time, just, get him a fair amount of long sleeves and high collars. Give him the choice to be modest."

"He's too cute to be kept covered up." Andy teased but he winked as he left. "Don't worry, I'll get the poor dear options and yes, yes I know, I'll behave. Can't hump every pretty man I see, why look? I haven't jumped Alec yet." Andy paused and pretended to give it some thought. "Maybe if we got him really drunk..."

The joke caught Toshi so off guard and the idea seemed so silly that he about choked on the laughter that welled up. It surprised him but Andy had that effect, a knack, of taking a serious mood and allowing a little lightness to seep in. "Maybe that's why he doesn't drink." He mused aloud around his own laughter.

"Hmm, maybe! Well, I'm off, sure you won't change your mind?"

"Thank you anyway, have fun."

"Have it your way then and it's always fun to spend someone else's money! Ta ta!"

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"We're almost there." Mick broke the silence.

In the back seat Rez forced his arms to unwrap around his body and his shoulders to lower, taking on a more casual air now that he knew the human was watching him. He shrugged and tried to look like he didn't care. "Whatever."

It might have fooled someone else but Mick had learned to notice the signs of withdrawal. Rez had slowly begun to huddle into himself, massed into a sullen lump in the corner of the back seat. At first he'd watched the city pass by outside the darkly tinted window but now he rode with his head braced back and his eyes shut, too sick to notice or care much of what was going on around him. Even the I/S's knees had slowly drawn up as if he wanted to lay down and just curl up and be miserable if he'd been allowed. None of it missed Mick's notice and he drove on with a steady pace and hoped they'd get to his family before the man suffered too much.

Finally, Mick made the last turn that took them up to the closed and sealed gate and from the look of Rez in the back seat it was none too soon. He rolled the window down and it glided back into the door with a smooth motion and allowed him to lean out and enter his family code into the keypad. It took a second as the program scanned his face and compared it to what the files said

he should look like. It was just a second before the keypad beeped and the gate began to roll back and open for them.

The lane to the main campus was one of his favorite stretches to drive on anywhere. A simple road well paved and maintained and lined by huge old trees. The trees reached out to each other to touch over the road and let sunlight through in dappled patterns. They dropped leaves in the fall to blanket the path home and maybe it was just memory or sentiment but the sight of those trees always made him feel like he'd come back to a safe place.

He kept to the proper slow pace as was proper but he drove them to the medical center directly and pulled up out front. If he expected Rez to comment on arriving or on the campus he would have been disappointed, the man again had his eyes shut and it wasn't until the car stopped moving and the engine shut off that he opened them and glanced around.

"We're here, you can wait in the car while I find Papa Mike or come with, it's up to you." Mick hopped out, the keys jingling in his hand but before he could come around the car's end Rez had popped the back door open.

"I'll follow."

Mick saw the shivers the other man was trying not to show and he suspected that Rez was trying to not be left alone. He'd have to warn his family that the man had a hit of Shine hidden on him somewhere. That was to be expected, the pain of withdrawal was intense and most Shine addicts learned to tuck a hit away for emergencies, even ones so regulated and controlled like Rez was. It just made Mick more confident that Toshi had found a good first subject, someone that didn't, deeply, want to be clean would have stayed in the car to take the edge off not followed and suffered.

There was no point to trying to tell Rez his family were good people. Words, especially words from a strange human, would mean nothing. There were plenty of stories of human Committee members saying one thing and doing the horrible opposite. The fear of human medical procedures was deep in all I/S and for someone like Rez there would be no reason to trust any human's words. Mick would have to leave it up to them to win the man over, and frankly they didn't have to so long as Rez was willing to listen and do what he needed to do. What they all needed him to do.

The medical center's doors opened for them and Mick smiled. The woman at the front desk had been one of his oldest sisters and she was, as always, lost to the work on her computer screen.

"Heya Pia, back from, where was it this time?"

"Amun! I didn't know you were coming along too and it was Egypt." Her smile split her face and tumbles of thick black curls fell forward. She could have been Egyptian for how she looked, black eyed, exotic, beautiful skin and thick springy curls of hair as dark as her eyes.

"How was it?"

"Hot but I got some amazing fungus samples." She glanced to where the I/S followed behind her brother but could tell from the look Amun wore that it was better not to engage the man. "Uncle Mike is back with Mama Ruth, they've the team ready and waiting for you two."

"Excellent, which lab?"

"Seven."

He smiled. "Thanks."

"Welcome and Amun..."

"Hmmm?"

"You look happy."

The maternal tone to her voice was for one abandoned child to another and it made Mick nod. "I am." Happy enough that she'd noticed and still grinning thinking about the cause of why he was so happy as he led them all the way back down to the far end of the medical center, through a sealed door that required a pass code and into the area reserved for family when they needed privacy.

The entire back section had been taken over by Mike and Ruth and about a dozen others all people Mick knew, one or two had even been siblings but they were all in work mode. He was pleased to see Rose floating around and was glad when she's the one that came over instead of the entire horde of them.

"Amun, dear, it's a delight as always." She pulled him into a hug but made it quick, the Incubus following didn't look like he was doing all that well.

"Grandma Rose, this is Rabin Rez, the man Alec spoke to you all about. Rez-san, my Grandmother Rose, just call her that, it's the only thing she'll answer to."

Rez nodded but his were busy darting about the room and struggling with hunger and pain and panic.

"Well, Rez-san, we've some options here. We can introduce you around, answer any of your questions, make sure you really want to do this..."

Rez nodded again. "I do, very much so."

Rose smiled gently. "Good, well, we can answer your questions, just be certain about things, or we can just do this. Right now, no pause. We can introduce you around to everyone when we wake you back up." She lowered her voice a little and used the same tone that she took with the frightened children. "I'd imagine you're not feeling too well..."

"I..." Rez couldn't hold the older woman's eyes. He'd never spoken with such an elder human before and didn't know what to say or do. His normal façade around humans was a lie and it was against everything he knew to lie to an elder, he just didn't know if that included elderly humans too. "Fast is fine. I'm not..." He drew a breath. "I'm not feeling well."

Rose reached out and patted the man's arm. "It's okay, don't worry in an hour you'll be sleeping like a baby. That bearded fellow, that's Mike, this is his project and the blonde woman beside him is Ruth, she's a doctor. You just head over there and they'll get you set, just forgive them for being a bit gruff, they understand the urgency."

That spiked fear sharp and brittle into Rez but he had long skill keeping his composure and with a nod of his head he tried to cross deeper into the medical room without any of his fear showing. He just wanted to be knocked out and if he didn't wake up, well, that was a good enough solution too.

Mick shook his head, seeing the fear in every movement and step the other man took and wishing he could soothe it. All he could do was wait until Rez had crossed the room and was nodding something to Ruth before he spoke. "He's Shine on him, somewhere."

"Of course he does. We'll find it and hold it until the test in a couple of days."

"There's nothing more I can do?"

"It's all in their hands now, and Rez-san's."

There was one more thing he could do, for Rez and Toshi. "I'll wait until they put him under before I head back into the city."

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Chapter Sixteen

Alec and Mick received updates daily on Rez even though there wasn't much to report beyond blood levels and the like. Toshi, however, wanted to hear nothing of it, not even when they were going to bring Rez around. He only wanted to know if it worked or not and when, if, they'd need to plan for Rez's arrival. Andy's purchases of clothing sat washed, folded and ready to go on a shelf in a small storage closet in the back of the apartment of rooms.

"Where are we going to put him?" Andy whispered to Alec as they pulled clothing from the stacks. Mick was going out to the commune shortly, they'd received word that Mike and his crew were going to be waking Rez up and someone needed to test if the Shine could be triggered. It had been Andy's idea to send along some of the man's new clothing but it was Alec that wanted to make sure the items sent were sensible.

He just shrugged. "Toshi's set on having him as part of the household."

"Hmm. You know, if we took out this shelf and got another futon and added some smaller lights... it'll be small but it would be better than having him sleep on the sofa. Especially if he's going to be sick for a while."

It wasn't a bad idea but it seemed wrong to put a full grown man into a storage closet. "It's a closet."

"It's a room, with a door and privacy. There won't be room to walk around but it's at the back here, he's the whole hallway to wander in and yeah a futon will fill it but he'll be able to stretch out. He'll have more space than if he has to share a room with either of us and in case you didn't notice, cutie, he doesn't seem fond of humans." He put a hand on his hip. "So, either he moves in with Toshi and Mick moves out, he crashes on the sofa or we put him down in the dorm with

the guard..."

"Or into a closet." Alec sighed and shook his head. "There is a cultural line in the I/S community between Shine addicts and the rest of them. I don't know how understanding they'll be if we put Rez with them."

"Assuming you can talk Toshi into that."

Alec shook his head. "I wouldn't have to, you'd have to talk Mick into it. Mick can talk Toshi into anything."

"Behold, the power of hot sex."

"It is small but it feels smaller because of the shelf."

Andy tsked and rolled his eyes, pulling out another comfortable, casual outfit and pushing it toward Alec. "Which is why I believe I said we'd have to take the shelf out."

"Don't pout, I'll get someone on it."

"God, how did you all function before I arrived?"

"We wallowed in darkness and misery."

Mick wasn't going to be bringing Rez home today and so he elected to take Toshi's bike out to the commune. It let him clear his head and empty his thoughts, steady him from the ups and downs of day to day life. He loved riding the beautiful bike, loved it better with Toshi along but their open road rides would be limited until the Containment Act got repealed. The day it was, they were going for a long, ride, maybe with a picnic lunch, they'd find a nice quiet place to stop and rest and just enjoy the freedom to move about as they willed.

For now, it was a dream. Toshi's lawyers had just begun the process of challenge and assault on what had been meant to be a temporary law and it would be months, years maybe, until it was fully removed. Just what it would mean to have the laws repealed wasn't really known yet but it would mean that the entire I/S community would have to be given fair and full citizenship. It would be something to be solved on another day, today, Mick was more concerned with I/S on a smaller scale.

The day was pleasant, sunny without being too hot and the air was gentle. It was late enough in the day, the weather beautiful enough, that most classes would have been let out early. The yard he drove up along held children, of all ages, playing and running about. Mick was always able to spot the newer arrivals, the kids that still hung back trying to look like they didn't care or the ones that hid away on the outskirts of the moving group frightened of joining in.

He remembered those days, battered and broken and overwhelmed. The openness of the commune had felt like a trap and he'd been sick and hurt and unwilling to try to fit in, unable to. Just as he had, those too used to being abandoned would come around, drawn in by the security and freedom offered by the Commune or by the vast love of learning that enveloped them. Being told that they were valued and then encouraged to be whatever they wanted to be, to learn whatever inspired them, was a powerful device for change. Knowing they were now in good hands didn't stop his heart from going out to the ones that couldn't quite bring themselves to join in.

On another day he might have stopped and kicked the soccer ball about, trying to angle it toward those few that stayed near but still far but today he had other concerns and there was little time

for play. He glided the bike up the long slow hill, admiring again the placement of the commune on such a wonderfully spot that was ideal to defend and cut the engine in front of the medical center. He pulled off the helmet and hung it on the motorcycle and wasn't surprised to see Rose waiting for him inside the doors.

"Grandma Rose." He nodded and let her pull him into a quick embrace as she always did, pressing a soft kiss to the side of his face.

"Just in time, as always."

"How is he?"

"Mike just let him have a hit a little while ago, he's getting...uncomfortable. We have him in isolation, waiting."

He shrugged off the backpack he'd worn. "Andy and Alec sent out some changes of clothes for him."

"Poor dear, he really did have nothing, didn't he?"

"Trust me, ownership is one of the things Toshi wants to address with his uncle."

"It needs to be ended!"

Mick shook his head, things were never that simple but he let her continue to lead him deeper into the medical center. "It isn't like that. There's so little work still, it's about the only way to survive still. I'm not condoning it." He cut off her protest. "But no one is homeless, no one starves, there are no orphanages, no one lacks this way. Like it or not it works for survival means it's just not always pretty."

The scolding look Rose gave him was strong enough that he didn't need to glance over and see it.

"I promise, we'll find a compromise, or at least try."

"You'd better, we didn't raise you to tolerate that nonsense."

"Hm."

"Don't grunt at me, you know we didn't."

He didn't want to get sucked into a debate about the world at large outside of the Commune or the particulars of I/S society. Their lives had become shades of grey and layers of distaste and approval and nothing was so simple as just being right or wrong. "One step at a time."

The first step was this test with Rez and Mick pushed down his nerves as they passed the last key coded door into a private hallway where all the rooms were of a good size and most had observation rooms behind one way mirrors. Rose led him to one of the observation rooms and Mick was surprised to find just his Papa Mike inside and no one else.

"Amun." Mike nodded with a serious tone to his voice that worried him.

Until Mick glanced into the other room and understood why. Rez looked bad, if anything he looked even more frightfully skinny. The common, casual pants and loose shirt that center kept on hand for anyone that had to spend the night hung on his frame. The man was too tall for a child's size but too skinny even for a slender adult size. His already pale skin didn't look milk pale not, it looked sickly pale with dark smudged circles under his too large, blood shot eyes. His



lips were chapped and split, his hair was pulled back into a slender braid but it looked dull and limp.

"Papa Mike..." He shook his head and tried to peel his eyes from the other room and the caged near frantic pacing of the slender man. "He looks like he's aged a couple of decades in a couple of days. Has he lost weight?"

"Seven pounds but we expected that. Toshi lose five and we had him under a day and a half less than Rez."

"Wow... is he okay?"

"All functions are within expected levels. He took a bit longer to fully level out but we got him there and the implant went in like a breeze." Mike waved to a computer screen set into a portable table. "It clicked on just like it was supposed to almost the instant the Shine hit his system. Everything appears right on course except the level of anxiety he's expressing and that is increasing."

"The need to reinforce the hit gets pretty strong, pretty fast." Rez looked like some dying, caged animal and Mick understood why some humans might forget the humanity in the I/S community. The exotic hair, the wide, large near panicked colorful eyes combined with the twisted pain and contempt and made the man look unearthly.

"We didn't test to see if it could be reinforced, just like you requested."

He had but now he wished he hadn't. It felt too much like kicking a puppy because he knew if the implant was working, Rez could take as many hits as he wanted but he'd never Shine again.

"Let's do it, no point in making him wait. Can he go under right away?"

Mike nodded. "My team is prepped and ready."

"Can he afford to loose another seven pounds?"

"We're going to double the caloric intake, his metabolism went off the charts while detoxing. He'll still loose weight but it shouldn't be as bad."

"Shouldn't be?"

Mike shrugged. "We've never done this before. Shouldn't kill him either way but asking him to detox while conscious might be too much of a strain on his system."

"No choice then." It was a shitty poor choice but one that had to have been done. Mike followed him but Rose stayed back in the observation room which actually made Mick a little more nervous. He would have preferred if she hadn't seen this, some part of him was still worried that she would stop carrying for him if she saw he wasn't always good and upright. What Rez Shined to couldn't be triggered with things that were good and upright.

With a hand on the door, Mick took in a slow deep breath and pulled it open. Rez actually jumped, startled a little by the sound and sudden appearance of other people and the emotions that darted across the wide, near frantic pink eyes moved to quickly for Mick to pin down. "Rez-san?"

"Finally..." Rez sighed and a wide false smile slinked across his face. "I've been waiting for someone to show up and what a delight that it's Sakura-sama's sexy, sexy pet."

"Papa Mike told you the implant is in place, right?"

Rez nodded and waved his hand dismissively. "I'm still hazy from the drugs. Don't make me beg for it, baby."

"Everything should be working, you can't Shine any more Rez." He said as gently as he could.

"Let's give it a whirl anyway." For a moment the false light mask disappeared and the look that came back was honest and painful. "Please."

"Then shut up and get on your knees." He dropped his voice down to the one he used when snapping orders while he was a cop. Behind him, he heard Mike shuffle his feet.

Rez didn't notice, he whimpered a little but the flush of drug induced pleasure didn't hit his system as he dropped his knees. "More... please...." Fear and panic began to claw across Rez's artificially calm face.

Mick slid a booted foot out. "Clean it."

There wasn't even the slightest of pauses, Rez dropped onto his hands, palms flat and body kept low. All movement came from his body, arms balancing his weight and gliding him forward in a smooth motion as Rez's tongue slipped across the leather. The first pass was instant and without thought, the second faltered and stopped.

Mick held his ground and didn't move, he didn't even let his face show the sympathy or regret he was feeling. Rez needed to learn it wasn't the groggy remains of the anesthetic, they needed to know if the Shine could be reinforced. Frightened pink eyes stared up at him and Mick met them steadily, understanding was starting to really dawn.

Those large eyes, so innocent looking, so begging to be used, blinked quickly and resolve settled into them. It didn't surprise Mick any when another forced smile settled on Rez's face or when the man rubbed a cheek against his knee.

"Awww, you can be tougher than that..." Rez whispered, teasing, promising, begging. "I can take it..." He slipped up a little higher, nuzzling at Mick's thigh. "I need it... I'll do anything you want, baby..." higher still and now he was a breath away from nuzzling the human's groin.

Mick caught a handful of the purple hair and pulled Rez's face away. "It's not the drugs, Rez, you can't feel me, you can't Shine anymore. Focus and try...."

The hungry desperate look was replaced by one of concentration and then one of panic. "I...oh god...I can't..." Pink eyes darted around and tried to focus on Mike, standing silently by the doorway. "I can't..."

When Rez started to struggle, Mick let go of his handful of hair and Rez stumbled back. He fell on his tailbone and scurried away from the humans, eyes even wider now, hazed in the burning need to Shine and the panicked understanding that he couldn't, that more than that, he couldn't sense anything.

"No... no...get it out!" He sobbed and his hands started to claw at the back of his neck but all that was there was the tiny sensor input. "I can't do this, I can't be blind! I can't, I can't do this I don't want to do this, I don't care, let me Shine get it out!" The clawing grew more desperate and frantic and blood began to appear on Rez's fingers.

Mike started to step forward but Mick stopped him and shook his head. This was something he had to do and it was best of his family, the doctors Rez would have to trust, didn't become involved. He hurried over and rather than trying to talk Rez out of pulling the implant out with his bare hands or talk him into continuing on his path to sobriety, he pulled back his hand and hit him.

He'd hit a lot of people over the years, for a lot of different reasons but never, not once, had Mick actually backhanded anyone let alone someone weaker and unable to defend himself. The fact that he didn't put much force into it was little comfort, his knuckles still split Rez's lip and would raise a bruise he was sure. He had to make it hurt, had to use enough force to really snap the man to awareness, get him to focus and more so, make him angry.

The frantic clawing and panicked cries instantly stopped and the room went silent but for the sound of the blow.

"Amun!" Mike snapped out, shocked and ready to knock his son down to defend the ill man.

Mick turned and faced his father, a man he'd never defied before and stood his ground. "Not now." He ordered and watched as his father wavered between what he thought was right and his trust in his son. Mick was surprised but pleased when Mike nodded a little and again stepped back. It let him focus on what had to be done.

"Shut up!" He snarled at Rez. "Stop whining!"

That welled up tears in the large pink eyes and made the man seem even smaller, more vulnerable but he stopped talking, stopped trying to remove the implant, stopped everything and just froze.

"This is pretty simple, Rez." Mick snarled trying to sound more angry than he actually was. "Choices are pretty crystal clear. You can give up right now, say the word, I'll see to it that implant is out and I'll happily drop your worthless ass into the Yards. You can Shine and whore yourself until it kills you, we'll find someone that actually wants a shot at a better life. Because this is bigger than you, bigger than me, bigger than all of us and if you want to sob and cry about being head blind for a bit while you're high I'm not going to listen to it. Think about it, of all the Shine addicts Toshi picked you. It wasn't random, he picked you, sought you out, because he believes you can do this. I won't be the one to tell him you simply gave up, I'll lie and say it didn't quite work this time. I can't hurt him with the truth that you just gave in. Do you know what that would do to him? Do you have any idea what that man's been through?"

The tears of fear, panic and pain had dissolved from Rez's eyes and some small sense had started to return.

"Toshi had as much of a choice about using as you did only he got clean the hard way, awake every moment." Mick shook his head. "I don't even want to think about it and he wore that implant, allowed himself to be blinded to stay sober, to at least give himself the fighting chance and now? He had no choice in using again, he did it to save me but this time he doesn't have the option of a safety net. Every day, every minute that man struggles with being sober and here you are? Whining about being temporarily blind? About how painful and difficult it will be to get clean? You with options he never had? Do you think this is just about you? Toshi needs to know others of his people can get sober, he needs to know it can be done and I will not, I will not, allow you to take that from him!"

The pink eyes weren't just thinking now, they were brewing with anger and hatred and Mick knew he just had to push a touch more.

"Now you tell me, right now, are you worth the time? Because Toshi thinks you are but he can't see you right now as I can see you, all whining and weak. Which one of us is right? Hmm? Toshi who believes in you or me? Cause I think you're wasting our time."

"Fuck you!" Rez snarled. "Stupid fucking ass human! You don't know shit about this!" He pushed himself to his feet, his legs trembling and threatening to give out. "Hey, you, Doctor man? I'm fucking dying here, you said you'd put me back out."

Rez chin stuck out but his whole body was trembling, caught in hate and rage, stuck in pain and weakness. He brushed past Mick, struggling to hold onto his pride when walking was an effort and stood, waiting, shaking, in front of Mike.

"Alright then, son, if you're certain."

"Fuck yes, I'm certain! Just do it already."

Mick managed to stay on his feet until the door to the room shut, leaving him alone in the empty room. Only then did he drop to the floor to sit with his back to the wall. One hand rubbed his face and he wondered how he'd explain that little show to his family.

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It was several minutes until the door opened behind Mick but he didn't look up. He wasn't sure he could handle the lecture Mike was sure to deliver but he knew he deserved it. He had been hoping that the fuss over getting Rez back under would give him the time to compose himself, or at least pick himself up off the floor but he should have known that Mike would have an entire team on hand and ready.

"Well now..." Rose spoke softly as she walked into the room.

That made him glance up. "Grandma Rose..."

"Hush you, I think you've said enough. Let me speak now."

He nodded and slumped further down onto himself.

"On the surface this is an easy life we live here. Surrounded by colleagues in an understanding environment but we give up a great deal to be here. One of those things is children of our own flesh which for most of us here isn't that large of a sacrifice but I love children." She sighed and leaned against a wall.

"Amun, Mike won't have an idea what you just did. He's a brilliant researcher, a good man, a strong father but when it comes to emotions well, he's a little blind to them. Have you ever wondered how we select primary parents for you children?" She waited but Mick just sat there, unmoving. "Sometimes it's random, who has the free time, the desire, the calling but with you, there was nothing random about who became your primary parents. They were picked because each one was a brilliant mind but rather cold and distant. It was felt that you, a child so untrusting of affection, would respond better to their brand of parenting. I was the only dissenting vote."

Rose paused and took in the man sitting across the room from her. She could still see the child, silent, sullen, so broken in more than just body and she remembered that day he'd first spoken to her and how shocked and startled she was.

"This isn't an easy life, Amun. We're supposed to care for all the children that come past those gates, even if they stay for only a day. Our belief is that every child is ours and we will care for every child the same. Ideals aren't humanity and I've tried, I've really tried over all those years to love each one of you children just the same but God it's not easy. Maybe one day you'll have children of your own and you'll see, some will just be easier to love than others and some you may love but not particularly like at all. No matter what your feelings are you can never, ever let the child suspect them."

Mick nodded. "I understand." He pushed himself from the wall and stood up. Back home, with Toshi's arms around him, he'd crumble to bits there but for now he'd respect his family's desires and keep their relationship on a strictly professional one.

Rose came over and cupped Mick's face between her hands. "You daft boy you don't understand, not one bit. It's not our way to let any child know if they're favored or if they're more difficult because all of you are dear to us but I'm an old woman and you're quite grown. You..." She shook her head but Mick still had his eyes lowered. "You stubborn boy. I've never been more proud of you than I am today and that's saying a great deal since I don't believe I've ever loved any of our children quite like I've loved you." When his hazel eyes darted up to meet her she chuckled. "Oh, surprised you! I've had to be doubly careful with you because you're clever. Too clever sometimes for your own good! That poor boy, he has never had a chance to trust himself, it's a curse of being owned and you, smart, wicked child, you gave him stubbornness and a desire to prove you wrong and anger to fight with. You did that even though you didn't want to and I'm so proud of you. I'll see to it Mike understands."

"I'm...I'm your favorite?"

"Don't let it swell your head...but yes. Do you remember? I wonder if you do, you were so sick, that first day I saw you? All bandaged up and tucked into this too big bed all alone. I thought, why is that poor scrap of a child alone and it wasn't until I read your chart and saw you were truly, horridly alone. Not even your case worker bothered to come see you and I knew, in that moment, that you were mine. Not ours, not the communes, not the greater good of humanity but mine. Not of my flesh but you were mine and I would have quit my life here if it had been required to keep you from going to that institution."

"Grandma Rose..."

"And you! A more difficult child I've never had to deal with. Stubborn as a mule, quick as a whip, sharp as a tack... and with such conviction and pride and strength. I've always known you were going to be a good man and you haven't let me down. I'm just glad you've stopped dating those creeps and found a good one to settle down with."

"You know about..."

"I know where you learned to hit like that, or should I say be hit like that?"

He shook his head. "I didn't want you to know."

"What? You think I wouldn't know you have a penchant for picking men who hurt you? I'm just glad you've found someone that won't." She sighed. "I've wanted to say something for a long time but, you needed to find your own answers and it seemed like you had things in hand. Figured if you wanted help you'd ask."

"Grandma Rose..." Mick shook his head and tried to speak and couldn't.

"I know dear... I know..." She smiled and wanted to hug him but knew the look in his eyes, knew how he held himself that he wouldn't, quite, be able to stand it. "I'm just delighted you've found a good man. That Toshi is a doll! Is he taking good care of you?"

Mick nodded. "The best."

"You should go back to him, no point in lingering here. I'll explain to Mike and we'll call when Rez-san is ready to go back. Stop fretting."

The bike ride home was slower, Mick took the time to think, to compose his mind and steady himself. Toshi had enough to worry about without having to fuss at him and having so much turned side ways threw him for a loop. It would be okay, the open road and time alone was all he needed to ease over the fact that his family had known about some of the situations he'd gotten himself into, that, at least, Rose had understood what he'd done and it was okay.

When days passed and word finally reached Mick that Rez was again awake and sober, he was uneasy about returning to the Commune to pick the other man up so he wasn't upset at the short delay. Rez had requested to be allowed to stay at the commune for a few more days and that was all the explanation they'd been given. Mick had agreed, Toshi had seemed uneasy but Alec's faith that everything was fine soothed him and he agreed.

This time Mick drove out braced for the man's wrath and the confines of the car felt tight and stuffy. Toshi hadn't been so comfortable with Mick going alone this time, he'd paced and fussed and wanted to go with him. It wasn't safe or practical and he'd known it but it had taken a lot of talk to convince him to stay home. That didn't mean Mick didn't wish Toshi could go with him or that Andy or Alec weren't too busy to ride along. It wasn't just knowing that Rez would be pissed at him but it was seeing the man so worn down, so ill looking that frightened Mick. Toshi could easily be like that and it was a reminder that chilled Mick and made him want to lock the half breed in a room and force feed him until he'd fattened up.

There were less children out on the lawns at this time of day, it was still morning and there were classes to attend but Mick still drove carefully and brought the car up to the medical center. He wasn't surprised when Rose met him at the door again, a small zippered travel bag over a shoulder and a smile on her face.

"Amun, did you have a pleasant drive?"

"Quite." He nodded and let her pull him into a hug. "Going somewhere?"

"Oh, goodness no, Rez's things all packed up. He's ready to go but still out under the trees." She handed the bag over to Mick and watched as he carefully tossed it into the front seat. "First, Mike wants a word with you. Don't give me that look, just go and talk to the man."

He nodded. "Where is he?"

"Back of Berger Hall, the back sitting area over looks where Rez has been tucking himself away at, Mike figured you'd want to go from speaking with him to getting the poor thing home."

"Has he been any trouble?"

"None really, well, he seemed a touch unnerved by the children. One of them touched him and he about came out of his skin. Poor thing, I don't think he's ever seen a human child before and you know what a noisy bunch we have here. They all wanted to talk to him or touch him and he seemed nearly terrified of them. Cold, distant and almost hateful about humans in general but us adults he's been fine around but the kids..." She shook her head. "It would be amusing if it wasn't just so sad."

"I doubt he's ever seen a human child. I know Toshi's cousins had never seen a human at all. Things really are far too segregated."

She patted his arm. "One step at a time, dear. Now don't keep Mike waiting, he's all foaming at the mouth to get back into research mode now that he has all this new data to go on. I doubt he'll come up for air for weeks."

"Thanks Grandma Rose." He said softly and leaned in to press a kiss to the side of her face.

Berger Hall was one of the older buildings, partially used for storage now and research. It was small and not as modern and some of the space had been left open as a place to socialize and gather but for the most part it was tucked into an out of the way corner that wasn't very high trafficked. Mick had been fond of it as a boy, particularly in the early days. It was a good place to study and think and just be alone. Even as he'd grown more comfortable and explored further, the comforting smell of old books in storage and dust combined with the still feeling of the hall had drawn him back.

He found his adoptive father in the back just as promised. He'd always been closest to Mike, the man was blind to things and forgetful but he'd always been willing to stop and take a moment to listen. His other two fathers were at other communes for research but Mike had stayed close at hand, close the I/S Camp that he'd struggled to gain access to for so many years.

Mick made no effort to hide his approach and his footsteps bounced a little around the empty hallway but Mike kept staring out the window, arms folded under his chest and for once his hair was neatly pulled back and his beard trimmed. Mike never bothered with being so carefully groomed unless someone was graduating, being buried, married or other big life events and the formality made Mick nervous.

"Papa Mike?" Mick asked carefully as he approached, suddenly feeling like a boy again and caught breaking into the secure labs.

"He's been fascinated by the trees." Mike answered and nodded to the window he'd been staring out of.

Mick grew close enough to look out and see for himself that across the lawn and down a bit, just inside the tree line to the woods, sat Rez. His long purple hair was pulled back and his skin was pale against the dark earth tones of the tree he sat against. He'd half curled up at the base of one, a hand and the side of his face pressed to the bark and it looked as if he was taking a short nap. Mick knew better, he'd seen similar from Toshi and knew the man was riding out a rough craving.

"I don't know if they have very many trees in the camp." And if they did he knew Rez hadn't been allowed to spend time around them.

"Amun..." Mike kept his eyes out on world beyond the window. "I know we can be a cold people but I never thought we were cruel."

"Papa Mike...I..."

"Hush up, boy and listen."

"Yes sir."

"We get lost in the science, in the big picture of advancement and discovery and forget the very human elements that will be effected by those advancements. This process works, that man proves it does but none of us, not myself or my team, not one of us really understood the impact this would have. Not on a real human level anyway." Mike drew a breath and squared his shoulders. "That men out there has been going through hell these last couple of days but he's not once tried to give up and I'm told it's because you split his lip and gave him something to fight with."

"I don't know..."

"I'm a big enough man to admit I thought some pretty harsh things about you Amun, until Rose sat me down and...explained the situation. I'm sorry for that, sorry I doubted your motivations. We're isolated here, that's the entire point of the Commune, to allow us to work with few distractions but in this case our work can't be performed in a bubble. We still wish to do the clinic and offer this procedure to as many as we can help but I am not qualified to oversee it." Mike nodded. "The science of it yes but not the running and managing. Do you believe that Toshi-san would approve of Pia overseeing the clinic? She has the management skills and most of her work at the moment is sorting files and organizational. She's volunteered and I'm told she has more compassion and human understanding than a stone, which, apparently I lack."

His father's steady, dry, tone never wavered but Mick could hear the amusement in his voice and had to wipe a hand across his face to hide the grin it caused. "I doubt he'd object to it."

"Good. One other thing, your grandmother Rose is retiring."

Most Commune members worked until they were unable to due to illness, most dropped over dead in their labs, the announcement chilled Mick. "Oh." Was all he could say.

"She no longer has any of the younger children in her care and the older ones all understand." Mike finally noticed the tension in his son. "Oh, not like that, boy, not like that, she's fine, it's just, she wants to have a more hands on approach with this clinic. She feels she can do good helping to set up the sobriety process. So if Toshi-san holds no objection she wants to oversee it personally."

"Oh!" The relief was sudden and rushing. "I doubt it, he's quite fond of her."

"And she of him from how she speaks of him." Mike turned at last and looked his son over. The child he'd disagreed to even taking in, the child he thought that had been too far gone and required an institution and was awed again at Rose's faith and strength and love. He'd had a hand in it, yes, but she had saved the boy and fought to pull him back from wherever it was he'd been lost in. It was a powerful lesson on never giving up on anyone, one he hoped his son could pass on the broken, abandoned man that was trying to make it another hour out under the trees.

He smiled and brushed some of his son's hair back from his eyes before pulling him into a hug. "I'm sorry I doubted you for even a moment, Amun."

It was held in his father's arms, tucked in the awkward almost bear like hug, that Mick finally understood the man had groomed and fussed and cleaned up just to say he was sorry. He closed his eyes and shook his head a little bit at the oddities of his family. "Nothing to be sorry for." He muttered as Mike slapped his back lightly and broke off the hug. "I couldn't explain in front of Rez without it undoing what had to be done."



"I should have trusted you."

"It's okay." He grinned. "Now, anything I need to know before I take him home? Toshi's about climbing the walls in nerves."

"Nothing you don't already know of and we're a call away. Day or night, if there's any trouble we'll be over."

"Thanks Papa Mike." Mike just smiled and patted Mick's shoulder again and turned and wandered away, back into the mostly empty hall. Which left Mick alone to go deal with Rez and nothing left to use to stall longer.

The back door was as stiff and heavy as he remembered but it opened and Mick held it as it tried to slam shut. It was tricky and he knew not to let it go because the heavy thudding closing would let anyone in the building know someone had come or gone. It was an old habit but he eased it back, drew a breath and crossed the wide lawn to the tree line.

He stopped several paces away from where Rez still lay, curled partially on and around the old tree. "May I join you?"

"Depends." Rez muttered without opening his eyes.

"On?"

"On whether you're going to hit me again or not."

He wanted to comfort and explain but Rez didn't need to be patted on the head and told it would be okay and he knew the man would never feel a sense of safety around him the way Toshi did. "Depends." He answered.

Rez cracked open his eyes and stared up at the human. "On?"

"On whether or not you're going to be a sniveling cry baby again."

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Chapter Eighteen

"I'm too miserable to snivel." He shut his eyes again and leaned against the tree again.

"Breathe." Mick said softly as he came closer and sat down on the grass next to where Rez was sprawled.

"What?"

"Breathe, steadily, long breaths not short ones. I know it's hard when you're hurting but it helps the cravings pass quicker."

"How the fuck would you know?" He hissed back.

"I've had a crash course in helping someone with Shine withdrawal, shut up and breathe, it'll pass."

Rez was too sick to debate it much and he was willing to try almost anything. So for once, he shut up and tried to get his breathing to slow down and deepen. It took a little effort but bit by bit it started to listen and as it did, some of the cramping pain eased. By the time he thought he had solid control of his breathing, the worst of the current craving had passed. He'd be damned before he admitted it though.

"What is it you want? We don't need to talk and play at being nice to just get me back to the camp."

Mick glanced about him, the back of the old stone building with its grass that always seemed just a touch too long and in need of trimming, the old wide trees that stood in line like an advancing army toward the manicured campus. "This was my favorite place when I first arrived here. I was pretty hurt and couldn't get far but no one really ever comes back here."

"And we're supposed to what? Bond over liking the same tree?"

"No." Mick glanced down. "You don't have to like me."

"Good."

"But I am part of Toshi's life and if you have any respect for him, you'll make some effort to get along with the people he cares for. He's not just dumping you off somewhere, he's bringing you to live with us." He tried to catch Rez's eye but the man wasn't willing to look directly at him. "I've read your file."

"So?"

"I wasn't going to." But he had and it hadn't been mere idle curiosity. He'd wanted to know how to maybe reach the man but the file had provided few clues. "Your mother was an addict, she sold you to the Red Moon when you were six."

Rez shrugged. "Happens, better than starving to death."

"Shine killed her, it's close to killing you, it's killed too many people."

"And what? I'm supposed to be some beacon of hope? Some bright example? I can't do that, I don't even know if I can get through today!"

"But you're trying to, and that's more than anyone's had. Toshi isn't expecting you to be perfect just to try." Rez's file had been difficult to read. It listed misbehavior and punishments, sometimes harsh punishments for small offenses and for too young of a child. It listed his attempts in the first few years to run away, to try to find his mother and how they'd failed. The file had been clinical, cold, but hidden nothing and it even listed how much Shine Rez used, how many calories he ate a day, how many humans he attended to and how much profit he actually produced for the house. He had been owned, far more than someone bought into another house, Rez had never had a means of complaint or protest and had spent his life doing whatever it was he'd been told to do with the Shine used to make that an acceptable choice.

"Look. You don't need to like me, even a bit, I don't expect you to. I just wanted you to know, it doesn't matter. I'll do my job to the best of my skills for you or Toshi or anyone else in his household, even if they don't like me or I them." He done enough research to know that the bottom rung of I/S society was the Shine addicts and among the Shine addicts, those that whored themselves were about as low as someone could get. None got clean, and how others would react to Rez now was unknown. Mick just wanted it clear that he wouldn't tolerate anyone threatening or harming Rez the same way he would anyone threatening Toshi, Alec or Andy.

The meaning wasn't lost on Rez. He dropped his eyes and wasn't quite sure how to respond. "I like the trees here." He said at last and knew it made no sense but he was going to really miss the trees. "I've never seen real trees before." He sighed and glanced up to the human and figured he was decent enough looking as far as humans went. "Sakura-sama shouldn't be with you. He should be with one of his one."

"He's as much human as I/S."

Rez shook his head. "I don't like you, you're a prick."

"Fair enough so long as we can work together I'm fine with that." Mick stood now that he was fairly certain the worst of the man's current craving had retreated. "Car's waiting, they'll be more police out in a few hours, we should get going."

And like Mick or not, Rez stood up and nodded because he was used to doing as he was told. Only, now, there was no pleasant afterglow of the Shine rewarding him for being a good boy. That would take some getting used to and he found as he followed Mick back around the side of the building and onto the campus proper that it bothered him a little to just so blindly obey. That would take some getting used to as well.

The trip was pleasant, if silent, and Mick kept it that way. He stayed within all traffic laws and didn't do anything stupid. They made it back in good time, between the morning rush and the evening scurry to get home, a time when Mick knew from first hand experience that most of the cops were willing to take things a touch more easy. Rez had no travel papers but as a worker of the Red Moon, he'd been allowed to attend private homes for short lengths of time, to go to clubs and out with his human companions, all of which had to stay within a set radius of the camp and they'd well broken that rule.

So he breathed a little easier when they grew closer to the Yards, knowing that even if they were stopped now Mick could wiggle out of any reporting to the Committee or arrests. Everyone knew of him now, and knew he was working with Toshi and the I/S community and for good or ill his face and name had been as splattered over the news reports and tabloids. He could brush Rez off as simply picking the man up and returning him to the Camp, or some other barely believable lie. Taking Rez to the Commune had been a risk but it was one he'd been happy to take on, that didn't mean he wasn't equally happy to be back home.

"McKale-san." A tall, well muscled Incubus said as he opened Mick's door. "Welcome home."

"Thank you Etta. You'll see to the car?"

"Of course, sir."

It didn't miss Mick's notice that the man didn't open the door for Rez and when the slender man crawled from the back seat Etta eyed him like an offensive bug. Rez kept his eyes steady, didn't back down but it seemed false and forced. If Rez had looked strung out and fragile before, he looked positively pathetic now and the only small encouragement was that Etta's look softened if only just a fraction.

"Everyone home?" Mick questioned trying to pull Etta back a little while the doubt was still there, knowing if the man was allowed to think to long he'd wind back up on trashy, worthless, shiner whore instead of the sad, half dead, broken man feeling.

"Alec-san is over at the build site, with a guard on him as requested. Andy-san is securely inside."

"Good, thank you." Mick had been forced to talk Alec and Andy to travel about the yards with an escort and he'd been happier if those guards could follow them into the city as well. They were becoming too high profile now, too well known both in the Camp and out and that made them targets of more than just paparazzi. Alec had been willing to give in because he hoped it would make Toshi balk less at the guard but Andy fussed every time he was followed. He spared one glance to make sure Rez was following and had his bag with him but after that he ignored the man.

Up they went to the apartment and inside, the door was locked because it was assumed no one unauthorized could make it so far without a horrible fuss. It made Mick nervous but the point was a valid one. There was no keypads, no modern security, in the building and a key could easily be removed from someone and far more quietly than having to full out storm the building. Is someone was going to come for Toshi, Mick wanted fair and good warning.

"Welcome home sweet checks." Andy called out from where he was sprawled on the sofa, swatches of fabric and paint scattered around blue prints and sketches. "I see Captain Cute Bunny is back safely."

"Be nice, Andy."

"Always!" He glanced up and tried to look innocent but it was a struggle. Rez looked sick, he looked like he'd been really sick and even in spite of that, the man was sexy as hell. "He's up on the roof, asked that I send you and Bouncy Bunny there up to join him."

"Alright." Mick nodded. "May as well leave the bag here, we've made up a room for you in the apartment."

Rez nodded and dropped the mostly empty travel bag to the floor, leaving it just where it fell and not caring if it was in the way. He gave the human on the sofa a look that the other workers at the Red Moon knew was trouble and all he earned in reply was a teasing quirked smirk. There would be time later to establish his place in his new house but now he was expected to follow and behave and Mick didn't seem willing to wait for him so he hurried after.

Rez had always known there was a corner of the Red Moon's roof that had a flower boxes and beds but he'd never been allowed up there and he knew a lot of the buildings in the camps had them but again, he'd pretty much been kept to one building his entire life and hadn't had a great many chances to explore. So the green growth and beauty of so many plants growing from boxes and planters and arranged into walk ways and groupings caught him a little off guard. It wasn't the large trees he'd been so drawn to at the Commune but it was green and smelled alive

and fresh. It felt vaguely wrong that he was allowed up there but he figured so long as he followed Mick, it would be allowed.

Mick heard voices coming from the open patio like section the guards had made that had hosted his family for their on the spot get together. Since one of the voices was distinctly Toshi's he lead them toward it and wasn't surprised to find his lover crouched down near one of the larger garden boxes ruffling across some of the plant's leaves but what did surprise him was the older man crouched down beside him.

It was someone Mick didn't know but the man was an I/S, his eyes were huge and dark orange. His hair was pulled sedately back into a respectable tail and bound at the level of his shoulders but it wasn't just wavy, it had loose curls in it, the first I/S Mick had ever seen with anything other than straight to slightly wavy hair. The older man's face was lined with age and most of his hair had gone white with a few clumps and strands of pale green betraying it's color from his youth. For an I/S to look so old, he was old indeed, they tended to not age for a long time.

"We're home." Mick announced but he doubted either man had missed their arrival.

Toshi glanced up and felt some of the tension drain away. "We heard the car, everything went well?" He stood and bent to catch the older man's elbow and help him rise stiffly back to his feet without being asked.

"No problems what so ever."

Toshi nodded. "Mick this is Bernstein-sensei. He was my tutor as a young man."

Mick bowed a little to the elder man. "Pleasure to meet you."

"And you young man, and you, we hear so many stories..."

"Bernstein-sensei as hand picked by my grandfather, he's a good man."

"No, no, your grandfather, that was a good man!" The man nodded. "Does my old heart good to see you and Sakamoto-dono haven't fallen far from that tree."

"Bernstein-sensei has been a teacher for his entire life, he learned from his mother who was a professor before she became an alpha. My grandfather always said there was none better or more trustworthy than Bernstein-sensei."

"Was an honor, truly an honor to serve. Too many were all nervous about trying to teach a zorkia but I knew better."

Toshi bowed his head a little. "Sensei? This is Rabin Rez, he's your new student."

"What?" Rez blurted out.

"Sensei has graciously agreed to come out of retirement to over see the teachers we're bringing in for the guards but I've requested that he personally over see your education, Rez-san. For the time being, your only job requirement is to attend his daily lessons, learn well and cause Sensei no trouble. From your file, your education in practical matters is lacking and we all must be examples. Education is a foundation of any society and I will not have any member of my house be ignorant."

"Your Grandfather always valued learning." The older I/S nodded.

"Do you understand Rez-san?"

Rez nodded and held his tongue, knowing it wasn't a great deal to ask but also knowing it was going to be a horrible failure.

"Good, Sensei is aware of your current condition and will be sensitive to your need for rest and breaks. Your start tomorrow, up here and you'll be in Sensei's care until he releases you for the day. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, Andy has set up a room for you. You should go settle in, get some rest." It was a clear dismissal and Toshi meant it that way.

Rez just nodded, held in the sharp retort he knew he didn't dare say and turned to leave the garden by the same way they'd come in at.

The older I/S stayed serious looking until the door to the roof shut behind Rez and only then did he chuckle. "I didn't believe it was possible to meet a soul more stubborn and ornery than you Sakura-sama but I've just been proven wrong."

"I'm sorry, I hope he won't be too difficult."

The man waved it off. "I've dealt with worse."

"I'm sorry to have disturbed your retirement but I couldn't think of anyone that I could trust more with him. Or with keeping the means to his recovery quite for the time being." The last thing Rez needed was everyone knowing he was a test subject and watching him to fail or succeed.

Sensei patted Toshi's arm in a fatherly way. "Is no bother, no bother, all I do is make a fuss of myself to my grandchildren these days and play checkers with the other old folks. It'll be good to tackle one last challenge."

Toshi shook his head. "Challenge indeed."

"So you were Toshi's tutor?" Mick asked carefully, he'd never given it any thought before.

"For eleven years, started when he was oh this tall." The man held an old, gnarled hand out at about knee level over the ground.

"Mick..." Toshi warned already knowing where his lover was going.

All it did was make Mick grin. "I'm sure you're filled with stories I'd love to hear..."

"Mick!"

The old man laughed and his eyes sparkled with mischief.

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Chapter Nineteen

Rez was reluctant to leave the pretty garden but really, he didn't expect it to be open for his enjoyment. It was enough that he'd been allowed to see it and well, even as new as he was to the house he'd been trusted to return to their rooms unescorted. There was a small moment to pause and think about trying to run while they were so trusting. Things looked safe and promising and it did seem like he was in a far better situation than before but looks so often were deceiving. Now would be the time to get out and away and well from there he didn't know but away and have a chance of maybe even a few days or weeks of independence.

It was just a passing thought. He couldn't Shine again, using would only drop him back to where he'd started and that wasn't a pleasant thought. He had no family to try to reach or see, no friends to shelter him, no where to go. There was really nothing out there worth the risk to find and that was all assuming he could get out of the building. He was pretty sure the guard had orders to keep him inside and while he could, maybe, bribe his way out or sneak out, they wouldn't be pleased when they found him.

There just was no point but that didn't mean he didn't think about it. He was too tired to try, to care, any more, to tired to risk pissing off his new owner and being sent back to the Red Moon. That would be horrible, not just because he'd be scorned and beaten and humiliated but because now he couldn't Shine and facing his trained profession sober was more than he could stand. It was just easier to do as he was told and go back to the apartments he'd been shown.

Which also meant going back to that annoying, odd, human and that had him frowning even before he got the door open and made it inside. Sure, he'd dealt with far worse people, for less pleasant but he had no choice there, that had been his job and so far his job didn't seem to include being nice to his new room mate. That meant he didn't have to back down and with Mick-san no longer acting as his baby sitter it also meant he no longer had to blindly and silently take the teasing the slender man tossed his way.

"You missed me, admit it. You just nearly died of a broken heart being denied the sight of me for a moment longer and rushed back here." Andy teased without looking up. He knew the people he lived with and knew how they opened doors and walked and the footsteps didn't belong to them.

"Fuck off."

"Ooo promises." Andy wiggled his eyebrows but finished going over the paperwork before he glanced up. "Such a snotty brat! Don't worry, I forgive you and I'll show you your room anyway." He yawned and stretched and stood up but the handsome stranger just stood there. "Well, get your bag, you're not cute enough for me to play bell hop to."

He picked up the bag but really wanted to smack the small case into the annoying man's head.

"Kitchen's back there, it's stocked and we try to have something on hand. Doubt you know how to cook." Andy hinted wistfully, it wasn't that he minded being the only one in the apartment with any creative skills at turning food into dinner but he liked being spoiled. The look Rez gave him

made it clear the man didn't cook, didn't care to and didn't like the idea of learning. "Well then, Toshi and Mick's room, Alec's, mine." He pointed out as they passed doors. "Hall closet has bed linens but your bed is smaller so you've your own. Bathroom is communal, there and here we are back here. I know it's pretty crappy but there isn't anything back here so you'll have some privacy." He pulled open the door.

The large closet made a small room but he'd had it painted in a shade of blue that he knew was soft and especially nice for I/S eyes. They'd re-hung the door so it swung outward and removed the storage shelf. In its place He'd had them build in a cupboard recessed into the wall and also had them install the small, dim, blue night lights the I/S community so favored. Andy had found the smaller than normal futon and the soft sheets and blankets for it, had a small fan to move the air mounted on a swinging arm to the wall and topped it all off with a pale wood lap desk that folded its chrome legs up and then could be hung on a slot in the wall out of the way.

Andy glanced over to where the newest arrival stood, staring at the small room with a blank expression. "I know it's not much but we're out of space. It was this or bunking up with me."

Rez snorted at that idea. He'd never had his own room before, he had a room he worked from sure but they all slept in bunks in a common room. It wasn't the idea of sharing space that worried him but the idea of sharing space with the guards when he knew he wouldn't be welcome.

"My thoughts exactly, so it was here or toss you down to sleep with the guard."

"This is fine." He finally admitted, actually, quietly pleased with the small secure space.

"Well, I'm glad his majesty approves." Andy sighed and waved down the hall. "I know it's not convenient but I turned the next closet down into yours. If you need anything that I forgot to buy let someone know." He folded his arms over his chest and raised an eyebrow. "Questions?"

Rez just shook his head, unwilling to pick a fight when his knees were starting to tremble and the tight, hungry feeling of a craving was creeping up on him.

"Good, I'm back to work." It wasn't easy being indifferent or cold to Rez, the man looked like a kicked puppy but Andy tried to tell himself that half of the sad look was simply the horrid chance in the man's coloring. He just looked more innocent, younger and more vulnerable with such springtime combination of almost artificial purple and pink.

"whatever." Rez muttered to himself or to Andy's retreating swish of a walk as he soared back to the front room and the work he'd been distracted from.

The hallway did seem kind of removed from the rest of the apartment, fairly far from the other bedrooms and closer to the bathroom than anything else. Oddly, Rez liked that sense of being alone. The only times he'd ever been alone were between clients and the hours at the Commune that he'd slipped away to sit alone under the trees. The idea that he could go into the room, small or not, and just shut the door and be alone seemed like grand luxury.

So much so that he was shy about actually going into the space and he used the mention of the closet to stall. He picked up his bag and moved to the next door, uncertain if it was the right one but sure enough inside was shelves and a bar that clothing hung from. On the back of the door hung a couple of hooks, one held a thick towel and another an even thicker robe. Slippers and shoes lined up along the floor, underwear and socks were neatly folded in small stacks on the shelves. There was a small woven basket and in it was a good selection of toiletries all unscented and the things an I/S would buy, not the stinky crap humans tended toward. He picked across it a little and found little to complain about the selections.

The same could be said for the clothing. He was surprised to find so many things and the vast



majority were comfortable and casual. There was only one outfit that he could wear out for an evening and a couple of pairs of dress slacks and nice shirts but the majority by far was awfully informal. Off work clothes his mind labeled them and was surprised by that, surprised that he really wasn't going to be dressed up and showed off, or provided as entertainment.

He'd have to worry about that later, maybe someone had made a mistake in buying his clothes. That seemed more likely but he started to feel the craving creeping over him and knew he was going to get really sick really soon. It was easier to not think about it all and he dropped his bag inside the closet, turned off the light and shut the door. He'd unpack it later, later when he could breathe and move again and not feel like he was about to keel over.

Later seemed like a small eternity away but he staggered back to his small room, his room and kicked off his shoes. There was a small shelf just above the futon to place them on and he was grateful for the thoughtfulness. It was small but it was plenty of space to stretch out in. Even if he couldn't have it would have been okay because he could shut the door and be alone. He would have tolerated far more just to be able to do that and as he lay down and tried to stay steady during another miserable craving he turned the lights out and let himself curl up, alone.

He must have drifted from the misery of struggling with a craving and trying to remember why he wanted to be sober to light sleep because he tossed an arm out and it hit the wall and woke him up. In that instant of waking he didn't know where he was, a sensation that had happened before, often really, but one that had never bothered him while he was drugged half way to oblivion. His new reality sunk in slowly and he lay there, alone, and it felt too much like a dream.

There was no thought to running away now and he shook his head at his own foolishness. He knew his place and this was far, far better than a person of his place ever managed to find. He shouldn't be thinking about running away, he should be trying his damndest to make them happy so he could stay. Because when he boiled it all down, he wanted to be sober, desperately, deeply wanted it. He'd never wanted to use and had never liked Shinning but it had been the only thing that got him through the day. Now, life was far more scary but he had a shot at being free if only of the drug and that was something no one ever had. He was a fool to run away from that.

So, he wanted to be sober and he wanted a chance at a new life and he'd made up his mind that he was in the best situation he could have found. After all, in a few years, maybe a few months, he wouldn't have been profitable for the Red Moon any longer and they'd declare his debt paid in full and turn him loose. That would have dumped him out on the street with nothing but the clothes on his back, no money, no food, no Shine, no place to stay. He'd heard stories about the people he'd seen turned loose, about how quickly the drugs consumed them or how they quickly were devoured by the violence in other clubs or in the Yards. Most made it a few months but he'd never heard of anyone that had lasted more than a year and he was close to that, he knew he was and he wasn't ready to die, not yet at least.

Staying meant he had to figure some things out and he sat up with a yawn and a stretch and no clue what time it was. His legs still felt weak but he got on his feet and opened his door, the hall outside was empty but he picked up the sound of music, soft and low, drifting in the series of rooms. Music and the smell of coffee which made him crinkle his nose and shake his head.

Step one was to unpack the small travel bag his things had been brought home in. He found the closet well laid out and it even had a small bag for dirty laundry. This time he searched the small room a little bit more carefully, wondering if he'd just missed instructions or if they really were lacking but this time turned nothing up. Which meant he had to go receive them in person, from the human, and that was something he wasn't looking forward to.

There was a small blessing, the front room only had one human and he found him, the coffee and the softly playing music sitting at the table. "Orwick-san?" He waited until the blonde man glanced over before he knelt and bowed, formally and properly. "Sir?"

Alec was so startled that he actually sat there, stunned and speechless for a good minute. "Rez-san, please, don't do that." He finally managed to scold.

"But..." Rez glanced up and then quickly around the room but they were alone there wasn't anyone else about that he could see or sense. "You are in charge of Sakura-sama's house, correct?"

He'd never thought about it so formally. "I guess so." Alec agreed but that agreement only prompted another bow, this time Rez's forehead actually did touch the floor. "Stop that. We're not so formal, I know Toshi doesn't want that. Please, Rez, come have a seat?"

Rez nodded but he was clenching his jaw so tightly he couldn't have spoken. It about killed him to offer such respect to a human but if that was what was required, he'd do it. It felt wrong to stand let alone come and take a chair beside the human, worse, the strong coffee made his nose twitch and he had to turn away and sneeze.

"Bless you!"

"I'm sorry!" He apologized as soon as he could.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot." Alec grinned and tried to be disarming but it didn't seem to be working. He glanced about the table, found a folder that wouldn't be harmed by the steam and set it over his mug, hopefully sealing in the smell of the bitter brew. "Toshi can't stand it either, I try to sneak a mug while he's away. You were so quiet I forgot you were home. What can I do for you?"

Rez kept his eyes lowered but it did surprise him that the human not only knew about how vile the brew smelled but had done anything to limit its smell. "Sir, when will I receive instructions sir?"

"Instructions?"

"Rules of the household sir."

"Oh, well...." Alec glanced around. The sofa was still a small corner of chaos from Andy and the kitchen had dirty dishes waiting to be washed. "Well....try to pick up after yourself, we do have someone come in and do most of the cleaning but still. I know Toshi will want to make sure you're eating, he's still struggling with that himself but otherwise I believe he just wants you to focus on your studies."

Rez clenched his jaw so tightly he thought the bones might break.

"But that isn't what you were looking for...." He sighed. "Honestly, Rez-san, just tell me what you need and I'll see about it."

"A clothing sheet sir."

Which didn't clear anything up for Alec. "I still don't understand."

"A list of what Sakura-sama prefers I wear for what occasion and when, the sheet will track use and record damage of his property."

For the second time in as many minutes, Alec sat stunned silent and unable to think of what to say. His first thought was that it was a joke but Rez looked deadly serious and he hadn't raised his eyes up once since he'd joined him at the table.

"Rez-san, the clothes are yours. I think Andy did a decent job picking things but really if you hate something or would like something else it's easily arranged. In fact we should take you out soon to pick up some more, we just wanted to give you the chance to get things you preferred."

"Sir? I don't understand."

Alec had read the files that Toshi had brought home about Rez. He'd noticed mention of damage to clothing and other property and the sum in his behavior records but it hadn't made a great deal of sense why something silly like a missing sock would be so carefully noted. If he understood right, Rez had never even owned his own clothing before, that everything he'd worn had been property of the house he'd belonged to and as such had been monitored and tracked as any other inventory would be.

"Rez, you aren't property anymore. No one in Toshi's house is owned. The clothing is yours, it belongs to you. Wear what you like when you like and if you need other things or more or replacements, so long as you're part of Toshi's house we'll see to it." Huge pink eyes darted up and Alec who was used to being around I/S was shocked at how easily the startled fear could be read in Rez's eyes. "This isn't a trick or a game or a test, Rez-san."

"I don't understand." He heard himself whisper. He sat there, feeling a little light headed and sick to his stomach. "I am part of Sakura-sama's house, yes?"

"Yes as much as any of us are."

"But..."

Alec sighed. "Toshi's family never owns anyone, no one works for them or lives with them unwillingly. It's that way in most houses, Rez-san, more so here, we're more like a loose family. Just, be yourself, stop biting your tongue to be nice to me because you're not going to be punished if you don't bow." Alec grinned but the pink eyes stayed lowered. "The clothing is yours and for now all Toshi wants is for you to learn and heal and rest. Later? I don't know what he has in mind but there will be work for you and a wage and you'll be free to come and go or find work elsewhere if you want but we'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Rez shook his head, overwhelmed.

"Don't take my word for it, ask Toshi yourself."

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Chapter Twenty

"No, I'm not debating that, the clinic needs to be opened to everyone but do you really think it's a good idea to fund it for any human that wants to come to the Yards?" Mick shook his head and opened their bedroom door. They'd spent the afternoon looking over the site that was most likely going to become the medical clinic, pending Yasun's agreement. The space would require serious work but it had plenty of room for growth and even for apartments for any of the volunteer doctors to stay in.

"We need to foster as much normal human I/S interaction as possible. The vast majority would never accept the care, don't worry and if it has cost overruns we'll set up a foundation." He nearly tripped over Mick, he'd glanced down as they'd gone into their bedroom and hadn't noticed that the other man had simply stopped mid way into the room. "What?"

"We've company." Mick pushed the door the rest of the way open and stepped to the side.

Rez knelt at the foot of their futon, his hair was loose. He wore only a pair of plain black boxers and a black cotton shirt with a deep v neck line. There was such a contrast to him, dressed in understated provocative fashion but his too skinny limbs and too bright coloring gave him a wickedly innocent look. There was no hint to how long Rez may have knelt there, nothing else in the room appeared to have been altered or changed.

"Rez-san?" Toshi questioned but he moved easily into the room, touching Mick's arm softly to let him know it was okay. "Was there something you needed?"

"Sakura-sama." Rez bowed. "No instructions were left, I understand."

He had overlooked leaving instructions deliberately, he hadn't wanted Rez to feel obligated to do anything. "No, none were left. It's late, Rez, you should try to rest if you can."

There was no way Rez could approach his new owner without express permission. Toshi wasn't just the head of his house, he was a Sakamoto and as such he shouldn't be touched without express approval. That didn't mean he was going to fail to please him, he had a place and even if Toshi may have been shy about asserting that didn't mean he didn't know what had to be done. It was worth it, even if he hadn't been showered with kindness and consideration.

Rez didn't so much as stand as unfold. The natural I/S grace seemed even more fluid with the slender man and if it was a strain to go from kneeling to standing straight with smooth fluid actions none of it showed. He didn't wait, there was no point to being coy, as soon as he was standing he took the few steps forward. When he raised his hands up he saw the human flinch but he ignored that, caught the sides of the human's face and slipped in close.

Once, in college, Andy had come up to him and full out kissed him in front of a particularly jealous and possessive boyfriend just to piss his boyfriend off. It had been such a sudden and bold move that Mick had stood startled and surprised and let himself be kissed, knowing his boyfriend would be pissed but too stunned to protest. He swore that wouldn't ever happen again but there he stood, in his small bedroom, being kissed silly by someone that obviously knew how to kiss someone silly.

Armfuls of Rez wasn't necessarily a bad thing. He was lean but not soft or feminine feeling. Clouds of fine, silky soft purple hair floated around them. His kiss tasted like oranges and his hands were strong on Mick's face, holding him in place.

Being kissed by another I/S would have been shocking enough but that it was Rez left Mick

stunned. The man hated him, seriously, deeply, disliked him but his kiss held no level of distaste, nothing at all to give away his disdain. If Rez had tried to kill him, Mick wouldn't have been the least bit startled. A kiss was the last thing he expected. Mick opened his eyes and tried to glance around the floating veil of lilac bright purple hoping to see something from Toshi to tell him what to do but he couldn't see his lover.

He couldn't see Toshi but he heard the man, it was an angry, low sound, almost like a growl that Mick felt more than he really heard. That was the only warning, one instant Mick was trying to gently push Rez away while trying to tell his body that kissing the very pretty man wasn't something to be happy about and the next his arms were empty. Toshi had Rez by the back of the neck like he would pick up a kitten and physically yanked the man away. Almost before Mick could react, Toshi had Rez slammed into the nearest wall, an arm twisted behind the man's back.

"Don't you touch him!" Toshi snarled and twisted the arm further. "Don't you ever touch him!"

The reaction startled Mick, he knew Toshi was having difficulty dealing with his jealous side but he never expected the man to become violent over it. It was easy to forget that Toshi could fight, quite well, and even though he seemed so gentle and harmless really could do a great deal of damage if he wanted to.

Right now it seemed like he wanted to break Rez's arm and the paler man whimpered a little and had gone limp under the assault. There was something dark and horrible in Toshi's crystal blue eyes, something that startled Mick, frightened him and oddly aroused him at the same time.

"Baby..." Mick put a hand on Toshi's shoulder, light and gently. "Don't, it's okay..." For a moment Mick wasn't sure Toshi was listening or if he was willing to stop without breaking the other man's arm but he felt the muscles of the lean shoulder under his hand loosen a little and with a low, dark snarl, Toshi let Rez go and passed a few steps away.

Toshi shook his hair back, his fangs out and sharp. Mick stood between him and Rez now and he had that stubborn look to his eyes. As much as he wanted to drag Rez to the bathroom and make him wash the taste of Mick from his mouth with some pungent nasty soap, he could see that Mick would never allow that. The depths of his sudden and horrible jealous anger shocked him and he was glad Mick had stopped him.

"Mick, please, leave us for a moment." Toshi forced out, struggling to sound calm.

Mick glanced from his lover to where Rez had landed against the wall. The man had simply slid down it when Toshi had released him and he'd made no effort to get out of the way. He stepped closer to Toshi and leaned in to whisper very softly. "You're not going to hurt him..."

"No." Toshi answered around a shaky breath. "I'm not but you're mine..."

There was that dark, possessive something in those clear eyes again and this time they were locked onto his own eyes. Mick shivered and nodded dumbly. He'd seen hints of that look, enough of it anyway to know that neither of them were going to get much sleep. The look was strong enough that he swallowed hard and simply left the room with no further warning.

Toshi had to remind himself that Rez didn't know better, take another long slow breath and only then did he try to speak. "Rez-san, I'm sorry."

Rez shook his head and stayed where he'd been placed. "No, Sakura-sama, I'm sorry, deeply sorry, please forgive me I didn't know. If I'd known I never would have which is no excuse, I'm sorry."

"Known?"

"That he smelled right to you."

"How did you..."

Rez just smiled softly. "I've seen it before. Anyone touching him without permission, worse, another I/S? Thank you for not breaking my arm."

The soft voice and sudden information that maybe his jealous would be worse with an I/S took the last of the anger from Toshi. He sighed and sat down on the edge of the futon. "Rez-san, we must talk."

Rez nodded and turned to put his back to the wall instead of staying half curled up against it. "As you will."

"I meant it when I said I wasn't taking you into my house to be a whore, mine or anyone else's. If you wish to take up with someone, so long as it causes no trouble I don't care but you're not required to. I don't want you thinking anything of the like, not any longer, not about me or anyone. Understand?"

The idea seemed absurd and Rez sat uncertain if it was a test or not.

"You're going to have to trust me, Rez-san."

"I do!" He sat straighter. "You're Sakura-sama, of course I trust you! I just..." he dropped his eyes. "I just want to please you. I don't know what to do, there's no instruction sheet, I don't know what to do." The words came out more desperate than he'd intended.

That tone of fear made Toshi's stomach turn over, he remembered what that felt like too clearly, what it felt like to be willing to do anything to avoid punishment. "The only thing you can do to anger me, Rez-san, is lie to me. I have too many people deferring to me because of who my grandfather and uncle are or who my father is. I need people who will be honest with me, people who will be my friend. I don't expect you to be always polite or gentle or proper, I expect you to be yourself. I want you to tell me to shut up if I'm being stupid. Alec does it, Mick does it and now I have Andy too. It's no use to anyone if you won't speak your mind. You're not stupid, I wouldn't have picked you if you were and I'm going to need your input. I...I want to make things better for those of us working the clubs but I..." Toshi sighed and shook his head.

"The club I was held by had me on so much Shine my memories are a little foggy. I need your experience, your thoughts, to get this to work. I need to be able to trust that if you've an idea that you'll speak up. Does that make sense to you Rez-san?"

The vulnerability surprised him as much as the confession and it hit him like a fist to the stomach that Toshi really did mean to take him not just into his house but his household, his family. That set off a tremble of excitement, hope and cold harsh fear into the pit of his stomach.

"Sir? I'm not a nice person, sir." Rez confessed. "I can behave but I'm not good."

Toshi grinned at that. "Nice is different than good."

"Sir?"

"Never mind, look, I don't want you to behave or be nice or good I just want you to figure out who you are and be that man. I know about the squabbling between you and Mick and I'd like to think you'll be able to talk so freely with me one day." He caught the shocked look that came over Rez and shrugged it off. "I'm serious. It's important to me. That's all I want from you for the time being. Study well, figure out who you are and be true to it and eat proper meals during the course

of the day.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s it.”

“Sir? The clothing…”

“Is yours.” Toshi answered firmly. “Even if you leave my house, they belong to you and you alone. Understand?”

Rez nodded but was glad his hair had fallen into his eyes and covered the look he knew was in them.

“One other thing…” He waited until he had Rez’s attention again. “Do you prefer Rez or Rabin?”

The question was the last thing he had expected. “Rez, actually.”

“Good, I prefer Toshi, Toshi-san if you must but Toshi, not Sakura-sama. Good?”

“Yes sir.”

“Now, Rez, get out of here, go watch a movie or something.” He watched Rez stand with the grace of someone held too long by a club. They’d tried to teach it to him but Toshi had been too old to really master it, too old and too stoned. “Rez?”

Rez stopped at the mention of his name and felt a sick uncertainty, knowing that he was being stopped because Toshi had to have changed his mind and wanted to take it all back. “Yes, sir?”

“I’m going to ask Alec to see to it you have some money. I want you to wait a little bit, a couple more weeks, until the cravings ease up a little but after that, I want you free to come and go as you will and some money to spend as you like. I’m sure there’s something you’d like that Andy didn’t think to get for you and if not, it’ll be good to get out of the apartment on occasion. Sound good? Can you deal with being cooped up for a few more weeks?”

He’d never, ever dreamed to hear anything like that. “I…”

“How about you let me know when you feel up to it? We could go with you the first couple of times? No shame in it, I keep Mick close by just for that reason, I don’t want to be out and catch a scent of Shine and have to deal with a craving alone. Think about it and let me know?”

“Yes sir.” Rez managed to force out, shocked numb from his new reality.

“Good, now get out of here, I’m tired.” He lied because just the thought of Mick and the memory of seeing Rez kissing his lover made his blood boil.

Rez just snorted a little, caught himself and glanced to see if the slip had pissed off his new owner. All he saw and felt from Toshi was lust over the human and amusement at him. Out in the hallway he had to slip to the side to let Mick get into the room or else the man would have knocked him down in his rush, Rez stilled his heart and rubbed at his sore shoulder. “Tired my ass.” He muttered as he wandered to see if maybe he really would be allowed to watch a movie.

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Story Home

Home

Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Twenty One

Andy had done something he normally never did, he dressed in fairly average clothing. Black Chelsea boots that had only a modest heel and black dress pants he'd owned forever. He pulled on a black spandex cotton shirt that had a high scooped neckline and was so tight it showed every contour of his chest and nipple ring. Over that he layered a pink Oxford button down shirt that he opened the top buttons to and tucked neatly into his waist under a normal black leather belt.

His hair he simply brushed out and left to fall in an unstyled style around his shoulders without even a pin or clip to hold it in place. He went light on the make up too, brushing on the most subtle of eye shadow he owned just to bring out his eyes a little and a clear very high shine lip gloss. If he'd had to wear a suit he would have done glitter and fake eyelashes and bold lipstick but the clothes weren't so formally male and he didn't need much to make the look shocking or to add his own spin to it.

Really, he should have dressed in his normal style and not cared but he was going into the city as Toshi's representative and there was already talk and gossip about the quiet half breed. Andy would be doing them all a disservice by being too normal or too wild but he had to look good. There was always a photographer that got wind anytime any of them went into the city and this time he was taking the I/S guard Mick wanted and that was going to draw notice for certain. If he was going to end up in the gossip columns he was going to look good.

His guard was a pair of I/S a man and woman and they were dressed for trouble. Mick's doing he knew, his friend had been turning the nearly informal effortless guard into a small paramilitary group and they were dressed now to convey authority and control to human eyes. It would seem unnecessary to the I/S community but Mick had been teaching them that humans responded to uniforms and when going into the city they needed every advantage they could gain.

So the pair that stood waiting for him looked sharp in their matching black combat boots, nearly police issue black cargo pants with room to move in and plenty of pockets to secure things. Both wore form fitted black shirts that had a military cut and long sleeves that tucked into leather gloves. From the very official looking belts each wore a very visible blade that was just a hair short enough to be legal to carry and Andy knew they were carrying them more to make people think twice. He'd seen how the I/S guards could fight without a single weapon, they didn't need a blade to keep him safe. Both had braided their hair back but the vivid colors were left un-muted and un-disguised just as he knew they'd have their sunglasses off for most of their little jaunt just so everyone would know what they were.

"Well." Andy grinned as he found his escort. "Don't you two look dangerous and sexy!" If they'd



liked the compliment he couldn't tell, neither one's expression changed for a moment but as he turned to gather up his own sunglasses, coat and helmet he heard them speaking softly in the pidgin slang that all I/S used when they didn't want a human to understand.

One thing Andy had learned over the weeks of living so closely with Toshi's house guard was that they did their job with clear skill and intense pride. His silly flirty comment wouldn't stop them from saving his life if some nut job wanted to hurt Toshi by hurting him but Andy also had learned that the I/S were very much human minus a few genetic mutations. They didn't have to like him to do their job but if someone was going to risk their lives for his own, he wanted to be liked.

"I'm sorry." He apologized as he pulled on gloves. "I didn't mean to offer offense." Most I/S were frightened of humans or viewed them as a necessary evil and he'd just lightly and mildly flirted with them as if there was no cultural barrier between them.

"Sir?" The man spoke for them both before they exchanged a glance. "Oh, the slang. I'm sorry, Sakura-sama said not to use it but..."

The woman grinned. "You're not as deaf as we thought."

"Well, gee, thanks, I think." Andy glanced between the pair but they had glanced to each other again and there was more to the look than just friends. "Look, I didn't know you two were a pair, I didn't mean to cause a fuss. I just..." he sighed and shrugged.

"You flirt as easily as you breath Andy-san." The man nodded back. "We've noticed."

"We aren't human, we don't..." she glanced to her partner. "Pair as you said as humans do. I just, I said how nice you look and said it was a shame we couldn't offer to share space with you, with both or either of us since you are a member of Sakura-sama's household."

"Share space..." He had to think about that one but the phrase sounded like he'd heard it before. It clicked that sharing space was the term Mick had used when talking about how Toshi's boyhood friend Tam had been sexually involved with a human woman. That they weren't lovers or in love or living together or committed to each other but that they casually shared space which had the implications of all the above with it. "Oh!" He announced when understanding sunk in and wondered if he was blushed. "Well now..."

The man bowed a little. "We meant no offense."

That made Andy grin around his blushing. They weren't actually offering to sleep with him but simply saying he looked good enough to sleep with and that made him quite tickled. "No no, flattered, truly I am very, very flattered. Wow, that may be the best offer I've had in a small forever."

"We'll be late." The woman warned but she was smiling now, surprised that the human hadn't run away from them in fear.

He waved off the warning but pulled on his coat and turned to the motorcycles. "So, which one of you cuties am I to snuggle up behind?" Now his flirting brought only shy smiles and shared looks and it felt good.

They had appointments at a half dozen stores and Andy spent the afternoon looking and making choices. Appliances took forever and trying to pry input from his guard as to what they would prefer in their own quarters, commercial grade or something that looked a little more like it belonged in a home was difficult but he eventually shooed the salesman away and got them to open up a little. They spent over an hour looking at flooring, Andy trying to juggle which grain and stain and style he liked best for about a dozen locations in the new club. In the end he

simply accepted samples of his favorites, figured his judgment was solid and took only two or three choices for each back to show Toshi. Or well, to show Alec and Toshi because Toshi so far had shown little to no preference while Alec seemed to have a good eye.

They were late to their appointment at the first furniture store and far later still to the third one they went too but Andy seriously enjoyed breezing in, looking fabulous, and having a sales staff willing to smile and do anything he wanted. It was nice having money, or representing money at the least. He finished at the third store armed with plenty of photos and upholstery swatches of furniture not only for their living space but for the guard and eventually for the staff of the club. Housing was always an issue for the I/S community and he'd yet to really hear a final tally of how many people would be living in the dorm style apartments being built onto the club but he wanted it to feel like a home and not like a work dorm. Something Toshi had agreed with completely.

So he was feeling like he'd accomplished something and gotten a lot of running done by the time the day had slipped into night and they finished up at their last stop. "So, would you two like to get dinner while we're out?" Andy asked of his guard, trying to treat them more like friends and not like an intrusion or babysitters.

"Press is here and McKale-san said to limit our time out in the city as much as we could." The woman gently answered.

Andy glanced out to where the bikes were parked and sure enough several people hovered near by, cameras tucked in hands and all looking like sharks smelling blood. "Ah well. Would have been nice and if I don't listen to Mick he spans me so I had best behave. Will they be a problem?" He nodded to the reporters. As much as it did amuse him to be stalked like a gazelle by them, it was a little unnerving as well. He was just glad they were too timid to venture into the Yards but he was willing to bet that would change once the club opened.

"No, Andy-san, they won't cause any trouble." The man answered and looked as dangerous as he really was.

Andy hoped the look alone would stop trouble. He shook his hair back and nodded. "Right then, let's go."

It was late when they got home but Andy wasn't sure anyone would be back. Alec had meetings with both Ranvier Industry folks and some of the contractors. Mick was accompanying Toshi to look at real estate and warehouses closest to the Yards. For now the property values were low and there was a thought to buy up as much as was for sale and keep I/S friendly companies that might hire from inside the camp working there. So all three or none of them could be home and either option sounded good to Andy.

He opened the apartment door and froze. Rez sat on the sofa, feet barefoot and tucked up under him, watching the tv screen and looking yummy. Somehow, in all the fuss, he'd forgotten about the man, which was only fair given how recently he was added to the household. Still, it was shocking to come home and find such a rawly sensual looking fellow just waiting for him. He remembered that he had promised to behave so he wiped the wicked thoughts and lusty look away and smiled.

It was then that soft, masculine, moans caught Andy's attention. The television screen had directional sound, so someone could sit and watch a movie and someone working at the dinning table wouldn't be disturbed. Alec had insisted upon it and the technology, while not new, was one that had made Andy laugh with amusement. He'd spent the first day stepping in and out of the sound area, surprised every time how a few feet made the volume simply disappear. It also meant that Rez had to have the movie up pretty loud for the muffled sounds to be floating out of their range.

"Rez, you dirty bunny you, watching a porno and not inviting everyone." He teased as he shook out his now helmet flattened hair and dropped the armload of files and samples onto the table.

"I'm watching the news, dickwad." Rez snapped back without looking over his shoulder to the human.

Andy glanced up and sure enough on the screen was the news. "Huh." He glanced down the hall to where the quiet moans were drifting from. "God, Toshi is such a screamer. Have to talk to Alec about making sure the club has better sound proofing. Are you a screamer too Rez? Is it an I/S trait?"

"How do you know it's him?" Rez challenged and ignored the too personal question.

"Because, cutie, I know ever sound Mick makes or doesn't make as the case may be..." He moved to sit on the arm of the sofa. "And I know quite a few of the one's Toshi makes..."

The idea that Toshi would refuse him and yet welcome the outrageous, absurd human into his bed seemed ridiculous. Rez snorted and kept watching the tv trying not to mind the other man sitting, hovering over him. "Fucking liar."

That just made him grin wider. "What's the matter sweetie? Jealous? Afraid I got something you don't?"

"Stupid, fucking, retarded human." He muttered and turned up the volume on the television to block out the teasing man on the edge of the sofa as well as the stuttering sounds of sex from deeper in the apartment.

Andy laughed and slipped from the sofa. He was hungry and feeling naughty and when he was feeling naughty he wanted to put something in his mouth. He wondered if he did lewd things with his food if it would make Rez uncomfortable, he didn't know but he was going to find out. If nothing else, he'd get a good giggle out of it.

Only, when he returned to the living room with his peanut butter and jelly sandwich he found it empty. The sofa was devoid of a snippy purple haired man and the television had been clicked off. Even the distant, muffled moaning had stopped and it left Andy alone with his sticky jelly and no one to torment.

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Story Home

Home

Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Twenty Two

He knew a large part of his annoyance at things was how crappy he was feeling. If he was being honest with himself he'd admit that he tended toward grumpy and unpleasant but he'd always justified that as an over reaction to having to be so nice to people he found distasteful. So, maybe, he was just a grumpy person and that was okay, maybe it wasn't just how sick he was feeling but the bottom line was he did not like that human idiot that kept pestering him. It wasn't one thing or the other just the man's over all attitude and mocking smart ass smirk, Andy simply rubbed Rez the wrong way and unless he was ordered to be nice to the moron he had no intention so it.

The comment about watching a porno was uncalled for, even if Rez had noticed those channels were turned on as well he certainly hadn't stayed and watched them. It was bad enough to have to hear those moans, a private porno live in the apartment. They shouldn't have bothered him, it wasn't like he hadn't spent his life listening to people getting banged into the floorboards, but it was Sakura-sama's voice making them. Worse, it was Sakura-sama moaning because of the other stupid arrogant human pet he was keeping.

For as embarrassing and shocking as it felt to hear those drifting sounds, he didn't turn the television volume up enough to cover them. In fact, since he was on a kick of being honest with himself, he had been paying more attention to those moans than the news report which was unlike him. Sounds of sex were a dime a dozen, he could hear them anywhere and really they all sounded the same but a chance to watch television, anything he wanted to watch, now that was a real treat. Instead he had put it on the most boring thing he could have picked and sat pretending to watch it with the sound of those so hungry and wanting moans floating around him.

Really, what could the human be doing? He was just a human after all and it didn't matter how good of a lay he was he was still just a human. Rez had known hundreds of humans and the handful he'd topped had just been human, bland, boring stupid humans. Nothing to inspire such vivid moans, that was for certain, and no matter how hard he tried to figure out what it could be his mind just couldn't conceive it. Didn't matter if the human smelled right to Sakura-sama he was still just a human and nothing more.

Then an idea floated into his head and it seemed crazy. What if Sakura-sama wasn't top? That seemed absurd, he had to be top, he simply had to be. Even as a half breed he was still part of the Sakamoto line, he was still a breath away from ruling them all. He was powerful and proud and strong and commanding and he had to be top. No amount of effort put into thinking about it allowed him to picture Toshi as bottom.

Except that line of thought was broken into by Andy coming home, smelling like motorcycles, leather, fresh air and annoyance. The teasing just made him want to snarl back or bite the stupid human and fill him with enough venom to make him miserable or unconscious or something. Just seeing the human made him feel like a cat with its fur petted against the grain. The moment he flounced off to another room, Rez turned the screen off and made a hurried retreat. He didn't care where Andy was going or why or if he was coming back, he had a room he could be alone in now and he didn't have to tolerate the stupidity if he wasn't feeling up to it.

Only halfway down the hallway, close to Sakura-sama's bedroom, his fragmented angry thoughts at being mocked suddenly went cold. It was bad enough that Andy was a whore that had slept with Sakura-sama's pet but to hint at having slept with Toshi himself was just wrong. Why would Toshi refuse him and then take the stupid artist to bed instead? It made no sense but it had reinforced his idea that Toshi was total top and that was it.

Until, around the area of their bedroom door, he over heard, strictly by accident because he wasn't, wasn't, trying to listen, an especially difficult to miss moan. It was shuddering and deep and something in the tone made Rez shiver in sudden and surprising lust too. The door

shuddered with a sudden impact and Rez jumped back a little, startled but the door stayed shut.

"Harder...I...ne..need it..ha.harder!" Toshi's voice whined and begged from just on the other side of the door. It twisted away into a desperate moan that sighed and shuddered on short gasping breaths.

It was like a slap across Rez's face. There was no denying that Toshi was bottom, not from that moan and suddenly he could see it. The spill of the disturbingly human black hair, the crystalline blue eyes with just the touch of Asian shape held tightly closed. All that power and authority and it was just on the other side of the door, begging to be taken harder by a human. Odd the thought wasn't repulsive and as he thought about it, as he knew what was happening just on the other side of that door, it made him shiver. Sakura-sama was being taken by a human within feet of where he stood and from the sound of things it was a wholly wonderful experience.

He reached out a hand and it glided across the smooth wood of the door. It didn't make sense, it didn't make any sense at all. Sure it sounded like he was quite pleased with the situation and the mental picture of the couple together was acceptable but why would Toshi, who could have anyone, want to bottom to a human? Yes, it sounded like it was a pleasurable time, there was no hint of fake or falsehood to the sounds that drifted out and Rez knew how to spot the difference. So there was no room to doubt it was as good as it was sounding but how could that be enough to make him want a human to take him? If he didn't detest Mick so much he might seduce the man just to find out.

With a shake of his head, Rez stepped away from the door. He was a little horny now and the sick withdrawal shivers were coming back. None of his new life made much sense and it all felt wrong, like he was breaking rules and no one noticed. Worse, he felt like shit from the withdrawals and it didn't seem to be getting any easier. But he had his own room, his own clothing, and that was something he wasn't sure he'd ever get used to either. So what if they'd turned his world upside down? It wasn't his place to say or judge and there were worse things a man like Toshi could be into then just being fucked hard against a door by a human. Far worse things and over his years Rez had seen far too many of them.

It made little difference to him how small his room was, that laying down with his arms outstretched he could brush his fingertips to the walls on either side, he could shut the door. He'd often felt like he was going to scream, the same building up of pressure and panic he felt now as a craving was clawing its way up his body. He'd never understood what that feeling really was other than simple anger and hatred until now when shutting the door and just being really alone soothed it. He'd heard humans say things like they were private people or the like and he'd never understood what that had meant until now.

Privacy didn't stop his body from cramping up into tight knots of pain and sickness as the craving crept across him and demanded he go out and find some Shine. He could taste it, when it got bad like this, sticky sweet in the back of his throat with the honey smell in his nose. When it was bad, it was only knowing that he couldn't actually Shine again no matter how much of the drug he did that kept him from going out to get stoned. It wasn't that he wanted to Shine, not really, he just would have done almost anything in those worst moments to make it stop.

When the craving finally eased down, not fully gone but manageable again, he felt sweaty and clammy and horridly thirsty. He'd have to start smuggling bottles of water into his room because it would have been nice to just open one and not have to move anywhere to get a drink. Now if he wanted to sooth the dry burning feeling he'd have to get up and cross the apartment to fetch it and while he did that, he felt shaky and sick and unhappy about it.

When he was really sick, he didn't have any true sense of time but from how empty and silent the apartment was, some time had passed. The hallway was dark but there was enough ambient light for his I/S eyes to see by. Thankfully, the hallway was silent too, no more shuddering moans and begging words slipped out to disturb his thoughts. There was a light on under Alec's door but the room was silent too so the man had retired for the evening and no one should care if he helped himself in the kitchen.

There was something oddly comforting about the industrial quality of the apartment's kitchen. If it had looked homey and proper, maybe he'd have been uncomfortable but the very institutional nature of it seemed right to him. It was, beyond his own small room, his favorite room in the apartment. He liked the matte finished coolness of the metal work surfaces, the way the pots hung neatly at hand and how the appliances hummed quietly to themselves. It just felt cool and soothing and right, which was odd given how little he ate and how little interest he had in food.

Someone had put a chalkboard up since he was in the kitchen last and scrawled in several people's handwriting was a short list of things that needed to be bought. At the bottom, written in a neat and tidy hand with the crumbly chalk was a simple message.

"Rez, eat something!" and it was signed simply "Toshi." A perfectly formed arrow was drawn to the side and sitting out on the counter was a box.

He picked it up and turned it over and found another note. "These have no taste but they're good for you, at least eat one, Toshi."

That was something he was used to. Shine stole away all interest in food, all taste and craving. He'd happily never eat if he hadn't been made to. Everyday he'd had a required amount of food he had to consume, generally processed crap that one of his owners had laughed and said looked like dog kibble. It hadn't mattered, he really couldn't taste it anyway and since he had to eat all the required amount no matter if he was at the house or out with an owner, he generally forced it down first thing and didn't worry about it. He ate with his owners if they'd required it but normally they didn't and he drank if they pressed him to but alcohol had little interest for him so long as he could Shine.

Now, Toshi had asked him to eat and he'd consider it an order unless he heard otherwise. He fished out one of the foil wrapped energy bars and tore it open. The first bite surprised him, it tasted a little sweet, like honey and he actually noticed it had a taste. It didn't taste good or bad and he didn't feel any interest in eating, but he did notice it had a flavor and that was something he wasn't used to making note of.

"Huh." He glanced to the bar in his hand and shrugged. If he could eat without hating every bite that alone was an improvement. He pulled open the fridge, found a bottle of cold water and cracked it open. Now with food and water he stood, leaning against the cool metal cabinets and consumed his solitary meal.

With it finished he tossed out his trash into it's right cans, pleased to see that Toshi for being half human separate his trash and recycled the way an I/S would, and felt a lot less sick. It was either the water or the food but the lingering pain and sickness of the withdrawals was pushed way down and he actually felt like he might be a living thing after all. He yawned and scratched his side and figured he'd try to sleep some.

Only, one of his fangs wobbled. He was shedding an old one out and now that he didn't feel so tense he'd finally really noticed it. It was quite loose too, ready to go. He knew logically he'd not be biting anyone and he knew there would be no morning inspection but old habits were hard to break. Fangs were a commodity. If management noticed one was loose they'd pull it and sell it as a bonus to one of the clients. He had a man that had owned two of his tenths for years that had a small box of shed fangs, all of them Rez's. He'd hated that box, hated seeing the trophies

of his ownership and had always done his best to lose a fang before it could be collected. They all did.

While he knew logically none of this was an issue any longer, he just couldn't shed the fang out and toss it away. Trash could be picked through and they'd always made sure they were really gone. He had always, since his tenths had been offered for sale, he'd always done as the others did. If a fang was loose enough to pull out early and management hadn't noticed, he'd pull it and flush the damned thing. It would bother him to wait for it to shed out naturally, if he wanted any peace of mind he had to go get it out and destroyed before bed. He was just grateful it was late and everyone else was in their rooms. Toshi might understand but he doubted the humans would.

Back out of the kitchen he went, stretching to get the fangs to extend so he could poke at the loose one with his tongue. It was far looser than he was used to. There were times when it had barely loosened and he'd still yanked it out but pulling them that early hurt, a lot. Once he'd pulled a fang too early and it had torn the venom duct and that would have gotten him badly punished but his owner had gotten rough with him the night before. The management hadn't been able to tell if the fang had been knocked out or if he'd pulled it and he'd gotten away with it but he'd never been so risky again.

He turned the corner to the bathroom and pulled the wood door open. It closed slowly on it's own but the lights were all on inside. More, he heard one of the showers running and smelled the humid scent of shampoo and soap. Alec's light was still on so it was a good bet that the human was catching a late shower before bed. He was still wiggling the fang, trying to work it as loose as possible when he thought he'd just check and make sure it was Alec in the shower, not, like Mick who didn't seem like the kind of man that like to be startled while nude and vulnerable.

It would be better to let whoever was in the shower know they weren't alone instead of surprising them and maybe getting hurt. Rez opened his mouth to call out but the words dried up and faded, forgotten as he saw into the tiled shower room. It wasn't Alec or Mick or even Toshi in the shower and that meant it could only be one person but it took Rez's suddenly frozen mind a moment to know who it was.

Andy was naked, which was to be expected since he was showering but without the flashy, odd, over the top clothes he looked different. There was no make up, no lip gloss, no false faces. His hair was loose and wet and stuck to his skin like flattened ribbons and looked quite ordinary. The annoying human was surprisingly fit, slender even and looked masculine and oddly sexy caught in the billowing clouds of steam.

Rez stood frozen in place as Andy turned slightly, his eyes shut under the hot water. He saw far too clearly the glint of metal piercing one nipple and the way one hand was braced so firmly against the tiled wall. The other was busy and Rez found his eyes caught on the steady, gliding motion as Andy stroked himself under the shower's stream. It so surprised him that Rez stood silent and unannounced, watching with his mouth open and tongue still pinned in place trying to wiggle the loose fang free only now he'd forgotten just why he'd come into the bathroom in the first place. While he knew he should move away he stood watching as Andy pleased himself and was unable to look away.

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Story Home

Home

Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Twenty Three

The shock of the sight froze Rez in place and it took him a long moment to shake it off. There was only one thing he could think of that would be worse than getting a hard on from catching the most annoying human ever born naked and jerking off in the shower, and that was being caught with a hard on from catching the most annoying human ever born naked and jerking off in the shower. There was only so much his pride could take, and as soon as his brain rebooted and some thought returned he scurried out of sight of the shower room.

He wanted to escape out of the bathroom, but if he encountered anyone they'd know, they'd just simply know, and that would be as bad as being caught hovering in the shower room doorway watching. That left the bathroom toilet stalls as the only semi-private place, and Rez quickly disappeared into one. He shut and locked the door behind him, which seemed like a good idea at the time but left him trapped in the small space with no idea of what to do.

But that wasn't the full truth, he knew what he wanted to do. He was hard now, aching a little, hungry. It had been days, weeks really, since he'd come last and he had been used to a lot more in the way of sexual release. A lot more, four or more times a day. Really, it was basic training to be ready for anything, and the Shine had helped with that a great deal, but still, his body was used to a certain level and that level had been drastically reduced. It didn't help either that he'd had to listen to Toshi and Mick going at it like rabid spring rabbits, or that it had sounded like they'd had such a great time at it.

That was it, it was just that he was horny and wound up because of those moans. It had nothing to do with the naked artist himself. That was it; it had nothing at all to do with the long lean lines that had been wet with clinging soap bubbles. Strong lines, not the too-slender sick look of a Shine addict, but the healthy strength of someone graceful and lean. Everything about the artist had looked slender and fit, his long legs that were far stronger than Rez had expected, the sleek neck that curved with a graceful line. Even the man's fingers were lean, long, slender, and they'd curled around his cock. It was long and slender too, in perfect proportion to his body.

It had nothing at all to do with that sight, even if Rez felt his heart beat a little faster at that memory. He loved long, lean cocks, so much more than shorter thicker ones. Girth did little for him, it just teased, tormented. A thick cock always made him feel gagged and overwhelmed, battered down but a lean, long one, that was the way to go. The lean ones always filled him, reaching deep into his body to hit all the right spots with ease and feeling oh so good in his mouth.

A momentary thought struck him, a vision of himself on his knees in that shower. The water pelting down, soaking his clothes and hair, running across his skin in teasing rivers. The smell of the human heavy in the humid air would be musky and good. He'd kneel there and drag his tongue along that lean, long length before swallowing it whole, delighting in the feel inside his mouth. The thought was strong enough that it made him light headed, he licked his lips and struggled to breath. There was no need to force his fangs down now, he was hard and wanting and needy.

It was just the new found celibacy. That was all it was. He couldn't stand humans in general, and the one in question was doubly annoying. He wasn't horny for the human, for any human, he was



just horny, but he'd be damned before he let Andy of all men bother him and he wasn't going to kneel in the shower and pleasure him. More so, he wasn't going to jerk off in a toilet stall like some undersexed boy. No, it didn't matter how much his body craved physical contact, he didn't need it. He was starting a new life and it was going to be one that didn't involve being a whore. If he wasn't going to be vulnerable to Shine and ruled by it, he wasn't going to be ruled by his libido either.

The resolution didn't solve the problem of being stuck in a toilet stall with a rather difficult-to-disguise bulge in his pants. He couldn't leave until he could meet Andy face to face without thinking about his lovely, graceful length--which wasn't a thought that was helping the situation any. It was a stupid fantasy, one brought on by kissing Mick and Toshi's possessive jealousy. He knew better, he knew humans too well but still the sounds that slipped from their bedroom undermined his better sense.

He knew humans, far better than he'd like. He'd had dozens, hundreds of men. None of them smelled as good up close, no matter what cologne they wore, they all smelled like a human, flat and flavorless. They all became grasping, demanding children, digging fingers into his flesh and drooling on his neck and shoulder as they panted after their own needs and pleasures. The few humans that had been enamored by him still treated him like some simpleton that had to be trained or taught to please them and while they tended to be more gentle, they still weren't anywhere near what his fantasies could call up. A human was a human, nothing more and Andy's naked, wet, leanness didn't change that.

Which helped to back down his desire a little bit, but still left him aroused and wanting. The easy answer was to simply take matters into his own hand. The human obviously hadn't had any problems doing just that. Normally, Rez would have few qualms about following his example, it just felt like he was giving in this time and he wasn't going to let the stupid human or Toshi's moans get to him.

If reminding him about the repulsive generalities of humans wasn't enough to chase off the unwanted desire, he had plenty stronger ammunition to fight it with. He called to mind a handful of humiliating, degrading things his owners had required of him and how much he had hated himself for obeying. The Shine had given him no chance of refusal and, worse, had rewarded his obedience with pleasure. He thought about the men that were falsely clingy or worse the ones that had simply dismissed him as an animal, a thing, that served only one function like a spoon or plate. Something pretty they could own and use and then set aside until they were ready again to put him to use. He thought about the old men, the vulgar men, and it was nearly enough.

He thought about his one client, one that had owned one tenth of him for years. A human man so fat, so enormously huge, that he couldn't walk. Rez had to bite him three, sometimes four times to inject enough venom into the man to fill all his body to a fever pitch, and then he'd had to move rolls of flesh aside to be used. That man had smelled of sour flesh and human stink and Rez always swore the scent lingered for a good day afterwards, but it was only in his head. He hated humans and their blind desires and petty cruelties. Now that he was sober and given the choice he'd never waste a second of his time, his body or his pleasure on a human again.

Now he had to force his fangs to fold down and that was fine by him. The loose one wiggled and itched but didn't seem willing to simply fall out and be nice. That was okay, he was used to this and Rez reached up and grasped the fang with his fingers. He wiggled it harder and it made a sickening crack-grinding sound as he forced it looser. As he thought about his owners over the years and the men that he'd serviced on his free days, he grew angrier at himself for getting hard over one naked, loud mouthed human in a shower. With a sharp pull, he yanked the unwilling fang free of its socket and didn't even wince at the pain.

He dropped the fang into the water below and spat the first mouthful of blood after it. The flush was strong enough to wash the fang safely away and that was all that mattered. The pain was a raw throb and it was welcome and good. His life may have been turned upside down, he may not

know where it was going or when the next craving would make him violently ill, but he still have control over a few things. As long as he had an ounce of will in his body he would never let his desires control him again.

Set now and stubborn, he flicked the lock off the stall door and moved to a sink. He had to keep spitting out the mouthfuls of blood, swallowing it would only make him sick. He hung over the sink until the bleeding eased and eventually stopped. He was angry with himself now, and still itchy horny feeling, but at least he hadn't degraded himself by masturbating while thinking about the world's stupidest human.

"Jesus, you okay?"

Rez glanced over and it was as if thinking about the world's stupidest human had made him magically appear, only wearing a pink bathrobe, pink fuzzy slippers and a purple towel wrapped around his head. He had a flash of a thought, the after image of seeing him nude, wet and hard but the taste of blood and dulling pain chased it away.

He turned and spat out more blood. "Fuck off."

"No, seriously, are you okay?" Andy stepped closer but the look Rez shot him was glaring, or as glaring as bubblegum pink eyes could manage.

"Just pulled a loose fang, it's nothing."

Andy stopped advancing at the dismissal. "If you say so."

"I do, go away." He turned on the tap, caught a handful of water and rinsed his mouth.

"Whatever you say, sweetie." Andy turned to go, but paused before stepping around the corner. "Next time I'm charging admission to watch the show."

He spat out the mouthful of slightly bloody water, but Andy had already sauntered away. "Fucking humans." Rez bitched and washed his mouth again, trying to stay focused on his sore tooth and not the memory of Andy in the shower.

Toshi had finally slept. They'd collapsed, spent and sated, to the futon and curled up together with no words shared. There was nothing that needed to be said, nothing at all, everything was understood and that alone felt really good. Mick had been amazing, as always, and he'd happily let himself be worn out. Sleep wasn't always easy to reach, so when it pulled him down he was happy to be swallowed by it.

Unfortunately, it didn't last as long as he would have liked and he woke in the near-darkness hours later. He'd slept soundly enough that he felt rested, but Mick curled up naked in his arms gave him no motivation to get up. He still felt relaxed and languid and oddly the possessive jealousy felt sharper than before their wild lovemaking. He needed something, he just wasn't sure what it was.

As he lay there, Mick's back curled up tight to his stomach, the two of them spooned tightly together, he tried to figure out what it was. He needed something and the ache was a growing pain in the back of his thoughts. It wasn't Rez's fault, but now that the jealousy had been sparked Toshi kept picturing Mick with other I/S. People that he knew his lover had no interest in suddenly felt like rivals. The idea of Mick meeting with the guard for normal security briefings or for training, in a room filled with beautiful, strong I/S suddenly made him want to snarl and he

couldn't chase the jealousy away.

Mick muttered a soft hushed whimpering sound and Toshi felt the muscles in the human's back tense up. It was a bad dream; they came sometimes and often trapped Mick in dark thoughts and images. He felt the sleepy undercurrent of unease a moment before he brushed a hand across Mick's head, soothing tangled hair back.

"Shhh, is a dream." He leaned forward and whispered nearly in Mick's ear. "Shhh is okay, is just a dream..." Normally, the soft hushing and soothing touch eased Mick from unpleasant sleep to sounder comforting rest. Tonight, Mick started awake at the touch and words.

"Oh..." He gasped, muscles tense now, but the too warm body curled tighter around him and it was more soothing than he could describe. "Mm, nice...."

"You were having a bad dream."

"Yeah..." He grasped after the shreds of it but they were melting. "Something about something...."

Toshi chuckled and nuzzled the back of Mick's head. The room still smelled of sex and Mick's skin still smelled of his mark and he liked that.

"What are you doing up?" he asked accusingly around a yawn while wiggling tighter to his lover's body.

"Woke up...."

There was a tightness in Toshi's voice. Mick didn't need to see his face or have an I/S's senses to know something was bothering his lover. "What?"

Toshi shook his head. "I can't shake this jealousy feeling....I just...." He nuzzled a little more now at the back of Mick's neck. "I just want....want to.... God...."

"What baby? What do you need?" He wanted to turn and face Toshi but the arms around him held him too tightly, pinning him in place, and he didn't want to fight that.

He kissed the back of Mick's neck, tasted his skin and felt the shiver the light kiss sent across the other body. Oddly, his fangs scrapped the pale skin and Toshi suddenly struggled with the desire, the need, to bite Mick. He wasn't that aroused, but it hit him, instantly, that it was his jealousy that made him want to bite.

"Mick....?"

"Anything..." He answered the unspoken question.

He believed it when Mick said anything. Toshi raised up a little and leaned forward. He kissed the pale, wonderful neck again, letting his fangs drag and catch. The contact made him shudder and he pressed their points to the tender skin. He paused just long enough to let Mick protest before he bit down, piercing flesh and growing painfully aroused as he filled his lover with venom.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Twenty Four

Mick felt the catch of those slender fangs, scratching against his skin. Toshi often teased with them without ever actually being aware he was doing it, the fine sharp points provided a nice scratchy counterpoint to the wet velvet of his lover's mouth. Never had he even threatened to bite, teased with biting, so when he paused, lingered with those points pressed into his skin, Mick knew he wasn't joking. He had a flash of a moment when he wanted to refuse, reminded of the horrible ache of need, the burning and tortured pain he'd felt the only other time venom had been in his system. He wasn't sure he wanted to feel that way again, wasn't sure he liked being that out of control.

Only, it was Toshi and he was sober and they were safe. This was something the half breed obviously needed, something primal and instinctive in his I/S bloodlines that went deeper than either of them really understood. He'd walk across fire to sooth Toshi, he'd do anything, be anything, try anything to make his lover's life a little easier. There had been too much denial in Toshi's past, too much misunderstanding and pain and trouble and Mick would never do anything to add to that history.

So he held still as those points pressed into his neck and didn't flinch when they bit down, broke the skin and pierced him. It hurt, stung really, like a sharp ant bite or a bee sting. It hurt worse than being injected with a needle but certainly wasn't unbearable or awful. Then it stopped hurting and felt warm, burning warm and it sunk in that Toshi really had bitten him and venom was now entering his system.

He didn't want to be frightened of that but the idea and the burning fire at the bite made him jerk a little away. The last time, he'd been too hurt to really care, too in shock to feel that first moment when venom hit his blood. He hadn't been in a frame of mind to fuss because there were so many other problems to deal with. But now, some deep part of his mind didn't want to have his control, his will, over whelmed with a chemical and even though he wanted to hold still he tried to squirm away.

Toshi didn't allow that. Mick felt the body behind him grow tense, the leg curled around his own slipped from gently resting against him into a restraining lock. One of Toshi's hands caught Mick's wrist and pinned his arm tightly to his body. The lean body rose up and half pinned Mick where he lay, using leverage and weight to hold him steady as the bite deepened and Toshi sighed a small, growling moan.

For the first time, Mick understood most human's fear of I/S that had been part of most human cultures since the first Alphas. He felt trapped, small, caught in that bite and very much like prey. Worse, his small, instinctual protest and surprised struggle had turned Toshi on the way only a predator could be. He felt the fangs deepen, so deeply that Mick felt Toshi's more human teeth digging into his skin and he wondered if he'd have bite marks from them as well. The fire at the site of the bite began to spread, rolling out like a wave with the beating of his heart and it made him shiver and twitch again where he lay, captured.

That only made Toshi growl moan again and Mick felt his lover's tongue lap at the skin between the slender fangs. "Oh, God." Mick whispered as the small teasing touch felt better on the sensitized flesh than a full on orgasm. His shuddering words made Toshi rub against him, and Mick was suddenly overly aware of every point of contact between their bare flesh.

Slowly, Toshi backed his fangs out. There was a reluctance to the withdrawal like an angry snake that wanted to keep biting and Mick had a moment to wonder if it was possible for an I/S to accidentally overdose someone. Venom was an odd neurotoxin, complex and varied, the right amount made for a sexual high like none other but too much knocked a body unconscious and more than that could easily kill. The trouble was, I/S didn't talk about venom, not in polite company and Mick wasn't sure if he'd ever heard anyone say how much conscious control they had over how much of a dose was delivered in a bite.

The fangs left his flesh and since he was still conscious and aware he figured he wasn't going to die. His heart was beating rapidly now, racing as the venom spread across his system making his skin burn.

"Toshi..." He heard himself whisper, around a panting breath but his only answer was the feel of that soft, moist tongue lapping at the tender bite. The touch sent off waves of pleasure and Mick writhed back to rub hard against his lover.

The fire in his veins started to mellow, it was never really painful, but it did make him feel fevered, sick and flushed. That first rush of venom quickly soothed to a tingling buzzing feeling, like maybe he'd stuck his toe in a light socket and not noticed and a current of electricity was humming along his nerves. It made the touch of the blankets intense, an erotic torture and he remembered that. He remembered from before how his clothing had felt both teasing and good and like a horrible torment because the contact was enough to drive him crazy but not enough to satisfy him.

It was little things that suddenly felt huge. The weight and scratchy tease of the sheets he knew were actually soft and light. The feel of Toshi's hair spilled across his shoulders was suddenly larger than life. Each strand was a tease, it glided against his skin and when Toshi moved and a section brushed as light as a breeze across Mick's chest, tickled across a nipple, he gasped and shuddered. The feel of Toshi gently licking the hypersensitive bite wound had him both arching into the contact and away. Last time he'd been so hurt, so in shock, that the double dose of venom had been a welcome pain killer. He remembered being painfully hard and desperately horny but there had been so much more to worry about. Now, his only focus, his only thought was the buzzing hum of his need and the sensations being granted to him, it wasn't even painful but it was still a torment.

"Do you have any idea of how precious you are to me?" Toshi whispered against the back of Mick's ear. He could feel Mick shivering, shuddering and sensed the growing level of pleasure in his lover. Now the words pulled out a small, tiny whimper which for Mick was an outrageous amount of noise. He loved hearing Mick and it was such a rare treat.

"Everything I have means less to me than you." He whispered again. "Every penny, every bit of power, everything from both sides of my family, none of it matters. Oh, Mick..." He sighed as the body he was holding nearly vibrated with need. "I would give it all up and count myself lucky so long as I got to keep you." He'd wanted to say that for so long, needed to but the words felt sticky and private and more than a touch embarrassing. Now, with them naked and aroused, alone in the dark, with Mick gasping at every touch, it was okay to speak the thought that so often rattled around his head.

Venom was supposed to be a purely physical experience but Mick didn't believe he was desperately hard enough to come just from the words as a sheer physical reaction. It was more than the tickling breath of Toshi's whisper against his skin, more than the hand that now rested on his lower stomach, holding them so tightly spooned together. The words were wonderful, the

made something inside of Mick feel bruised and sore but it was such a welcome, good pain that he never wanted to not feel it. The words would have turned him on under normal circumstances but now, with his body trembling from the venom, it tipped him over the edge.

Toshi knew the change in Mick's shuddering breath but the sound of the almost whimpering, soft whine that slipped from Mick's throat surprised him. He wasn't sure what he'd expected from his confession but pushing Mick to the brink of release was something he'd imagined was possible. He knew the feel from Mick, that strung too tightly, ready to snap at any moment or movement and Toshi wasn't willing to help Mick find his control. Instead, he lifted his and from the strong, lower stomach. As soon as his palm brushed in the lightest of touches against the very crown of Mick's cock, the other man lost all fragments of his control.

The gasping, hungry, near whimper that shivered from Mick's throat was one of the best sounds Toshi had ever heard. Any sound from Mick during sex was hard won and a prize worth cherishing only this time the sound carried pleasure but not relief. The body pressed so close to his own was still tightly wound muscle, trembling in need, shivering in lust and release didn't ease his desire any. He held still, trying to give Mick a moment to stabilize from having come so suddenly and so easily but Mick, it seemed had better ideas.

A hand like a vise closed around Toshi's wrist and lifted it. He didn't protest, knowing Mick's kink and finding it unbearably sexy but it still surprised him when his lover began to lick his hand clean. Like some over grown cat, Mick washed the sticky fluid from Toshi's hand, sucking in each finger, teasing it with swirls of his tongue, promising and begging with each swipe to do even more lewd things to other parts of Toshi's anatomy.

Mick was panting now, blinded by lust and need and the feel of Toshi hard so close to his own. He nipped the last fingertip and slipped the long, graceful finger from between his lips. His body was sweaty and yet shivering and coming hadn't done anything to ease his need.

"Baby..." He gasped out, pressing Toshi's fingertips to his lips while he spoke. "I want to say something as pretty but...god...if you don't use me....now...I'm going to die..."

Toshi chuckled, low and dark and the sound made Mick shiver harder against him. "That was pretty to me." He felt like predator and aggressive and seeing Mick quivering, almost moaning and begging for him was just what he'd needed. There was little worry Mick was going anywhere now and Toshi let himself untangle from the other man.

Only, as he retreated, Mick gasped a little and it sounded like a protesting whimper. There was no way Toshi could take him and not loose it right away, there was no way. He was trembling now too with the need for release, buzzing along on the after image of Mick's desperate desire. He pulled the blankets away, needing to see Mick, needing him exposed.

The light was too low for human eyes but Toshi could see just fine. Mick's pale skin nearly glowed in the darkness. He watched the way he squinted his eyes shut, the way he bite his lip. All the scars his lover wore, all the pain carved into his skin, were sharp edged reminders of how many times Mick nearly slipped away before Toshi had met him. All of them were close calls where a moments wrong move, a second longer paused, could have stolen Mick from him before they'd ever met. He touched all that exposed pale skin with feather soft touches and watched as Mick shivered and arched against the contact, following his fingertips like a cobra following the tune of a snake charmer.

It wasn't difficult to get Mick to roll over onto his back but the man didn't seem to want to lay still or flat. He writhed, moving with an utter lack of self consciousness, comfortable in the darkness, lost in the venom induced haze of desire. Toshi watched as his hands tried to stroke across his own chest, teasing hard nipples a little before wandering lower toward his restless hips and legs.

That wouldn't do, he couldn't have Mick touching himself. He'd loose all control that way, having

to watch that showy, beautiful display. Worse, it wouldn't be nearly as satisfying as what they could do together, so he caught the wandering hands and held them tightly. The strong grasp made Mick shiver again and he moaned, low and soft but it was a moan and it almost like was venom for Toshi, those secret sounds.

Mick's legs kicked at the futon in small frustrated twitches but they fell still when Toshi slid against his body. They'd had the conversation about how sometimes Mick liked things a little rougher and Toshi could understand that, even if he was having trouble shaking off his history and past and the shyness he hid his shame in. Shame didn't seem to be a word Mick had in his vocabulary, at least when it came to sex and Toshi was slowly learning that and learning it was okay.

He crept up across his lover, Mick's breath caught in gasping pants each time their skin touched and he couldn't help it. That needy desperation sound thrilled him and he found himself petting Mick just to hear his breathing sigh and catch but it was when he settled across Mick's shoulders, pinning the man's arms in place and hovering over him, that Mick actually moaned. He didn't ask, he didn't speak at all. He just fisted a hand into Mick's hair and lifted the man's head up.

Words weren't needed. Mick whimpered and arched higher, happily and easily parting his lips to swallow his lover whole. It just felt so good, pinned there, unable to use his hands, the only support for his head the hand Toshi had in his hair and the strength of his own neck. The angle was odd, challenging and thrilling and it sunk in that he had no real say and even less control. That made him whimper again, soft and low and if his cock had softened even a little from coming just a moment before it returned readily to aching want.

Toshi was so close to giving in, breaking beyond his barriers of what he felt was proper and what his mind had labeled improper, Mick could feel him hovering there. There was no doubt the half breed was nearly as turned on as he was but there was always that small voice, the one that whispered about degradation and missed the point that when two people wanted it and cared for each other there was no such thing. Mick sucked at the length teasingly in his mouth, the lapped at it and teased it and shivered waiting for Toshi to let go and slowly, far too gently for Mick's liking, Toshi began to ease his length into Mick's trapped mouth and back out.

It wasn't long until Mick remembered that while his arms may have been pinned and he couldn't reach himself to provide any relief, he could touch Toshi. His hands could barely reach those golden, beautiful legs and he learned that touching with venom in his system was nearly as nice as being touched. When his hands trailed up Toshi's legs to the curve of his hip Toshi jerked forward, catching Mick by surprise but thrilling him. Toshi's control, his sense of what he shouldn't do, went out the window when Mick teased him a little bit. He tossed his head back, thrusting more easily into Mick's hungry mouth, his hair falling down to brush against Mick's hands as he arched his spine and lost himself in sensation.

When Mick's hands slipped higher, teasing Toshi's ass and hips, Toshi wondered if things were maybe getting a little out of hand. It felt too good, felt like he was high and Shinning. That simple touch made him feel slutty and sexy. It was impossible for his mind to process. He was kneeling, straddling Mick's shoulders, forcing his lover to blow him and every sense he had was demanding more. Worse, every sense he had was telling him Mick was demanding more and Toshi desperately wanted to it to him.

The touch of Mick's fingertips, teasing and ghosting light down the crevice of his ass, down to just barely brush the hidden entrance that was still hyper sensitive from their earlier romp, short circuited all of Toshi's worry. He wanted Mick to slip his fingers into his body, he wanted Mick's cock, so close but miles away, back in him but he didn't need either. Just the thought, the teasing touch and promise of it, tipped Toshi over the edge and he came, moaning and thrusting hard, into Mick's trapped mouth, only now, his earlier concerns were gone and he simply wanted.

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Blurring The Lines:

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Chapter Twenty Five

He hung there, shuddering down from the high of coming, still pinning Mick down, still holding his head, back arched and drawing in long deep breathes. Mick's need, his hunger for more and burning pleasure was like dark, sweet chocolate. Sticky like honey, it clung to Toshi's nerves. It was in moments like this that he wondered if his sense of things might possibly be able to slip into telepathy. It felt so close, that final edge, the unseen border between his mind and thoughts and Mick's and breeching it felt so close. He sighed and rocked backward, slipping himself from Mick's mouth and back from his shoulders, letting go of his grip on his lover's hair.

Mick drew a long, gasping breath and Toshi wondered how long he'd smothered the air from his lover. Normally he'd worry about such rough treatment, such selfish thoughtlessness, but not right now. Not when he could feel how much Mick was loving every moment, every second, of it all. Certainly not while they were both so aching with need and wanting so much more could he be bothered to worry.

"Oh...baby....please..." Mick moaned softly, his eyes mostly shut in the darkness, lips parted as he heaved in air. "Please...use me hard...please..." He sighed.

The darkness was a voyeuristic pleasure for Toshi. Mick had no masks, no pretense of hiding anything, while he was in the shadows of night. If he remembered that Toshi's night vision was so much stronger he had forgotten it, or didn't care and it let him watch without the worry of being watched back. It felt naughty and hidden and special and he was grateful for his odd, overly large eyes when he saw Mick sigh and slowly lick his lips.

Toshi was going to take Mick, there was no doubt about that. He wanted to be rough and take the human as forcefully as he could feel Mick begging to be taken. He wanted to growl and lick the pale skin, wanted to cover every inch with his scent, his mark so Mick would reek of him to other I/S no matter how well he showered. He wanted to be demanding, selfish, wanted to push Mick beyond his limits and make the man moan. There was not a single doubt he was going to have everything he wanted and more before they were done but he wanted something first.

It was entirely Mick's fault. Toshi had been feeling very aggressive, very much like simply taking Mick as deeply as Mick had taken him a short few hours before. His entire body had wanted it, demanded it, and when Mick had slammed him against the door and lifted him so his legs were wrapped about Mick's waist, pinned there, he thought he'd go mad from the pleasure. The need to be taken had been quite solidly and totally quenched but that ghosting, teasing touch down the sheltered, private spots of his ass had fanned the fire back to life.



He didn't want to be taken, he wanted to take himself. It was so easy, Mick lay there, still panting for air, hands clenching into the sheets, unaware. Toshi slipped down his lover's chest, as if he meant to slide down and between Mick's legs, plunge himself into the tight, hot body. It was at the last second that Mick started to understand, when Toshi reached behind himself and steadied Mick's weeping cock.

The light touch made Mick arch and his breath stopped but none of the exotic moans escaped. Toshi saw how Mick's head rolled to the side in the darkness, how he bit his lip, the way his face looked so close to pain. It made him smile in a lewd, wicked way as he pushed back and down, taking himself on Mick's cock with no further warning.

"Oh... fuck!" Mick groaned, clawing at the bed, at his own skin, trying to scramble fingers across Toshi. Pleasure was a blinding white light in the darkness of the bedroom. He was suddenly grateful for their earlier lovemaking, Toshi was slick still and stretched and still painfully, deliciously tight. If he'd done that without the earlier preparations, with venom in his blood, Mick wasn't sure he could have survived. The thought flitted across his mind and fluttered away, leaving only the sense that there were a hell of a lot worse ways to die.

The cursing gasp and wave of shocked pleasure from Mick was almost better than taking himself could feel. Almost, because to say that it was would be a lie. Never had Toshi ever dreamed being taken by a man could feel so good or that he would crave the feel, miss it when work and stress kept them too tired to do more than fall into each other's arms and sleep. It wasn't just the feel of being taken by a man, but by this man and Toshi had to close his eyes to hold in all the emotions that threatened to boil over.

Maybe it was because Mick could make him feel so much, not just physically, that he felt like being a little bratty. He raised himself up a little, sliding Mick slowly from his body and felt his lover shiver in appreciation. Higher he went until Mick was barely within him and that made Toshi tremble now too but instead of dropping back down he stayed there, hovering, waiting to see how long it would take Mick to understand.

It wasn't a long wait. Mick growled a little in a small kitten mewing kind of way and slammed his hips upward, arching his back and burying himself deep into Toshi. There was still no doubt that this was Toshi's show, that he was calling all the shots. He was getting just what he wanted and they both knew it and the thought pushed Mick to thrust up harder the next time--which, not surprisingly, was counter productive to maintaining control. Mick was too close to the edge as it was and it only took a handful of long, hard, deep thrusts before he was coming again.

Toshi had only meant it to be a taste, a way for Mick to take some of the edge off. He had wanted the feel of being taken, of Mick filling him, but hadn't meant it to be a goal and Mick coming was just what he wanted. He got to feel his lover in him again, got to watch Mick's reaction to the feel of taking him while filled with venom, got to watch the silent, gasping-for-breath Mick did when he wanted to moan but couldn't quite do it. Most importantly of all, Toshi got to feel his lover come again, and it made him feel powerful and lewd to know that Mick's release would slick his own ass while he was buried deep in his lover's. It was perfect and he couldn't think of anything better.

Toshi was panting now too, his heat racing, his body sweaty. He wanted to take Mick, claim him, make sure the human never forgot who it was he belonged to. Even while his thinking mind was repulsed by such absurd thoughts of ownership, something primal and demanding craved it. He'd bite Mick and leave a new scar or tattoo the man or anything to mark him more permanently as owned and taken if he could, at least while Toshi was spinning as far out of control as he currently was. It was something he knew he'd regret doing when he settled down and felt more normal, but right now he wanted to bite and scratch and mark Mick.

He'd settle for taking the other man, hard, rough, with selfish abandon. Not that Mick seemed to

mind that idea, when Toshi slipped lower, the human's legs tumbled widely apart and his hips rolled invitingly. He liked the shuddering gasp that slipped from Mick's control and how his lover arched, begging without words to be taken, to be used as he'd said. His fingers dug in, even though he didn't mean to leave bruises, as he forced Mick's willing legs wider apart and raised them. Even the idea that lube wasn't exactly present in generous amounts didn't stop him, he was going to take Mick roughly and drive his lover crazy.

But he didn't. He was right there, so close and gasping with the need to have Mick but something was holding him back. He repositioned his grip on Mick's legs and still couldn't quite bring himself to plunge forward and do it. Mick sensed his pause, sensed that maybe it was more than just a tease and sighed, his head tossing to the side. The sight was sexy, he really, really wanted to take Mick but something held him back.

"Baby...." Mick gasped out. "Please...use me....hard... oh... hard..."

Toshi very carefully lowered Mick's legs back to the futon. He was panting now, struggling to catch his breath and his control. He swallowed hard to clear his throat but words didn't want to come. It seemed impossible to explain and he wasn't even sure he entirely understood.

Mick whimpered in protest and dug his heels into the futon, spreading his legs wide and begging with his body. It was a sight that would have anyone doing as he wanted, using him, taking him hard, fucking his body until exhausted. It was a temptation but Toshi couldn't do it.

He stroked a hand across Mick's leg, across his stomach, gentle and soft and felt the flesh shiver under his hand. "Roll onto your side for me." He whispered into the darkness. Mick was only too eager to obey and he lay there, tense and waiting, needing, head pillowed on his arm.

Finding the lube in the dark was easy, they'd woken up late at night to play often enough that keeping it close at hand was a necessity. Mick shivered when he heard the bottle open but he held still, his back to Toshi. He slicked himself up with one hand and let the other touch Mick, feather soft, ghosting touches across his pale skin and loved how even the lightest of touches drew out such a strong reaction.

Mick whimpered again, soft and low and with needy desperation, as Toshi lay down behind him. "Shhh, relax.... It's okay..." Toshi said softly into the darkness and curled himself around his lover, pressing his chest into Mick's shoulders. He tilted Mick a little forward, sliding a leg between his lover's own and Mick naturally spread himself as widely as the position would allow.

Toshi wrapped an arm around Mick's chest, holding him close and tight and in one long, slow, unrelenting push, finally entered him. Mick was almost painfully tight and Toshi would have stopped any other time, but not tonight, not right now. Some part of him still didn't care if he hurt Mick and he felt the combination of pain and pleasure heightened by the venom into a sweet, additive mix that Mick was feeling.

"O..oh...god...." Mick gasped and shuddered, it was as hard as he'd wanted but not nearly as rough as he'd expected. Toshi took him, without request or care and the tightness of his body and the fire of the venom made Mick feel like he was in shock. His skin suddenly felt clammy, he could hear his heart pounding in his ears and he worried for a long moment that he may very well pass out.

Only he didn't and as he began to feel more stable, more like his flesh could stand such overwhelming sensations, he was surprised to find Toshi had pushed deep into him, taken him fully but hadn't moved. They just lay there, Mick curled inside Toshi's arms, held tight, his back pressed impossibly tight to Toshi's chest. He could feel every breath Toshi panted against his shoulder, his neck, he thought he could feel Toshi's heart beating against the skin of his back. Their legs were tangled and Toshi was deeply buried in his body but unmoving.

That was a horrible, cruel punishment. Mick wanted to be tossed down and attacked. He wanted to have his face shoved into the futon and his ass ridden hard. He wanted his hair pulled and bruises left on his skin. He wanted to be used and fucked hard. He wanted all his own will and say stripped away and his body to become a thing but Toshi just lay there, gasping breath against his skin, holding him with almost brutal tenderness.

Mick bucked a little, trying to get Toshi to move and he succeeded. Every fraction of an inch leaving his body made Mick shiver, not just shiver in pleasure but real, physical, overloaded shivering but it was as Toshi pushed back in that he nearly convulsed in a fit of trembling. It was too slow, deep and long but too slow and gentle. His body loved it, his mind protested.

"Shhhh...." Toshi whispered against Mick's shaking shoulder and on the second, painfully slow thrust Mick tried to buck and slam himself hard back against Toshi. He'd been waiting for that and it was easy to twist them a little, turn their bodies so Mick was a little more pinned in place. "Not like that...." He said low, barely audible but he knew Mick heard him.

It took a second for him to understand that the small repositioning now had him solidly immobile. He now had about as much say and control over how Toshi was taking him as if he'd been tied down, only the bonds were Toshi's own body, the velvet touch of his limbs. It would have been a perfect position to be in if Toshi wasn't moving so slowly, touching him so gently. He needed it hard, needed it almost brutal, but Toshi kept moving in low, horribly delicious, gentle thrusts, sliding nearly all the way from his body before dropping steadily but slowly back down.

"No..." He moaned but Toshi didn't even pause in the slow taking. "Please...no...."

"Shhh." Toshi just whispered back. He could feel it, feel the trembling, gentle pleasure in Mick, felt the way his lover wasn't quite sure what to do with it. When Mick wanted to be taken, he liked it rough, liked it fast but Toshi wanted to love him in the same way Mick loved him, as if he was something fragile and cherished. He could feel how it was too much, with the venom and all they'd done, changing directions and making it gentle and careful was simply too much for Mick's venom hazed mind to handle, may have been too much for him to handle with a clear head.

Mick struggled against the grip he was held in but it was like struggling against stubborn iron. "Stop." He ordered, gasping now, lips trembling in shivers of pleasure, unable to even tell now if Toshi was filling him or retreating it all felt so good.

"Shhhh," Toshi just soothed again.

"No... stop it..." Mick could hear the edge of panic in his own voice.

"Stop what?" Toshi whispered against the tense shoulder. "Stop loving you?"

"Oh...never...never...." Mick tried to struggle again, the words too much with the soft lovemaking but Toshi held on. He didn't change the slow, steady pace even though his own body was screaming for more, he couldn't change it, not yet.

"Stop...stop..." Mick whispered but he didn't want it to stop, he was spiraling close to coming again and that release looming closer made him feel panicky. It was going to tear him apart, he could feel it like an approaching tidal wave that would crash and wash everything away.

"D..don't...please...n...no..."

Toshi ignored the words and trusted his own senses, trusted that Mick's thinking mind felt he needed to stop but he really, truly didn't want it to end. He could feel how release was building in his lover and he held himself steady, moving in the long, tortuously slow thrusts, advancing, retreating, all with determined gentleness. His only response to the softly begging words was to kiss the flesh under his mouth softly, tenderly.

Which made Mick gasp and the gasp melted into a moan as the feel of the soft kisses added a new layer. He struggled again, trying in vain and without real will to stop the tenderness that was shredding him with velvet claws. It was too late, he moaned again, louder. His body tensed and wanted to buck and writhe but had no where to go. He tumbled into a release that made the others look like trivial nonsense.

Not for a single second did Toshi alter the slow, steady taking. He held Mick tight, as tight as he could, held him trapped in place and drank in the man's moans. They started out soft, whimperingly soft, begging soft and grew almost to a normal volume as his body sparked in glowing pleasure as he came.

"That's it....let it all out..." Toshi sighed. Mick had grown limp in his arms as he spiraled down from his release. He couldn't swear if the aching burn of desire from the venom had been spent with such a hard won climax or if Mick was still hard. He couldn't let go of his embrace on Mick's body to touch the man and see but it didn't matter, they'd finish when he was satisfied and they both knew it. It was just, Mick was no longer locked away, closed up in all the unconscious ways he protected himself with. Every slow, long, delicious thrust was now met with a soft, sometimes barely there, mewling moan and Mick's entire body was limp in surrendered exhaustion.

There were no protesting whispers now and Toshi wasn't even sure how aware Mick was of the sounds he was making. All he knew was that his lover was feeling nothing but pleasure and wasn't fighting it. He was letting himself be gently taken, taken in a loving, tender way like the precious soul he was and all his defenses, all his masks had been torn away. He lay in Toshi's arms, limp, exhausted, accepting of all the sweet bliss filling him.

When the soft, mewling, moans grew a little sharper, Toshi moved them. It was easy, Mick offered no resistance and molded to him, clung to him as if the only thing in the world that mattered was keeping their bodies held closely together. Gently he rolled them and encouraged Mick to get his knees under him but still back pressed to chest and Toshi moved quicker but with continued care and tenderness.

"So deep in you..." He sighed against Mick's neck and felt the exhausted body shiver and lean against him more. He wanted to tell him how perfect the finally freed moans and gasps were but was frightened if he pointed them out Mick would remember himself and lose his voice again. Instead he simply relished the rare treat of Mick so far out of his own head that he was just experiencing the moment and slowly increased their pace.

If he could have held them like that forever, he would have, but Toshi's body wasn't high on Shine, just the echoes of the venom in Mick. Now he was getting the echoes of his lover's growing exhaustion and his lazy build to a final climax. As his body began to scream for release, Toshi took Mick into his hand and gently stroked him. It didn't take much, there was no will in Mick to prolong anything and his body was at a breaking point of too much tenderness, too much pleasure and he easily fell into release. This time it was softer, gentler but he nearly sobbed in moans and begging whimpers.

It was the sound as much as anything that spun Toshi off into his own pleasure. He nuzzled the back of Mick's neck, his hair, kissing him, nipping him gently, as he came deep in his lover's body. Mick whimpered, moaning at the feel, trembling and weak and etched by tenderness into vulnerability. He let Toshi kiss him, pet him, hold him as the half breed found his own gasping delight and then let Toshi pull him down to collapse into an exhausted sweaty heap on the futon.

Toshi tugged and pulled and gathered Mick against him. He kissed the dry lips, kissed the tip of Mick's nose, stroked a gentle hand across Mick's body. He wanted to tell Mick how much he loved him, not just that he smelled right but that he was human enough to love and he loved Mick more than his own life. It felt important for Mick to know that and really, deeply believe that. But even now, exhausted and battered down by pleasure, Toshi couldn't say it and he doubted Mick could stand to hear it. Instead he tucked Mick as close as he could and soothed his

trembling body with soft touches until he'd fallen into well earned sleep.

Rez woke bleary eyed in his small room and touched the small light set along the baseboard. It was barely a glow and turned the total darkness into the soft soothing darkness that I/S eyes liked so much better. He felt achy and crampy and dried out, but too lazy to get up and go get a bottle of water. That was it, he was going to have to see about either sneaking water into his room or getting permission because this waking up at night thirsty and dried up from withdrawals was so not good. Getting out of bed and trudging down to the kitchen was even less good.

Eventually, his sore throat and dry, parched mouth forced him to sit up with a groan. He was dressed only in cotton boxers and a plain cotton short sleeved t-shirt and it seemed stupid to worry about someone seeing him at the late hour. He yawned, stretched and flipped his hair back before he stood up with a groan and got himself moving.

He was halfway to the kitchen, walking softly, when he paused near Toshi and Mick's bedroom door. The moans were distinctive but different and left little room for the imagination.

"Christ, fucking sleep already." He muttered and scratched his chest, hating that those sounds made him feel twitchy. "Fuckwits humping like...like..." but he was too sleepy to think of an insult and there was no one to care if he did. "Fuck." He sighed and continued his trudge to the kitchen, thinking about ear plugs now and not water.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Twenty Six

Andy glanced down the hallway at the sound of shuffling feet, but it wasn't Toshi or Mick but a bleary eyed Rez dressed for the day in soft jeans and long sleeved t-shirts. His hair was damp but combed back and braided and it didn't look like he'd slept very well. The oatmeal flopped off his spoon and Andy shook off the thought that no one had a right to look that good with that little of an effort.

"Seriously, maybe one of us should knock?" he asked Alec again. The man sat reading the morning paper on his computer screen and sipping a cup tea slowly, lingering over a breakfast he'd been finished with for a while.

"Let them sleep," Alec soothed for the fifth time and didn't even lose the line he was reading.

"But..." Andy frowned as Rez ignored them to shuffle past them into the kitchen like a man in

serious need of caffeine. "Mick never sleeps in and Toshi's worse than he is. They've meetings in an hour and they both need to eat."

"I cancelled the meetings, let them sleep."

Andy stabbed at his cooling oatmeal and frowned. It worried him, he'd seen first hand how little Toshi was sleeping, and anyone with eyes could see how stressed Mick had become. He forced another spoonful of oatmeal down and frowned as Rez shuffled back into the room. A mug of tea steaming in one hand and one of those awful energy health bars in the other.

"Maybe they're not even in there?" he asked, but Alec's eyes didn't even lift.

"They're in there."

"How do you know? What if something happened?"

"Shit of course they're in there!" Rez snapped. "Spent half the night listening to them fucking moaning and humping each other. Christ, he's trying to say they screwed all night and should be left alone. Stupid-ass human." He bit angrily into the bar and chewed it methodically.

Andy's mouth hung partly open in mid-protest and he glanced to Alec who finally was looking up. He just raised an eyebrow but didn't comment. "But..."

"Half deaf humans, sleeping through that shit..." Rez frowned and dared either to challenge him but neither man protested.

Alec finally answered. "I've a sound machine; it plays ocean waves all night. I sleep like a baby. If they're awake by noon, I'll be surprised. And speaking of noon, your lessons start today Rez, up in the garden."

That ended any debate about moans or sleep and Rez just sat and glared while forcing himself to finish his breakfast.

The message Andy had gotten while in another meeting was simple. Toshi was awake and would meet him in the garden to go over a few things, as they'd planned. He'd checked the time and, sure enough, it was after one so Alec's prediction had been dead on. It frightened Andy sometimes, how skillfully Alec managed to run everything. He knew all their habits and preferences and the blond organized things to perfection. For a fly-by-the-seat-of-his-panties kind of guy like Andy, someone like Alec may as well have been from another planet.

The day was sunny and getting warm, so Andy didn't mind waiting. He plopped himself down in a shady spot, intending to sketch the blossoms on the tomato plants, but when he glanced up he could have kicked himself. Rez was across the garden, seated under an awning at a table with the ancient teacher Toshi had dug up and dusted off. Even on the far side of the garden he could see them clearly; the way purple hair fluffed about on the breeze like spider silk and how the sunglasses weren't the proper fit because Rez kept fussing at them. There was no way he was going to be able to sketch flowers now, and he knew better than to try.

"That's an excellent likeness." Toshi spoke softly, unsure if the artist had heard him approach or not. Below him on Andy's sketch pad was Rez in various poses, mostly involving how the wind toyed with the I/S's hair.

"Hm. Damned freak is prettier than the flowers." He glanced over his shoulder and up at Toshi with a smile. "When are you going to let me sketch you and Mick? The two of you together are hot."

He grinned back, thinking about the night before and how Mick had dissolved in his arms. It would have embarrassed him to no end to know that an image like that had been captured but only if anyone else ever saw it. If he could tuck it away, for his eyes only, he could take it out anytime and remember it. "Maybe one day."

"Promises, promises." He watched as Toshi folded himself down to sit on the roof beside him with unnerving grace. It was like watching a feather fall instead of a gangly human collapsing and he wondered, not for the first time, if it was a genetic thing or a carry over of the manners and properness this I/S camp seemed to have. He turned his attention back to the sketch he'd been toying with. "Sleep well?"

"Wonderfully. You?"

He shrugged. "The moaning from your bedroom got me all horny and a certain bunny there caught me jerking off in the shower."

Toshi actually had to blink a few times and run the words across his mind a second time just to make sure he'd heard them right. "Excuse me?"

Andy chuckled and put the sketch aside. "I thought everyone was asleep."

"What did you do? What did he do?" He knew he shouldn't ask but it wasn't like Andy was a casual friend, they'd almost, sort of, slept together.

"Me? Sweetie, I'm easy to predict. I let him watch. However, pretty bunny boy scurried away like a frightened virgin--and why the fuck would you pull out a fang? Gross, just, like, let it fall out."

"The clubs collect them and sell them if they can find a loose fang." He'd only shed one while at the Pony Club and that had been pure chance. The client had paid extra to extract it himself and that was a memory he hadn't even recalled in years. Rez and the construction were stirring up far too many memories that were better buried.

"Huh, well, can't blame him for getting rid of them first then, I guess. And isn't it just cruel of you to bring such a tasty tidbit into the house, knowing I can't touch him. I swear, it should be illegal how pretty you I/S are, and now having to live with two of you and not being allowed to drool on either of you--simply cruel."

"Red Moon has good taste; they only bring in the most attractive workers. It's actually a good sign that he didn't disturb you."

"What? Like he'd come in and join me." Andy snorted.

"Actually, that would have surprised me less."

"Yeah, well would have surprised me way more." He got his computer up and humming, it still smelled new and, oddly, that made him happy.

"I'm serious. If he was thinking of himself as property, and his place as being a whore, he would have tried something with you simply because he would have felt it was expected. Even if he would have found it distasteful."

"Hey! I am not distasteful naked, thank you very much!"

Toshi smiled fully now and almost laughed. "That isn't what I meant. I'm sorry we disturbed you."

"Disturbed may be too harsh of a word, and it's okay. I'm used to it. For all my slutty ways, I'm

normally the one going home alone. So, here, I was going over the blueprints and I can't figure this out." He really didn't want to talk about being alone when his ego was still feeling brittle and fragile.

"I didn't know you could read blueprints."

"I'm the first person in my family to go to college since the world came to an end. My mother made me learn something practical. She wanted me to become an architect, so I took a few classes and was bored out of my skull. We compromised, took art but minored in education. She figured I could always teach it and was happy."

"Didn't know that either."

"I am a man of mystery."

"My father is disappointed I can't have a degree." Across the garden something slammed and a voice rose in anger, but the wind was blowing the actual words away. They both looked over and saw Rez standing, obviously angry, but the older I/S wasn't the least bit disturbed by it. "Excuse me, Andy." Toshi nodded slightly to the artist before he raised his voice. "Rez-san!" The name held a tone of scolding and anger, sharply barked out.

It made Rez flinch and he turned, his eyes scanned the garden until they found Toshi. His hands still were balled into fists, but he bowed toward Toshi, long and slow, before turning to the elder I/S and bowing far deeper.

Toshi sighed and shook his head. "It's going to be a frustrating path. I don't believe his owners really cared if they learned or not. They provided the lessons because my uncle demands, it but that doesn't mean they had to learn them. Maybe this was a mistake..."

"I don't believe it is, and you shouldn't think so either. He's just over-compensating right now, trying to find his footing. Give him some time."

"I'm sorry to ask but if you can help him..."

"I'll poke at him as much as I can, like prodding a badger. He'll hiss and growl but it'll be good for him to have some idiot to yell at." He grinned and brushed some loose hair back. "Anyway, before I amazed you, I was looking over the blueprints and I saw this here." He pushed the screen over so Toshi could see it. "What is that? Four thousand square feet, top floor over the club? I have no notes on that, I didn't even know you were making it four stories. What do you want done with that?"

"Leave it."

"But that's a lot of space to leave empty. Tall windows, direct entrance, plumbing for what looks like living space...I need to know before ordering."

"I was thinking of leaving it empty, use it for expansion to the worker's dorm or maybe entertaining."

"That's a huge, tall, open space for entertaining..."

"You don't need to worry about it, I promise."

"But..."

"Andy, it's okay."



It was the tone, nearly the same one Toshi used on Rez a second before. It made his knees feel like jelly but not from fear. He was commanding and confident and strong and very alpha male. It made sense now why Toshi, who looked so slender and graceful, so totally enthralled Mick when that tone alone could half-arouse Andy and Andy didn't have a kink for authority figures.

"Very well, I'll leave it alone but I'm going on record--it's an awful waste of space."

"Noted."

"I've some more swatches and such too..." He dug in his bag and pulled out the folder. "Keep meaning to sit you down and show you..."

Toshi shook his head. "I trust you to pick what's right."

"Brat." He shoved the folder back in his bag. "So what was it you wanted to see me about?"

"I..." he drew a careful breath and glanced from where Andy sat waiting to the growing plants around them, but they didn't seem any more likely to encourage him. "I wanted to ask you... about Mick..."

"What about our favorite sexy ex-cop?"

"The two of you, would you... I mean... I don't want to assume but I..."

"Honey," Andy broke in with a gentle smile. "It's me, Auntie Andy. Just spit it out. Nothing I ever did with that boy am I ashamed of." He paused and blinked a little bit. "Except that one night, but we were really drunk and I swear it was all his idea--point being, so long as you won't scratch my eyes out in jealousy go ahead and ask."

Which was so random and so Andy-like that it shook off a lot of his nerves and he nodded. "For all that my people are...."

"Sluts?"

"Free-spirited."

"Same thing."

"We don't sit down and discuss private matters, not often, not outside of close relationships, friendships held for years."

"Which you don't have and which I complicate things with because I used be Mick's fuck buddy." He dropped the teasing lightness and nodded a little. "I'm honored, please, ask?"

Toshi drew a breath and just asked. "You've topped him?"

That was the last thing Andy had expected. He'd thought for all the fuss it had to be something really kinky, at least on the level of bondage or toys or something, and it reminded him again how not everyone had the same easy-as-breathing view about sex. "Yes, occasionally, but we both liked it the other way better."

"Have you noticed, he only wants to be taken if it's rough?"

Andy nodded and wondered just what had happened the night before. "When Mick first started talking about you, I could tell he was smitten. So knowing his type, and only knowing what I knew of you from the tabloids, I had certain expectations before we met."

"Do I even want to know?"

"The tabloids are mean to you."

"I never read them, Alec does."

"Good, but I was expecting you to be this bossy, arrogant, snob. All 'I'm Mr. Rich-pants, shut up and listen to me', which you aren't. To the contrary, you're soft-spoken and thoughtful and, well, quiet. And I thought, God, what's Mick doing? Not because you weren't the sexiest thing I'd seen in a long time, but because I know him and I know he only babbles about some guy if that guy can slam him against the wall and fuck him, and you don't seem the sort." He sighed, but Toshi's quiet acceptance of all of Andy's thoughts was just further proof the man was far from the normal guy Mick would show an interest in.

"Like Sal." Toshi finally said more because it seemed Andy was waiting for him to say something.

"Yeah, like that fuckwit. Now that I know you, well, I can see that you can be very commanding when you want to, and you've this aura of authority that is just hot. But it's not an obvious thing and we're talking about, Mick, right?"

Toshi nodded and, oddly, wanted to kiss Andy.

"I'm not an expert, by any means, but I know that boy. Just think about this: until he was oh, like ten or so, everyone that Mick ever loved hurt him or left him. The few foster homes he stumbled into that weren't cold or abusive, the few good ones? The system shuffled him away from as soon as he'd started to bond. And, God bless 'em, the folks at the commune gave him stability, but really, you've met them, they're not the warmest of people. It's too much for him, being taken and having it mean something. Shorts out his messed up order of things, makes him all twitchy."

"The intimacy of it?"

"Don't get me wrong, I've never known a lover like Mick. He just has a sense of how to make you feel better, what you need, but only when he's top. He's very aware of whatever's going on in your head, cause honey, we all have issues. It's why I always want to snuggle him when I've been dumped, he just knows how to make a body feel better. But as bottom? He can't deal with it."

"You've tried?"

Andy nodded. "He spazezd, hit me without thinking. I bruised but I'm tender that way." He knew then, from how Toshi so closely studied his own hands that the man had indeed topped Mick and not in the rough, almost violent way that his friend normally preferred. "Look, give him some space, then talk to him about it. And Toshi?" He waited until those large eyes hidden behind the sunglasses glanced up. "It says a lot that he let you. A lot." He leaned over and quickly pressed his lips to Toshi's. It was meant to be a quick, friendly kiss like he shared with all his friends; only, a hand caught the back of his head and the kiss quickly deepened into a real, deep, passionate one. It didn't feel like it was about sex, though it was sexy as hell, but something in it expressed all of Toshi's uncertainty and his gratitude to have someone to talk to. It was still friendly, just special, extra-friendly-with-whipped-cream-and-a-cherry-on-top friendly, and he let Toshi kiss him all he wanted.

Rez felt something, itchy and annoying and he didn't think it was the stupid poem he was supposed to understand and explain or the start of another craving. It nagged at him until he physically shivered and glanced around, wondering if someone was watching him or something to make him feel so suddenly edgy. The only thing his eyes fell on was where Toshi-san sat

across the rooftop next to the artist, but as soon as his eyes focused on them he found the source of the itchy annoyed feeling.

They were kissing. Not softly, not friendly, but like lovers. Like people that had kissed before and knew it was okay to suck face so publicly. It made the hairs on the back of his neck raise and his growing-in fang itch. The human was kissing Toshi-san, which sparked a sense of possessive shock in him. That surprised him, it wasn't fitting. Toshi had made it clear that Rez wasn't to be a sex worker any more. He didn't have to worry about his place being supplanted by anyone else and turned out, but yet, that's what it felt like. It felt very much like something younger and prettier that was getting too much attention and making him look old, used and strung out. Even though he knew he was prettier to look at, a better kisser, certainly a hotter fuck than Andy could be--even in the scrawny, sick shape he was in--he still felt a lightening bolt of jealousy.

Part of him wanted to throw a fit, make a scene and make Toshi-san scold him again. That would at least break the lingering kiss he had to watch, force them to stop. Trouble was, he didn't want to be difficult. It wasn't the sensei's fault he was a poor student or that the sight of Toshi-san kissing the twit artist made him want to snarl.

Instead he turned away, forced himself to ignore the itchy, annoyed feeling and sighed. "Forgive me, Sensei, I wasn't listening."

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Twenty Seven

"Good God, sweetie, what are you doing?" Andy had stopped into the apartment to change clothes, brush his hair and trudge down to the site to get an idea of space and landscape. In the process he'd slipped into the bathroom only to find Mick sitting on a stool, a tourniquet around his arm and filling vials of blood.

Mick yawned, still only in his boxers and thinking he might need to just call the day a wash and sleep some more. "Huh?" He glanced down to the vial and shrugged. "Courier is on his way, promised Papa Mike a blood sample." He yawned again and easily switched vials with one hand. "Toshi about?"

"He's out with Alec, at the bank or something."

"Good, I really need some coffee."

Andy circled his friend and was surprised at seeing bruises, thin welted scratch marks and what looked like bites. "Toshi do that? Or did you take a tiger to bed with you and I not notice?"

Mick grinned lopsidedly. "Things got a little out of hand last night."

"So it seems." Andy traced his fingertips across Mick's neck and the small round, welted marks that would have looked like insect bites if not for the light bruising around them. "Venom?"

Mick nodded as he slipped the needle from his arm, dropping it and quickly covering the puncture with a cotton ball already stuck to some tape.

"How was it?"

He released the tourniquet with a sharp snap. "I don't want to talk about it."

Andy folded his arms over his chest, but Mick wasn't meeting his eyes. "Last time you said that, Sal had beaten the snot out of you. Did he hurt you?"

The idea hadn't even crossed Mick's thoughts. "No, of course not, he wouldn't."

"Good." He trailed the hand up from Mick's shoulder to ruffle the still damp auburn hair. "Talk to him about it." Andy offered the advice with a quick, soft kiss to Mick's head before he drifted from the bathroom to go about his day. His conversation with Toshi told him just why Mick was upset, and it was a good thing he knew. Otherwise, he'd have to hunt the I/S down and find out how he'd hurt his best friend and that would have been embarrassing.

Mick sat still watching Andy leave and found himself still there after he was left alone again. The night before had been exhausting and occasionally unnerving, but also one of the best he'd ever experienced. The trouble was, each time he wanted to really think about it his thoughts skittered away, unwilling to face the emotions the lovemaking had drawn up.

The advice Andy offered was sound and good and right and he really should sit down with Toshi and talk to him. It was only fair, the I/S had spoken to him of events and emotions so much more difficult and embarrassing than anything Mick could dredge up, and he'd trusted him each time to listen and understand. It was only right that he trust his lover as much as his lover had trusted him.

Even as he resolved that talking to Toshi was the best thing to do, the most proper course of action, he knew he wouldn't do it. He wasn't even fully sure why he felt unnerved and uneasy, so there was no way he could explain it to someone else. It wasn't like he was unhappy with the night before, not really, and he groped across his own thoughts trying to understand why he felt edgy. If he couldn't explain it to himself, there was no way he could explain it to Toshi, and that wasn't fair.

By the time he had the blood draw kit sealed back up and tucked in the package with the vials of blood he'd drawn, he had rationalized himself out of even trying to talk to Toshi because, really, there was nothing to talk about. With a yawn he shrugged into his shirt and one of his new pairs of jeans and went in search of coffee while his lover was out of the apartment.

Rez didn't like being asked to meet Toshi on the roof. He hadn't mouthed off that badly on his first day of lessons, but he had been difficult. So much so that he knew if he was still at the Red Moon he'd be punished for certain, unless his orders had been to defy a customer, to play that game. When Alec had knocked softly on his room door and told him that Toshi wanted a private word, well, the craving that had been making him sick and hurting suddenly seemed small in comparison to the fear that clenched his stomach.

Even sick and cramped up in a craving and fear, it still pleased him to step out onto the roof and

the dozens, maybe hundreds, of plants that were growing there. The commune may have been swarming with stupid humans but the land it had been tucked on was amazing. Rez had never thought much about plants and trees and grass and the like until he'd sat under an old tree and felt safe and connected. The rooftop garden wasn't that nice, but it was still one of his favorite places.

It took a little hunting but he found Toshi in the back of the garden, sitting in the shade. He was still in a suit, dress shoes properly shined, tie loosened but still tied in place, shirt neatly tucked in. The suit made the half breed look both more human and more I/S at the same time, as if the formal wear so ordinary to humans accented both sides of his heritage in compliment and contrast. It was a sharp reminder that it didn't matter which world he walked in, Toshi was a man to be reckoned with in either place.

"Sir?" Rez spoke softly when he was closer and waited until distracted ice blue eyes focused on him. "You wished to see me, sir?" He bowed a little and braced for whatever was to come, which wasn't easy to do when the craving was making him feel like he was about to puke.

"Hm, you look like I feel. Sit Rez, I didn't mean to drag you up here if you weren't feeling well."

He sat but kept his eyes down. "Just a craving."

"Which isn't just anything, just misery." Toshi sighed and let his head rest against the planter behind him. When he opened his eyes, Rez was carefully watching him and he forced a small smile. "Been a rough day, being tired seems to make it all worse. I was in a meeting for the last several hours and all I could think about was Shinning. I've no idea what was said or agreed to, just sat there thinking about how good it would feel to stop hurting. Alec covered for me but... I'm sorry. Must be disappointing to hear me like this."

"No, sir." Actually, knowing that Toshi struggled as much as he did, hurt as much as he did, was oddly comforting.

"We're alone here, right now, Rez." Toshi had seen to it, needed it and the privacy of being alone. "...I know this is an intrusion but I was wondering if I could speak to you about something?"

Which wasn't the scolding he'd been expecting. "What?" The questioning word tumbled out before he could stop it.

"You're not in trouble, I'm sorry, didn't mean to worry you like that, I just...just wanted a word alone."

Rez nodded and worried he might really become sick now that the nervous fear wasn't holding him together. "Ask." He agreed.

"I have no one else to go to. I can't ask one of the guard, it wouldn't be right, it would be too awkward. I'd ask my uncle but he'd blush and stammer and then be upset he hadn't thought to speak of this before now. I've no siblings and the boy I grew up with, well... He's dead now, and we'd grown apart." He tugged at the hem of his sleeve, fussed at a crease, all in an effort to keep from looking up.

"Sir? I don't understand."

"Venom."

"Oh?" The single word made Rez blink a little surprised and then the moans of the night before and how long they'd slept sunk in and he really understood what was being asked. "Oh!"

Toshi glanced up and was grateful the other man wasn't blushing, he just looked startled. "I was a virgin when my grandfather was murdered, when I was taken to work in the club. Then I was too high to care to ask questions. After, I lived with my father, and he's human. I can tell you the chemical compounds in venom. I can tell you how much is in a normal sample I've given. I know the science of it as well as most specialists, but it doesn't answer any of the important questions. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"No." But he did feel a little embarrassed. "Well, a little, but you're right, someone should have told you this shit before." He tried to imagine being his age now and not knowing the realities of venom. "Because I kissed Mick-san, you bit him last night."

It wasn't a question but Toshi nodded.

Rez thought about it and how even though he'd always known he would grow up to be a sex worker, no one had told him one thing about venom until after he'd lost his virginity. Even then, the other workers, all of them vastly experienced, had drawn straws to see who would be the one to tell him things, just as once he was older he drew straws praying he'd not get the short one and have to educate a younger worker. He remembered how the older woman had made tea and radiated her discomfort, how she dimmed the light and spoke in hushed words as if the topic was something dirtier than the reality of their work.

If he'd been in a normal family, an older sibling would have taken him aside. If there were no siblings it would be an older, more experienced friend or cousin. Toshi had been in a similar situation and it would be unforgivable to make the man ask his uncle, his father figure basically, because that was worse than not knowing. The gap in ages and generations always made talking about such a sensitive issue worse. It just surprised him that Toshi would ask him, and for a change he didn't feel badly about being in the position of educator.

"How much do you know?" Rez asked gently, as he always started such conversations about sex or venom.

Toshi shook his head. "Beyond the science? Not much. I nearly killed a man with a bite, I wanted to. I knew if I did bite him I'd overdose him. Once before, when threatened, I nearly killed someone with venom. I... Could I have killed Mick without meaning to?"

"No. You were frightened that first time right?" He wasn't sure what Toshi was talking about, but he knew from the feel of the man what the answer was even before he nodded. "It was instinct. We all do that when spooked."

"But it just felt so good to bite him, and it seemed like I bit him a long time..."

"Always does when done out of jealousy but, really, bet you didn't get much into him." He watched how Toshi squirmed a little and still wasn't quite willing to meet his eye. "Look, it's a big fuss over nothing. Every time you bite, the venom will be different. Potency goes up if you're scared or really pissed off. If you don't really want to fuck someone for hours, you can limit how much you put into them. Have to concentrate though, and it takes practice, but it's how the whores in the yard do it. They charge extra for biting, then barely get any venom in their clients. Shine helps too; being high makes it easier to control the venom. I..." Rez froze in his babble and realized he'd been talking to Toshi like the man was planning on going out and turning tricks. "Not something you really need to know, just don't know a lot about it in a relationship."

"Can I hurt him?"

The earnest concern chased away any lingering embarrassment Rez may have felt.

"I don't want to hurt him. I don't like that I may have lost control like that and hurt him."

It seemed impossible, but if he'd had any doubts at all that Mick smelled right to Toshi, they were gone now. "I've never heard of anyone unintentionally hurting someone with venom. You'll know it if you're likely to hurt him, it just feels... different. Most times, unless you know, really know, it's going to be a lethal bite, the most you can do is knock him out cold for a couple of hours. Can't believe no one ever told you this shit before."

"Wasn't a need before, I didn't want to talk about it. It's embarrassing to be my age and not know the first thing about something so basic."

Rez shrugged and tried to pretend it was a normal subject, like it was normal to find an I/S close to thirty that hadn't experimented with venom for years. "Have you ever been bitten before?"

"I... Yes but I was too Shiny to really remember it."

"It's not as potent for us as it is with a human but still...amusing. We used to cheat, if it'd been a long day and a client was demanding attention, we'd get one of the other's to bite us so we could get it going again. Weren't supposed to, but...." He glanced up and saw an odd look in the blue eyes. "I'm sorry."

"No, don't be. I just...I have no right to ask. You said you've seen others react like I did to you kissing Mick?" Just remembering it made him feel jealous.

Rez nodded and wasn't sure it was a good idea to remind the other man of the incident. "I would never have if I'd known..."

Toshi waved it off. "How I felt, feel, how I reacted... this is normal?"

"Jesus...." Rez whispered before he could clamp his mouth shut. "I'm sorry."

"No, please, say it, please... Rez... It's nice to have someone who's I/S to talk to. I told you before, I want you to be free to be yourself. Please, tell me."

"Just... was going to say... they fucked up your head more than they did mine." He shook his head. "I mean I always knew I was trash and going to be a whore, but it must have been shit to be from the family you're from and zorkia... I mean, a half-breed."

"Do you know where the word zorkia comes from?" Toshi asked carefully.

Rez shook his head no. A lot of the camp slang was pretty close to a real word, but just as many seemed to make no sense.

"It's a twisted form of the word zombie, the walking dead, because most half breeds don't live very long."

He tried to picture what it would have been like to have grown up with that weight. Always knowing how different he was, how even the lowest of house servants would have disliked being in the same room with him as if he were some dirty animal. It made his treatment at the Red Moon seem almost kind and it was no wonder Toshi had so few answers about such basic things concerning what it really meant to be I/S.

"It's normal." Rez answered the original question. "I don't know about when it's a human that smells right, but I've seen folks like that and they can share a lover with a human, but if another I/S even looked twice at them, well, it'd get ugly. Just how it works; it's an I/S thing, we get territorial. And venom is so personal, makes sense if you hadn't bitten him before you did last night. Like marking him, god knows he reeks of you already."

Toshi felt himself blushing. "I um...I like that my scent is on him."

Rez snickered a little. "Stop blushing then, and stop worrying about it. You won't be able to put enough venom in him to even knock him out let alone hurt him. Doubt you'll ever learn to just give him a little bit so don't bite him unless you've hours to spend bumping uglies."

The odd term caught Toshi and made him chuckle at the unexpected silliness, and that did a lot to make him feel less embarrassed. "Why is it so difficult to talk about this?"

"We're almost all bisexual; most of us have no trouble sleeping with anyone even if we don't openly talk about it. We don't pretend to play the monogamy games humans do, but we're always twitchy about how different we are from humans. Venom is just where we've put all our taboos and shame. No one talks about it when they're fucking around with another I/S, and if you're biting a human you're just a Shiner whore so there's all that shit wrapped up with it."

"So....this is normal?" Which was a big concern on his mind. Was he normal for an I/S, or was this just another thing where he was stuck between the two and not a part of either heritage?

"Other than that he's a stupid-ass human? Yeah, it's normal. Just don't go biting him every night... humans are fragile things, you'll wear him out."

"Or he'll wear me out...."

Rez snorted. "It wasn't you I heard moaning late last night!"

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Twenty Eight

Some days, Toshi felt he was being drowned in meetings. They used to feel important, vital, and while they often annoyed him, he approached each one as a means of proving himself to not only the humans at the meeting but his father and the media and the public at large. Every day he walked in the human's world without being the stereotypical I/S monster was a victory, something small to be cherished. It just all seemed so pointless now and he found himself enduring meetings out of obligation when all he wanted to do was scream at them all to simply shut up.

Oddly, returning to the hijacked barracks that had only been his home for such a short while made him feel like he was coming home. Or, at least, what he imagined coming home felt like. As soon as he crossed back into the Yards he relaxed, knowing he was safer there than anywhere, but moving into his building actually made his shoulders feel soothed. Like some weight had been removed, or a too tight belt loosened after a full meal, he just felt more



comfortable in his own skin tucked away into the privacy of his own small corner of the world.

Alec had gone to the last meeting without him, Toshi had bowed out pleading exhaustion and a headache and Alec hadn't debated the issue. Neither excuses were lies, but simply returning home made him feel better. He slipped into the quiet apartment and tossed his jacket at the nearest chair. All he wanted was a hot shower, something cool to drink and Mick to snuggle against. He wouldn't enjoy the first two without securing the final one and his quick search of the apartment turned up no Mick.

His first thought was that Mick was out, but he quickly dismissed that thought. If the human had gone out, the guard would have told him. It hadn't taken them long to learn Toshi's preferences, and one of them was if Mick wasn't by his side, he liked to know where the man was at. Yes, it felt a little clingy, but it made him feel more secure and that was something he found he needed.

Since no one had quietly informed him that Mick-san was at the build site or some such, he knew the man was somewhere in their building. He could have asked, the guard would know, but he liked the idea of looking. It gave him something to do, to think about. He started on the roof and worked his way down. Twice on his search guards asked if he needed help and he simply shook his head and left them standing uncertain as he continued his wandering.

Finally he found Mick down in the basement where they'd turned a long open room into a small gym. Mats covered some of the floor and mirrors had been put up on the wall, weight machines and treadmills lined up along another, heavy bags and other equipment hung around. It had been necessary to add the space on, Toshi ran daily and couldn't simply go jogging about the yard, and the guard had spent their lives training. It wasn't fair to ask them to train outside in an unsecured location until the club was built. That didn't mean he didn't have space at the build site planned, both modern equipment areas, Alec's lap pool, and an old fashioned dojo. For now, they were dealing with the lower ceilings and general basement feel that even extra lighting and coats of paint couldn't quite fix.

Not that anyone had complained; it just nagged at the back of Toshi's thoughts like a parent unable to buy their kids new shoes. The more people that became part of his household, the more responsible he felt. Some days it felt crushing and Toshi wondered how his uncle managed, knowing he made choices and picked directions for all of their people to go in. It all just built up and maybe there was some secret that his grandfather had passed to his uncle that maybe his uncle could pass to him.

Those thoughts went out the window when he turned a corner and saw Mick. Dressed far more casually than he ever wore outside of the gym, his pale legs were sticking out from long, loose shorts before being hidden again under turned down socks and sneakers. The burn on his leg from the grid that had electrocuted them both had healed and faded to a peachy-brown leathery scar that was supposed to fade slowly with time. At least, his Mother Ruth had said as much when she'd provided the ointment Mick rubbed on the ugly scar after every shower, but so far it didn't seem to be fading much.

The scar on his leg--or the ones on the rest of his body--didn't seem to bother Mick a great deal. Once he knew Toshi didn't mind them, didn't think less of him for them, he dismissed them. No one else's opinion mattered, and he did little to hide the chance eye from seeing any of the marks he wore. Today he'd dressed to work out in a sleeveless cotton shirt and, as he moved, the burn on his shoulder flickered out from under the fabric and darted back under cover, hinting at the ugly scar there. The slender fabric over his shoulders did nothing to hide the newest scar, the place where a bullet had slammed into his shoulder and broken his collarbone. That one was small and puckered and pink and fading better and faster than the one on his leg was.

Mick was just as careless with the scratches, bites, bruises and welts he'd gained from the night before. Once he'd learned how obvious their relationship was to any other I/S he made no efforts to disguise any obvious signs of their play. It was a causal acceptance Toshi admired and wished

he could copy and one he enjoyed. He had a perverse pleasure in knowing any I/S would scent him on Mick and it went doubly so for anyone seeing the marks he'd left on his lover's skin.

Any guilt his conscious may have prodded him to feel for actually leaving marks on Mick was crushed when he laid eyes on the human. One of the things Toshi loved best was watching Mick fight, watching him even practice fighting. It was so different from the fluid, formal, graceful style he'd learned and the guard knew. Mick fought to win, rough and hard, not worrying about structure or form, going for function and impact. It wasn't as pretty, but it was as effective. There was no doubt Mick could take a punch, but if he landed a blow of his own it would take his opponent down.

The I/S guard bracing the heavy bag Mick was punching noticed his approach instantly and Toshi saw the already large eyes grow wider. It was a guilty look that Toshi didn't need to sense the man's mood to understand and it spiked jealousy in his stomach. As he stepped closer he drew a slow breath and reminded himself that it was okay for another I/S to lust after Mick, so long as they didn't act on it. He couldn't blame the man for finding Mick attractive and knew his own obviously sexual marking of the human would only arouse more interest in him. He didn't have to like it, just accept it.

Mick punched the bag a few more times, aiming his blows against his imaginary enemy with hands barely taped up for protection. It wasn't until Toshi was almost next to him that he stopped and the guard nodded a little and hurried away. "I think you scared him," Mick teased, glancing over his shoulder, sweat beaded on his face.

"I can't blame the man for looking." He answered softly and loosened his tie before he moved to stand behind the bag and brace it for Mick. "Sleep well?"

"A little overdressed for being down here."

Toshi shrugged. "Had to cram in the better part of a days meetings into a few hours."

Mick nodded and ignored the blue eyes studying him, which wasn't easy. He hit the bag a few more times and stopped to rub his recently healed shoulder. "Arms still not right."

"How so?"

"Just... off, weaker, not as flexible, feels..." he swung the arm a little in an arc. "Unstable maybe? Just not right."

"It's barely healed, give it some time. How long does it take a human to recover from such a bad wound?" He healed more slowly than the average I/S but still far faster than a human--and far more thoroughly. Scars were gone in weeks, if he scarred at all, and sometimes he envied Mick's physical reminders of the wounds he received.

Mick snorted. "Too long, I'm just impatient. I don't like feeling like one arm could freak out on me. Been trying to strengthen it...." He rubbed the shoulder again and sighed. "You look tired."

"Someone kept me up all night."

That made Mick grin in a silly way. "Sent some blood samples over to Papa Mike, wish I could have seen his face when he got them. Bet it lit up like a kid getting a pony for his birthday."

"I don't care how much for science it is, he can't watch or take notes or tape us or anything of the like."

The serious scolding warning was betrayed by the amusement in the blue eyes and Mick chuckled. "God, no, but he'll ask, I promise you he will."

"Going to hurt your hands punching like that. Weren't you the one scolding the guard for taking chances and maybe getting hurt in practice?" He nodded to the lightly taped hands that had no protection on them.

"I like it better this way, makes it easier when you have to punch some one for real." He caught the edge of the tape on one wrist with his teeth and started to peel it off.

"Don't have to stop on my account."

Mick shrugged. "Was about done anyway." Toshi wouldn't have wandered in still in a suit if he wasn't feeling off or lonely. He may not say it in words, but Mick could understand what he was saying.

"Didn't ever answer, did you sleep okay?"

He paused in unpeeling the tape. "Soundly, was worn out."

"About last night..." Toshi started carefully, his voice lowered. worried the sound would carry in the low ceiling room.

Mick didn't even glance up, he just kept unwinding the tape. "What about it?"

"I just... I didn't mean to... I know you weren't ready to go that far." They both hadn't been ready, Toshi still wasn't sure he was ready.

He picked at the tape on the other hand and tugged the loose end up. "You needed it, it's okay."

"Mick..."

"I didn't mind." He glanced up and was shocked again by how easy it was for him to read Toshi's mood in those clear blue eyes. It wasn't quite guilt there, but something close to it. "We both knew we were going to try it sooner or later. I like that you got all jealous." He did, he really liked knowing someone was possessive of him. When Toshi had walked into the gym and noticed the guard checking him out, he knew it would make his lover jealous. It hadn't exactly been a sexual thrill that knowledge had sparked in him, but it had made him feel good.

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"This?" Mick brushed at one of the scratches on his arm. "I really didn't mind that. You know I think it's hot when you get all aggressive. I'm still waiting for you to take me over my desk like you promised to." He softly whispered back and was pleased to see Toshi's eyes dilate a little in surprised lust at the thought and memory that came along with it.

It wasn't what he'd expected to hear and he certainly wasn't braced for such a delicious thought. "You don't have a desk right now."

"True, but I will again soon."

"It wasn't a promise, just a thought."

"Nice thought."

"Seriously, Mick..." he tried to shake off the thought of taking Mick, hard, over his desk. It all tied in to what he'd been trying to say. "Last night, when I...forced you."

"You didn't."

"You said no."

Mick wadded the tape up. "You didn't hurt me, you didn't force me. I wanted you."

"But maybe not like that."

"It was fine," Mick answered a little too quickly. "I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"Mick." Toshi felt the sharp brittleness in his lover and was worried about pushing too much, too hard. It gnawed at him that in his desire to love him, to be as tender to Mick as Mick always was with him, that he'd somehow hurt him.

"I'm all sweaty, come shower with me and I'll wash your hair."

He didn't want to let the subject go. He didn't want to let Mick run away from it, but if he pushed that brittleness could shatter and he couldn't stand to be the one to cause that. Instead, he smiled and pretended like he didn't see the truth and the hidden fear in Mick's eyes. "You have such a hair fetish."

Mick reached out and let a lock of the loose black hair slip through his fingers. "Are you protesting?"

So many people had been repulsed by the most obvious sign of his mixed heritage. So many people had hated the black hair and he'd had countless suggestions that he should just bleach it lighter and fit in better. He'd spent most of his life viewing his hair with a stubborn sense of pride. Mick's obvious fascination with it, and pleasure in it, was one of a long list of things he found he required to be happy.

"I would never dream of protesting. Just, shower upstairs, not here. Wouldn't want to have to scare off more people." He was tired and wasn't sure he could stop himself from snarling if another I/S saw Mick naked, and wet, and sexy. That was a line of thought he didn't need to follow since Mick passively agreed and let himself be led from the gym. No point in lingering over a thought that within moments would be happy reality.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Twenty Nine

Alec hurried into the apartment with his briefcase and helmet in his hands, feeling rumpled and rushed. "I'm sorry I'm late, they just wouldn't shut up. Finally had to get Etta to look all stern and

order me to leave to break up the damned meeting.”

Rez was slumped on the sofa wearing black jeans and a baggy sweater that hid his frame, his hair was brushed out. Still, he looked like sullen and unhappy--he was the only one not sitting at the table.

Andy was all in black. Black pants, black shirt, black make up and a black waist corset tightly laced around his midsection, his hair falling in waves about his face. Toshi and Mick were both nicely dressed in suits with ties, so he noted he didn't have to go change from his own formal work clothes to fit in, but all Alec could see of Mick's elder sister was the back of her head and the abundance of dark curls.

“Hope I didn't hold everyone up, excuse me a moment and I'll be ready.” Alec continued to apologize as the people at the table turned, smiling to greet him. Their guest smiled and started to stand up and Alec forgot what he'd been planning to do. He was so suddenly struck that he didn't even notice Mick and Toshi standing as well.

“This is Alec Orwick, the one who really runs things around here.” Toshi introduced. “Alec, this is Mick's sister, Pia Hardy, she's going to oversee the clinic.”

Alec wondered if his mouth was hanging open and he blinked, startled a moment before he got his mind to work enough to remember formalities. “Hi....er...” He paused and cleared his throat. “It's nice to meet you.” He tried to offer his hand to shake, but it was still holding the helmet.

From the sofa, Rez snorted and shook his head.

It only took a heartbeat before he saw why she hadn't accepted his hand and Alec blushed a little and stammered an apology, but the dark-eyed, beautiful woman only smiled warmly and accepted his suddenly clammy feeling hand. “Sorry about that.”

“It's okay, I was just worried it was some obscure I/S custom to offer to shake headgear instead of hands.”

“Actually, I/S tend not to shake hands, they bow, based on Asian manners...”

Pia smile warmed even more. “I know, I was teasing.”

“Oh.” Alec blinked. “Of course, of course, I'm sorry, I...”

“Let me run to the bathroom before we leave for dinner. Excuse me gentleman.” Pia's smile widened as she caught the amusement in her younger brother's eyes as she slipped back through the apartment to the bathroom.

“Mick.” Alec hissed when the woman was out of hearing.

“What?”

“Not once in all these weeks did you think to mention that your older sister was gorgeous!”

Mick glanced to Toshi and the I/S just shrugged a little. “Ah.”

“Awww, is little Alec finally old enough to have the nature of your relationship with Toshi explained to him?” Andy teased and tried not to laugh.

“I'm gay, and, well, she's my sister.”

“You still should have warned me! I was expecting some plain, bookworm when you told me she

studies fungus. Not....not...." He glanced down the hallway and shook his head.

"Again, she's my sister."

"Still you might have mentioned it!"

"She's single." Mick added and heard Toshi snickering a little beside him. "Smart, funny, always was easy to get along with, used to date blondes..."

"Are you her brother or her pimp now?" Andy asked, and Alec blushed a little redder. "Well, this will be an amusing dinner. Alec drooling on our guest and Rez's first venture out of the house, I simply can't wait!"

"You all are evil." Alec whispered but footsteps drew his eye down the hallway and again he felt stunned silly by the woman. She wasn't overtly pretty--not actress pretty or model pretty but solid, real and stunningly handsome and Alec felt that sort of beauty to his core. It was going to be an interesting dinner, without a doubt.

Rez didn't want to go out. The weeks had lulled him into a sense of security. When a craving got too bad and he thought he might go crazy if he didn't go out and Shine, he soothed himself by knowing the guard wouldn't let him leave. He didn't know for sure if they would or not, figured at the least they'd tell Mick-san, but it made him feel safe, trapped inside and away from temptation.

He was happy to stay that way, secure in a building the way he had been most of his life. Leaving the Red Moon meant going to meet one of his humans, serving them, being their toy and being too high to refuse and that had never been something he'd looked forward to. While he knew in his mind leaving the apartment was different, he wasn't happy about it. It felt crazy and wrong and unhappy to go out and, worse, Toshi really wanted him to be free to come and go as he wanted. There just didn't seem to be any nice way of telling the man that he hated that idea. It felt like he'd be refusing some prized gift and he didn't want it to be like that.

There was just a big problem, one larger than having easier access to Shine. He didn't know what to do out there. Sure, he was growing more and more comfortable in sobriety, but not at all with his freedom. What would he do with a free afternoon outside of the apartment? Even with the money Toshi was insisting be set aside for him, Rez just didn't know what to do with it. He needed nothing, had never once in his life been shopping unless his owner was shopping and took him along. He'd never gone to a club alone, wasn't sure he was strong enough to do that anyway. He'd never gone to the bathhouses so many I/S visited, not to bathe, socialize or Shine. He had no family to visit or take care of, no place to go see, no one to care if he did.

So while he knew he had permission to leave the building, with an escort of course, he hadn't set foot from their building since arriving. He went to the roof for his lessons, soaking in the warmth of the sun and the fresh air. With his free time he studied as he'd been instructed, watched television with abandon, read, helped to tend to the garden and--now that he'd been feeling better--he had taken to jogging and using the weight machines in their gym. All assuming he wasn't in his room curled up in a ball, trying not to vomit over himself with another craving making him sick. He had no interest or desire in the outside world and no hints or prodding from Toshi could make him change his mind.

A direct order was another thing all together. Construction was progressing at a solid pace and not just on the club but on the section of the Camp's wall that was being torn down and modified to make room for the clinic Toshi was having built. So much progress, in fact, the woman the humans were going to have run the place was being sent over early to help things along. Rez wasn't entirely sure he understood human families but he gathered that Mick's wasn't normal; he

knew the sister wasn't one by birth but part of the pack of roaming human children the Inky Commune seemed to keep like pet cats. None of it would have mattered to him if Toshi hadn't made it a direct order for him to come along.

In celebration of the human woman's arrival, they were going to a teahouse for dinner. It was close to the wall, saw enough human traffic to not draw a ridiculous amount of notice to have four humans moving around in a group--but still was an I/S establishment, catering to I/S tastes. Arrangements had been made, the room was reserved, a meal was being prepared and for all the celebratory feel of it, Rez would have been far happier to be excluded. He wasn't even sure why Toshi wanted to include him, he was a part of the household, yes, but not part of Toshi's family, not really.

Yet he'd agreed when asked without too much fuss. It felt odd to be included, not because he would be expected to be a whore and entertainment but because Toshi had wanted him to come along. He'd said the whole family was going to dinner and Rez should be ready to go at a set time. There had been no line drawn between family and Rez and it drained any desire to protest out of him. Even if going outside scared him silly, being part of a family outing was too tempting to refuse.

He'd never been on a family outing and while they often managed to sit down and have a meal about the same time together, it had felt different to Rez. Meals shared inside the apartment had made him feel like the guest that had stayed too long, the deviant cousin no one spoke of but invited out of protocol. To go out of their way to invite him to this formal function had made him feel really, truly wanted because it would have been so much easier to just simply forget to include him. He'd seen family outings, groups of siblings or close friends--both human and I/S--but always from a distance. He'd even been a part of a few with his human owners, but as a party favor or something to show off, not as something included.

It scared him to leave, but he wanted to accept the offer. He wasn't sure what it would be like, if he'd even be welcome at a proper tea house. All he had to go on were stories and he knew full well that Shiner-whores were not welcome. Then again, he doubted half breeds were either and Toshi was allowed in the front door, his patronage was even welcomed and celebrated. His world had so vastly changed and some part of Rez knew he would never stop thinking of himself as what he was and move on to whatever the future held for his life by hiding in the apartment and watching television. He needed to go out and prove to himself it wouldn't end with him high and on his knees.

So he'd showered and dressed and sullenly waited. He'd been gruff and almost-but-not-quite-rude when re-introduced to Pia but it had mostly been from nerves. He didn't feel like his past was so easily gone, a few weeks didn't seem long enough to make it all different and have gone away. Even if he no longer felt like the Shiner-whore he'd been, he didn't feel like anything new either, and the lack of a new, solid identity had him feeling unstable and off balance. As they waited for Alec-san to return home so they could leave, he sat on the sofa away from the others and tried not to bite his nails in nerves.

When Alec finally did come home, there were stupid, awkward human reactions and Rez held his amusement--as well as his scorn--in check. He stayed on the sofa, pretending disinterest until the whole group was finally ready to go, and then he waited until he was called to pry himself off the sofa cushion. The group filed from the apartment, chattering and laughing and he hung back, tempted to simply refuse to leave and go back to his room.

"It'll be okay," Andy said softly when the others had slipped out into the stairwell.

"What?" Rez answered, startled into an answer.

"Going out, it'll be okay. I know it's got to be unnerving. It's just, you'll be with friends and it'll be okay."

"Fuck off, you don't know shit." Rez snarled and to prove his point, a point he didn't actually feel but could fake, he shouldered past the annoying artist to catch up with the group.

Andy shook his head. "I don't know if I should cuddle him or slap him...." But the empty apartment offered no answer to his mumbled words.

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Chapter Thirty

Mick was oddly grateful that the teahouse Toshi had chosen for dinner wasn't the same one he'd been to before. Somehow, that one would be forever linked to Tam and the sad failure they'd made of Toshi's former friend. The downside of that was he had no means of knowing what to expect. The camp had no central listing of blueprints and most of the buildings so close to the wall had been tossed up after the camp was sealed, or more recently after some free movement had been restored. Even old databases wouldn't have outdated copies of those blueprints so he had to go in blind and trusting Toshi.

Yet again, his faith proved well founded. The teahouse was one of the newer buildings, put up in the last few years with the flush of money and materials slowly creeping in from the outside world. It wasn't fancy on the outside but was solid and well built. They pulled up, and their string of well made, solid motorcycles and were greeted in the foyer by a half dozen men and women all wearing beautiful, well-made kimono, rainbow hued hair loose in some sections and elaborately styled in others. They were smiled at and the hosts laughed warmly as if welcoming old friends back home. Coats were collected, helmets gathered up and their entire party was joyful and quite loud.

Maybe because of the noise or Toshi's earlier instructions, they were quickly guided back into the building to a formal room. It had one entrance but two sections, one set back with a slightly raised floor and paper screens from the front closing it off. Low tables sat in each area, cushions tossed about and steaming pots of tea waited on the lower and tea and small bottles of sake waited on the upper.

The arrangement made Mick smile. Toshi thought of the guard as his house, his people, and while decorum and proper manners forbade them from sitting at his table, he wasn't going to exclude them in the least. As they were guided to the back table and the screens were pulled to give them some privacy, the guard fell around the table in noisy, happy excitement.

"They sound like a flock of parrots!" Pia grinned and spoke softly.



"We don't get out often." Mick answered.

"They've been working hard, Mick's been driving them like a devil. They deserve to unwind a little as well. The food here is excellent and I've left instructions that we won't be requiring any attendants, so we won't be bothered with formalities." Toshi motioned for them to sit but it was Rez who dropped the quickest and started to pour out tea out of habit.

"I'm excited, will it be authentic I/S cuisine?" Pia smiled at the sullen looking Rez and accepted the tea he offered her with a nod of her head.

"As authentic as we can get. Most everything we have is canned or dried. You'll find fresh tomatoes, peppers--the things that are easy to grow in small gardens. All the meat has to be brought in canned, but some of that is changing. Cuisine might be giving it too grand of a title but even on limited rations we managed to eat well." Toshi accepted his tea. "Thank you Rez."

"Welcome, sir."

"Amun, I don't remember you being so well armed." She teased as Mick loosened the button to his suit coat and the gun in it's shoulder holster was clearly visible.

"The last time I saw you I was fourteen, so yeah, I doubt you would."

"Is security such an issue? How much of a threat will the clinic be under?"

Mick glanced to Toshi but it was Alec that answered. "There will be some, yes, but it's manageable. Most of the threats we get are just hot air, Toshi's only been shot at once. Mick's quite good at his job. Don't worry, we'll provide security as necessary."

"It's humans not I/S that are the threat." Toshi nodded.

"And for that, I am deeply sorry." Pia apologized. "Not all of us humans are so cruel, just most of us are ignorant about your people. Maybe together we can change that, hmm?"

"Please tell me you aren't dating someone?" Alec blurted out.

"Alec!" Andy laughed.

"Sister," Mick reminded.

Pia just laughed warmly and without malice.

"I'm sorry," Alec rushed to offer. "It's just, I just..."

"Alec is almost an honorary I/S." Toshi explained gently.

"And well, finding beautiful, smart, women who aren't put off by that isn't easy. I'm sorry." He shook his head and knew he was blushing bright red.

"No," Pia answered softly. "I'm not."

"That's good, I mean it's not good because you should be happy but I'm glad to hear it but not like that just..." Alec sighed. "I'm not normally such an idiot."

She reached over and patted his arm. "It's okay, we'll blame it on the moon."

"Oh god, just kill me," Rez muttered and poured himself a small flat cup full of the sake. He was going to have to get drunk to keep from puking.

"So there I was..." Pia forced out around her laughter. "Literally up to my elbows in it, and my translator turns to me and says... That's no goat!"

"Oh God, that's horrible!" Andy groaned and they all were laughing, Toshi was laughing so hard his too-large eyes were crinkled tightly shut. Even Rez was chuckling, it was low and tight and sounded like he was trying very hard not to laugh, but laugh he was. Of course, they were all a touch drunk now. The meal had been plentiful and bursting with intense, strong flavors and they'd gone through far too many of the little bottles of sake that didn't taste quite like any sake Andy had ever gotten drunk on before. It wasn't just them, the room slightly below them was filled with laughter and conversations too, even if Mick had limited them to two of the small bottles of wine to share.

"Horrible to hear, horrible to be in!" Pia laughed harder and shook her head. "Those are the things they don't teach you in school."

"Speaking of school..." Toshi's laughter soothed out, but he was still smiling and more than a touch drunk but feeling relaxed and good. It was nice going out in a group. Pia was a good woman, comfortable with I/S and more. Not even Andy's occasionally crude comments or the fact that Mick was obviously more than friends with him upset her. She fit nicely with them, comfortably, and it was just good. Only Rez looked uncomfortable, but he was learning and growing and that was okay. "I spoke to sensei today."

Rez stopped chuckling and sat straighter. Any bit of eased relaxed pose he'd gained was suddenly gone.

"It seems Rez-san is doing quite well. Often a touch mouthy and disrespectful, but sensei feels it's a sign of restrained intelligence and stubborn pride. He's quite pleased with your progress, Rez-san, congratulations!"

"Thank you, sir." Rez mumbled out in reply.

"More so, Alec and I were talking. It isn't right or fair of us to leave you dangling in the wind like this, not knowing what's to come. I promised you work when I invited you into my house, Rez-san. Mick, Alec and myself will manage the entire club, Andy is going to step up as Artistic Director, but I need someone to manage the I/S side of things. Someone who knows how to handle other people and won't back down, someone that I can trust and Rez, I'd like that person to be you."

"What?"

"It was my suggestion, I think you'd be perfect for the job." Alec nodded.

"But... I've never managed anything before. I wouldn't know how..."

"There's weeks yet before you'd even have to worry about it. I've spoken to sensei and he'll tailor your lessons to get you ready. That is, if you'd be willing to try."

He tried to picture himself with so much authority and power and failed. "I thought I was to be a waiter?" He'd been hoping to work up to bartender and not have to deal with people so directly. This was so far beyond that.

"Sweetie, you'd make a shitty waiter," Andy added.

"Bite me."

"My point exactly."

"But..."

"Rez, just shut up and say thank you. You'll be fine, we'll all help you get up to speed." Mick grinned, wondering if he was the only sober one in their group.

Rez blinked and swallowed his fear. He bowed. "Thank you."

The group chattered on, Andy pulling the attention away from Rez and onto himself as he started to detail plans for events and promotions he'd been considering. It left Rez sitting stunned and silent. His stomach knotted up over the food he'd forced down the liquor he'd voluntarily swallowed. He tried to picture himself in charge, a manager, someone given respect and authority, and he thought he might be sick.

Without drawing attention, he stood up and stepped from the table. They'd all wandered to the bathroom at one point or another and while he felt eyes flick to him, no one stopped him or questioned where he was going. That alone was unusual. He was used to having to ask for permission to leave his owner's side. He wasn't sure he really was going to be sick but he was sure if he didn't find a moment alone he would.

As he walked past the table the guard was piled around, one of them stood up to follow, leaving the pretty attendant that had been laughing with a dainty hand shyly covering her mouth to sit alone. Rez paused at the door and turned. "I'm going to piss, what're you going to do? Hold it for me?"

"You only wish I would," the man mocked back, almost teasing and with none of the open malice the guard had displayed toward him before.

"Seriously, it's at the end of the hall, no one can get to it without going past here. I don't need to be babysat. No one is going to drag me down the hall and kidnap me without your notice."

The guard sighed and glanced down the hallway at the other closed doors with other groups and parties hidden behind them. They may not have been able to kidnap Rez without notice but he could be killed. Only, their orders were to be as unobtrusive as possible. He glanced over his shoulder and made eye contact with his leader, the woman shrugged and relented.

"Fine, but if you get knifed I don't want to hear you bitching about it later."

"Promise." He felt his shoulders loosen a little as he stepped away from the joyful group and all their happy stories and easy laughter. Part of him craved to be so easy in their world, and part of him wanted to snarl and hate them. It was something he'd have to resolve or he'd find himself driven half crazy from the conflict.

The men's room door shut behind him with a smooth thump and the empty, plain tiled room soothed some of the near-panic he felt. Being alone was the key; he could keep himself together if he could settle down in the solitude of the small room. It didn't work, and within a moment of the door shutting behind him he was hung over a toilet turning his stomach inside out. He retched until there was nothing left, but it made him feel a little better—shaky, but not so uneasy.

The toilet flushed with a whoosh and he moved to the sinks to wash his hands and mouth. The cool water felt good and he splashed some of it up over his face. It stopped his hands from shaking, even if the idea of so much responsibility still had him upset. The door thumped shut and a tall I/S with blueberry colored hair and dull green eyes brushed past Rez to reach the urinals. He wasn't dressed as an attendant, but had the basic tossed-together style of most of the people in the camp. A dress shirt that looked hand sewn tucked into drawstring pants made out

of linen. It was fine, expensive fabric mixed with a simple cut and style and gave the man an elegant air.

Rez found himself eyeing the man. He imagined the man was some well-to-do store owner, someone that maybe ran a grocery store or tailors shop or a bathhouse, someone respectable and well liked. The fall of rich blue hair swished a little against the pale, linen-covered ass, and Rez suddenly didn't feel so sick.

The man finished and turned. Rez glanced away quickly, but knew he'd been caught staring. The stranger grinned a little in a confident, smooth way and moved to the sink directly beside Rez to wash his hands.

"Beautiful."

The deep rich voice murmured and it made Rez shiver. "What?" He glanced up into the mirror and was caught in green eyes that studied him with a predatory look.

"Your hair, the color, your eyes, beautiful."

It wasn't just the voice or the way the eyes slid over him, Rez felt the man's lust and it made him shiver. He was horny, and part of him was lonely. The need for contact had been a slow building itch he hadn't been able to scratch and here was a handsome, virile, Incubus hitting on him. It had been a small forever since he'd been with anyone, and even longer since he'd been with one of his own kind.

"I didn't mean to frighten you, little one," the man said gently. He reached out and caught a lock of Rez's hair and let it slip across his finger.

Rez knew his eyes had to be huge, his breath was moving too quickly. He didn't know who he was anymore but he knew what he had been. He knew what he needed, knew what he was comfortable being. He stopped thinking and caught the hand that had toyed with his hair.

"You don't need to be gentle," Rez finally answered.

The man smiled brighter and caught the side of Rez's face with a hand still damp from the cool wash water. He closed his eyes and parted his lips and let himself be pulled close. This was easier, he didn't have to think about this, he didn't have to worry. There was no responsibility here, he just had to close his eyes and let it happen.

He thought he wanted this; the hands on his body, strong and sure, felt good, felt comfortable, and he let himself be pulled tighter, closer. The stranger was taller and wider and didn't have the frailness Rez was still struggling with. It was easier to give in to that strength, to let himself be rubbed against the other's body, groin into groin and hardness to hardness. It was easy to let go and be drawn back into one of the stalls.

He found himself pressed against the stall door, scrambling his fingers for purchase, something to grip on to. He was panting for breath, hard and desperate now and shivering with every touch of the stranger's hands on his bare hips, his stomach. It felt good, it felt like something he needed as the hands slipped up under his shirt to trace his spine.

"So beautiful," the stranger whispered as he pushed forward, filling Rez.

It wasn't until they were almost done, the stranger pounding hard into him, his body dancing on the edge of release that he suddenly didn't want it. Suddenly, it felt cheap and he just wanted the man to finish. Even his own release no longer seemed important. It didn't stop feeling good, he just suddenly wanted to be done.

The man moaned, low and throaty, and Rez liked how the sound vibrated down his nerves. His hands clutched at the top of the stall as his body trembled, the man nibbled at his neck and pleasure filled him. It didn't take long to tumble over the edge, the man shivered and took him hard, growling again as he came. The stranger sighed as he came down from his sudden and unexpected fuck, pausing for a moment before slipping from Rez's body.

Rez stayed clutching the stall door as the stranger used a bit of toilet paper to clean up and tucked himself back into his pants. He was breathless and his body was humming from his own climax. It was the first time he'd had any sort of contact with anyone since getting sober and it made him feel good and oddly horrible at the same time.

Hands petted him, soothed across his body. They pulled Rez back from the door, sliding him away. Lips brushed against his own, a soft teasing touch before the man whispered once more.

"Beautiful." And with that word, his blueberry colored hair teasing his linen covered ass, the stranger disappeared from the stall.

Rez clung to the stall a moment before sliding down to sit on the toilet seat. The fear and tension that had driven him into the bathroom was gone, and in spite of his random lover's words, he didn't feel beautiful.

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Chapter Thirty One

Rez took his time getting himself pulled together and cleaned up. He didn't want to go back feeling so out of it. Being roughly taken in the bathroom should have made him feel better and, in a way it did--but it also didn't. It was confusing, was all sex now that he was sober going to make him feel so tawdry? He may not have always welcomed all his clients, but he was I/S and he had enjoyed most of the contact on some level. Of course a lot of that could have been the Shine but other I/S, people who had been sober for their entire lives, they seemed to enjoy sex. The man that had just taken him had very much enjoyed it.

When he finally did return to their room, his guard-babysitter was leaning in the doorway. The man was trying to look casual but there was a teasing glint to his eyes.

"Was starting to get worried, about to come find you."

"I didn't get knifed."

"You got something though. He was handsome."

Rez froze and glanced up a little at the taller, stronger man. It hadn't occurred to him that the guard was as much a creature of his upbringing and place as Rez was, but it suddenly struck him now. Guards were born from other guards, few were ever invited into their ranks and their children would be raised from birth to grow up and be guards one day as well.

Rez sniffed a little. "You don't smell like celibacy to me."

"Neither do you anymore. Look, isn't my orders to keep you from getting some quick in the men's room. Just to keep you safe, that's it. Did he hurt you? You look a little off."

The genuine concern surprised Rez and he wondered what would happen to his blue haired stranger if he said he had been hurt. Would the guard actually kill the man for hurting him? Hurting Rez? The Shiner-nobody-whore they'd scoffed at even allowing into the same room with their Toshi-san?

"No, he didn't."

"Alright then, just pick someone better, you shouldn't look so sad."

Again the unusual concern. "What do you care?"

The guard glanced to the table that sat laughing. "My sister Shines."

"A lot of people do."

"You don't." He nodded a little. The meaning in the two words was clear. "They'll be missing you back there, should get you back."

That's when it hit Rez. He was sober now. Not for any length of time, but he was sober. Certainly for longer than he'd ever heard of anyone making it, a week, maybe two if they were really lucky. He'd heard a story once of someone that had gone a month without using, but he'd always chalked that up to just stories. He'd been clean now for well over a month, and every day he made it without using was another day he was sober, another day his body flushed out his addiction, another day the cravings would ease fractionally. Every day he hung on was one step closer to doing more than simply hanging on and really being clean.

The only other person to do that was Toshi-san. He'd had to do it the first time while awake, suffering in agony for every one of those moments of early withdraw, but he'd had the best rehab money could buy. Everyone admired Toshi-san for who his grandfather was, who his uncle was, and for all the strength, will and courage he'd shown. It surprised him to think that maybe some of the people in the community were thinking of him in the same light. The idea that anyone thought of him as something to admire shocked him, then chilled him, then unnerved him.

Unnerved him so much he had to get away from the guard and the sudden concept that people were thinking of him similarly to Toshi-san. The only place to retreat to was the back table. The table were the head of the household, those in charge sat; the table he was expected to be part of. As he hurried away he knew he liked it better when the guard had viewed him with disdain. He understood that and knew how to react. This just felt wrong.

Rez moved lightly, falling back on learned manners that said he had to be graceful and appealing and nice all the time. He hoped to rejoin the main table without being overly noticed but eyes swung to him as he stepped closer. Most darted away just as quickly, noting his return but not fussing over it. Toshi's lingered, the blue eyes weighing him, but the half breed quickly smiled again and dismissed whatever he'd noticed. Andy's eyes lingered as well, longer than Toshi's. They were less willing to slide away and it made Rez want to shoot him the finger. When Andy glanced away, he wasn't smiling. Without being asked, the artist poured a drink and slid the

small, flat sake cup at Rez and, as much as it annoyed him to accept, Rez did because he needed that drink.

"Are you sure you'll be okay getting back to your hotel?" Mick asked for the third time because Pia was quite drunk. She wasn't the only one, it seemed the entire party had gotten tipsy, leaving Mick the only sober one beyond their guards. Even Toshi was walking with a little too much care and staring with a dazed happy emptiness to his blue eyes and the look of a man desperately trying not to show how drunk he was.

Pia patted the shoulder of the handsome I/S guard driving her to her nearby hotel. "I'm good, bro, got this strapping fellow to make sure I don't crack my head in. Besides, not like I haven't gotten drunk before."

"I can send another pair."

"I'm fine! Stuffed full but fine. Great food, wonderful dishes, unlike anything I've had before. I can already tell I'm going to gain twenty pounds working here." She sighed and tried to align the strong, confident man before her with the sad eyed boy she'd known. "Well, I'm getting sleepy." She smiled and chased away the odd thoughts. "I'll call you tomorrow, late, when I'm awake and not hung-over."

"Alright." He let her pat his arm and grinned as she wobbled a little as she got on the motorcycle and was zipped away. He watched as the bike rolled away, out of the Yards as far from the small tent city that popped up every night filled with addicts and whores.

Toshi wanted to get a larger guard presence in the Yards. It would bring some stability to the chaos there. And while it wouldn't stop the violence totally, it would seriously limit it. It would just give a better sense of safety for the people there, knowing if something bad happened someone would be there and care if they were hurt or not. It was a good idea; it wouldn't be easy to implement it but well worth it and it would help secure their place in the Yards before moving to put rules on the clubs.

It was so much promise and so much work. The possibilities seemed endless. Not just the Yards but all of the I/S population hung, just waiting to be formed into something new. The night was bright and open and Mick wondered just what they were forming and how much he was going to be apart of it. It certainly wasn't a role he had expected to play. If he'd been asked a year ago to think of the wildest situation he could see himself in, this wouldn't have even been in the realm of possibilities. A year ago he'd been on the police force and still dating Sal, it was shocking how much a year could change things.

Thinking about the past year and standing alone outside the looming building made him feel melancholy. He took in another long breath of the night air and turned to go back inside. Mick nodded to the guards on duty, too distracted to bother looking to see if they were as sharp as he'd like them to be. Inside the apartment Andy was splayed out on the sofa, but while he looked up when Mick came in he didn't speak, which was good because he wanted to think and be alone in the privacy of his own thoughts.

Or mostly in the privacy of his own thoughts. As he opened his bedroom door and saw Toshi methodically brushing his hair out, he knew he didn't really want to be that alone. Wide blue eyes glanced up at him, blinking slowly in a warm drunken haze, and Toshi smiled gently at seeing him.

"Pia on her way home?"

"Yes." Mick sat down and took the brush from Toshi. "Give me that, you're so drunk you might

take your eye out braiding your hair back for sleep.”

Toshi snorted but gave up the brush. “Not that drunk.” The methodical strokes of the brush were soothing and he closed his eyes, happy and content now that Mick was back. “Tonight was really nice.”

“Mmhmm.”

“Very....normal, like a family.” Toshi sighed but Mick didn’t seem like he was in the mood for conversation. “Pia is nice, Alec seems quite smitten. You should have felt him.” He chuckled again. “He’s so smart yet so bad with women. I’d like for him to be happy, find someone. He should have a family. Adopt a mess of kids to have underfoot. He’d be a good father, just he says he won’t risk fathering any kids. He’s all worried they’ll get his genetic flaw and a half breed won’t be enough to fix them. Can’t say as I blame him but he really would be a good father.”

Mick set the brush down and gathered up the waterfall of glossy black hair. He stroked his hands across it a few times, enjoying the feel of the strands tangling around his fingers before he started to divide it into sections and plait it into a simple braid.

It felt good enough to make him purr, almost, and Toshi was just happily drunk enough to feel eased and mellow. He was just drunk enough to know he wasn’t entirely in control without feeling like he was out of control. “Tonight was good. Like a real family. Father is pushing for me to have children. He’s making a list of socially and genetically compatible women.” He felt the steady hands in his hair falter before continuing to smoothly twist the sections together. “He’d like for me to marry one while she’s breeding his grandchildren, then divorce and marry another.” Again the hands stumbled and he felt Mick unraveling a section of hair and reweave it. “I... Mick...”

“It’s okay.” He forced out.

“Marry me?” The hands dropped the braid altogether and scrambled to catch the ends as they unraveled.

“You’re so drunk, it’s not funny,” Mick teased and quickly finished the last of the braid and tied off the end.

Toshi waited until he could turn, but he already knew what he’d find when he turned around. “I’m not that drunk. I know what I’m saying. Marry me.”

“Never, ever listen to what someone says when they’ve been drinking. If you’d take that seriously, Andy’d be married a dozen times over.” He brushed a stray hair back and forced a small smile. It felt fake and he wondered if it looked fake too. It was a silly notion, he couldn’t marry Toshi. He’d never once, not for a second of his life, wanted to marry anyone, and he certainly couldn’t marry Toshi.

“I’m serious, marry me.” Toshi could feel that brittleness again in Mick, like thinning spring ice, but he pushed once more hoping it wouldn’t crack.

“Now I know why you don’t normally drink. We can’t get married.”

“Well, not legally. I/S can’t legally wed, but we can have papers drawn up. We’d be married in every way but in government records.”

“I didn’t mean because of that. You said it yourself, your father wants grandchildren.”

“And he’ll get them, but I don’t need to pretend to care for the mothers. It’ll be a formal business arrangement like any other.”



"I can't... we can't... I'm the hired help. People already talk with us as lovers..."

Toshi hated that line of thought, hated that his wealthy and chance of birth was a wedge between them. "I don't care what people say, I never have. And you aren't just anything, without you nothing has meaning. I didn't know how unhappy I was until I was happy with you."

Mick sat silent as the confession and words spilled over him. When he did move he shook his head. "You're so drunk."

"I am not!"

"Let's go get ready for bed, you're going to need to sleep this off."

Toshi watched him stand up and move to get his things together for sleep. He wanted to stop Mick and make him understand that he was dead serious. If he'd just agree, Toshi would have papers drawn up right away, they could sign them tomorrow, buy rings or whatever else Mick would like as an outward display, maybe plan a ceremony, something to make a statement in front of their friends and family. All he needed was Mick's acceptance, but the man shied away from the very thought.

So he kept his mouth shut and stopped pushing. He let Mick gather a change of clothes and slip out of their room to make a final trip to the bathroom. Toshi knew he'd be happy being publicly and legally committed to Mick for as long as Mick would have him, but he wasn't sure how to convince Mick of it. Apparently just saying it wasn't enough and he'd have to think of another way to get through to his lover and show him it was okay because he was safe and wasn't going anywhere.

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Chapter Thirty Two

Alec's palms were sweating. He'd been in meetings with Presidents and Prime Ministers, Kings and Dictators. He'd sat across the table from some of the wealthiest people in the world, negotiated with major companies and never, not once, had his palms gotten sweaty. He fidgeted with the blueprints, the paper ones, spread out on the foreman's work desk and wondered if he shouldn't have worn a tie.

Then the motorcycle pulled up and he stopped worrying about his tie. The guard this time was a woman and she dropped the kick stand on the bike and cut the engine. Pia happily hopped off the back, she was smiling as she pulled her own helmet off, dark curls falling out everywhere and Alec forgot how to breathe. He watched from inside the construction site as the two women

spoke, the I/S guard grinned a toothy smile and her large yellow eyes flicked over to where Alec hovered in the doorway. That made her smile wider and she nodded to Pia before causally make a display of waiting by the bike.

Which meant he'd been spotted lurking in the doorway, spying like a frightened child and that wouldn't do. He shook his head and hurried out to meet Pia half way to the entrance. "Ms. Spiers." He called out in greeting.

"Mr. Orwick, are we still so formal?" She grinned in a sly way and allowed him to escort her inside the half torn apart building.

"I...I didn't wish to assume."

"Please, call me Pia and I'll call you Alec. I'm sorry to have pulled you away from your day. I know you must be awfully busy."

"Oh, no... well I am... but not today. Toshi was a touch hung over so I cancelled all the morning fuss and this afternoon was set aside already. His father has invited him to a dinner party and really, that'll be a disaster so I never schedule anything for him the afternoon before." The words tumbled out and he drew a breath trying to settle his nerves.

"You take good care of him."

"Well, it's my job and he's my best friend." He laughed nervously. "One good thing about the plague, it made scientists and doctors more hated than lawyers, makes me almost respectable now!" Only she didn't laugh and he really heard what he'd said and suddenly felt very stupid. "Not that I mean that you or the Commune... I have deep respect for science and medicine. I wouldn't be here if not for some very advanced therapies it's just... I meant..."

"It's okay." She said gently.

"That's how Toshi and I actually met, his being a half breed let them fix my sub-mutation so I really, really have nothing against and only good things to say about researchers. The only down side is that no one can tell me if I can safely have children, not that I would need to have my own... I don't have a problem with adoption, I mean I know you don't given that you're an Inky." Then it occurred to Alec that he'd basically implied that they'd be having children together and he suddenly wished he could just die and save himself further embarrassment. "Not that I meant anything by that, just, I understand and..."

Pia chuckled softly. "It's okay, I know what you meant. I'm not an Inky though."

"Oh, I just assumed with your last name and your work, I'm sorry."

"I had no last name when they adopted me and I'm a resident fellow with the Communes. I haven't made my mind up about becoming a full member."

"I guess that would be a big decision. Full members don't date do they? Or marry?"

"No they don't, all members are basically committed to each other, like a large group marriage."

"Oh that would be sad." But he saw her raise an eyebrow and he knew he'd said the wrong thing again. "Not that I'd presume to judge, God knows all I do is work. It just seems a shame a woman like you wouldn't date... I... oh God." He rubbed a hand over his face.

Pia chuckled warmly again but it had no malice in it. "It's okay."

"No...no...it's not. I'm sorry. I just get really nervous around beautiful women."

"I..."

"I'm sorry!" He shook his head and tried to laugh at himself. "See? You'll just have to dismiss me as an idiot but I swear I'll do my best to get the clinic built to your specifications."

"You think I'm beautiful?" Pia asked carefully.

"Yeah, but don't worry, expect for my being an embarrassment, I won't let it interfere with anything."

"No one's ever said that to me. I get complimented on being intelligent but not attractive."

"Oh you are, but that just makes it worse. Beautiful and smart?" He glanced up and grinned in his best disarming, please don't hate me, way. "Devastating."

"Well." The grin made her heart skip a beat and for a moment the normal cool composure she wore, the same composure that had let her handle nearly any situation life tossed her way, broke if only a little bit. She drew a long breath and got herself thinking. "Lucky for you I like blondes." She watched his mouth open a little bit in surprise, watched his blue eyes flicker with uncertainty over her sincerity but she didn't linger. Behind the blonde she saw the desk and the blueprints and moved forward to try to study them.

It left Alec standing slack jawed and with his heart pounding for a moment too long before he turned to follow. "Really?"

Pia smiled brightly but ignored him. "Now, explain these plans to me, I'm sure there will have to be some changes made."

"Oh..." Work... he could focus on work and not embarrass himself too badly, it didn't help that standing so close to look over the papers gave him a good whiff of her perfume. The soft scent of honeysuckles drifted from her springy curled hair and he thought for sure he was going to do more than stutter over his words to embarrass himself. "Well..." he cleared his thoughts and forced on work. "I'm sure of it as well. I have a meeting set up for this evening with the contractor, you're welcome to come with me just to make sure I get everything addressed properly."

"I'd like that, thank you."

"And maybe we could get dinner afterward?"

She paused but knew what she wanted to say, just, she had to make sure it was really okay to say it. "I'd like that too."

They could have gotten a car, it would have been easier. Suits tended to wrinkle a little on a motorcycle and it really was an informal way to travel. There were only two upsides to it, the first being how hot Mick looked in his leather riding coat, gloves and low heeled boots and the second was that it pissed his father off. Well, honestly, it annoyed the man more than angered him, but Toshi felt the need to reinforce that he wasn't his father's lapdog whenever he could. The more he seemed to do it, the more his father seemed to respect him.

There were several cars parked off to the side when they pulled up to the far less impressive house than most people expected to find. Several cars meant guests and his father had offered no warning about that. He dropped the kickstand but left the bike still running because there was a valet to move it to the side and park it. That was another bad sign; if his father had a driver on hand it meant the guests were more than simply old friends.

"I'm going to kill him," Toshi muttered, helmet in hand and he'd give that over to whoever lurked inside to collect coats. "He told me it was a small dinner, nothing formal."

"We can leave if you'd like?"

He was tempted to agree. "No, he's making an effort."

Mick nodded but he saw the way Toshi's shoulder tighten up and the smile he'd been wearing more and more often was gone. It wasn't just dealing with his father, which admittedly wasn't an easy task but one Toshi handled way better than Mick ever seemed to. It was the inclusion of guests, strangers and Toshi just didn't seem able to hold onto his own self under those situations. He grew quiet, formal, proper, and very much on edge. It wasn't changes Mick liked seeing in his lover.

Inside the door was a young, pretty woman that smiled and accepted their coats and helmets as well as a discreetly placed, very large man that filled his suit out almost to bursting. The tall man's eyes skimmed Mick and caught sight of the small bulge of the shoulder harnessed handgun. Mick just glared back and dared the larger man to attempt to disarm him. Fancy, important guests or no, he'd break the man's arm before he let himself go anywhere with Toshi and be unable to defend him. The man studied him a moment, obviously aware of who he was before he nodded slightly and made no further moves.

The girl who took their coats directed them to the parlor and offered to escort them. Toshi grinned. "I know where it is." She actually flinched when he spoke directly to her. That wasn't like his father, he tended to hire people that were at the least prepared for meeting Toshi face to face. It made him want to grind his teeth.

From the number of cars out front, Toshi was braced for maybe a half dozen people at the most, but really he had in his head the image of four or five well known faces and names when he turned the corner to the well lit and well accorded parlor, he actually paused in the doorway. There was a good dozen and a half strangers there, all milling about, holding drinks and talking in a warm low buzz.

Apparently, Toshi's father had been as open with the guest list to his other guests as he was to his son. None of them seemed prepared to suddenly have Luke Henri's bastard half-breed son show up in the doorway. One by one as the guests noticed him, conversations died and eyes swiveled and stuck to him. It made Toshi wish he'd listened to Mick's suggestion and just gone back home.

"Now I'm going to be the one to kill him," Mick muttered from beside and slightly behind Toshi.

Their tall, white haired host, Luke Henri broke away from his pretty and very young wife to come over. He held his hands out like he was greeting someone he was close to instead of the son he was barely starting to know. "Toshi! You're a bit late, but I'm so glad you could make it," he announced into the silent room. He moved and pulled his stunned and rigid son into an embrace. "Smile, you're scaring everyone," Luke Henri whispered.

Toshi forced a small smile. "I'm right on time; you told me this time so I'd make an entrance, and you didn't mention this was a large party, father," He hissed back.

"If I'd told you, you wouldn't have come." He nodded as he broke the hug and offered his hand to the silent man that followed his son everywhere. "McKale, you look a sight healthier from the last I saw you."

"Good as new," Mick agreed but he didn't smile, not even a forced fake one.

"Let me introduce you two around."

The warm greeting had soothed most of the guests and conversations quickly returned. Mick followed and said little, not at all impressed with the people they were formally introduced to. Actors did nothing to impress him, and while he'd at least heard of the powerful woman in charge of a huge global bank, the power she wielded didn't interest him. Toshi seemed equally unimpressed and more upset and stressed out at their reactions to him than their titles and wealth. No one offered to shake his hand but none of them seemed to have a problem shaking Mick's. If his father noticed that, he made no comment on it.

They hadn't quite been introduced to everyone before the time to sit for dinner rolled around. Luke Henri had at least been sensitive enough to seat Toshi beside Mick and not across the table from him or some other nonsense. Though, Mick half wondered if that was more to keep one of his guests from having to sit next to him. With Luke Henri on one side and Mick on the other, no one could be uneasy or uncomfortable having to be directly beside him. It didn't bode well for the formal dinner that was soon served and Mick had to remind himself that as much as he may want to, he couldn't indulge in the very nice wines being poured.

Dinner was painfully uncomfortable for the first several courses with Luke Henri and his pretty wife trying very hard to keep things light. Mick actually suspected the older man was enjoying using his son to make his powerful and famous friends squirm. By the third course when Toshi had barely spoken a word and hardly lifted his eyes from his plate, the table began to relax and pretend he wasn't there.

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Chapter Thirty Three

Eventually the conversation loosened up and took a more normal tone and talk swung around to economics and politics which bored Mick but he could tell just by how Toshi was holding his fork that the other man itched to join in and was holding himself back. It wasn't until one of the people across the table from them was gushing about a new company that Toshi finally forget his need to stay silent and snorted a little at one of the comments predicting an economic windfall from their investment. It was a very soft sound of disagreement but one no one missed.

"Apparently my son disagrees with you, Roger." Luke Henri injected smoothly. He'd kept his thoughts on the subject silent but he'd been bad and deliberately drawn the other man into the line of conversation knowing Toshi's portfolio.

Roger, a man of substantial wealth that lived in far more showy of a lifestyle than the Ranvier's did, raised an eyebrow but didn't even glance at Toshi. "We're all entitled to opinions, correct or not. Their restructuring is going to bring in a tremendous profit margin, especially in this

upcoming holiday marketplace.”

Luke Henri folded his hands a little and very carefully avoided glancing to his son and didn't respond. He didn't have to look over to hear the sound of a fork being carefully placed down and the rustling of fabric as Toshi shifted in his seat.

“Actually.” Toshi spoke softly, the first words he'd said since sitting to the table five courses ago. “The restructuring isn't going to help. It's too little, too late. Worse, they've disrupted too much by making vast changes in their supply chain and I'd be surprised if they manage to even post a profit this quarter when they aren't busy. By the time the holiday season swings around they're going to be dealing with delays, back logs and unfilled contracts which is going to kill them in the fourth.” He glanced up and locked eyes with the older man and wasn't surprised when he dropped his own eyes to his plate. “Being heavily invested in them would be a horrible mistake.”

“That's nonsense.” Roger dismissed.

“Michelle, sweetheart, help me to remember to dump my interest in them first thing tomorrow. My son is a Ranvier, he can scent out where the money is the way a shark can blood in the water.”

“Father.”

“What? I can't be proud?” His eyes sparkled. “It's not commonly known but I gave Toshi a small sum of money when we found each other, he was just a kid so it wasn't much. Without any input from me, he's double that dozens of times over just on his own savvy. If he says the wheels are about to fall off of a company, you can bank on it.”

The praise surprised him and warmed him but it also made him wonder just what it was his father wanted. In any case, the compliment shook some of the tense nervous worry from his shoulders. Thinking his father supported him was a vastly different thing than having his father openly back him. It was the difference between having to accept the snubs of the elite members of society or challenging them and forcing acceptance.

Toshi shook his head. “My father is too generous. I just paid attention to what my teachers taught me then applied it.”

There hung an uncomfortable silence for several heartbeats when no one was quite sure what to say and Toshi refused to glance down and back away again. Eyes shifted about the table but it was one of the wives that finally ventured forward to break the silence. She was pretty and had a well groomed, born to money look to her with not a single hair out of place and a grace that came from being raised to weather awkward social situations.

“I've heard that you're challenging the legality of the Containment Act. Do you really mean to loosen the restrictions on the I/S community?”

Toshi met her eye easily and smiled a small, soft smile. “No, I mean to wipe that law completely from the record. When I'm done, there won't be a scrap left.”

“But doesn't that worry you? The act may be flawed but it protects the I/S community as well.”

“My people are just fine, they don't require protecting that comes in the form of slavery and ownership. What we need are jobs and fair wages and decent trade, none of which we'll ever see while everything goes through the Committee.” It made him uncomfortable to speak so freely in a room full of humans, in a room full of his father's friends and peers but he was tired of pretending. As scary as it was, it was less scary when his father gave him another nod of approval and under the table Mick lightly squeezed his knee in a show of support. For all his new found willingness to speak up, Toshi said very little for the remaining courses.

Dinner passed, and Toshi managed to survive the hour or so of casual conversation and drinks afterwards while they mingled. Mick stayed close to him and stayed silent and brooding looking but it surprised him that his step mother hovered near by. She seemed very nice but it made him a little uncomfortable. She was closer in age to him, less than a decade older than he was and felt more like his date than his aged father's current wife. He wasn't going to complain, she seemed to be in a similar situation as he was in. The older friends didn't quite snub her but they did act as if she wasn't terribly smart. Toshi knew better, his father may have had his head turned due to her beauty but she'd lasted a year longer than his recent wives because she was quite bright.

Thankfully, the group broke up sooner, not later. Luke Henri was well known to be a man that went to bed early and rose early and worked hard. His dinner parties tended to end early because of this. Toshi knew it was part of it but also that his father had little tolerance for socializing. He did it because it was important to make connections and listen to what people were thinking and saying, a belief he was obviously trying to pass onto his reclusive son, but he didn't socialize to amuse himself. He tended to shoo people home sooner than other folks would simply because his tolerance was often limited. Toshi wasn't lucky enough to escape so easily. His father made it quite clear that he wanted them to stick around and as the last of the people left, he wondered what his father really wanted.

"Well, that went well," Luke Henri declared as he returned from seeing the last of his guests away. "I think you made Roger wet himself." He chuckled and poured drinks. His wife accepted the drink but Toshi paused.

"When you offer me a drink, it normally means you have something to say I won't like." He accepted the glass but didn't drink it.

"You're too young to be so cynical. You're not drinking are you, McKale?"

"No, sir."

"You'll drive home?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's been a long day, what is it you wanted to tell me?"

"Good, no point beating about the bush is there?"

"I'd prefer not to."

"Do you know who Paul Epps is?" Luke Henri sat down next to his wife and watched as his son and his lover settled into a pair of chairs across from them. Being seated, however, didn't seem to put his son any more at ease.

"The name sounds like I've heard it but I can't recall."

"The journalist?" Mick added carefully, glancing from father to son.

"The same one."

"He did a piece early in his career on the Communes. He lived with one for months, it was a fair story, honest. They still speak highly of him and it wasn't our commune he lived with. Did a lot of reporting on some of the nastier dictatorships as well. He has a good reputation for being fair."

"And did a solid report on me shortly after I moved RI headquarters here 30 years ago. He was a

hard ass, but as you said, honest and not scared of me. I saw to it he was hired on after that, free reign to investigate what he wanted. He's won all sorts of awards, has made our papers look good." He swirled his drink in his glass.

"What about him?"

"He's going to do a piece about you."

"No."

"Toshi."

"No."

"This isn't up for debate." He raised his voice a little. "He's doing a piece on the quarantine of the I/S population and all that's gone wrong with that and like it or not you are the face most people think of when they think of what an Incubus is. He'll be spending a couple of weeks over the next few months visiting you, asking questions and you will treat him properly."

"Father..."

"I've already spoken to your uncle, we're in agreement this would be good for the community."

Toshi took a long swig from his drink. "You know I'm not going to refuse but next time include me in the discussion. It's my privacy being invaded."

"Men like us? We have no privacy."

"I'm not happy with this, you know what a precarious situation I'm in right now. I haven't even begun to get any sense of order in the Yards, things are still up in the air. Worse, Rez is still vulnerable. He's barely been sober for a month and I'm still not recovered. No one needs this scrutiny."

"Epps is a good man, just be yourself. He'll do right by things."

Toshi rubbed his eyes and felt a headache forming. "When is this starting?"

"He'll call your fellow tomorrow."

"I'll let Alec know."

"One more thing..."

Toshi felt his stomach drop. "Yes?"

"I'm an old man. It's time you had children."

Toshi felt the sharp spike of cold from Mick but the man didn't make a sound or move. "Father, I'm not going to go over this again. I'm considering it."

"You've considered it long enough. I've sent you lists and you don't answer me."

"He's sent you lists?" Mick questioned just above a whisper but Toshi didn't glance over.

"Don't worry, I helped pick her out."

"You've picked someone out?" Toshi downed the last of his drink. "This is absurd!"



"It's not absurd to ask for the family to continue." Luke Henri raised his voice again but he wasn't really angry, just frustrated. "Your grandfather hauled corpses and dug graves doing the work no one else wanted and built a company that got us both where we are now. I'm sorry this falls to you but it does because the line will end with you otherwise. You will have children, we've already agreed on this but I'd like to see them before I die."

"Father."

"She's here. Just meet with her for now. We can draw up the papers and make it official later, do a ceremony with her in a few months when we know she's pregnant."

"I'm not marrying some stranger."

"She's a really sweet woman," Michelle added. "Here, let me bring her in."

"She's here?"

"Of course she is." Luke Henri nodded to his wife and she stood up to hurry away and fetch the unknown woman. "She's a good woman, solid family bloodlines. She has a Prime Minister in her pedigree before the plague."

"She's not a poodle father, and neither am I!"

"Of course, of course but this is important. She's from a good line, solid, healthy, no sub mutations and she's a 97% chance of conception with you."

"Father..."

"Here she is. Bridgit Michaud, let me introduce you to my step-son, Toshi; Toshi this is Bridgit," Michelle beamed, leading the other woman in.

Toshi felt Mick bristle and felt his father's smugness and the young woman's nerves and it was all too much. "May we have the room, please?"

"What for?" Luke Henri questioned.

"Come on, my old man, let them have a moment to say hello." Michelle let go of Bridgit's arm and move to tug at her husband's.

"Toshi?" Mick spoke softly.

He hated doing it but he couldn't stay together with Mick being all twitchy and tense and sharp edges so close to him. He already had a headache, he just needed some quiet to think. "Please, just a moment?"

Mick didn't like it but he nodded and followed Toshi out. When the door shut the young woman actually flinched and Toshi wondered what she expected was about to happen. He wondered about that too.

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Chapter Thirty Four

Toshi moved to refill his glass from the crystal decanters. "Would you care for a drink?"

Bridgit shook her head. "Thank you, no I... I shouldn't."

He poured a second glass and offered it to her. "They tell me that it's easier to detox if I don't drink, so I shouldn't either but if ever there was a time that called for a good bourbon this would be it. Do you like bourbon? There are other choices..."

"No, I'm fond of it. My father used to drink it; he'd give me a thimbleful when I was a girl and laugh as I coughed on it." She accepted the glass but didn't drink from it.

"Please, sit," Toshi waved to a pair of chairs that faced each other. He was too mannerly to sit while she stood, but his legs felt weak and he really wanted to sit down.

"Thank you," she answered softly and gingerly took a seat.

Toshi sat silent, unsure what to say or do and he spun his glass over and over in between his hands. "Where are you from?"

"We live outside of London but my family is partly from France."

Which made sense; his father had picked someone with similar bloodlines to his own. "We?"

"My family."

And he knew she wasn't speaking of parents. "You're married?"

"Yes, sir, but it won't be an issue. My husband and I have discussed it and he's going to stay with our children until... well... until we separate."

It was logical, his father would want to make sure any woman he selected would be able to have children and the best test of that would be if she already had given birth. He sat and studied her, she looked uncomfortable but when she glanced up quickly he saw two things. The first was that she looked homesick but resolved and stubborn and the second was that she looked quite a bit like Mick. The same dark auburn hair that wasn't quite brown or red, hazel eyes, a face that was attractive and well balanced. They didn't look like siblings but maybe second cousins. That would have been by design as well.

"It seems my father has thought of everything." He wasn't sure if he spoke with respect or frustration. "He's paying you?"

"In a way." She took a quick sip from her drink but it was a tiny one. "My husband, he's a sociologist, he's recording the memories of the people who were alive and old enough to really remember before the plague. No one wanted to talk about it, they still don't. He doesn't want that

to fade away.”

“Noble.”

She nodded. “But not profitable.”

“And my father has promised what?”

“The building we live in, which has three other apartments, will become ours. Our student loans will be repaid, our children will attend the school of their choice on scholarship and my husband’s work will be funded. There will be a bonus for every child we have together as well.”

“You’re doing this for the money.” He hadn’t expected it any other way but it felt so cold and mercenary.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Do you have a picture of your family?”

That brightened her face up in a quick smile. “Yes.” She dug in a pocket and pulled a battered paper from it, barely glancing at it before handing it to Toshi.

The family in the photo looked happy. The youngest was maybe three or four and a boy, the oldest, a girl, was as quietly pretty as her mother and had wide serious eyes. “You must miss them.” He handed the photo back and noticed again that she was quick to glance away and tuck the picture away.

“I do.”

“Are you frightened of me?”

She glanced up and met his eyes. “A little, but not like that. It’s just... I was convent-educated and my husband and I were childhood sweethearts and I’ve never...”

Again, something his father would have thought of--someone unlikely to accidentally become pregnant with someone else’s child. That made him need a swallow of the whiskey to wash the bad taste from his mouth.

“It’s not that I’m frightened of you, it’s all just different. I’ve never traveled before, never met an I/S before. You seem quite nice, not at all what they say in the papers. I didn’t expect you to be as uneasy with this idea as I am, guess I should have given that you’re gay and all.”

“I’m not gay. I/S aren’t...” She looked confused and he shook his head and didn’t try to explain. “My lover is male, yes. And yes, this is completely unnerving. You’re sure you want to do this? You know, there’s never been a quarter I/S born. I can’t, no one can, tell you what your child will look like, if they’ll have my eyes or yours.”

She nodded. “I know, I’m not worried about that, a child is a child, no matter the size of their eyes. I’ll be giving up custody anyway, though it would be kind if you’d keep me informed of how our child is doing, I’d like to know. That is, if you’d allow it and if you find me acceptable.”

The whole situation was bizarre but he’d known it would be uncomfortable and unpleasant. There was no avoiding that short of him accidentally meeting and becoming lovers with a woman that happened to be genetically compatible. He didn’t see that happening, and since it was highly impossible for Mick to suddenly find himself in a family way, it wasn’t going to happen at all. But she looked a little like Mick, had his coloring at least, and it would almost be like his first born children had been theirs. He was going to have to do this with someone, sooner or later, but if he

was going to have children, he would play by his own rules and not anyone else's.

"Ms. Michaud, I have a proposition for you."

Mick was getting close to shooting someone as the minutes stretched away. He wanted to pace but refused to betray his nerves, instead he picked a spot along the wall and leaned against it. It took focus to look so unconcerned and he tried to pretend to watch Luke Henri and his pretty young wife where they stood talking softly. He felt sick and stressed and wanted to grab Toshi and drag the man home away from all this nonsense.

When the door opened they all jumped a little. Mick pushed off from the wall and stood straight. He'd been expecting the worst, but he wasn't expecting to find Toshi gently leading the woman from the room, a hand resting comfortably on her shoulder. Both of them were smiling a little bit, obviously far more relaxed and at ease, and Mick thought he might be sick.

"Alright, Father, you get your grandchildren but with certain conditions." Toshi glanced to Mick and the small smile faltered a little but he quickly pulled his focus back to his father.

"What conditions?" Luke Henri had everything written and planned out and new conditions would change things.

"Bridgit's name stays sealed and as much out of the press as can be managed."

"Okay." That was already planned and in the works.

"She's not marrying me, she's staying married to her husband. They love each other, he loves her enough to let her do this, I will not come between that to fulfill your ideas of a forced happy family. She's getting on the next plane home, she'll stay with her husband and children, and conception will be done artificially. There is a Commune near her; they can be trusted to oversee this."

"But..."

"I was born out of wedlock, does that make me any less, Father?" Toshi asked coldly.

"Of course not!"

"It won't matter here either, except that we'll both be a great deal more happy being with the people we care about." He wasn't going to debate the issue, not for a moment. Instead he turned her toward where Mick stood looking very cold. "Bridgit, this is Mick, the man I spoke to you about."

Her smile brightened and she offered her hand. "It's nice to meet you, your boyfriend is a good man. He speaks very highly of you."

Mick didn't know what to say. He accepted her hand but what was he supposed to say to the woman that was set to have his lover's children? "Well, Toshi's a good man, he'll be an excellent father."

"I'm certain of that now." She nodded.

"Michelle, would you be kind enough to see Bridgit back to her hotel? I'm sure she'll want to rest before the long flight home." Toshi spoke to his step mother but kept his eye on his father, uncertain if the man was angry or amused or some odd combination of both. He waited until the women had walked away before he spoke again. "Father, I will fulfill my obligations and have

children, I will, but my commitments are already set. Neither will I take some strange woman to bed simple to produce a baby. That's asking too much and you'll have to be content with this." Luke Henri frowned a little and glanced to Mick but the silent man looked almost as unhappy, in spite of the blank, cold look he was trying to wear. Finally he sighed. "So long as you do this, I can overlook certain changes. I have a second woman, and I'd like to find an I/S mother as well. I was thinking three human children, three I/S?"

"Father." His headache was growing worse, but the idea that his father had wanted to mix I/S blood in surprised him. "We'll discuss it later." What would it be like to have a child that looked more like him instead of less? He knew his uncle would be pleased with the idea. "I'm not feeling well, we should go."

"Very well but Epps will be calling you. Be nice to him. I'll let you know what's arranged with Bridgit."

Toshi nodded but didn't want to talk about it anymore. He just wanted to go home because the headache was growing into a craving and it would all be so much simpler if he was Shiny. Mick moved without being asked to gather coats and helmets but didn't speak, not even a single word while they pulled the protective gear on. He didn't say a word as they made their goodbyes and got on the bike and then the wind and speed stole any chance words.

The tension in Mick was making Toshi feel worse, tight and wound up, like he wanted to scream but couldn't get the sound out. It made his senses feel dazzled and blinded like the afterimage of a bright flash bulb going off for his real eyes. He couldn't make out if Mick was pissed or hurt or something totally different and that was making him feel worse. They arrived home in silence and Toshi held it until they were back inside the apartment.

"Would you rather I have refused?" He finally asked, loosening the tie that felt like it was strangling him. From the sofa Andy glanced up from where he was playing solitaire but, glancing between the two men, he kept his mouth shut.

"No," was all Mick answered with as he shrugged out of his jacket, his shoulders defined and outlined by the leather of the shoulder holster he wore.

"We've discussed this, you knew he was pushing the issue. Why are you pissed at me?"

"I'm not."

"You're acting like it."

"I'm fine." It would have been better if he'd yelled, but the tight, level tone to the words made Toshi flinch. "I'm going to shower and change."

Toshi wanted to shout after him but all he did was stand there and loosen the buttons of his collar.

"What the hell happened to put a stick up his ass?" Andy asked carefully, unsure if his input was welcome.

"My father picked out a woman for me to have grandchildren with and I apparently did something wrong."

"Whoa, kids huh? I mean, I knew, but so soon?"

"My father isn't a young man. He wanted me to marry her, or as legally as I could, and I refused. You'd think he'd feel better about that."

Andy shuffled his cards together. "Let him shower, bring him to your room."

"What?"

"Trust me, just go settle yourself down too. I've got everything under control."

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Thirty Five

The shower did little to help him relax and Mick wasn't sure why. He wasn't angry, not really, and he had no right to fuss. Toshi had been very forthright about his obligations, from still working for RI and with Alec and his own interests to the expectation that he was going to have to have a family. Mick figured part of him had always assumed it would be later, much later, like after they were no longer together. It was no big deal, he was just tired; some sleep would do him a world of good and in the morning they could worry about the normal stuff again.

He pulled open his bedroom door, expecting to find it empty, or maybe to find Toshi hovering inside. However, he stopped in the doorway, surprised. The futon was still folded, but pillows had been gathered and tossed about. Instead of the light being on, candles had been lit in clusters on trays to give light without it being harsh. In the center of the room was a deck of cards, a plate of bread, fruit and cheese, a pitcher of water, three glasses, and a bottle. Across from the food and drink sat Andy, brushing out Toshi's hair and skillfully braiding it back. Both men looked up at him but it was only Andy that smiled; Toshi still looked nervous and upset.

"What's going on?"

"We're bored. Sit down, we're going to play poker, truth or dare rules."

"Andy, I'm tired."

"It's not that late, don't be an old man." He picked up the cards and started to shuffle. "Low hand has to remove one item of clothing until stripped to undies, and hopefully you two are not commando tonight cause oh, poor me, I may go blind. Once down to boxers, lowest hand must take a shot of ouzo or answer a question honestly." He dealt out the cards with a slick ease as Mick sighed and sat down. "And no counting cards!" He threatened at Mick. "I'm using a mix of decks so you can't cheat."

"Math is not cheating," Mick muttered and picked up his cards.

Andy just raised his eyebrows. "I'm calling bullshit rule too."

"Bullshit rule?" Toshi questioned and wondered what he was getting himself into.

"Meaning if you pick dare you do the shot; if you pick truth and fail to be truthful, the other interested parties, namely us, can call bullshit. If we both call bullshit, the bullshitter has to take a shot for each bullshit and still answer truthfully."

"We're going to get very drunk aren't we?" he asked of Mick.

"Generally, yes, by the end of the night we all get very drunk. Most of the special game rules Andy comes up with get us drunk."

"If games don't get you drunk, laid, or both... why play?" Andy grinned and was tickled that Mick was the least dressed of the three of them.

A half hour later, Mick was down to his boxers and cursing as he downed a milky white ouzo-and-water shot. Andy was wearing one sock, a t-shirt and his boxers and Toshi was still almost fully dressed. Ten minutes and three more shots later, Toshi was actually starting to feel sorry for his lover--he was getting the glassy eyed look of someone that rarely got drunk and was now smashed.

"Ha!" Mick grinned when it was Andy down to his boxers and with the worst hand.

"I'll take the truth please."

Which meant Toshi--with the highest hand--had to ask him something, and he'd gotten the impression it had to be something personal, sexual or embarrassing and that was something he had to think about. "If you had to pick someone in the household to never sleep with, who would you pick?"

"Why cause mega slut Andy will sleep with anyone?" Andy laughed.

"Bullshit, stalling." Mick declared and poured a shot.

Andy rolled his eyes but easily downed the liquor. "One person from the whole of the household, with the assumption that I'll slut my way through the rest?" Toshi nodded and Andy didn't even have to think about it. "Rez, without a doubt, Rez. I'd even screw the female guards before him."

"Why?" Toshi was as surprised by the answer as Mick seemed to be.

"If I had to pick from the whole of the planet it would be him!"

"But why?"

"He's annoying, and grumpy and rude and has no sense of fun and takes everything fucking seriously. He doesn't even shower with us, he's such a prude. And besides he fucking hates me, it would be like screwing a blow up doll. Masturbation would be more fun; the guy is like a fucking stone wall he has such little personality. Without a doubt, Rez. Hell, I'd be slut boy to Alec long before I touched Rez."

Toshi sat unsure if he should call bullshit or not, but if Andy was lying he was faking it really well. "Huh."

"Seriously, yeah I like guys, but touchy-touchy and more with a girl into it would actually be pleasurable over his cold, bitchy pride. You couldn't pay me enough or get me drunk enough to

screw him.”

“The lady doth protest too much.” Mick teased but dealt out more cards, willing to let Andy off the hook.

“The dude fucking annoys me. Want to smack him upside the head.” He muttered but took up his cards and was happy to see he had a nice hand.

Several hands later, Mick was still picking a shot over a question and Andy was a little drunk now as well, but Toshi still had his shirt on as well as his boxers. Mick was staring down another shot--Andy had poured it without having to be asked but he still hadn't picked it up and slammed it back.

“I hate being drunk.” He heard the slight slur to his words and shook his head. “Alright, just ask a question but... I'm going on record that Toshi is cheating and you shouldn't ever play cards with an I/S that doesn't have an implant....”

“If math isn't cheating...” Andy reminded Mick with a grin before he leaned over and whispered into Toshi's ear. He needed Toshi to ask silly, stupid questions so Mick would relax about it before he asked the stubborn man a serious one.

Toshi nodded and tried not to shiver at the feel of Andy's lips so close to his ear. The two drunk humans were growing languid and were looking sexier than normal, and he wondered if he was getting a little drunk feeling from their own drinking. Then he remembered the amount of alcohol he'd already had that night and wondered how drunk he was on his own.

“Okay... I know Andy was your first but who'd you want to be your first?”

“What?” Mick asked, surprised. He wondered just what Andy had whispered, but his hazed mind couldn't quite focus on it.

“If you could have picked. Who'd you have a crush on as a teen?”

“Oh...” Mick flopped down and tossed a hand over his face. “Benny Harris from Life With Frankenfurter, the stupid sitcom... God I used to jerk off to a picture of him all the time...”

“That was a horrible show!” Andy laughed.

“Oh yeah...” Mick nodded. “But Harris was so hot in it...”

“He was hot. Do you remember the one where Frankie got his foot stuck in that box thing and they had a dinner party coming over and Harris tried to get the box off and they had Frank's pants off and they were both all slicked up and oiled and falling on each other....”

Mick laughed. “Yes, yes I do... I don't think my family really understood why I loved that show so much, but I must have seen that one like a dozen times.”

Toshi shook his head. “I never saw it.”

“Oh my god!” Andy shook his head. “The show is awful, but the guys on it were sexy. We'll have to rent it. That is, if Mick can watch it without jerking off to it again.”

“I'll restrain myself.” He chuckled and rolled over on his side and propped his head on a hand. “I have something better now.” He locked eyes with Toshi and his grin grew lusty and serious as understanding sunk in to his lover.



Andy rolled his eyes. "After the game, you two." And more cards were shuffled out.

More silly questions were asked and Toshi soon was required to take a shot of ouzo, Andy downed a couple himself, but Mick was too drunk and continued to take on the silly, random, almost childish questions. They were okay, they weren't serious, and as the liquor settled into his system he felt more and more comfortable answering them.

That's when Andy struck. They were still laughing from his description of the worst blow job ever and Mick was almost too drunk to sit up. He was hiding it by lying down between hands as if the room was a little floaty and needed to be held on to. It was the perfect time to strike. "Okay my turn. Mick, truth or dare?"

"Another shot and I'll puke."

"Truth it is.... What's the one thing you haven't been able to tell Toshi but wish you could?"

"That's not a fair question," Toshi answered softly, hating the way Mick suddenly froze, laying there on his back, his eyes shut.

"Of course it is. Come on Mick, don't make us call bullshit."

"There isn't anything I haven't told him...I mean not really...nothing...I just...it's well...I try to be honest." He flopped a hand up and rubbed at his eyes. "There isn't anything wrong...I get it...I really do...I mean I really get it...it's just...I'm gay."

Toshi glance to Andy but the artist shook his head, unsure what it was Mick was really trying to say.

"I mean...yeah I know you all know and I know but I mean I get it." Mick added with a sigh.

"Well, we don't, sweetie." Andy prodded gently.

"I'm gay!" He said more forcefully but the energy bled away. "Toshi isn't. I'm drunk."

"Yes you are," Andy replied softly, but he knew from how Mick had clenched his jaw shut that the game was over and that was the last Mick was going to say, maybe the last he'd be able to say and he'd drink himself sick or worse to hide that fact. He glanced over and saw that Toshi got it, that the simple small clue to what was swirling about in Mick's head hadn't been wasted and was now going to be processed and understood and hopefully applied. He didn't know how to get around the raw and honest truth of it, Toshi was I/S and like almost all his people was more bisexual than gay or straight but now at least he knew one of the little insecurities tripping Mick up in their relationship.

"I think..." Andy continued just as softly as he picked up a poured shot and slipped closer to Mick. "That such honesty should be rewarded." Before Mick could open his eyes, he drizzled the shot across the bare chest, watching the liquor run over skin and down to pool in his navel. Andy didn't wait but bent down and sucked the drink from Mick's skin. It earned him a hiss of surprise from Mick, but Andy was more worried about Toshi's reaction. He heard movement behind him and braced to be yanked away.

Instead, Toshi just moved closer and leaned down to claim Mick's lips. It gave Andy a front row seat and he found himself trailing ouzo slick fingers across Mick's chest. Watching them kiss was reward enough, Mick was always hot with someone but with Toshi it was heartbreakingly hot. He had a sense that maybe this time he really was a third wheel and should gather up his discarded clothes and leave. He dipped a finger into the remaining shot and idly teased one of Mick's already hard nipples. It made his friend arch a little and the kiss broke mostly because Toshi

wanted to see what Andy was doing.

"I'm so drunk," Mick slurred, one of his hands catching and curling around Toshi's braid.

"Yes, you are." Toshi grinned softly but instead of letting Mick pull him down for another kiss he moved lower and licked across the nipple Andy was teasing. Ouzo fingers and flesh teased his mouth and he sucked both in, lapping, sucking the licorice flavored alcohol away, liking the way Andy and Mick both suddenly froze. "I think I like ouzo," Toshi announced when he finished licking the drink from the two men's flesh.

He would have laughed if he thought they wouldn't have taken it badly. They wore matching looks of stunned shock at his sudden and sexy actions. It made Toshi feel drunker than any alcohol could induce and he reached over to Andy's idle hand and plucked the shot from it. It was over half gone, poured on his lover and licked away or left to roll in fragrant sticky coolness, but he tipped it back in one long motion. Instead of swallowing it he reached over and caught the back of Andy's head and pulled the stunned artist closer.

Andy didn't need to be enticed, his lips were parted and the final drabs of the ouzo flitted between their tongues as they kissed. It made him shiver but he surrendered to the kiss and the control in Toshi. Distantly he felt Mick slid away from between them but keeping up with Toshi was taking all of his remaining concentration. Hands slid across his body and Andy moaned when Mick tugged on his nipple ring just hard enough. Those same hands guided him up so he was standing on his knees and then slid down under the fabric of his boxers and pulled them down with them.

Toshi broke the kiss when Andy moved and glanced down, it was all flushed pink skin and hard arousal displayed before him and he wasn't entirely sure what he wanted. They were all too drunk, that was the bottom line. He wanted to explore further with Andy, but not when Mick and Andy both were tipsy. There was time for that later when more sober heads prevailed so for now he limited himself to touching. It was a limit Andy didn't seem to mind.

He was caught there, kneeling, his boxers pulled down to pool at his knees and Andy couldn't be happier. They didn't just toss him out, he was caught between them. Mick's hands teased across his skin with a knowing touch and Toshi kissed him, his lips, his face, his neck, down to tease a nipple and back up as his own hands slowly grew more bold. He closed his eyes and drank in all the offered and didn't even leave room for a thought of more. This was their closeness and he was being allowed to share it even if it had conditions. He was okay with that, more than okay with it when Toshi's too warm hand closed over his length when almost at the same time one of Mick's trailed up the crevice of his ass.

"Andy, you're bad." Mick chuckled and met a pair of questioning ice blue eyes on the other side of his friend. To answer the unspoken question Mick gently pulled on the head of the plug he'd found Andy wearing and the artist arched into Toshi's hand.

"Oh! But being bad is so good." He moaned and found himself tumbling forward into Toshi's arms. His body was trembling. He'd been on a low simmer for hours from the butt plug but he hadn't expected anything other than the comforts of his own hand later. Now with Toshi stroking him, kissing him, nipping at his neck and collar bone and Mick gently tugging on the toy, he knew he wasn't going to last long.

"He's wearing his pride and joy," Mick explained, giving the plug another twist. "Stainless steel butt plug with a shiny, crystal button end."

"Oh!" Andy arched again and let himself be supported by Toshi's strength. "It's...oh god...it's pretty..."

"Yes, it is." Mick answered but his eyes were locked on Toshi's. He hadn't wanted to introduce

toys into their love making, not yet. Toshi's only experience with them was as something cruel and degrading. Andy had the opposite mind set and it didn't surprise him to find something kinkier than a nipple ring on his friend.

It was too much and he was too drunk and Andy didn't want to fight against it. He knew Mick and Toshi needed some time alone. He knew they were being kind not to send him away with a hard on, just as he knew he should have been gracious enough to leave before things had gotten to this point. He was just grateful they hadn't and as Toshi licked an ear and Mick pushed the plug back into his body, Andy let himself go and he came with long, shuddering gasps.

He took a moment, tucked against Toshi, before he sighed and patted the I/S's side. "Thank you, both of you." Andy let himself slip from between their arms and easily found a napkin to clean himself up with. "God that was so much fun." He grinned at the two very aroused men because neither one of them looked like they wanted him to stay, but neither one looked like they knew what to do if he left.

He sighed and gathered his clothes, tugging boxers and cotton pants up over his hips with one hand and snagging the bottle of ouzo with the other. "My work..." he kissed Mick on the side of his face. "Is done here..." He grinned and kissed Toshi the same way. "Have fun boys." He smiled and quickly escaped from the bedroom, his shirt clutched in one hand and the bottle of booze in the other.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Thirty Six

Out in the hallway, Andy flipped his t-shirt up over his shoulder and let it hang there. He was too flushed from the ouzo, being happily drunk, and the great hand job to put his shirt on yet, he needed to cool down a little first and, really, who would care if they saw? Part of him knew he should be jealous of whatever was going to go on behind the bedroom door he'd left, but he just couldn't make himself feel it. For all his fussing he really was happy that Mick had found someone, but he was honest enough to be know he was happier now that they were occasionally including him.

Now he was happily buzzed and lightly sexed and ready to think about sleep. First he had to get the bottle away, maybe get some water, take a shower. A long hot shower sounded like a good idea, and he was drunk enough to think about jerking off under the hot water. He was still wearing the plug and removing it could be fun if he let it be. He'd pull on his oldest, frumpiest flannel pants and snuggle under his blankets with the thick fluffy pillows around him and happily drift to sleep. He grinned at the plans, knowing he was--for all the outer frills--a rather simple sort and easily amused.

The light was on in the kitchen, which wasn't unusual. Alec, for all his skills at organization, was a repeat offender at forgetting to turn lights off. Andy just chalked it up to Alec's mind being too busy on other issues and bigger concerns than flipping a switch. Though if the light was on and Alec was home that meant the dinner meeting with the contractors and Pia had stayed simply a dinner meeting and he hadn't managed to talk the woman into a few drinks afterwards. That would be a shame, Alec needed to be dating someone that wasn't so prejudiced against I/S. He would never be happy until he found some balance between work and a social life outside of causal friendships. Andy could relate to that, at least his friendships were anything but causal.

Only it wasn't that Alec had left the light on in the kitchen. As Andy turned the corner to go to the pantry and put the ouzo back on the shelf with the other bottles of liquor, he stopped, surprised to find canned fruit spilled everywhere. Sticky syrup dripped from the counter and pooled on the floor. The can had rolled away from where it had fallen to rest against the leg of one of the workstation prep tables and the lid had flipped to actually stick to one of the cabinet doors.

"What a mess!" He glanced about, but no one was in sight to take credit for the sticky spill. Andy sighed. "Damn it, I'm not in the mood for this." He stepped with exaggerated care over the spilled fruit to avoid making the mess worse. The bucket and mop and the like were in a corner of the pantry, and since the ouzo had to go back there anyway, he may as well put the drink away first and get what he needed to make the clean up easier.

He found the source of the spill inside the pantry. Andy paused at the open door and stood there, uncertain of what to do. Rez sat on the floor, curled over his own legs where he'd collapsed. Both hands were stretched out and up and had a tight, white knuckled grip on the mop handle. The I/S's sleeves had ridden up and for the first time Andy saw several inches above the man's wrists, on the outside of his arms were two inch-tall red crescent moons tattooed on his arms. It would have interested him more if Rez didn't look like he'd simply fallen while trying to get the mop and now looked like he was really sick or in a tremendous amount of pain.

"Go the fuck away," Rez hissed out with panting breath.

Which at least told Andy the man was still coherent, and that was a step above what he'd expected to find. "Hey?"

"Fuck off!"

"You okay?"

Rez glanced up. Moving hurt, breathing hurt, living hurt, and he wanted to beat the artist to death with the mop. "Do I fucking look like I'm okay?"

Andy stepped into the room and slipped the bottle back on its shelf. "What can I do to help?"

Rez groaned and curled back up. "Leaving me alone would help."

It was tempting to do as the purple-haired man was demanding but Andy wasn't the sort to walk away from anyone that was so obviously in pain, even if he didn't necessarily like them. It just wasn't how he was made. Instead of leaving, he took the top of the mop handle.

"Here, give me that."

"It's my mess, I'll clean it," Rez shivered and forced out, praying now that the human would just go away. He couldn't even see straight at the moment and he needed to be alone.

"Don't make me yank it away, give me the mop," Andy snapped back and tugged. The gripping hands hung on for a second before letting go and releasing the mop. Andy nodded and scooped

up the bucket. He left then, but didn't go far, the sticky spilled fruit wouldn't take long to clean up but it needed to be taken care of first.

Andy wasn't gone nearly long enough for Rez's liking. He'd hoped that as soon as the human had cleaned up the spilled can--and wouldn't he just be smug about being helpful--that he'd just leave. Instead the pantry door opened a little wider and then closed shut behind the half-dressed human.

"Here...." Andy knelt and drew the cool cloth over the side of Rez's damp face. Shock, pain, the fit of withdrawals had made the I/S damp with sweat and Andy knew how much better it would feel to cool down a little.

The cool cloth touched his face and Rez almost screamed. He couldn't stand it, couldn't bear to be fussed over and touched and tended like he mattered, like the human actually gave a shit. He didn't scream, just pulled away which caused his stomach to cramp up harder and his head to spin. "Leave me alone," he whined, begged, but Andy didn't try to fuss at him again. Instead, the cloth was slipped into Rez's hands and, for as much as he wanted to snap at that, it was nice. He could clench it in his fists or press it to his face and neck as he willed and that felt better than being treated like an invalid. For once, the artist didn't say anything; he just sat down and stayed as far away as he could manage in the small room.

"I brought water." Andy waited until some of the outer signs of discomfort eased. That didn't mean the man was feeling better but maybe less like he was about to die. It was only then that he spoke and set the bottle with the loosened cap next to where Rez was curled over himself. Rez didn't even glance over to it. "Still bad, huh?"

"No, I just fucking like curling up on the floor hoping someone will bash my head in, dip shit," Rez snapped back, but that set off a coughing fit and he had to take the water to sooth it. He didn't want to do that, didn't want to accept anymore help than he had already, but his throat was so dry.

"Were you hungry? I can heat something up." He ignored the look Rez shot him, the one that said that instead of food, Rez hoped Andy would stick his head in the oven. Toshi wanted Rez to get healthy, wanted the man to find himself. And for as annoying and difficult as he was, Andy was going to be nice for Toshi's sake and, well, because he was a better man.

When the helpful look didn't leave the human's face Rez sighed. "Wasn't hungry, stupid human doctors said that fruit might help...." He sighed and tried to get his body to uncurl a little. "Help with this, so thought I'd try but got sick too fast." The worst of the craving was passing, another withdrawal was fading. It was getting better, he was going a day between really bad cravings, sometimes a little longer, but when they hit they hit hard and fast.

"Don't eat the shitty canned fruit, there's plenty of fresh. I can chop some up for you if you want? Might not be a bad idea to keep on hand for Toshi too. He won't think to eat and Mick, well, I doubt he could cook well enough to make a fruit salad. Poor boy could burn water trying to boil it." He heard himself babbling but Rez didn't seem to be listening.

"Can's fine." He drew in long breaths and told himself he couldn't quite get his legs to work well enough to make it all the way back to his room. The water helped, he sipped at some more and found himself explaining. "If it's not in a can, we don't get it in the Camp." It must have given the artist something to think about because he went silent again and Rez was just grateful for the small miracle of it; he needed the silence to pull himself together.

"I didn't know you had a tattoo. Didn't know I/S got tattoos beyond house crests like Toshi's got. One of the guards told me house crests are always put on the back. I didn't think to ask him if I/S got inked for other reasons. Been thinking about it but, well, I doubt I could pick one image to mean something to me for the rest of my life."

"It's not a decoration!" Rez snapped. He didn't want to explain, didn't want to talk about it but the nattering was making his head hurt. "I was owned by the Red Moon, they mark all their property this way." He tugged his sleeves back down, even though the fabric had slipped over his arms and again covered the marking. He hated it, hated seeing the reminder all the time and hated that other people could see and know his past.

"Oh." Andy hadn't even thought about that. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up something.... Something like that."

"Whatever." He was starting to feel like he might live, the water soothing his throat and helping to uncramp his stomach. He was feeling well enough that he noticed for the first time that the human had his shirt off, it was sitting on the floor next to him. The nipple piercing glittered at him and Rez wanted to touch it, just to see what it felt like. That was a thought he didn't want to entertain. "I'm going to bed."

It took two tries to stand, but he managed and hid the difficulties of getting his withdrawal-shaken limbs to function pretty well. He was good at hiding how he was really feeling; it was a talent useful in a whore and humans were easy to fool. Getting to his feet and staying there were two different efforts. Rez stumbled, dizzy and off balance and would have had to stagger back and clutch at the stainless steel pantry shelves behind him if strong, slender arms hadn't slipped about his body.

"Easy now, don't rush it," Andy whispered and felt the body he steadied tense at the touch to shoulder and waist.

Rez drew in a breath to cuss the human out and demand he take his hands away, but the words disappeared. It was the closest he'd been to the artist and the first time he'd really got a good scent of him. He thought he knew what humans smelled like--flat, boring, uninteresting--but Rez was startled to find Andy didn't smell flat and uninteresting. It wasn't something he could pin down; the scent was obviously human but had a spike of spice and something luscious good like crisp fresh oranges or spicy fresh rosemary. It wasn't so specific, but it made him feel good like that and that instinctual sense of comfort surprised him.

That alone would have surprised him, shocked the grumpy protest from his lips, but what chased the undercurrent scent of the artist himself knocked him senseless. The smell of the liquor, anise sharp and crisp, was obvious and Rez knew the man was at least somewhat drunk but he'd smelled drunk humans before, that was no surprise. The smell of sex wasn't a surprise either. This time the scent of sex and drink and Andy's own natural scent made Rez shiver. It wasn't a repulsive smell, it wasn't unappealing, it wasn't even boring, quite the opposite. The combination was like Shine poured into his body; pleasure spiked and tickled along his nerves and settled to pool with far too much of his blood into his groin. He started to tell himself all the things he had been telling himself. He was horny, some part of him missed physical contact and physical release. He was I/S after all and they tended to be creatures with high libidos. It wasn't the smell of sex, booze and Andy that had him shivering in lust but his own needs. He was after all fairly well conditioned to being the sexual partner to humans, his reaction was natural and if he denied it long enough it would go away and he'd stop associating sex with humans.

Which was all nice and good to say but didn't stop him from getting dizzier and weak in the knees just from how strongly the scent of the human affected him. He needed something solid and real to steady himself and Rez staggered back a little, disoriented and looking for those cool metal shelves to steady himself against. It wasn't the shelves he found but a warm, bare shoulder and a lean strong chest. He tried to jerk away from the touch but the hands on his body had already slid to his back and steadied him, held him in place.

He had absorbed the scent that was Andy and the odd mix of the human and sex and ouzo that made him tremble in unexpected eroticism and now his brain finally processed the last layer, the

one he hadn't wanted to really smell. Toshi's scent was on Andy's skin. Not Toshi and Mick's, Toshi's, and where he'd stumbled against the bare shoulder there was no denying it. Andy smelled of sex because of Toshi and it made Rez feel sick again, but not in a craving-painful way.

He had no claim to Toshi, he understood that, but that scent on the artist's skin turned him inside out with jealousy. He even understood that he wasn't required to be sexually desired to have a place so there was no reason he should even blink at Andy being in Toshi's arms instead of him. Only he was doing more than blinking. It made him short of breath and a little angry and sick with jealous need. He could dismiss Andy smelling better than a human had a right to and he could dismiss the lingering scent of sex but Toshi's mark shut his brain down.

Andy was surprised when Rez didn't bite his head off for helping to steady him, and even more surprised when the I/S staggered a little and tumbled blindly against him. He chalked it all up to the simple fact that I/S or not--proud and grumpy or not--all people hated being alone when sick, at least in his thinking. Even the most independent of people like Mick still wanted to be checked on occasionally and know someone cared when knocked down with the flu. It was surprising but acceptable that Rez would stumble against him to regain his balance, and he'd do what was right and hold on until the other man was stable enough to move about on his own. That didn't mean he wouldn't tease Rez mercilessly for it once he was feeling better; he was a good man but he wasn't a saint.

It should have been as simple as that, but things rarely stayed simple. Andy felt it more than heard it, a soft low rumble, like a growl but given no voice. It was like the sound of a rattle snake; even if it was an unknown sound it chilled a body and put a kernel of fear in the back of the mind. He didn't need to understand the source to just simply know it was a bad, bad sound.

"Hey, you okay?" Andy asked carefully, unsure if he should push Rez away and leave like his nerves were telling him to or not. He remembered the sight of the man, crushed under the pain of withdrawal and alone on the floor and told himself he was being stupid. He'd grown up with stories of I/S as monsters and sometimes, no matter how much he knew better as an adult, those deep rooted childhood fears returned. He wasn't going to let those stupid fears control him as an adult all because of a rumble that could have been Rez merely clearing his throat.

Rez's hands had been hanging limply at his side, now they moved, snapping out to catch Andy's upper arms in a tight grip. The sudden movement made Andy jump, a little startled, but Rez was standing too close to see the expression on his face. He wasn't sure if he was about to get slugged in the gut for trying to help or not but he didn't want to get hit for doing what was right.

"Look..." But his words stopped when Rez leaned in closer, the side of his face brushing against Andy's bare shoulder, dragging up across his collarbone to his neck and then higher, up to nuzzle a little at his jaw line, all the while inhaling deeply. "Did you just sniff me?" He tried to pull away but the grip on his arms was tight. He pulled harder. "Let me go!"

Some part of Rez's mind was still thinking clear enough to know he should do as the human had demanded, but it was a very, very small part. It just didn't seem important to listen to him. His grip tightened on the surprisingly strong arms, and that only made the artist squirm more and try to pull away again. That wouldn't do, he just couldn't have that.

Andy was starting to worry. Maybe Rez had snapped, maybe he'd been pushed too far and this was it. He thought about calling out for help, but who would hear him? Mick and Toshi were busy and Alec wasn't likely to be home. The panic button for the guard was out in the kitchen and he couldn't pull away enough to step back from Rez, let alone get out of the pantry. If Rez had snapped, he could kill him and leave his body here and it would be hours or more before anyone found him. He was going to be killed by a crazy, strung-out addict with hair and eye color that looked like an easter egg. It was absurd but at least his paintings would go up in value; there would be a huge scandal.

He tugged harder, almost pulling them both back, but Rez swung them, using the force of Andy's efforts to get his arms free to move them around. Before he knew what was happening, Andy found himself slammed back, hard, into the pantry door. It rocked with the sudden impact of their bodies, clicking shut. It startled him and he didn't notice that Rez had let go of his arms, mostly because Andy was shocked by the sudden pinning to the door and had let go of the too skinny body.

"What the hell?" He snapped when he caught his breath and brought his hands up to push Rez back. It sounded like a good idea, but the man was quick and caught Andy's wrists and tried to force his arms back against the door. For as skinny as Rez felt, he was strong. Andy struggled to push the other man forward and he was gaining ground--until one of Rez's thighs slipped between his legs and pressed into Andy's groin, and that set such a shock of surprised pleasure across his body that he forgot he was supposed to be pushing the purple-haired man back.

The single moment of pause was all that was needed for Rez to get the upper hand and, with a smaller thud, Andy found his hands pinned to the door close to his head. Rez was far enough away now that he could look the man in the eye, and he wasn't sure what he saw there. Anger, yes; hate, maybe and something more, something darker and deeper, something that made Andy shiver and lick his lips. He pushed hard against the hands holding his arms, but the angle was awkward and he didn't gain much ground before Rez pinned them again.

There was a pause when the look on Rez's face grew ugly and Andy wondered why he wasn't bleeding yet. Then the thigh rubbed against him and the skinny body pushed forward and Andy choked on a moan at the feel of just how aroused the I/S was, and that was the only warning he had before Rez's mouth covered his own.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Thirty Seven

The lips were dry and firm and not at all unpleasant. They demanded entry, but Andy was too stunned to kiss back. He stayed where he was pinned, eyes open wide in shock, startled by the sudden contact and uncertain just what it was Rez was up to. Sharp, strong teeth nibbled at his lower lip and it was erotic and sexy and scary as hell and Andy pulled back a little, his head thumping against the door. There was no where to go and he was too confused to open his mouth and allow the kiss to deepen, even as his lower lip was sucked into a very skilled, very hot mouth and teased.

Teased and then bitten. Not nipped, not tickled, bitten, hard and Andy jerked away as much as he could be his lip was still in that sexy dangerous mouth. A muffled protesting sound of surprise



and pain squeaked from his throat in a very undignified way. His lips parted on instinct, his mouth opened and Rez showed no mercy in claiming his prize, deepening the kiss. Andy's eyes slipped shut. His lip throbbed where it had been bitten, he tasted blood in his mouth and in Rez's and oddly it only added to the sudden pleasure that poured over him. He'd give the purple haired man one thing, he knew how to kiss and while Andy considered himself an expert, he was left breathless. All the fight slipped from his body, his arms eased and he no longer strained to break the grip on them. He gave himself over to that delicious, horrible kiss.

Rez retreated, back from the deep consuming kiss to suckle on the injured lip, licking the last traces of blood away in small apology or simply to claim the wound as his. It took Andy a moment to understand his mouth was now free and he opened his eyes slowly, waiting to see if this was when the man planned to murder him and instead he smiled softly at the surprised lust in the candy pink eyes. There was still hate there, and anger but need and desire as well.

"I fucking hate you." Rez hissed out.

Andy smiled, slow and long and lazy, stretching the small bite wound and tasting blood. "I hate you too smut bunny, now shut up and fuck me."

There was a pause and Andy saw the doubt, the desire, in Rez's twisted up face and he saw the moment the man fell and landed squarely on the side of desire. A hand let go of his wrist and buried itself in Andy's hair, holding his head in place as Rez rushed forward to steal another violent kiss. This time Andy was ready for it and he parted his lips and tried to give as well as he got.

Rez broke the kiss with a small snarl and nuzzled against his face and neck again, inhaling and Andy understood. Mick had mentioned it as something Toshi did occasionally, scenting him he called it. This time, knowing Rez was smelling sex and Toshi on him, it made him shiver at the low, deep moan growl sound Rez made a moment before he began to kiss the flesh of his neck.

He wasn't just kissing the side of Andy's neck, he was licking it, nipping at the skin, almost trying to devour it. There was nothing of Toshi's gentle kiss here, no soft tease and gentle give and take. Rez was taking what he wanted and Andy hung there, half pinned to the door, pressed back against it by the warm and very hard body that was slowly, languidly rubbing against his own. He surrendered and let Rez nip his skin, let him trail wet, teasing tongue and mouth across his neck, his ear, his shoulder. He gave in, closed his eyes and let it happen, gasping for breath at the tormenting roughness and found his free hand reaching up to trail into the purple hair. It was fine and light against his fingers, abundant but each strand felt fragile and slender, soft like spider silk or the fibers of spun sugar. The purple strands slipped around his hand like teasing ropes and tangled about his fingers and Andy was honest enough to admit he liked how it felt, as soft as feather down, as binding as steel.

Until Rez's hungry mouth moved down below his collar bone to his chest and Andy forgot how to think enough to be honest. "Oh... god..." He sighed and glanced down at the soft purple head that was finding every one of his sensitive spots and teasing it with a mouth that was far too hot. It flashed across his mind that all I/S had a slightly higher body temperature and Rez's mouth was always that hot and wouldn't it feel amazing with that hot mouth around his cock, sucking him as it was lapping and teasing his chest. The thought made him moan and arch forward and he found himself rubbing mindlessly against Rez and not caring that it was Rez, it just didn't seem to matter at the moment.

"Oh..." Andy whimpered as that teasing mouth found his un-pierced nipple and he proved as skilled there as he was kissing. That seemed impossibly good. So good he didn't notice when Rez released his other arm, the fingers that had held him so immobile with such force traveled with almost tickling softness over to his pierced nipple. He touched it with uncertainty, exploring, touching, feeling the contours where flesh joined cool metal, sliding the metal slightly in the hole it had created and Andy melted.

"Stop fucking teasing me..." Andy sighed, needing it now, wanting it but still frightened and a little scared.

Rez glanced up and pink eyes locked onto his own and Andy's mouth went dry. He never saw such a look, such desperation and want and it was aimed at him. It didn't lead to an end to teasing, rather Rez's too serious face grew more serious a mere heartbeat before he attacked that junction of metal and flesh, sucking it into his mouth. Andy's legs went weak and he was grateful for the body and door holding him in place as tongue and sharp teeth pulled and tormented the already hypersensitive nub. There was no sense to gentleness, just want and it shorted out Andy's rational mind. This wasn't about friendship or love or even really about touch, this was desire and lust and need and power and control and taking and it was sexy and delicious.

Too hot hands slid across Andy's ribs and it made his breath hitch and gasp. The feel of the teasing mouth working up the other side of his chest and those hands trailing down his sides to his stomach made Andy reach out and he found himself gently stroking his own hands across the slender shoulders, the lean upper arms that felt lost in the layers of fabric, back to feel the stunningly soft hair slip across the cotton of Rez's shirt. Down the hands went on Andy's body as up the mouth moved until the hands gripped his hips and pulled them forcefully forward. Rez held him in place as he ground his erection into Andy's own. It was rough and it felt dirty in a good way and Andy closed his eyes and opened his mouth as the lips returned to consume him. He let Rez grind their bodies together and didn't protest when those hands slipped under the soft cotton pant's waist band and found their way to the bare top of his ass.

The hands didn't tease but instead pulled Andy forward again like a rag doll and he let himself be tugged about. Rez pulled him and pushed and spun him around to push him to the side toward a stack of boxes. Pushed him with enough force that Andy stumbled and had to catch himself on the boxes to keep from falling but before the rough treatment could really sink in, Rez was there. His hands petted down Andy's back, nails clawing in to raise scratched welts and then forward to scratch up his chest and tease his nipples. There was no uncertainty this time, the nimble fingers attacked his pierced nipple as roughly as his un-pierced and Andy fell forward over the boxes with a moan.

Rez followed, his mouth biting, nipping at the bare shoulders and the back of the long, slender neck. Andy wanted more and he pushed his hips back, pressing his ass against Rez's fabric encased cock and he rubbed, teasing, wanting, trying to see how far the I/S was really willing to go. The tease must have been too much because Andy heard a low, whimpering moan, felt it against the back of his ear and the hands darted away from his chest. Down they danced to his hips and roughly, brutally, yanked the fabric his pants and boxers down.

A too warm hand slipped over his bare hips and Andy sighed but oddly kept his mouth shut. Something about what they were doing demanded silence. As if maybe if he didn't speak it wouldn't be real, that it would all be some vivid dream and it would be okay. If it was a dream, he didn't want to risk speaking and waking as the hot agile fingers scratched over his hips and then forward to stroke his length. Even that felt rough, as if Rez touched him to please himself instead of to offer pleasure to Andy and oddly that only made it hotter.

He closed his eyes and shivered, feeling his cock weep into Rez's hand and not caring if it was all real or a dream so long as it didn't stop. The hands didn't listen, they slipped away and back to his hips. They pulled him roughly forward and Rez kicked his legs as far apart as the pulled down fabric pants would allow. Andy shivered and clung to the boxes, part of his mind noticed and laughed when he saw they were cartoons of paper towels and the entire idea of being roughly fucked over cartons of paper towels seemed absurd.

It didn't matter as the hot hands slipped down his hips, to the back of his thighs and up. They teased forward between his legs to stroke the sensitive skin, to roughly grope his balls almost in

passing before stroking higher, trailing up the cleft of his ass where they stuttered to a stop when they found warmed metal and crystal not soft flesh.

It was too tempting. Andy turned a little to glance over his shoulder and drank in the shocked, needy lust on Rez's face. The shiny crystal button of the plug was a sparkling find, oddly lewd to see something so beautiful on such a hidden part of the body and Andy loved the reactions it got. On Rez, the look of surprise and hunger was a thousand times better and he felt himself smiling. At least until Rez grasped that shiny button and pulled on the metal plug and made Andy's mouth fall open in a hushed moan.

"Dirty whore." Rez whispered and roughly jerked the plug from Andy's body.

The sudden removal sent his entire body into surprised convulsions. Not pleasant but not unpleasant and it left him feeling horny as hell and empty, aching, horribly empty and needing to be filled. He gasped for a second and struggled to catch his breath and when he did he glanced over his shoulder again.

"Takes one to know one, bunny."

Any further mocking was cut short because Rez pushed his shoulders down, hard and rough to the tops of the stack of boxes. The hands disappeared from his body and he heard the soft whisper of fabric but that was all the warning he was given. The hands returned and a cock, hard, demanding and perfect, suddenly filled him. It was a good thing the plug had him lubed and stretched because Andy had no doubt that Rez would have been as brutally rough without such accommodations. It burned, Rez was quite a bit larger than a plug and far rougher but the sudden delight in being filled, in being taken, made the minor pain worth it.

Andy hissed a little in a gasping exhaled breath of need and pain and want and clawed at the boxes for purchase. Rez was wasting no time, this was no gentle lovemaking, this was fucking. He pounded into Andy's body, filling him hard and rough, rocking him forward on his toes with each thrust. Rez kept trying to force his legs wider than the fabric of his pants would allow and finally Andy managed to catch the fabric with his toes and slip it all the way down to his ankles and get one leg free. That was all Rez needed, he kicked Andy's legs even wider apart and it left Andy teetering there, balanced only by cartons of paper towels and scalding hot hands on his hips. Each hard forceful thrust nearly spilled him forward off balance to the floor and yet somehow he managed to remain standing.

The room was filled with the sounds of gasping breaths and the hard rough slap of flesh into flesh. Andy struggled to hold on to the boxes, his hands making scrambling scratching sounds on the cardboard and under it, Rez started to moan softly. The sound was soft but it filled Andy's world and made him gasp and tremble, frightened to breath even too loudly and blot out that sound. He wanted to turn, face Rez, see the look in the falsely innocent pink eyes that went with those shamefully wonderful sounds but Rez jerked on his hips again, pulling him into an even more extreme angle and Andy's vision went white.

There was no room in his world for thoughts as petty as want. Andy whimpered, broken under the assault and unable to stay silent at the scalding delight. Rez clawed at his hips, his ass, his back and his thrusts became impossibly more violent, more raw. He folded over Andy's back and Andy felt the rough scratch of fabric on his nude back as a hot mouth suckled the skin of his shoulders and neck. A hand snaked around Andy's body but it didn't dip low to stroke his desperate length but higher to tug and roll the pierced nipple in fascinated exploration. It was a bold move, one that almost made Andy feel like the dirty whore he'd been accused of. It screamed that Rez didn't give a shit about anything beyond his own pleasure and that oddly made the whole thing sexier. It made Andy feel like a very good dirty whore and he hung there, trapped by the intense mix of thrilling pleasures.

He cared if he came or not and from the rougher thrusts, the hungry mouth and low, cloying

moans Rez was close. Andy dared to release one hand from its grip on the boxes. He wanted to reach down and jerk himself off but he paused and stopped first on his own chest. Rez's fingers trembled under his own and Andy stroked them, whisper touched his fingertips across the back and side of Rez's hands with tenderness that contrasted lewdly with the roughness of their fucking. It wasn't missed on the I/S, he moaned louder and the fingers pinched the hard pebble of flesh they'd been teasing hard enough to hurt. It was a hurt that was perfect and he arched under Rez like a small ocean wave.

There was no more time for teasing. Rez's moans and pants were growing short and Andy felt the man's control fragmenting away. His hand found his own length and it felt good, really good and it made him grin around his panting sighs. He had planned to jerk off, after all, before going to bed this was just better. It was still jerking off but he was getting roughly fucked at the same time.

There was no time, no room in his world to touch himself gently. Andy gripped his length roughly, stroked himself hard. Each time one of Rez's rough thrusts hit that spot he moaned and bucked, threatening to knock them both off balance and fall in a heap on the floor but someone Rez managed to balance them. Andy was mindless to silly things like balance, all that mattered was the rough invasion of his body, the deep hard pounding that filled him, thousand points of pleasure across his body and the feel of his own cock sliding in his hand.

"Oh... oh...fuck..." Andy moaned and shuddered and tossed his head back so hard he nearly smashed the back of his head into Rez's face. He didn't care, release claimed him, controlled him, and took control of his body. His toes curled, his knees gave out, his mind shattered. He came as hard as he was being taken, trembling, moaning, his mind scrambling after sanity the way his fingers struggled for a grip on the cardboard boxes.

"Oh... oh god that's it....oh...." He heard himself sighing as some of the blinding pleasure retreated. He found himself limp and being held up by Rez's arm around his waist and the high of a really great orgasm faded just in time for him to be aware of Rez tumbling over his own edge of control.

Rez came almost silently, gasping for breath, shivering, pounding in deep forceful thrusts. Again Andy wished he was turned so he could see those massive bubblegum eyes lost in pleasure, see the way the pale purple hair clung to the milk white skin. The sounds were good enough, the feel of the other man filling him hard and deep, freeing himself from all controls and just letting go was enough. He stayed limp and relaxed, shivering over the last trembling waves of his own release, idly stroking himself as Rez slowed and finally stilled in his body yet for a moment seemed unwilling to part.

Part they did, Rez slipped from his body more gently than Andy had been prepared for and the arm around his waist eased his trembling body down to kneel lightly on the floor. Andy stayed there, his forehead pressed to the cardboard boxes and struggled to catch his breath. When he thought he could move without losing his balance, he turned and started to work the tangle of his pants free to get them pulled back on. He glanced up and Rez sat on the floor several feet away, his eyes wide and startled, his hair sweat damp and stuck to him. He'd pulled his pants shut but hadn't closed them but the hem of his shirt hid anything worth seeing.

"What the hell was that?" Andy finally asked as he eased fabric up over his sore ass, he was going to have bruises and scratches and most likely suck marks too. It would be days or more before he could risk being caught in the shower by one of the others.

Rez just shook his head, still gasping for breath and startled himself. "It's never happening again. I can't believe I just fucked you."

"I'm not exactly doing backflips with joy either, this isn't my proudest of moments." Proud or not, it had been hot and just thinking about it made him shiver. Andy watched as Rez kept shaking

his head in denial.

"Never again..." Rez whispered.

"Damn straight there. At least we agree on something."

"Fucking humans." Rez muttered and stood up and quickly hurried from the pantry.

It left Andy sitting alone, still drunk but feeling way too sober. Well and totally fucked and feeling better than he had in weeks and completely confused about what to do next.

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Chapter Thirty Eight

Rez was shaking, trembling still and he found himself surprisingly clumsy as he hurried from the pantry. He was never clumsy, even stoned out of his mind and Shinning bright he was never clumsy but here he was, staggering over his own feet in his rush to get away. He had to escape, because Andy was sitting there, his hair mussed up, his skin marked in red lines from where Rez had scratched him, his lips parted and slightly swollen from how roughly he'd been kissed. It made him feel sick in the pit of his stomach and horny at the same time.

He had the sense to grab one of the health bars from the box on the counter and the bottle of water he'd already set out on the counter before he'd dropped the fruit as he hurried from the kitchen. It was bad enough that he'd lost it and fucked the annoying human but it would be worse if said human followed him wanting to talk about what had happened. His breath was still moving too fast, his heart was pounding and all he wanted was a shower and the privacy of his own room.

The shower was necessary, he didn't feel dirty, not really, but he smelled like the artist and the lingering feel of his touch was everywhere. Rez stripped his clothing away with abandon, peeling it from his body in his rush to shower and escape. He ran the water hot and scrubbed brutally at his skin, shivering and unable to get the feel to fade. There was no time to think, just react and all that drove him was a fear of being caught naked and alone in the shower when Andy arrived for his own.

It almost happened. He had the water shut off and his clothing bundled into a ball. He hadn't stopped to get his robe but now, with only a towel about his waist and his hair a dripping tangled mess, he wished he had. Health bar and water were bunched with his discarded clothing against his still damp skin as he hurried from the bathroom trying to get to his room and the door he could shut solidly behind him. Only he nearly ran into Andy in the hallway outside.

The human had paused to fetch his own robe, his feet shoved in the absurd pink fluffy slippers he wore. His hair was still tangled, his lips still a little too puffy and worse, he reeked of sex and Rez. The scent hit him hard, made his head spin and his stomach knot up. For one blinding moment Rez wanted to shove the man back against the wall, push the robe open. He wanted to get in close and drink in that scent, feel the smooth skin under his hands again. It would be easy to let the towel drop from his hips and then he'd be naked along the human's skin. It would be even easier to hold him in place and take him again, longer, slower, deeper this time until maybe this odd urge would finally be sated.

He felt the artist's eyes dart across his body and Rez felt suddenly more naked than he had since he'd lost his virginity. It made him feel exposed but he liked the feeling of unexpected lust that he sensed from the human. That wasn't new, humans always lusted after him, I/S too, it was the nature of his coloring but somehow, this time, it felt different. Rez glanced up and his eyes caught on Andy's, the small, piggish looking tiny eyes all humans had didn't seem so closed or beady this time. Some of his own surprising desire must have shown in his own eyes because he felt the moment Andy sensed it and the spark of lust and fear it lit in the human. Worse, he liked that feeling, liked knowing if he did surge forward he could have the human shivering under his touch almost instantly like a cornered mouse.

He didn't want to, he swore to himself he didn't want to. Rez frowned and tossed still dripping hair back off his shoulders, refusing to even hide behind the length. "Get the fuck out of my way, moron." He snapped even though Andy really wasn't blocking the way and he didn't even have to turn to avoid him as he hurried away down the hall to his room.

When he got there he tossed food and water into the small room and moved to his closet. The dirt clothes he stuffed in the laundry bag but he would have happily and gleefully burned them because he doubted even a washing could remove the human's scent from them. With that done, he grabbed a pair of boxers, pants and t-shirt more out of habit than worry about being nude, that and he didn't like being cold and after a bad craving he normally felt chilled. It was all comfortable excuses, the deepest truth was that he was enjoying being modest. He liked the luxury of not being so on display of being a little more covered up and less slutty even in the solitude of his own room.

It wasn't until he dropped his clean clothes on the floor and shut his door that Rez felt he could breathe again. He was quickly taking his privacy for granted and needing it more and more. The towel slipped free of his hips and he followed it to rest on the futon he hadn't bothered to roll up. His hands were shaking but he refused to see them as he roughly toweled out his hair trying to get as much of the water from it as he could before attacking the tangled mess with a comb.

His hand stilled in his wet hair as the reality of what had happened sunk in. He's just fucked the moron. He'd totally lost all control and just taken him, without any real permission or desire to he's just lost it and done it. It was just that he was horny and lonely and Toshi had smelled so good on the human's skin. It didn't mean anything other than the fact that he was a vital male and the artist was a slut.

Only it had felt really good, sparking on Shine good. The I/S in the bathroom with the beautiful blue hair hadn't been able to make him feel like this. It had been okay but empty, dirty feeling and had left him hungry and empty afterwards. He didn't feel empty, he felt good, almost high. For the first time in his memory he felt really good without being stoned out of his head. His skin tingled a little, he felt a little dazed but it felt good, really good.

It had to be how little fight the human had offered. It wasn't often he was asked to top and even then it was at the order of a human. Most everyone saw his coloring and wanted him under them, being used by them, begging to them and he'd known that from the moment he really understood what having his tenths sold meant. It was his coloring, it made him look like something weak and gentle and pretty but it had felt amazing to pin the human down and take him.

He'd worried that sex would feel like it had with the handsome I/S in the men's room, empty and hollow, but this proved all his fears wrong. He shivered at the memory alone. In his mind he replayed it all, the taste of the man's skin, the sound of his gasps and moans, how it had felt to feel the human's strength pressed against him, fighting him. It had surprised him to find Andy nearly hairless and Rez wondered about that. Had his body hair been permanently removed the way Rez's had? Or did the artist use one of the lotions that kept hair from growing in? The smooth skin had felt nice in contrast to the hard masculine lines.

"What the hell?" He muttered to himself when he caught his train of thoughts. "I don't give a fuck about him." But the memory of the long, smooth cock in his hand, the human arching to rub against him and worse the memory of how it had made his blood burn wasn't so easily dismissed.

He sighed in the silence of his room. Andy would be naked in the shower, lingering under the hot water. The thought was teasing and pleasant and he hated the sick feeling of hungry desire it knotted into the pit of his stomach. He wanted to hate himself for it but he couldn't because it made sense. Celibacy wasn't his thing, it never was and still wouldn't be even with his new found sobriety. He'd caught the scent of a powerful and respected I/S on the human's skin and it had set off a perfectly natural chain reaction. He was horny and Andy had smelled like an easy target.

That was all it was. He rubbed a hand over the tattooed marks on his forearms and frowned. He's spent his adult life being a whore to humans and being a highly sexualized man. Being sober and in a new house wasn't a magic cure to make that go away and there hadn't been nearly enough time to give the hazy comfort of distance. Andy was human, he was used to being sexual with humans. Andy had smelled of a vital, powerful I/S that was like catnip for him, it marked the human as sexually approachable. That was all it was and had nothing whatsoever to do with the human himself.

Some of the sick feeling in his stomach settled down at the conclusion. It wasn't the human but the circumstance and that was okay because things like that happened. He just would have to be more careful and see to it that things like that didn't happen again. That was easy, he could manage that. He was a new man, he had control over his life and situation. He wasn't going to be controlled by his desires, sexual or otherwise and that knowledge soothed him and eased his nerves.

"Never again." He muttered in the solitude of his room as he pulled on his shirt, the sleeves long and they covered the hated marks that were so much deeper a part of him than merely flesh. Rez clenched his jaw, set his will and finished dressing. "Never again." It was a promise to himself as he cracked open the water bottle and opened the book he was supposed to be reading, he just hoped it was a promise he could keep.

The book didn't hold his attention. He found himself munching on the health bar without any desire to eat and without tasting it. The water had a much better effect, soothing and sweet but it was doing little to clear his head. The pages scrolled across his computer screen but he wasn't really absorbing the words. He felt restless and unable to relax in spite of being tired. Things suddenly felt heavy and quite and it gradually pressed down on him seeping a sense of being smothered into his mind.

It finally became too much and he turned off the screen. His hair had dried and the hour had grown late enough that it should be safe to wander around. By safe he meant unlikely to have to over hear hot sex from one room or bump into someone he'd just had hot sex with. There had to be something on tv he could watch, some movie or show or news program that he could flop down in front of and turn his mind off to. Access to the television and freedom to watch whatever he wanted was a luxury, very much like his privacy, that he was rapidly taking for granted.

The channels flipped by and he paused occasionally to watch snippets. He kept looking for the one thing that would hold his attention and stop the itchy restlessness. Some of the movies he'd heard about and had wanted to see, some were fast paced and mindless but none stayed on for long. There were comedies with laugh tracks and dramas with serious music but it all seemed annoying. Even the adult channels with the big breasted women bouncing about and moaning and the handful that had only men did little to slow the quick flip of channels.

He didn't want to watch tv.

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Chapter Thirty Nine

Rez didn't want to watch TV. He needed to move; standing, he turned the screen off. A walk wouldn't do him any harm, some time out in the night air to clear his head might be just what he needed. He hadn't been outside except on the roof since he'd arrived, and normally that didn't bother him but tonight it was making him feel trapped and confined.

There was a jacket in his closet but he had no desire to go back and get it. It wasn't cold out--it was pushing into summer after all--but he was prone to being chilled now. It was more than that, he found he liked being wrapped up in layers of clothing. Tonight he just couldn't bring himself to care and he slipped out the apartment door as silently as he could manage.

There was dim lights on the stairs, low for human eyes but plenty for his own. Rez moved down the steps, intending to slip out the door and chase away the restlessness so he could maybe get some sleep. He was a flight above the entranceway when voices made him pause.

He'd forgotten the guard and how they'd be waiting there, at the door, watching. Worse, his timing had him arriving not just with the pair of guards at the door but at a shift change, so there were two arriving and two finishing and leaving. His feet froze in place as he listened to them talking quietly, laughing comfortably in their friendship.

They wouldn't stop him, at least he didn't think they would. If there were orders keeping him in the building he hadn't heard them, but he also knew he was to be guarded. He could walk out that door but someone would follow him. The idea shouldn't have bothered him but suddenly he understood he wasn't going out there to walk and he didn't want witnesses for what he wanted to do. He hovered, uncertain, wanting to push forward and not care and wanting to run away.

Red eyes flicked up the stairwell and Rez locked onto them. He knew the guard by sight, if not by name. The blond hair and red eyes were as common in I/S as brown eyes and hair were in humans, there was nothing noteworthy about the man except for the fact that he had noticed the



blue-haired man that had joined Rez in the men's room. For a moment Rez held the man's eyes, wondering what he was thinking, until another guard nudged the blond and he turned from Rez to smile and laugh with casual ease.

That was all he could stand. The weight of his isolation suddenly crushed Rez. He couldn't take it any more, he needed to run, but even going full speed he couldn't make it out the door without one of the guards snagging him. Instead of rushing forward he turned around and ran up the steps as fast as he could manage, skipping steps and stumbling as he went.

The door to the roof wasn't locked, if it had been Rez might have broken his arms, he hit it so hard. But it opened for him and he tumbled out onto the roof. The air was cool, with the promise of humidity that would arrive in a few weeks, but for now the sky was clear and stars winked above him. The neat lines of plants gave the roof shadows that fell deeper and areas that clung to what light there was. He could see clear enough and he didn't stop there at the door but rushed to the back side of the garden. The wall there was low, reaching just above his waist and he paused at it, pressing his legs to its solid comfort and tried to catch his breath.

Things hurt, everything hurt, and it wasn't physically. It wasn't like the pain of a craving that balled his body up and made him want to sob over how awful and unfair it was. This was different, this wasn't a pain he could point to or rub at and sooth to make better. It hurt in his core, in his stomach, in his soul. He felt like his heart had been hollowed out and he had been left as an empty shell: breathing, moving, alive but dead inside.

It had always been there, the aching, gnawing pain that was living, only he'd been too high, Shining too brightly to feel anything. His life had always been about getting Shine, using Shine, avoiding the pain of withdrawal, and not for a moment in his adult life had he been faced with living cold-sober with nothing to buffer the cold brutal truth of his life. It hurt, knowledge hurt. The empty isolation of his life was a deep pain and he didn't know how to make it stop.

His hands gripped the edge of the low wall, slid across the rough surface so his fingers curled around the far side, wiggling out in open air. He was a long way up, and he wasn't all that much. If he just slipped over the edge, tumbled into the open air, he'd be sucked down to smash against the pavement like a broken egg. It would hurt, he had no illusions about that, but that was a pain he could accept and deal with. It would hurt but, if he was really lucky, it wouldn't hurt for long. That would stop the crippling pain he couldn't stop or fix or Shine away and he'd slip away to nothingness.

A footstep crunched on the pathway behind him but Rez couldn't bring himself to care enough to turn and look. He just wished they'd go away and leave him alone. The isolation hurt but trying to interact with others hurt more. He just didn't know how to do it and didn't know how to learn and didn't want to bother.

"The Yards look almost pretty from up here," a deep voice rumbled out.

"Go away."

There was a sigh, and footsteps carried the blond-haired guard closer. "I don't think I should. I come up here sometimes, watch the humans drive up to the edge, watch the cabs drop them off so they can come here and treat our people like filth. I wonder, where out there is my sister; is she okay, is she hurt? Mostly I just watch how pretty we look from a distance." He stepped up to stand next to Rez. He could feel the tension and his eyes didn't miss how Rez's hands toyed with the far edge of the wall.

"You don't want to go out there."

"What the fuck do you know?" He wasn't sure if the guard meant the yards or over the wall into thin air and he didn't care.

"I know. I've a good sense of things. I felt you back there, on the steps, figured you shouldn't be alone."

"I'm awed by your intuition."

"I know what it is you're wanting, but if you go out there, you'll get more than you think you're looking for."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" he snapped. Turning to look to the tall, strong man, he wondered if he was snappish and rude enough if the man would toss him over the edge and make the choice for him.

"I figure, if I was told tomorrow I was to be a shopkeeper and not a guard anymore? And if someone trained me to be a shopkeeper and told me not to worry about fighting again? Well, I figure I'd still practice, still watch the corners for trouble, still keep a weapon on hand just in case. I don't think I could just stop being a guard simply because I was told to be a shopkeeper now. Or at least, for a long time, part of me would need that. I'd sneak out at night just to pick fights." He chuckled a little. "You get used to what you do."

"What's this have to do with why you're bugging me?"

"You were a Shiner whore."

"So?"

"You aren't now, all because Sakura-sama says so but I figure it'll be a while before you stop thinking like what you were. I don't know, I don't think it'd be easy to have so much change so fast. I can't even imagine what it's been like for you."

"So, don't try."

"Thing is, if you go out there, you'll get what you want. Pretty thing like you? They'll be all over you before you even really get into the Yard. You won't have any trouble finding someone willing to take what you're offering. I won't stop you from going out there. Just, if you do? If you go looking out there? You will use again."

"Fuck you." He wanted to snap but the words came out tired sounding.

"I don't mean it to be rude, just a fact. If you go out there and whore yourself, you'll take a hit before you get back. If you take a hit of Shine you won't feel good again. I know you can't Shine anymore but you'll undo everything you've gone through to get sober. I can't stop you from going out there to find what you need, I don't have those orders. I can't stop you."

Rez wanted to shout or scream or sob in rage at the other man. He wanted to hate him and his truths and how easily he seemed to know all the things that Rez himself didn't know about himself. Slipping over the edge and finding the better sort of pain suddenly seemed the only way out, the only way to make it all end.

The guard shuffled a little closer. "I can give you what you need."

"You don't know the first thing about this," Rez whispered back, but he was shivering now and it wasn't from the mild night air. He could smell the other man, vital and strong and feel the warmth of his body he was so close. A hand ruffled across his hair, still damp in place and brushed it back from his face and Rez almost fell apart. He needed it, needed it more badly than he thought and he hated himself for it.

"I know this isn't how I normally like it but that I'd rather give you what you need here than see you go out there looking for it. I know I need someone other than Sakura-sama to be sober, to break away from Shine. I know no one would have to know about it but you and I, and when you get to a place when you don't need this any more we'll stop."

"I don't want this," he heard himself whine. The hand softly teased his hair again, gently.

"I never said you wanted it; I said you needed it, and I understand that. I'd rather have you stay here and be safe than go out there and get hurt."

"So fucking noble of you."

"Well I won't lie and say you aren't a very, very pretty thing." The guard smiled warmly but it had the teasing feel of a joking friend not the slick lewdness of most people that smiled at Rez. "I'm Kesses."

He thought he might get sick but Rez knew he wasn't going to refuse. He didn't want to go out there, not really. He'd never had to find a client, never had to look for someone it was always more an issue about finding time when people weren't trying to fuck him. It didn't matter that he hated himself or that he was silently grateful to the guard, to Kesses he corrected himself, for keeping him from really going out and being a whore again.

Rez turned a little to the side and faced the ordinary looking man. "I don't want this," he tried to explain, some of his emotion slipping into his voice.

"I know," Kesses whispered back and let himself pet across the soft purple hair again to cup the back of Rez's head. He barely had to tug to get the slender man to tumble forward against him, and when he leaned down the lips trembled below his own before they parted and allowed him entrance.

There was no room for words after that. Rez closed his eyes and was surprised at how he was shaking. The kiss was demanding, strong and aggressive and he sensed it wasn't how the man normally kissed. He had a thought, a sense, that the guard tended to be a gentle, careful lover and was being rougher because it was what Rez needed. He did need it that way, needed it to be about his partners, his clients, needs and not his own.

When Kesses drew him back from the edge, Rez followed without protest or complaint. He let himself be taken to a quiet corner where screens with climbing plants blocked off the rest of the roof and the rest of the world. It felt dark and private and dirty and just what he wanted. This time when the lips covered his own he parted them instantly and shivered at the strong hands that roughly explored his body. He moved out of experience and habit to rub back against the body rubbing against his own but he found no amount of friction was able to really get him hard.

In the darkness, Rez heard a sound he knew. The rattle of a belt as it was loosened seemed impossibly loud, the sound of a zipper opening clicked in the empty silence of the night. Part of Rez wanted to run away, lock himself in his room and never be in this place again but other part was stronger. It hungered to be stripped bare and taken raw and made to hurt and whimper, and it needed more deeply and more powerfully than the side that didn't want any of this.

A strong hand settled on Rez's shoulder and another on the back of his head and gave just enough pressure to tell him what to do without really being rough. Even now, in spite of his promise, Kesses was being somewhat gentle. Rez didn't fight it, he let the hands push him down, the rough floor of the roof digging into his knees. He closed his eyes and hated himself but it was easier to let go and just let go and stop fighting. Closed his eyes and hoped that this would make it stop hurting at least for a little while, even if all it did was make him numb again.

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Chapter Forty

Rez pulled his clothing back in order around his body with sharp, quick, rough hands and he didn't glance up at his unexpected lover. That was okay, Kesses didn't take it personally; he wasn't sure he wanted to make eye contact either as he straightened his own pants. It wasn't his proudest of moments but he had to admit that even as skinny as Rez was, he was easy to look at. Healthy with some weight on his bones he'd be stunning and Kesses' job would be keeping lusting people away from the man. It gave him an insight into what the former whore would have looked like in his prime and it was no wonder the Red Moon had claimed him.

"You okay?" He wanted to be gentle to the pissy man but he doubted it would be welcome.

"I'm fine," Rez hissed back, pulling away from a hand that tried to brush his hair back.

"You know how to find me? You won't go out there?" The idea of repeating what they'd done was unappealing, but Kesses knew it was necessary.

Rez just nodded his head.

"Good."

"Are we done?" He muttered, hands shoved in his pockets and suddenly wanting, needing another shower but too used to having to ask if his client was done with him to not check.

"If you're feeling better, we are."

"I can sleep now."

"Okay, then I guess we are. Thank you for trusting me."

"Whatever." He shook his head and hurried from the screened-in area.

Kesses didn't need to follow him to know the man wouldn't stop running like a cat with it's tail on fire until he was safely back in the apartment, and even then he was willing to place a solid bet on it being the purple haired man's room he scurried all the way to. He didn't move; he wasn't in any rush and the cooler night air was soothing. There was no need for him to go back down to the barracks, he was off duty and a lot of them wandered up to the roof top gardens on during their time off.

"Well," a woman's voice drifted around the screen. "That was interesting."

He glanced up to see a slender, short form darken the entrance and smiled. "Thought I sensed you hovering out there, how long were you waiting?"

"Long enough, but not long enough to be lewd. How was he?"

"Julia."

"Don't take that tone, I'm not jealous. He's prettier than me."

"It's not like that, you're my partner." They had been for years, and in far more than a professional sense.

She laughed lightly and stepped closer, liking the smell of her lover and sex and another man in the small space. "You know I'm teasing you, stop being serious. How was he?"

"Pretty, sad, lost....I feel like a bully doing that." He opened his arms and let her tumble against his chest, petting her hair and holding her the way the man he'd just fucked hadn't allowed. "He just needed so badly it was painful to feel."

She thumped his chest a little. "You're too sensitive, you let things bother you too much."

"He almost broke tonight."

"It's not your responsibility." She knew better than to say that Rez was just a Shiner whore, Kesses had already gotten into two fights in the last few weeks when someone else in their unit had been so dismissive.

"I know, but.... I know." He sighed. "He didn't even enjoy it. Wouldn't let me touch him to pleasure him, didn't even get hard, not really. It hurt him to let me take him, but he needed that hurt."

"You can't fix her or save her by saving him."

"I know... I know... Julia... it's just... If Rez can't do this, my sister will never be able to. I know Sakura-sama said to keep what Rez is doing quiet, but it's so important. I could mean so much."

"There's no saying who Sakura-sama will allow to have this treatment."

Kesses shook his head. "He'd let my sister, I know he would. He's a good master, he cares about us."

"Yes, but did you stop to think that these human doctors might have their own criteria? That she may not qualify? Or that she may not even want to get clean? That she might not be able to do it? Rez is a bitch, but he's a tough bitch and it's tearing him apart. And Sakura-sama, we've seen how he's suffering."

"I know." He pushed down the sharp edged anger. He was just defensive and Julia always played the devil's advocate. She was always logical and reasonable, and that was why they were so good together because he wasn't logical and often wasn't anywhere near reasonable. "But if Rez fails, Sakura-sama may not offer the treatment to others. I know my sister might not qualify, she might not want it and she might not be able to do it--but someone else's sister might. That's why I followed him up here. Too much of all our hopes are resting on his shoulders, and they're awfully narrow."

Julia sighed and cuddled a little closer. In the distance she heard the sound of cars buzzing near and around the Yards, picking humans up and dropping them off. Otherwise the night was still beyond the beat of her lover's heart under her head.

"Is a shame." She finally whispered into the silence.

"Hmm?"

"That Rez-san is so pretty and yet so much more drawn to men. Not fair, I would have used him like he wanted." She grinned, knowing if she kept prodding she could make Kesses blush. "Used him hard and put such a pretty thing away wet."

"You're an evil woman."

"Yes, yes I am." She pulled away and climbed up on tip toes to kiss his mouth. "Now, it's been a long day, take me to bed and make love to me right. I like smelling another man on your skin."

"Evil...evil woman." He was blushing now and knew she knew and didn't care.

"You're up early." Mick turned under the hot water, expecting to see Toshi yawning with tussled hair staggering in for a shower. Only, it was Andy, and instead of creeping almost up to the showerhead before he shed the pink bathrobe he simply peeled it off near the entrance to the shower room and hung it on a hook there.

Andy didn't answer in words; he yawned and grunted while shaking his tangled hair loose.

Mick chalked up the suddenly more normal Andy-behavior of not being body shy to the fact that his friend was still half asleep and dunked his head under the hot water again. When he shook the spray from his eyes he glanced over and Andy was just standing there under the water, a hand on the wall and his eyes shut. That was very un-Andy like, even for when the man was half asleep.

Mick watched as his friend sighed and shook his head, thinking something serious--which didn't suit Andy either--and began to soap up his hair. "You okay?"

"Huh?" Andy turned a little and forced a grin. "I'm fine, just sleepy and thinking."

"Okay." He turned away a little until Andy went back to washing, but Mick knew the man well and knew something was on his mind. That's when he saw the scratches on Andy's side, the bruise on his pale hip, and when Andy lifted his hair to rinse it Mick saw suck marks on the back of his neck. What was on Andy's mind suddenly became very obvious.

That made the question whether or not he should say anything and Mick lingered, wondering.

"Who was it?" Mick finally asked.

"What?" Andy tried to sound casual but when he glanced over Mick saw how Andy's eyes were a little too wide.

"Who was it? I think I can tell when you've gotten laid, and since I know you didn't leave here... it was a guard? Wasn't it?"

"I wouldn't know what you're talking about," Andy almost snapped back and hurried to rinse his hair.

"Okay." But Mick knew when Andy was lying and Andy was lying big time. He lathered soap in his hands and watched from the corner of his eye as his friend hurriedly finished washing and snatched up his towel.

"Don't forget..."

"What?" Andy snapped back far more harshly than he had to. "What?" He gentled the word when Mick just raised an eyebrow at him.

"That reporter fellow is coming by today, about noon. He's not staying, just here to meet Toshi and see the place. Toshi's only half-agreed to this and wanted to get a feel for the fellow first. Just giving you a heads up."

"Okay." Andy rubbed the towel quickly over his hair and shrugged into his fuzzy robe and hurried from the showers.

On his way out Andy almost bumped into Toshi who was on his way in, yawning and with his hair tussled and a towel around his waist. It was Toshi that turned to the side to get out of the way and keeping them from colliding. He yawned again and frowned, glancing after where Andy had scurried away.

"What's with him this morning?" He flipped the towel open and over a hook, moving to a shower head close to Mick's, but not too close. Too close often led to far too close and that would be bad if Alec hadn't showered yet.

"Oh, him? I think he got laid last night."

"Huh." He pulled on the water and let it stream over him. "Well, you didn't leave the bedroom last night and unless Alec has been possessed... did he go out?"

"Nope."

"So a guard? Andy and one of the guards?" He blinked, a little surprised. but than the reality of it made it not so surprising. "They do seem to like him. Huh. This is not necessarily a bad thing. I've been hoping they'd grow more comfortable with humans, but didn't expect them to be so willing to take a human lover so soon."

"Well, whatever's going on, he's not talking and that's totally not like Andy."

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Chapter Forty One

The room was small and, until a day before, had been a storage room of some sort. Toshi had been willing to meet this reporter in their apartment but Mick had violently opposed the idea. He

didn't even want the man really knowing the lay out of the building until they had established some ground rules about what the man would be reporting on. Since Mick was very much the head of security and the guard instantly backed him on his idea, there was no way Toshi could out stubborn them all.

So a storage room was hastily cleared and cleaned. A table was found and installed with several chairs, but even with the rooms new look it still felt like a storage room. Toshi sighed as his chair wobbled again, one leg slightly uneven from its fellows, and tried not to grumble about the over blown precautions everyone seemed to be making. He felt Alec glance up at the sigh but didn't lift his own eyes from the paperwork he was scanning.

"It wouldn't kill you to take an entire day off," Alec said softly.

"When this is all settled, we'll see."

"Toshi, things will never really settle, least not while we're young enough to enjoy a day off."

"This is a stupid idea; it's going to cause trouble. The last thing we need is someone poking about." He set the pen he was holding down and tried to push the shakes away. This was a bad time for a craving to hit. It made sense: when he wanted to avoid something his body reminded him how good it felt to Shine and forget the world.

"It'll be fine. Mick and I will keep him in line and do you really see both your father and uncle tossing you to a wolf? Your father is touchier about the press than you are." He'd gotten several careful phone calls from Luke Henri's secretary, George, about articles that Alec hadn't stopped from going to press, ones Alec was inclined to simply ignore but that Luke Henri had been furious over.

"I know. Let's get this done before he arrives." He bent back over the papers that had to be physically signed by him and tried to make the stack smaller.

He'd made a good dent into the stack but was earning a headache from the harsh overhead lighting and the small, tedious print when a knock on the door broke into their work. The door cracked open as he'd already told them to just knock and come in and one of the guards stood in the half open door, his body blocking the view inside from anyone waiting in the hallway.

"Sakura-sama, sir? Your guest has arrived."

"Thank you Jonah. Send him in and stay on hand."

"Yes, sir." The door pushed open wider. "Sakura-sama will see you now."

There was no answering acknowledgement but a man shuffled uneasily around the guard into the room. Toshi didn't bother looking up, he kept scanning the paper still in front of him but this time he didn't sign. "I don't care what sad story they're offering, the deadline stands. Make sure they know that, please, Alec." He slipped the paper from the pile and handed it to the blond and only then glanced up. "Mr. Paul Epps I assume?"

The man that walked in was in his mid to early fifties, not overly tall but not short either. He had a solid frame but not bulky that was just starting to show signs of age and decline. His hands and face were weathered and tanned, a slight smile was stuck to his face with the feel of it being a habitual expression, but Toshi could see how the man's face would crinkle up in lines carved from a lifetime of easy emotion. His hair was trimmed short and tidy but not in a fussy way, and the coppery orange red was fading to snowy white in flecks and patches. Brown eyes took in the room with a quick flicker and the freckles across his nose danced as his smile broadened.

"Mr. Ranvier, I've been trying forever to meet you. I'm honored, sir, simply honored."



Toshi glanced to Alec but the man only raised an eyebrow. That said clearly that Alec had no open objections to the man and Toshi found there was a timber to the man's voice he liked. It had an easy open feel that welcomed closeness and confidence. There was something about it that made him feel comfortable and that could be dangerous.

"Please, have a seat." Toshi knew he had his father's cold, distant, vaguely disapproving air down almost perfectly and what little he hadn't mastered his cold blue eyes made up for. Epps didn't even blink, he nodded and smiled again and moved quickly to take a seat, not at the far end of the table but next to Alec on the side.

"You are aware that this meeting is strictly off the record and is not to be recorded in any context or manner, correct?"

"Of course, Mr. Orwick here was quite clear in his instructions when we spoke and your body guards were quite adept and searching for anything hidden. I haven't even got a notepad and pen on me." He smiled quickly again but Toshi caught the undercurrent of annoyance in the man, which told him his guards had found something and removed it.

Toshi gathered the stack of papers together and handed them to Alec. "Alec, may we have the room please?" Alec paused for just a moment, hiding his uncertainty with a very deliberate fumble of the papers. "Mick will be along shortly."

"I'll get these on their way." Alec nodded and the papers that had seemed to give him such trouble fell easily into place. "It was nice to meet you in person Mr. Epps, I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again soon."

"Likewise."

Toshi sat still until Alec left and shut the door behind him. He could almost picture his friend scurrying to a phone to call Mick and prod him to get home sooner. It was pointless, Mick would have been notified the moment the reporters car entered the Yards and he'd have left the build site that moment.

"I'm sure you're aware, Mr. Epps, that I am against this idea."

"It's been expressed to me. Why do the guards address you as Sakura-sama?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Epps, you don't get to ask any questions right now. This is my chance to question you. What is it you believe you'll find here?"

"Excuse me?"

"I believe the question was specific enough to be understood."

"Here? As in with you directly, or generally at this camp, or in this room?"

"All of them. What is your angle?"

"I have no angle, I just report the truth."

That made Toshi snort a little. "In my experience reporters have little interest in the truth."

"Well, Mr. Ranvier, you need to hang out with a better class of reporters." Epps sighed and leaned back in his chair. He sat with a casually relaxed appearance that Toshi knew was forced, and the sense that the man was seeking something only grew stronger.

"What is it you're looking to learn here?"

"I was the first human not part of a containment authority to walk down the streets of the ghetto camp in Europe. It was worse than any war zone I'd ever seen, I turned a corner and there was a barricade and behind it? Behind it I found order and control and life. One side of a wall was anarchy controlled by thugs and sadists and the other was, if not thriving, surviving with as much dignity as could be managed. So I stopped this old man, missing an arm and an eye and I ask him how is it this camp is so literally divided. He says to me, Sakamoto-sama saved us, that his house arrived fifteen years ago and slowly began to forcibly claim their camp. He says to me that every year a few more blocks are won and more lives saved. He called your Uncle a savior; he had a picture of him in a locket around his neck. I'm here because something extraordinary is going on and no one anywhere is paying attention." Epps dropped some of the casualness and sat straighter. "I'm in this room because there isn't a man alive like you and I know if I want access, real access to this camp and your uncle, it has to be through you."

"To what end? I know you've been here before, you gained the notice of my father by pushing to interview him when he moved our cooperate headquarters here and you expressed no interest in the I/S situation at that time."

"I'm older now."

"Why now?"

Epps leaned forward and Toshi felt the sudden, heavy seriousness the man tried to hide behind his habit of appearing at ease. "I need to do this. It's a great story and no one is telling it. Like it or not, you are a big part of this story."

"My intention is simply to be..." Toshi let his words stop when the door opened and Mick joined them. His lover had his jacket off and the leather of his handgun shoulder holster defined his torso well. It was a subtle threat that was obvious and made Toshi unsure if he should shake his head or smirk. "Ah, Mick, you arrived sooner than I'd expected."

"I/S eyes see a long way, they gave me a good head start."

"Mr. Epps, this is the head of my security, A.R. McKale. Mick, this is Paul Epps."

Epps hopped to his feet and quickly offered his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. McKale."

Mick accepted it out of reflex. "Mr. Epps."

The exchange made Toshi frown a little. Epps hadn't deliberately snubbed him upon arriving, Toshi had made it clear he wasn't in the mood for forced niceties and that he wasn't going to like Epps no matter how friendly he seemed. Mick had done nothing to encourage the man either but there was a tight tension that seemed to wind up harder the moment Mick joined them. It made no sense to Toshi unless it was the nature of their relationship beyond work, the open threat of Mick's hand gun or some worry that the head of security would find a way to disapprove of the interviews he wanted. He mauled over the ideas and all seemed like they could fit but none of them felt quite right.

It was something to think about later. Mick moved easily around the man and came to sit down without being invited because he didn't need the invitation. He sat in the seat Alec had abandoned. It placed him physically between Toshi and the stranger.

"I am not agreeing to this willingly. However, both my uncle and my father believe it is a worthwhile risk and that you are trustworthy. So I won't refuse you, but it's for their sakes, not yours."

"Thank you," Epps answered sincerely.

"Mr. Ranvier may be agreeing to this but I'm not so easily convinced. My job is to see to his safety and there will have to be some ground rules in place for this to go forward." Mick spoke up smoothly, looking for a reason to deny the man access simply because he knew Toshi wanted to refuse.

"Like meeting me off the record in what was formerly a broom closet a couple of days ago?"

Mick narrowed his eyes a little but didn't hear any mocking in the older man's voice. "Yes, things like that. Most of the threats made against Mr. Ranvier are simply threats but there are some people who would be happy to see him harmed. I'll need to pre-screen your reports concerning him to check for any tactical information that might have to be removed."

"Things like?"

"Building layouts, movements, how many guards are maintained, how they are armed, things like that."

"Ah..." Epps smiled again. "I have interviewed heads of state before, I'm aware of the sensitive nature of some aspects of Mr. Ranvier's life. I won't compromise his safety but I will not compromise my work either. You won't have final say over what I print. However, I will allow you to read any article I publish in advance of publication. You'll just have to trust that this isn't my first time at the rodeo."

"I'm not paid to trust."

"Of course not. Let me be blunt: I'm not unaware of the reputation of both sides of Mr. Ranvier's family. I have no doubt that if I step over the line too far, betray any trust, I'll meet an untimely end. I'm not looking to screw your employer, to make I/S appear as monsters or Mr. Ranvier to seem a trained dancing bear, I'm looking to be honest. I understand the situation and the threats that are unspoken without them having to be mentioned here."

Mick sat silent for a moment, surprised Epps had been so open and liking that aspect of him. When he did speak he didn't raise his tone and didn't blink. "If you betray one ounce of Mr. Ranvier's trust or compromise his security in any way, the reputations of his family will be the least of your concerns because you will have to deal with me."

Toshi felt it again, the sudden trembling unease and intensity in the reporter but he kept silent. Epps grinned again, lighthearted and happy. "Good! We understand one another. If all is settled I'll be by tomorrow. That should give you time to make up your mind about how much to trust me and show me. I'd like to meet your staff, talk to them one on one, and I'd like to observe you for a time."

That sounded like a good cue to escape for Toshi. He nodded. "Fine, call Alec and set up a time and I'll make it work." He stood up, Mick moved quickly to follow. "Thank you for meeting with me, Mr. Epps."

Epps hopped to stand in the small room. "No, thank you!"

But Toshi was still frowning as they left the room. There was no doubt the guard would see the man out safely but he worried about it. He had visions of the man poking around in dark corners to look for dust or rummaging in their underwear drawers looking for hidden diaries and journals. More, he couldn't shake the feeling that Epps was holding some hidden motive he just couldn't pin down, and that made him nervous.

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Chapter Forty Two

"You don't like this fellow." The guard asked carefully. It wasn't so much that they were afraid of Mick but more that they respected his skills. None of them worried about an open fight but the human had training and knowledge they lacked and was freely and openly showing them and that had made him well liked and respected.

Mick glanced up to where the tall guard, Dellorin, stood closer to him than the door he was watching. Glossy red hair was pulled back into a tight, secured braid as he'd ordered and eyes a shade darker than Toshi's watched him with interest. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, you're waiting for him outside, which you never do and you brought a chair so you want him to know you'd rather wait around outside than trust him to be escorted inside before you're with him. That and you keep fussing with your gun which we both know is in perfect order anyway." He nodded to the partially disassembled handgun in Mick's lap, all neatly placed on a clean, cloth handkerchief to protect the human's dress pants and while Mick wasn't wearing a tie, he was wearing a jacket and his shirt's collar was button tightly closed.

"I don't know him well enough to like him or not."

"But you don't."

Mick held in a sigh and skillfully put the gun back together and forced himself to stop toying with it. "Toshi doesn't like him. That's good enough for me."

The guard was silent, thinking but eventually nodded. "And me as well."

His handgun safely latched back into its holster, Mick leaned back in his chair and balanced it on two legs. "If we're lucky we can shoot him."

Dellorin chuckled warmly partly because none of the I/S guards were really comfortable with the firearms Mick had required them to learn and wear and were more likely to break a bone or draw a knife than a gun. The other reason he laughed was because it was painfully clear the only one of them thinking about shooting the reporter was Mick himself.

"If you shoot him, Sakura-sama will make you sleep on the sofa." That earned him a tense and quick flashed grin from the normally serious human and set him off chuckling again.

The silence lingered between them with them both watching for the arrival of the reporter's car. Mick continued to lean back in a precarious way and couldn't shake the feeling that Dellorin was

hovering close to catch him should he become unbalanced. He was considering if his relationship to the guard extended far enough to ask about Andy. Was it proper for him, as a direct member of Toshi's private family, to ask something so personal of his house guard? Even he couldn't pretend it had anything to do with a concern over security, he just was wondering about his friend's new lover that he was so uneasy talking about.

"I was wondering..." Mick finally started.

"Excuse me sir, the car's in the Yards." Dellorin interrupted, spotting the dust plume from the car as soon as it turned from the well paved road to the more broken up and worn down side road. "I'm sorry. You were wondering what?"

"It doesn't matter." His focus wasn't on Andy's mystery lover but on having to escort their new shadow around the building and warn him about not causing trouble. He saw the small dust cloud now and the dark moving form of the car and deliberately stayed leaning back in his chair and his hands away from his gun.

Before he could worry too much about it, the car was a safe distance away and Epps was climbing from the backseat. This time a black camera bag was slung over one shoulder and a small, very expensive, camera was neatly tucked in the man's hand. Ground rules for photos would need to be established as well and Mick frowned as he caught the glint of a recorder pinned to the man's shirt.

"Hello, Mr. McKale, are you to be my babysitter?" Epps grinned and lopped over on long legs with an easy stride.

Mick didn't answer, he didn't lower the other two legs of his chair back to the ground and he didn't stand up. All he did was slide his eyes over to where the two door guards were on duty and the pair of them moved forward, silent and stubborn and began to search the man.

"Just, some of that is very expensive equipment and can be delicate and I'm fond of it, have to be careful..." Epps tried not to watch as the guards roughly and thoroughly checked his bag and totally ignored his concerns. "Careful!" He hissed when Dellorin shook one of the cameras, deliberately, Mick was certain, trying to upset the reporter.

"I/S access to technology may be limited but they aren't stupid about it. You don't have to talk slowly or in small words." Mick answered and let his chair flop forward back to its natural position.

"I know, I know, it's just, you get attached when you've carried the same gear for so long." He winced again as Dellorin prodded at another bit of equipment but totally ignored the rough and skillful full body pat down the other guard was quick to deliver. The two I/S exchanged a look and Dellorin handed the equipment bag to Mick. "He's clean, sir."

"Thank you." Mick took the bag but didn't hand it back to its owner right away. "Some ground rules. Get permission before you snap pictures of people, not everyone wants to be photographed and be certain the images you take won't compromise our security. Understand?"

"I did promise to play nice. May I have my camera's back now?"

Mick paused a second longer before offering it back. He didn't like the welcoming smile that drew people in, it wasn't in his nature to trust people that seemed happy for no reason. "When you get here, you do what the guard at the door says."

"What sort of straw did you draw to get stuck with me today?"

That made his eyes narrow. "Mr. Ranvier is in meetings all morning. He's willing to grant you

some freedom of movement while with us but only as long as a guard is escorting you. This is both for security reasons and your own safety. I'm to show you around and then you may do whatever it is you do."

"You call him Mr. Ranvier? Isn't that a touch formal given the nature of your relationship?"

He guided them downward, figuring to start the tour with the lowest levels and working their way upwards. "He's my employer and the nature of our relationship is none of your concern."

"Actually, it is. I don't want to just know him and the I/S of this camp but I want to get to know you and the other humans here. So many people have such a fear of all that I/S are and yet a handful of you elect to interact as if there are no differences. Trust me, that's very much part of this story. I'm curious about you, Mr. McKale. You're not just Mr. Ranvier's head of security, do you credit being raised by an Inky Commune with your more ease with the I/S community?"

"The difference between an I/S and human are superficial. Any thinking man will see that."

"But will you grant that having been born almost in the shadow of the largest concentration of I/S on the planet may have given you a different perspective on the matter?"

"This is the training floor, showers and such back there and no I don't concede that. I'd never met an I/S until I was already an adult." He moved them across the training floor and back to the second staircase that opened directly into the guards barracks. Epps followed like an ill breeze on his heels, easily keeping up and obviously not interested in the training room.

"Little is really known about you beyond what the tabloids kick about. I wonder what kind of man would risk so much to become the lover of not just any I/S but the most famous I/S in the world."

"It's not like that." Mick opened the door and let the older man enter the floor ahead of him. He tried not to bother the guards on their private floor. While he had the right to inspect them at anytime, as Toshi had as well, they both felt the group needed their own space as surely as Toshi's family did. There were four guards lounging on the sofa, snuggled together and all four cursed in their camp slang and sprang to their feet. Mick waved at them be at ease but they stayed on their feet, watching. "This is guard's barracks, don't come in here without permission from myself, Mr. Ranvier or one of the guards."

"People want to know how you came to be who you are as much as they want to know more about Mr. Ranvier himself. How did the orphaned son of Teresa McKale, a waitress and homicide victim end up the partner and lover to the son of the richest man in the world?"

Admittedly, Mick had been on edge for while and yes, he did consider himself a fairly even tempered man but there were a few things he didn't tolerate well on the best of days. For a moment he saw red, so bright and gut level deep was his anger and his teasing about wanting to shoot the intrusive reporter no longer felt like a joke. Behind him he heard the I/S mutter a little in low voices but he didn't care. He had a handful of the older man's shirt and before he was aware of even how angry he was, he'd bodily slammed the reporter back into the nearest wall.

"You don't get to ask about me. Get it? Not about my mother or my parents and who I sleep with is none of your concern." He hissed out, his arm getting dangerously close to crushing the other's throat. His childhood records were supposed to be sealed and private but he knew first hand how easy it was to simply bribe the right person and get access to anything.

"I got it, geesh chill out!"

Epps' voice was light but his eyes were serious and cold. Mick saw it, he was too close to miss it but he'd made his point. Worse, he'd let the man push his control and that wasn't good. As quickly as he'd pushed the reporter against the wall, he released him and stepped back. "This is

the barracks, it's the private space of the guard, do not enter here without permission." He repeated in a very careful, very controlled voice.

Epps nodded. "I understand."

"Good. Same goes for our apartment, one flight up." He pulled the door open and let the reporter step ahead of him again but Mick lingered to spare a glance to the off duty guards. They looked serious but not upset and when he nodded at them they returned it easily. The small apology for disrupting their space was quickly accepted but Mick knew his loss of temper would be quickly gossiped about.

The one up side to having his temper snap was that the reporter kept his mouth shut. The back steps let them out into the hallway but Mick paused and preferred to finish in the apartment. He took them to the main stairs and up, past the empty floor being used for storage and up to the garden on the roof.

"Wow, this isn't what I expected." Epps nodded to the rows of pots and containers that turned the roof into a something alive.

"It's I/S tradition, at least here. They use every space they can find." He moved them around the corner and sure enough under the canopy at the table Rez was bent over his lessons looking like he was being tortured. "Rez-san, a moment?" He called out and the man's head swiveled over. "Garden is open to everyone, the guards pretty much maintain it. They built it of their own accord."

They watched and Epps even more closely, as Rez said a few short words to his sensei before bowing a little and stepping away from his studies. Rez's hair was pulled back but the braid was uneven which wasn't like him at all and he had a tired, distracted look to his pink eyes.

"Rez-san, this is Paul Epps. Mr. Epps is the reporter that will be documenting things off and on for the next few weeks. Mr. Epps, Rez-san is in training to be the manager of Mr. Ranvier's I/S side of the club he's building."

Rez glanced between the two men, blinked a few times and frowned. "What do you want with me?"

"Just introducing you so you know the new face walking around."

"Hm."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Rez."

Rez glanced from the older man to Mick and back again. "Do I have to care that he's here?" He asked of Mick directly.

"Toshi just asks that we attempt to accommodate him within reason."

"Good, I'm busy. Are you done with me?"

Mick nodded and Rez gave them another odd look before he went back to the table and his lessons. "Well, that went better than I feared. Rez is a touch moody and isn't fond of humans."

"I could tell."

"That brings us to another issue, one requiring a certain level of sensitivity. One you can not write about without permission from those it effects."

"Okay."

"It's commonly known that Mr. Ranvier is a recovering Shine addict, it's something he struggles with. What isn't as well known because the press hasn't even gotten wind of it yet that so is Rez. We're working on a new treatment for recovery, Rez is the first one to receive that treatment. If I think your being here is making their recovery more difficult? I will have you removed."

Epps glanced over to where the very pretty man with the very odd coloring had returned to his table and his elderly I/S teacher. He'd seen enough of I/S communities to know what a pretty man who used to be an Shiner meant and he couldn't blame the fellow for being bitchy about it now.

"I'll be careful, I do understand. I know a thing or two about recovery."

"Good. Come on, I'll show you the apartment and introduce you to Andy which will be fun because he's in a snit today too." Toshi so owed him for doing this, the last thing he needed today was to escort the busy body around, especially given the mood everyone was in lately. He didn't think to include himself on that list.

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Chapter Forty Three

Epps followed him silently down the steps to their apartment. Mick just didn't have anything to say and his earlier snappish temper had silenced the older man. He opened the door and held it. It wasn't done to be polite, Mick wanted to make sure the door shut securely behind them.

"Kitchen's back there, living space, we pretty much work from the dinning table. There is an office but it's tiny." He frowned because Andy should have been in the apartment but he wasn't in sight and when Mick pushed the door to the kitchen open it was dark and empty as well.

"Bedrooms are back the hall. Alec's..." He opened the door but the space was it's normal chaos. How a man that was so completely organized in every other way could let his private space be so cluttered always baffled Mick. He let Epps have a quick view but only a little one. "The room I share with Mr. Ranvier." There was no worry about opening the door there, the room was as neat as a pin. Even the futon was folded back up and away. It wasn't in either of their natures to let things get cluttered. "Andy's room is down here."

"This is a fairly modest space for a man of Mr. Ranvier's wealth."

Mick just nodded as he tapped on Andy's bedroom door. There was no answer so he cracked the



door open but the room was dark and empty. "Andy's room." Not really messy or cluttered, Andy's magpie mentality had the walls painted in swirls of color and fabric sample swatches simply stapled to the wall. The entire space was being eaten by the design project that was the club. "Rez we put back at the end here. His room is the smallest." Mick didn't let Epps see into that tiny space, he just waved to the doors at the far end of the hall. The I/S was touchy about private space and Mick wouldn't help the reporter invade it. "Common bathroom is here." He flicked on the lights and again found no Andy.

"Not at all what I expected of Mr. Ranvier, has he adopted his father's philosophy of living simply?"

"Partly and partly from circumstances." The only two rooms Mick hadn't actually, physically looked for Andy in was Rez's bedroom and the office. Since there was no way Andy would be in Rez's room he back tracked them to the tiny office which was nothing more than a secured computer hookup, a desk and chair.

He pushed the office door open and Andy jerked straight up in his chair, the pencil he'd been holding fluttered from his hand and skittered across the sketchbook to finally stop against his pencil case. His friend looked so guilty, Mick wondered what he'd interrupted almost as much as he wondered why Andy was using the office he hadn't ever even set foot in.

"Hey." Andy greeted as he blinked a little and reached to snatch up his lost pencil.

"What're doing in here for?"

"Huh? Oh, Alec has a slew of snot nosed wet behind the ear brats coming by to interview to be my assistant. Just thought this was more proper." He shrugged. "Sketching in between appointments." He tucked the pencil away and started to close the sketchbook.

Mick was in the room and close enough to make out a sketched pair of I/S eyes but without a face or color, just who's eyes they were he didn't know. It made him want to smirk but he held it back. "Any luck so far?"

"Naw, they're all frightened silly of the guards and we can't have that. Thinking about asking Alec about maybe finding an I/S with an art or design background instead. Seems easier to get an I/S used to humans instead of the reverse and I am so not holding their hand every time a pair of big eyes lands on them. I even dressed casually too and they're still running away like little kids faced with a boogiemán." He'd worn jeans and his fraternity t-shirt from college with only the barest touch of lip gloss and eye liner. Not that he'd ever joined a fraternity but he'd certainly dated or slept with enough of their members to have earned the t-shirt.

"Can't hurt to ask him about it, has to be someone in the camp with the experience to be of use. You know how Alec is about giving fresh faces a chance, that's why he's picking from recent graduates."

"Hm." Andy sighed and glanced to the man hovering behind Mick and frowned a little. There was something familiar about the man, like he'd seen his face before but couldn't peg from where. "With what Toshi's offering to pay them they could at least pretend not to be rubes."

"I'll mention to Alec when I see him next. Andy this is Paul Epps, the reporter I told you about, he's going to be around off and on for the next couple of weeks. Mr. Epps this is Andy Fendle."

Epps nodded and smiled. "Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Fendle, I'm quite a fan of your mother's art."

"She's quite popular in Europe."

"I was wondering if you'd have time to talk to me about things?" Epps asked carefully, eyeing not Andy but Mick.

Andy shrugged. "Whatever, I'm always underfoot."

Which was totally un-Andy like, normally the man would have done back flips at the thought of being interviewed. It worried Mick and he'd have to pry a little harder about whatever had happened to make the artist so unusually quiet.

"It'll have to be later, going to take Mr. Epps over to the club now. Toshi's over there waiting."

Andy just shrugged again and opened his sketch book to a new page. "Whatever."

Mick frowned, hovering between leaving and asking Andy again if he was okay.

"I'm fine, get out of here, my next duckling is supposed to arrive in like ten minutes and the last thing I need is you making them wet themselves." He had already dismissed them from his attention, turn back to his world of image and sketch but continuing to mutter to himself. "That's a mess I'm not cleaning up....cleaning up messes....being nice....for the fucking birds..."

"Alright then..." Mick sighed and wondered if the entire house had gone insane. He motioned for Epps to leave and shut the office door behind Andy, leaving his friend to his ranting and his art. "Have to take a bike over to the club, no one in the Yards or camps uses cars."

"I've noticed, there's no transportation in other camps, the Canadian one has rickshaws but most people can't afford to hire them. It's changing though and it's a change directly due to Sakamoto's influence. People actually are starting to prosper. It's a dramatic difference."

Mick didn't answer but just kept them moving. He didn't want to be this man's best friend and share happy conversation about Yasun's grand plans or the plans his father had laid the foundations for. For all that the reporter smiled and seemed easy and happy, he wasn't part of the family and as such, Mick had him pegged mentally as the enemy. No amount of flattery or smiles would make Mick come around and answer the man's questions.

Downstairs a pair of bikes and guards stood waiting as soon as they left the building helmets were handed their way.

"Here sir."

"Thank you. Generally, I let the guards drive for me. I/S eyesight and reflexes are better, makes them amazing marksmen and drivers. Don't worry, you'll be safe."

"Wasn't worried." Epps nodded and pulled the helmet on showing this wasn't his first time on a bike.

Mick dismissed his concerns after that. The guards really were amazing on the bikes and he had no doubt that even in a firefight or other harrowing situation, any of his people would drive the zippy bikes with the skill of a professional and the nerves of a madman. Epps had no chance of falling off and maybe accidentally cracking his skull open, which was a shame in some regards because it would make Mick's day easier.

It was a short trip over to the construction site, taken at a sedate and steady pace. People offering threat went quickly, it would put the guards with Toshi on alert but by going slowly, smoothly, it gave them time to identify who was approaching and let everyone that needed to be informed know well in advance.

Everytime he made the trip over, Mick was surprised by the progress. After weeks of seemingly

nothing being done, advances were springing up like mushrooms after a soft rain. There was nothing left of the old Pony Club, even its footprint was obscured or gone, absorbed by the larger, more graceful building taking its place. It still had the squared lines of a warehouse, something industrial but it looked clean, smooth, like a fancy design firm's idea of what a warehouse should look like instead of the dirt of the real thing. The walls were up and the roof was finished now, designed with the I/S habit of building gardens in mind. There would be green houses there, not just for growing things but to sit in warmth during a cold winter night and have flowers around.

The front face of the building would funnel people to the sides where I/S and humans would enter on opposite ends of the building, segregated as they were in all their lives but the main exits were in the center, co-mingled club. It would take people a while to get used to that and there were doors to the outside from all points of the building in case of emergencies but the most obvious way to leave would force I/S and human alike to actually face one another.

More than just the club being wall and roofed in, the squat, efficient apartment building attached to the back was nearly done. Some of the space was in dorm style barracks the way the guards preferred, living in a communal manner seemed to be what they wanted and expected. They'd have far more space and better equipment, their own training ground and the best security equipment Mick could find but still they wanted to share living space and Toshi had respected that. Mingled in was the worker's dorm, honeycombed with simple but livable space where bartenders and cooks could live if they chose, it would vastly expand Toshi's household as everyone that moved in would consider themselves a part of Toshi's home and under his direct care.

Most importantly, their section, their wing was walled in and looked almost done. It hovered over the guards space, their barracks and offices, training facilities too and anyone trying to reach their home had to go through all of that to reach them. It was how things were done in the camp and Toshi had it replicated here as well. The apartment would be ample space for their private offices and living areas and Mick wondered if they'd made it too large. After being so close together with such a small amount of square footage they'd rattle around the space like a couple of peas on the bottom of a bucket.

The bikes smoothly rolled to a stop near a line of others and the single guard near them. There was no Toshi in sight and Mick could guess he was poking about the build site. His lover was almost obsessively checking on things. One day it was the sprinkler systems, the next the materials used on the façade, he would ask twenty times in thirty ways about fire safety and lines of exit. He was haunted by memories of how the Pony Club burned and the bodies they'd found trapped in the lower levels and was acting like if he just checked enough, made certain enough, something so horrible would never happen again. Mick wondered, privately, if Toshi was going over every inch just to make sure the Pony Club was really gone and wasn't somehow managing to infect the new building with its old horrible taint.

"We're ahead of schedule." Mick spoke mindlessly, trying to pretend he wasn't playing tour guide in some bad movie. "Club will be three parts, a section just for humans, one just for I/S and a center Common space. We'll live here, the guard will live here, a lot of the employees will live here, there's a housing shortage in the Camp. Starting a free medical clinic in one of the Committee's old spaces too but construction on that is barely started." He nodded to the guard that was standing watch at the worker's elevator and guided them inside. Mick knew where Toshi would be, his current obsession was on the strength of the windows and they were being installed on the top floor. "Mr. Ranvier has plans to better lay out the Yards for the sex workers and addicts that live there, to try to give some safety to their lives." He pulled the door open when the lift came to a stop and ushered Epps out. "This is a long term project, we may be a few weeks away from having the living spaces here ready to be occupied but we're years away from having everything done."

Sure enough, he spotted Toshi off to the side with a stack of invoices in his hands, checking with

his own eyes to make sure the product they had ordered was what was delivered and used. Mick moved them over, knowing from just how his lover stood that he was knotted up in worry or riding out a smaller craving.

"Hey." Mick called out softly when they were closer, Toshi had knelt to compare serial numbers stamped on window frames with those on the invoices.

The sound of Mick's voice and the feel of his lover made him glance up and the smallest of smiles came to his face. "Mick." He acknowledged softly when he wanted to embrace the stern faced man or at the least take him aside and find out why he was pissed.

"Showed him around, introduced him to everyone."

He stood up and nodded. "Good. What do you think so far, Mr. Epps?"

"Quite a bit more humble than I'd expected. This building being excepted of course."

Toshi glanced around and there was none of the heartbreak he'd felt at seeing the rubble of the Pony Club, now it was just pride. This club was I/S built, with I/S and human hands both and might make a small, tiny difference in things.

"You were looking for a story, Mr. Epps? Something that would speak for my people? This is it, right here. Human and I/S working side by side to build something. I/S that had no formal construction training that learned quickly and skillfully. This entire building will have craftsman touches everywhere, made by both I/S and human hands. This is the story, this is what the future is, both our people side by side, making something better." He glanced around and couldn't help but smile. "This is how it should be."

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Chapter Forty Four

"Not very talkative are you?" Epps sighed as the small gathering of I/S on the rooftop garden simply sat on the ground cross-legged and watched him. It had been Mick's idea when, after several days of trying to get anyone in the household to talk to him, he'd mentioned speaking to Toshi about finding a better approach. He was convinced this idea of sitting down the guard was merely a ploy to keep him from pestering the half-breed. "You know I've interviewed people all around this world, from all walks of life and backgrounds and I must say you all are the most stoic of people I have ever encountered. Is this an I/S trait or do you simply not like me?"

Silence was his only answer, even the large eyes didn't flicker in emotion or movement. Off to

the side, Mick set the device of unknown origin he had been tinkering with aside.

"Toshi's asked them not to speak in the slang of the Camp and most I/S are uncomfortable speaking to a human." He shrugged. "That and they don't like you."

"I'm really quite likeable once you get to know me. How about I ask direct questions?" No one even flinched.

For as much as Mick liked seeing Epps get no where with the guard, the man couldn't do his job with them being so tight lipped. Some interaction was needed. "Sooner he does his job, the sooner he'll be gone," Mick added to the conversation and, while no one even really twitched a muscle, he sensed the easing of the mood in the half dozen guards. They seemed to be enjoying making Epps' life more difficult too but understood that if they pushed too hard it would make Toshi's life, not Epps', more troublesome.

An Incubus near the front shifted his weight a little. "Ask, maybe we answer."

"Progress at last. How much contact did you have with the outside world while growing up?"

It was a softball question and Mick instantly knew it was one tossed out just to get the group talking. More, he was pretty sure his guards were smart enough to see it too and he didn't worry about it. If he was suspicious of the reporter, the guards were doubly so. He just shook his head and went back to trying to fix a design flaw in his newest non-lethal toy and only half listened as the guards carefully and very selectively answered Epps' questions. Until one question caught his attention and he only pretended to pay attention to what he was working on.

"In the camp, does everyone call Mr. Ranvier by the name of Sakura-sama and if so why?"

It was something Mick had wondered about too and the one time he'd tried to approach the subject with Toshi, his lover's obvious discomfort with the subject had made it clear it was something off limits. He hadn't asked the guards for the same reason; if the question had made Toshi squirm it should have made them want to die of embarrassment.

Instead the small group shared quick grins and actually seemed to relax with that question. Part of the ease was in not having a question directly addressed to them personally, their own histories and private lives but a lot of it was sheer pride in who the head of their house was.

"Sakura-sama is the only one of his kind, you've noticed? People don't like half-breeds?"

Epps nodded. "Not just here, everywhere I've been. Most are killed at birth."

"But not Sakura-sama." A woman nodded.

"Grandfather Sakamoto, he started calling Mr. Ranvier Sakura."

"But isn't Sakura a girls name?"

Looks were exchanged and shrugs offered. "Not here, he picked it because the black hair is the way things were and because it's a sign of the fleeting beauty of life and an old symbol of..." The guard's word died off surprised himself at how much he'd said before catching himself and saying too much. "When Sakura-sama got clean and managed to live in the human's world? Everyone just started calling him that."

"You seem quite fond of him."

"We are."

"We would die for him," one of the women said with utter and total conviction. It wasn't simply

out of duty or obligation, she meant her words, they all did. Mick had known it but it hadn't really, deeply sunk in until that moment how beloved Toshi was to his people, how much hope they'd placed in him.

"Twenty minutes until shift change," Mick broke into the conversation. "And Toshi still wants to go to Sleaze tonight. Arrangements will have to be made because he's not letting any of you go along." They'd be on alert and awaiting a call from Mick if they ran into trouble. On bikes, with no concerns for traffic laws, they could be at the club in ten minutes. Ten minutes didn't seem like a long time but in an emergency situation it could be a lifetime.

"Do I get to go along?" Epps asked. He'd just gotten the group to start to open up and Mick was scattering them back to their work.

"Can I get you to not go?"

"Nope."

"Guess you'll be tagging along then."

Andy paused outside of Rez's bedroom door and drew a deep breath. He hadn't shared more than a dozen words with the I/S since The Pantry--as his mind had labeled the odd occurrence. The few words he'd had with Rez since had been short, snippy and down right mean, but here he was, hovering outside the man's bedroom door, screwing up the courage to knock.

When he finally did it took a moment but Rez cracked the door open and peered out. Andy wasn't sure what he saw in the pink eyes, but they swept over him, took in the thigh highs he had on with the garters that just peeked out from under the slightly too-short school girl skirt, up to the white button down very proper shirt he had barely buttoned in place, up to the two braids that fell behind his ears finished off with fluffy pom pom holders. It could have been desire or disgust, Andy couldn't read whatever flickered across the I/S's face.

"What?"

"Toshi says the car will be here in, like, half an hour." What he could see of the man behind the door didn't appear like a fellow dressed to go out. "You aren't going like that are you?"

"Not going."

The idea that anyone would not want to go out clubbing wasn't an idea that had room in Andy's world. Especially with a hired driver and no concern about money--and that went doubly so when one of the richest men in the world had personally declared they all needed a night off and arranged it.

"What do you mean not going? Are you loopy?"

"Fuck off." Rez tried to shut the door but a surprisingly strong hand flung out and stopped him.

"Toshi asked us all to go. Look, you have to go out sooner or later, and at least this way you'll be with people that... you know... care. Toshi asked us all to go. Now, you've got a half hour to get ready so you'd better move that cute bunny ass of yours because Toshi asked us all to go." That had been a big deal, that Toshi had planned the night and asked the people he considered friends to spend a fun night out with him. A very big deal given how little down time the half-breed granted himself, and it was quite the honor to be counted as a friend. An honor Rez seemed to be missing the point of, and one Andy would happily smack into him if he had to. If the man took it to mean that Toshi had ordered them all to go, well that was his own dumb fault,

all that mattered was making sure Rez didn't snub Toshi's awkward efforts of friendship. "Half hour," he reminded one last time before walking away to put on his make up. The last thing he had to do was tie the little schoolgirl tie around his neck and put on the saddle shoes but they were laid out in his room; for once, he'd be ready before anyone else.

Which turned out to be a good thing as Alec was the next to wander out into the living space. "Oh my God you are hopeless." Andy declared from his pink lip gloss covered lips and hurried over to where the secretary stood looking baffled.

"What?" Alec glanced down himself to make sure his fly wasn't open or something else, but he didn't see anything out of place.

"Straight men, I swear... Pia is going to be with us tonight... you look like you work in an office."

"I do work in an office."

Andy just rolled his eyes and attacked the man's tie. "Get this off, and this shirt, unbutton it a little and good God a white t-shirt under it. Do you own anything with color?"

"Color?"

"Yes, you know, a t-shirt that isn't a functional white boring one?"

"I have a red one, but it has a cartoon character on it."

"Go change into that one, leave the pants and shoes but keep this--" he flicked at the pinstriped dress shirt, "--on, just unbutton it a little and here." He reached up and tussled Alec's short cut blonde hair messing up the perfect order and giving the man a more casual approachable look. "That's better, you'll get your ass pinched now. Well, what are you waiting for? Go change that shirt."

"Andy..."

"Shoo!" He pushed a little at the other man. "I swear helpless as a babe, what would you do without me, at least you thought to put cologne on, now on with you and hurry..."

Alec gave in with a laugh. "Just to keep you off my back."

"Do it for Pia if not for me, at least try to look like you aren't all work and no play."

"But I am," Alec protested from the hallway, unbuttoning his shirt as he went to save time and still chuckling.

He wasn't alone in the living room for long before Toshi and Mick emerged from their room. Alec nodded approvingly. Mick had put on one of his new pairs of jeans, black and cut as if made for him—which, knowing Toshi, could be the case. They were tight in all the right places without being 'I'm trying too hard' tight and, better, they looked expensive in a casual way. Mick had finished it off with a nearly skin tight, at least a size too small, stretchy black t-shirt advertising some security company or another. The logo had a handgun emblazoned on it and some slogan about well oiled machines. He'd tussled his hair; it had grown a touch too long to spike any more, so instead had more waves in it than normal. It made him look like he didn't care and sexy as hell for it.

Toshi was a different story. Andy was pretty sure it was entirely Mick's doing, that or Toshi had dressed to impress his lover. There was nothing obvious or blatant about how Toshi was dressed but it oozed sexuality, power and confidence. He'd pulled on a pair of ivory colored dress pants that looked like the cost more than most people made in a year and were in 'I don't care if they

get ruined' color. Over it he'd selected a black shirt with a scooped neckline that was just wide enough to show the edges of his collarbones, conservative for a human but sexy as hell for an I/S, over that he'd slipped on an ivory dress shirt that matched the tailored pants. He stood all in black and white, his dark coal black hair loose and brushed smooth and flat. It was so well brushed it shined like silk against the ivory.

"Wow." Andy sighed and wondered what his odds were of ending up in bed with the pair later that night. "You two... Wow."

"You look pretty wow yourself." Mick grinned and moved to put a kiss on the side of Andy's face, careful not to smear the man's lipgloss.

"How's this now?" Alec asked from the end of the hallway. He still looked overdressed and a little fussy but to dress him down any further would change who he was. Now he just looked like a more approachable version of himself.

"Far better." Andy grinned.

"Guess we're all here then, I was hoping Rez would come along but..."

Andy stopped Toshi with a hand on his arm and nodded to the hallway. Just barely close enough to the living room to be seen, hovered Rez. Now that he'd been noticed, he moved closer and Andy thought he might have to sit down, his knees suddenly went a little soft. It wasn't even that Rez had made any effort to be sexy or to draw attention to himself, quite the opposite. He'd pulled on dark jeans that weren't tight or suggestive or well styled, just ordinary. Andy had bought him fancier clothing with going out in mind but instead of one of the trendier shirts, Rez had put on a dusty gray shirt that had the softest of rose tints to the gray and over it he'd put on a deep blood black red cashmere light weight sweater Andy had selected on a whim. It was well made, soft to the touch and long sleeved with a high neckline. He'd picked it out because it was modest, classic and versatile and he hoped the deep color would set off the man's coloring.

Which it had, almost too well in fact. Rez had unbraided his hair and brushed it out but his didn't fall in a single smooth curtain the way Toshi's did. Instead it fell in waves and tumbles of purple. The layers some idiot had cut into his hair caused sections to fall forward around his face. He stood there, dressed simply, arms crossed tightly over his chest and looking like he expected to be kicked in the ribs at any moment.

"This okay?" He finally asked his eyes flickering over the obviously more tight knit group and settling on Andy.

Toshi gave Mick an 'I told you so' look and turned to smile at Rez. "Glad you could make it."

Rez shrugged and moved uneasily into the living room, closer to the group but still outside of it.

"Now, car should be waiting, we'll pick up Pia and head out for dinner before the club. What about Epps?"

"He's going to meet us there. I've already let Sleaze know, he said he wanted to be unobtrusive," Alec answered.

"Which means he wants to watch us like a stalker," Mick grumbled, but it was hard to be upset when Rez joining them had made Toshi so much happier.

"Let him work. Tonight, none of us are." Toshi let the group file out in front of him and nodded to Mick to let his lover leave as well. He paused and Rez felt the attention he suddenly focused on him as surely as if Toshi had caught the man's arm.



"This is my first time out to something like this since getting clean again," Toshi confessed. "Thank you for coming along, I know what it means. Just, stick close to one of us and it'll be okay, we'll get through this together, alright?" Unlike Rez, Toshi had been out of the apartment almost daily. He'd seen and smelled Shine since he used it last and he was fairly sure he was strong enough to avoid the temptation of it. Rez was untested, uncertain, and he would need to face it sooner or later. At least this way they'd all be together; Toshi was hoping that would help.

Rez just nodded, not sure of what to say, and let Toshi guide him out of the apartment. He comforted himself with Toshi's shared confession of concern and told himself that the shaky feeling in his limbs wasn't from fear but he knew that was a lie.

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Chapter Forty Five

They piled into the car and picked up Pia who was wearing a gauzy, light blue dress with a full skirt covered in bright embroidery. With her dark hair loose and little make up she looked like she should be dancing in some tropical festival and Alec about broke his leg getting out of the car to open the door for her. Luckily for his pride, the occupants of the car had stopped snickering when she slipped inside and Alec followed.

He had to press tightly against her in the car, the space was getting crowded. "Sorry," he muttered and prayed he wasn't blushing as red as he felt.

"I don't mind." She smiled. "So what's for dinner?"

"I..." Alec glanced to Toshi but his friend seemed tight lipped. "We've reserved a table at Fusion, that new French-African place.

"Oh that sounds wonderful."

"I've been meaning to try it but we've been so busy. Thought this was a good time and Toshi didn't protest."

"I'm sure it'll be wonderful."

And it was; the place had great music, better wine and even more wonderful food. The table Alec had secured was semi-private with enough visibility that they were seen, but enough privacy to allow Mick to relax and everyone to speak freely. The only one who didn't look like he was having a good time was Rez and the man's scowling face and odd coloring made their waiter twitch each time Rez glanced his way.

It was something Toshi had discussed with Mick. They'd have to make a move on the other clubs soon and before they did that, Toshi wanted it known he wasn't frightened. It was a bold step for a man in his position and with his power to go out with friends, unguarded. It said he was ready for anything, capable of handling anything on his own, and it would make people think twice before trying anything later on.

"The paparazzi are here. They'll follow to Sleaze." Mick nodded towards the door. He'd asked the driver to step inside when the press showed up, and sure enough, as the final course was being cleared away, the man had stepped inside.

"Paparazzi? What an interesting life you lead now little brother."

"Get used to it, once they get your face and name they'll hound you too."

"They stay in line, mostly because my father owns all of or part of the majority of the companies they work for." Toshi shrugged.

"That and if they don't behave Mick breaks their noses." Andy grinned.

"Once! I broke one guy's nose, once, and that was only because he laid hands on Toshi first."

"The judge agreed it was justifiable, all charges were dropped and even the man's civil suit was tossed out." That had all fallen on Alec's shoulders. While his law degree was in corporate law, not civil or criminal, he still oversaw it all. When their lawyers had gotten finished, the recommendation was that Toshi sue the reporter for assault, which Alec graciously declined to do on Toshi's behalf.

"And what part in all of that did you have to play, Toshi?" she asked innocently.

"I gave Mick a raise." And dragged him home and straight to bed, but he doubted Mick's sister wanted to hear that part.

"Something like that." Mick grinned, and when he caught Toshi's eyes neither man was thinking about the money.

Andy no longer had a regular table at Sleaze, he'd been so busy working that it was weeks between nights out. It wasn't a concern; they didn't wait in line, flirted with the mountain sized men that stood acting as bouncers and were greeted just inside by the manager himself. Alec's single phone call had done more than Andy's visits every week for years could. They were guided to a booth in what passed for a VIP area and really was nothing more than a booth set with a good view of the dance floor and slightly away from the other line of tables. If Andy recalled correctly, tacky fake palm trees with little white lights had stood in the unused corner the last time he'd visited, so Alec's call really must have motivated them.

Not that he was going to complain. He liked how people turned and watched, liked how they whispered, and he was smiling like the cat that ate the canary as they put in their drink orders.

"I so could get used to this lifestyle of the leech on the rich and famous." He laughed.

"I'm glad you enjoy it. I've never liked it." Toshi shrugged until Mick tossed a casual arm around his shoulders, then he just sighed and leaned against the offered support.

"Well I do." He grinned around his fruity drink and shared the smile with his friends. The only one not to notice was Rez, he was staring off across the dance floor. When Andy followed to see

what had, or knowing the club, who had caught his notice, Andy caught the flash of grass green hair swirling among the more normal colors on the dance floor. When he scanned the tables and crowd, he saw at least two, maybe three, but they could have been punks, people with odd hair colors. He hadn't considered this aspect for Rez, coming back to one of the places his clients had taken him to or facing more than just the drug use connected to the club scene. Andy resolved to keep an eye on the man and smiled brighter. "We should toast to good friends and good fortunes!"

Andy stumbled back to the table, breathless from dancing and the rather heavy handed flirting of the man that had dragged him out to center of the club. Only he found the table empty but for Rez, tucked in the back of the booth, legs drawn up and wide eyed. The drink in front of him was barely touched, the ice had melted down and made it look watery and too full but the other glasses left forgotten on the table were all but empty.

"Hey, where is everyone?" Andy found his, sniffed it and set it back down.

"Out there somewhere."

"I'm getting a drink, I'll grab you a fresh one."

"I'm fine."

Andy waved it off and slipped away to the bar. When he returned with a bubbly red tinted drink in each hand, Rez had shifted and had his feet on the floor and seemed to be less curled up trying to hide looking. Andy slipped the glass across the table with the same care he'd used to approach a moody cat.

"Try it."

"I'm fine." Rez snarled back again.

"Stop being a bitch and try it." Instead of being pissy, Andy just laughed and sipped his own. He slouched down and ignored the I/S and watched the dance floor. Mick had finally dragged Toshi over to one corner and had the half-breed dancing. That had only taken a good solid hour of convincing. He'd spotted them hovering off to the side and could tell by Toshi's tense unease that Mick was slowly wearing him down.

If Toshi only knew how hot the two of them looked together, he wouldn't have hesitated. Andy understood it, the uncertain awkwardness, the fear of not dancing right, because he'd had to get Mick over his own nerves so many years ago but really it was a boon to humanity to just be able to watch the two of them. Toshi had his eyes shut and he was letting Mick's hands guide him. They were almost dry humping each other but it didn't look sleazy, just sexy and they earned quite a few jealous looks.

"Hm."

"Told you it was good," Andy said without even glancing over to Rez, knowing from the surprised sound the man had finally sipped the drink he'd brought over. "Ginger ale with a little cherry juice and a chunk of pineapple to make it look pretty. I don't booze it up all night you know."

"Stop it."

Andy glanced over now. "What?"

"Stop being fucking nice to me."

"Honey, I can barely stand you, only reason I'm sitting here with your sorry ass is because the gentleman I was dancing with was obviously part squid and I didn't need his tentacles all over me." He sipped his soda and turned back to watch the dance floor. "As soon as he's moved on, I'll be leaving."

"I didn't peg you for a smoker," Pia said as she sauntered up to where Alec stood in the small section of the club set aside to light up.

Alec hung his head a little. "Caught me." He moved the ash tray and slowly smoldering cigarette away from the side she was approaching and made room for her to move closer. "I don't smoke, not really..."

She raised her eyebrows but held her tongue.

"Only when I'm nervous. I know it's a bad habit and I shouldn't but I almost never do." He moved to crush the half finished smoke out but a slender hand closed over his wrist.

Pia plucked the cigarette from his numb fingers and took a drag. "I didn't say I minded." She handed it back and laughed out the smoke, surprised by the open look of awe and lust on the blonde's face. "You really don't get out much do you?"

"Not really." He glanced out over the balcony to the dance floor below and where he could just see Toshi and Mick dancing.

"He keeps you on a tight leash."

"It's not like that," Alec instantly defended. "I love what I do. There isn't anyone alive that would have given me this much trust, this much of a chance to do things that mattered. Besides, he's my best friend." He smiled and took another long puff. "It's good to see him relax; your brother has done wonders for him."

"Odd, I was about to say Toshi's done wonders for my brother." She glanced down to the dance floor and felt herself smiling. She'd only had a passing knowledge of Mick as children but the Communes tended to install a strong sense of family to all members. "So what are you nervous about that has you up here smoking?"

"What's not to be nervous about? Rez is barely sober enough to risk going out, Toshi still struggles himself, there's no back up for Mick if something happens and Mick's not armed. All it'll take is some punk with a knife and a grudge and Toshi'll be dead and you, I'm man enough to admit when I'm out of my league. I keep turning into a blathering idiot every time you smile at me and I'm scared silly you'll ask me to dance because I don't know how."

Pia laughed. "How about you put that cigarette out and I show you and if you try to learn without being a fussy scrooge about it, what do you say we slip away to someplace quieter? Someplace where we could be alone to...you know...talk?"

"Talk?" He managed to question without his voice cracking like a teenagers.

"Talk." She smiled warmly.

It was a smile that made Alec want another cigarette. "Only if you promise not to hold my two left feet against me."

"Deal."

"Toshi..." Alec slipped around a couple too busy making out to notice anything around them and caught up to his friend. He rubbed a hand over his mouth. "I have a question."

Toshi just raised his eyebrows and glanced up the steps. Mick was already at the top and would be getting them something to drink. "So, ask?"

"Would it be rotten of me to ditch you?" He glanced over his shoulder to where Pia was leaning against a wall, flirting with some tall brute of a guy that had swooped in the moment Alec had stepped away. "She wants to go someplace quieter."

"It'd be rotten of you to not ditch me with an invitation like that." He grinned. "Go on, take the car, just send them back when you get where ever you're going. What about Rez?"

"Already spoke to Andy, he's keeping an eye on him, but that's pretty easy. Fellow hasn't left the table once yet. What did Mick say?"

"I haven't shown him yet."

Alec nodded. "You're still this sure? I mean, I like Mick, but you haven't known him that long."

"I'm that sure. Sometimes you just know, and I know."

"Well good luck with it, call me if you need me?"

Toshi nodded. "Good luck yourself."

He grinned. "Apparently she finds bumbling fools cute."

Toshi watched as his friend, still grinning, moved back to where Pia waited and how the woman turned instantly from the other man to smile at Alec. It didn't quite make Alec puff his chest out but it certainly made him stand straighter. With a final glance over his shoulder, Alec let Pia take his hand and guide him away toward the door of the club.

He was still smiling when he climbed the stairs and found Mick waiting for him at the top, a bottle of water in both hands. "Thanks."

"What was that about?"

"Alec and Pia are going someplace quieter."

Mick made a face. "The details of which I do not need." He nodded to one side. "There's a spot over here, by the railing near the corner."

It suited Toshi because he pretty much didn't care and he followed his lover over to the spot he'd found.

"Thanks for dancing with me."

"Your toes may not thank me."

"You did fine."

He didn't deny it, just cracked his water open and sat down. "I think I'll go sit with Rez when you go back out." When Mick frowned but didn't protest he pushed on. "I like watching you dance and

Alec says Rez is still sitting at the table.”

“Andy watching him?”

“Yes, but Andy should have some time to relax too so I’ll take the next shift and let you go make every man here want you while I sit back and enjoy the show.”

“You sure?”

He nodded. He could deal with the humans drooling over Mick and the only I/S in the club were working and wouldn’t be allowed to hit on him. “I’m sure.”

“Epps is here.”

“I know I’ve seen him sulking about like a thief. I don’t want to think about him tonight. I don’t want to think about anything like that tonight.”

Mick reached over and brushed some stray hair back from Toshi’s face. “Sounds good to me.”

“Mick...I...” He caught the hand and held it a second before he reached into a pants pocket and pulled out a neatly folded paper. He quickly handed it to Mick. “I had Alec draw it up.”

“What’s this?” Mick unfolded the paper and had to squint in the low light to make out the tidy lines of print.

“I was serious before, I know you think I wasn’t but I was. I know how you are about jewelry, things that could get caught in a fight so I didn’t get a ring but that doesn’t matter right? It’s all written up, it’s back at home, all we have to do is sign it.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Marry me.” He shrugged. “At least as legally as you can. Alec used the same arrangement my father uses for his marriages. All assets owned before the marriage remain sole property but half the club would be yours and if something happens to me you’ll be well taken care of and if something happens and you can’t stand me, again you’ll be provided for. But this? This would make you able to speak for me and I for you and...well...we’d be married in all things but in the eyes of the government.” He shifted uneasily in his seat, waiting for some reaction from Mick but the man hadn’t even glanced up from the paper. “What do you think?”

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Chapter Forty Six

Mick sat, stunned. His water forgotten, still untouched in front of him, and the paper felt brittle and sharp in his hands. He tried to read it but the words seemed to blur together. "You're serious about this?" he finally asked and looked up over the paper to where large, bright blue eyes watched him.

"Completely."

With far more care than was needed, Mick placed the paper on the table and began to methodically smooth it down. He fussed at the creases and corners trying to make it flat and perfect again but he couldn't bring himself to really answer.

"Mick?" Toshi was starting to feel a little breathless, and it wasn't from him. It was that same brittle, too thin fragile feeling he'd gotten from Mick before only much sharper this time.

Mick just shook his head and kept fussing at the paper.

"Talk to me?"

It took a couple of tries but he finally forced words out. "I can't."

"You can't talk to me?"

He drew a long slow breath. "I can't accept this."

"Of course you can."

"No, I can't. I...it wouldn't be fair. You don't need to do this."

"I know I don't, I want to." He glanced to the paper Mick's hands were still soothing over. "You mean more to me than any legal mumbo jumbo. I can't help how I was born, but if something happens to me I need you to be taken care of."

"Don't say that, nothing is going to happen."

That was the wrong angle to take. If something happened to him he knew Mick would blame himself for it. Even if it was a total accident or some chance happenstance and pointing out that some situations would always be beyond Mick's control wasn't the best idea. "What if...what if I slip up and use again? What if I fall down the steps and crack my head on something? Who's going to speak for me? My father? Alec is a better choice, but I've told you things I haven't quite been able to tell him. There isn't a soul alive that knows me better than you do, or that I trust more."

Mick sat unmoving and silent, a sharp contrast to the thumping music and flashing lights around them. "I can't accept this, what we have is enough." He finally glanced up. "Besides," he forced a smile that felt only slightly less fake than it was. "When couples break up it should be simple, like who's t-shirt is this and who bought the towels. Think how much easier things would be for your father if he hadn't bothered with legally marrying all your step-mothers."

"Oh." Toshi heard himself say softly, the word stolen by the sounds of the club. He felt like someone had surprised him and punched him in the gut. It hurt; not so much Mick's refusal, because he'd been braced for that and the need to wear his lover down, but the reasons behind the refusal. There wasn't a force on the planet that could make Toshi break up with Mick until those words were uttered. Suddenly, Toshi understood there was one force out there, one thing that could break them apart, and that force was Mick himself.

With deft fingers Toshi pulled the paper off the table and quickly refolded it. "Well, I wouldn't want to ask you to do anything you weren't comfortable with. I guess it is a really big step."

The words were said a touch to quickly, a touch too crisply, and Mick couldn't quite understand why his refusal would cause that. Toshi was only doing what he thought he was supposed to do. His father was pushing for him to get married and it was logical and proper to offer that to his lover, that didn't make it right. Beyond that, Mick really didn't want to complicate things. Good things went bad awfully fast when they got complicated, and he desperately wanted to hold on to what they'd found.

"Toshi..." he began to question, but his lover smiled gently.

"It's okay." Toshi leaned over and lightly kissed Mick, just a brush of his mouth to his lovers and nothing more. "Why don't you go back to dancing? I'm going to go check on Rez, make sure he's okay."

"Toshi..."

"It's okay, really." It about killed him to say that but he wasn't going to push and drive Mick away. He couldn't stand that, and if Mick didn't care enough to make their situation permanent, well, he could accept that but he didn't have to like it.

"You'll dance with me after you've checked in on Rez?"

He nodded but it felt wooden. He wasn't sure he could let go and dance now, out on the floor and in so public of view, not when all he wanted was to go home and to bed.

"Promise?" Toshi said it was okay and while Mick wasn't sure he'd been very clear with his reasons, he needed it to be okay. They couldn't marry, it was ridiculous. Toshi had never seriously dated anyone and eventually he'd grow out of his interest in Mick and move on as his tastes matured. If Mick had married his first serious boyfriend he'd be a miserable fool now and eventually Toshi would understand better. If they wed, the odds of them staying friends when they grew apart were slim, but if they stayed casual and just lovers, they had a good shot at it. Mick needed to hold on to Toshi's friendship, at the very least, and he'd do what was necessary to secure that.

"I promise." Toshi stood up and backed away. "I'll be down with Rez."

It didn't feel right but Mick nodded and let Toshi slip away in the crowd. He sat for a long moment and tried to figure out if something had gone horribly wrong. Eventually he sighed and figured Toshi meant what he said and from how quickly he'd disappeared wondered if maybe the man was pleased the idea had been rejected. Just because it seemed like the right thing to offer didn't entirely mean Toshi felt ready to offer and wasn't grateful he didn't have to deliver.

Chewing it over was going to give him a headache and he really didn't want to think about it any more than he had to. Before Mick could get to his feet, Epps slipped in and took the chair Toshi had abandoned without waiting for an invitation.

"That looked interesting. What was on the paper?"

Mick gave the man a cold glare and didn't answer.

"You two have a fight? Is everything okay?"

"Go to hell." Mick cursed and stood up, not waiting to see if Epps followed and in no mood to deal with him. He was going to go dance, if he lost himself in the music and movement he wouldn't have to think and maybe the sick tight feeling in his stomach would go away.



Toshi hurried away, his water in one hand, and wove around the press of people. It wasn't difficult; most folks went out of their way to avoid bumping into him if they saw who he was. Normally that annoyed him, but at the moment he was grateful. His nerves felt raw and the last thing he wanted was people he didn't know touching him.

When he reached their table he found it empty. A few new glasses sat on it, one was empty and one had what looked like cherry soda still bubbling with a good third left in it. From the lip gloss on the rim, he guessed that the one with a drink still in it was Andy's, but where either man had disappeared to he couldn't guess. He was just suddenly grateful for the solitude and he slipped in and to the back of the table.

"Hey," Andy said as he stumbled over to the table, breathless. He snatched up his drink and sipped at it. "What happened? You look miserable."

Toshi shook his head and stopped rubbing his eyes. "Just getting a headache. Where'd Rez get to?"

"Finally got him to drink something, so he had to scurry off to piss, said he'd be right back. Don't worry, I'm keeping an eye on him."

"You let him go off alone?"

"Sweetie, if the man can't drain the fluids without someone to hold his hand? He should have stayed home. He'll be fine."

The first time a client had taken him to Sleaze, Rez had been overwhelmed by the loud music, the press of humans and the sheer amount of scents. He'd hated it and gotten stoned out his mind Shiny to deal. It had taken a few months, but soon he'd come to enjoy not just Sleaze but other clubs if nothing more than the thrill of Shining really bright and dancing to the throbbing music. It didn't hurt that clients tended to get drunk or stoned themselves and that usually meant a much shorter evening once they got alone.

Now he found he hated it again. Being there with so much sound and the raw feel of so many people made him feel small and vulnerable and far too fragile. He could catch the scent of drugs on some of the humans and occasionally a drifting scent of something sweeter that made his spine feel like jelly. Rez wasn't too proud to deny the fact that he'd have been just as happy waiting in the car or at the table the entire night.

Biology didn't allow that. He'd sipped at his liquor carefully, not wanting to be even the slightest bit drunk, but he was thirsty. Andy's sudden return and the soft drink he'd fetched them both had been too tempting. It tasted sweet, which half-surprised Rez as he wasn't used to tasting anything, and he liked the way the bubbles felt in his mouth and throat. Before he'd really been aware of it, he'd finished the drink and soon had to make a trip to the men's room.

Which was a daunting thought and he almost wanted to slip out the back side door and just relieve himself against the building. The men's rooms were always crowded; people were always getting laid or high or both. They stared at him as if there should be a third bathroom choice just for the animals that were I/S, and it made him want to snarl back at them and threaten to bite.

The bathroom hadn't changed any since his last visit and Rez wove his way around the humans to a urinal that was vacant. He felt their eyes on him, felt the way they stared as if he was going to whip something bizarre from his pants. Some hated him, some wanted to fuck him, but they all knew he was a whore and an addict because why else would an I/S be at their club.

He hated them but ignored them so long as they at least pretended to ignore them. Fortunately, no one was snorting any pink powders while he was in the room and the other drugs, while he'd used some over the years, held little interest. His body knew what it wanted, most likely always would, and was unwilling to settle for something else. Not that he didn't have a pause to consider it, and it was only knowing it would do little to sooth the cravings of his body that kept him walking steadily back from the bathroom to the hopeful security of their table.

It wasn't ten feet from the men's room when he heard a high pitched hissing whistle, almost too low and too high for most humans to notice. Rez instantly felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up; it was how I/S workers got each other's attention in a crowded human setting and his head instantly swiveled to find the source of the sound. Off in a darker corner, halfway to the back rooms and the small side exit door that the I/S other than Sakura-sama's party were required to use, a flash of grass green hair and emerald green eyes caught his attention.

His first reaction was to ignore the call. Even at his best, he'd never been overly popular. The others had listened to him because he demanded it of them and they were often completely unable to keep their wits about them while high. Rez had the distinct honor of always being able to put two thoughts together no matter how Shiny he was. He had to be, some of his clients demanded he talk to them and if he had wanted to secure his place and their patronage he had to keep his mind functioning. He'd been respected, not liked, and had been happy with that and just as happy to leave it at that.

Walking away wasn't an option.

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Chapter Forty Seven

Walking away wasn't an option. He drew a deep breath and slipped around the humans, working his way back to the darker corner and spotting not one but two I/S hiding there. He knew them, didn't overly like them but knew them. Both men were several years younger than he was and were quite tickled to remind him how close to being washed up he had been.

"Rezy dear, we've been worried sick about you! No one's seen or heard from you in like two months." The man with the green hair and eyes said as soon as Rez was close enough to hear

his low voice. They all did that, spoke softer so the music covered them from human ears.

"We heard a rumor that Sakura-sama bought your contract. Never believed a word of it until tonight." The other man said, his hair a pale light blue and his eyes a bright red.

"Jos, Gat." Jos was the man with the green coloring, he stayed fairly in control so long as he didn't mix booze with the Shine and Rez could smell the liquor on him. Gat was older than he looked, Rez knew he was only a few years younger than himself but if pushed the blue haired man always denied it. "Yeah, Sakura-sama bought me out."

They shared a look that said they didn't entirely believe him. "So what's he like? I bet he's super kinky, all whips and chains and farm animals. Rich men are always perverts." Jos leaned closer. "I mean, he keeps a human for a pet."

Rez shook his head and had to swallow back nausea. The man reeked of Shine, sweet and comfortable and it made part of Rez want to lick his skin to get any taste from it. "I'm not his whore."

Gat actually laughed. "Of course not, Rezzy. He has you cleaning his bathroom and cooking his food. We're not stupid, what else are you going to be other than his suck toy? So just spill, what's he like?"

"I don't know, he hasn't touched me, no one has." It was only a small lie but it was totally the truth for how they meant. If they were unwilling to believe he was anything but a whore they'd never believe he was to be a manager at Sakura-sama's club.

"God you're such a bitch." Jos pulled a slender gold tube from his pocket and twisted the cap off. "So if you won't tell us about him, you must tell us what you do to so enthrall your clients. I heard that the Red Moon had to toss several of your humans out until they calmed down when they'd heard you were gone and now to have caught Sakura-sama's eye? What is it you do?"

"Nothing. I don't do a damn thing you don't do." But his eyes were on the gold tube and the sweet, wonderful scent that drifted from it.

"You are going to share right?" Gat raised an eyebrow and held out the back of his hand.

"Of course." Jos tapped the tube and the pink powder fluttered out. "My of my fellows bought me this, he filled it for me too. How elegant!" He tapped out his own hit as Gat quickly snorted the powder he'd been offered. "Here Rezzy, you can be an utter bitch but share and share alike. I do still owe you a couple of hits, you've saved my ass a couple of times."

The green haired man held the tube out to Rez and Rez stood there staring at it, transfixed. He wanted it, badly. Just the smell had him trembling, his skin clammy in a cold sweat of need and it was so close. He knew the look of ease, the soft hint of pleasure that came into Gat's eyes and knew all he had to do was take that tube and his own hit to make the tight cramping pain of withdrawal go away. He wanted it so badly.

"I don't use anymore," he finally forced out around a clenched jaw.

Jos snickered and snorted up his own dose. "Of course not Rezzy, you just look like shit and like you're hungry for a hit because you don't use anymore. I get it, Sakura-sama doesn't want to see you using, that's fine, we won't tell."

His heart was racing and his hands itched to take that tube, to snort his own sweet release, to lick the residue from the other men's hands and his own and then to go out into the club and find someone willing to make him beg for it. He licked his lips but didn't move. Instead, he closed his eyes for a second and reminded himself that using would only make him head blind and unable

to Shine.

"I don't use anymore, really. Been sober for... well, since Sakura-sama took me in." When he wasn't shaking like an addict he could have counted off the days, hours and maybe minutes of his sobriety but now he couldn't even recall what day of the week it was or how long it had been since that sweet powder had touched him with its cloying scent.

Gat giggled but Jos, high on booze and Shine, frowned. "Fuck you Rezzy!" He pulled the tube back and capped it, shoving it in his pocket. "Like I should share anything with you, you fucking arrogant cunt. I try to be nice and you piss on the offer, suffer, see if I give a shit. You know he's going to figure out that you're using and kick your worthless, dried up ass out into the Yards and I'm going to see to it everyone, I mean fucking everyone, knows what a stuck up high and mighty fucking prick you are. Thinking you're sober, thinking you're like him? Fuck you Rez. Sakura-sama may have bought you but you're still taking it up the ass to his human fucking pet! You're still a fucking whore! I don't care how pretty you are, it won't be long until he sees what a fucking slut you are and how many humans you've fucked and grow bored with slumming it with your tired ass."

"Fuck off." Rez snapped back. "I hope you fucking OD and die in your own puke." He had to get away, he couldn't breathe and he hurried to slip away from the two men.

He was barely to the edge of the crowd when hands caught his back and roughly pushed him. The shove was so violent and so sudden that Rez stumbled and fell, hard. He'd been beaten before, by the Red Moon and by clients--too many times really to remember each one--but he could take a beating. Being shoved and having suddenly every eye on that side of the club swing to him shouldn't have mattered, shouldn't have even stung but Rez lay there, breathless, weak, and unwilling to try to get back up. He just wanted to curl up and disappear or better to just die right there but neither happened.

"Fuck you! You fucking pansy ass bitch! FUCK YOU!" Jos shouted and hovered nearby.

If he'd been high, Shiny and feeling good, Rez would have popped back to his feet and beaten the tar out of the man. Or at the least, scratched, bitten and pulled hair until he made the younger man cry. It wouldn't have mattered if the entire room of humans had watched and chuckled and thought them nothing more than ill trained animals, he would have had to hurt Jos.

He wasn't high and he wasn't Shiny. He just felt sick and he crawled slowly back to his feet. The feel of so much attention made the hair on the back of his neck stand on edge. Rez just shook his head. "Fucking crazy Shiner whore," he whispered, low and dark with the same contempt other, sober, I/S had always used toward him. Instead of jumping him, Rez just walked by, hurrying to the exit door in a sudden need to get some fresh air before he would get sick.

"Washed up, worthless pathetic, dried up, ugly WHORE!" Jos shouted after him but Rez kept moving.

The bouncer at the back entrance didn't stop him from leaving. He hoped that all the staff had been informed of who was in Toshi Ranvier's party because otherwise he wasn't getting back inside. It was a minor concern, with his only thought being to get away and find some air to breathe. The door the back entrance opened to wasn't as impressive as the view of the front of the club. It showed the buildings age, the alley was dirty and dark with a small pinkish neon sign that flickered the word Sleaze down on the corner. Rez stumbled out and hurried toward that sign and the side alley that ran behind it.

He hadn't but he knew several I/S from clubs moonlighted on nights out by bringing humans out to this alley. His clients had always required full attention, jealously keeping an eye on him at all moments, even escorting him to the bathroom and when he was allowed to go off alone he was timed for how long it took. If he was too late getting back, it spelled bad things.

So he'd never had time to fucks some random stranger for twenty bucks in the side alley to buy an extra hit of Shine. In all honesty, Rez had never been a heavy addict, what he was allotted was enough to hold him together and he'd never wanted more than he'd absolutely needed. It hadn't always been easy, but he'd viewed it as a small victory over his situation, some small thing he could control.

That didn't mean he didn't know the alley or that his clients themselves hadn't sometimes taken him out back and used him. Not all of them had wanted to do more than grope and kiss in such a public place. Even the back rooms were showy, people would actually stop and watch while he was being fucked in the back room, so if any privacy was wanted the back alley was a good fill in.

It hadn't changed since he'd been there last. Dirty but not with trash, the bare ugly brick walls would scrape skin raw if care wasn't taken. There was a scent of damp and mold and under it the smells of sex, desperation and fear. Once, one of the workers from Blue Lightening, had been strangled out in the alley and the bricks had reeked of fear scent for weeks.

Thankfully, there was none of that tonight and Rez stumbled around the corner to find it empty. He leaned against the wall, a couple of paces into the ally, and tried to fill his lungs. His stomach churned, he wanted to vomit but stubbornly clung to his control. Puking somehow felt like he was giving in and he wasn't going to give in.

He turned and pressed his clammy forehead to the cool brick wall. "I don't want it. I don't." He whispered and panted for breath.

A hand petted down the back of Rez's head, following the fall of his hair down his back to the top of his ass. The hand lingered there even as Rez jerked away startled from the contact. He started to turn, ready to snap at whoever had followed him, willing to shout at even Toshi but prepared to scream in rage if it turned out to be the dimwitted artist.

"I think you do," a male voice purred, but it wasn't Toshi's or Mick's or Andy's and Rez shivered hard and barely was turned enough to see a face he knew before the man's other hand caught his neck and slammed him tightly back against the wall.

He didn't remember their names. The pair--and he knew it was a pair from the second set of footsteps and the low chuckling that came from behind the man holding him--always traveled together. They never bought a tenth and floated about the different clubs. They tended to purchase a man, occasionally a woman, for the night and had picked Rez about a year ago. They liked things rough and he'd returned to the club bruised and sore but better than some of the workers had made it. What was worse, they had withheld his evening hit of Shine and had waited until he was sick and desperate to take him to bed, he'd been more than happy to let them hurt him so long as they gave him his hit first, which they had and he'd hated himself for begging for it, for jumping through their hoops to get it.

He struggled against the grip on his neck and the hand on the top of his ass caught his arm and twisted it painfully back. "Get the fuck off of me!"

"Ooo that's no way to talk to us. Such a mouth on him."

The one not holding him laughed again. "I remember that mouth."

The human pressed him tighter to the bricks and nuzzled the back of Rez's ear. "I remember your mouth too."

He tried to pull away, hating the feel of the man on the back of his neck and the pleasure the contact caused against his will. It scraped his face against the brick and from the burn he knew

he'd torn skin off.

"Don't worry," the second man said and moved in to pet the side of Rez's face not being scraped raw against the bricks. "We won't keep you long."

"Not long at all." The other laughed against Rez's neck, licking it roughly and pressing his hips and his aroused length tight into Rez's ass.

"He's lost weight but he's still so pretty. I told you we should rent him again."

"Why rent him when he can sample for free."

Rez jerked away again but all it did was press him back against the man holding him and let the fellow get a better grip on his arm. He was spun away from the wall and pulled harder back against the one restraining him. The hand on the back of his neck gripped the front now and tightened as he struggled. As sensitive as his neck was normally, the tight grip was agony and it wasn't until his vision started to get spotted that he knew he couldn't breathe because of the grip and not because of the pain.

He didn't want to be murdered like some cheap Shiny whore. They didn't want to kill him, just hurt him a little and fuck him. He could deal with that, hated it but he could deal with it. It took a force of will to stop struggling and let his body go limp, to let them know he was surrendering and that they didn't have to knock him out or choke him to death to get him to behave.

The hand on his throat eased and Rez gasped for breath. He was trembling again and he swore it wasn't from fear but from useless rage. He coughed and struggled to breathe as they laughed at him, the other one moving in to press to Rez's front, pinning him bodily between the two men.

"I did remember how stubborn he was. God... we so should buy you." He sighed and kissed at the side of Rez's face not scratched up from the bricks. One of the human's hands dipped down and grasped tightly to Rez's groin and he frowned at his friend to find the length flaccid. "He's not happy to see us."

"Do you care?"

The man grinned but his eyes were locked with Rez's. "Not really."

Rez closed his eyes, he could do that much. He could shut them and deny the man the chance to see the odd size and cute pink color humans loved so much. It earned him another low laugh before a mouth closed over his own and he clenched his mouth shut as well. The human in front of him groaned a little at his small denial and he rubbed his groin into Rez's. The hard length hidden under the fabric was a mocking counter point to Rez's flaccidity. He pulled away from the grinding rub but that just pushed his ass tight along the man behind him, rubbing his hard cock tight into Rez's ass. When he jerked away from that he found it pressed him forward into the one in front of him. He was trapped, caught between them and he just hoped they'd be as quick as they promised.

With his eyes shut, Rez saw nothing but blackness so he was a little confused when a hard, wet cracking sound suddenly seemed to fill the alley. The human in front of him stopped his grinding, stopped licking his lover's fingers and Rez's neck and stepped back.

"What the fuck." He pawed at his shoulder.

"Behind you," the human holding Rez said.

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Chapter Forty Eight

Rez opened his eyes in time to see the other human turn and standing in the mouth of the alley was Andy, looking ridiculous and utterly non-threatening in his school girl outfit. He tossed a rock up in the air and caught it easily.

“Oy, assholes! Get your stinkin’ drunk hands off him.”

The two humans shared a look and Rez shook his head and prayed Andy would have the good sense to run away. He was a whore, he could deal with being raped in an alley, but Andy wasn’t. There was no doubt that they would happily include the artist in their games--and him dressed as a slutty sixteen year old would only amuse them more. A few rocks to the shoulder wouldn’t stop them from taking anything they wanted.

“What? Tramp wants a part too?” the human that had been in front of Rez and had taken the first stone to the shoulder asked. “That fucking hurt, you’re going to be sorry for that.”

“Having to see your ugly face has already made me sorry,” Andy tossed back, not the least bit scared of the threat. He pulled back his arm and threw another rock, winding up like a real pitcher.

The rock caught the man above his upper lip and he staggered back. Blood sprouted and he stumbled back. “What the fuck? Oh fuck you broke my teeth, oh fucking hell, I’m going to kill you!” He charged.

Andy frowned and another rock took flight. This one caught the man on the forehead and he stopped advancing. He paused for a moment, stunned, dazed, and turned back to the where Rez was held by his partner. Blood was pouring now from his mouth and the bruise above his upper lip and a red bloom of blood on his forehead.

“Shit Jimmy...” he whispered and fell down into a messy heap on the ground.

“Fucker. Faggots can play baseball too!” Andy cussed and slipped another stone into his throwing hand. “Asshole? I suggest you let my friend go and get this wet end to a doctor before his brain bleeds to much.”

The man, Jimmy, paused before he made up his mind and half of that pause was simple disbelief. When he moved, he flung Rez hard into the wall and hurried to pick up his fallen friend. Andy shifted to keep an eye on the pair, the one he’d hit with the rocks had fluttered his eyes open but wasn’t talking, even though his lips were moving.

"Pansy boy, if he dies..."

"Oh yeah, you'll hunt me down, what the fuck ever."

Jimmy paused, balanced his friend with one arm and swung a punch at Andy with his free arm. Andy didn't see it coming and it landed hard under his eye, catching his cheekbone and sending him staggering back. "Fuck you!"

Andy stumbled, but before he could see straight to throw another rock the pair had disappeared from the alley. "Oh god that hurts! Shit, it's going to get all swollen and ugly and Mick is going to have an entire fucking litter of kittens." He prodded at the swelling side of his face and glanced across the alley to where Rez was still crumpled on the ground. "Hey, bunny boy? You alive?"

Rez didn't answer, wasn't sure he could. He still couldn't breathe, his throat was fire and pain and he knew with how pale his skin was that he'd have bruises in the very noticeable pattern of a man's hand on the column of his neck. It hurt, he hurt, and he stayed where he was kneeling, trying to steady his racing heart and stop the sick feeling in his stomach. It wasn't that he'd been afraid for himself--the pair would have hurt him, yes but he'd have survived. It wasn't even that the person to stop them had been the same person that was also the biggest thorn in his side. Rez was shocked to find that what had him shaking in residual fear was the thought that Andy had come so close to joining in the assault. He wasn't sure why that idea upset him so badly, but it did.

"Hey... Rez... you okay?" Andy's voice had gone from protesting flippant angry to soft and concerned. Rez felt the gentle touch to the back of his head that came with the concerned words. He felt the way the slender fingers toyed a little with the strands, how the man rubbed his fingers as if measuring the quality of fine silk.

It felt good. Really, wonderfully good, to be touched so softly, so gently and Rez hated how good it felt. He wanted to snarl and scream at the human to go away. He wanted to be angry, but he just was empty. The sudden offer of Shine, the will it took to refuse, the fight and then being jumped and saved had taken him and wrung him dry. He just wanted to sit in the alley and stay there. If he had any will to weep he would have but the tears refused to come.

"Rez?" Andy whispered, his fingers retreating from toying with his hair, and Rez was startled by how he suddenly missed that contact. "You must be hurt, I called you bunny and you didn't tell me to fuck off." Andy hovered, Rez saw how he shifted his weight from foot to foot before he sighed. "Look, I don't want to leave you here but I need to go get help okay?"

The artist started to turn to go and Rez snapped a hand out. He caught the lean wrist, surprised at the strength there as well as the fragileness of the sharp bones. Andy had a bulkier build than Rez did, his bones were more solid and he had nothing delicate about him, but he was also lean and his hands and wrists were slender and expressive. It made him feel better to catch that wrist and make the human stay with him.

"O...okay...I'll stay I guess. Are you hurt? Did they hurt you?"

A short gust of wind danced around the alley. It kicked up the scents that lingered there but his mind dismissed those smells, hating that a trace of his own fear scent was now mingled in the muck, and caught on a new scent. Andy, he knew the way the man smelled and with it the scent of arousal and the clinging scents of other men. Lots of other men, all tumbled over themselves, rubbed on to Andy's clothing and skin from kisses stolen and dances shared, but what was missing was the smell of sex. Arousal, yes; but Andy, who was obviously dressed to get fucked, hadn't indulged in anything more than dancing.

He glanced up, knowing his face was scraped up and his hair a mess and he must look as pathetic as he felt and didn't care. Andy's legs were long, wrapped in the tall white stockings with



the clips of the garters just peeking out from under his skirt. A compulsion hit Rez: he needed to know what was under that skirt, what those stockings would feel like under his hands.

Some of the predatory feeling must have shown in his eyes because Andy gasped a slightly and pulled away from where Rez knelt. "We...ah...we should go...go back in...it...it isn't....oh god...."

The stockings were smooth and soft under his hand. Rez traced over the slender ankle up to almost knobby knee, higher to where flesh peeked around the stockings and burned hotter to the touch. He let go of the wrist he was holding to run both hands over those legs.

"Rez...stop it...I...god...." Andy stuttered and forgot he should protest when those too-hot hands slipped up under the hem of his skirt. He stumbled and Rez turned and guided as best as he could and got Andy's back to the wall. He moved quickly to kneel in front of the artist.

When his hands went boldly higher, up under the stupid skirt and slipped over tight, stretchy fabric to rub lightly over the artist's groin, the human hissed like a startled cat and pulled back, tighter to the wall. The sound, the startled jerk, made Rez's blood feel on fire. It was like he was sucking will and life from Andy to replenish his own emptiness; or, if he didn't want to be so kind to himself, maybe as if by preying on the human he could burn away what it felt like to be the prey.

One of his fingers caught on a garter and he tugged. It snapped and the stocking sagged. Andy shivered under his hands but Rez didn't see the man running away. He remembered the man in the shower, naked and wet and all long lean beauty. He'd been tormented by the memory of seeing that lean cock, wondering if it would fit as well as he suspected. Now, he wanted to find out. He slipped his fingers up into the waist band of the stretchy underwear and tugged them down just enough to remove all fabric and make Andy bare to his touch.

"We...god...we can't...I don't...god stop...." Andy sighed.

Rez glanced up because the artist was only minimally aroused. That could be from the location, the situation, the pain in his face or because he really did wish he could run away. Rez had no intentions of stopping, but he wanted to know if he was going to get in trouble for molesting the human against his will.

Nothing in Andy spoke of protest beyond the silliness of his words. His head was back, one braided pig tail over his shoulder, his mouth was parted and a tongue slipped out to moisten his lips. His hands were splayed on the bricks behind him. When Rez trailed the tips of his fingers down the inside of one of Andy's thighs, the human moaned softly and spread his legs just fractionally wider.

Words or cock be damned, Rez needed and he was tired of never getting what he needed. He pushed the fabric of the short skirt up and moved in quickly to suck the half-soft, half-hard length into his mouth. He didn't tease, he wasn't trying to please the artist or get him off, he was hunting what he wanted and he wanted to know what it felt like to have that lean length in his mouth. Maybe it wouldn't be anything like he suspected and the fantasies would be defanged and no longer able to stalk his sleep.

"Oh!" Andy arched a little from the wall, but Rez held his hips in place. "We...we... really really...oh god...really shouldn't be...oh fuck me...so fucking hot..."

Hands stroked across Rez's head, petting, touching, teasing, but not forcing or pulling, and he found that odd. It wasn't that he didn't like the gentleness, it was just unusual, something he hadn't ever felt before while blowing a human. Normally they kept their hands off him, not wanting to touch or contact beyond the pleasure he was giving them, or just the opposite, they dug their hands tightly into his hair and moved his head around like he was some inanimate sex

toy. This soft, petting touch wasn't something he was prepared for and it sent tiny shivers down his spine.

"So...fucking...hot... Rez... stop..." Andy moaned above him but the words fell on deaf ears.

Rez understood. The normal body temperature of an I/S was several degrees higher than a human, the effect during a good blow job was shocking to the inexperienced. It didn't hurt that Rez was good at the task either, drawing all of Andy deep into his mouth just to see if, now that the human was fully aroused, he really would fit as nicely as he thought. It was perfect, the feel of the cock in the back of his throat, filling his senses but not gagging him with too much thickness. The space to suck and lick and nibble, to drag the points of his fangs and the softness of his tongue over the heated flesh in contrasts of sharp and soft. It made him ache and want to moan himself to feel how every little twitch, every movement he made had an echoing answer in the artist's flesh.

"Rez...oh god... fucking hell... Rez..."

The sound of his name falling over him where he knelt was as beautiful as the first snowflakes of winter drifting down. It made him hungry, made him want more, made him want everything. Rez's pulse beat loudly in his ears and his head spun as he tumbled out of control and gave himself over to the wonderful lusty pleasure of taking instead of having to give.

"Stop... I can't... god... Rez...I'm going to...fuck..."

The warning surprised him almost as much the gentle hands toying with his hair. Rez didn't need a warning, he could feel the release building in the human. It wasn't just his experience but his own senses that told him if he didn't stop right there, Andy would come. But the warning was offered as if he wasn't a whore used to the sexuality of humans or as if he was an equal, a partner, someone cared for and about, and they were thoughts that felt like a punch to his stomach, reminding him of what he couldn't ever really have.

Fortunately, before he could linger on the thought Andy came. One long lean stocking clad leg skidded forward, kicking up loose stones as the stupid school girl shoes scrambled for purchase. The human's spine arched, but he was obviously struggling to hold still and not gag Rez, again a thoughtful touch he hadn't been expecting or required. He glanced up to see one lip caught between strong teeth but the hushed, moaning gasps still dribbled out. Rez was forced to admit, as he stroked his hands under the skirt, down the long legs, touching what he willed, that Andy was quite beautiful as he came, at least for a human.

Worse, much much worse, as he licked his lips and gave the softening cock a few laps more, he was forced to admit that the feel of Andy in his mouth was better than he'd imagined. He liked the way it filled his mouth, liked feeling like he could really work and do a good job, liked the smell and taste and sounds and how Andy shivered and writhed. He liked how something so simple could make the man forget how to put a sentence together and he was willing to admit, if only to himself, that he liked that he had been the only one to enjoy the slutty benefits of the absurd short skirt the man wore.

He was still licking his lips as he braced himself against the wall on either side of Andy and used it to support himself as he climbed back to his feet. The human had his head still leaning back against the brick, displaying a great deal of neck and even knowing that showing off that area meant nothing to a human, it still made Rez feel dirty to see. I/S tossed their heads back or to the sides when aroused and being sexy, they displayed the length of their sensitive necks when they wanted to get fucked and seeing Andy arching his head back pushed buttons in him Rez didn't think a human could push.

Andy sighed. "Fucking hell bunny boy.... Next time just send a thank you note."

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Chapter Forty Nine

The mocking words pushed Rez and he growled a little, felt himself grimacing in hate and frustration. He wanted to shut the smart ass mouth up but he liked hearing the sarcastic mouthy comments and he hated himself for that small glimmer of amusement. He hated that he wanted the other man, that his touch felt good. It drove him insane to wake up alone with the lingering touch of Andy on his skin from some too vivid dream. Most of all he hated that he was going to fuck the human again when he promised himself he wouldn't.

Andy's eyes were open to mere slits as he panted to catch his breath and Rez couldn't stand it. He knew he should walk away and leave it there but his hand snapped out and wrapped around one of the ridiculous braids and pulled Andy's head roughly further to the side, exposing all of one side of his neck.

"Hey!" Andy squeaked and frowned but Rez didn't linger to see the frown. He pushed forward, pinning the slender man to the bricks and attacked his neck.

He knew human necks were no where near as sensitive as his own, just as he knew when it came to I/S he was almost hyper sensitive on sections of his neck. Rez didn't care. His blood was on fire, boiling, rolling through his body and demanding he take what he wanted. He wanted that neck, wanted it under his mouth, scraped by his fangs and he was surprised that he wanted to bite. He'd never wanted to bite anyone before, he'd had to by necessity and command but never from want. He wanted to sink his fangs into Andy's flesh and fill the man with venom, make him wild and frenzied, take him somewhere more private and have him for hours. Or, one small, tiny voice whispered, let the artist have him for hours. Rez hated that voice but wondered if Andy would be as gentle taking him as his hands had been in his hair while he was being blown.

The thought made him shiver. His fingers tugged at the stupid little tie the human was wearing and struggled with the buttons to the soft, white cotton shirt. It was difficult to get them through the holes when every nip and kiss made the human writhe and moan. Slender hands finally batted Rez's away and made quick work of the buttons. The fabric hung open now and exposed all of the bare skin below. Rez's hands explored the flesh offered to him freely. The body felt cool to his touch, soothing to the fever in his own blood. He rubbed his hands up the side of the lean ribs and liked how Andy's whole body arched into the touch. His thumbs stopped when they grazed over already hard nipples and he rubbed them in tight circles, the metal in the one rolling with his touch and Andy moaning freely now.

"Oh bunny boy..." Andy sighed and opened his eyes. "I've a little vial of lube in my shirt

pocket...”

It bothered him that Andy was so comfortable with this. Rez's insides were twisted up with angst and pain at the thought that he was breaking his own personal promise to not do this again, that he was losing his control again. It made him feel half crazed, tight with lust and want and anger tingeing it all because this stupid, absurd man in a school girl outfit drove him so far with just a scent. For all his confusion and conffliction, Andy should feel more than acceptance. If it tore Rez up, it should bother the human more too, only it didn't. He just tossed his head back and gave whatever Rez wanted to take.

When he had no desire to let his hands wander from the chest he was teasing, touching, petting, to the white shirt pocket, Andy dived in for him. He pressed the small plastic vial under the curve of Rez's fingers since Rez hadn't been willing to fully remove his hands from Andy's body. The sharp edges of the plastic scraped and Rez knew by feel the brand. It was a good one, high quality, edible with a slight berry flavor and didn't that just bring too many ideas to mind.

Far too many ideas and none of them involved an alley. He hated this, hated that he was in pantries and alleys, rooftops and bathrooms, like the whore he supposedly wasn't anymore. It made him feel dirty in a way he had never really noticed while Shiny. It suddenly made him frightened that some of his filth could rub off on the slender human's skin and he pulled his hands away.

He quickly switched the lube vial to his left hand, his fingers curling over it in a fist. He put his hands on the brick wall around where Andy was leaning like some overly loved languid cat, hoping that if he braced himself he could gain some control. He didn't need to fuck Andy, he didn't want to fuck Andy. Andy was just a stupid human and Rez wasn't some animal so ruled by his desires to simply take someone because they were slutty and easy. He closed his eyes and drew in long gasping breaths, trying to find some shred of his control.

Only to have what little he'd been able to gather around himself puff away like smoke on a breeze when tender, gentle, fingertips brushed the injured side of his face. The touch was comforting, soft in its care and it made Rez shiver. Across his face the contact slipped, shattering his thoughts with barely any contact, brushing away any guilt or worry with such a small fluttering contact. The fingers trailed up into Rez's hair, not pulling, not demanding as all humans did when burying their hands into his hair. He blamed the color, human's couldn't help themselves, they simply forgot it was real hair and attached and it would hurt if yanked but Andy didn't forget in the face of the oddity. If anything he slipped his fingers across Rez's head, tangled them in his hair, with an extra awareness to being gentle because of the odd color. As if touching him, simply running a hand to the back of his head, was something valued or sacred.

“Kiss me.” Andy whispered and Rez forgot they were in an alley, forgot everything as those words filled his mind. It was a command, an order, not a request but it had so much longing in it, so much want that Rez didn't feel ordered. He felt like he was some great lord granting the request, fulfilling a desire by his own choice not because he was required. He shivered as he leaned forward, his arms still tight and tense trying to hold him safely away. There was a moment of panic, just before his lips found Andy's, when he knew if he allowed a kiss, he would be lost but the voice asking for a kiss had wanted so badly he felt powerless to deny it.

The first time they'd kissed Rez had to bite Andy to open his mouth. He had pushed the issue and taken the kiss deeper than the human may have wanted. Now, Rez found himself the one holding back. He could feel how Andy wanted it deeper, wanted it to be more but he kept it teasing, almost shy and brushing, frightened of pushing the kiss to the depths of before, frightened of growing lost. But to deny that hungry mouth was impossible and with each brushing pass, each tease of lips to lips, the kiss deepened until Rez's arms no longer held him away and his body was pressed firmly to Andy's and Andy's hand softly petted the back of his head.

A firm hand pressed to Rez's groin, crushing his erection in a very good way and making him

moan. The lean fingers molded to fit him, rubbing, teasing through the layers of clothing and he found he was unable to continue the teasing kisses, unable to think with that hand rubbing him.

"I don't need prep, just fuck me." Andy leaned forward and whispered in Rez's ear.

He was really going to do it, he was going to break his promise to himself and take the artist again. The words bounced about inside of Rez's mind and left behind a sticky desperate feeling. They left him feeling trapped and he hovered, a breath alone between their flesh and felt frozen.

The hand teasing him faltered and stopped. A moment later both of the lean hands slid across his face, teasing with just the hint of a touch to his jaw line, teasing with dipping lower to stroke his bruised, hyper sensitive throat. Thumbs stroked his cheekbones tenderly, fingertips brushed hair back from his face and Rez shook like a child under that touch.

"You're a moron." Rez forced out.

"Why now?" Andy chuckled.

"Do you know what they could have done to you?" He needed to stay angry to hold back the gentleness in the slender hands touching him. He opened his eyes and saw a soft bitterly sweet smile on the human's face.

"The same thing they were about to do to you, sweetie." The smile widened. "Which is hopefully the same thing you're about to do to me, in a nicer way."

"Fucking twit." Rez cursed before pushing forward to take another kiss, nothing shy or hesitant this time he dove in and shut Andy's teasing, easy words away. The hands slipped from his face down to his shoulders and lower, touching, caressing, teasing with mindless want and Rez surrendered his control.

He broke the kiss to bend down a little. His hands found the long legs easily, the human seemed to be made up of ninety percent leg, and he ran his hands up the silly stockings, over the garters and under the stupid skirt. The black stretchy underwear he ridden back up and he caught his hands in the waistband and roughly tugged the fabric down. Andy wiggled against him, rubbing his body along Rez's as he helped to work his panties down and Rez was surprised to see they were panties not briefs. The artist came dangerously close to shoving his knee into Rez's groin as he wiggled the fabric down to his ankles and off of one foot.

"There..." Andy sighed, breathless, panting. "I'm bare under the skirt for you. Touch me."

It sounded like a line Rez would use on a client. He used to say breathy, silly lines and wonder how a human could believe such nonsense. Now, with Andy writhing against him, in his arms, the words felt real. It felt like the man really was naked under his short skirt just to please him and Rez's fingers dug into Andy's thighs. The garters were still there but all around it was nothing but bare, smooth flesh.

His hands moved of their own will, tracing across smooth thighs, up higher to stroke and tease that beautiful lean length, over sharp hips and back to stroke in light touches and bruising grasps to the round ass. Every touch made Rez hungry for more, made him ache to bite, made him crave slipping into the tight, hot body again. Hands at his waist distracted him and Rez moaned as Andy worked and got his pants open.

A slender hand suddenly dipped inside of Rez's pants, diving down to grip him and his vision went white. "Oh..." Rez cried out. "Don't..." He caught Andy's wrist and stopped the smooth motion of the man's hand. Rez couldn't meet the confusion in the artist's eyes so he leaned forward to avoid them. "I'm...I'm too close....wanna...I wanna..."

"You want to fuck me." Andy whispered and rubbed his ass back into the hands teasing with almost shy touches.

Rez shivered against him.

"Lube?"

"I..." He had been holding it, clutching it so tightly he'd been worried he'd break the seal and make a mess but both of his hands were flat on Andy's ass. He glanced around and down and sure enough near their feet it had fallen. "Dropped it." He moved back a little.

Andy's hands stopped him and he grinned. "Let me..."

Something in that grin warned Rez that it was a bad idea but he let Andy slink down between him and the wall. His hand found the lube without ever having to take his eyes from where they were locked onto Rez's but he didn't stand back up. Instead he caught the vial between his teeth and ran his hands up Rez's legs to his partially opened fly.

Nimble fingers soon had Rez's pants open. "What are you..."

The wicked grin answered him and Andy quickly broke open the lube. "I'm helping." Lube soon slicked Andy's hand and from there was smoothly and surely stroked onto Rez's length.

It made him shiver and moan. Not just from the touch but from how Andy watched him with eyes that were hungry and bright. The man had been well satisfied, Rez knew that, he knew no one blew or fucked better than he did, it wasn't a desire for release driving the human but a deeper hunger and one Rez wasn't sure he knew how to name. He just knew he liked the way Andy felt when he was looking at him, when he was watching his hand stroking Rez's length.

He heard himself moan and then growl a little and without knowing what he was doing he physically dragged Andy back to his feet. A hand on his cock held him steady as he lifted one impossibly long, slender leg and leaned forward. He held Andy there, pinned between the brick wall and Rez's body, slipped back and found that hidden, tight entrance. He pushed forward, barely moving and was shocked at the burning tightness. It wasn't dangerously impossible but the human was shiveringly tight.

Andy writhed against him and the lean leg being held up snaked around Rez's waist. He had a moment where it sunk in how good that felt, to be enfolded in the artist's leg, before Andy tugged. His leg yanked Rez forward, his hand guided him and suddenly, blindingly, Rez was deep, fully in Andy's body.

He moaned and the sound shuddered into a growl as he nearly stumbled into his own release. Andy gave a soft, sighing, whimpering sound, a sound mixed with pain and pleasure and contented happiness. Rez was so tightly pressed to Andy's body he could feel the artist was hard again, slightly wilted from the roughness of the first joining but still obviously interested.

"Be quick..." Andy sighed and cracked his eyes open. "Mick...Toshi... might...might come looking..."

Being quick didn't seem like it was going to be an issue. Rez was about a deep breath away from shattering and coming without even moving a fraction of an inch. The idea of being caught, literally in Andy, by Mick or Toshi didn't carry the worry he expected it would but he did agree they had to be quick just in case. He doubted the human wanted to be caught slumming it with Rez either and that thought, that maybe Andy was ashamed to have his friends know what they were doing, broke his stillness and had him sharply thrusting into the artist's tight body.

"Oh...oh...fuck...Rez...God..." Andy moaned and clawed at Rez's back, pulling him tighter,

harder, closer to him. "R...right th...there...oh God!" Andy moaned loudly and his single leg on the ground kicked out.

Rez caught it just in time and he found both of the long legs around his waist. He scrambled to half hold and half pin the human to the wall, fucking him hard and not missing a beat. The angle changed for him too, he was suddenly deeper, each thrust in pushing him to take the next one harder and the change in angle was good for Andy too. He wasn't moaning now, he was whimpering and trying to claw and pull at Rez to bring him even closer.

"Touch yourself." Rez growled. "I...I wanna...wanna see you... fuck...touch yourself."

Andy nodded and licked his lips.

"Hurry!" Rez warned, moaned as one of the tormenting hands left his body and dipped under the bunched up skirt. The fabric brushed aside, Andy had taken his request quite literally and exposed himself to Rez's watchful eyes. He was pinned there, his shirt open, his chest exposed, his skirt up and panties gone, stroking himself in a luscious display just to please Rez and Rez was drunk on that desire.

Rez groaned, low and deep in his throat and crushed Andy tighter to the wall. He buried his face against the human's neck, the unraveling braid of hair tickled his skin and Rez let go and came. He'd been wrong before, it wasn't almost like it was on Shine, it was better because he was clear headed and was right where he wanted to be. It didn't feel empty like with the guard or the man in the bathroom, this was far from empty. As his release swept him away and he filled Andy over and over as deeply as he could, some empty part of him felt filled as well.

As his head cleared a little and his heart eased from it's wild thumping, Rez felt Andy's hand still stroking himself. The human's eyes were tightly closed, his mouth was parted. He was trembling from the strain of trying to support his weight pinned there, legs around Rez's waist, against the wall. Rez stepped back a little, prying the legs from around his waist and easing them down to hard pavement below. Andy whimpered as Rez slipped from his body but his eyes stayed shut and his hand didn't still.

He could have walked away. He had every right to. Rez had gotten what he wanted and his body was happily humming from a really, really good release. Instead he found himself pressing Andy's hips against the wall again and dropping down to his knees. He lightly closed his lips over the mildly berry flavored flesh, Andy's hand stroking lower, pulling, trying to drag release from his flesh, sucking in just the tip and swirling a tongue over it. That was all it took and Andy gasped, arched from the brick wall and came in long, trembling shudders.

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Chapter Fifty

It wasn't enough, Rez found he didn't want to stop. Which was highly unusual for him. Normally he couldn't wait for a human to be sated just to leave him alone but he found himself continuing to lick Andy's cock, sliding his tongue across the man's flesh and fingers to lick every bit of berry flavored lube away. It wasn't the taste, if he was being honest, because he still didn't really get any pleasure from taste but it was more how Andy sighed in such a soft contented way that made him want to never stop.

The desire wasn't right, it made no sense and he didn't like how it made him feel. Rez stopped his slow teasing and pulled away, Andy's skirt instantly flapped back down covering him from casual view. His shirt was open and one stocking was sagging but there was no real outward sign that he'd just been well and roughly fucked beyond the happy, stupid grin he wore. That and his panties, and what man wore panties anyway, that were still on the ground.

Rez picked them up as he stood up. "Here."

Andy sighed and opened his eyes. "Want to keep them?"

"Fucking slut." Rez flung the black fabric at Andy as if they'd suddenly become something poisonous.

The human chuckled and caught them. "Oh... that was almost worth the black eye..." He sighed and slipped long legs back into the holes in the panties and wiggled them back up and under his skirt. "Next time I'll return the favor and show you what a blow job really should be like. Not that you're lacking skills at it or anything but who knows, maybe I can curl your toes." He clipped the stocking back to its garter and started on the buttons of his shirt.

"There isn't going to be a god damned next time." Rez snapped as he shoved anything he didn't want caught in his fly back inside his pants and quickly did up the zipper. Andy's eyes were bright and spoke the truth Rez couldn't. There would be a next time, if they were alone for too long, or isolated, or horny but Rez didn't truth right now. He caught one of the artist's pointed elbows. "You can do your shirt up inside, it's not safe to be back here."

"Hey don't yank." Andy dug his heels in but Rez tugged harder and half dragged the man back around the corner to the side entrance.

"Do you have any money on you?"

"Honey where would I have cash tucked away in this outfit?"

"Never mind." Alec had slipped him some cash for drinks and it hadn't missed Rez's notice that it was enough to buy several hits of Shine. He didn't like having that cash in his pocket but hadn't been able to refuse it either. He just guessed they'd hoped if he did slip up and needed a hit he'd buy it and not sell his ass to get it.

Before he opened the door to go in he fished out some bills, checked to make sure it was enough and pulled the door open. The bouncer frowned at him, glanced at Andy but didn't stop them. Rez reached a hand out and the large man did the same, money slipped from one palm to another. Andy stood and finished the buttons on his shirt as he watched the bouncer slip something back to Rez.

"Don't block the door." The large man, that Andy didn't know on sight which was odd because he knew all the front door bouncers well, growled and Andy moved to follow Rez just inside the door.



"Here." Rez held his hand out to Andy.

"What?" He reached out on reflex and a foil packet was dropped on his hand.

"Clean up with that, wipe down, no one will smell me on you after."

"Oh." He hadn't thought about Toshi knowing they'd done anything or how to prevent that. Part of Andy wanted Toshi to know, wanted someone to know but if they did, he could well see Rez never even speaking to him again.

"What're you standing there for? Did you want to cuddle?"

"Blow me....oh wait... to late." Andy teased back and liked how the pink eyes narrowed.

"Stupid fucking human... dumb ass piece of shit..." Rez muttered and moved to the nearest bathroom to the side entrance simply out of a habit.

"Once a whore, always a whore I see." Jas teased Rez as he walked by, his wide green eyes glazed now from being so totally stoned on booze and Shine.

Rez stopped, turned a little and made it very clear he'd happily beat the shit out of Jas if the man pushed him once more. "I'm sorry, I don't waste time speaking to candy ass Shiner cunts."

He watched the insult and his own disdain wash over Jas and knew the deep cutting pain it would cause. Not because of the names he'd used, they'd all been called names and far worse since they were small children but rather his total dismissal, his indifference, that would cut Jas to the core. Shiner whores were trash, they knew they were trash but to have one of their own stop using and so coldly dismiss an old friend would be more painful than if Rez really did beat the man up.

He didn't linger to gloat, he was too tired for that. Rez pushed around humans not caring if they were startled by his bold arrogance and disappeared into the men's room. He found a stall that didn't have people fucking inside and locked the door. It took longer to pull his emotional self together than it did to smooth out his hair and wipe down his skin.

When he thought he could face Andy, Toshi and Jas's taunts as well as the clinging looks from humans, Rez flushed the toilet and unlocked the stall. He moved to an empty sink to wash his hands out of habit but a human slipped close to him, a touch too close for even the crowded bathroom.

"You are so beautiful." The man said in a drunken slur.

Rez glanced over at him in the mirror. Middle aged, not ugly or handsome, simply human plain ordinary dressed in a too young too trendy t-shirt and loose cut jeans that looked a little too new. He guessed the man was recently dumped from the slightly trying to hard, out of touch with the current scene a little too long look about him but it didn't matter.

The human took his silence as acceptance and grew bolder. He stroked a hand over Rez's shoulder, down over the soft, expensive sweater to Rez's elbow. "So...beautiful... I know how your kind work. How much? I won't tell your owner...I would never...ever...want to get something so pretty into trouble."

It disgusted him that he even thought about accepting. It wasn't about the money, he was well provided for and really what more did he need that he didn't already have, so the money wasn't an issue. Rez toyed with accepting because of a sick little knot in his stomach that Andy's tender touches had twisted into him. He toyed with accepting because he was a slut and a whore and part of him needed to be reminded of that.

He didn't want it, not the reminder or being a whore again and he really, really didn't want it. "You couldn't afford me." He knocked the man's drunken hand from his arm.

The human laughed. "I've money, just tell me how much to suck me off....God... you're so beautiful, why aren't humans as beautiful as you freaks...."

"I'm not for sale, stupid asshole. God, you're fucking pathetic. No wonder he left you, if you grew a pair you might have kept him." He felt the man's drunken lust slow and turn to pain. Rez had just been guessing but fueled with an I/S sense of things he'd guessed right and he felt the bitter pain sharpen to anger.

The hand that had been petting his arm gently pulled back and came crashing down. The back of the man's hand impacted hard on Rez's already scratched up side of his face and with enough force that Rez was knocked over. He caught himself on the counter to the sinks but before he could get away a knee came up into his ribs. That sent him crashing down to the dirty floor, his breath knocked out his lungs.

The human kept hitting him. His hand a closed fist now caught the side of Rez's head and the impact rocked his skull into the tile floor but the blows weren't aimed, the human was too angry for that and they hit his shoulder and sides equally. The man cursed him, calling him a bitch and whore and going on about teaching him his place to mind his manners with his betters and Rez stayed still and took it because he'd rather get beaten than give the man what he wanted. Drunks lost interest pretty quickly but Rez knew he was in trouble when a foot caught his side and a second voice joined in with the taunting.

"Back away, mother fuckers!" Someone shouted and Rez barely processed that he knew the voice. The fists stopped landing, the feet stopped kicking and he dared to uncover his face enough to look around.

The men's room had cleared out and the first person he saw was a man he didn't know laying slumped and unconscious near the stalls. Carefully Rez uncurled and glanced around and found a third human slumped actually in a stall and from the banging he'd heard he was betting the man had been thrown there. He heard the sounds of a fight around the ringing in his ears and followed it to see Mick beating the shit out of the human that had started it all.

All joking thoughts about Mick being around simply to be Toshi's human pet dissolved as he watched the easy way the man fought. He could have just as easily taken this man out in a few seconds the same as the other two but he didn't. He lingered and made the man hurt and Rez wasn't sure if it was in some odd desire to avenge the beating Rez had taken or simply because Mick was enjoying it. Because Rez knew Mick was enjoying it, maybe not the way the man would enjoy kittens and rainbows and comedy movies but on some level he liked being able to hurt people he perceived as deserving it.

Rez had been beaten enough times to know that Mick wasn't killing the man or even maiming him but his blows would leave bruises and cause the man pain for days to come and that was fine by him. Eventually Mick finished toying with the fellow and dropped him the way a cat dropped a mouse it was done flipping around. The man fell to the floor, coughing, still conscious but unmoving and unlikely to be moving quickly any time soon.

"You okay? Anything seriously wrong?" Mick asked as he came and crouched down by Rez, unsure about how much to help the slowly rising man.

"I'll live." Rez groaned. "Thanks."

Mick shrugged and got a steadying hand on Rez's shoulder and helped the skinny man to stand up. "Doing my job but thank your friend there, he came and got me."

Rez glanced to the door where Mick nodded and saw Jas's wide green eyes peering inside. He couldn't speak as he got to his feet and had to clench his teeth to keep from groaning but as Mick steadied him and got him on his feet he knew he was okay.

"Where's Andy, we should get you home."

"How the fuck should I know where that bitch is? What do I look like? His fucking keeper?" Rez snapped and wasn't sure which hurt to rub first.

"You're okay." Mick nodded. "Think you can get back to the table without causing a fight?"

He nodded.

Mick looked unsure but nodded. "If I don't see you in two minutes I'm coming back here." He had to find Andy and get Toshi and the car and get them home. It was too many things for one person to wrangle.

"Whatever." Rez moaned and felt at his split lip. Mick frowned and slipped from the men's room around where Jas still lingered, watching. Rez glanced to the man. "Thanks."

What he could see of one shoulder raised and lowered in a quick shrug. "Gotta stick together." He said softly. They'd all been there but normally no one came and helped them until after the crowd got done kicking the shit out of them. "Just be glad my client is in a stupor from doing so much shit tonight. He's almost totally passed out right now."

Rez snorted and pushed off from the counter to try his skills at walking on sore, unsteady legs. "Still, thanks."

"Welcome. Rezzy?" Jas asked softly, the thumping music a counter beat loud and echoing behind him.

"What?"

"You were serious, weren't you? About being sober, about there being a way?"

"Please, Jas, no more taunts, okay? I'm not in the fucking mood."

"No, no taunts, it's just, Gat... he's a Shiner to the core, that boy will be dead face down in a gutter in a couple of years but Rez... I don't want to...I...I know you don't like me and I can't fucking stand your prissy ass but if you could put in a word for me? I know I'm under contract but Sakura-sama got you out." Something dark and desperate flashed across Jas's green eyes. "I can't do this much longer."

Rez wondered if he'd looked as desperate at the idea of being clean and free when Toshi had made the offer to him. It was difficult to see. "I can't promise anything."

"That's okay." Jas forced an empty, blank smile. "I didn't expect anything."

"Shut up. I don't promise shit, but if I can, I'll say something for you."

The hungry gratitude made Rez feel sick. "Thanks, Rez, thanks so much."

"Whatever." He pushed past Jas and his desperation and tried not to limp on his way back to Toshi's table and the promise of home.

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Chapter Fifty One

Toshi met Rez almost back at the table and Rez braced to be scolded. The man didn't say a word, he just frowned and took Rez's elbow and got them back securely to their table. The silence worried him, it left him wondering what to expect and not knowing was worse than knowing he was in trouble.

"Do you need a doctor?" Toshi finally asked.

Rez shook his head. "Not that hurt."

Toshi nodded and frowned but stayed standing, protectively, near the table. Rez was too tired, in too much pain to do more than slouch where he'd been placed. He wanted to go home, wanted his small private room with the door that would shut behind him. He didn't want to think about how everyone would always consider him just a whore to fuck and beat and toss aside or worse, think about the hungry desperation in Jas's eyes. He wasn't sure how Toshi was able to bare it, with everyone looking at him like that and he wasn't sure how he'd bare it if they started to turn such looks to him.

"Jesus, what happened?" Andy fussed as soon as he could see where Rez was slumped at the table. "I'll get some ice."

Mick caught his arm before he could go wandering off. "We're not far from home and we've plenty of ice there, you stay put."

"But..."

"No. I turn my back for a moment and you're both in fights?" Mick shook his head. "He might not know better but you do." He scolded, sick with a knot of worry over his friends.

"I've called for the car. It should be out front."

"The press is going to have a field day with this." Mick sighed and considered trying to sneak them out the back door. "I'm sorry."

Toshi shrugged. "I don't care what they think. Get us home, Mick."

"Yes, sir."

There were a half dozen reporters out front but the car was waiting. The driver had the door held open and Mick kept them moving. He hated the flashes of their cameras mostly because he knew it hurt Toshi and Rez's eyes. Toshi kept a plastered on gentle half smile, a practiced look that came out well in their photos and made him look cold and unapproachable. Rez hung his head and squinted from the light and would have stumbled, blinded, if not for how they herded him to the car.

Toshi disappeared into the car first, followed by Rez, then Andy and finally Mick climbed in after he spoke quickly with the driver. Toshi heard him and couldn't debate the order.

"Straight home, don't stop, stay within the limits."

"Yes, sir." The driver nodded and shut the door behind Mick when he climbed in.

"God, now I can't see anything." Rez moaned. "Can't you just shoot them or something?"

"I wish." Mick muttered and glanced out the window. As they pulled away he noticed one of the reporters in the bunch was Epps and he wondered how long it would take the man to catch up with them.

When the car brought them home, Mick caught Andy's elbow and held him back. Rez didn't notice and while Toshi paused, he caught Mick's eye, nodded a little and followed Rez up to their apartment.

"What happened?" Mick asked, feeling the bright and worried eyes of the guards on him. They'd want a report of what had gone on and to know who had been hurt but Mick wanted answers first.

A guilty look crossed Andy's face before he could stop it. "What do you mean? What makes you think anything happened?"

"You've a black eye and someone choked Rez. The guys that jumped him in the bathroom weren't the cold, slowly strangle someone sorts. What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"Andy..."

"Look, some guys got a little rough and I mouthed off and it wasn't a big deal."

"Got rough with you and Rez got in the way or got rough with Rez and you got in the way?"

"Does it make a difference?"

"Yes!" Mick snapped but settled down at Andy's raised eyebrow. "I just need to know who they were targeting."

He sighed and figured Rez would be pissed. "They jumped Rez, I'd been keeping an eye on him so when he went out for some air I followed. Two jackasses weren't taking no for an answer, I showed them the ol' fastball pitch. Wasn't a big deal, just some drunks."

"Did Rez do this?" Mick touched the swollen lump under Andy's eye with care.

"No, one of the jackasses sucker punched me. It wasn't Rez's fault, he didn't do anything but be too pretty and before you rant at me there wasn't time to come find you."

He wanted to rant but shook his head instead. "You should get some ice on that eye. And please, please, be more careful. They could have had a gun or a knife and..."

Andy leaned forward and kissed Mick, quick and gentle. "I know, I love you too."

"I'll get some ice and the first aid supplies." Toshi said when they got into the apartment but if Rez heard him he didn't answer. The man wasn't quite limping but he was moving with none of his normal grace and his arms were wrapped around his slender chest.

Mick insisted they keep a fully stocked medic kit. Not just bandages and gauze pads but it looked like the man could perform minor surgery with their supplies if he had to. It made Toshi a touch nervous to think that Mick might seriously think their building could be stormed and shot up and they would need to dig a bullet out of one of them. The only comfort was that knowing the kit was on hand made Mick feel better because the man was planning obsessively for any emergency. If it helped Mick sleep better at night, he was all for it.

He dug past suture kits and foil sealed medicines and found antibiotic cream, ointment for bruises and some plastic bandages. He was careful to put everything else back in properly and put the kit back in its bracket on the wall before he wandered to the kitchen. Ice was easier to get and he sealed it in a bag and wrapped that in a dish towel.

Rez wasn't in his room but Toshi didn't have to look far to find him. He heard the shower running before he actually got into the bathroom and found Rez trying to scrub his skin, wincing every time he moved and outside, the clothes he'd been wearing sat neatly folded even knowing they were going right into the dirty clothes bin.

"Want help?" Toshi asked gently, making it clear it wasn't a come on.

Rez glanced up and over and shook his head, water and purple hair sliding into his face. "Almost done, smelled like a bathroom floor."

Toshi set the supplies down and gathered a couple more towels. Rez was moving slowly, drying a leg and not caring that he was naked. It suddenly reminded Toshi of working in the club, how the need to scrub the smell of humans from his skin had made him not care who saw him nude. After a couple of weeks he stopped caring at all because they were all whores too and he had no modesty left. He just hoped Rez's ease was more from trust and comfort than a lack of self still.

Rez had sat down on a bench, a towel loosely about his waist and Toshi gathered up the length of the purple hair. He gently worked the water from it and tried to towel dry it without pulling on bruised scalp or make it more tangled.

"You don't have to do that." Rez said softly. "I'm okay."

"I'm sorry." Toshi finally offered. "I shouldn't have taken you there, it's too soon. People don't know yet."

"Toshi-san..."

"I forget, because they're frightened of me, how people view full bloods. I didn't think they would try to take what you weren't selling. I'm sorry."

Rez paused from dabbing the antibiotic cream on a cut. "It's not your fault humans will always view us as whores." He was surprised at the real concern Toshi felt for him. "Toshi-san?"

"Yes?"

"Sensei is teaching me about accounting, showing me how people can cook the books to show what they want it to show."

That made him smile a little. "He's teaching you that?"

"Yes, so I'll know what to look for. I....he had me go over my own file from the Red Moon."

"You hadn't seen it before."

"Not the full file no. They lied. I had paid back my purchase costs by the time I was twenty. They should have paid me a wage, given me the option to leave or stay but they faked the records, inflated charges, made things up, all to keep me."

"Yes, they did." He'd wondered if Rez would figure that out and more, he'd wondered how the man would take it.

"That needs to stop. Especially now that there is a way to get clean, or at least have a chance to get clean."

"It's one of the things I will address with my Uncle." He'd never have guessed Rez would show any concern for others working and living in the clubs the way he had. At least, not nearly so soon, and as Toshi patted the tangle of purple hair to get as much water out as he could he couldn't help but feel a little proud. "Here, you've some nasty bruises, let me get some of this ointment on your back. It'll help with the pain."

"Thank you." Rez handed the tube to the waiting hand and kept dabbing at cuts, bandaging the worst of them but really not overly worried. The ointment was cold but warmed up quickly on his skin and started to sooth the pain of the fresh bruises. "There's a man, Holiday Jas, Jason. He's owned by Single Oak."

"A friend of yours?"

Rez snorted. "No, he's a pain in my ass stuck up snot but he's good with people and a hard worker and isn't stupid, not totally."

"Are you offering to take responsibility for him?"

That was more than Rez had considered. Toshi was the head of his house and as such in charge of him and all that belonged with his house but it wasn't uncommon for authority to be delegated. He knew he was being groomed to manage the I/S side of the club but hadn't really considered that it would mean he'd be responsible for those that worked there. It was a chilling thought and one he wasn't sure he was ready for but saw no way to refuse.

"Yes, I guess I am."

Toshi nodded and closed the tube, setting it down beside Rez. He knew the man would be able to reach any other bruises and really didn't seem to want more help. "Very well, I'll make some inquiries. The clinic is on a rush order, they'll be ready to accept the first handful for de-tox in the next couple of weeks. Perhaps you should be part of picking who is selected, since they most likely will end up working for you."

"I..." that was a heavier weight than he wanted. "If you want me to."

He could feel the tight unease swirling inside of Rez but that was something the man would have to get used to. There were no right or wrong answers with what they were doing and each choice

could save or damn another soul. It wasn't supposed to be an easy feeling and the only comfort offered was that at the end of the day the very fact that they made a choice should make a difference.

Toshi patted the slender shoulder. "When you're dressed, come eat something before you go to bed."

"Surprised you don't want to drag your pet away for some alone time. He was all macho rushing in to save my ass. Thought you'd want to kiss his bruised fists and make it better." He didn't want to be bitchy but he was hurting and felt as bruised inside as out and couldn't let Toshi walk away with just a tender moment shared.

"Consider food an order not a suggestion." He answered softly but all Toshi felt was the unsigned paper still folded in his pocket and a deep exhaustion that made him just want to skip food himself and go straight to sleep.

Rez felt the sharp undercurrent to the order. "Yes, sir." Oddly, he regretted being snippy, if only this once.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Fifty Two

A light flicked on in the darkness of the room and Pia rubbed her eyes. It was small, just the glow from under the bathroom door but the hotel room was poorly laid out and the light fell across the head of the bed. If she'd been sleeping facing the other direction she'd never have noticed. The space beside her on the double bed was empty which made sense since the bathroom light was on and she laid awake waiting.

The light flicked off and the door opened. Alec crept out shoes in his hand, t-shirt pulled on, watch and dress shirt in his hand with his shoes.

"Running away?" Pia asked from the bed and almost laughed at how Alec started at her voice.

"Oh, no, didn't mean to wake you...I just...I..."

She sighed. Whenever she met a guy that she liked he turned out to have something wrong with him. Sneaking out after sex was a big no no on her list of traits.



"I just... didn't know if you wanted me here when you woke up."

In the dark she only had his voice to guide her but she heard only self conscious uncertainty not jaded malice. She doubted Alec could lie without it sounding like a lie, his open charm was half of what she found so undeniably sexy.

"I'd be disappointed if you weren't here."

Alec sighed.

"You don't have to stay, if you don't want, just you're welcome to..."

"No, I..." he sighed again. "I do...I'm just not used to being wanted to stay. You're sure?"

"Yes I'm sure, now get back in here before the covers get cold."

He moved to the foot of the bed and put his shoes down and draped his shirt over them. Placed his watch in his pants pocket and undid his belt. Pants, socks and t-shirt were quickly stripped away and placed on the pile before Alec moved to the far side of the bed and slipped back under the covers. The bed was narrow and to be comfortable they almost had to wrap their bodies around each other. He sighed as he sunk into her arms.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you it's not nice to sneak out after really amazing sex? It makes a gal insecure and besides, I'm more stubborn than my brother I'd have to hunt you down." She teased.

"I doubt anyone is more stubborn than your brother. Mick's like a bulldog when he sets his mind to something I don't think even Toshi can sway him."

"Can't say as I blame him, poor kid's only ever gotten anything by holding on too tightly to it so no one could steal it. It's good to see him happy."

Alec made a murmured sound of agreement and nuzzled at the springy curls that seemed to take over both their pillows. "Good to see Toshi happier too, you've no idea how much I worry about him."

"You care about him more than I expected. I thought you were just his secretary."

"Toshi's my family, he's the only family I have..." he traced the curve of her waist, down over her hip and back up. "God, I can't believe I'm in bed with such a beautiful woman..."

"Stop..." she chuckled. "Flatter, I'm pudgy, should have seen me a couple of years ago, all flat stomached and wearing tiny bikinis..."

"You're not pudgy, you're womanly, curvy...." He let his hands wander. "I like women...never understood anyone fascination with woman that look like twelve year old boys...if I wanted a man in my bed I'd have slept with Toshi years ago." He kissed her neck. "Would have been simpler for both of us...so beautiful..." he whispered into her ear.

"Are you still wearing your boxers?" She reached out and snapped the elastic of his waistband. "You are!"

"Ow! Hey!" He laughed and caught her hands, they tussled a little and Alec found it difficult to concentrate with Pia wiggling against him but he managed to slip on top of her and pin her arms down.

She was laughing freely, warmly and Alec wished there was a light on so he could see her. He

leaned down and her laughing stopped. Her lips parted as he kissed her and Alec knew he was in trouble.

"Pia..."

"Hmm?"

"Tell me now if this is just a fling to you? It's okay if it is, I'm grateful for it and I do casual really well but just tell me now so I know..." He stroked the side of her face with his thumb and was glad it was dark.

"Alec..." She wiggled again and pulled away and he let her go. Pia sat up and reached over and flicked on a lamp. That made things more difficult because Alec with his hair ruffled was much more difficult to deny. It didn't hurt that under the kind of fussy clothes he was quite toned and fit and not the kind of soft office geek she'd been expecting.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to push or pry. Really, I'm amazingly good at casual." He smiled but it didn't warm his eyes.

"Alec just shut up for a moment." She flashed a grin but it didn't last. "I'm a smart woman."

He nodded. "I know, I tend to only date smart women."

"No, I mean, I'm really smart."

"Okay, I'd guessed as much or else you wouldn't have been adopted by the Inkies."

"My work is very important to me."

"Okay."

"I really, really like you Alec but things aren't easy for a woman like me. I'm not going to stop working to have babies or stay in one place and I'm too selfish to sacrifice my research to help you in your career."

"Do I seem like such an ass?"

"No but you're an important man..."

"I'm nobody, I just work for an important man. Pia I work all the time, I mean all the time. I get time off when Toshi gets time off and really that isn't often. I'm not threatened or intimidated by smart, complex women so long as they don't think I'm dumb and simple. I would never ask any woman I was involved with to give up anything so important to her and kids? Well no worries, I'm sterile. I have a fatal sub-mutation in my code. It killed pretty much all my family and should have killed me but Toshi being a half breed gave them a bridge to fix it. I went while in college and had a vasectomy just to make sure I don't pass it on. No one can tell me if my children will get the sub-mutation or if something from Toshi could scramble things. I've actually had girlfriends I'd gotten pretty serious with dump be when I told them. I tend to tell women a little sooner now." He glanced up to her serious dark eyes and tried to look sheepish. "Maybe not soon enough..."

She sat and blinked at him, surprised. "Are you always so honest?"

He nodded. "Pretty much, have to be most I/S will over look avoidance but outright lying they can generally spot a mile away. I'm told it can be an annoying trait."

"The honesty or their knack for seeing through our little white lies?"

He laughed. "Both I guess. I'm sorry, I should have told you before we... you know..."

"Did the nasty?"

"Yeah." He grinned again and tried to keep the puppy like affection he felt for her from his eyes. It wouldn't take much to fall for her, he knew that and really didn't want to get his heart broken.

"I'm a scientist, Alec, I study rare and odd fungi and molds and categorize sub varieties, hearing you're carrying a lethal sub-mutation doesn't bother me and hearing you've a few strands of I/S DNA doesn't bother me. I don't know what this is but I've never met a man like you..."

"That's a good thing right?"

She smiled brightly. "A very good thing."

"Hmm I like that sound of that..." He leaned in and kissed her and that turned into a second kiss and a third and soon she was laying beneath him. "Let's...just...take things slow."

"Does slow mean we still get to have sex?" She asked, her hands slipping below the waistband of his very boring boxers.

"Oh.... sounds like a good idea to me..."

Rez dressed slowly. It wasn't the worst beating he'd had, in fact he'd gotten worse from other workers at the Red Moon but he wasn't Shiny and had no promise of Shine to dull the pain. It just seemed to matter more now that some horny, grabby drunk had beaten him up. All of it rolled up into one knot and the bruises and cuts only added to his misery. Worst of all, he had to go eat something and sit with the others and make nice nice.

Out in the main room he wasn't surprised to find that Andy had changed clothes but Mick and Toshi were still wearing their club clothes. Mick was standing over where Andy slumped and held his hand with the ice away from the other man's eyes.

"Tell me the truth, Mick, sweetie....am I deformed for life?"

"It's a bruised cheekbone and a black eye, you'll live."

"Foundation is not going to cover it." He moaned.

Mick put the ice back on it. "It's your own dumb fault for trying to be a bad ass."

Rez had his own ice pack but he wasn't very fond of being cold. He'd rather swell and hurt. Toshi caught his eye and pointed with his chin at the table and the sandwich sitting on the plate. The half breed was methodically munching through his own sandwich which kept Rez from complaining too much, even if it was easier for him without the sore jaw and bruised throat. He plunked himself down at the table and forced himself to eat.

"Bunny you look awful."

"Fuck you." Rez snapped back to where Andy sat.

The artist sat up a little and met Rez's eyes. "Maybe later, if you're a very good boy and ask me

real nice.”

Rez almost snapped, he came so close to throwing his plate at the other man, maybe jumping him and trying to strangle him as he'd almost been strangled. It wasn't even really because of the tease but because the tease made him shiver a little with the half joked, half real promise. The only thing that stopped him was the look of real concern and worry in Andy's eyes.

“You couldn't afford me.” He answered but his voice had lost a lot of its malice and anger.

“What an odd night.” Mick sighed and sat down next to Toshi but with a noticeable distance between them. “Who would have thought that we'd have gone to Sleaze and Alec would be the only one of us to get lucky.”

“Do you think he did?” Andy asked from under his ice pack.

Mick sighed and dropped his head back. “Well, he isn't home yet and it's late. And with my sister yet, ugh.”

“Don't fret, night's still young. You two have plenty of time to keep us up all night and there's hope for me yet, Rez promised to fuck me.”

Mick chuckled a little but when he glanced to Rez the other man obvious didn't find it at all amusing. “Are you sure you don't want a doctor, Rez?”

“I'm fine.”

The four sat in empty silence that hung with awkward weight in the room. Andy sighed a little as he poked at his puffy bruised face but otherwise no one said anything. It worried Mick a little, Toshi had seemed odd since he'd refused to marry him and Mick wasn't sure just way. Was the man hurt by it or relieved? He wasn't sure he'd done a good enough job explaining why he'd refused but he did know that, in the long run, Toshi would be grateful he had.

Worse, Andy kept glancing to Rez. He was trying to hide it with the fussy motion of moving the ice around but Mick caught it. So did Rez and the purple haired man was frowning more and more with each caught glance. Something was brewing between the two of them. Mick knew Andy had been deliberately prodding at Rez to give the man a target to snap and vent at but this felt different, deeper, more hidden and some of the tension was coming from Andy now too.

He'd have to get them to resolve that. They didn't have to be best friends but they had to get along and trust each other. Mick wondered what Rez said to upset Andy so much. Generally his friend was almost impossible to insult but for all his foppish exterior and seeming unconcern Andy had a few insecurities. Rez was I/S and used to dealing with humans, if he'd stumbled onto one of those insecurities and poked Andy there, he knew Andy was likely to never forget or forgive.

“It's going to be a long time before people stop assuming an I/S moving about in the human world isn't a whore.” Toshi said into the silence. “This won't be the last time Rez is targeted.” He glanced over where Rez had the sandwich raised to his mouth, he was eating it with the mindless habit of necessity. “They way I fight, the way the guards fight? Will take years to master and we were all trained from childhood up. Mick? Think you could teach Rez some of what you know? He doesn't have to be good at it, just enough to get away whole.”

There was the out Mick needed to get the undercurrent of tension between the two men out into the open. “Not a bad idea, consider it done. Andy, you'll do this too.”

“Mick!”

"Don't start, you'll show up and you'll try. Both of you will show up and do your best. In a couple of days, when you're feeling better we'll get down to it."

"Aw come on Mick."

Rez just stood up. "Whatever." He took the last few bites of his sandwich with him and left the room.

"I'm going to bed." Toshi stood to follow.

"Toshi?"

"I'm just tired."

It left Mick sitting alone with Andy watching from his good eye.

"What did you do to piss him off?"

"Nothing, least nothing I know of." But he glanced back down the hallway where both I/S disappeared.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Fifty Three

It was late afternoon when Toshi managed to make it to the clinic build site and his the meeting Alec had quietly arranged with Grandma Rose. It hadn't taken much to get Alec to call over and set something up, every time Pia and the clinic were mentioned he smiled like a goofy love sick fool.

"What is that?" Toshi asked when a delivery arrived at the build site for the club and Alec eagerly signed for it. "It smells horrible."

"It's for Pia. I can't smell it."

"Be grateful you can't, oh..." He rubbed his nose and sneezed.

"It's Octopus Stinkhorn."

"What?"

Alec glanced up and blushed a little. "It's a fungus a rare one and really neat looking, has tentacles."

"You bought her a fungus?"

"Yeah."

"A stinky fungus that smells like something died?"

Alec glanced to the box in his hands and up to Toshi. "Yeah."

"That's....that's either the oddest thing or the most romantic thing I've ever heard. You must like her."

"I do." He sighed. "I really do, she's so beautiful and smart and amazing and doesn't think I'm a dork."

"You're not a dork."

"Says you." He glanced over across the mostly empty yard as a card drove another human to one of the sex clubs. "You'll want to talk to Grandma Rose alone?"

Toshi nodded.

"Think they'll agree?"

"I hope so. I'd love to shut that place down. I know Uncle won't be sorry to see it gone and it is in the Yards."

"The other clubs will flip...think you're starting a war."

"I know, we won't make any moves until I can sit them down." Toshi looked back to where the Pony Club had stood and where his club was growing. "How much longer?"

"Worker dorms will be habitable in two weeks, maybe a little less, maybe a little more, easily be done before the first group are released from the clinic. Guard dorms and our spaces will be finished two or three weeks after. The clubs over all will be done and ready to be opened, not counting in a lack of manpower, in roughly two months."

Toshi nodded. "I can't wait any longer."

"I agree. Don't worry, it'll be okay."

Toshi wanted to believe the optimism Alec carried so easily but he wasn't able to be so hopeful. "Says the man carrying the stink plant."

"Stinkhorn, it's a Stinkhorn."

Alec's odd pride at the smelly box and the happy warm glow he was projecting made Toshi grin. "Stinkhorn." He agreed and was glad for the smelly box, it was the first time he'd smiled all day.

The guard Alec rode behind over to the clinic sneezed four times when they came to a stop and glared at the offensive box. It made the other guards chuckle but they were smart enough to

keep their distance. Alec didn't seem to mind, he was still grinning happily.

"Toshi!" Grandma Rose called out and came out of the chaos of the build site all smiles and long skirts. Her hair was still pulled up on her head and she threw her arms out to hug him. "And you Alec, you're all she's been talking about."

"Grandma Rose!" Pia scolded and looked shocked but she grinned. "Hi."

Rose rolled her eyes. "Young people."

"The box, Alec." Toshi gently reminded because Alec just stood there holding the box as if he'd forgotten it. One of the guards sneezed.

"Oh! I ah... here...I got this for you..." He pushed the box toward Pia and one of the guards snickered, got elbowed in the ribs by another one for it.

"Alec... you know you shouldn't have."

"It's not much, something that just...well..."

She spared him and opened the box and with his help got the plastic pot with it's steamed up plastic domed cover out. She had to tap at the side to get the condensation to pool and run down but when she peered inside her eyes lit up. "Clathrus columnatus?"

"If that's a stinkhorn, than yes, just, don't open the lid. It's making I/S noses twitch already." He grinned a little sheepishly.

"Oh and it's a red one! Alec how in the world did you find one in a container? Oh there's some that haven't sprouted yet, it's wonderful!" She smiled brighter. "You romantic devil you, giving a girl a stinky fungus."

"It's okay, right?"

She leaned over and kissed the side of his face. "It's perfect. The people at the hotel might not like it though."

"Alec why don't you and Pia check on the construction while I try to entice Grandma Rose to take a walk with me?"

Looks were exchanged but soon everyone agreed and the guard split up. Two followed behind Toshi at a respectable distance but he knew they could hear them. One followed Alec and Pia and one stayed by the bikes. Rose walked by his side over the cracked pavement and hard packed dirt, scraggly grasses poking up where they could find purchase.

"Fine weather for this time of year." She finally said, casually, not glancing over to Toshi.

"Yes."

"I was amazed at how much work has been finished on the clinic. Pia's been telling us but I just didn't expect it to be so close to being finished."

"I've a list put together of names and what medical background we know of a good fifty people who I think would agree to treatment. If you could see to it your people look it over and remove those you feel are unsuitable? It'll help us to narrow it down for this first group." He kicked at a stone. "I need them to succeed."

"They will if they wish it, if they fail it isn't your fault."

"Hm." They walked a little ways. "Grandma Rose, you'll be able to staff the clinic, yes?"

"Oh without a doubt, dear, several from our own Commune, one or two from outside, all good doctors and medical staff they'll be here before the clinic is ready for this first batch."

"Good."

"How's the construction on your club?"

"It's progressing. It's...it's good to see the old one gone. I used to feel sick every time I saw it. It's good to have it gone, nothing of it stands but the cell they held my uncle in."

"Have you ever spoken to anyone about what happened to you?" She asked gently, carefully knowing what a tender issue it was even after so many years.

"No. My father had me in therapy but the man didn't...he didn't understand and really there isn't much to say. I was so Shiny I can only remember fragments. When I was detoxed I was using almost three times the amount Rez was using when you detoxed him and he'd been using most of his life. I remember detoxing far too clearly."

"Fragments still are hurtful. I would be honored to listen if you'd ever like an ear. There's nothing you could say to me that I haven't already heard over the years."

He knew it was meant well but the idea made his stomach clench up. "Thank you, I'll keep it in mind."

They walked further in silence and past several buildings of various sizes, the beaten in roads and paths that lead to them and the steady if not rushed stream of cars that brought people to and from as discretely as possible. Toshi stopped them finally and nodded to a squat four story building built just in front of the wall.

"See that building?"

"Yes." As they watched a car drove slowly up and disappeared into a covered car port shielding from sight who came and went.

"It's a sex club but also a hotel. It has a hundred rooms, some small just a bed and bathroom and some elaborate suites. No one arrives just for a few hours, they stay a night, a few days, sometimes several weeks. I want to shut them down."

"You want to but you can't?"

"You're looking at one of a handful of places in the world where hiring a child for sex won't get you arrested. They maintain at least three infants under the age of one, a dozen or so workers between one and five years old, close to sixty between the ages of six and twelve and nearly an equal number of kids older than twelve but still young looking. When they start to look like adults they sell them to the other clubs, use them as housekeeping staff, dump them out into the yards, all without thought."

"And it's allowed to go on?"

"You can't judge us, when this place was built they bribed the Containment Committee to sell them children kidnapped from inside the wall. No one even admitted to knowing what was occurring there for years. Now, my Uncle couldn't move on any of the clubs in the Yards until he could secure the entire of the Yard, which is my responsibility to manage. On top of it, we are over crowded and our resources are stretched quite thin. We don't have the man power to



absorb a hundred and fifty children, some of which are already Shine addicts, all of which have survived being prostituted."

"I'm not judging, I wouldn't dream of it." She heard the pain in the man's voice.

"I need to shut them down, this can not be tolerated. It's bad enough humans view us as nothing more than things to their pleasure and prey on our adults but not our children."

"How can we help?"

That made Toshi grin a little, dark and bitter but it was a grin. "Can your people absorb them? I can pay for their care but to find humans that I could trust with those children isn't so easy. Sometimes the best credentials on paper still can't be trusted with the vulnerable."

That sounded to Rose like experience talking and she wondered what Toshi refused to say and share. "I do understand. What were you thinking?"

"The building is a hotel. They could stay there, as an orphanage, if a trustworthy staff can be found to care for them. I can find several I/S to act as foster parents, but my people don't have a foster system, we've never done it. If your people could help? Pap Mike has mentioned wanting to adopt a few I/S children and prove my people are as smart as yours. This could be that opportunity." He stared at the building and wondered if any of those children could even be saved, really saved. He'd been far older and he still wondered if he could be saved. "At least maybe help them adjust and receive a basic education."

Rose didn't want to promise what she couldn't deliver but her heart broke at the idea of not helping. "I will speak to the others, we'll see what we can do but I can't imagine there will be too many protests. Finding the children cast aside and unwanted and helping them be the brightest and best is one of our founding guidelines. None of those guidelines say find only human children."

"Thank you. I can't move forward until I know someone can step in and take the place of their handlers."

"I'll need a rough head count of ages."

He nodded. "I'll have the count I have double checked. The support staff will need to stay on and since most of them are children grown too old they'll have special needs too but they shouldn't be on Shine. The ones on Shine get moved on pretty quickly."

"I'll speak to the others. When do you need an answer?"

"Sooner than later. I want them shut down and I'm going to make an example of them to the other clubs."

"Very well, and I think it's a very good idea." She nodded in thought, already thinking about names from even other Communes that would be good to bring in. "But, Toshi dear, you know that saving them won't fix what was done to you, right?"

That hit like a fist to his chest. He couldn't even think of how to answer and didn't try. When words felt like they could come out he glanced over his shoulder to the guard and they nodded and stepped back further. They stepped back just far enough to be out of easy earshot.

"Is it..." He swallowed hard and tried again. "Is it normal to still feel...to still feel like...like someone poured acid into your insides even after so many years?" He sighed. "Like you're hollow and raw?"

"It is and I know it sounds counter productive but talking about what happened really does help sooth that feeling away. Won't be over night but it does help..."

And he almost told her, almost opened his mouth and broke down and told her everything. Oddly, it wasn't being a whore and an addict he wanted to tell her about the most but instead it was seeing his grandfather murdered and doing so many horrible things to Tam that haunted him the most. It was right there but just didn't want to slip out and Toshi feared if the let go it would be like a cork popping off a bottle of champagne and he'd spill everywhere.

Instead he groaned and rubbed his eyes before running his hands through his hair. "Most days I'm okay, I've just been melancholy lately. I do know, about saving them, but someone came and saved me and I should return that to others."

Rose patted his arm and they stood together in the late afternoon sunset. The amount of traffic slowly increased as the sun grew lower on the horizon until the guards shuffled their feet and coughed slightly. All small signs to remind Toshi that it wasn't a good idea to be out and about in the Yards as dusk drew in. He knew he should be safe but it was their job to leave nothing to should be and keep everything secure. It was only then that he was willing to turn around and walk back to where the clinic was taking shape but Toshi didn't feel up to going home and facing Mick and Rez's sad seen too much eyes.

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Chapter Fifty Four

He was tired when he finally made it back to the apartment and was a little cold to the guards. They didn't seem to blame him, if anything they understood and shared sympathetic looks. Their loyalty had surprised him, it wasn't just that they were serving his house out of respect to his uncle or from a desire to clean up the yards but out of a real sense of almost affection for him. On days like today, Toshi was grateful for it.

Just outside of their apartment door Toshi paused and Alec stopped beside him. "She's going to see if they can take the children."

"Good."

"I have to execute the people running that club."

Alec nodded. "I know." They'd talked about it before, even before they'd made the move to the Yards. Hashed out plans for gaining control and it couldn't be done bloodlessly. They'd both agreed which club would make the best example, the one that deserved it the most.

"Do you think Mick will understand?" Toshi kept his eyes on the door, his hand on the knob.

That made Alec sigh a little. "I don't know. Part of him believes this can be done with very little violence. He doesn't understand the Yards, not really. He's a good man but he's not innocent, he has been forced to kill before."

"In the line of duty, this would be different, this can't be clean and quick."

"Show him the videos of adult men dry humping toddlers and I think he'll understand. I don't think he'll find any joy in it or be happy about it but you're not either. It has to be done, if the other club owners don't fear you they won't fall in line."

Toshi nodded but didn't open the door. "Set up an meeting with my uncle, please."

"When?"

"Soon."

"Family or formal?"

Toshi glanced over to his oldest, and for a long time his only, friend. "Alec, it's time we stand up and do something."

Alec locked eyes with Toshi and nodded. People were martyred for less than what Toshi wanted to do and he feared that in a decade he'd be interviewed as the former secretary to the idealist half breed that had been gunned down for trying to get humans and I/S to live peacefully together. "I'll let him know."

The apartment was tense and uneasy. Alec was blissfully happy and seemed unaware but it wasn't a happy dinner they shared. Whatever was going on between Andy and Rez was giving Toshi a head ache. Rez kept glaring at Andy like he wanted to hit him and Andy kept shooting him smug lewd looks that only seemed to piss Rez off even more. Both men were bruised but Rez seemed to be ignoring his injuries while Andy made a fuss and kept asking Rez to kiss it and make it better. Worse, on top of it all, Mick seemed to be brooding and lost in his own thoughts, worried about something Epps had said or done during the day.

Staying healthy and eating a dinner wasn't worth the headache it caused and Toshi happily retreated to his bedroom to prop against the wall and work. Work was something he could deal with, something he could accept and place into logical order. It was a place he knew what to expect and could control and there were so many plans to be made.

"I'm thinking one of us needs to tell Andy to back off of Rez. I'm worried that they'll come to blows." Mick said when he slipped into their bedroom.

"Hmm, they'll figure it out. Rez needs someone to snip at and I think Andy's enjoying it."

Toshi didn't even look up. "Want me to go and let you work?"

"Huh? No, Mick sit down, we should talk."

The tone was serious but distracted and Mick nodded. He kicked off his shoes and sat down on their futon. "Okay. Let's talk." He braced himself unsure what was on his lover's mind but unwilling to avoid the conversation.

"I met with Grandma Rose today. The clinic should be ready for the first group of detox soon."

"I've seen the reports."

"Our club is getting closer to being finished." Toshi waited until Mick nodded again. "Mick...I need to start acting on some things."

"Okay."

"The other clubs need to be brought into line. If I just call a meeting and tell them the new rules, they'll nod and agree and ignore me. I don't believe they'll threaten me, even the strongest of the club owners aren't willing to risk angering both my father and uncle but they won't and don't respect me."

Mick glanced down and nodded. "You're going to have to make an example of one of them. Let the others off the hook, offer them a clean slate to start over with but show them what disobeying will bring them. Gradually move them to a regulatory system. It'll have to be bloody and showy and horrible." His mind was already whirling around the possibilities. "I'll sort out which of the guards would make the most impact, I'd handle this myself but they need to see you aren't squeamish."

The breath Toshi hadn't known he was holding rushed out. "I was worried... this isn't legal, you know that? The Yards aren't technically autonomous and even if they were it's not the most moral of actions. I'll understand if you want no part of this."

"I'm the head of your security. Don't insult me. I used to work the Yards as a cop, remember? I know that the rule of law is only really applied to the tourists. If you ever want to move to a more legal system some order must be enforced. I get this, Toshi. It's ugly but it'll be faster and have far less bloodshed. Let me work up some scenarios, which club owners are the most vulnerable, which ones being taken out will threaten the others the most without making them fear their own places."

"No need." He turned his computer around so Mick could see the screen. "We're shutting down the Sunshine house."

"The kiddie club?"

"You've heard of it? They keep a low profile."

"I've heard rumors. You can't even get in the door without being recommended by someone already on their membership roles. Last I heard it was twelve to fifteen or so age group? What will you do with the workers?"

"That's why I spoke to Grandma Rose. My people are strained with their own children. It would be difficult to ask any family to take in another child, let alone ones that will need so much help. We don't have the training for this so I can't even hire in I/S with experience fostering abused children. If your family can help..."

"They do have experience dealing with children from troubled backgrounds."

Toshi reached around and tapped a few buttons. "It's not just twelve to mid teens, Mick..." It wasn't one of the filmed encounters Toshi pulled up but as accurate of an account as they could get on the workers, photos and ages mostly and they scrolled across the screen in mute testimony to the crimes being committed. "Every day that club stands makes me sick."

"Won't have any trouble doing what needs to be done." Mick glanced up, his eyes hard. "When did you want to move on them?"

"Soon, once we know for sure your family can help out."

He nodded. "It'll need to be timed with the meeting with the other club owners. Will you grab just the slime running the club or the patrons too?"

"I want to round them up and hurt them." Toshi drew a slow breath. "I can't kill them but I don't want them leaving. Anyone inside is to be held, try to document what they're doing there. I was thinking of a press conference, something public, where we turn them over to human authorities, publicly show them for the pedophiles they are. Even if they aren't arrested at least we can shame them."

He nodded. "Good idea, I'd be happy to help make them disappear."

"I wish we could but it'll gain more publicity for the abuses being inflicted on the I/S community if a big show is made of it."

Mick nodded. "Agreed. I'll start working up some plans."

"Mick...I wasn't sure...well just how you'd react to this."

That made him smile a little. "These people are animals and my loyalty is to you. Even if it wasn't so clear cut, I stand with you." He handed the computer back as much to get the faces of some very young children to go away as to let Toshi return to his work.

"Thank you, Mick, I wasn't sure..."

"Well be sure from now on."

"I'm setting up a meeting with my uncle. Mick, things are going to get bumpy for a while."

"I know." He could tell just from how Toshi was sitting, the tense lines of his lover's shoulders, that he was worried about things. Mick wrapped his hands around one of Toshi's sock clad feet and began to carefully rub it. "Don't worry, I'll make sure everything is secure. All the guards are confident with handguns now, we've been running drills, it'll be okay."

It confused him. Mick could be so loyal, so confident about their relationship in situations that should send the average lover running for cover but still refused to marry him. Toshi didn't know what to make of it, didn't know why something that seemed so ordinary, so primal would be so easily refused by Mick. Maybe Mick was right, maybe what they had was good enough and trying to solidify it was silly. They were good together, good like this and he was selfish to want to bind Mick to him.

"That feels nice." He let himself relax a little at the soothing touch.

Mick grinned and pulled the simple, boring socks off of Toshi's long feet. "So not fair, even your feet are handsome. I have ugly stumpy feet." He sighed and rubbed more freely.

"Mick..."

"Shh, work..." Mick hushed and turned his attention to the feet he was working on.

Toshi sighed and tried to turn back to his computer. He had too much to do anymore, even with Alec taking up so much more of his to do list never seemed to shrink. Mick's hands were strong and pulled small happy sighs from him as he found tension hidden in his feet that Toshi hadn't noticed he was carrying.

The sound of the lube bottle opening made him glance up. "Mick?"

"Work!" Mick scolded again and rubbed the dab of lube between his hands to warm it.

Now warm, slick, strong hands were working his feet and that felt even better. It should have been a distraction but Toshi found he was actually focusing more and getting the simpler tasks done more quickly. Strong hands slipped up and began to work as his ankles and that felt good too. It felt even better when Mick slipped his hands up under his pants leg and rubbed at his lower legs.

"Mmm, nice..." Toshi sighed and felt his shoulders unknotting. He'd never had a massage before, I/S had always been uneasy with him being half human and humans uneasy with him being half I/S. Mixed in with his own phobia about being touched and vulnerable around strangers and he'd happily avoided the chance to relax.

Mick's touch feeling good didn't surprise him but the contact was supposed to be simple relaxation and Toshi was surprised when he began to enjoy it in a more sensual manner. It took a moment for it to sink in that the wispy curls of desire swirling over his nerves was sparked by the echo of soft desire from Mick. Mick was enjoying touching him and that thrill of sexual desire was spilling into Toshi. It felt really good but made him less concerned about work.

Hands at his waist surprised Toshi and he glanced down to find Mick skillfully undoing his belt. "Mick..."

"Shhh....work...." Mick soothed and popped open the button on Toshi's dress pants.

Toshi's breath froze. He'd seen this from Mick before, this sudden need to please and he was still a little uncomfortable with it. It helped that he knew Mick really enjoyed it and more that Toshi really enjoyed it but it still felt like he was using Mick for his own pleasure. He gasped as Mick quickly lowered his fly and slipped still slick hands inside his pants.

"Oh...oh God..." Toshi sighed and he found himself staring at his computer screen no longer able to focus on what he was supposed to be doing.

Mick slipped between his legs and Toshi let him spread his knees wider apart to make room for him to kneel there. His hands were slightly slippery and warm, strong and firm but teasing and Toshi soon was hard, his breath a panting gasp. The room was silent but for the sound of his own breathing and the soft, wet sounds as Mick took him into his mouth.

The silence made the experience feel amplified. Every gasp, every moan Toshi lost control over felt like a bell sounding. The low hum of his computer suddenly seemed mammoth. Every wet lick, every soft suckling sound from Mick became more erotic than moaning and Toshi shivered under the sudden advancement of Mick's desire to relax him.

He knew Mick was enjoying it but he also knew Mick wasn't achingly hard. He didn't want to come, didn't want to pursue his own release and Toshi focused on that and the melted sweetness of his own pleasure. Mick was enjoying this and that enjoyment was enhanced by not caring about his own desire. He didn't want things to go further all he wanted was for Toshi to enjoy his efforts and that made Toshi shiver.

It was also unspoken permission to not hold back or hold out. Toshi accepted that and allowed his body to drop easily, smoothly into release. It felt lewd, letting Mick pleasure him with no mind to gaining any satisfaction of his own but he would have to be head blind again not to feel how much it pleased Mick on a level so much deeper than mean sexual release.

He let his body hum with his own pleasure and Mick's own and set his head back against the wall, his eyes closed now, gasping for breath. Mick gently slipped him back into his pants but didn't close the fabric again. When Toshi glanced down he liked the lewd, happy smile on Mick's face and the contented way he licked his lips. ?

"Mick..."

"Shhh... get your work done, baby, I'll be back to take you to bed soon. Okay?"

To take him to bed implied anything from sleep and cuddle to sex and Toshi felt himself nodding.

Mick leaned forward and brushed his lips to Toshi's, still grinning softly and easily left their room with his promise still floating in both their minds.

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Chapter Fifty Five

It took almost a week before Yasun had time to sit down to a full meeting but Alec had stressed the importance of making it an official visit. For once, as Toshi tightened his tie and shrugged into his suit jacket, he wasn't the least bit nervous about the meeting. He'd been thinking a great deal and for once he felt like he understood where his uncle's thoughts were going as well.

Alec was dressed in one of his plain, none flashy, quietly elegant suits that always made him look less noticeable than he should be. Rez too now was dressed in a very proper suit but he was frowning and looked uncomfortable. He kept pulling at the collar a little, unused to the tight tie around his neck. Even with the suit and frown, Rez still had the too graceful, too pretty look of an I/S sex worker.

"Andy what are you wearing?" Mick sighed as the click of heels came down the hallway.

"What? You said to wear a nice suit?"

Alec out right snickered and had to turn away and Rez frowned even more. "You look like a stewardess."

Andy glanced down at the very plain navy blue dress skirt that went just below his knee and the very proper navy blue ladies dress jacket he wore over a crisp white blouse. He'd swept his hair up and pinned it in place and wore dark stockings and little white gloves. Around his neck he'd clasped a strand of fake pearls with matching clip earrings and he'd kept the make up muted but added on long, fake eyelashes.

"I do not look like a stewardess but in case you were wondering I can show you how to put your seat into the upright and locked position?"

Alec nearly choked on his laughter.

"Leave him be, I think he's adorable." Toshi grinned and tried really hard not to laugh himself.

"How are you going to ride a motorcycle?" Mick countered.

"I am wearing panties and I can sit like a lady."

"Slut." Rez cursed and shook his head. "I'll be downstairs."

"Would you like me to change? I don't want to embarrass you."

"You're fine."

The ride through the camp was kept slow and alert and with full guard. Mick had wanted to split the group up to limit the number of targets in one place but Toshi had disagreed. He needed to show no fear, no worry and appear as confident and strong as he could before moving on the clubs. It would take hours or days for their trip to filter across the camp and to the humans that ran the clubs but eventually it would reach their ears.

And the bottom line was there really was little to no threat in them traveling all together through the camp. Yes, people stopped and stared but no one even seemed to give them so much as a harsh look. Some did point at Andy, riding sideways, his legs crossed casually at the ankle and still obviously a man in a woman's outfit. Rather than be offended, most of the I/S that saw him, young to old, laughed and smiled.

They arrived safely and were quickly checked over, their guards frowning at Yasun's guards but no one was challenged or asked to disarm, not even Mick. They were quickly and quietly escorted up several floors, not to Yasun's private living space but to the more public offices and work areas around it. Mick had seen them in passing but they were generally escorted in as family, not as professional equals.

The room was large and well lit with a well polished wood table in the center and chairs around. Yasun sat at the head of the table with four I/S around him, some looked old enough to have advised his father and one man looked younger than Toshi, all five stood up as they were shown in. Very respectfully, bows were offered and exchanged but Yasun grinned and moved around the table.

"Please, nephew, this may be an official visit but I will not miss the chance to greet you as your uncle." He opened his arms and gathered Toshi into a hug.

"Nor would I, Uncle."

Yasun threaded strands of the loose black hair through his fingers. "You look tired."

"There is much work to do."

That made Yasun nod. "For us all. Sit, please, and let us discuss what is so important so that we may retire and have dinner together." He waved to the chairs and hid a small amused smile at seeing how Andy was dressed. The unorthodox human pleased him and if situations were different, Yasun might even consider courting the man. Few people managed to surprise him any longer, humans were even less likely to and yet the few times he'd met with Toshi and Mick's friend he was surprised and pleased.

They settled in and Alec opened a case. He unrolled the flat screen across the table and flicked



his computer to warm up. Alec sat to Toshi's one side, Mick the other and Andy and Rez crowded on one side of the table. One of Yasun's advisors raised an eyebrow and locked eyes with Rez, silently questioning his place at the table but instead of backing down Rez scowled and met the glare.

"Thank you for making the time for this, Uncle." Toshi said as he settled, his hands folded on the table.

"Of course, tell me how I can help you?"

"Perhaps, I can help you?"

Yasun raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I've been giving a great deal of thought to your Father, my Grandfather in the last few weeks. He was not an indirect man, I know he was aware my parentage would be known in time. I find myself thinking about the lessons he wished for me to learn."

"Yes?"

"Leadership when he knew a half breed would never inherit. Urban planning, structure, history, sanitation, how to build and maintain infrastructures, all knowledge important for a leader but of little use for a half breed who should never hold authority. He would tell me stories of his dreams for our people as if I was fully one of his children. Lately I've asked myself why he would do this."

"And have you found the answer to that question?" Yasun asked carefully and avoided meeting his advisor's eyes, the tense nerves in them were enough to deal with.

"I believe I may have. My grandfather, your esteemed Father, saw my mixed heritage as a bridge. I believe he wished for me to help him, or his heir, create what he always dreamed of but never dared speak of for our people."

"What would that be?"

Toshi glanced up and met his Uncle's eyes. "A country of our own." Mick was too disciplined to react, Alec was privy to his thoughts already but Rez shifted uncomfortably and Andy almost actually gasped. "Tell me if my line of thinking is wrong, but you have been slowly building our people to demand independence for years now, have you not?"

"Perhaps."

"You ask, what makes a country, I've asked this as well. We have a culture, we have a race, we have some, if not a great deal, of land. We live without the authority of the country around us. You've built infrastructures, schools, clinics, and most impossible of all, free trade and commerce within this camp." Toshi pushed forward, unsure if he was right but he thought he saw a light in his uncle's eyes.

"Uncle, I'm not wrong am I? We have been kept here too long, there is no returning us to our homelands, this camp is our homeland and you have been quietly easing our people toward true independence. Tell me I'm wrong and I'll let this matter alone, tell me it's too soon yet and I'll stay silent until your daughter inherits from you and I will serve her as I can."

Yasun sat silent for a long time. Long enough that Alec and several of his advisors fidgeted but Toshi didn't move or look away, he just sat, waiting. Finally, Yasun cleared his throat a little and sat back in his chair.

"Nephew, my Father saw you not as some abomination of mixed heritage but as the greatest

chance our people have. It was I that pleaded with him to allow you to mature and find your own path and when I took up leadership in his stead, going against several advisors, I stepped back and tried to offer you the space to find your own way. A man, a real man, must map his own destiny and yet here you sit before me, right where my Father wished you to be.”

Yasun allowed himself a small, very small, smile. “Yes, our dream, our goal, is to be a recognized government and be a homeland open to all I/S across the globe. We have been trying to establish what we can internally, treating purchase made with the human world as an import, but things aren’t so easily managed.”

“What’s the largest concern, internally, you have?”

“Space and resources.” Yasun answered instantly. “We can’t farm or raise livestock and we’ve filled every livable building almost twice over. We need jobs too and acceptance into human universities and schools.”

“This is where I think I can help the most. Alec and I have been quietly buying most of the warehouses around the Yards for the last few years. Ranvier Industries or myself personal own the majority of them as of this week. There isn’t very far back we can extend the camp, with the harbor there but if we lease some of the warehouses out, tear some down, encourage business to come in that are willing to hire an I/S work force in exchange for lowered rent and if we can fully annex it as I/S territory, lower taxes, there’s one problem addressed.

“The Containment Act forbids any but the most minor of construction inside the camp but within a year we’ll have that law dismantled. Alec?” Toshi glanced to his secretary.

“If I may? We’ve constructed a digital survey of the land already actively under I/S control.” He tapped some on his computer and the flat panel he’d unrolled hummed to life and displayed a map. “The issue seems to be one of space but it’s not, it’s one of design. Most of the structures inside the camp are pre-plague and most far older. Most are in ill repair and weren’t really designed for housing.”

“What I propose,” Toshi leaned forward. “Is a step by step, district by district renovation of our lands. First step is the most difficult, find the area with the least population density, move everyone out, clear the district, raze it to the ground and build this.” He glanced to Alec but the man was ahead of him.

On the table surface buildings appeared, the screen of high enough quality to give the appearance that they were glancing down into a three dimensional world. Where old buildings had been new ones grew taller, more modern.

“Each district would be remade with an eye to not only housing but aesthetics. The building materials would be non-reflective, building style and height would vary.” Toshi went on as Alec let the simulation run and slowly, block by block the camp was transformed. “There would be solar panels used to allow us to be energy independent. Green zones for parks would be created, commercial space would be built. Some of the buildings would be dedicated to something our people have never known, privacy. Small apartments, most one room but with careful layouts and planning, alternating single living apartments or small double living with family ones, we can easily triple or more our living space.”

“Full conversion?” Alec clicked to bring up the statistics. “We’ll be able to house every I/S living in the world right now and still have plenty of space. Housing won’t again be an issue for four or five generations.”

Yasun leaned forward. “How long would this project take?”

“From start of the first demolition to the last building? If we use humans as well as I/S workers,

fifteen years, twenty five at the most but it won't matter. Within three our entire current population can be housed in the new structures."

"Some will protest."

"The buildings of this district were worthless, that's why our people were dumped here. This would make our home beautiful. We can add influences from grand buildings across the globe, from all of our origins, make it a combination the way our people are." He drew a breath, suddenly uneasy now that he'd laid out his plans. "I can fund this, Father might not be pleased but I can make this happen. What do you think, Uncle?"

Again Yasun sat silent, his eyes studying the simulated rebuilding that acted out over and over again before him. Occasionally it zoomed in to show greenhouses or school buildings and then back out to tick off the plans. Yasun sighed. "I think we should have them bring us dinner in here, there is going to be much to discuss."

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Chapter Fifty Six

Yasun barely touched his food and Toshi noticed it. His uncle was well used to working through meals but this was something he was too focused on to worry about food. His uncle's forehead was knitted up in worry and concentration as they discussed issues ranging from food importation to sewage processing and back again but there was a weight to the room that only seemed to grow heavier as the anticipation level increased.

"We're not perfect but we're trying. We've certainly created a greater stability than some countries post-plague." One of the advisors said carefully. "We've a long way to go but a great deal of that is because we have been so limited. Not allowed any rights, any education, not allowed to travel. Most humans view us as animals still."

"I can help change that." Toshi nodded. "To bring the other clubs in line I have to shut one down, we're taking out Sunshine house. The Communes will help care for the workers and we may turn

it into a full time I/S orphanage. I'm going to drag the humans found there out into the public eye and let it be known just what has been done to us."

Alec straightened up. "We've run a lot of simulations on this, it'll be difficult to ignore, child prostitution isn't easy to dismiss. Wait a day, no more than two, depending on how long it takes the story to crest in the news outlets and sir, if you could make a speech? People have heard about Sakamoto Yasun but even most people in this city have never seen you or heard from you. If you step up, look strong and like a head of state already and address the ongoing and past abuses, people will listen."

"I'm not a public speaker."

"Uncle, you are the key to this, I can't be the face of our people. I am mixed blood. They need to see you and believe in you as an honorable leader. All you must do is speak, and I know from the lectures you used to give me as a child you can do that."

Yasun rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Toshi-chan....I..."

The advisors exchanged a look and shared it with Toshi. It was a rare moment of uncertainty.

"I wasn't supposed to be the one to do this. Father told me once that I would not inherit because I didn't have the personality to do what must be done. My brother's betrayal may have changed some of that but I've never been comfortable in my place, now more so than ever. I am not meant to be a head of state or king. I am not likeable. Humans...they'll call us a cult of personality, a dictatorship with a straw man for a leader."

"Uncle-san, our people respect you and love you because you don't believe you're flawless. They see you as a single man doing the best he can for far too many with far too little resources. Don't you worry about the humans, let us worry about that, you just focus on our people."

"Perhaps it's time to move to a fully democratic system."

"Yasun..." The oldest advisor scolded softly. "We've been over this."

"I have to agree with them, Uncle. Our people have a fairly solid system in place, a good mix of democracy with a strong single voice and leader. What we have works and it would be a poor idea to confuse things now. Especially with this idea of annexing two other camps, moving refugees here... we need a solid, consistent system and this is the one our people prefer. We do not get to choose our place in life." Toshi hated tossing his uncles's words back to him but he'd always known the man was uneasy with his place, with how he'd come to his place.

"A lesson taught to you by someone still quite young himself at the time." Yasun smiled softly. He drew a breath and squared his shoulders. "Very well. So we ask for two camps, which should raise little protest as we already have near total control over them. We ask for free and unobstructed movement between the camps. Ask that those stuck in failing misery be allowed to come to us as refugees. That those camps, the ones that have become hells on earth be shut down and their people moved to safety. We ask for the same rights given to any citizen of another country, the right to seek passage, travel, commerce, education. In exchange we won't seek retribution for having our alphas forcibly removed from their homes and countries, shipped about like cattle, used for experimentation or for any of the cruelties inflicted on our generation."

"I think that's a mistake." Mick spoke up for the first time. He muttered it and the room went silent at his voice and looked to him. "I'm sorry." It hadn't occurred to him to not contradict Yasun at his own table.

"No," Yasun nodded. "Please, share your thoughts."

"Well, if all that's been done is laid out, especially all that's happened in other camps, anyone with a bit of empathy is going to feel sick over it. But you're going to say that it's excusable, that all you want is freedom and a chance to have a homeland and you'll over look it? I think it's a mistake." He shook his head.

"What would you suggest?"

"Humans like absolution. We haven't been raised in a community that compromises and makes do with little the way your people have. Here? If you want something you know you must sacrifice something. Humans will view that as weakness. Demand justice, make those that have harmed your people be tried for genocide. Demand compensation as well. It'll be limited to aid bills or promises of handouts which is bullshit but it'll make people think. Than slap up a 'send an I/S to school' help fund and ask private citizens to help. You'll raise money, allow a ground level grass roots support of the I/S communities to be formed and make you look properly outraged by all that's happened. What's been done? Maybe not so badly here as elsewhere but you're going to be speaking for all I/S, what's been done requires outrage, not acceptance."

"I..." Alec glanced to Toshi. "I have to agree with Mick. Humans aren't going to understand the mentality of I'll give up something to gain something more valuable. I say push for it but be willing to surrender it in compromise later if there is a fuss."

Yasun sat and thought before he nodded. "Very well, I'll give it more thought but know I value your input greatly. Alec, I know my nephew values your skills highly, I am wondering if I can convince you to bring our situation to the eyes of the world's governments?"

"This is another issue. The studies and reports we've run? Show that this isn't going to be easy to accomplish."

"I'm aware it's going to be a very difficult goal to achieve but from all I know of you, you're not a man to back down from a challenge."

"Thank you, it's not that I don't wish to. But..."

"Uncle, we've a better chance of success if you prosecute this effort directly. If you sit and speak, as one leader to another to those with influence and power. If the conferences and debates are attended directly by you, the speeches and words spoken by you." Toshi added carefully. "Even I would have less success with it. I'm too closely connected to my Father and my mixed bloodlines. It has to be you Uncle."

"I can't receive an implant. I..." It was an entirely gut reaction. Yasun stopped himself and nodded. "Very well. Can it be arranged?"

"Uncle..." The room had gone painfully silent and no one wanted to quite look at each other.

The silence was broken by Rez snorting softly.

"You have a thought, Rez?" Mick asked challengingly. Knowing the purple haired man hadn't been sitting silent and thoughtless but would need to be prodded to get to speak up.

Rez shrugged. "Isn't my place."

"You're at the table, Rez-san, please, I'd like to hear your thoughts."

From Yasun was a direct order. It made Rez feel very small and dirty and far from important enough to be at the table he'd been invited to. "Sir? Sakamoto-sama, none of use will allow you to wear an implant for any reason. I'm just a Shiner whore but we all admire you, your pride... it's all of our pride. We...I...wouldn't want to see you bowing to their stupid ass rules. Make them

come here, to you.”

“We’ve whispered in some ears already, they won’t budge. It’ll be impossible to get enough really important people to come here.” Alec answered.

“I...okay...”

Yasun met Toshi’s eyes and raised an eyebrow because they’d both felt how the man backed down. “Rez-san, if you’ve a thought, please, share it.” Yasun prodded again.

“Well, I don’t know shit about this but, isn’t Toshi-san here the son of a big shot human?”

“That’s not political power though, my father has tried to stay out of politics as much as he can.” Toshi explained.

Rez dropped his eyes. He knew his place. Toshi could clean him up, sober him out, dress him nicely, listen to his words but Rez knew he was about as far down their societies totem pole of respect as a body could get. Yet here he was, part of a very powerful meeting, invited in, being asked his thoughts. Invited to sit with a man he’d admired as they all had and he’d heard that same man express uncertainty and doubt about his place and position as surely as Rez felt every day he wasn’t Shinning and being whored out. He couldn’t dishonor that with his own cowardice.

“But...the whole world is buying and selling. They can plop some stuffed shirt up as their leader but it’s what gets bought and sold that makes a country strong. I don’t know shit about this but if your father made it quietly clear he wouldn’t work with any country that snubbed his son’s family by not attending, wouldn’t they have to come here?”

The room was still and Rez squirmed under the focus of so many people. He glanced up and around quickly but only really noticed the small, proud smile on Andy’s face. “Was just a thought.” Rez muttered and slumped back into his chair.

“How much influence could be brought in?” One of the advisors asked.

Alec glanced to Toshi and raised his eyebrows. “Enough, enough to get them to the table. If they all dig their heels in RI can’t threaten to pull out of all of them for not agreeing to our demands but with the right kind of pressure I bet most will at least sit down and hear you out.”

“I’ll call my father.”

“No.” Yasun nodded. “It’s the favor I wish. I’ll speak to him. Rez-san, it was a brilliant idea, one that might well work out perfectly. Thank you, I’m pleased you joined us at this table.”

It was such a small thing, Rez nodded and muttered his thanks but it made him almost tremble in pride. They were talking about building a country, a real, honest to God homeland for their people. Something none of them had ever known, that their parents hadn’t known. With it would come security and a chance for a solid, real future for all their people and Rez, the Shiner whose that was burned out and strung out, who had done every vile and lewd thing any human had paid him to do, had been able to have some part in that. It was more than he’d ever hoped for, dreamed he’d be capable of and it made him feel overwhelmed. So powerful was the pride he felt at the praise that he worried his heart might burst under the weight of it, he was part of the household of his leader’s, this strong, wonderful man’s nephew, by extension he was part of the Sakamoto family and Rez found peace and pride in that sudden knowledge, two feelings he wasn’t used to encountering. He spent the rest of the meeting savoring them.

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Chapter Fifty Seven

It was late when they finally made their way back home, the Yard was lit up and people moved around with the same ongoing trade of drugs and sex. Epps waited for them as they pulled up, obviously freshly arrived himself on the back of one of their motorcycles with his own smaller I/S guard escort. He looked flustered but moved over to meet them as they arrived.

"You had a meeting?"

Mick scowled and frowned and left it to Toshi to answer. His concern was getting everyone safely inside and away from being obvious and easy targets. It was paranoia, most I/S gave their building a wide berth, too used to moving carefully around people in the yards that had power to change that now. It didn't make Mick feel any easier, a nut with a gun didn't have to get close.

"Yes and you were...?" Toshi glanced to the guard but it was Epps that answered.

He hefted his camera. "Your people were kind enough to show me about the Yards. I couldn't get anyone to talk to me until they cleared it. You have a lot of influence and respect with the people there."

Toshi nodded and only half watched as Andy and Rez disappeared inside. Alec hovered and Mick stood speaking to one of the guards. "Yes, it was private."

"I'd still like to meet with your uncle..."

"I don't think..." Toshi started to protest being the middle man for every human wanting access to his uncle but stopped himself. Yasun would need to get used to dealing with human press and he'd need to get used to it quickly. "Tomorrow, nine am, meet me in the garden, we'll discuss this." Epps didn't need to know everything about what they planned but having a reporter, one well established and trusted, documenting the process might not be a bad idea. Especially one that was sympathetic to their cause.

"Thank you." Epps smiled brightly but his eyes flicked from Toshi to where Mick stood.

It made Toshi uneasy and again he was nagged with the sense of Epps focus on his lover. It wasn't a sense of jealousy, he'd ruled that out but it was something he was missing. The wind shifted directions and Epps' scent swept up over him and Toshi found himself frowning deeper. There was a quality to the man's scent he hadn't caught before, a hint of fading arousal and more.

When Epps flicked his eyes back to him, Toshi forced himself not to frown and met those sharply intelligent eyes that he now knew was hiding something and it wasn't just his own unease at the man's presence.

"I'm filing the first of my reports in two days, I'll bring it along tomorrow morning for you to read if you'd like. It's mostly on the other camps but it's a good base for the work I'm doing here, that you're so generously helping me with." Epps smiled again but there was an unfocused quality to it as if he watched Toshi and Mick behind him as well.

"Hm, yes, I'd like to see it. Shall I have someone escort you back to your hotel?"

"Oh no, no I'm fine, I've a car coming for me later but your guards have offered to show me a fighting lesson. I'm sure it's just an excuse to knock the stuffings out of me but I'll take it. Thank you though, you've been very kind."

Toshi nodded and let the man nod as well and return to the guards he'd been following. He watched Epps leave, watched as the man's eyes locked with Mick's and Mick scowled at him as he passed.

"Sakura-sama?" One of the guards asked when Toshi continued to stand there.

"Epps was driven to the Yards and back?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you followed Mick-san's requirements for helmets?"

"Of course, sir."

He glanced over to the guard. "Did he wander away from your sight while there?"

"No sir."

"He smelled of desire..."

"Oh, that..." the guard half grinned. "One of the female workers, she was a little aggressive in her efforts to convince him to hire her. Must have needed a fix."

"How'd Epps react?"

"Respectfully, sir, but not without a physical response. He tried to joke it off but it was pretty obvious he was aroused and embarrassed by it."

"Very good. I want you hold onto his helmet, make sure it isn't cleaned. Have it waiting at the front door, Alec will be down for it shortly. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Toshi nodded and moved to join where Alec and Mick stood waiting. He let Mick guide them inside and when the door was securely shut he paused. "Mick, would you please check on Epps? He said something about the Guards showing him a fighting lesson, I'd like to make sure he doesn't get his neck broken."

"They can..." Mick started to protest but there was something hard and worried in Toshi's eyes. It was something new since they'd left Yasun's meeting. "Of course." He'd noticed the brief conversation between the guard and Toshi and he wondered if the man had confessed



something to worry his lover. He nodded and moved to go to the lower level exercise areas without questioning again.

Toshi rested a hand on Alec's arm and gave the guards that waited by the door a look. They nodded and stepped outside, standing there to do their job instead of inside and still keeping a close eye.

"What's wrong?" Alec asked in a soft voice.

"Alec...I...it may be nothing."

"What? Is it Mick?"

"No, well sort of, look, I don't expect you to get this but I'm having them send Epps' helmet here. Can you pull some hairs from it and send them out tonight for a rush dna sample?"

"Of course I can, I can have the results to you tomorrow morning."

"Before nine am."

"May I ask why?"

"Alec... Epps, he's been bugging me, he... I feel like I should know him. I want to know if his DNA kicks up any matches. I want to know why he smells like I know him."

"You don't..." there was no delicate way to ask. "You don't suppose he went to the Pony Club?" Toshi had told him once that his father had sampled any DNA from Toshi when he'd been found. In theory if any confirmable evidence of which humans of the hundreds that had attended the club and possibly paid to have sex with his son could be found, it would be saved and matched up as it could be. It was something that Toshi hadn't even wanted to know about, even to the point of if any useable DNA had been collected.

"No, that would make more sense. I want you to run it in comparison to Mick."

"Mick?"

"Alec...just...please?"

"Of course, I'll see to it directly. "

"Don't let Mick know."

"Not a word."

"Good, thanks, Alec."

The blonde smiled. "Welcome."

"I'll be downstairs with Mick and I'll keep him there long enough."

"You'll have the results before nine, promise."

Andy sighed and kicked off the blunt square heels he'd been wearing. "Oh so pretty but they pinch my toes." Mick hadn't followed, neither had Toshi or Alec and he figured they were holed up in some exclusive meeting and didn't want to hurt his feelings by excluding him. Not that he

minded, meetings bored him senseless.

"Don't wear them, then, dumbass." Rez muttered and slipped past the artist to get some water from the kitchen. While there he looked for food and settled on grabbing an apple when nothing else appealed. He figured he should make sure he had something to eat, make some effort anyway. He'd been almost too nervous to enjoy the honor of sharing a meal with so many powerful and respected people.

When he wandered back into the main room and down the hallway no one else had made it back to the apartment yet but Andy was coming back from the bathroom. His hair was down and his face was washed and the man looked almost normal. Normal if the lady's dress suit and small beads of fake white pearls could be overlooked.

"Laundry's back early. It's late, I'm putting mine away tomorrow. Want to watch a movie?"

Rez just shot Andy the finger as he walked by.

"Guess that's a no, ah well, I'll read a book." Andy's voice drifted down the hallway after Rez.

The human seemed to have issues with being alone, he was always around someone. When there wasn't someone for him to cluster about he had the tv or radio on or some other noise and it annoyed Rez. Privacy and silence were rare treats and Andy didn't seem to understand that.

There was no thought about waiting until the morning to put his clean laundry away. The idea that the clothing was his was still novel and new and he treasured the outfits too much to leave them waiting in their laundry bag. He'd happily have learned to do his own washing, something he hadn't done since he was nine or ten years old and taken off of household duties and moved into cleaning up after the workers. He'd even offered to do the washing but Alec had refused. Someone was paid to do it, another job made for someone, another I/S life partially supported and who was he to debate that.

He settled for just taking really good care of the clothing while it was under his control. That meant putting them away, properly and promptly and he placed his water and apple into his room before hauling the bag down to his closet. He turned on the light and began to remove his clean laundry, refolding anything that got rumpled and slipping some of the items onto hangers. It made him feel good and happy to do it.

Even underwear was a new concept. He hadn't ever owned any, wasn't sure of the point to wearing it either. Beyond wearing it because seeing him in it or removing him from it appealed to his owners, he'd never worn underwear the way most people did. When he'd found this closet full of clothing he'd found an interesting selection of boxers, briefs and long combinations of the two. He'd been experimenting with wearing them and so far had been unimpressed. The boxers were more comfortable but the baggy fabric bunched, the briefs felt too tight and the combination pairs made him itch. He was trying though simply because he knew it was the modest thing to do and, well, because he had the choice now.

One of his pairs of boxers was all lumpy and Rez tsked at it like it had been bad. He tried to refold it but the fabric was lumpy so he snapped it open trying to flatten it. Black cloth fell from inside the pair, Rez thought it might be a sock and he finished folding and putting the boxer away before he bent down and picked the fabric up. It didn't feel like a sock, the fabric was too smooth and cotton stretchy feeling. He turned it around in his hands and frowned.

It wasn't a sock but a pair of black underwear and not one of his own. They looked like some woman's pair but as he turned them over in his hands he saw the two tiny initials, AF on the back. Just like his clothes all had RR hidden somewhere in them. It made sorting their laundry easier when one pair of blue boxers looked like every other pair of blue boxers. They were a pair of Andy's black, stretchy, soft panties. Sleek and seamless and oddly elegant in a perverted kind

of way and so totally Andy, Rez almost dropped the pair when he figured out what they were.

He shoved them quickly into his pocket and hurried to get his clothes away. There was nothing for it, he had to return them. The cloth was bunched up in his pocket, rubbing a little against him and that made him feel a little flushed and embarrassed. There was no fun left in sorting his clothing now, no time to straighten everything and make sure every hanger was facing the same way and all the stacks were tidy, he had to get the panties back to Andy and away from him before he got caught with them.

Andy wasn't in the front room. The lights were dim and the television was off. The bags of returned clean laundry still waited outside of Toshi and Mick's room as well as Alec's so they weren't home yet. That meant Rez was alone in the apartment with Andy, with the man's panties in his pocket like some guilty testament. He moved to the artist's room door meaning to just slid the panties into the top of his laundry bag and return them with no fuss or notice. Only, in spite of his fussing about not putting the clothes away until morning, he had taken the bag into his room.

He raised his hand to knock but froze. What if they were the same pair Andy had worn at the club, the pair Rez had pulled from his hips? The same pair Andy had teased he should keep, like it was some trophy. He'd refused it that day but here he was, hovering in the hallway with them in his pocket. The nitwit wouldn't believe it was an accident of the laundry. He'd make some joke, some lewd dirty comment and Rez didn't want to hear that, didn't want to be teased when it was not his fault.

He dropped his hand and didn't knock. The panties stayed in his pocket, a guilty weight. He could drop them into the dirty clothing bin and they'd show up in Andy's washing next week and he'd be none the wiser. Better, Rez wouldn't have to listen to him bitch about how he'd stolen his underwear. Only he didn't go to the bathroom to throw them in the dirty clothes right away, he found his hand in his pocket stroking the fabric and his feet taking him back to his room. Andy wouldn't get them back for another week if he put them in the dirty clothes now or in an hour or tomorrow morning and Rez was going to be damned before he made a special trip to the bathroom to return them, not when he'd be going there eventually anyway. Or so he told himself, but as his bedroom door shut behind him he had the cloth out, turning it over and over in his hands, he even went so far as to carefully sniff the fabric to see if it had retained any scent of the other man but all he got was a nose full of soap scent that made him sneeze. What was a few more hours or days, Andy wouldn't know the difference and as Rez justified it to himself he found himself wondering what the human had worn tonight. Was it panties and garters, or maybe some odd contrast of men's briefs under the fussy serious lady's suit, or maybe it was a plain pair of pantyhose, no panties just silky nylon covering his ass, his groin... Rez groaned at the thought but he didn't put the panties down and he made no move to return them.

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Chapter Fifty Eight

Alec turned a corner and had to pause. Toshi stood, staring out over the yards around the green plants. The morning sun was bright and it struck his hair and brought out the blue highlights hidden in the black. He had it brushed out, loose and glossy, to fall to his waist and the light breeze teased with the ends. He knew Toshi well enough to judge his mood just from how he stood but was surprised he'd retreated to the casual formality of his mother's family.

It wasn't a suit or dress pants and shirt he wore, nothing of the boardroom. Instead he wore tabi socks and a crisp white juban that peeked from the sedate and very proper grey and black kimono that was belted in place. The fabric was I/S woven and made in the camp, Toshi's family crest was a subtle monochrome pattern woven into the shades of black and grey. The high end sunglasses that covered his eyes were an odd contrast to the ritual casual clothing he'd put on.

"Mick was asking where you were." Alec said as he moved closer. A cushion had been tossed on the roof and on a small table Toshi's computer was open, humming to itself. "How long have you been up here?"

One dark shoulder shrugged. "Couldn't sleep, I didn't want to wake him. What did you tell him?"

"That you had an early teleconference."

"You shouldn't have to lie for me."

"Well, it wasn't a lie, you did have an early teleconference but I took it for you. Twenty minutes until Epps is to meet you, he's actually here already, downstairs making Mick want to strangle him." He slipped the paper from its folder, placed the folder under the report and glanced at it again. "Courier arrived..."

Toshi turned a little but Alec was virtually unreadable to his eyes or his senses. The report was in his hand and all he had to do was reach out and take it but Toshi found himself pausing, uncertain he wanted to know. If he took that report and had been wrong he'd have to explain to Alec. If he took it and was right he'd have to explain so much more to so many others. He was frowning when he reached for it and Alec put the paper and folder in his hands.

Alec watched as Toshi scanned the paper and nothing in his eyes or expression changed. "Who do you want me to send up?"

He read the paper a third time before glancing up to see Alec watching him. "I have an appointment set with Epps, I mean to keep it." The paper and folder were placed on the low table next to his computer, face down.

"Should I...?"

"No. I want to speak to him alone. Don't worry so."

Alec only frowned a little but as Toshi's legal counsel as well as his secretary he was just glad that Epps had signed a really well crafted release form that may, if they were lucky, cover them if Epps accidentally got tossed off the rooftop. Just to be safe, he'd have a guard on the other end of the roof, someone that would happily witness Toshi was far, far away when the reporter suddenly made up his mind to try to fly.

The sunlight was bright but the Yards still looked cheap and dirty. Even the section that had become a small market where wealthy humans wandered in to shop for authentic I/S crafted goods. Dingy-looking I/S huddled together and watched the humans with wary eyes. The market was a small bit of hope and he had plans to expand it, make it a real place of safe commerce

where a human having a wallet go missing wasn't more important than an I/S being beaten to death. His vision was good enough to make out the warehouses that abutted the Yards and as he waited he tried to picture things as they one day could be, people with all sizes of eyes, working and living side by side.

"This never ceases to amaze me." Epps' voice reached Toshi as his footsteps clicked on the walkways. "I can't even keep a cactus alive. Beautiful morning though, isn't it?"

"Yes, quite." Toshi answered but he didn't look away from the land laid out in front of him.

Epps came and stood near Toshi and glanced out over the Yards. "Imagine what your people could do if all that concrete was pulled up? All the Yards would be a garden."

"My people have valued what resources they haven't been stripped of." Toshi drew a breath. When he glanced to the side Epps was pretending to study the Yards. "I'm not a man to be trifled with, you do understand this, correct?"

Epps turned and very directly met Toshi's sunglass shaded eyes. "I respect the authority you hold."

"I think it's time you tell me the truth of why you're here." He watched very carefully for any change to the human's expression but it remained perfectly open with an easy, trust me half smile.

"I've told you the reason I'm here."

"You're a man that has covered some of the most brutal wars in the last twenty years. You've interviewed leaders that happily make their enemies into dinner and serve them to their victim's family members. You've been kidnapped by factions not wanting the truth of their horrors to be made public on a global scale and yet, here you are. Following a story that is fairly stable, in places that are fairly stable, and a cause that most humans will find absurd at best. What are you doing here?"

"I've told you. This is an amazing story and no one is telling it. An entire race of people are in the efforts of forming an identity, this is a singular moment in history and I want to record it. That's it, that's my full motivation."

Toshi lashed out without thought or even with anger. He swung and Epp's legs were easily knocked out from under him. The man tumbled down, knocking a planter over as he fell and Toshi followed him. As he got the older human twisted onto his belly and his arm literally twisted behind him, Toshi held him down with a knee to his back. He wasn't even upset but he wasn't going to tolerate being lied to any further.

"Enough!" Toshi snapped. "Did you think me so stupid or blind that I would believe your word?"

Epps grunted a little, startled by suddenly finding himself knocked down and held in place, arm twisted at a painful angle. "I'm here for the story!" He protested again.

Toshi twisted the captured limb a little further to show his displeasure.

"Christ! Alright...alright....and for personal reasons too....don't snap it off!"

The confession spilled, Toshi released his hold on the older man and stepped away. "Stop playing us for fools." He hissed out and snatched the paper from the small table. As Epps was getting to his knees, Toshi pushed the paper under his nose.

"How did you..."

He shook the paper when he wanted to shake the man. "You will tell him the truth, today and until you do you will have no further co-operation from me or my people."

"You don't understand..."

"Shut up!" He snapped. "I'm not the one that needs to understand. Make this right and with his permission you may stay. Or slink away and make sure I never see you again. Either way, by this time tomorrow, he will know the truth."

"Let me explain..."

Toshi stood up and wasn't surprised to see one of the guards standing within line of sight but far enough away to offer privacy. He nodded to the woman and she started over. "I don't want to hear another word from you, remove yourself until this is resolved."

Epps was smart enough not to try to remain with the guard ready to drag him from the roof. He was equally smart enough not to push the issue with Toshi. The man didn't look overly intimidating physically, but he knew he didn't need the guards to back up his order. He didn't miss the anger in the half breed and didn't want to linger and push his luck further.

"No, roll with it, when he pulls you back don't fight it, go down, roll, find your feet." Mick shook his head and moved over but Rez was frowning and so was Andy now. Getting the two of them to practice fighting wasn't the smartest idea. It seemed to make them both extra stubborn. "You pull on someone..." he caught Rez's shoulder and arm and yanked but the purple haired man dug his heels in and pulled against the yank. "Their reaction is to hold their ground. You'll catch someone more off guard by going with the pull."

The guard that was helping them came up behind Mick and yanked him in the same way but instead of resisting, he dropped and let the momentum carry him back. He rolled on one shoulder and easily was back on his feet to the side of the guard.

"Neither one of you can out muscle someone, so don't try. From here? I can hit his knees, his ribs, his kidneys, even keep the hand that grabbed me and twist it into a lock." He was sticking with throws and locks, drops and rolls. "You keep your balance, put them off of theirs."

Andy sighed and rolled his eyes, one of his pigtailed twirled endlessly around his finger.

"Try to take this a little more seriously. Grab him, and Rez, don't fight it, give in."

"Yeah, bunny boy, don't fight it."

"Eat me."

The guard next to Mick snickered a little, but the banter just gave Mick a headache. Day three of this and they'd made little progress. Andy was resenting every moment and while Rez seemed willing to learn he was having a difficult time accepting that he had to learn from Mick.

Andy unwillingly moved behind Rez and slapped a lazy hand on the skinny man's shoulder. He pulled and this time Rez didn't dig his heels in. Andy stumbled back a little startled and Rez slipped down to the mat, rolled far more gracefully than any of them had expected. He even managed to find his feet fairly smoothly and he flashed a quick surprised smile.

"There you go."

"You're cute rolling around on the floor, legs over your head, and you made it seem so natural...like maybe you're used to wearing your ankles for earrings." Andy teased.

"Fucker!" Rez snarled, and this time instead of just snapping back he leapt at Andy.

Mick sighed and rubbed his eyes, the guard beside him chuckling happily as the two men rolled to the mats like squabbling children. Neither man really knew how to fight, they looked more like they were wrestling, each one trying to restrain the other's arms and heads. They ended up tumbling on the mats in a pile of arms and legs and Mick knew it was going to get ugly when he noticed Andy rubbing against Rez in ways that had nothing to do with pulling hair or twisting wrists.

As he moved in to separate them, Rez noticed too and it made him snarl a little. It didn't seem to matter that Andy had Rez's braid wrapped around one hand and was pulling his head to a painful angle. The teasing, almost foreplay-like wrestling only served to make Rez angrier. He caught one of Andy's hands with both of his own and twisted.

"Shit! STOP IT!" Andy cursed, but he didn't let go of the braid, he was angry now and he yanked harder pulling a painful grunt from Rez.

"Enough!" Mick shouted, but every time he got a grip on an arm or leg, the body attached to it slithered away. The pair seemed almost glued together in their anger. The guard had to come in and physically pull Rez away, catching the angry man about the waist and not letting him go so Mick could get between them. "What are you two? Five years old?" They both glared at him, Andy rubbing his wrist where he sat on the mats. "This is important, you can joke and snipe at each all you want, but this could save your life."

Andy sniffed and stood up, raising an eyebrow and looking seriously put out. "Sorry, Mick, I'm a lover, not a fighter. This is ridiculous. I don't go anywhere without a guard on me now and when I do, you're with me. I've taken good care of myself for all these years I think with all this added protection I should manage just fine."

"Andy..."

"No! I'm not doing this stupidity anymore and I'm not letting jelly bean boy break my wrist. All I have, all that matters, is being able to use my hands. I'm not going to risk them to this nonsense!" He had his wrist cradled to his chest a little and it wasn't hurt as badly as it could have been, but it was painful and it had frightened him. "You two can roll around together all you want, I'm done with this."

"Andy!" It was pointless, the artist had a point and it was a valid one. Worse, Mick knew that look and he knew Andy was done indulging him. He felt his headache getting worse. "You may as well go too Rez, I won't force you to learn this either."

"I..." Rez glanced from Mick to Kesses and back again. "I'd like to learn, if you're still willing to show me."

That surprised Mick. "Of course, just enough for today? I'll show you how to punch tomorrow, maybe teach you some boxing." With the amount of anger Rez carried, he bet the man would like to learn to box.

Rez nodded with a serious look to his eyes. "Thank you." It galled him to be nice to Mick but they were right. He needed to know something about protecting himself because it would be a long time before he wasn't viewed as just a whore to most humans. Rez nodded and quickly left the training floor, preferring to shower back in the apartment.

"God those two..." Mick sighed.

"They're making progress." Kesses nodded. "Rez-san isn't the same man that you and Sakura-sama brought home."

"Thankfully. Thanks for the help again. You know you can pass this off to someone else, doesn't have to be you every day."

Kesses shrugged. "I don't mind. All I'm doing is throwing you around."

"Wait until I show him how to knock a bigger opponent flat, you won't be smiling so smugly."

Kesses rubbed his neck. "I remember." They'd all been reluctant to take orders from a human until one by one Mick had challenged them all, one after the other, he'd taken some heavy blows, but knocked most of them down in the process. "Tomorrow, then."

"Thanks." Mick nodded and wandered to the showers to clean up and change.

The hot water helped with his headache, but the silence and solitude helped just as much. Toshi was the source of his headache and he knew it wouldn't fully go away until he was able to find and corner his lover. The man had been gone when he'd woken up and had been gone all day. Every time Mick had a moment to go looking for him, he was busy or away or off somewhere. Mick was starting to think it was personal.

He dried off a leg. Toshi could only avoid him so long. He was going to peg the other man down and find out why he was being so twitchy. It was most likely stemming from the whole "build a country plan" that was being forged with Yasun, but Mick wanted to be sure. Really, if Toshi couldn't lean on Mick a little over something so serious, what good was he? He just had to remind Toshi that he was there and that he'd be there as long as he was allowed.

"Mick?"

The voice wasn't Toshi's and that was about the only voice he wanted to hear at the moment. The voice did belong to Epps but the man was sounding unusually serious. Mick stopped toweling dry his hair and reached to pull on his socks, not caring that the man had caught him in his boxers.

"Now's not a good time." He answered and was surprised Epps wasn't even really in the locker room but hovered in the doorway.

"I know, I'm sorry but this...Jesus..." Epps whispered a little when he came into the room and spotted the younger man mostly undressed. "I'm sorry." He answered to the hard glare. "It's just... you're so young to have scars like that."

Mick shrugged and was unwilling to hash over old times with a man he didn't like. "What is it, Epps? I'm not in the mood to play more of your games tonight." He slid jeans on and sat down to pull on his shoes.

"I know, really, trust me I know. I didn't mean to do this, not this way, it's just, your boyfriend is a crafty sort and this is too important for me to just disappear over..."

Mick glanced up and frowned. "What are you babbling about?" He shoved his other foot into his shoe and stood up to pull a loose t-shirt on.

"Look, we need to talk."

"Not now, I'm not in a mood for your questions."



"No..." Epps sighed and shook his head. "Not like that... Look... God there's no easy way to say this. I didn't know, okay? Well, I've known for months now, but that's not the same. I didn't know, know, you know?"

Mick stood and knew he was staring at the reporter the same way he would a mad man. "No, I don't know."

"Look...you see..." Epps met the hazel eyes and sighed. "No easy way to say this, I'm afraid."

"You're not saying anything."

"Yeah well... look...Mick...I'm your father."

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Chapter Fifty Nine

Mick froze. "What?"

"I'm your father."

"This isn't a funny joke." His chest felt tight and he didn't want to take his frustrations, worry and anger out on the reporter. "If you're trying to provoke a reaction I suggest you stop."

"I'm not. I didn't know, I mean about you. I knew your mother the timing is right. Couple months back Mr. Ranvier, Luc Henri, he calls me up and says why is your son sleeping with my son. I had no clue. He'd run your DNA and because I have Ranvier Industry security clearance it popped out a match to within 99% certainty. Which is about as close as it can get with the sub-mutation that runs in my family. I was only a 98.5% match to my own father."

Mick stumbled back, trying to shuffle away a little from the reporter that was playing games with him.

"So I didn't know, I didn't and I didn't mean to just drop this on you but Mr. Ranvier, Toshi, told me I had to tell you if I wanted to stay. He's a smart one." Epps smiled a little. "Yeah there's a great story here but I was hoping to meet you without having to tell you who I was. I mean I always joked about the possibilities of a babe in every port of call but it was just a joke." Epps smiled wider as Mick looked more horrified. "God, I'm not handling this well, but hey, I'm your dad."

"No." Mick shook his head. "The police...they ran my DNA it didn't...there were no solid hits..."

"I saw that in the report, three or four to 97% but none of them admitted to knowing your mother. It's that sub-mutation we carry, it can be slippery. They only ran it against locals too and I wasn't registered as a local, I was only in town for a few months. I...I have a copy of the comparison but it's in my hotel. Toshi has one too but I did know your mother..."

"Toshi knew..." Mick felt his chest cramp up and was finding it hard to breath. "He...you're..." Toshi knew, Toshi had known and Mick didn't. That hit him like a rock and almost was more of a shock than the confession the reporter was making.

Then it sunk in. If what he was being told was true there was a solid, real connection between them. Luc Henri wouldn't have been the only one to run his DNA code and compare to private records, the Commune would have as well. They always tried to find any living relations before adopting a child, they would have run Mick's code. Epps had done a report on the Communes, not the one Mick had grown up in but the Communes in general. His DNA would be on file, it would have shown up as a hit. His parents didn't make such bold mistakes and they never lost data.

They'd run his code looking for family and Epps would have shown up. They would have known. Mick's head spun. Toshi knew. His family had known. He had a father, a real father and they'd all known. He wasn't just some random mistake from some chance encounter he had a father. A father that had left him with his drunken mother and then let him be dumped into a foster care system that had been less than kind.

"Mick... say something would you?" Epps asked. "I can't be that much of a disappointment..."

He wanted to curse the reporter out, wanted to scream at him but the words stuck in his throat and not even a sound came out. He was shaking, in pain and rage and betrayal. They had known and kept it from him, even Toshi had known. His mind spun over on itself and he wasn't sure if he wanted to be angry or deeply, achingly hurt.

"I was married for a time, I've two kids, a boy and girl. The oldest is fourteen next month." Epps swallowed hard as the look of panic and horror grew on the other man's face. "Look we should go somewhere and talk this over. I was pretty shocked when I found out too..."

Epps took a step closer to him and Mick jerked back. He couldn't breath, he was stuck under ground in a building that suddenly felt like a trap and he couldn't breath. As Epps talked his head felt light and there wasn't enough air to breathe. Mick moved quickly now that Epps was away from the door way and slipped around him.

"Mick!" Epps called out as the younger man darted away.

He didn't listen, couldn't wait because if he stayed there he'd suffocate. He stumbled blindly for the steps and rushed up them, tripping in his haste and not caring. He reached the door and one of the guards, he couldn't remember the man's names stopped him.

"Mick-san?" The questioned, his eyes darting down the steps and the second guard moving to draw the handgun they wore.

Hands fell on his shoulders and Mick roughly knocked them away.

"Mick-san, what's happened?" The human looked frightened and wide eyed.

He needed air and to get away. Mick pushed past the guard and stumbled outside, moving quickly to put distance between himself and the horrible truth Epps had just spilled out around him.

The guards exchanged a look. "You don't think he shot the other human do you?"

"We'd have heard it."

"Mick!" The human in question called out and hurried up the steps following in Mick's panicked wake.

The guards stepped in front of him. "Follow him, at a distance." They'd already called for back up but neither one seemed willing to leave the door unguarded or to leave Mick staggering blindly out into the Yards.

"Damn it!" Epps cursed and moved not to leave the building but to climb more steps, hurrying up to the apartment and hopefully where he'd find Toshi.

He didn't knock, didn't wait for entry and the room went silent when he stormed in. Andy was there, curled on the edge of the sofa with invoices and fabric samples around him. He was on the sofa because Alec and Toshi had taken over the table.

"Call your people off." Epps demanded. "I won't be held hostage here."

Toshi raised an eyebrow and glanced to Alec but the man looked as clueless. "I don't know what you mean."

"I told him and he freaked out and left and your people won't let me follow. Call them off."

"What do you mean he freaked out? What did he say?"

Andy forgot his invoices. "Told who what?"

"He didn't say anything, you're the one that put a deadline on this and now he's run off."

"What?" Andy asked again. He glanced to the door to the kitchen and where Rez wandered back into the room at the sound of raised voices but the pink eyes looked as uninformed as Andy felt.

"Epps is Mick's father, Toshi ran the DNA." Alec explained.

"What?" Andy sat up, papers scattering everywhere.

Rez snorted. "Duh. They smell like family." The room turned and looked to Rez and he shrugged. "I've been around a lot of humans, sue me. I just thought it was something I wasn't supposed to know."

"It doesn't matter." Toshi held a hand up.

"Wait, you knew but you let him tell Mick alone?" Andy snapped at Toshi. "Are you stupid?"

Toshi pointed to Epps. "He's the one that's been lying to us all. Saying he's here for a story when he's just been jerking us around to get close to Mick, he's the one that should tell Mick the truth."

"This is Mick we're talking about, of course he freaked out. God. He's going to think we all conspired to keep this from him. We need to call Grandma Rose, she'll be able to talk him down." He started to move to get the phone since everyone, even Toshi, stood still and a little shocked.

"Talk him down? Admittedly this sort of thing is a shock but this is Mick we're talking about." Alec shook his head and wondered if Andy should be scolded for theatrics.

"Yes, Mick, who's spent his life being the disposable kid no one wanted. Someone threw him in a fucking trash can and left him for dead and now you waltz in and tell him oops daddy didn't give a shit about him? He's going to go half mad hearing this, especially if you just dropped it on him. And what the hell are you doing here now? Where were you when he was a kid and needed you? Do you have any idea what that boy went through? The things he survived because you were busy off playing globe trotting reporter?" He paused in dialing the phone. "Shit...you did a story on the Commune didn't you?"

Epps nodded. "While back yes, but not the one here."

"Fuck me, they knew. They would have your DNA on file, they would have run Mick's to their internal database, they knew and never told him." Andy put the phone down.

"Do you think he'll figure that out?" Alec asked and knew either way they'd have to call Mick's parents.

"Honey if I figured it out I promise you he did. We need to find him, bring him home. He'll go someplace quiet."

"Andy..."

"No!" Andy snapped back at Alec. "I'm right about this."

Toshi nodded. "We need to find him. I didn't think about how he'd take it." He'd been more caught up in Epps' deceit that he hadn't thought too far about how Mick would take it. "We still should call his family and you..." Toshi turned on Epps. "Are staying here until we bring him back. I want someone to watch him too."

"I'll stay, see to it he minds his manners." Rez volunteered.

"I'll stay too." Andy added.

"But..."

"Mick's not going to want to see me, Alec should get his family together and I'll stay here with daddy dearest." He didn't think Epps was a danger but he didn't like the idea of Rez staying alone with the man. His offer made Rez frown. "Besides, Mick doesn't deal well when he's upset and surrounded by people. Just go, find him and bring him home."

"One of the guards followed him." Epps finally offered. "I didn't mean...it wasn't my intention to hurt him I just blurted it out. I wasn't even going to tell him."

"Stay here." He ordered Epps. "Alec?"

"I've got it covered, I'll go over and get them and explain everything."

"Thanks." Toshi nodded and moved to leave.

Andy moved and caught the man's arm. "This isn't your fault."

"I wasn't thinking."

"It's not your fault, just bring him home. We'll get his pretty head straightened out from there." He smiled and leaned up to quickly kiss Toshi, not caring if the reporter saw. Toshi was family and worried and that was all that mattered.

He nodded and accepted the quick kiss before leaving the apartment. He was downstairs before

it occurred to him that his own father had to have known and that was an entirely different issue to deal with. One that would wait until Mick was home safe and okay and Epps was dealt with.

It didn't surprise Toshi that the guards led him across the darkening Yards not through the closing up market but over toward the club and the freelancers that worked the nights. Mick wouldn't linger there, he knew he wouldn't and he also knew how much ground the man could cover on foot if he wanted to hurry. The motorcycles allowed them to catch up and Toshi was suddenly grateful that the guard had followed his lover because the way Mick was moving he didn't seem to notice his surroundings and in the Yards that would get a man mugged or worse.

Toshi finally caught up with Mick as the human was slipping around the barricades about the construction site. He hurried to catch up but Mick didn't seem to notice him.  
"Wait...Mick...please..." Toshi ran but Mick didn't pause. He had to reach out and snag an arm.

The contact made Mick jerk away but instead of lashing out as he normally would he pulled away and back. His feet stumbled in a rut on the uneven ground and his ankle turned. He fell hard and made no effort to ease or catch his fall. Toshi followed him down in the darkness but able to see far too clearly. Mick's eyes were wide and tormented, his breathing too short but there was nothing aware about him. Even to his senses, Mick felt shut down to Toshi.

He ran his hands over the turned ankle but it was just twisted and he gently eased it to straighten out. "Come on, Mick, shhhh, it's okay. Let's get you home, okay? Let's get you home..." Mick shivered at the touch but didn't try to pull away again. "A little help please!" He called out to the guards that had fanned out around them and that was all he needed. Now that they had been invited to help, the Guard was eager and Toshi was suddenly and for the first time, grateful for their presence. Getting Mick safely home was going to be so much easier with them to help. He glanced up to the I/S that had gathered around him. "Let's get him home."

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Sixty

Andy thought he could handle just about anything. For all his flighty silliness, he really did consider himself a grounded, stable, steady man. He'd lived on the estate of a wealthy man as a boy and had very clear memories of skipping more meals than he'd eaten. He'd been up and down, busted broke and had plenty of money; he'd been in fights and smashed roaches with barely a flinch. It disappointed him to be so utterly grateful to escape from Mick and Toshi's bedroom and the utter helplessness he felt sitting there next to Toshi, unable to reach Mick.

"How is he?" Rose asked as soon as Andy came back into the main room. Rez was plopped into a chair at the table, watching everything with bright eyes that seemed more fascinated than

upset. Alec was sitting by Pia and Rose on the sofa and Epps was pacing. Everyone but Rez hopped to their feet when he joined them.

"He's..." Andy sighed. "Fuck if I know, lights are on but no one's home. He's just sitting there. Figured Toshi might have better luck alone."

"Has he said anything?" Rose glanced behind Andy looking down the hallway.

"No, not yet."

"I should..."

Andy put a hand on her arm. "No, you shouldn't. You knew, you all knew and you never told him? How could you do that to him?"

Rose drew a breath and squared her shoulders. "We made a choice. We did what we thought was best for him."

"That wasn't your choice to make, he's my son." Epps snapped.

"Your son?" Rose frowned; Andy had never seen her frown before. "You aren't his father in any way but biologically. When I found him he hadn't spoken a word in years, he was an emotional and physical wreck. No one wanted him, he was days away from being institutionalized. When the computers kicked your name out as a potential match as his father, what should we have done? Would you have quit your work, bought a house, settled down and raised him? Or would you have dumped him with a nanny or into some group home and sent him cards on the holidays?" Her voice grew more angry as she went on. "We gave him a home, a family, stability and a chance to heal. He's a fine man now. He is well loved and you have no claim to that or to call him son!"

"Grandma..." Pia put a hand on Rose's shoulder, frowning herself.

"It's okay, dear." She drew a breath and calmed herself down. "We should have told him, but he's been happy. None of us ever expected him to ever be happy, not like this and none of us wanted to risk damaging that with something that seemed so unimportant."

"Unimportant?" Epps questioned. "Did none of you think that maybe I would like a chance to know I had a child? That wasn't your choice to make, like it or not I am his father!"

"All of you shut the fuck up!" Rez snapped.

The room went silent and everyone looked to the I/S who had, until that moment, been silent. Rez was sitting, rubbing his forehead.

"You're giving me a fucking headache. Don't any of you get this? It's not about you or what you want, fucking lying ass humans, selfish twitwads. Yes, you should have told him but like dumbasses, you didn't! Deal with it. And you? Whine, whine, whine! He's not a fucking thing you can claim. It's too late to buy him a fucking pony, so sit down and shut up! Maybe if you're not total slime he'll let you have something to do with him later on, ya know, once he's over the fact that you're all pieces of shit." He stood up and snatched his bottle of water from the table. "God, I'm fucking going to my room."

They all stood silent as Rez disappeared down the hallway. Andy was the first to react. "I'll be right back." He nodded to Alec, trusting the man to keep peace and hurried down the hallway.

He caught a glimpse of purple hair floating around the corner and hurried a little more. Rez didn't disappear into his room but had continued down the side hallway to his closet.

"Rez..."

"Fuck off, I'll say whatever I want to say, fucking whiny selfish humans..." He pulled open the door to his closet and stepped inside.

Andy didn't pause. He followed Rez into the small space and caught the slender man's shoulder. It didn't take much force to tug and pull Rez around to face him.

"What?" Rez snapped, but didn't get any further than that.

Andy swooped in and covered the frowning mouth with his own. Rez pulled back but Andy followed, kissing his lips even when he stayed startled and unhappy. They stumbled back into Rez's perfectly organized and neatly hung line of clothing and hangers rattled.

Hands crept around Andy's waist and pulled their bodies closer as Rez's mouth softened and his lips parted. Andy kissed him properly now and let Rez swing him around to stumble and catch the door. It shut behind them, cutting them off from the rest of the apartment and Andy let Rez force him back against the door.

The kiss slipped from his control, from teasing, friendly like he'd planned to deeper, hungry, wanting, and he let Rez slip them down a far more desperate path than he'd expected to open up. Rez seemed to devour him and Andy let the slender man slip a leg between his own. Andy hadn't meant for it to grow so hot between them, but Rez seemed to have two modes; pissed off or horny, with no stops in between.

The kiss broke, but rather than let Rez start another one or move to take them any further forward, Andy wrapped his arms around Rez's body and pulled him close for a tight hug. That felt really good and not just because Rez was sexy as hell but it felt right to hide his face against the lean shoulder surrounded by so much spilled purple hair. He was careful not to tuck his face against Rez's neck, he didn't want to give the wrong impression and even when Rez tried to squirm away, Andy held onto the simple hug.

He sighed. "Thank you." He petted a hand gently over the back of Rez's head and felt the way the other man's hands fluttered, uncertain from where they'd held so tightly to his waist just a moment before. Rez could handle sex but the quiet casual intimacy of a hug had him uneasy.

Andy didn't push the contact for too long, and with a tight indrawn breath, he slipped away far enough to put a kiss on the side of the other man's face. "You said everything I wish I could have said. Thank you." He smiled softly at the startled, open shocked look on Rez's face. "I need to get back. You okay?"

Rez nodded stupidly.

"Good." He gently brushed his fingertips across Rez's face and felt something sharp and painful in his chest. Being tender to and with Rez shouldn't make his heart ache, it was Rez after all. The man was sex on legs, yes, but it was foolish to feel anything for him, wasn't it? "Join us if you get lonely?"

Again, Rez just nodded.

Andy nodded too, and slipped away to crack the door open but he paused half in the closet, half out in the hallway. He smiled wickedly. "Remind me when this is all settled down? I want to give you a thank you blow job, show you us humans know our stuff too." The shocked look on Rez's face turned startled and Andy grinned wider. He quickly slipped away, feeling almost giddy, before Rez could snatch him and demand proof then and there.

Toshi was both grateful Andy had left and upset by it. He wanted to be alone with Mick but he desperately wanted as many of Mick's friends and family around to help him as possible. Even though he knew, and agreed, that Mick would respond better to not being overwhelmed, he felt unprepared to deal with the situation. Andy had seemed willing to go away, leaving Toshi with the quite advice of just talk to Mick as his lingering help.

"Talk he says." Toshi whispered and sat back down. He frowned but Mick didn't notice. He hadn't noticed much of anything for hours now. They had been moving him around like a rag doll with no sign that he had noticed, Andy and Toshi had even changed Mick into comfortable sleeping clothes and Mick hadn't responded. "Andy assumes you're listening, wherever it is in your head you're hiding at. I would have thought you'd have wanted to cuss Epps out at least."

Mick had stopped and stared at Epps when they had gotten him back into the apartment. His face had twisted up angry and emotional but no words had come out. Epps had tried to talk to him but Mick had moved hurriedly away, retreating to their bedroom and they'd found him sitting in a corner.

"Should cuss me out too." Toshi said. He couldn't swear to it but the dimmer light and quiet room did seem to be drawing Mick back out from himself. "I should have known better. I was so angry with him, so pissed off... that he'd lied to you and me and all of us that was all I felt. I didn't think that this would upset you, I was just so angry with him. I wanted him to come clean, I...."

Toshi had to pause and rub the back of his neck. "My father? He had a secretary tell me. I mean I had father figures in my life before, my Uncle and Grandfather but they weren't my father and to be so sick and miserable and to know everything I had was gone... surrounded by humans and just so..." He sighed. "And then to have this guy in a suit tell me they'd identified my father and who it was and that he had made an appointment to meet me in a few days time? I just...I know it was stupid but I didn't want you to hear from someone else. I wanted Epps to have to tell you and I didn't think that you'd be upset...I'm sorry."

He glanced up and Mick was watching him, his eyes still a little unfocused but he was looking up now. It just made Toshi feel helpless. "I'm horrible at this. I'm better off alone. Maybe you're right; maybe forming a commitment is stupid. I can't see why you'd want to keep being with me. I'm an idiot and I'm going to keep doing stupid things like this, thoughtless things, that hurt you. God, I'm an idiot thinking you'd want to stay with me, having those papers drawn up... I just thought if I showed you I was serious..."

He snorted a little and shook his head. "Isn't this ironic? I can buy almost anything, once the Containment Act is pulled apart I'll be able to do almost anything and the only thing I want, the only thing I ever have wanted, is you and I can't buy that or force that and the little things like not messing up something this important I can't manage.

"I know...I mean I get it...the whole half breed thing is a bit much to get over. Publicly, legally, to declare ourselves together and partners? It'll be harder on you I'm already the freak. I can understand that it's just...time is wasted so easily. I think about my father, you know he says the only woman he ever loved was my mother. What would have happened if he'd had the courage to stand up for that? Would she still be alive? Would I have siblings? Maybe she wouldn't have died alone...God I don't want to die alone like that I mean if I don't get shot in the gut sometime in the next few years. Don't laugh at me but I was kind of thinking, if I were an old man and laying on my death bed it would be nice to have kids and grandkids and maybe a few great grandkids around and I wouldn't be afraid if you were there holding my hand, our family around us. Or if I outlived you, I wouldn't be afraid if I knew you were waiting for me..."

"I'm I/S and we don't...we don't bond like that...but you smell so right to me, that's so deep in my core and I can't shake it out. I know that you don't have that and you don't feel that the way I do,



I do know it and it's okay. I just can't imagine a day without you in it. I...God...I... it's not because I'm inexperienced or lacking real history in relationships, I know what I feel and I know how I am and I know I'll never, even if you can't forgive me for this and leave, I'll never get over you. You're it for me and that sounds so stalkerish but I swear I won't stop you if you want to go, when you're feeling better. I...it's not something you can really understand because you're human but you're all I want, all I need."

Toshi had to stop and sniff hard, his nose had gotten runny and he refused to admit that the burning feeling in his eyes might be tears. "You know, I'm half human too and some days I hate that half, some days it's the I/S side I hate more. It would be so much easier if I was one or the other, I'd know what the rules are but I'm not. I'm both so maybe it's okay to say this but maybe I shouldn't but maybe I need to and maybe you need to hear it to understand. I'm not just I/S and humans don't have that sense of scent like I/S do... but I love you, God help me I love you so much. Some days, I look at you and I can't breathe I love you so much and when I can't sleep and I'm feeling sick I'll sit here and watch you sleep and it just makes me feel better and when you laugh I want to laugh and...." He sighed.

"I don't expect anything, I just want you to be okay. I have no right but it's just...I thought if you knew how deeply you're loved...I promise I'll never mention getting married again or love again or any of this nonsense just don't leave and come back to me...please..."

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Blurring The Lines:

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Chapter Sixty One

The room was fairly silent while Toshi sat and tried to compose himself. Somehow he'd hoped that expressing all the feelings he was only really half aware of having words for would somehow magically cure Mick and make everything okay. It didn't and he knew it wouldn't but he'd still hoped.

"I'm going to go, get us some tea, maybe something to eat?" The irony made him huff a little bit in mild amusement. "Odd, me nagging you to eat something." He reached over and brushed a length of Mick's hair back behind one of the other man's ears. It was getting long and he was going to enjoy touching it before Mick broke down and went and got it cut. "Be back in a moment." Toshi stood up to leave and found a hand on his wrist, stopping him from leaving.

"Toshi..."

Mick's voice sounded dry and rough but it was the sweetest sound Toshi had ever heard. He sat back down and slipped the clinging hand from his wrist lower to twine around his own fingers. "I'm here." Mick's eyes had drifted down again.

"I...those papers."

"I know, I'm sorry...I won't ask again...won't badger you about it...I just...just want to keep you with me."

"They lied to me." He said softly. "They knew...you knew..."

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..."

Mick shook his head. "You knew for a few hours and made him tell me, they knew for years."

"That's upsetting you more than Epps himself."

"He didn't tell me either! Like I didn't matter..."

"Don't say that. I'm sure they have their reasons, may be selfish reasons but reasons."

"He knew... for months Toshi, months..." It was tearing him up and all manner of things he thought had been resolved and buried clawed at him. Every word felt like a struggle but the only bright spot he had was Toshi and he wasn't going to sit by and let the man berate himself over nothing. "Those papers...Toshi..."

"It's okay, really...I'm just being selfish."

"No...Toshi...I..." He didn't know how to explain, how to put feelings to words. Words had never been his ally and he'd never done well with them.

Toshi was only a half-breed and he often wondered what it felt like to be fully human or fully I/S. In this moment, as he sat with Mick, he was sure no full blood could sense another person as clearly as he was his lover. He knew, as surely as he knew anything, that Mick wanted to accept and was refusing him out of fear. The crushing, terror of a child not the cold fears of an adult and Toshi understood.

"I'm not going to abandon you." Toshi whispered. His hands slipped to either side of Mick's face and lifted it up but Mick kept his eyes down. "I'm going to try to never hurt you but I promise so long as you want me around I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I... Mick...I love you so much...the sound of your voice, the scent of your skin? This isn't about sex to me, it's you, all that you are. I can't...no..." He stopped himself. "No I can face the day without you but God...I don't want to try. I can survive without you in my life but I can't live if you're not in it. The only way you're going to lose me is if you ask me to go and even then I can't swear I'll go." He stroked his thumbs over Mick's cheekbones. "You're never going to be alone again if I have my say."

That made hazel eyes dart up and lock onto blue. "Get those papers."

"Mick..." but there was nothing in the other man's feel or face that said no. "Alec has them. Don't move. I'll be as quick as I can." He leaned in and brushed his lips to his lover's, but it was a brief kiss and he hurried to his feet and away to fetch the papers.

Toshi should have felt ready to do back flips. All he wanted was to make Mick his own, to join their lives as fully and deeply as he legally could, to shout to the world that they were together and now, when he'd given up hope, Mick had agreed. He should have been giddy with excitement but as he shut the bedroom door, all he felt was unease. Toshi was too honest to lie to himself; part of him knew Mick was only agreeing because he had just been reminded of how suddenly he could be abandoned.

One of the things he'd been told, yes before, as he'd been released from rehab was to not make

any major choices or changes for at least a year. He'd barely listened because his entire world had changed and he'd had little say over any of it but he thought about it now. It wasn't just good advice for someone in recovery but for anyone with a life turned upside down. Mick's father showing up qualified as that, his adoptive parents hiding his father did too. In a few hours time too much had been upended for Mick to make any real, solid, fair choices and Toshi knew it.

He knew it and knew if he brought those papers back Mick would sign them. Toshi would have everything he wanted and when things settled down Mick might come to regret such a serious choice made when he was so unstable. Worse, even if Mick never regretted it, Toshi knew he'd always wonder if his lover did. When...if...Mick signed those papers, Toshi wanted to be completely certain the other man meant it and was clearheaded enough to make the choice.

"Damn it." He rubbed his eyes and told his stomach to settle down, pushed the itchy feeling of a craving as far away as he could. Just because he was going to do the right thing didn't mean he was going to let Mick get totally away, he had a back up plan, one he hadn't expected to bring out until those papers were signed. "It'll do...it'll do for now." He muttered and made his way down the hallway to the front room. Not surprisingly everyone stood and stared at Toshi, but it was the crush of their worry and wants that made him want to snap.

"How is he? Is he speaking? Can I see him?" Rose asked right away.

"What's with this 'is he speaking?'" Epps questioned.

She turned and glared at him. "If you'd been a father you'd know."

"If your people had told me I would know." He snapped back.

"All of you shut up!" Toshi finally did snap out. "Yes, he's talking and no, none of you can see him. Not tonight, he's still upset and hurt and angry and if you try to talk to him now...well it'll do more harm than good. Let him sleep on this, all of you go home. He'll let you know when he's ready to see you." He caught Alec's eye and knew the other man understood and would see to it everyone cleared out without too much fuss.

Toshi didn't wait to see. He moved quickly to the office and the safe there. Alec had the combination number and that was it, no one else, not even Mick. Mostly it held back-ups of important information and the like, but Toshi had stashed something else in there a few weeks ago. The door to the safe beeped and opened. His hands found the smooth wood box without having to look for it.

The box was highly polished and a work of art by itself. It sometimes awed him what money could do, how much easier it was to get things done. A mere idle thought and a word to Alec, some brainstorming and a short wait, and that thought sat, waiting, in his safe in the smooth well crafted wood box. He only hoped he'd read Mick right and the man wouldn't be horribly offended. The safe door shut with a click and tight thump and Toshi kept the box in his hands, he'd made his choice and wasn't going to turn back.

"No, no I'll call with any news..." Alec soothed. "Both of you, I promise." He nodded to Epps before the man could ask, but glanced over when Toshi stepped from the office and forgot what he was saying when he saw what was in his friend's hands. "Toshi..." But he caught the slightest of shakes of the dark head and understood. Toshi didn't want notice drawn and he turned back to Mick's family. "Really, it'll be better to give them some space." He smiled gently and used it to hide the thrill of nervous energy he felt for Toshi. Alec knew what was in the box and what it meant.

Toshi nodded gently to where Andy sat, looking nervous and unsure and slipped back down the hallway, he didn't want to explain. He wasn't really sure he could, and he didn't like leaving Mick alone. He slipped back into their bedroom but Mick hadn't moved from where he had been

sitting. Still looking lost, confused and very much alone.

"Are they...?"

"I sent them home, told them you'd contact them when and if you feel like talking to them."

Mick sighed a shuddering breath. "Thanks. I don't...not tonight." Hazel eyes took in the wood box and not the expected papers and frowned.

"Mick," Toshi sat back down across from his lover. "I, I can't ask you to sign those papers, can't let you sign them, not tonight. In a couple of days or weeks when things settle down...not tonight but I'm selfish. I want you to be mine so badly, so deeply..." He glanced down to the box with its inlaid woods and smooth polish. "I was in a meeting a couple of weeks ago, sick and not even sure I could sit up for the whole thing and I started thinking about that first time you took me to Sleaze. And I thought about that collar that Andy gave to me to put on you and God, Mick, maybe it was wrong but it felt so good to put it on you and made me feel good every time I saw it on you and we weren't even....not yet..." He tried to grin sheepishly, but it felt flat. "I asked Alec, blind leading the blind, we're both more social rejects than anything but he understood. It was actually that conversation that lead to the whole, draw up the papers to legally join us but this one came first. One thing about having money, it's easy to make a whim a reality and I thought I'd be showing you this after we were as married as we could get but...now....I don't know this feels more right and maybe you'll think I'm a jerk or crazy and that's okay too...but...."

Toshi shrugged and opened the wood box. He had forced himself to put it in the safe and forget about it because each time he opened it his heart would thud faster. Nestled inside, just as he had left it, was the white gold necklace and bracelet he had made. Both were made of chain links, large enough to be obviously masculine, but not too large. Non-reflective and burnished to a matte finish, he'd requested that knowing Mick would never wear any jewelry that might spark and give away where he was hiding. Even the man's watch didn't catch the light.

"I... here...I didn't want it to be..." He picked up the bracelet. "Both have hidden latches and neither can be opened without the other. See?" He picked up the chain collar necklace and found the link he wanted. It was secure and tight but part of it swiveled down and he inserted it into the small slot on the bracelet. The latch popped open easily and one of the links came apart with slender ends that slipped from inside like swords from scabbards. "It's a key. It only opens the collar. This link...here..." Toshi slipped the little knobs into two small holes in one link and turned. The collar popped open smoothly and Toshi let the flat sided links slip through his fingers.

"See? The bracelet is useless, it's a key that only opens one thing and the bracelet, without the collar it's just decoration. Neither one appears what it is but both need each other, they're connected and neither one can be removed easily without the other. I was going have two collars made because really you own me as much as I hope I can own you but I can't stand to wear it. I wanted to have something...something outward." He stammered and had to look away. "Something that says this, what we have, we're taken...that you're mine and I'm yours...I know...it's stupid...I just..."

Something cold and with weight rested against his wrist and Toshi glanced down in time to see Mick clicking the bracelet's parted links back together to make it a seamless, continual round of flat sided links. He glanced up and met Mick's hazel eyes. They were wide and he was breathing a little too hard but he slipped the collar chain necklace into Toshi's hand.

His lips and mouth felt suddenly too dry. "You're sure?"

Mick nodded, his lips must have been dry too because his tongue slipped out and he quickly moistened them.

The collar was cool and a solid weight in his hands. Toshi smoothed out the links and slipped them around Mick's neck. The bracelet on his wrist was oddly comforting feeling and seeing it against his skin felt so right. Mick raised his chin to give Toshi room to get the links lined up, his eyes were shut. When the links came together with a small click Mick shivered.

"Oh." He whispered, his brow crinkled together to form a ridge between his eyes. His fingers came up to trace the links but his eyes stayed shut.

It would have worried Toshi if he didn't catch the touch of desire in Mick's scent and the suddenly and surprising ease that washed over him. Like a pressure valve being released, fear and tension bled away from Mick and while he wasn't at ease, left him stable and steadier than he'd been since Toshi had found him wandering the Yards.

"This is okay?" He asked, uneasy but thrilling inside to see the chain collar around Mick's and how it matched his own.

Mick nodded and his eyes opened to mere slits.

It was all Toshi needed to see for his breath to be stolen. Mick was vulnerable right now, still shaken emotionally and mentally and Toshi had no right to ache with want for him just from that slight look. Right or not, his heart pounded and his skin tingled just from the feel of Mick's eyes on him. He could no more stop himself from kissing Mick in that moment than he could stop the moon from rising. Mick accepted the kiss with a passiveness that surprised Toshi and oddly made his blood feel like fire. It brought his hands up to cup his lover's face as he teased the yielding lips.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Sixty Two

"Oh....God..." Toshi sighed and gave in. He scented along Mick's jaw, breathing deeply the scent of his lover...his love's skin. Each breath was followed with fluttering soft kisses that teased with barely there contact.

The desire that had burned in him before to bite, to mark Mick in some way was still curled in the pit of Toshi's stomach but now it wasn't overwhelming. He nuzzled at the warming flat links of the chain collar around Mick's neck, kissing the skin and gold alike. Under his mouth he could feel Mick's pulse thudding a sharp counterpoint to the beat of his own heart and he breathed that beat in.

"I'm going to make love to you." Toshi whispered nearly against one shell of an ear. "I'm going to

take you..." His hands slipped over Mick's shoulders and he felt how they eased under his touch, softened from the tense way he'd had them held, braced for a blow that hadn't landed. Under his fingers Mick's flesh softened, yielded to him, melted into his embrace and Toshi drank all of it in. "I'm going to be gentle with you... careful...so you feel everything..." He whispered. "I'm going to love you."

His fingers found the edge of Mick's shirt, casual, the kind he pulled on after practicing with the guard, soft cotton. It always made Mick look younger, less formal, more fragile and Toshi often found the desire to remove such odd clothing almost more than he could control. Tonight it wouldn't have mattered what Mick wore, he needed to feel, to taste, to smell the other man's skin so badly he thought he might die if he delayed.

It was a force of will to lightly touch the flesh hidden under the cotton. Mick shivered and Toshi chased those small shudders up the strong back. He loved when Mick took him, loved the strength in the human's body held so deeply in check. Loved that all he had to do was close his eyes and know it would all be safe and good and wonderful. He also loved feeling that strength mold to his touch, beg to be overwhelmed, plead with silent trembles to surrender.

"I want you naked." Toshi whispered and felt the hiccupped little breath the soft command drew from Mick. He drew his hands up, already under the fabric of the casual shirt and this time he took the cloth with him. Mick raised his arms and let himself be stripped.

"I love being able to look at you. You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Mick just dropped his face and hid his eyes.

"Is it just that one one's ever felt this deeply for you or no one you've felt this deeply for has felt the same in return?" He questioned and kissed Mick's forehead. "You're going to have get used to this, I plan to love you forever." It made him feel so good to say that, to be honest to Mick. It didn't seem to matter if Mick felt for him to the same depth, just being able to acknowledge what was in his heart made him feel amazing. It did help that he was almost totally certain Mick cared for him too. The man may never be able to express it in words but Toshi could feel it.

"Get naked for me, I want to see all of you." He whispered and liked that Mick writhed a little. It was a small wave that shifted across his body, the way Mick would arch a little when touched, when wanting to be touched more only this time mere words had provoked the reaction.

Mick didn't hesitate. Stripping his clothing away was easier than sitting there feeling Toshi's eyes on him and the burning intensity the blue depths carried. Fabric peeled away and was set aside and soon left Mick sitting naked but for the collar necklace locked around his neck. His eyes caught the glint of dull white gold peeking from the cuff of Toshi's shirt and it settled something warm and safe feeling inside his chest.

It wasn't a desire he'd ever verbalized. He suspected Andy understood but Andy often understood matters of relationships and emotion with horrible ease. It wasn't even anything he was normally consciously aware of but Mick wanted to belong to someone. Not in a casual way, or even a committed relationship way, he wanted to belong to someone in a real, true way. Vows could be broken, promises faded but people tended to take care of what belonged to them.

He'd had it with Sal, for a while. The man had known, sensed somehow, that Mick needed that near ownership. For a short while, Mick had belonged and it felt amazing. He'd liked the commanding strength in his former lover but things had gone wrong. Sal had tried to own him in a way that had been destructive and harmful and not good. He'd belonged to Sal like a toy to be broken but his need to belong to someone had been so deep he'd allowed things to go further and longer than he should have.

Only he sat in the small room, naked, collared, belonging to a man that viewed that relationship

as something valuable. He knew, without a single doubt, that Toshi was strong enough to order him to strip naked and have it feel commanding but that he'd never be hurt by that strength. More, he knew he wasn't expected to always be overwhelmed by Toshi's strength, that his own skills, talents and strengths were equally valued. He could close his eyes and belong to Toshi without being abused, without being weakened. It was everything he'd ever wanted and he hadn't even had to try to explain it, Toshi had known. He'd understood and claimed Mick not with wedding vows but with a necklace and it felt as solid and real as the links in the chain around his neck.

He watched as Toshi methodically undressed as well. Watched the way he slipped cuff links off and carefully set them aside and how unhurried and smoothly he let fabric fall away from his body. Mick knew that I/S healed more cleanly, more smoothly and tended to not scar and what scars they collected faded and disappeared with the passing of months and years but it always awed him to see Toshi. So much flawless skin bared for his eyes, broken only by the sweep of a lock of black hair or the colorful tattoo marking his lower back. He wondered now if he should accept the offer to join their family, or if he had just accepted that offer, and how it would feel to know the Sakamoto family crest was inked into his skin. Somehow he doubted it would look as beautiful on his flesh as it did on Toshi's.

All thoughts fled because Toshi touched him. A mere gentle slide of a hand over Mick's shoulder, soft and careful and it was right and good and a vivid reminder of where he belonged. He couldn't bring himself to marry Toshi, even in the quasi-legal sense an I/S was allowed, and maybe accepting half of the matching set of jewelry would be something Toshi regretted in later years, but Mick knew he belonged to this man and knew he was supposed to belong to him.

"God... seeing that chain on you..." Toshi whispered.

It made Mick feel feverish and flushed. Toshi understood and knew and cared and it was how it was supposed to be. He wanted to tell him how the chain made him feel, wanted to tell him how seeing the matching bracelet, the key to the collar's lock, on Toshi's wrist made him feel, but words were sticky and refused to be voiced. He hated not being able to get the words out but it felt okay because Toshi understood.

He didn't need words when Toshi was kissing him, the heat rolled from his lover's golden skin. Even after so long he was still amazed by the warmth of Toshi's body, the higher temperature of an I/S felt otherworldly. He could happily curl up in with that warmth forever and never feel chilled again. As Toshi tugged at him and pulled him closer he let himself do just that, let the strong hands guide his legs and pull him even closer.

Toshi parted his legs with tender touches and Mick let them slip apart. He let himself be pulled ever closer until as they were kissing he felt himself sliding up, over, straddling Toshi's bared legs to sit across his thighs almost in his lap. It was where Toshi wanted him because he stopped being guided and the strong hands slipped up to cup his face and deepen their kiss. He closed his eyes and let himself be drawn close, closer still.

But the kiss ended and before Mick could open his eyes to question he was pulled forward and tightly wrapped up inside of Toshi's arms. It was warm and he liked feeling safe tucked against Toshi but the embrace lingered and soon Mick began to feel a little uneasy. He shifted his weight a little, the universal unspoken hint in a hug that it was time to end it but Toshi only nuzzled the side of his head softly and pulled him closer. He pulled back a little but the arms didn't yield and that turned the uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach almost to sharper panic.

"Toshi..." he hissed out in a whisper.

"Shhhh."

He squirmed a little more but the arms stayed as tightly locked around him. What hardness his

cock had gained fled and he felt his heart beat faster from something other than desire. He pulled a little to get away but found himself pressed tightly to Toshi's chest instead. His breath felt too short and he knew he could break free, force his way from inside Toshi's arms but part of him didn't want to, didn't want to risk hurting either of them.

"I...I can't..." He gasped out and squirmed again.

"Shhhhhh." Toshi soothed.

A hand slipped down Mick's spine. Soft, gentle, safe, a careful petting touch that lingered away at the small of his back only to reappear at his head to stroke over his hair and down his spine again. It made him flinch the first time, the second long stroke made him shiver, the third eased some of the panic away. As he settled down and leveled out he felt his own arms raising up to circle Toshi's waist, unwilling to let the other man release him and while his heart still beat too fast and panic skirted the edges of his mind he didn't feel sick with it.

He had intimacy issues. He knew he did. Grandma Rose had talk to him about it on more than one occasion. Sex he was fine with, he could have sexual contact with anyone fairly easily. Casual contact like snuggly with Andy on the sofa while watching a movie he was fine with. Letting people in, letting them really in where he was soft and vulnerable, where their leaving could shatter him from the inside out? Well, that was something he knew he didn't do well.

With good reason too his mind nudged him to remember. His own mother had resented him, the people assigned to care and protect him after her death were sometimes cruel, often indifferent and the few that seemed to want to care for him were too quickly removed from his life. When he'd finally been taken in by the Inkies he'd let them in and now found out that they'd betrayed him as well. It was too raw of a pain not to feel uneasy panic at being held so gently, in a nonsexual way, naked and vulnerable, tight inside of Toshi's arms. It just spoke volumes that the soft, soothing touch and shushing whispered voice settled that fear better than anything he'd ever found.

He shivered and pulled himself as close as he could get to Toshi's body. His face tucked in tight to one slender shoulder. The hand kept methodically petting down his spine in a barely there, gentle touch and Mick tried to focus on the feel of that. Small shivers still made his shoulders shudder a little. He couldn't help it, couldn't stop it and just rode out the spikes of uneasy fear that still fluttered around his mind.

"That's it..." Toshi whispered. "That's it...it's okay...we'll get through this together...I promise...you'll never be alone again...shhhhh..."

As the fear backed down, he felt silly for being so trembling and uneasy. Mick pressed a kiss to the curve of Toshi's shoulder and sighed. "Promise?"

Mick felt the dark hair brush his skin as Toshi nodded. "Promise."

He hadn't know he was holding his breathe but he was and it rushed out with Toshi's single word. He drew it back in to steady himself but wasn't in any rush to let his arms slip from Toshi's waist. "And here, I was thinking you were getting me naked for other reasons..."

Toshi's chuckle was light and warm and good, it bubbled out across Mick and made him feel wrapped in a blanket. "Who says I didn't?"

The answer surprised him and didn't at the same time and Mick pulled away, rocking back on Toshi's thighs to look into the impossibly large blue eyes. He saw warmth there and he realized love as well. It made him feel naked in more than flesh. "Toshi...I..." but the words wouldn't come and he had to glance away. Instead he touched the chain around his neck. "Thank you."



"No... thank you... I would do anything for you."

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Chapter Sixty Three

"No... thank you... I would do anything for you." Now he had to glance away as well. "And I'll spend the rest of my life proving that to you, if you'll let me." When he raised his eyes he was surprised. Mick's lips were parted slightly, his face open without any of the cold masks he tended to wear. Even when they were alone together, behind closed doors away from any chance of prying eyes, Mick tended to be wary with what he expressed. Not now, now he sat naked across Toshi's lap, eyes glossed over a little, hiding nothing. It made him look suddenly younger than he was and younger than he ever acted and vulnerable looking.

Until drew a breath and swallowed hard and some of the raw openness faded away. "I..."

"Shhh..." Toshi wanted to push. He wanted to crack all of Mick's shells and masks and stomp them into dust. He wanted to always be able to sit alone with him and not have to look around anything to really see his lover. He didn't push, he didn't try to shatter all the protections Mick had built over so many years, no matter how badly he wanted to. He loved Mick as he was. Flaws, masks, protections and all. To try to force the man to remove them would change who he was in ways Toshi didn't want to change. When it came down to it, he was just grateful to have been given that glimpse inside that he was willing to bet Mick had almost never shown anyone.

"Don't speak..." He whispered. His hands slipped up to cup Mick's face and lift it so he could claim the lips he loved to tease. Mick let himself be kissed with continuing passivity and Toshi didn't mind. It allowed him to tease, to simply enjoy the pleasures of kissing without the crushing rush to go further, faster. It was a delight to have Mick in his arms, seated across his legs, skin bare against skin, mouth accepting whatever kiss was shared.

He might have been content to just hold Mick and kiss him without ever moving forward. At least he might have been until Mick sighed a little and it sounded more like a softly hushed moan than a simple breath. Mick was so reserved with any sounds that the slightest of them was erotic far beyond what such a hushed moan should be. It caused his fingers to clutch to Mick's back. His fingertips dug in more roughly than he had intended and Mick sighed and moaned again.

It would be easy to slip Mick higher on his hips, easy to reach the lube they kept close at hand. It wouldn't take much to make everything hot and hard and slick, to lift Mick and settle him with Toshi buried deep in his body. He could make love to Mick this way, facing him, holding him, petting him. He could take him softly, gently, ease into his body with care, move with gentleness and it would be so good, so perfectly good.

Except that it would upset Mick, make him tense and uneasy. Being so close, being taken with tenderness while being held and loved, would be too much on a good day. Today with Mick so shaken and vulnerable it would be cruel to ask so much more of him, to ask him to face his own phobias again so soon, all just so Toshi could take him the way he wanted to. Worse, tenderness could easily shatter Mick when he was already so uneasy and Toshi didn't want that. He wanted to help his lover find his way back to himself not break him down further.

He traced his hands back up Mick's body. Across scars and skin, over his strong shoulders. His fingertips drew shivers from the body he caressed as he slipped over Mick's neck and up to hold his face again. This time he held Mick steady, held him in place, and when he kissed him this time there was nothing light or teasing in it. It caught Mick off guard, the sudden depth of the new kiss but he answered it with just as much desire.

"Mmm..." Toshi sighed. "When I'm taking you? I want you to moan..."

"Oh!" Mick whispered, struck speechless by the slight hungry predatory growl in Toshi's voice. He wanted to warn, to caution Toshi. He knew that tone, he'd heard it before when Toshi had bitten him, when he was high on Shine and needing. Mick didn't think he could handle venom in his system tonight. But the warning and words didn't come and Mick suddenly didn't want to offer one. He wanted to trust that Toshi knew, that he knew so well that he wouldn't push too hard when Mick couldn't stand it.

"Like that...only more...please, you once said you'd give me anything I wanted...tonight I want to hear you..." Toshi whispered, his lips so close to Mick's they brushed against the other pair as he formed words.

Toshi slipped his hands down Mick's face, lower down across shoulders, tracing downward to slip forward and glide across the strong chest. Dressed, Mick looked like he might be toned, might be strong, but undressed there was a raw power to the strength in his body. Like a prize fighter that had to stay light on his feet, Mick was a delightful balance between strength and grace, Toshi could spend hours drinking in the sight of Mick's body.

Fingertips glided lightly over already hard nipples and Mick arched, his breath shortening into a tight hiss. The sight and sound made Toshi smile in a languid almost wicked way that made Mick's eyes widen when he saw. He didn't tease and didn't linger there and his hands slipped lower, leaving Mick both wanting and being unsure about more. The touch stayed teasing and light, barely there brushes of contact, until Toshi had his hands around Mick's waist.

His hands circled and gripped and Toshi leaned forward. He didn't so much as lift Mick from his lap as guide him as he glided away, back to fall on the futon. Mick allowed himself to be moved, helped as much as he could without knowing where Toshi wanted him. He ended up on his back on the futon, his hair fluttered out in a reminder that it was going to need to be trimmed again soon. His legs stayed parted, Toshi's own still between them in an erotic display that had Mick blushing a little when he felt Toshi's eyes devouring him.

Hands slipped from the strong waist down over lean hips careful to avoid the begging hardness that bobbed as the soft touch slipped by, ignoring the obvious. Toshi drank in the feel of the touch of his hands on Mick's skin. It was a rare moment when Mick was willing to be so passive, willing to be pushed without slipping out to push for control. He liked when Mick took him, liked when Mick guided their love making, liked being able to give himself over to his lover and it was because he liked that so much that made the rare moments when their positions, desires and wants reversed all that much sweeter.

Mick knew he was blushing a little. Being fair skinned made it easy for even a small flush to show freely and Toshi's eyes always made him feel flushed. Lying there, naked, exposed with Toshi kneeling between his legs made him feel like he was right where he belonged in the world.

That was an unusual feeling, Mick was used to feeling like there was no place for him and he liked that the feeling disappeared when he was laid out the way he was.

The soft touch trailed down his legs and Mick sighed. When a hand circled each knee he let his legs go lax, dropping the weight of them into Toshi's hands, waiting to have them raised. He was closer to the where the lube was tucked away. He glanced away to reach over, his fingers pulling the tube closer, in his mind he could already feel Toshi hovering over him, taking him, maybe without the painful gentleness his lover had threatened.

One leg dropped to the futon and the tube of lube followed as it slipped from stunned numb fingers. Toshi hadn't lifted his legs; he had released one and knelt with both hands focused on one leg. One hand stroked Mick's thigh, one braced his knee while he pressed hot, soft kisses to the inside of his leg. The kisses were teases, wet, small spots of fire that burned Mick's skin, but it was seeing Toshi that stole his breath.

Dark hair fell loose and tumbled everywhere, heavy, thick, silken and when it brushed against Mick's skin, he thought he might die. The smooth careful way Toshi pressed a kiss to his skin, the way he barely removed his lips to move to the next spot to press another tender soft kiss. It was enthralling to watch and Mick almost didn't notice the slow progression of kisses away from his knee, down to this inner thigh and beyond.

It was delicious to feel the tease as Toshi's lips crept higher and higher on his inner thigh, dark tendrils of hair brushing against in tickling touches. Places where the smallest of touches felt so much more profound. It was a tease though, Mick knew it was and he loved it and hated it and dropped his head back to the futon. In all their time as lovers, Toshi was still barely comfortable letting Mick pleasure him orally and only rarely attempted to return the same to Mick.

Not that Mick could begrudge him or complain. He adored pleasuring a man orally. Even with men he didn't know he found pleasure in the act, it was just something hard-wired in his brain and he felt no shame over it. With Toshi, he'd be on his knees half the day if the other man would let him and it had taken a tremendous effort to get Toshi to understand that.

He understood because for Toshi, even after so many long years, fellatio was still a reminder of something horrible and degrading. It had been a far more personal violation than intercourse and one he still struggled with. Mick understood and expected nothing and let Toshi experiment or not as he willed. The few times that Toshi had made an effort had been short, quick passes of warm lips and tongue that had retreated just as Mick had begun to enjoy it. He had learned not to protest, not to complain, not to ask and above all never to expect.

It was impossible as the kisses drew closer, so soft and teasing, not to anticipate things a little bit. He didn't anticipate the way his toes curled into the fabric of the futon, the way his body curled up a little bit as if he'd just taken a heavy blow, the way his breath escaped in a surprised desperately soft pleading moan or how his vision blacked out for a moment as his eyes squinted tightly shut the moment Toshi slipped his length into his mouth. Nothing could have prepared him for that, already disturbed and off center from the day and Toshi's vulnerable confessions and the swollen bruised feeling of his own heart, the pleasure of that first contact was almost physically painful it felt so good.

He braced himself for the sudden disappearance of that blinding pleasure. Toshi, when he braved his own fears enough to attempt this, rarely lingered for long. It had made each time a little more vivid, the denial and tease had Mick trembling from the start. He had gone so long without any form of oral sex, since Andy had introduced him to the pleasures so long ago. Now a simple blow job wasn't enough. He no longer wanted it unless it was from Toshi, and he found even the stolen moments occasionally given him were better than a full on contact with even the most skilled lover.

Only Toshi didn't tease and stop. He didn't retreat back to safer ground as usual and Mick forgot

to brace himself for the sudden end to the overwhelming pleasure. More, as the moments slipped away it became very clear that there was no innocent teasing going on. Toshi was showing a shocking depth to his skills, the like of which Mick hadn't yet experienced with the man. It was so good, so surprisingly good he lost control of his body and only distantly felt himself writhing, the soles of his feet dragging up the cloth of the futon only to slide restlessly back down, his spine arching from the soft surface only to collapse back down. He was equally unaware of the soft, desperate, hushed mewing whimpers that escaped his throat, each one a plea for more that he'd never give voice too.

Until it occurred to him how and where Toshi had gained such skills. Something he enjoyed, something he found great pleasuring in doing, had been forced on his lover. Toshi had learned such skill in an effort to make each contact as brief as possible and he'd apparently learned very well. It made Mick feel a small bit sick that he was gaining such pleasure from something with such horrible roots. Toshi very lightly dragged a fang across hypersensitive flesh and Mick full out moaned. He promised himself he'd feel guilty about enjoying it later and shivered under the assault.

It took his mind a good three or four seconds to process that the tormenting pleasure had faded away and stopped. He was breathless, painfully hard, a light sheen of sweat covered his skin and when he glanced up he fell into endless blue eyes.

"Oh..."

Toshi grinned wickedly, licked his lips and ran his hands across the insides of Mick's spread thighs. "That was for me."

The voice was lowered and a little husky and poured over Mick like honey.

"Now I'll give you what you need..."

Mick knew his mouth was hanging open like an idiot but he laid there, stunned, wondering where this side of Toshi had come from and how he could encourage it to come out and play more often.

One of Toshi's hands flicked back and gave the thigh it was petting a small, stinging slap. It made Mick jump a little startled. "On your knees."

"Oh...god..." Mick heard himself moan. His body shivered and he struggled not to come just from the command and the burning commanding look in those ice blue eyes. He saw no room for questions or debate and scrambled to get his shaking, rubbery feeling legs to move, desperate now to get on his knees as Toshi had ordered.

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From The Ashes

## Chapter Sixty Four

He was breathing hard, aching with want and Toshi had said he was going to give him what he needed. Did Toshi really know him that well, understand him that deeply? The thought made Mick shiver, frightened now that maybe Toshi really did and more frightened he didn't.

A hand stroked up his spine, paused between his shoulder blades and pushed him forward hard. It made Mick quiver. He lowered his shoulders down, further down as the pushing hand continued to press on him, until his shoulders and head were pressed to the futon and his ass was exposed to the air. The hand stopped pressing and stroked gently back down Mick's spine, right to the top of his ass and then simply disappeared. It left him shivering in want.

His head was turned the wrong direction, but Mick strained to hear. Toshi sighed softly, with a contented sound to it. Across the silent room the loud creaking crack of the lube's lid being popped open broke the quiet. It made Mick's breath stop in his throat, made the muscles in his legs and back tighten, made him want to slide his knees further apart and whimper.

Lube drizzled down, cold and sudden, right along the cleft of Mick's ass. It made him hiss in surprise and he would have jerked away but a warm hand caught his hips and held him still. Each drop felt far colder than it should have and slipped in surprising contact across his skin. Toshi always gave enough thought to warm the lube a little and it sunk in all at once that his lover really did know what he needed. The cold lube stopped dripping down on him and the hand on his hip petted his skin a moment before it retreated.

It left him bent over, panting, waiting for Toshi to return and take him. Instead, the hand returned. It reached down roughly and caught Mick's wrist and tugged. It nearly spilled him face first into the futon and he struggled to stay balanced as Toshi pulled his arm back. The angle was odd but Mick offered no resistance and soon felt slowly warming lube under his fingertips and the curve of his own ass.

He got the point and the hand on his wrist disappeared. Mick found his own entrance and teased it but he needed more. He could feel Toshi watching him, heard the other man's breath catch as Mick plunged his fingers in deeply. There was no way of knowing how long Toshi would wait. Did he want to watch Mick pleasuring himself or just wanted Mick to prep himself? Mick didn't know and balanced between the two choices, all he knew was he liked Toshi watching.

Until the hand returned, clasping tightly over his wrist and pulled his hand away from his own body with a quick tug. Mick gasped a little, almost moaned, almost wanted to beg but nothing came out. His legs slipped a little further apart and he tilted his ass a little higher into the air, hoping, knowing, Toshi would understand.

The lube opened again in the silence and Mick shivered. He braced himself but nothing happened and Toshi didn't touch him. Moments passed, what felt like an eternity and still nothing. Finally he heard a sigh, a breathy exhale that tapered into a soft moan and hands touched his hips. They weren't needed; he wasn't going to move away.

Toshi slipped closer, his legs spreading Mick's wider. The heat from his body warmed Mick, made him feel flushed being bathed in that warmth. Until the hands slipped from his hips down to his ass, rough and demanding they kneaded his flesh a little, opening him a little. He should have been ready but Mick was so caught up in the touch that he wasn't even thinking further until something hard and blunt pressed at his entrance.

Mick moaned, softly but the sound escaped him. One hand slipped back to hold his hip and the other left his flesh entirely. Mick didn't care, his quick prep had done little to ease being taken

and the length pushing steadily, fully, into him hurt. His body trembled but it hurt in just the best way. He was gasping for breath and trembling like a leaf by the time Toshi fully took him.

There was no pause, no moment offered to let Mick adjust or adapt. No thought was being given for Mick at all and it was just what he had needed. He braced himself in the awkward position as Toshi slipped from his too tight body only to fill him again. Mick had no control over pace or pressure, angle or depth and all he could do was balance there while Toshi moved to fulfill his own pleasure.

The room was silent except for the soft, wet sounds of sex and softer still Toshi's stuttering breath. It felt unnaturally silent to Mick. Toshi had never been shy about making noise before and the sounds of his lover enjoying himself always pleased him. It sunk in slowly as Mick's body rocked under the steady, firm thrusts that this really was not about his pleasure and maybe Toshi was quiet to deny him the sounds he enjoyed.

"Oh!" He almost moaned when the understanding sunk in and the sound made Toshi push harder back into his body. It was the level of roughness he wanted and Mick understood a second element. Not only was Toshi going to be quiet, he wanted Mick to make noise.

He felt moans, cries and whimpers in his mind every time they came together even for casual, quick play but the sounds almost never managed to actually come out. It was the same tight, vulnerable trapped feeling he got when he couldn't speak at all, as if moaning was too much to ask of him, too much to ask him to give up. It was as if he gave in and surrendered those sounds something of himself would be surrendered as well and that was such a risky thing to do.

Only the sounds of their lovemaking was everywhere. Every soft, slippery sound matched the physical, trembling delights in his body. There was nothing for him to latch on to that was external. Nothing to look at that didn't remind him of anything other than himself, nothing to hear but sounds that only turned him more inward, there was nothing to distract himself with. It left the moment as the only thing he had in his mind and that made it difficult to know what he heard only in his head, and what he actually gave voice to.

Mick gave in. Toshi was taking him so hard now, so roughly that it overwhelmed him. He closed his eyes and let everything go. Everything turned off but the pleasure of being taken, of being used by someone that wasn't going to hurt him. His hands fisted into the fabric of the futon and he held on.

It was what he needed. It took him off into his own head where he forgot himself. All the anger and hurt and betrayal disappeared and his own thought was how good he felt. The chain collar around his neck was warmed to his skin now but with each rocking thrust it slipped on his skin and reminded him that he was safe and wanted and being taken by the most amazing man he'd ever met.

He was so gone inside of his own head, inside of the pleasure and sensation of his own body that he forgot about his own needs. His own release and climax didn't even seem like it existed in the universe he was swimming in. His body ached in burning fire of need and his nerves vibrated with want and still he hung suspended, lost, somewhere on the other side of reality.

Fingers dug into his flesh and pulled him roughly tighter, closer, harder and somewhere in his thoughts he knew the feel, knew Toshi was trembling in his own release. He knew it had to end but it seemed like maybe, just maybe, it might not. Mick was shivering, his muscles trembling in exhaustion, hating that Toshi was slowing in his pace in and out of his body, still hungry for more. He wasn't even sure what he was still missing until a too warm hand closed around his neglected length and stroked him.

It didn't take much. He was hovering on coming as it was and that hand knew how to touch him. It was just one sensation more than he could stand and his body spasmed. His feet scrambled

for purchase but his toes were curled and they just slipped away from him. His spine didn't know which way it wanted to curve, his arms gave out and his hands released the hold he'd had on the sheets.

"Oh....oh...oooh god..." Mick moaned and heard himself for the first time. One of Toshi's hands was petting him, easing him to lay down on the futon; the other was still stroking him gently. "Oh my God." He moaned and collapsed into a boneless pile. "Oh my God...."

Toshi stroked some of the damp hair back as gently as he could and leaned down. He pressed a kiss to the side of Mick's face. "I love you." He whispered. There was no doubt that he'd never be able to say that with anyone but Mick able to hear but he wasn't sure how comfortable Mick would be hearing it even in private. Toshi needed to say it one more time, with Mick vulnerable and open to maybe believing it.

If Mick heard he didn't respond and that was okay. Toshi moved to clean up and get Mick cleaned up a little but it was Mick's turn to reach out and catch his wrist. "Mick?" He glanced down but the hazel eyes were still shut, the human was still gasping for breath. The grip on his wrist tugged a little and he smiled. He could feel the desire as clearly as if Mick had asked him in words and they could stay sweaty and sticky for a little while longer.

He moved carefully, as exhausted as Mick was, almost. He was too tired to avoid being a little clumsy he just didn't want to pinch or step on any part of Mick in his tired stumbling. It took a little caution but he lowered down onto their bed and curled around Mick.

"Mmm..." Mick mumbled contentedly and wiggled and squirmed until he was fully tucked inside of Toshi's arms. He wrapped his hands around Toshi's arm and held on tight. "Don't go..."

Toshi nuzzled the back of Mick's neck. "Never." The collar was a contrast to the warmth of flesh but it was a nice contrast. It occurred to him only then that Mick had grabbed his arm that had the bracelet. He was already so used to the weight of it; it already felt so right that he forgot it was on. "Never going anywhere..." He pulled Mick closer and let his lover cling to him in a needy desperate way.

Mick tugged Toshi's arm closer to his chest, needing to be held as close as he could get. "God.. Toshi...thank you."

Warm chuckles tumbled from behind him. "Thank you."

"It...I..." He sighed.

Toshi nuzzled again. "We both needed it." It wasn't just something nice to say. He hadn't felt this soul deep in control and steady ever. He'd never felt like he belonged this much before or that he was right where he needed to be.

"Was I...loud?" He wanted to know how much of what he'd heard was inside his head and how much of it had escaped.

Warm chuckles answered Mick again but there was no mocking in them, just pleased, happy love. "For you? Yes. For me? Not at all but I did make you moan as I took you."

Mick sighed. He pulled Toshi's hand up and kissed the back of the fingers. "You do get noisy..."

"With good cause! I liked hearing you, liked that you let me hear you."

Mick wasn't sure how to answer that and he stayed tucked in Toshi's arms for a long silent moment. "Did you mean it?"

"hmm? Yes, I liked hearing you."

"No." Mick answered a bit too quickly.

It took Toshi a second to understand but there really could be only one thing Mick was asking about. "I love you, more than is sensible maybe. Don't worry, I won't make a fuss about it, I don't expect anything. I just wanted you to know that..." Toshi sighed. "That you're loved, deeply." Toshi felt the shiver that slipped along Mick's body, the one that had nothing to do with being naked with cooling sweat on his skin.

It took a long time for those words to really sink in but they did and Mick knew he believed them. He drew Toshi's hand back up and rubbed the side of his face in a gentle caress. "And I you, very much." Mick whispered, low and hoarse and uncertain but he got the words out. "Please, don't leave me."

The whispered words were so unexpected Toshi had to replay them in his mind a good dozen times before they really made sense. When they did, he almost choked on a sob and his heart felt like it had swollen up to smother him. He couldn't stay curled along Mick's back, not after those quiet words so he lifted and pulled and tugged and got Mick turned around so he was holding him close, tight against his chest instead. Toshi knew better than to push harder, to make a fuss about that tiny whispered confession. Instead he tucked it aside to cherish and ignored it.

"You're never getting rid of me."

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Chapter Sixty Five

Breakfast the next morning was later than normal in the apartment and oddly had all the residents sitting about the table. Andy had been up early, feeling fussy and uneasy so he prepped food to distract himself. When the others began to stagger into the front room, it was easy to get them all to sit down to tea and pancakes, fresh fruit chopped up into small bites, and Greek yogurt flavored with honey.

No one seemed much in the mood for food. Andy finally sighed. "Eat, all of you." He snapped as he sat down at the silent table, glaring at the I/S who always needed to be prodded to eat and Mick who was simply pushing his food around. At the least, Alec had the sense to not require scolding to eat and Andy wasn't going to fuss over it either.

Mick put his spoon down. "Alec? Can you ask my grandmother to come over?"



"You sure?" Toshi asked softly. "They will wait as long as you want."

"Want to get it over with. Hear what she has to say."

"And Epps?" Alec asked as he stood to make the calls.

That was a harder choice but Mick nodded. "I don't know."

"Will do." Alec nodded and slipped away from the table to call from the office.

Andy folded his arms. "That doesn't mean any of you can stop eating."

That earned the first small, quirked half smile of the day from Mick. "Yes, mom."

Andy raised an eyebrow but quickly turned his glare of death on Rez who snorted and then, hurried to hide it behind a bite of fruit. "I'll make more tea." He stood with great dignity and ignored the teasing with mock dramatics. If they could tease him, the mood was lighter and he didn't mind.

Even Andy's easy target of fussiness wasn't enough to lighten the mood as the dishes were cleared away and more tea was poured. No one seemed willing to leave the room. Rez had retreated to half crouch down by the doorway back to the hallway but didn't leave the main room. Andy had taken a seat next to Mick at the table and was lightly running a hand across his friend's back. Which went virtually unnoticed as Mick sat studying his tea, thinking whatever thoughts he was unwilling to share. Toshi was brooding too, eyes a little distant and not really watching anything. Only Alec was able to sit casually and sip at his tea, pretending to read the morning paper with a casual air that even Andy could see was fake.

They all jumped a little, surprised at the expected buzzer from the guards to signal the arrival of their guests. It was Alec that stood up and went to get everything in order. It took a moment more than it should have, but he soon escorted Grandma Rose, alone, into their main room. Mick didn't even look up from his tea.

"Mick?" Alec asked carefully, glancing to Toshi. "Epps is here, he's been here all morning. Says he's not leaving until he can talk to you and apparently is prepared to wait right here until then. I had him put into a conference room out of the way."

Mick didn't answer.

"Thank you, Alec." Toshi spoke for him.

Alec nodded and stepped to the side to gather up his computer and paperwork to get out of the way.

"Amun?" Rose asked carefully, stepping into the room. "Can we go somewhere and talk?"

Mick licked his lips, swallowed hard, and didn't look up. "People in this room are family. There's nothing they can't hear."

Alec moved to go to the office to start his work, to be out of the way.

"That means you, Alec." Mick said and glanced up to the blonde man that paused, surprised by the inclusion. "And you too, Rez." He turned and caught the I/S with a foot in the hallway, already in the process of slipping away. Rez looked more startled than Alec, he frowned, but then nodded.

Rez slipped back into the room and crouched down again by the doorway. He had never

expected to be included and wasn't entirely sure he liked that he had been. He still didn't like Mick, still didn't like Toshi being with a human. Even Mick earning his grudging respect didn't make him like the man. He certainly hadn't expected to be considered family, not today, not ever, and it made him feel a little queasy. Queasy or not, he returned to the room as he was asked

Rose glanced around the room before nodding. "Very well." Mick wasn't a child any longer. She couldn't approach him as one. "May I sit?" She waited until he waved his consent in a non-caring way before taking an empty seat across from her grandson. Andy poured another cup of tea and placed it near her. "Thank you."

Andy just smirked and settled back into his seat again.

"I called home last night, Mike was quite upset. He wants to come see you. I convinced him to wait until you were ready. I'm sure you've a great many questions..."

Mick shook his head. "No...just one... why didn't you tell me?"

"Amun...you have to understand." That was the one question she knew was most important to Mick. "When we got you, you were so...."

"Damaged?" Mick offered bitterly.

"Wounded." She corrected. "Not just the broken bones, you were so wounded." She sighed and folded her hands around the tea. "You were so fragile. Even after the hospital let you come home it was a good two weeks, almost three, before we got around to entering your code in our database and looking for matches."

"But you knew."

Rose sighed and nodded. "Yes, we knew. I won't pretend we didn't. It was discussed."

"Discussed with a list of pros and cons and projected outcomes and then dismissed." Mick hissed out softly with scorn in his voice.

"Partially, yes, you know that's how we tackle every issue but it wasn't meant clinically."

"Just coldly."

"Amun..." She didn't quite scold but her tone reflected disappointment. "We're talking about a choice we made almost twenty years ago. You were barely surviving and desperately needed stability. Epps was a different man. He was in war zones exposing dictators and documenting genocides. None of us believed for one moment he would just stop all of his work; quit what he'd spent a lifetime building to come back here to take care of his son. At best, if he gave up all his work to take care of you, he didn't have a hundredth the experience we have with children. He couldn't even begin to understand what you'd been through."

"You didn't even let him try."

"At worst?" Rose continued without stopping. "He'd have seen a broken child that refused to speak and was marked by Child Services as dangerous and out of control. He might have done what they recommended. He could have found a very nice institution

for you that

would have medicated you, sedated you, and written you off. He would have left you there alone, and gone about his life."

"You don't know that. You can't possibly know what he would have done."

"And I wasn't going to take that chance! Mike thought we should tell you, he was a dissenting voice, the others followed my suggestion. He thought we should contact Epps and ask him to sign his parental rights to us. I felt it was too great of a risk. Your need was too great to risk."

"And it didn't occur to you to tell me at any point after all these years?"

"Amun..."

"Some point between when I was a child and now it could have come up in conversation. Oh, by the way, you have a father! Thought you'd like to know, since you have all these feelings of being unwanted and cast away. Thought maybe you'd want to know your father wasn't some one night stand or trick your mother picked up. Just in case, you know, it mattered!" He snapped back.

"It does matter, I don't mean for it to sound like it doesn't." She sighed. "You just....you just adapted so well. Then you were so set on college and you made friends there." She waved to Andy. "And you were doing so well. It didn't seem like a good time and then it was the police academy, all the pressure of making detective, and we all knew you were struggling with things."

Mick sighed and shook his head.

"Things you didn't want to talk about. Things you didn't want us poking our noses into. We knew full well being raised in the Commune made things more difficult for you. The last thing you needed was more disruption. And then those changes, and all the turmoil. So much you had worked for disappeared. It felt cruel to toss something that didn't seem so important in comparison on you. Then you met Toshi and started working here and for the first time you seemed happy!, Really, deeply, truly happy and it felt cruel to tear open long healed wounds."

"Wasn't your place to make that choice."

"It wasn't just us. Paul Epps made the same choice. There's an international database for finding lost relatives. It would have taken no effort at all to register and he never once put his DNA into the database. He's lived all over the world. Do you think it never occurred to him that someone, somewhere along the way might have accidentally conceived his child? You checked that database yourself when you were a teen, you know he wasn't in it."

"You could have told me then and there. You knew he wasn't in the international lists...."

"I could have and maybe I should have, but...but...I didn't...I feared I'd lose you. I just...Amun...I just wanted you to be happy. To have the best chance possible to find your way to being happy..."

Mick glanced up but it hurt to meet her eyes. For the first time he looked away from her not because he felt he had something to hide, or something he couldn't share, but because she'd been the one with secrets and it hurt him to see. He was hurt and he wanted to be hurt for a while longer, but her desperate need to explain made it difficult to stay angry.

"I'm sorry. Please, don't blame the others, blame me. It was my choice, my urging that caused this. I am sorry it hurt you. I didn't tell you because I... I wanted you to be my child. I helped raise you. We don't share a gene code but you're my child Amun, because I carry you in my heart. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Say you'll forgive us... forgive me?"

"I..." He wanted to forgive his family but at the same time, he wanted to yell at them and never trust them again. "I need time to think. It's not fair to have this drop on my head and have you

expect me to just be okay with it. You lied to me; you promised me you'd never lie to me."

"I didn't..."

"Don't play semantics with me! You may not have outright lied but you knew and didn't tell me, you lied by omission and I need to be angry right now."

"Amun."

"Just...don't." He rubbed the back of his neck with a hand and tried to get the headache that was growing to go away. "I'll get over this...but not right now. You have no concept of how much this has hurt me, just go away and give me some time."

"But you don't hate us. Mike wants to make sure you don't hate us."

He wanted to but he didn't. "No, but I'm going to need some time."

Rose glanced from Mick to Andy and then Toshi and knew that it was okay to back away. Mick wasn't alone any longer, he wasn't going to retreat into his own isolated thoughts. She knew from the stubborn concern in their faces that he'd be well taken care of. "I understand. Call Mike first, when you're ready to talk? He's worried about you." She stood up and smoothed her skirt. "I'll be going. Thank you for the tea, Andy. Toshi." She nodded to them both and left with as much grace as she could muster.

The apartment door shut and Mick's breath rushed out in a long, sighing gasp. "God."

"You okay, sweetie?" Andy asked.

"I don't know. Should I be?"

Andy shook his head. "I don't think I'd be as calm as you."

"That's because you adore drama." Mick teased lightly.

The small joke eased some of the worry and tension in the room. Looks were exchanged over Mick's head before Toshi spoke. "It does sound like she meant well in hiding this."

"I know. I know. It'd be easier to never forgive them if it didn't make sense. Stupid, logical, nearsighted scientists..." He grumbled. "Nobody wanted me and they took me in, fought to take me in. They were the only people ever to think I might be worth something. I can't stay angry with them, but right now?" He shook his head. "Right now I want to punch the wall or kick something. How could they think it wouldn't matter?" He glanced around but knew there wasn't any real answer.

"Mick?" Alec spoke softly. "As another kid dumped into foster care? I'm not defending what they did, but I don't think they hid this because they thought it didn't matter. Just the opposite, I think they hid it because they knew how much it mattered. Sometimes things like this? Well, it can undo a lot of things, it can overshadow a lot of the good that we might have been able to find."

Mick chewed over the words and ended up shaking his head. "I'm still going to be angry for a while."

"Good, you stay angry as long as you need to, sweetie." Andy patted Mick's hand before pouring him more tea.

"Alec? Can you have them send Epps up?"

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Chapter Sixty Six

"Alec? Can you have them send Epps up?"

Alec looked to Toshi first, but while his friend didn't look happy about the idea he didn't protest it. "Sure thing, Mick."

"Want us to leave so you two will be alone?" Toshi asked carefully. He would have given anything to have had someone be on his side when he'd had to meet his father, but that didn't mean Mick wouldn't feel the opposite.

"No, if you all could stay?" Mick even glanced to where Rez was crouched by the door way. "I just want this done."

It took a moment, but not as long as Mick wished before the door opened again and Alec led Epps into the room. There were no cameras, no equipment bags, no sign of anything the man used for work on him, and he quickly stepped around the frowning Alec.

"Thank you for seeing me. I mean, I was all prepared to camp out here for however long it took, but I was hoping it would be sooner not later. Though I can perfectly understand your not wanting to see me." Epps babbled a little and moved over to the table. For the first time he was able to openly stare at Mick without worry. "God, you look a lot like I did at your age. I have a picture, I brought some, but I left them downstairs."

"We don't look alike." Mick shook his head.

Andy glanced between the two men. "You have the same smile, same ears. Different noses, same eye color."

"You have your mother's nose."

"Do I really look like him?" Mick asked, glancing to Andy and then around the room.

"Enough so, sorry sweetie." Andy shrugged. "Rez said you two smelled like family."

Mick glanced to Rez but the man just shrugged.

"A lot of you humans stink alike."

"If I sit down, will you shoot me?" Epps tried to smile, but no one laughed at the joke. "Well, I'll risk it." He nodded and sat down and some of his uncomfortable unease showed. "I'm sorry, if that means anything, I am."

"For what?" Mick managed to ask. "For leaving my mother, for never bothering to care to check on her again, for waiting months after you learned about me to tell me, for coming here under false reasons or for blurting it out last night?"

"All of it?" He shrugged. "Could we...maybe...talk alone?"

"No." Was all Mick said.

"Okay. Do you remember your mother?"

Mick sat silent.

"Okay...look, I'm not a saint. I won't pretend to be. When Ranvier moved his entire company, the world's largest company, here to this nothing of a city I followed because I wanted to know why. I got fired for it too, but I followed the story. I was just a kid; I was at this horrible little diner, and that's how I met your mother.. She was a waitress there. We talked, then went out for drinks after. God, she was beautiful. Do you remember that? Fair skinned, bright red hair, green eyes...I can see a lot of her in you. I was in town four months. She had this crappy single room apartment, but it was nicer than my crappy hotel room, so we ended up living together for most of those months. She had a temper, and was jealous."

"Did you love her?" Mick asked but he already knew the answer.

"Should I lie and say I did?" Mick frowned at him and Epps sighed. "We both drank too much, fought all the time. She knew I wasn't staying, but when it was time for me to move on she was furious with me. A year or two later, I was in town and she wanted to talk to me but she was drunk. I had six months of sobriety at that point. She started talking about us getting together, being a family and I told her it wasn't going to happen. I swear to you Mick, I swear, she never mentioned a child. I just didn't want to go back to living like that, drunk all the time, angry all the time. I didn't know, if I had..."

"You would have what? Been father of the year?"

"I don't know but I wouldn't have left things like that."

Mick shook his head.

"I heard a couple of years later that she'd been killed. That she had a child but the report said the child was four and I hadn't seen her in that time and the boy was listed as John McKale. I assumed she'd met someone after me, the math didn't add up so I didn't look into it and honestly, at that point, I figured the kid was better off in foster care. I didn't know squat about four year olds."

"Better off...you selfish son of a bitch."

"I didn't know."

"You didn't care to know! The paper got my age wrong because the hospital records were destroyed. They didn't even know what my real name was or just when I was born!"

"Look, I don't claim to be a sunshine, rainbow, wonderful, good person but I am trying to be honest here." Epps sighed and reached into his coat pocket. "If you're going to hate me, you need to know everything." He flipped some old, scuffed up, printed photos onto the table.

The angle was odd and something blocked one corner, a man's foot blocked another edge, but in the background and easily seen was a screen of some kind of monitor or television, and on it was the image of a slender child with a shock of red hair and large puddles of blood around his crumpled body.

Mick picked one of the photos up but it made no sense to him. "What's this supposed to be?"

"Would be close to twenty years ago now. I had hard evidence of the Montross genocide and proof that the government was not only turning a blind eye, but was sanctioning it. Women were getting their feet hacked off so they'd be unable to run from the rape gangs. The children that were allowed to live had their ears removed so they'd be marked for the work camps. Whole towns had every male, every male from infant to elder slaughtered. Horrible crimes....unspeakable things... worse than anyone outside knew and I had it all proved and documented. I knew it was too risky to keep that level of evidence on me, so I had arranged to have it smuggled out, people who could be trusted, who trusted me.

"My train was late. If it had been on time they wouldn't have picked me up, but it wasn't and I disappeared. They couldn't kill me, too many people knew where I was and they just wanted my reports. They beat me for a couple of hours, but I didn't tell them word one, and then they said they had my kid, and they'd kill him if I didn't tell them. They made me watch while they beat the crap out of this skinny little red headed boy. I told them I didn't have any kids and they said it was Teresa McKale's son."

"You let them..."

"What was I supposed to do? I had no proof the kid they were killing was even hers! I knew he wasn't mine and even if he was, how could I justify thousands of innocent deaths to prevent one? My camera was set on a time delay, I'd been trying to get shots of their faces, hoping that maybe someone would find it after they killed me. Didn't get them, but I got the screen. Anyway, the reports got out and the Calvary came for me and I got shot in the process, and by the time I woke up in the hospital it was weeks later. I looked for reports of a kid showing up dead here, but there was none. I figured the whole thing had been a lie, something staged to make me talk. I didn't think about it again until a couple of weeks ago."

Mick didn't remember and the hazy images in front of him didn't help any.

"You're right, I should have followed up more, done more but I didn't. Honestly, I never thought twice about it. I married, I tried to do the husband/father thing. I was awful at it, failed completely. My daughter just called and chewed me out last week because I missed some father/daughter thing I was supposed to go to. I'm a lousy father, my ex-wife says it's because I'm so selfish. I won't lie to you, I never even thought about checking. And then I get this phone call from the most powerful man in the world asking me why my son was sleeping with his son, and I know my boy is safely with his mother and way too young to be sleeping with anyone else's son. I didn't believe him, had to see the DNA comparison for myself. Even then I had to see a photo of you."

Mick pushed the blurry pictures back toward the older man. "What is it you want?"

"I don't know. I hadn't really thought that far ahead. I want to cover this story here, it's a good one, I wasn't lying about that. Maybe get to know you? I don't know I just... I wanted to meet you. You're my son."

"I'm not your son. You might have fathered me, but you're not my father."

"I'm sorry, but I can't undo the past."

"No, you can't."

"But I'm here now and I want to get to know you. I hear you were a cop?"

Mick sat silent for a long moment before he shook his head. "No, you don't get off so easily. You can't just walk in now and assume everything is okay or better because now you know. You weren't here when I needed.... I used to lay awake at night and pray that my father, assuming I had one, would find me. That all the misery I was in was just some mistake. And now? When I don't need you, here you are."

"Mick, I can understand..."

"No, no you can't and don't even think you can. I have a father, three of them actually, and they may not be perfect but they've been here for me. I can't...I can't do this right now. We've so much else going on..."

"Which is why I wasn't sure I should tell you. I didn't keep it from you to deceive you, any of you, I just wasn't sure I should say something. Or if I should, when I should say something. What you are doing here, trying to build here?" Epps shook his head. "It's revolutionary. I didn't want to be a further distraction but I will admit I wanted to meet you, see what your life is like, see if you're happy..."

"What do you care?"

"I'm your father!" Epps snapped back. "Like it or not, I am and yes, I may have done a shitty job at it but really I've only been on the clock for about a day now. I care because you are my son."

"As simple as that?"

"Yeah, as simple as that." Epps snorted a little. "At least now your friends will know where you got your stubbornness from." He touched the blurry pictures. "Was this you? I've always wondered what happened to that boy..."

Mick shook his head and glanced to Toshi before he answered. "I don't know. I don't remember. It's a likelihood. I...disappeared from foster care, was found later but I don't remember anything about it."

"It was you, they did have my son." Epps' hand curled up into a fist. "Do you understand why I couldn't tell them? Can you forgive me for that? So much counted on that information getting out..."

"It doesn't matter now."

"Are you high?" Andy finally snapped and broke in. "They broke his bones, broke his jaw! They took him and dumped him still alive into a dumpster and left him there to die! They think it was days before anyone found him! It does matter, it really does! You were off playing globe trekking reporter and all the bullshit spy games or whatever trying to save the world when you should have been here, right here, trying to save one child!"

Toshi couldn't help himself from nodding in agreement. He'd stayed silent and held his thoughts because Mick didn't need him being angry as well, but it didn't mean he agreed or that he wasn't thrilled when Andy spoke up. Under the table, Mick slipped a hand over and clutched at one of Toshi's.

"I'm sorry." Epps said and truly did mean it. Sorry or not, even if he had known they really had his son, he wouldn't have done a thing differently. "So...what do we do now?"

Mick only glanced up but wasn't sure what to say.



Epps prided himself on knowing people. He'd made his living reading what people weren't saying as they spoke and knowing what other people didn't always want him to know. It was why he was so good at interviewing, people liked him, trusted him. When he poked at a tender spot they tended to open up to him. Only he'd been quietly watching Mick from day one and still felt clueless about what was really going on behind those hazel eyes.

He swallowed and licked dry lips, uneasy, knowing so much was riding on what his son wanted and not having a clue what Mick would say next. "Do you want me to leave? I'd like to stay. We've lost a lot of time already. I know, I know I'm not really your father I just fathered you. I would like a chance to get to know you though. I'm sure you have questions, if not about me, maybe your mother?" He drew a slow breath. "I want to stay, but I will leave if you'd rather not have me around."

Mick looked to Andy and saw the anger there that he couldn't quite bring himself to feel. He knew Andy would happily toss Epps out on his ear in an effort to protect him, but tossing Epps out didn't change the truth of the situation. When he glanced to Toshi he saw more reason and total utter support for whatever choice he made. One black eyebrow quirked up and Mick didn't need his lover to speak to know his thoughts.

He drew a breath and faced his father. It was an odd thought, to know the man sitting across from him was his father. He tried to see it, tried to see the resemblance and failed, but he trusted Andy. If Andy said they looked like family, then they did. He wondered if he would age like the man across from him, with lines from smiles and laughter and life around his eyes and mouth, with a full of life and living feel to him and health. At least he knew he had good odds of not going bald.

"Do you mean to do right by this story? Or was it all just a cover to come here?"

"It's a good story I'll admit. I came across it while researching you, but even if you kick me out, I'll keep with the story."

Mick nodded slowly. "Telling you to go away won't change things. I can't deal with this right now, we've too much going on. Stay, do your job, don't force the issue. As far as I'm concerned, nothing has changed." It was a lie and everyone knew it but Mick didn't care so long as everyone nodded.

"Fair enough." Epps agreed and wasn't sure if he should shake Mick's hand, hug him or just scurry away before he really did get shot.

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Chapter Sixty Seven

Toshi sighed softly, hiding his frustration, refusing to rub at the tension between his eyes. He was getting a headache, the lighting required for a good teleconference call was always too bright but Alec swore if they dimmed it, he looked like some evil villain in a comic book hiding in shadows. He'd forgotten just where his father was, some country he'd never see in person, overseeing some new project or another and he'd have happily left this to a voice only call, but his father had insisted.

"I'm waiting for an explanation." Luke Henri folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, the camera on his end took a half second to refocus.

"Father I would imagine that Uncle explained things quite well when he spoke to you. And I could say the same thing to you." He wasn't going to back down, there was too much balanced on such thin hopes. "You knew who Epps was and you didn't tell me."

Luke Henri waved the accusation off. "It wasn't my place. He's not my son, Epps isn't your father, and it's best to stay out of it. Besides, I knew you'd be smart enough to figure it out if he was too chickenshit to confess. Not that I can blame him, trying to introduce yourself to an adult son you've never met isn't the easiest of tasks."

"Or being that son." Toshi reminded him and instead of receiving a scolding frown from his father, Luke Henri nodded.

"It doesn't change my question to you."

"But it does need to be resolved. Like it or not, Father, Mick is a part of my life and he isn't going anywhere."

"Let me tell you some advice, as your father. Lovers, even spouses, they're good company, but never get too attached and no matter how much you think you can't live without them, there's always another one out there."

"Is that how you thought of my mother?" It was a low, cheap blow but he wasn't inclined to let anyone, even his father, speak so dismissively about what he shared with Mick.

Luke Henri's eyes narrowed. "Your mother was a different situation entirely."

"So is Mick."

"You're young still, very young."

"Father."

"Don't scold me, boy."

"I mean no disrespect." And he only said that because he'd been raised to respect his family and elders and he required his father's help but he did say it.

"Hmmp, you mean it." Luke Henri nodded. "If Mick is the reason you're confident enough to stand up to me, how can I speak ill of what you have. I like you better this way, even if you're more difficult to deal with. Shows the Ranvier in you."

"This wasn't a good way for Mick to find out, you should have told us."

"Can't unscramble an egg. Now what's this Yasun was going on about? Tell me I'm getting a bit

touched in my old age and I didn't just listen to him go over a plan to turn the camps into an independent nation."

"It's a solid plan."

"And you're going to single handedly rebuild the camps? With my money?"

"No father, with my money. Spread out over twenty years, with the returns being reinvested in the project, I can fund it without touching your money."

"Nonsense, you're a Ranvier, your money is my money, my money is yours. If you start this mad plan we're both in it together."

"Father..."

"Your grandfather, he built homes before the plague. When everyone was dying around him, and the world fell apart and no one had work? He dug graves to keep us fed. When the sickness took your grandmother and your aunts and uncles, I helped him dig those graves. We took whatever was offered in payment, deeds, property, and companies. We did the work no one wanted; going into homes with whole families rotting in the summer heat to retrieve belongings for loved ones or cleaning them out for the government. We built up, hired others to work for us. I was still a boy, but your grandfather sunk every penny he had into getting some industry running so others wouldn't starve. That's what we do, son, that's what a Ranvier does. It isn't about how much we own or how much cash we have but what we've built."

"I know, father." He'd heard the stories before. His grandfather had been a successful, hard working man before the virus swept in waves across the globe. He had become wealthy by seizing every chance he could find and always building, growing toward more. Luke Henri had taken the solid, growing fortune from his father and kept it growing, expanding, building and the money had built up along with it. Toshi knew he'd inherit it all one day and with it the knowledge that it was about more than cash in the bank or profits made.

"You want to risk a sizeable portion of what's been built on this whim?"

"It's not a whim and I have full control over my personal finances. I am doing this father; I wasn't seeking your permission."

"I wouldn't expect any son of mine to seek permission. It's a gamble; it may never even return the investment."

"Perhaps not, but as you've said to me many times, investments aren't made in things, they're made in people."

Luke Henri steepled his fingers together and frowned. "You get that girl pregnant yet?"

The change in subject caught Toshi a little off guard. "We don't know yet. The doctors aren't sure how many tries it'll take."

"Hmmm. You bed that Scots Irish mutt of yours less and give me some grandchildren and all of Ranvier Industries will back this construction plan of yours."

He refused to blush and kept everything deadpan serious. "There's nothing wrong with my sperm count, father. We should blame your rogue mutation for any failures before my very much private sex life."

"Still, I want a mess of babies toddling about before I'm too old to enjoy them. You follow through with that and we'll build your city together. Fair enough?"

"Yes, father." Especially since he had to have the children anyway.

"All assuming you can get the permission to do this, the Containment Committee won't let go so easily."

"Will you help us, father?"

"People respect RI because we don't meddle in politics."

"Father." He was never sure if his father was agreeing with him or denying him until it was actually said.

"I'll do what I can but I can't promise it'll be much. I might get them to come to you, but we're talking about some of the world's most stubborn sons of bitches, just getting them there doesn't promise anything." It was going to burn up a lifetime of favors and debts, but he could do it. Could and would, he'd do it for his son and his lost love.

"But it gives us a chance, which is more than we've had." Toshi paused. "Thank you."

Luke Henri waved the thanks off.

"We're announcing the new treatment for Shine addiction tomorrow."

"When?"

"Later in the day. I have the final selection being made today for the next five. We'll pick them up tomorrow. We're going to be shutting down Sunshine house in the next few days and Uncle Yasun will be part of that as well, but I'll have to bring the other clubs into line as soon as Sunshine is shut down. I'm going to be a little busy for a while, Father."

That made the older man frown. "You have enough security in place?"

"Yes."

"I know you don't like it when I give you advice; but listen to an old man that's strong armed his way about those Yards for the last forty years. Show them no weakness."

"I won't father."

"No, listen to me. In the Yards, bodies disappear into thin air, don't hold back your hand. Take them hard and fast and make them pay attention. Do what you must and when they agree, give them enough space to skim some off the top of the profits to keep everyone quietly fat and happy."

Toshi smiled a little, surprised to hear Mick's thoughts echoing in his father's words. "We've already planned for it."

"Be careful."

"I will."

"You're sure you don't want extra security? I know those I/S sorts are good but couldn't do any harm to have some humans around too. I can have an entire military unit ready for you in four hours."

It was almost touching. "We're good."

"Toshi." Luke Henri paused. "Don't do anything stupid, stay back, let the guards do their job."

It was genuine worry he saw in his father's face and it surprised him. "You should thank Mick, he's seen to it I'm almost wrapped in cotton and put on a shelf for the whole effort. It'll be fine."

"Good..." But the worry stayed on Luke Henri's face. "Now about those grandchildren...."

The rooftop garden was empty and the area covered with a tent roof over the table he normally took his lessons on was just as deserted. Rez squinted under his sunglasses but he glanced around and saw no one.

"Sensei?" He called out, and no voice answered. It was unusual but not alarming and Rez figured the old man was simply late arriving.

"Rez?" Alec called from the door to the stairwell.

"Here." He snapped back.

"Ah, there you are! You slipped past me, I've been hunting you. No lessons today, your sensei is teaching a class inside the camp, and well here..." Alec hurried across the rooftop and handed Rez a thick folder.

"What's this?" He flipped the cover open and found a stack of papers divided by thick staples into sections. A photo of an I/S woman was on the top sheet and neatly organized information surrounded it.

"The final list of candidates for the de-tox treatment. Dorms at the club are ready to move in, furniture goes in tomorrow and the clinic isn't fully finished, but the de-tox areas are. Toshi wants to go ahead sooner instead of later. Those twenty names are the short list, he said you should pick which five of those twenty to go first. Just to be safe, can you order them all? In case one of the five you pick refuses treatment?"

The blond human spoke so casually, but Rez felt his stomach turn over. He wasn't holding paper and files in his hand, he was holding lives. "You want me to pick which five?" realizing that picking five would also decide which fifteen didn't receive treatment.

"Toshi said since you'll end up managing them, you should get the choice. Said you had something in mind for assistant managers or such?" Alec studied the falsely innocent face. Rez was very good, like most I/S, at hiding what he was thinking, but Alec had years of reading Toshi's moods. He could see the surprise and unease behind the pink eyes. "Don't worry, after this five another five can go and then another five and in a couple of weeks we can be detoxing in batches of ten. This is just the first five; pick the ones there that you think can help you the most. Can you do that?"

Toshi wanted him to make the choice. Rez's first thought was that it was some form of test, but that was his old life speaking, that was what a Shiner whore would think. A manager didn't assume everything was a trap, the side of him that was learning and growing knew he was being asked to do this because his input was valued.

Carefully Rez nodded. "Yeah, I can do it."

"Good. Because Toshi wants those five pulled tomorrow and at a press conference where he'll be announcing the treatment. He won't directly ask you to be there too, but it'd be nice if you would. He's going to publicly confirm he's a recovering addict to the press for the first time. It

would mean something to him if you were there, but we'll all understand if you don't want to be the poster boy for I/S Shine recovery." Alec and Mick wanted Rez to be there because Toshi really was uneasy coming out about his past. Both men respected Toshi's desire to let Rez find his own way enough to not make it an order but that didn't mean Alec wouldn't strongly suggest it.

People would find out about him sooner or later and it wouldn't take much to know he was an addict. From there it was only one more step to figuring out that he hadn't been working as some rich human's maid his whole life, it was an easy jump to knowing he'd been a whore. He may as well own up to it, put it out in the open and make it more matter of fact than scandalous.

"I'll be there." He'd do it for himself as much as Toshi and the other five people about to go from Shiner whore to recovering addict.

Alec smiled. "Good, thanks. Anyway...I'll leave you to it, but if you could get those selections to me as quickly as you possibly can?"

"Sure."

"Thanks." Alec smiled wider and quickly left. He did have things to do but it wasn't work that had him rushing away. Rez looked like he needed space and time alone and he was willing to give him that.

Rez sat still and quiet after Alec left. The breeze was pleasant as it ruffled the fabric overhead that was granting such cool shade and he enjoyed it. The folder in his hands was a solid reminder that life a few months ago didn't have quiet moments of warm sunshine and cool breezes. He had been lucky beyond words to do something, say something, catch Toshi's eye and to have been rescued. Without that luck he'd have lived and died as nothing more than a thing. Sooner or later, the Red Moon would have declared his debt repaid and turned him out to make room for a younger worker. He'd have spiraled down to heavier and heavier Shine use and no food until he simply died. They'd have picked him up with the trash in the morning like the filth he was.

But he had been lucky. Toshi had chosen him, trusted him, and taken him in. He wasn't using, he wasn't whoring, he wasn't even getting deathly sick anymore. There were still moments when he wanted to Shine so badly everything screamed at him to go out and use; but he wasn't curled up in a ball wishing he was dead any more. More, he was learning and growing, becoming more than he ever thought he was capable of. He was getting healthier and stronger and he was going to be a person in a position of respect. All because Toshi had picked him and given him a chance and now he had to do the same for five other people.

Worse, he had to exclude fifteen people. Fifteen lives all physically capable of the de-tox, all fifteen in situations Toshi was sure he could free them from with a fair amount of ease. That meant they were all pushing past their prime, running out of time and options. Fifteen people just like him in situations with death the only way out that he was going to refuse. The responsibility made him feel ill.

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Blurring The Lines:

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Chapter Sixty Eight

Rez sat still and quiet after Alec left. The breeze was pleasant as it ruffled the fabric overhead that was granting such cool shade and he enjoyed it. The folder in his hands was a solid reminder that life a few months ago didn't have quiet moments of warm sunshine and cool breezes. He had been lucky beyond words to do something, say something, to catch Toshi's eye and been rescued. Without that luck he'd have lived and died as nothing more than a thing. Sooner or later the Red Moon would have declared his debt repaid and turned him out to make room for a younger worker. He'd have spiraled down to heavier and heavier Shine use and no food until he simply died. They'd have picked him up with the trash in the morning like the filth he was.

But he had been lucky, he had been chosen and more trusted and taken in. He wasn't using, he wasn't whoring, he wasn't even getting deathly sick anymore. There were still moments when he wanted to Shine so badly everything screamed at him to go out and use but he wasn't curled up in a ball wishing he was dead any more. More, he was learning and growing, becoming more than he ever thought he was capable of. He was getting healthier and stronger and he was going to be a person in a position of respect. All because Toshi had picked him and given him a chance and now he had to do the same for five other people.

Worse, he had to not pick fifteen other people. Fifteen lives all physically capable of the de-tox, all fifteen in situations Toshi was sure he could free them from with a fair amount of ease. That meant they were all pushing past their prime, running out of time and options. Fifteen people just like him in situations with death the only way out that he was going to refuse. The responsibility made him feel ill.

He sat still and quiet with the folder in his hands for a long time after Alec left. Some small part of him wanted to just reach in and randomly pull out five lumped together files, five random people. That would be easy. All twenty people were acceptable, it only came down to his choice and preference. It was a choice he didn't want to make.

It was a choice he was going to make. Toshi was going to count on him to do his job. That meant making difficult choices. All he'd been asked to do was recover, get clean and learn. This was the first real task asked of him and Rez was not going to cave in and randomly pull names. Toshi hadn't randomly picked him, he wasn't going to randomly do anything.

The files inside the folder were separated by men and women and Rez thought it best to start with the first ten. It would have been easier if he had to pick six, he could select three men and three women but five didn't even up so nicely. One of the photos stopped his fussing about sorting the men's paperwork.

It was how he remembered Jos, fifteen and just starting to work. Still healthy looking and not the slender addict look they all had by twenty. His green hair was shiny in the photo, glossy and healthy. It had been brushed to fall in a straight shower across his shoulders and it made his pale skin seem to glow. That was a trick of the lighting. Rez had worked jobs where their clients had been at the same party and they'd performed together. Jos naked with his hair loose looked a little sickly, a little green, just slightly. It was why he always wore his hair pulled back a little and why his house made sure he kept a slight tan. The large green eyes were a couple of shades lighter than his hair and looked wide and innocent still. Rez doubted the man had even tasted

shine when this picture had been taken, he knew his first photos had been taken the week before he'd been sold the first time. It was likely the last time Jos had been sober.

Those were thoughts, and a time, that Rez didn't like to recall but every file had young innocent, sober eyes staring up at him. To contrast it, inside the file was a more recent photo. Jos looked strung out, he looked tired. There was no innocence left in his green eyes and now they just had a glassy exhaustion. Without the man's pissy attitude and bravado to hide it he looked young and burned out and very much like he wouldn't last much longer.

It was selfish. Rez didn't want to deal with Jos and the memories that came with him. The other faces he didn't know, not really. Some he knew the names of and faces but he wasn't close to them, he wasn't friendly with them. There were six houses and clients tended to be loyal to one or two. More so, the workers were competitive with each other, none wanted to be viewed as useless and turned out so interactions were kept to as minimal as possible. Jos was the only he had any existing personal relationship with and he found himself not wanting to have any contact with the other man in his new life.

Only, Jos had asked him for help. He hadn't begged or blackmailed or bribed. He'd simply asked for help without expectations. He'd just said he wasn't sure how much more he could take, a feeling Rez knew quite well. Even when Rez hadn't made any promises, he could see Jos didn't expect anything. None of them expected anything, their lives were laid out for them and hope was too heavy of a weight to carry. But he'd asked for help and Rez had said something to Toshi and here was Jos's file.

He set Jos' file aside and focused on the others. Very carefully Rez read each one and as he progressed he didn't notice that his lips moved as he was reading. It was a habit Sensei was attempting to break him of. He found he fell back on it when concentrating too hard, trying not to miss the meaning behind the actual words. No one was around to notice or care and he was too caught up in the responsibility of the task at hand to worry about such a minor habit.

None of the files were the official papers on the people. Rather they were privately gathered reports. Somehow, Alec or Toshi or both had managed to get agents close enough to speak hushed words to each person on the list and confirm the fact that they'd like to be clean. The rest was all information gathered externally. Ages, level of Shine use, overall health, how many of their tenths appeared to be sold or free, how long they'd been using, how long they'd been whoring all was neatly spelled out. Along side that was any notes on personality, temperament and behavior.

None of it was any real guide to picking one over the other. Rez had to stop and put all the files away and put a heavy rock on top of them. It was too much to deal with and he had to get up and walk away. Even though he knew the plants wouldn't be able to offer him any advice or help he needed to physically step away. He knew he was too close to the subject but he hadn't expected it to hurt so badly to say no to two thirds of them. It was just too easy to see himself as one of those fifteen rejected and being stuck. Stuck with no hope, no future, stuck simply waiting to die.

"They'll be another five and another after that." He whispered to himself. It was small comfort in the face of so many people addicted. So many forced into addiction as a means of control, all without any hope. "Can't worry about them all, have to do what you can for your own." He reminded himself and wondered again how Toshi or his uncle managed to live with so much responsibility and not go crazy from it.

A choice had to be made and it was his to make. Rez angrily pushed a loose lock of hair back and went back to the table and the waiting files. Like it or not, he was responsible for Jos and he couldn't refuse the man a chance at a real life simply because Rez didn't want the reminder to his own past. That filled one place. He carefully went over the files and again found nothing special in any of them that overly qualified or under qualified any of the others.



In the end Rez made the choice on the remaining four by gender and coloring. Two men and two women to make it even, though that really wasn't even because that would make it four males, counting himself and two females that had received the new treatment. He couldn't count himself because Toshi had made that choice and Rez was making a private choice for Jos. He soothed his guilt by promising the next batch of five to have three females. After that he picked the four by their coloring, as so often I/S were divided up by such superficial factors. The more extreme or rare the coloring, the more likely they were to have been mistreated. Rez knew that from first hand experience, he'd always been special because humans found him cute.

It seemed a rather superficial means of making a choice but it allowed him to make that choice. He ended up layering the files with the five he'd selected on top, two back up people below and the rest stacked randomly. His hands were shaking when he'd finished but he'd managed to do it.

Alec was easy to find. He was spread out over their table like he always was, swamped under files and paperwork and tapping away at his computer. He smiled when Rez came in clutching the file close, frightened he'd drop it and have to start over.

"Finished?"

Rez nodded. "This wasn't easy."

"I would imagine not."

He handed the file over but hovered. "Top five and next two are second choices, beyond that it's all random."

"I didn't intend for you to order all twenty. It's okay." He placed the file down, having the tact to wait until Rez actually left to see who had been selected.

"They're being picked up tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"The top one? Holiday Jason? Could I go with you to get him?"

"Well the guard is doing most of the retrievals but I can arrange for you to go with the group picking him up." They were going to try to get them all at once to prevent any word of what they were doing spreading and making things more difficult. "You don't have to go along."

"I know, it's just, I know him. I'd like to go."

Alec nodded and trusted that Rez knew his limits. "I'll make the arrangements."

"Thanks." He wasn't sure it was a good idea but he did know Jos would be difficult and that the guards didn't tolerate Shiners well. It didn't make him feel any less uneasy about going back to a house, even if it wasn't the Red Moon and he turned to leave before he could change his mind.

"Actually..." Alec spoke as Rez started to go. "It's not a bad idea. I'll see to it someone goes with each group, not just the guards."

Sometimes Rez wondered if Alec was a little I/S himself, he seemed so skilled at reading the people around him. "Okay." He muttered. "Whatever." And with a shrug he left before Alec could creep him out further.

Without his lessons, Rez didn't have much to distract himself with. He could have stayed in the apartment, maybe retreated to his room to read the next chapter in the book Sensei had him working on. It was just that he didn't want to read. He would have rather simply watched a movie

or a bad human tv show but he didn't want to sit there while Alec was working. The moment the human would open the folder to start the preparations Rez would know and that would ruin his mood. He could garden maybe, a little, if he knew anything about gardening, which he didn't.

In the end he found himself down in the basement. He didn't feel like training and certainly knew Mick wasn't up to knocking him down for a lesson. There just wasn't anything else to do and he was feeling sick, worse, he was sick of feeling sick. He couldn't just lay down and be miserable. He wouldn't train, he'd just run a little or something and burn off some nervous energy.

Rez moved into the locker room to change, he'd been keeping a change of clothes down here since Mick had started teaching him, and nearly ran into Kesses. The blonde guard froze and studied him and the look made Rez frown. It wasn't that he disliked the man, on the contrary for a stubborn clod of a guard he seemed like a good sort, he just didn't like how easily the other man seemed to know what he was thinking. His frown deepened when Kesses didn't move out of the way.

"What?" Rez finally snapped.

"Tonight, twelve thirty, back corner of the roof, be ready because my break isn't long."

That startled the angry frown from Rez's face. He hadn't really been thinking about it but part of him instantly eased at Kesses' offer. What was odd was that he hadn't known right away what it was that would make him relax and feel more stable, more like he was back on solid ground. A few weeks ago he would have instantly known and Rez didn't know if it was a good sign or not.

Kesses studied him again and Rez stood still and mute under the probing eyes. He almost asked for it then and there but it was obvious the guard was on his way to someplace which would mean he'd be missed. Rez almost asked to be taken to their apartment and passed around the off duty guards. He could close his eyes and be a whore and chase away all of the queasy uncomfortable sickness from having to be responsible for others. Only he wasn't a whore anymore and he didn't want it, he wasn't even sure he wanted it from Kesses.

"If you're not there, I'll understand but if you are it's okay." Kesses nodded and turned to the side and slipped past Rez without another glance.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Sixty Nine

It was the way Kesses had known him, both his need to be used and subjugated as well as his sudden distaste for that desire that upset him so. Rez brushed it off and pushed the feelings

aside. It didn't matter, nothing mattered, and it was an easy, if painful, lie. He almost scurried away to hide in his room, but he'd come to the basement to burn off some nervous energy and he wasn't going to let a thick headed guard spook him from that. It helped that by the time he got settled and changed the basement was empty. He was as alone as if he really was in his room.

He was still jittery even after his body was tired. Nothing formal was planned for dinner so Rez took his time showering and changing. Maybe it wasn't right but he didn't want to see the others, not when part of him was scared silly about the following day. He grabbed something to eat out of habit instead of desire and retreated to his room and the door he could close behind him. He had mock accounting paperwork to do, things Sensei was testing him with. Rez had been surprised at how quickly he had learned things. He still had a long way to go but he wasn't stupid.

The assignment would have been easy if he hadn't kept making stupid mistakes. Worse, he kept looking at the time every ten minutes. As the hours passed his mistakes grew more complex and more difficult to find and fix. His attention refused to do anything but watch time tick away carrying him closer to midnight.

He didn't want it. Only he did, badly, painfully, worse than a craving he wanted it. It wasn't about sex, wasn't about pleasure, he needed to be used and not in a good way. Black cotton fabric clenched in his hand and Rez wasn't even sure when he'd picked Andy's stupid panties up. He had stalled on returning them and found them in his hand at odd times. It was silly but feeling the texture of the fabric helped a craving pass, helped settle him when he was upset and he didn't know why.

"Fuck it." He wasn't going to be able to sleep, not when he felt like this. It wasn't that he was horny, jerking off wasn't going to help. The solution would find him on the roof, if he was there and waiting.

He didn't notice the black cotton was still in his hand until he was out in the living room and the panties owner was sprawled on the sofa. Rez quickly shoved them into his pocket and tried to pretend the human didn't exist.

"Where you going?"

"Out."

"Good movie on...Toshi and Mick are cuddling and I think Alec slipped out to see Pia. I promise I won't even make sarcastic comments."

"I'm going out." He snapped again and didn't stop. He didn't want to look over, didn't want to remember those panties over those long legs, the lean length pushing it's way to freedom. He didn't want to pause and wonder what it would be like if it was the artist and not Kesses he was going to meet, going to be used by.

As he shut the door behind him Rez was surprised to find the thought linger. Only he didn't want that empty, cold, roughness like Kesses gave him. He liked the idea of Andy taking him, them naked together with plenty of time to spare but not like his trysts with Kesses. He wasn't sure he'd ever fully purge himself of the needs his encounters with Kesses fulfilled, he just wasn't sure he could ever explain those needs to a human.

He wasn't even sure he could explain those needs to himself. Luckily, he didn't have to, all he had to do was get to their corner of the roof and be ready before Kesses went on break. After that he didn't have to say anything, think anything. He wouldn't have to understand or explain or worry and that was what he needed to make the sick knot in his stomach go away.

The roof was dark but he could see just fine. Even blindfolded he could hear clearly enough to know the space was empty, he wasn't deaf quite yet. Rez wondered if Kesses managed to

quietly spread word that the space had to be unoccupied because in all of their encounters he'd never seen anyone around. Suddenly, for the first time, he found the idea disturbing. He didn't want other people to know what they did. It wasn't quite shame because he was of age, not owned by a house and I/S which gave him the right to fuck who he wanted, how he wanted, but he wasn't at all proud of it either.

He found their screened in corner.. Rez had long since suspected they weren't the only ones to use that area for a quick tumble. One of the boxes that should have held gardening supplies instead had thick lotion, hand wipes and paper towels and a small, always empty, trash can. All of it on the surface could be for gardening, working with the plants required the hand wipes to clean up and the slick lotion kept skin from growing rough, but Rez saw no innocence in any of it.

Waiting was the worst part. Rez felt like every nerve in his body trembled as he waited, ready, with nothing more to do. Even his pants were open, a sharp tug would pull them down and out of the way. There was nothing left to do but wait, until footsteps warned him that his waiting was over. As the footsteps grew closer he felt like he couldn't breathe.

Black fabric at the base of the potting table he'd just taken Rez over caught Kesses' eye. Rez had held a scrap of black fabric in his hand while being fucked and it had seemed so odd that it made him notice. What was more odd was that the purple haired man had closed his eyes and actively sought pleasure from their joining. For the first time, when Kesses had reached forward to stroke the pretty man he'd not only been allowed but welcomed. He'd have been a head blind fool to not feel the difference in Rez, the man was thinking about something, or Kesses guessed someone, and that had changed the entire feel and flavor of their encounter.

It surprised him that the fabric turned out to be a simple pair of stretchy cotton panties. Not overly fussy and girly but Kesses had taken the panties off enough women in his time to know most didn't wear lace thongs. They weren't Rez's, no one clung to their own underwear like it was something erotic but he'd never have guessed Rez to fall for a woman. He just seemed too much like the sort to want interaction with men but maybe that was his former profession peeking through and not reality. That left the only question being which woman it was and there was an easy way to find that out.

All of their washing was done together, like a family and then sorted. All the guards had a number and all of their clothing would be marked with their number so that their article of clothing could be cleaned and returned to them. Rez still had his back to him, fussing at cleaning up. The painful awkwardness that always followed their quick meetings gave him time to peek inside to see which number was there. Only there wasn't a number but the letters AF instead and that could only be one person.

"Did you drop this?" Kesses asked carefully.

Rez turned and his eyes flashed for a moment, startled and guilty before he regained control and shrugged. "What is it?"

"It seems to be a pair of Andy-san's panties."

"Why the fuck would I have his dumb ass panties?" Rez snapped back. "Fucking slut must have left them up here last time he got banged."

And if Kesses hadn't seen Rez clutching the fabric the way a child clung to a security blanket, he might even believed him. "Must have." He offered the fabric out to Rez. "Still, be better if you have them. Wouldn't want to have to explain to Sakura-sama why I have them."

Rez nodded and took the fabric back, but he shoved it into his pocket before he finished closing his pants.

"Rez-kun..." Kesses began carefully. The use of the more casual address snapped Rez's head back up. "Tomorrow, would it be easier or more difficult for you if I was in the group accompanying you? I know we aren't friends but we do have an understanding." The truth was he felt responsible for Rez in some way greater than average simply because the snippy man was a member of his house.

"Do you care?"

"My preference is to be near."

"Doesn't matter to me, do what you want."

Which was as close to an invitation as he was going to get. "Very well, I need to return, I've been gone too long." He'd lingered when it had sunk in that Rez was finding pleasure in their joining and he'd tried even harder to make it better for Rez and not just the dirty thing he needed.

"Whatever." Rez muttered and turned his back again. He waited until Kesses left, waited as he heard the footsteps disappear across the roof and only when he was sure he was alone did he let his legs give out. He crumbled onto the floor into a messy pile and felt like he might be sick.

The dress slacks, button down shirt and nice suit jacket felt odd but Rez couldn't debate the logic of it. They all were dressed in casual dress clothes and looked expensive and powerful. It made him feel out of place and a little like a fraud. No one else seemed to notice and Toshi had even nodded and smiled a little, pleased that he was playing along.

"Today is going to be a strain. Mick has tact teams assembled to do the retrievals but each one must be brought to the club. The dorms are secure and will remain so, the press conference will be out front. Concluding the conference, all but a single team will leave to the clinic. Time is of the essence, I don't think I need to stress that too much." Toshi glanced around the room and tried not to frown. "Mick will go to Bending Willow, there are two to be collected there, Alec will go to the Green Leaf and Andy and Rez will go to the Single Oak for the final two. Do not debate the issue with the managers, each one of these five have long since paid their debt. Demand them, demand their files and leave. Do not linger, do not take chances. If there is a refusal call here and I'll reassign." He should be going. This was going to cause trouble and he should be there. Alec was right though, he couldn't personally retrieve any of them without it being an insult to the other clubs or addicts. He couldn't give a hint of favorites. Mick had agreed and added that it was safer to stay here. His lover had been unusually and painfully quiet since learning of his parentage and any small thing Toshi could do to help him he would.

"Epps is going along, he'll follow Alec." Toshi glanced to the man in the corner, the one Mick was glaring at and trying to ignore at the same time. "He is still my guest and will be regarded as such. If trouble occurs, abandon the worker to save those of your house. Is that clear? I want all of you to come back without harm. Do not cause trouble but be unrelenting." He didn't like sending Rez or Andy out but it was a good idea to have one of his agents go with the guard. "You should be inside each club no more than a half an hour. I expect each one of you to stand by that. Consider it an order, if it is taking too much time move out. Bending Willow has a reputation for violence but they use humans. If they are stalling they are waiting for reinforcements. We can not afford a conflict at this point. Do I make myself clear?"

There were nods of agreement but it didn't miss Toshi's notice that Mick had the guard dressed to look threatening and more, he'd made sure they were armed to the teeth.

"Once you've accomplished your goal, return without delay and please, be careful." He was nervous. Frightened really and worst of all, some part of Toshi was glad he didn't have to walk

into one of the houses and smell Shine today. He wasn't sure how Rez was going to deal with that.

Mick nodded. "You heard the man, time is escaping." Mick waited until the guards nodded and left the cramped conference room, Alec, Andy and Rez following but Epps and Toshi lingered.

"Mick..."

"Shut up and go do your job." Mick cut Epps off but stayed because Toshi stayed even after Epps nodded and left.

"You'll be careful." Toshi didn't make it a question, he made it an order.

Mick nodded.

"Mick..."

"We'll take no chances, the groups going with Alec, Andy and Rez are on high alert. It'll be okay."

It was Toshi's turn to nod. "I wish I was going with you."

"I'm glad you aren't. Just make sure everything is ready to go with the clinic."

"I will. Everyone is going to be watching."

That made Mick smile a little, a small grin with a bitter tug to it. "Everyone is always watching."

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Seventy

"We'll have to try to avoid puddles." Andy sighed and wished they had a car. "I wore butter colored linen." He caught the look from Alese, a female guard that quietly longed to share his wardrobe. He wasn't surprised to find amusement as well as agreement in her wide purple eyes.

"It is a lovely pair of slacks."

He'd put on the only linen pants he owned, because linen and silk were what the wealthiest, most successful I/S wore, excepting Toshi and Yasun and their family who lived a ridiculously

simplified life. When he'd asked Alese what to wear to impress an I/S manager and show he was someone important, she had suggested linen and he'd listened. He'd pulled on his black Chelsea boots and a wine purple lightweight and very elegant sweater instead of a dress shirt. He'd pulled his hair back into a simple tail and barely put on make up but the effect was a good one. Casual wealth and an air of expected power, it was what he was looking for.

"Though I must admit, bunny boy looks yum." Andy teased as Rez collected his helmet from Kesses. He was only half teasing, the dress casual clothes with the I/S hair and eyes was a delicious combination. It made Andy think naughty things.

"Fuck off." Rez muttered, but it was half hearted. He didn't want to go but he had to. It was the right thing to do and he was suddenly glad both Andy and Kesses were going with him. He could frown and look unhappy and Andy could do the talking.

To have a bike in the camp was to be more mobile and respected. Many families had converted bicycles to rickshaw cabs and earned good livings hauling others around. A moped made you a big man, someone that could afford the fuel and upkeep, someone with connections. An old motorcycle in any level of repair spoke louder, but a real, shiny, new motorcycle made people feel like they were seeing royalty. Motorcycles had always symbolized power and authority inside the camp and even Rez, who had been raised in isolation, locked up in his house, was affected by the site of so many. Not even a real car could have such an effect. Humans drove cars and I/S didn't give a shit about humans.

Rez watched as Mick gave the gathered guards final instructions. It would be an awe-inspiring site, so many dark motorcycles with the riders all dressed in similar dark uniforms. People were going to talk about it for months inside the camp and more, they'd talk about the ones not in the dark uniforms. Rez was painfully aware that he was the only I/S on this little adventure that wasn't a guard. He knew he would draw the most attention and gossip and his hair would mark him very clearly.

The guards nodded and broke into groups. Mick moved easily to his and Alec already stood waiting by a motorcycle in another. Neither human seemed uneasy or concerned. Rez couldn't say the same thing. They were human, all humans were lumped together but he was an Incubus. Everyone in the camp would be wondering about him and in a few hours he'd be standing beside Toshi as things were explained. In a few hours he'd be the public face of Shine recovery. It made him want to Shine.

"You don't have to go." Andy said softly as the guards started to rejoin them. "No one expects you to do this."

"I'm fine."

"If you say so, sweetie." He wasn't going to push the issue but Rez looked even paler than normal and the sunglasses didn't hide the glazed over look in his eyes. He forced a smile and brightened when Alese came to gather him up. "Be gentle with the slacks baby, I wrinkle." She only laughed as he climbed onto the back of the bike behind her. They pulled out, four guards, four motorcycles and Andy and Rez being kept in the middle of the small pack. As they rolled away, hidden by his helmet, Andy let himself frown.

They all rode together to the main entrance past the wall around the camp. The Committee members that Toshi still allowed to track who came and went stepped out from their posts and I/S looking to move from one side or the other stepped back. No one stopped them, no one questioned them, the same way that any human rolling into the camp moved freely but there was little doubt they weren't really human. People watched and no one tried to stop them. The motorcycles didn't even slow down.

Inside the wall the groups peeled off. The houses were all close to the wall, a place most I/S avoided because bad things happened to people that lived too close to the wall. Even after the strict lock down had officially ended, it wasn't unheard of for someone to simply go missing if they strayed too close to the human world alone, and were unlucky. The houses preferred that, it allowed them to stay close to their human clientele as well as the humans who owned the clubs on the other side of the wall. It was an open secret every house had a human master if traced back.

Andy had expected something more of the houses. Flashing neon signs blinking phrases like "Get Laid Here" or red-tinted windows with I/S in sexy clothes lazily dancing, but the building they pulled up to was ordinary. Kind of square, plain, unadorned, it did have a fence around it to hide who arrived or left from prying eyes, but overall the building was disappointingly normal. The only odd thing he noticed was that he didn't see one window that wasn't boarded over. It was tastefully done and it took a moment to sink in but when it did it brought with it the knowledge that those inside really were little more than slaves.

"No one moves alone." Alese said to them all but she was looking at Andy and Rez. "We stay in pairs or groups. Understood?"

Andy noticed Rez didn't even nod and knew he'd have to take charge. "Yes, mommy." He smiled far more brightly than he felt and moved to the simple front door.

The room it opened into was long and narrow with the back part of the room raised up several feet from the main floor. A small table sat with a binder style folder that was filled with sleeves and to either side were doorways. The front door opening must have triggered a bell of some sort and from one doorway a short round woman emerged. Her hair was a pale red and her eyes a bright red, Andy knew enough about I/S now to know an older woman, her hair slowly fading to white. He guessed her age and added fifteen years to it to compensate for how well I/S aged.

"Ah, Artist-san, what an honor to have a member of Sakura-sama's house come to pay us a visit." She smiled brightly and waved her hand. From the far door a half dozen very beautiful, and barely dressed I/S walked out onto the platform. "This is what I have not booked for today. I would be honored to have you select any of them and I'm certain amusement can be arranged for your guard as well."

They were beautiful and young, the oldest was maybe in her mid twenties. The youngest still looked more like a child than even a teenager and Andy felt like he might become ill. They stood with blank looks in their eyes, some obviously Shiny and others trying to ignore him, their hair loose about their shoulders. He suddenly wanted to gather them all up and steal them all away.

"There's only two I wish, Snow Bendin and Holiday Jos."

Her smile trembled and nearly twitched off her face. "Bendin is to be picked up by her client in an hours time and is unable to serve you and Jos is unrepresentable at the moment. Truly, neither is any more or less talented or beautiful than any of my children here."

Andy glanced to Alese and she pulled the sealed envelope from her jacket. She handed it to Andy, Andy handed it to the manager. "I'm not here for amusement. Sakura-sama has reviewed your account methods and has found those two have paid their debt in full."

Her eyes widened and she tore the envelope open. "Impossible! They have years more on their debt!"

Andy forced himself to smile but it felt more like a snarl. "Did you think he wouldn't know your real books? Did you think scum like you and your owners could lie to the Sakamoto family? You should fall down and beg them for mercy because of this offensive insult." It sounded



melodramatic but he'd asked Alese what tone to take as well as what to wear.

Melodramatic or not, the woman responded to it and visibly trembled. "It will take some time..."

"No, it won't." He glanced to where the other works stood, no longer looking so bored and found two that seemed more sober than the rest. "You, escort Rez-san to Holiday Jos this instant and you, take two of my people to collect Snow Bendin. Meanwhile, my dear lady, you will take me to your office and turn over their complete files and if I'm not satisfied you're working as quickly as you can, my people will be very displeased. And their displeasure? Won't be a third as horrible as Toshi-san's." He deliberately used Toshi's real name and not the nickname his people used to grind home the point that he was close to the nephew of the man that owned everything in the camp.

The pair Andy had picked out didn't move but a worried look was shared around the workers. The manager lady studied the paper she held for a long moment before glancing up. "This is unacceptable, I'm afraid I can not allow you to remove anyone from this house. These poor dears are under my care and who knows what you will do with them."

One of the guards behind Andy snorted. He couldn't tell if it was because it was absurd to think that he would hurt the I/S or because they were calling up some lewd vision of what he'd do with his very own Shiner whore. Worse, Andy couldn't help but think of Rez, standing slightly beside and behind him. He cleared his throat softly to purge the idea of just what it was he would do with his very own Shiner whore.

"You think I'm harsh?" Andy raised an eyebrow. "I was going to be gentle with you but now I think I will help collect Snow Bendin and my companions will help you retrieve those files. They have such love for your like, I'm sure they'll be gentle. Just in case, I wouldn't push them too far." He wasn't going to be the one to confirm the files anyway. All he had planned to do was stand there and look snotty. "Gentlemen? Would you care to escort this dear lady to her office?"

There was a barely hidden grin and one of the tall guards stepped forward. The manager squared her shoulders. "This isn't right! This isn't proper! I will not be manhandled!"

"Than I suggest you do what they tell you." He didn't wait for her to be gone, Rez looked paler than normal and the workers left on the small stage were wide eyed and shocked. "Will you two be more helpful?"

The pair that Andy had picked out nodded and moved forward and he tried not to look like a big scary human. "So, which one of you will be my guide?"

Alese followed him and Kesses stuck close to Rez but it was unnecessary. The pair nodded and led them out one of the doors and down a hallway before pausing. The hallway continued around a corner but a staircase went up to the next floor as well. It didn't take much to figure out that Andy was supposed to follow the guide up the steps and Rez around the corner and down the hallway. He was suddenly glad the larger, scary looking Kesses was following Rez, Alese was just as capable but she didn't look like she could snap someone in two. Kesses did and that would stop trouble before it started.

"She's in there, preparing for her client." The worker said softly, meekly, outside of one of a series of doors they passed.

"Thank you." Andy answered but the worker scurried away almost before he could get the words out.

"Most likely afraid he'll be beaten for helping you."

Andy snorted but didn't argue. He opened the door without knocking. He'd seen photos of Snow

Bendin but they didn't do her justice. She stood in the center of the room wearing only a short silk kimono style wrapped robe and was unloading enough toys to make an S&M shop jealous from a box into neat lines on the bed. Her skin was cocoa, her eyes a pale orange and the hair that tumbled in thick corkscrew curls down her back was a soft, pale, powder blue. More than her exotic coloring, she was beautiful and graceful and while Andy didn't find her sexually attractive he wanted to paint her, capture her beauty.

She glanced up and raised an eyebrow. "You've the wrong room."

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Seventy One

For once in his life, Andy found himself speechless. He'd never really been so close to a Succubus this beautiful, but it made sense now why straight men about died. He was sure there were ugly I/S but the coloring and odd blend of ethnic backgrounds had produced a group of people that literally took the breath away. He'd known he was gay since before he knew what it meant and Andy still wasn't fully immune to her beauty.

Only, his eye was quick and he saw more than the surface appearance. Her collarbones were too sharp, the flesh behind them looked a touch sunken. The bones of her wrist weren't simply delicate but sharp under the beautiful skin. Her eyes were bright and large and beautiful, but looked tired, looked too empty. It wasn't one thing but a series of little things that added up to a whole that screamed the truth of a long term Shine addict. Even the single, perfectly shaped, eyebrow she raised seemed to speak of her addiction if it was looked for.

"Snow Bendin-san?" Andy asked but he knew it was her.

"You're not my date, go away." Her eyes darted from Andy to over his head, where the camera that monitored the room was hidden. Or at least one of them and she waited for security to arrive and remove the human.

"No, I'm not your date, you're not my type." He smiled and liked the way she suddenly looked surprised. It wasn't often a human man said no to her. "I work for Toshi Ranvier. There's a treatment for Shine addiction and you've been selected to be one of the first to receive it. If you want it, you have to come with me now."

Her beautiful face went blank and her mouth was still and a little slack. When she blinked, slowly, she looked at Andy like he might be crazy and glanced to the Succubus guard that had

followed with him.

"He's not crazy." Alese answered the look.

"It's crazy. I can't...I'm not Sakura-sama...I can't do this sober...."

"Toshi is offering you a place in his house. You won't come back here." Andy answered smoothly but the lost, desperate hungry look on her face made him feel like he should apologize for being human. "I won't lie to you, it won't be easy. You have to want it but it can be done. It has been done already."

"Rabin Rez-san." She whispered and again glanced up with a quick dart of her eyes to where the camera was. "I can't, I'm under contract."

"That's been taken care of. The only thing you have to do is say yes and find some clothes or no and let us move to the next name on the list. Time's important here. What's it going to be?"

Her eyes fell to the bed and the box she had been unloading the toys from. For a moment her fear was great enough that even Andy could feel it and he thought she was going to choose to stay. He tried to picture Rez in a room like this, a bed laid out with toys to be used on him not with him, the same fear in his own eyes. It must have been even more frightening having Toshi right there and knowing no one had managed to get clean. Yet, Rez had flung himself headlong into the chance of a new life, which was far more courageous than Andy knew he would have been.

"I have no clothing here. Just..." she waved to the bed. "I have to go to the dorm. This is real right?"

Andy smiled gently. "Quite, now let's hurry."

"Oh... I mean I had heard and someone had asked me a couple weeks back what I thought but I didn't... no one thought... and me... why me?" She fussed as she abandoned her tidy preparations and hurried to leave the room.

"It's not my place to question what Toshi does." It sounded meek and proper and Andy knew it was a partial lie. He could question but simply didn't care to. It was enough that he trusted his friends were doing the right thing.

"You know him well? Sakura-sama."

Alese snorted a little and Andy ignored her as they followed behind the beautiful I/S as she hurried down the hallway. "Yes, I do."

"I'll get to meet him...no one will ever believe...I...he wants me to be part of his house..." She turned a corner and the hallway here was short with a heavy looking door at one end. Snow paused with a hand on the latch. "I won't let him down."

"One step at a time sweetie, one step at a time."

The room on the other side of the door was well lit by I/S standards, almost painfully so for their stronger eyesight. It was a long room with painted concrete block walls and a bare concrete floor. It was a vast difference to the warm, almost home like feel of the front part of the house. Along the walls were rows of bunk beds with frames of plain welded metal. One wall was covered with bins, cheap plastic with snap on lids and each one had a sticker with a name on it. Andy did a quick count, ten rows of beds on each side, the room housed forty people. All forty had to share the space between the rows of beds and the industrial bathroom at the far end. The showers were open like what they were sharing now in their apartment but there were no doors on the

stalls for the toilets and only four of them and two sinks. Andy had felt bad that the workers in Toshi's club were being given such small dorm rooms and asked to share a communal kitchen and bathroom but what they'd built would be a palace compared to this.

The room wasn't empty. On some of the bunks people sat, wide eyed and frightened. More, they sat silent, watching, their unease and fear greater than their curiosity. Not one of them looked older than twenty-five and the youngest looked like children. Andy felt himself clenching his jaw. It was just such a broad anger, an anger at the system and blind mistreatment of innocents. He'd always felt overwhelmed and helpless with that kind of anger. There just wasn't anything he could do about it to make it right.

"Alese, here." Kesses called out when the door opened, his head popping up from the end of the one row of bunks.

Snow and Andy paused, but they really were on a limited amount of time. "Go, get changed, we're taking Holiday Jos with us too."

"But he's..."

"Just go get dressed." Andy ordered and shooed at her as he hurried to follow behind Alese. "Holy shit." He whispered when he reached the end of the row and found Rez kneeling there beside a green haired man dabbing at dried blood with a damp towel. "It looks like he got hit by a truck. What happened?"

Rez didn't look up and Kesses finally nodded. "We found him this way. No one's talking."

"Someone jumped him because of us?"

"The wounds aren't that fresh."

Andy glanced around, but while large, colorful eyes watched them, none looked willing to talk. A few feet away, with a bin pulled out and the lid opened, Snow was pulling on jeans. She'd dropped the silk robe and seemed to have little concern for how very naked she was. Andy was suddenly very glad he was gay and wouldn't make a fool of himself.

"Snow, what's happened?"

She glanced to where Jos lay and to where Rez and Kesses were checking the unconscious man for broken bones. "I'm leaving right?"

"Yes."

That made up her mind and she nodded. "He told manager-san no so she gave him to a group last night. Had him brought in here and dropped, ordered us not to touch him." She pulled a shirt on with quick angry jerks. "I think he was trying to get killed. Happens sometimes...a lot of us would rather go down that way than out in the Yards."

"Great... Mick's going to kill me." Andy sighed. "He can't ride a bike, he's not even conscious."

Alese and Kesses exchanged a look but otherwise stayed silent.

"I'm not leaving him." Rez finally snapped back. "I just need some time, he'll wake up."

Andy moved to where Rez was trying to wash dried blood from a bruise to see how bad the damage was. He knelt down and spoke as gently as he could. "Sweetie, he's out cold and will be for a while. We don't have that kind of time."

"I'm not leaving him!" Rez hissed and glanced up.

It wasn't the man's anger or stubbornness that caught him off guard but the near panicked, unshed tears in his pink eyes. "That's all well and good but Rez, we can't leave you here."

"I don't care! Fucking leave me alone!"

Andy stood and stepped away. Kesses and Alese followed him without his having to ask. "Suggestions?"

"I can haul Rez-san out of here." Kesses nodded.

"He'll bite and scratch the whole way. He'll be like an angry cat." Andy answered.

"We can't leave him." Alese stated again.

"More, he can't leave his friend here." Andy glanced up to the taller blonde Kesses. "You've looked him over, will being moved hurt him any?"

The larger man snorted. "It won't help him any. None of his wounds look serious, he's just really roughed up and higher than a kite."

Andy sighed. "Bite him."

"What?"

"One of you, bite him. Venom acts as a stimulant, right? And a pain killer? It'll wake him up, keep him moving long enough for us to get the hell out of here."

Alese gave Kesses a look and arched an eyebrow. The man sighed and they both produced a fist. It took Andy a moment for him to understand that they were going to do rock paper scissors to pick who had to bite the Shiner whore.

"I'll do it." Rez snapped out. "Just get him some fucking clothes, I don't know how long he'll be awake."

"Snow, sweetie? Can you get something of Jos's to put on?"

She'd been standing wide eyed and unsure but nodded and moved to open another tub and rummage around inside. Loose, easy to put on clothing began to appear in her hands and even a simple pair of pull on shoes. Andy started to believe it all might work.

That was until Rez took up one of Jos' limp arms and raised it to his mouth. Andy caught a glint of the purple haired man's fangs and it felt almost pornographic to see him biting the still arm. Every small detail, the way Rez's lips moved over the other's pale skin and how the first shock of fang into flesh seemed to surprise Rez, causing him to back away a little before biting harder, all of it felt intensely erotic. Worse, Rez opened his eyes and looked up but he only looked at Andy. The pink eyes had a challenge in them, Andy wasn't sure even sure what Rez was challenging him about, but he didn't look away. It almost felt like a promise, or a wish and it felt very much directed at Andy.

Snow snorted as she handed the clothes to Kesses. "No wonder he didn't look twice at me."

Oddly, it was her comment, not the fact that he was obviously aroused with no way to hide it that made Andy blush. He had two choices, be embarrassed or deal. "Honey, if you had his plumbing, I'd have popped a woody for you too."

Rez pulled Jos's arm away. "Fucking human slut."

They were all saved from further comment by Jos moaning a little, arching in the way someone would when waking up in an uncomfortable position. He rolled his head and one hand moved stiffly to rub at his swollen, bruised face. Andy wasn't the only one obviously aroused but no one seemed willing to point out the venom's effects on the half conscious man.

Green eyes opened, blinked and opened again. "That was some good shit if I'm seeing Rezzy over me..." His words were slow and slurred but he was speaking.

"It is me you idiot."

Jos frowned and rubbed at the spot Rez had bitten him. "You bit me..."

"Yes, now get dressed."

He moaned again and shut his eyes. "Everythin' hurts...."

"And it'll hurt more when I kick your Shiner ass from here to the Yards if you don't fucking stay awake and get dressed!"

"Fuck off, Rezzy, you don't own me..." Green eyes fluttered shut again.

That was all Rez was going to take. He'd gone out on a limb and promised to be responsible for Jos. He'd made the choice to include the man on the list when it would have been safer and more comfortable to ignore him. His stomach had been twisted into knots for hours, sick with worry about what he was doing all because it felt like the right thing to do, and here Jos was, Shinning and stoned on God only knew what all, beaten to a pulp and passed around to a good dozen different men. He wasn't even willing to get dressed to stop it all from happening to him again.

Rez hauled back a hand and slapped Jos, hard, over already tender sore bruises on his face. The sound echoed around the starkly barren room. He hadn't meant to hit Jos as hard as he had but it felt good to do it.

"OW! What the fuck, Rezzy? You hit me!" Jos wasn't half asleep now, his eyes were open and he'd actually leaned up a little.

"Get the fuck up, put some clothes on or I will leave your sorry, worthless, used up Shiner ass here! I spoke to Toshi-san for you, I said you'd be worth it! Don't you fucking make a liar out of me! If you want a chance at a new life, a chance at being clean, you'll get up and get dressed! NOW!" He snapped and wanted to hit Jos again.

Green eyes blinked but weren't so fogged. "You really mean it don't you?"

"Fucking idiot, I'm surrounded by total fucking idiots!"

"Rez... you really came for me?"

That made him frown. "And I'll happily fucking leave you here if you don't move. I know it hurts, you're not the only one to ever be punished, you know. Get up, get dressed so we can get the fuck out of here. There's a treatment bed with your name on it but you have to get there. I'm not going to fucking make you if you don't want it. If you're too fucking lazy to get off the floor you'll be wasting a space! I don't care if you stay here and prove to everyone what a worthless piece of shit you are. I took my chance."

Green eyes darted about a little wild, hazed now with drugs, drink and venom. "Don't leave me."

He clutched at Rez's arm. "Please, I can't...I..."

"Than get dressed, dumbass." Rez glanced up but he didn't have to ask, Kesses was there and together they helped haul Jos up. They didn't get him to his feet but off the floor to sit on the nearest bed, which may or may not have been his and neither of them cared.

"Must have really....really worked me over if...if....God...it hurts so much with how high I am..." Jos whined and winced but he helped as much as he could while Rez and Kesses dressed him like a child. "I'm so sleepy, Rezzy.... and so....so....horny...."

"He's not riding behind me on the way home." Alese muttered.

"We'll put him on with Heinz, he looks like a fellow that can take a joke." Heinz was deadpan serious about everything and tended to frown at Andy like he was some bug.

"Brilliant plan." Kesses snickered. "Shoes?" He reached behind him and let them hand him the slip ons. "Alright now, up we go..."

"I got him." Rez moved quickly and got the unsteady form on his feet.

"You sure?"

"I'm fine, let's go."

Jos leaned over and sniffed along Rez's neck. "Hey....Rezzy....how about a quickie for old times sake..."

"Shut up and walk."

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Chapter Seventy Two

No one stopped them but Alese led the way back down the hallways followed by Andy and Snow with Rez guiding the increasingly unstable Jos with an arm over his shoulder. Kesses moved behind them, ready in case the larger Jos weighed down the slighter Rez and slowed them down. The man looked more than capable of slinging them both over a shoulder and hauling them home on foot.

Once they were back in the front room display area, Andy felt some of his nervous fear edge away when he saw the other guards were waiting, the manager with them looking both angry and frightened. She didn't look any worse for the wear, but her hair was no longer perfect and that made Andy feel better. Even if she was a flesh peddling, cold hearted pimp, he didn't like the idea of grandmothers being slapped around.

"Got the files?" He asked.

"She was quite co-operative."

"Good. See? All this fuss just wasn't necessary. I'm sure Toshi will appreciate hearing how understanding you've been. He's not one to forget those that can play by the rules." Alese and Kesses didn't pause or wait but kept Rez, Snow and Jos moving and they were outside before he finished. "Thank you, and have a nice day." Andy smiled brightly and followed, knowing the remaining guards would both be right on his heels to keep anyone from putting a knife in his back.

There were quick, nearly barked commands, short and in a lingo that wasn't quite the slang of the camp. An adaptation, Andy decided, one Mick must have encouraged because none of them would whisper slang when Toshi had strongly suggested they not use it.. Two of them took over Jos, getting a helmet on him and freeing Rez to do the same. Snow simply had one shoved at her but Alese tried to fuss at Andy's. He slapped her hands away.

"Shoo, mother, shoo!" He could manage the helmet on his own. "How're we on time?"

"In and out in twenty seven." She grinned at him.

"Wonderful! See? Flaky artist humans can follow orders too. Maybe I should be a guard when I grow up?"

That just made her laugh. "Get on the bike."

He moved to obey, eager to be away and spared a look behind him. Everything seemed okay. So long as Jos didn't pass out again and fall off the bike they'd be okay. "What a day." He sighed, hiked up the legs of his pants and climbed behind Alese. "They won't let him fall off, will they?"

Alese shrugged and soon had them rolling away.

Andy knew as soon as they were within sight of the back of the club that they were in trouble. The line of bikes was long, Alec and Mick had both beaten them back and even though they were in and out in their time frame, he knew they were going to get scolded. He planned to blame it all on Rez and Jos and maybe aliens. Aliens were always good scapegoats. He'd blamed aliens when he'd accidentally broken one of Mick's projects while they were in college. He hadn't believed it, but he also didn't snap his neck like a toothpick, so it was all good.

They had barely killed their engines before Mick and Toshi both were outside, a handful of guards with them. Andy hopped off and peeled away his helmet. "Aliens, I swear we would have been here sooner but aliens tried to kidnap us!"

"Are you okay?" Mick asked, his eyes darting along the line.

"Everything's fine..." Andy was surprised by the reaction but Mick had already seen Jos.

"What happened?"



"Nothing!" Andy snapped back. "They'd roughed him up last night. God, chill out sweetheart, you'll give yourself a stroke."

"Mick ran into trouble, one of the house guards got rough." Toshi explained and let Mick move along the line of people, checking and double checking that everyone was alright.

"Anyone hurt?"

"Some bruises, nothing serious."

"Nothing happened. We just had some trouble getting Jos there on his feet."

"He's still bleeding." Toshi wrinkled his nose. "And drugged."

"Everyone inside!" Mick snapped and got the group moving.

Andy let himself be herded in because he knew Mick in this mood was going to be unreasonably paranoid. It wasn't like snipers were hanging from windows to pick them off, but Andy moved inside anyway. It was a small thing, Mick didn't deal well when people attacked those he considered his responsibility. He acted doubly so when the situation was already so volatile. Andy didn't need Mick's mind for strategy to know what they'd just done would piss people off and what they were planning could start a small turf war in the near future. Mick was right to be a little paranoid.

They'd designed the worker dorm to be efficient but also a small community. It wasn't just a narrow tight lobby, but some real space to have community events, set up a classroom for children in the future, even to hang a line to dry laundry if they had to. It was pretty barren now because Toshi had wanted to leave it up to the people living there to find a use for the space and make it their own.

It's first use, was a small triage of sorts. Some of the guards stood around, in clumps and groups talking. One or two had ice packs but none of them seemed seriously harmed. One of the new I/S, a woman, was obviously in the early stages of withdrawals and not doing well. She was lying down, curled up, with another I/S sitting beside her, petting her gently. The other I/S hovered nearby, arms folded over his chest, frowning but his eyes had a glossy look and there was no doubt he was hours away from coming down from his own Shine.

"Who else is hurt?" Ruth asked, hurrying over as soon as they were inside.

Andy stayed silent, knowing Mick would answer, only Mick didn't, he moved past his mother like she hadn't spoken and wasn't really there. "I..." Andy glanced past where Mick had gone to stand near one group of the guards, Mike and Rose both watching him but Ruth ignoring the snub. "Just Jos and he was hurt when he found him, but they roughed him up pretty badly."

"Any idea what he's on?" She followed Jos as he was lowered down to the floor, Mike moving to join them.

Andy just shrugged.

"Shine and booze." Rez answered. "Jos likes to mix them, so he's Shiny and drunk, most likely some X, maybe some speed, smells like maybe some heroin. He wouldn't have had a choice, he'd have done whatever they gave him. I had to bite him to get him moving. Can you.... Is that okay?" He didn't like the humans, not really, but they'd put him together and hadn't killed him.

Ruth glanced up and spared a smile. "We'll do what we can. Can you find out how long Ms. Snow has until she starts withdrawal?"

Rez nodded.

"Thank you."

Only Rez didn't move. He just stood there a few feet away, apart from everyone watching. Andy moved closer and for a bare second brushed his fingertips to the back of Rez's shoulder. It was a nothing contact, barely there, but it swung the large pink eyes his way. The near panicked fear in them made Andy unsure about moving away but he knew Rez wouldn't be able to get the answers Ruth needed. He also knew Rez couldn't have the fact that he couldn't get those answers pointed out to him. Andy smiled softly and moved to where Snow stood, by herself, between the door and the group of other I/S Shiners.

"Hey, how you doing?" He wasn't sure how to ask someone about something as private as their drug use, especially since it was mixed in with their sex life.

She shrugged. "I've never been this close to him..."

"Close to..." He followed her eyes and saw she was watching Toshi. "Oh. Yeah, well, look, see, the blonde woman, she needs to know how long you've got until, you know, things get bad?"

"What's it matter? It's going to get bad sooner or later."

"No, actually, it won't. They're going to put you out, unconscious, for the worst of it. You'll wake up and the worst of the withdrawals will be over."

"But..."

"It works. They put Toshi out first and Rez too. When you wake up they'll have put in a modified implant that will only turn on if you take a hit of Shine. It'll keep it from being reinforced so you can't ever get fully addicted. Crazy, huh?"

"I didn't know. I thought we'd have to...maybe... be locked in a room for a few days...I thought..."

"Toshi wouldn't ask anyone to do this that way. He's not a cruel man."

"But he detoxed that way. I just assumed..."

"It's going to be okay. I promise. Now, can you tell me how long you've got?" He glanced up looking for Toshi, but found a pair of pink eyes watching him instead. "It's going to be okay." Andy repeated but he wasn't sure if he was telling her or Rez.

There was some more fussing before Andy found himself drawn into a small circle with Mick, Toshi, Ruth, Mike, Rose and Rez. He felt like the odd man out as he had no say over matters. Most likely he'd been included because otherwise he'd be the only human left out.

"Mandy and Jos there, we need to move over to the clinic as soon as possible. Mandy's already badly in withdrawal and we're going to need to make sure there isn't anything more serious wrong with Jos before we put him under." Ruth glanced to the five addicts about to be entrusted to them. "Might be better to get them all under sooner than later."

Toshi followed where Ruth glanced and frowned. "I'll leave the choice theirs but yes, you'll need to get Mandy and Jos to the clinic immediately." Blue eyes drifted back and locked onto Rez. "Would you like to go with them, Rez?"

It was an out, a way to avoid the press. "I'm sure they'll be fine." Rez answered, refusing to let Toshi do this alone.

Toshi nodded slightly, but offered Rez a grateful smile before turning back to Ruth. "Take who you need. Excuse me while I speak to the others."

Toshi stepped away and oddly it was Rez that moved to instantly follow. It left the humans standing alone for a moment. Andy knew he was out of place and wasn't sure if Mick wanted him to stay or follow Toshi.

"Amun..." Mike began.

Andy knew from how Mick clenched his jaw that his friend wasn't ready to talk yet.

"I know you're upset...."

Mick held up a hand and just shook his head, a little bitterly, a little sad and backed away from them to quickly follow Toshi. Mike's eyes didn't follow his son but glanced to the side. Andy looked to see what had caught the older man's attention and was surprised to find Epps crouched down near a wall. He was out of sight but obviously paying close attention.

"Give him some time." Andy tried to ease into the silence. "You know him. He's stubborn. Give him some time and he'll come around. He does love you, you know, all of you. You're his family." He watched how Mike dropped his eyes. "You're his father."

"No. I'm his adopted father." Mike shook his head. "Let's get some help lined up. Going to be a long day and lots of new equipment to break in."

For the first time, ever, Andy was grateful his mother was wrapped up in her own life and that he didn't have any siblings. It had made his childhood more isolated but he never once had to wonder about who his parents were or if he had half siblings somewhere. That didn't mean he'd trade places with Rez and not know much of anything about his family, just made him quite grateful for what he had as he wandered over to catch the tail end of what Toshi was saying.

"So you see, none of you have to stay. It might be more advisable for you to go and begin treatment now. It isn't quite fair to ask you to be so public with what should be a private struggle. I only ask because I've wished to try to put real faces on our people, not the old photos the Committee still trots out. I want people to have a chance of viewing us as real people with real problems, not mythical monsters. Either way, Jos and Mandy are leaving now. Each of you will make up your own mind and choose to stay or not. Thank you." He turned to Rez and lowered his voice. "Conference starts in ten minutes, can you see them sorted out?" They'd stared at him like people stared at his uncle, only Toshi was far less used to it and he wanted to get away.

"Of course." Rez muttered and let Mick and Toshi move away.

Andy wasn't sure where he should be. Mick stood to the side, his arms crossed over his chest in a stance of obvious uncomfortable defensiveness. Toshi was with him but Toshi seemed as uneasy and nervous as Mick. They were speaking quietly, or rather it looked like Toshi was talking and Mick listening. It didn't take a genius to guess the subject, they both glanced occasionally to Epps and the group from the Commune. Any other time he would have gone with them, knowing he might be of some help but they had each other. Rez had no one and while he was trying very hard to hide it, he was scared silly. That made making a choice easier.

"Is it really possible?" One of the new I/S asked of Rez, but he kept petting the shivering woman's hair. "It'll work?"

Rez frowned. "Won't be easy. It's going to be a bitch for a couple of months, going to make you sick as dogs for a while, but if you want it you can do it." He cleared his throat a little and glanced over, surprised Andy had stayed near them. "So what's it going to be? If you're going to get the shakes and look like an addict go the hell away. Toshi-san's got too much to worry about without wondering if one of you is going to puke on his shoes."

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Chapter Seventy Three

In the end, all three who were not actively sick stayed. Rez wasn't sure he liked that idea but was grateful that there would be other non-guard I/S there with them. He was nervous now, sick with nerves. He'd never had to stand in front of so many humans and try to look respectable.

"You'll be fine." Andy said softly.

"Fuck off."

"You can tell Toshi you don't want to say anything."

"I'm fine."

Andy shrugged. "Too stubborn to back down? Just tell them yes, the treatment works, it'll be over in a moment."

"What part of fuck off didn't you get?"

"Just trying to help."

"I can deal with this. Toshi-san wants faces to put with the story. Well, he's got them. Now get lost, people will assume things if you keep hovering."

"What? Like we're lovers? Or worse yet, that maybe we're friends?"

Rez sighed and rolled his eyes and moved to stand closer to Toshi and escape the artist. He didn't need the distraction and Andy made him want to grind his teeth. All too soon Alec was poking his head in and there was nodding and speaking, and they were being herded down a

hallway. The hall ended and Rez followed because he had to, but he felt his mind shut off as they waited at the end for it to be okay to enter the main room of the club Toshi was building.

Alec moved out ahead of them and from where they waited Rez caught a glimpse of the crowd. He didn't know that the world had so many human reporters or so many cameras could be crammed together. If each camera only broadcast to a thousand people, a thousand humans, that was far more than he'd ever seen before. It was more likely each one broadcast to tens of thousands or more. He hadn't been prepared for how fascinated the humans were with Toshi and suddenly he didn't want to take part.

The guards followed behind Alec, moving into the main room with Mick. The human oversaw the way the guards fanned out but stayed a good distance away from the collected group of reporters. Just close enough to grab someone that caused trouble but far enough away to keep from feeling like a threat. Alec ignored them and moved to the podium and the tangled mess of clipped on microphones and recorders that snaked around the front.

"Thank you all for your patience. Each of you are pre-screened, but be aware that due to the high security concerns any breach of the security contract will result in an instant revocation of your press pass to any future conferences. I'd like to remind each of you that flash photography or any additional lights will be considered an attack on Mr. Ranvier and his associates and will be handled accordingly."

Rez tuned Alec out as he droned on about other regulations and rules they'd asked to be respected and worse when he droned over the spelling of everyone's names, including his own. He didn't pay attention, not even to the nervous fidgeting of the I/S behind him and the sweet lingering smell of Shine on them or Andy's far-to-focused hovering to his other side. Even as Toshi moved forward at his introduction and they all followed he still felt detached.

"Thank you, Alec." Toshi nodded to his friend and glanced to where Mick stood to the side but his lover's eyes were busy keeping a close eye on the group of humans. "And thank you all for taking time from your busy days to come here today." Toshi glanced to his hands but he'd prepared no notes. Now he wished he had, he hated speaking in front of humans. "Most of you are well acquainted with my father and know my families preference to privacy but there is a time for privacy and a time for honesty. There has been a great deal of speculation about myself, things the I/S community already know but that has been not so well known among the human. My grandfather was Utiaka Sakamoto, when he was assassinated I was taken and sold to the club that once stood on this very site. They forced me to take Shine and I became an addict." Those were some of the most difficult words he'd ever said before but Toshi managed to say them looking right into the cameras, refusing to have any shame. The display of courage made Rez feel small and he felt his detachment melting. "Because of who my father is, I was given access to the best rehab money could buy. Only, there is no real treatment for Shine addiction, it changes your brain chemistry. The best treatment money could buy was locking me in a room, strapping me to a bed where I screamed in agony for a week. It nearly killed me, trying to detox has killed others. Shine is an enslavement to my people greater than any chains, but that is going to change.

"I am clean, as clean as any Shine addict can be. I've been lucky, I've had the best care and support from two amazing families. Most Shine addicts aren't so lucky. I am Luke Henri Ranvier's son and Utiaka Sakamoto's grandson and both sides of my heritage believe deeply in taking care of their people. I have asked you here today not to confess my past, which should matter not at all in the larger scheme of things but to make a proud announcement.

"For the first time since Shine was first introduced over thirty years ago, there is now a viable treatment. The credit goes to the Spiers Independent Study Family for the Advancement of Human Knowledge, known better to most of you as the Inkie Communes. Their research has developed an effective rehab treatment. It's been tested and it works. Today, for the first time, five Shine addicts will receive this rehab and detox. They will be given a second chance at a

real life. I'll leave it to Rose Spiers to explain the treatment, but first, I'd like to introduce you to Rabin Rez-san. He was hand selected and quite bravely accepted the offer of being the first to receive this treatment and stands testament to it's effectiveness." Toshi turned and caught Rez's eye but wasn't sure what he saw in the pink depths. "Rez-san?"

Rez bowed a little and stepped forward. "Thank you." He muttered and took Toshi's place. The room looked more crowded than before and the cameras made him feel sick. "I ah..." He paused and felt trapped and figured he looked as terrified as he felt. "I was the one to receive this treatment first and it's worked. I haven't...I..." He glanced out and they were staring at him with the same look they'd have given a dog that had stood on it's hind legs and started speaking. "Toshi-san, he doesn't have it easy. We admire him, quite a bit, but he's still half human and well I can see from how you're all fucking staring at me that you look at him the same way and just see the big eyes."

Behind him Alec groaned a little and hoped the live broadcasts were on a time delay to bleep away the cursing. He almost moved forward to stop Rez but Toshi laid a hand on his arm and stopped him. When Rez glanced over to see if he was about to be wrestled away from the podium, Toshi just nodded slightly at him to continue.

"The stupid thing is we look at you the same way. Everything bad that happens to us is because of you humans. You're worse to us than rabid animals and you look at me the same way. Toshi-san doesn't have it easy, but he gave me a life and he's trying to make it so you see us as people not animals. He's trying to do the same for you humans to see us as people." He shook his head. "It's a fools errand, but he's trying and he wants you to see a real face to Shine addiction, someone with I/S coloring and that lucky bastard is me. Well here, you want to know what I owe this man? My mother Shined. She'd whore herself in the Yards. When I was little it paid our rent and bought some food and it was okay. But as she used more she needed more Shine to get by. She functioned less and got sicker more and what money she made by selling herself to you humans went back to keeping her Shiny. Shine makes it so you're not hungry and you don't eat, everything fucking tastes like cardboard and days would go by and she'd forget to buy food. I used to sneak into your city to dig in your dumpsters for trash to eat. If I found a lot, I'd try to get her to eat, but she almost always said no. Every day she got thinner and thinner. One day she took me to a house and sold me to them. I never saw her again. Shine killed her. When I was fifteen my virginity was auctioned off to the highest bidder and I was made into an addict and a whore like my mother. There were no options, I would have lived and died as my mother did, but Toshi-san saved me. He's brought about this rehab and given me the chance and I'm clean. I'm not going to die in a ditch like my mother. For the first time there's a real chance for all of us." He was angry now, pissed off at how they were still staring at him and he doubted if the truth would really make a difference. The room was deadly silent. "Thank you." He finished and bobbed his head and stepped back. "I'm sorry." He whispered to Toshi in a low voice only an I/S would pick up.

"No, thank you, you were perfect." Toshi grinned and put a hand on Rez's shoulder. "Give me a moment to finish and we'll go."

Leaving felt like a great idea, he felt like he might be the one to puke on Toshi's shoes. Worse, he didn't like how Andy was watching him with such a sad, serious look to his eyes. Leaving was a seriously good idea.

It took a moment for Toshi to finish and for Rose to speak her part but the whole thing only lasted a half of an hour, tops. It felt like a small eternity as Rez stood there. He could feel the humans, their disgust and fascination and hungry need for a story. It made his skin crawl, made him want to scream at them. Standing still and waiting like a good boy was painfully difficult. In some regards it was easier when he was Shiny because then he didn't care when people looked at him.

They were shuffled out and he was happy to be moving again. This was no time to have a craving hit or doubt about the joys of being sober. The other Shiners were watching him almost

with the same awe that they watched Toshi with and it made him sick to feel. It felt like a betrayal to them and Toshi, to even have a single doubt about his own sobriety.

"You okay?" Rez caught Mick's hushed whisper and the genuine concern in the words. He glanced over, expecting to see a tender moment but nothing in either man's body language gave away their relationship.

"I'm fine."

Mick only raised an eyebrow.

"It'll pass." Toshi answered and confirmed what Mick hadn't asked about. Rez had thought Toshi looked collected and calm standing in front of so many humans but it must have just been a good cover. The stress of it had made him sick as well and Toshi was months further along with his own sobriety and it made Rez feel less bad about his own queasiness.

"Come home and rest."

Toshi shook his head. "Can't, I want to get them settled at the clinic."

Rez moved closer and both men turned to look at him. "I'm sorry...I...they're my responsibility. I'll get them settled, sir."

It surprised Toshi but Rez looked stubborn. "You're certain?"

"Yeah."

"Alright than." He nodded. "You get them settled and come home after."

He didn't want to do it but it wasn't a lie to say it was his responsibility. Rez nodded and squared his shoulders. He could get them herded over and passed over to the doctors care. It was good to make them think of him as a boss from the start.

"Rez?" Andy asked softly as he walked by. "Want me to come with you?"

Part of him did, badly. He felt sick and weak and small but it was Andy that was asking and the man was like a splinter under his skin. "I don't need a fucking babysitter." He snapped back and kept moving. "All of you, lets get moving." He snapped at the three Shiners and instantly dismissed them, knowing they'd obey. They would have to, obeying the people in charge was all they'd ever known. Not too long ago, it had been all Rez had known too.

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From The Ashes

## Chapter Seventy Four

It didn't take much to get them together and back on bikes. Moving helped, staying busy and not in one place kept Rez from feeling like he needed to scream. The bikes moved at a steady careful pace and he wished they'd speed up and whip away down the road. Maybe if he got going fast enough he could outrun everything and it all would feel okay. He knew it wouldn't but he still struggled with the urge to try.

Construction on the clinic had gone faster in part because most of the original building didn't need modifying. There was still much to be done but they'd put the focus on making it ready to detox the few that were selected. The only major change to the front of the industrial-looking building was a foyer and an extra set of doors. They were glassed in and Rez knew they were bulletproof, the best money could buy. The guards would stand watch inside and it would keep any thugs, gangbangers or just pissed-off humans from doing drive-bys. In theory, the glass could even stop a small explosive, which wasn't a very comforting thought. He hoped that Mick was just being paranoid.

"This is..." One of the Shiners whispered and Rez felt the sudden spike of fear. They may have been as sheltered as he'd had been but everyone knew where people were taken and experimented on by the Committee.

"It's ours now." He nodded to the doors and knew the guards would guide them inside as gently as they could if the others grew too fearful. Rez tried to pretend he was Toshi, tried to pretend he had the other man's calm confidence. It was absolutely faked, the building made him fearful too but he walked inside without any outward sign of it.

It didn't help that most of the building was dark still, plenty lit for I/S eyes but knowing it was being staffed by humans made it seem like they had something to hide. Rez and the guards knew the truth, not all of the wiring was finished yet but it made the new arrivals move a little closer together until they reached the back room with its line of medical beds and equipment. It was well lit and well staffed. Rez tried to ignore the faces he didn't know and focus on the ones he did.

"Oh, is she..." One of the I/S whispered and it didn't take much to understand.

Jos wasn't laid out on a bed but the woman that had come over early was. She was dressed in a simple blue gown and tucked under the clinical looking blankets. Her hair was no longer sweat soaked but an IV was sticking from her arm. She was still and looked like a corpse.

"She's fine." Mike nodded and came over, smiling in a welcoming way. "Just sleeping, you can go see for yourselves if you want, just don't touch the IV."

No one moved. Rez sighed. "How's Jos?"

"Awake, asking for you. We got a cup of tea into him. Shouldn't let him have anything before putting him under but it helped sober him up."

"He's okay?"

Mike shrugged. "He has some injuries but nothing that can't be treated."

Rez nodded. "Alright, this is Mike and that blonde woman is Ruth and they're doctors and in charge. You three listen to them, they know their shit, and they took care of me."

No one moved. Snow glanced to the other two before she spoke. "This really works?"



Rez stared at them as if they were stupid.

"I mean, it's not a joke, it works? It's safe to be sedated?"

"Well, yeah, or you wouldn't be here. They put Toshi-san out and they put me out twice. You'll wake up feeling like shit but you'll wake up."

"And someone will always be monitoring you, around the clock." Mike added.

"And this...this implant...this new one... it won't...I mean..."

"You stay clean, it stays off, but yeah, you take a hit and try to Shine and you'll be head blind. It's not a pleasant feeling, so don't fuck up."

"But..."

"Christ, here look." Rez lifted his hair and turned so they could see the back of his neck. "Can't even tell it's in there, can't feel it, doesn't fuck you up like a normal one. Stop being a bunch of whiny babies, either go with the doc-man or let the guards take you back to your houses."

They hesitated again but Snow drew a breath. "I've got nothing to lose, do your worst, doc-man." That tipped the tide and the other two nodded and moved forward.

"Good, good, alright, let's get you all changed and looked over....oh Rez, Jos is over there." Mike pointed to a curtained-off area large enough to have a bed behind.

He nodded but waited until the other three were lead further into the room. Rez understood their uncertainty and even their fear. He'd been almost too sick to care and certainly hadn't cared if he didn't wake up but he'd still been frightened. It was everything they'd been taught to be frightened of, but it had worked and he knew it would work for them too, or at least give them a fighting chance. It was only when they were obviously not going to cause trouble that he turned to the curtained area and the man behind it.

Jos was changed into the same medical blue gown and the dried blood had been washed away. Some of the scrapes had been bandaged but his face was still bruised, his lip still split. He still looked like hell, even with his hair combed out and pulled back but his eyes were focusing better now.

"Rezzy..." Jos sighed, but he didn't move. He sat on the medical bed, back to the headboard and legs folded in front of him. His hands were curled around a mug and steam still rose from it, carrying the fragrant smell of black tea.

"Jos." He nodded. "You back with us?"

That earned him a shaky, uncertain grin. "As much as I can be...I'd forgotten how strong your venom is, still got a hard on even with feeling like shit." He tried to make it a joke but ended up sniffing a little and rubbing his nose with the back of his hand.

Rez folded his arms over his chest. "You need to let them put you under; you're only going to feel worse."

Jos waved a hand and dismissed the concern. "Look...Rezzy...I...maybe you should get someone else. I mean...I...I'm about done. I can't..."

"Oh stop your whining. God, you're such a bitch. Do you want to go back? Be some gang's fuck-toy again for mouthing off to boss lady? Do you really want to go back to that?"

It took a moment but Jos shook his head. "I can't."

"Then let them put you under." He sighed and wanted to slap the other man. "Look, I won't lie; you're going to feel worse when you wake up. For the first couple of days you're going to wish you were dead most of the time. You're going to be too sick to go out and look for a hit but it'll get better. It'll take time but it'll get better."

"Then what?" He shrugged. "What good will it be to be sober? It's just a dream..."

"You'll work for Toshi-san and his house; we'll figure out what later, but Jos, imagine it. Try to at least, no one telling you to take it? No one beating you, no one selling you...might even have a shot at finding someone that gives a shit if you live or die." The words cut him deeper than he'd expected, it was a thought he hadn't even bothered to entertain. No one gave a shit about him, ever; he didn't go out of his way to be liked. He hadn't even thought he wanted something like that. It had always been enough for him to take care of himself.

"Rezzy, you always were a mouthy slut." The words were brave but Jos' hands were shaking now and threatening to slosh the still hot tea over them.

"What's it going to be? I can't stay here playing nursemaid all day. Going to let them put you out?"

Jos nodded but his eyes stayed on his tea.

"Good, and don't be such a bitch to them, they'll think it's cute or some stupid shit like that." He turned to go, to let the doctors know Jos was ready now.

"Rez-san?"

The respectful use of his name froze Rez in his place. Jos never was respectful to him. They'd been rivals of a sort and only loosely allied. "Yeah?"

"Thank you, Rez-san, thank you."

It made him want to puke. He was glad his back was to Jos because he knew his eyes would give his unease away. He was grateful Jos was still so high and out of his head because it would be an even bet that he wouldn't pick up on that unease either. "I'll have them call me when you're awake." He muttered and left without glancing back to Jos again.

He spoke quickly to Mike but didn't linger. They needed to face this on their own and there would be I/S guards about and on hand if one of them freaked out. Rez needed to get home, needed his small room with the door he could shut and hide behind.

"You okay?" Kesses asked softly as he moved to leave, the guard following skillfully at his side.

"What do you think?" Rez snapped back.

"I think you're too pale and not okay."

"I'm fucking dandy. I want to go home."

Kesses nodded and left Rez alone. He gathered up the guard that was to follow and soon had their bikes ready to go. Rez could snap and be pissy all he wanted but it didn't change the fact that he clung to Kesses' back on the ride across the yard and radiated misery. He wasn't going to push, it wasn't his place and he doubted it would do any good. Instead he just got them home and back to what he hoped Rez would view as safety as quickly as he could. It was all he could

do but Rez's unspoken emotions made him sick as well.

Back at their building Rez didn't linger with the other I/S. The guards had softened up on him. They no longer made snide comments about having a Shiner whore to look after. It should have been an accomplishment, he'd made it so far, but instead, it just made Rez feel worse. He didn't belong with them and likely never would but he didn't really belong with Jos and the others anymore either.

"Hey, back so soon?" Epps chimed up as Rez came in the door. "They wouldn't let me go with you, said it was a private thing and what not. How are they taking it? Did they all still agree or did someone back out?"

Rez turned and glared at the man. "Is this just some sick circus to you?"

"Well... now that you mention it..." Epps grinned but the purple haired man almost snarled back at him. "Hey, it was a joke. Kidding, I was kidding, geesh."

"Fuck off."

"Awww, come on, how about you invite me up for a beer? Mick tossed me out but they're planning something, I can feel it."

"If he tossed you out, be smart and stay out."

"Toshi didn't look good, all kind of ashen...actually you don't look so hot yourself..."

"I'm not part of your fucking story! Leave me alone!" Rez pushed past the human and started up the stairs.

"Come on now, I don't think even you buy that. You're Rabin Rez, the first full blooded I/S to get clean of Shine for more than a month, ever. You're working alongside Toshi Ranvier, like it or not you're a big part of this story."

The words were boldly truthful and did nothing to make Rez feel better. "Stay the fuck away from me!" He hissed back to the human and hurried up the stairs in a desperate need to escape from everyone and the realities of his new life. It was easier to be a nothing, someone forgotten and worthless and the truth of Epps' words made Rez cringe. The people in their history were strong, vital, and proud. They knew their places, stuck to them, and did great things. They never wanted to get Shiny to forget everything and they never felt unworthy. He was a fraud, knew he was a fraud, and suddenly knew it was only a matter of time until everyone else knew it too.

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From The Ashes

## Chapter Seventy Five

The apartment was no real escape. Alec and Andy hovered near the office door which was shut. Alec had the dignity to sit at the table and pretend to be working but Andy nearly had his ear pressed to the door. Rez heard raised voices from inside, Toshi and Mick and neither one sounded happy.

"What's going on?" He paused inside the door, uneasy about coming inside. Fighting was never a good thing. It led to short tempers and managers tended to punish workers for no real reason when their tempers were short.

"They're having a spat, no shhh, I'm listening." Andy hissed back.

Alec sighed. "Toshi wanted to move on Sunshine House tonight, Mick wants him to wait until tomorrow or the night after. Mick's right, they need to wait at least a day to be safe. Everyone is too high strung right now."

Rez didn't answer. The idea of Toshi moving and shutting down any of the clubs disturbed him. Humans owned those clubs and the workers, and by extension owned the houses inside the wall like the house he'd been owned by. Powerful humans, humans with connections and money, ones that considered Rez and his people less than animals. Toshi was right, an example had to be made if he was going to establish himself as a real authority in the Yards but it made Rez uneasy.

He moved from the doorway to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water. Somehow it felt wrong to walk past the office door to get to the hallway and his room beyond. The whole idea made him just pit-of-the-stomach nervous. It wasn't for himself he was worried. If Toshi's efforts failed they'd wipe out his entire house, down to the people that did their washing, all the guards, Andy, Alec and himself included. He wasn't afraid of dying and knew he'd place himself between Toshi and harm without a first, let alone a second, thought. It wasn't death he feared but something deeper, something less easy to define.

If Toshi failed, all he wanted to build and do would fail with him. The Containment Act would never be repealed. The Camp would never be rebuilt. Jobs and industry to give their people honest work that allowed them to feed their families would never arrive. The rehab t,reatment for Shine would disappear because no one would fund it or care that the drug stole lives. At best things would continue as they had been, at worst the Committee would assert it's authority, lock them down again, kill Sakamoto-dono and his house, fully enslave them all. Or worse, exterminate them. Their people were contained in central locations, it would be easy to kill them all and push their kind into extinction. They wouldn't even be charged with genocide because they had no rights as people.

He clutched his bottle of water and tried to remember how to breathe. It had never really occurred to him how much was riding on Toshi's shoulders. If he failed, maybe all the horrible things wouldn't happen but maybe they would. It was his father's family and wealth that made humans pause before dismissing him. They'd never have a better representative for their people than Toshi and that was a great deal to place on one man.

Rez didn't want to listen to their fight but he hovered in the kitchen doorway and found his own ears straining. Neither man was making an effort to be quiet, and he'd never heard Toshi so upset before. Or Mick, for that matter, the human seemed very level about everything. Worse, as a couple, he'd never even suspected them of fighting. The way Toshi looked at Mick and vice-versa made fighting seem an impossibility.

"Everyone is too wound up, yourself included!" Mick shouted. "I will not allow my men to go into

that house tonight and I will be damned before I allow you to!"

"Your men!"

"My men! Those guards are my responsibility as head of your security! If you don't like it, I'll tender my resignation right now! I'll resign before I knowingly and willingly let you do something that will get you killed! One day isn't going to make a difference! One day will let everyone rest and prepare! You know full well that it won't stop with Sunshine House! There will be more fighting and more bloodshed in the days that follow. People that are already wound up on nerves will do stupid things and make mistakes. Even you!"

"Every day, Mick, EVERY day is another hell for those children! Will you look them in the eyes and say I'm sorry you got raped another day because I wanted to sleep?"

"Yes, I will! Gladly! If it means I can tell them it won't happen again and not have to bury any of my people to say that."

"Every day matters, every single day, every hour!"

"This isn't about you, Toshi! Rushing too fast now won't shorten what already has happened to you."

The room in the office went silent for a moment. Painfully silent. Rez found himself straining to hear, suddenly worried he'd miss something. Toshi was right, every day mattered. One more day may have been one too many for Jos, or himself, and that was why Toshi had rushed the clinic and insisted they take the first batch to detox before the whole building was ready. A day, even a single day did matter.

"Don't!" He finally heard Toshi say. "Just don't!"

"Will you meet with them?" Mick asked more gently but still angry. Whatever had happened too softly to be overheard hadn't stopped their fight.

"Human law enforcement?"

"People I trust."

Toshi snorted. "Human law enforcement! They don't give a damn about us!"

"You don't know that, you haven't met these people!"

"They're human!"

"You know we're going to round up a good dozen humans at that club, if not more! Yes, trotting them out to humiliate them will work but they're not going to say you treated them with care. They'll be all over every news outlet claiming I/S officers mistreated them. Worse! They could claim you set them up, that they weren't actually even there! And like it or not people will believe them simply because of the shape of your eyes!"

"They're HUMAN Mick, Human! What do they care? Raping any I/S isn't even a crime by human law, even an I/S child! It's not even against human law to murder us! At most they'll charge them with destruction of Committee property! Human law doesn't give a damn about us!"

"They might be different, hear them out!"

"They're HUMAN!"

"So am I!" Mick shouted back and opened the office door, nearly knocking Andy down but the artist scurried away just in time. Mick didn't notice, he paused in the doorway. "And so are you in case you've forgotten!"

"Mick." Toshi called out but the other man didn't wait. Toshi hurried to the doorway but Mick was already at the apartment door. "Mick!"

Mick just waved him off and kept moving. The apartment door slammed shut behind him.

Toshi sighed and glanced around the room. "You all were listening?"

Andy tried to look innocent and Rez ducked back into the kitchen a little. Alec didn't even glance up from his paperwork. "So, I'll set up the meeting with these human law enforcement people tomorrow afternoon." He didn't even ask it as a question.

Toshi wanted to snap back but he knew he was going to agree. "As late as possible."

"I'll get it done. You are going after him, right?"

The halfbreed shook his head, dark hair swaying and moved not to the apartment door but down the hallway to his bedroom door.

Alec chuckled. "Stubborn."

Rez clutched his water bottle so tightly the plastic caved in. The sound made him startle and he knew he couldn't stay there. He hurried away, down the hallway and didn't stop until he was locked into his own room.

The silence of the small space did little to stop the pounding beat of his heart. He didn't even know why he was so upset, he just knew he was. He tried to blame it on the day, the stress of it all and how tightly wound his nerves were but it didn't work. The day was done, they'd gotten in and out with minimal fuss and even Jos was currently resting in detox. It was all going according to plan and he had no reason to feel so worked up over it.

He got his computer up and running and shoved earphones over his ears trying to block out the silence he normally liked. His music choices were limited but it really didn't matter, he wasn't in the mood to listen or enjoy it. It was more important to just have some noise not what the noise was and even the smooth voice of Carlos Gardel didn't settle his nerves.

There was work to do, layouts and designs and information to learn. He had homework still to do and the tasks given to him had been growing increasingly more difficult. For all he tried to focus on them he couldn't. His thoughts kept stumbling back to Jos, laying where he'd been dropped on the floor to recover or die alone. He'd been there a time or two, they all had been and he remembered the same sick desperation he'd felt while so helpless. Alone in his room with only his thoughts the distance between where he was and where he had been seemed far smaller. It wouldn't take much for Rez to be back on the floor, left to live or die, helpless.

If Toshi failed, if his house was attacked or destroyed, Rez knew how easily he could be right back where he was. The implant in his neck was smaller but it wouldn't take a skilled doctor to remove. Once gone it would be frightfully easy to have him use again, be a whore again, beg for it again. He'd be lucky if they killed him but his coloring was a commodity and even at his age still could demand a good price. He'd rather be dead and some part of him knew if it all fell apart he wouldn't be given that option.

That was what was really eating at him. The house Jos was from wasn't the Red Moon, it wasn't Rez's home but it was similar. It smelled the same, a mix of the sweet sticky cloying smell of Shine, a wiff of sex, the acrid sharp smell of fear and over it all the scent of industrial cleaners

and air perfumes to make the place smell nice for the humans. The workers had the same glazed look of an addict but were sober enough to be worried and frightened. Worse, now Rez was sober too and saw the emptiness in them, the look of hungry desperation. He'd had that same look, like a kicked dog begging it's master for more abuse and knowing how he'd been and could be again made him sick. It was his very awareness how close he was to being that again that made him shiver.

There was work to do and Rez turned his attention back to his computer. There was a file he'd been putting off reading. Toshi had wanted him to look over the files on the Sunshine House. They were secret, only a handful of them had copies and he was betting Mick had woven in security features so if the file was leaked or lost he could track down who had screwed up. Not that it was an issue. Rez rarely left the building and his computer never did. He'd been happy to be excluded but Toshi had some notion that the children would trust him, someone who was a full blood and had been a whore, where they might not trust an I/S guard. If Toshi was pushing to move on the house tomorrow, he needed to read the files.

All the human run clubs were secretive but Sunshine House was doubly so. Some of the footage was obviously from hidden cameras on whoever it was that had been sent in to gather it. Mostly it showed the layout of the building which had been translated into floorplans and close ups of the children in the workers book. The entertainment directory the book was called, and they used the book the same way the houses inside the camp did.

Each child had two photos. One was a full body shot with the child in minimal clothing and looking serious and oddly kind of knowing. The other was a close up of their face with them smiling in a bright, childlike sweet way. Beside the photos was lists of information, age, hair and eye color, tidbits on their personalities that Rez knew was entirely made up. What churned his stomach was the lists of services each child could be hired for, all things he'd done and worse really but it made him feel as helpless and small as the children in the photos to see such things being performed by those so young.

Then he saw a photo that made his heart stop. The boy was eleven, nearly twelve. His skin was pale but not quite as pale as Rez's own. His hair was royal purple, almost a grape purple not Rez's disgustingly bright perky artificial purple. His eyes were deep rose pink not Rez's bubblegum pink. The boy wasn't quite as rare in coloring as Rez was but he was close and he may as well have been looking at himself at that age. He didn't want to but his eyes scanned the boys information and it felt like he'd been punched in the gut.

That could have been him. If his mother hadn't distrusted the humans that ran Sunshine House she would have sold him there and they'd have happily paid. If Red Moon had been full and not in need of another worker they could have sold him out, to another inside House or just as likely to Sunshine. He would have been the boy in the book, already broken and tired of life before even being a teen. When he had grown too old for Sunshine he would have been sold to another one of the clubs and used up, sold like cattle to a human willing to pay or dropped into the Yards to fend for himself or die.

The files and faces spun away from him. His life had taken different turns and he felt even worse for being chewed up over it. Here he was whining about being a fraud when he could have been that boy in the photos, it made him feel worse, even less worthy of all he was being entrusted with. His past seemed simple, seemed like he should just get over it, compared to the horrors others were surviving.

On top of it all, he was heart sick. His chest hurt like he'd been stabbed and he was in so much pain he had trouble breathing. It wasn't that he liked Mick-san, not really, but he respected the human. More, Toshi-san cared for him and somewhere in the weeks Rez had come to need them to care for each other. It made him hurt less to know they were careful with each other. He'd never have that. That tenderness wasn't for what he was but seeing it in others, seeing that Toshi-san had it, had made him feel better. Their fight had made that gnawing, ever present,

aching pain of living feel raw and fresh. It was all lies, even Toshi-san wasn't able to find something soothing. Life was misery and pain and that was it. He'd been a fool for thinking otherwise and forgetting the lessons of his life for even a moment.

Only now, he was sober and had to face that alone. It hurt. It all just hurt so much. He was weak and selfish. He was sitting, hiding in his room because he couldn't face the truth of things. He'd even turned off his computer because he wasn't strong enough to face the sad, too old eyes of the Sunshine House workers. Too selfish in his own pain to be able to prepare to help them and that made everything hurt more. It was then that it occurred to him, a thought that drifted up.

He didn't want to do it anymore.

Not just the whole sober thing or the not being a whore thing. He could find Kesses and the man could fuck him senseless but it wasn't working anymore. It made him less frantic, less trapped feeling but it didn't fix things anymore. It only seemed to make things worse. It left him feeling dirty and cheap and made his failures seem larger. He couldn't do it anymore but other than finding a hit and Shining he didn't know what else to do to make everything stop hurting.

Unless everything stopped.

His hands were shaking but the idea was there in his mind now. He was soft and weak and the ground was hard and unforgiving. They'd think he'd slipped maybe, if they were kind. It would be easy and everything would stop hurting. He would be able to stop pretending, stop being scared every breath of every day that he'd screw up and everyone would see what a useless tawdry whore he was instead of the skilled manager Toshi thought he was. It was be over and nothing would hurt anymore. The thought alone made things feel better, gave him a sense of calm and he let the calm pull him from where he'd been cowering in his room to walk in steady steps out of the apartment and to the roof.

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Blurring The Lines:

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Chapter Seventy Six

The apartment was dark, a dim amount of light that his eyes quickly adjusted to. The other bedrooms were dark, not even a light was on in Alec's room and he heard no voices, no muffled sounds of the music of life. That felt right, it was better he was alone. Even out in the main room it was dark and empty, a single lamp burned but that seemed more like an afterthought. It was late but not late enough to have all of the others asleep. Maybe, rather it was early still and they were all about their lives, doing the important things they did that mattered.

He considered a note. It was customary to leave a few final words or thoughts. What could he



say? Should he leave an apology for what he was? Should he say he was sorry for failing, for not being strong enough to face another day of hurting? He didn't think he could do it and doubted anyone would care to even wonder why. He was replaceable. Jos would make a great manager, a far better one than he would. They'd think about it and wonder for a few days, then move on. In a couple of months they wouldn't even remember him. Worse, some small part of his brain reminded him, he might not be able to do it. If he backed down and they found the note he'd be humiliated. He wouldn't leave a note, that felt melodramatic and he wasn't the sort.

The door to the roof opened easily and the early summer air was cool against his skin. There was still warmth to the night but the breeze had a chill that he liked. It would soon be hot and humid, both day and night. Summer would settle in and make even the nights feel heavy. For right now he was pleased to find the cooler hint to the air. It made him feel steady and calm as he crossed the roof to the one area where he wouldn't have to crawl over plants to reach the wall around the roof. This time, Kesses wouldn't magically appear to stop him. Even if he did, letting the guard take him aside and fuck him wouldn't make it better.

The wall around the rooftop was just tall enough to keep people from accidentally falling off the edge, just over waist high and almost two feet thick. He'd collapsed on it before, let his hands dangle out into the open air of the far side but that wasn't enough now. He wasn't here wondering what to do, feeling trapped and sick and desperate. He knew now what would make it all go away.

Rez didn't toy with the idea. He lifted himself up onto the low wall and swung his legs out into thin air. There was nothing there, nothing between him and the quick drop. He sat down on the wall to catch his breath and still his mind. Part of him had wanted to come to the roof and just take a running leap. Start running at the door and not stop until he was out into open air, falling, crashing, ending. He liked the idea that there was no time to think about what he was doing if he could have just started running for the edge. It was only the sense of the melodrama and his own fear of tripping and falling face first into a plant that stopped him. Instead he settled onto the ledge and let his feet feel the release he craved while he braced himself to push off and end his own life.

"Could you move to your right a couple of feet?"

Andy's voice behind Rez startled him and his fingers dug into the rough surface of the ledge. He spun his head and saw what he'd missed in his haste to get to the edge. Andy was settled in on the edge of one pathway on a blanket. Sketchbooks and pencils were scattered around him and among the mess was a few round hard candies and empty crinkly wrappers. The human was dressed simply, his hair pulled back into a tail at the base of his neck and he had none of his normal absurdity.

"What are you doing here?" Rez snapped out accusingly.

One elegant hand swept over the sketchbooks. "I was here first sweetheart, now move your skinny ass a few feet down. Your shadow is blocking the Devil's Trumpets." It was a strain to keep his voice level and slightly annoyed. There was only one reason why Rez was where he was and it wasn't for the view.

"What?"

"Devil's Trumpets, can't you smell them? God, and they say you've a better sense of smell. They only bloom at night, flowers fade in the sun and you're blocking the moonlight." He shooed a little in the direction he needed Rez to move. "You know, never mind, just get down and stop blocking my light."

Rez's feet scuffed on the far side of the wall. He wanted to get down but not the way Andy meant. There was no reason to delay now. If he did, the stupid human would make a fuss and he

didn't think he could stand a fuss. In fact, being caught at all in such a personal, private moment made all the pain surge up through his calm acceptance and made it difficult to breathe. He knew what he had to do to stop it.

A hand, soft and gentle, touched his arm. "Rez?" There was none of the normal mocking flippancy to the tone now. "What're you doing?"

Rez pulled away from the hand and it slipped his body a little closer to the far edge. "I...just tell them... fuck it doesn't matter..." His hands scratched on the rough surface as he slipped a little closer to the edge.

It was easy, one push and it was done. He drew a breath and braced his feet. Only a long leg covered in loose cotton swung out over the ledge and disappeared over the side. Another soon followed, the absurd pink fluffy slipper disappearing over the edge and Andy easily settled in beside him with a sigh.

"Nice view."

Rez did his best to ignore the other man.

"Look..." Andy sighed. "No bullshit, okay?" Rez made no sign he heard him but every muscle in the skinny body was tense to the point of trembling. "I'm not going to sit here and tell you not to take a flying leap. I'm just going to say two things. If you want to have any sort of life, ever, you have to decide you're not better off dead. Also, I'm fragile, it's going to fuck me up to see you go splat. In fact..." Andy reached over and pried one hand up from the ledge. Rez had been clutching it so tightly he'd cut his palms with tiny scrapes and Andy curled his hand around the tense fingers that felt more like claws. "I'm not going to let you go without me."

"I can't even imagine what's going on inside that head of yours." Andy spoke softly as he let go of the ledge with his other hand, trying to hide his own fear, and instead stroked the tense hand he was holding. Rez's fingers were brittle feeling, tense and still extended. They hadn't curled around Andy's own and they hadn't relaxed. The man's whole body trembled as he sat, struggling to breathe, eyes focused out on a point in the open air. Andy was pretty sure they both were going to be flattened pancakes in a few moments but he held on to that hand and continued to pet it softly.

"My father killed himself." Andy said softly into the night. He didn't try to sound clever or smart and he kept trying to sooth that tense hand. "I was just a kid. He was an addict, couldn't get clean for more than a few weeks at a time. Mom says he was brilliant, I've seen his stuff and he was good. He just couldn't take it anymore and OD'd at my birthday party. I never really knew him. We all have our demons. Mom still will go quiet and look at me like she expects to find me dead in my own puke in a bathroom one day.

"Dad had people, my mother loved him even when he was out of his head. He had friends and people that supported him but he just...he couldn't feel it. Isn't that horrible? To not be alone but to always feel alone? Like being colorblind and having red right in front of you and not being able to see it. Whatever was going on in his head, he could have made it if he'd been able to feel less alone." He snorted a little. "Odd thing is? It must be genetic. I feel so alone, all the time. And I know I'm not, I've friends. Mick is like my brother, my mom is a pain in my ass but she cares, but even when I'm with a lover I feel alone. Doesn't help that most people just want to fuck me and no one gives enough of a shit to really care but it helps, letting them take me, you know? At least for right then, I feel less alone and the people I think care? That I might be able to build a life with? They get tired of me pretty quickly. I think they see how alone I feel and it scares them away." He shook his head. "Or worse, I get caught up in the whole don't let them see who you are because they won't like you thing so I keep acting like a fool and an airhead and sure enough they leave because they get tired of the frivolousness. It...it's tough feeling so alone and God who can you trust to let in? Better not to risk it, right?"

"You know why I'm up here sketching night flowers? Because I can't stand to sit in that apartment alone. I start thinking. I mean I'm not getting any younger and soon I'm going to be a white haired old fag all alone. Mick has Toshi now... so I keep myself busy. I don't know what's in your head but I do get how alone it can feel, even when you're surrounded by people."

"That..." Rez struggled to breath and keep his control, keep from flinging himself forward into open air, keep from falling into all that Andy had shared and said. "That wasn't two things."

Andy was startled by the tight, forced words and laughed a little. It caused the grief and vulnerable tears he'd held in to well up. "Yeah." He agreed with a nod and stopped petting the tense hand long enough to wipe at his eyes. "Yeah, I don't ever know when to shut up."

"It hurts." Rez confessed. A spasm made his hand tremble and he blamed the cramp for why his fingers curled around Andy's. "All the time...I can't..." He couldn't look to the side. He didn't want to see it was Andy beside him. It would have been too much to meet the human's tiny eyes.

"It'll get better. The doctors all say every day your body doesn't have Shine in it's system it'll clean it out a little more."

Rez shook his head. "No...the cravings I can deal with. This hurts, breathing hurts." He clutched the hand. This was his note. He'd explain to Andy and Andy could tell the others once he was gone. "I'm afraid every single day."

The voice was so small, Andy wasn't sure if he was supposed to hear it or not. "Afraid of what?" He wasn't going to say there was nothing to be frightened of, he didn't have the right to assume that.

"Everything." Rez shrugged. "I can't do this. I'm sorry but I can't, it's too much...I'm not...I'm just not..."

The hand wrapped around his own clutched tighter. "Not what?"

"Not enough." The words sighed out and it felt good to say them aloud. Like knowing there was a monster in the corner of a dark room only to turn on a light and see it's just a rat, not some demon. "Toshi wants me to be something I'm not, I'm a fake. I'm not good, I'm just a whore and he's going to find out. And it's not just...just easier to do it while high...now I can't....it hurts to remember it...I can't...I can't do this anymore... And there's this kid in the files from Sunshine House and it could have been me. How am I supposed to tell them it's okay when I have less reason to hurt and I can't breathe? I can't..."

"This isn't a contest! It's not a 'who's been fucked with more' competition! There's no scale that says if you've been hurt enough to be miserable, or oh, he's been hurt more, so you should suck it up!" He didn't want to sound angry but the very idea triggered that emotion. "It's partly our fault. I mean you seem so...like you're adjusting so well. None of us have thought that maybe, well, that maybe you're not. I know Toshi is so focused on getting folks clean that he's not looking closer. Hell, he doesn't want to look closer. It's just simple to say, "Oh here now you're sober" and "Everything is okay" but it's not, is it?"

"No." Rez shivered and leaned a little closer to the edge. "You'll tell them? Make them understand?" It seemed important now, when it hadn't before.

"Toshi will never understand, he's going to blame himself for the rest of his life. You can't explain this sort of thing." Andy said gently.

"He'll understand, life is shit, that's all there is and even he can't manage to make more of it."

"Even he can't...but...oh their fight!" Andy smiled gently and was glad Rez couldn't see it. "They were just blowing off steam. I bet they're all cuddly and disgustingly cute right now. Even people who love each other fight, doesn't mean they stop loving each other. Not saying both those boys don't have issues, but that fight was nothing." He wanted to lean further forward to try to see Rez's face but that would take him closer to the edge. For all his words about going with Rez, he didn't want to and he didn't want to slip by accident. "But I bet it felt like more to you. What with that I/S sense of things and I'll lay even money on the fact that you've never really see a couple of people that care about each other before...have you?"

Rez only shook his head.

Andy slipped a little closer to Rez, the sides of their legs nearly touching. "Life can be pretty shitty. Just look at all the crap you've gone through. There are a lot of horrors out there, a lot of pain, but there's more to it. Things like what Toshi and Mick have found. It hurts to see them though, and not have something like that of your own, but seeing them is a reminder that it's out there. As long as you're here, you've still got a shot of finding it. Things like the differences we can make, I know today had to hurt you, being so honest to those reporters but the difference that will make...that'll be amazing. Even if stuff like that is too much and too complicated, there's simpler, beautiful, good things in life. Like the smell of those flowers I was sketching, can you smell them? And...seeing a hot guy sunbathing....and chocolate....and...and warm socks when your toes are cold...."

Rez snorted.

"Okay so the socks were stupid but that's one of the little things that keeps me going. Not saying it's easy for me, and hell, I've had a good life for the most part. Just saying it's worth the fight. Just saying it's okay for it to hurt. I'd be worried, I guess, if it didn't hurt. And I can understand why you feel like you're faking it, because in a way right now you are, but God, Rez, we're all faking it. None of us has a clue what we're doing! Well, Alec might, but for us mortals, we're all making it up as we go along. No one, not even Toshi, is expecting you to just figure it out like turning on a light switch. And...and I know this won't mean shit to you, but I like you. You make me happy and I don't want you to give up on yourself, not yet. And I want to help you and I don't want you to do this alone, not if you'll let me help. I don't expect you to like me, cause I know you can't stand me, but I think you're a great man and I don't want you turned into smut bunny jelly on the pavement below. And it's okay that you don't like me just so you know you don't have to do this on your own and...and...and that you're not alone."

Rez shifted beside him and Andy closed his eyes and held onto the too warm hand curled around his own. If they were going over the edge, he didn't want to watch. Fear spiked in his stomach as Rez moved but there was no rough pulling on his arm as Rez fell from the ledge. Instead, soft, hot lips brushed his own and Andy startled at the contact, his eyes flying open. There was no doubt, they weren't plummeting to their death but in a way Andy did feel like he was falling.

There was no aggressive need in Rez's kiss this time and no worry about getting his lips nipped at if he didn't allow the contact. This time Rez's kiss felt timid, shy, fearful and that drew Andy in almost as much as a bite. Softly he deepened the contact and he let his free hand come up to rest on the side of Rez's face. The touch made the other man shiver and pull away a fraction. Their lips parted but Rez didn't retreat further than a breath.

"I...I don't promise anything." Rez whispered, shaking now and sick.

"I understand." Andy answered but he leaned forward and softly returned the kiss Rez had given him.

This time it went deeper. Rez's mouth parted instantly and Andy exploited the rare uncertainty. Rez allowed it, accepted it more passively than Andy imagined the man capable of. The moan that escaped Rez wasn't one of passion but sounded more like a wounded sob and Andy knew

not to push the contact too far. Only as he tried to retreat, Rez pushed forward and demanded more, his lips parted, his mouth waiting to be passively claimed. Andy obliged but gently, treating Rez with care and awareness of the man's fragility.

"Oh." Andy pulled away and glanced toward his legs.

"What?" Suddenly seeing the human leaning forward made his guts knot up. It was dangerous and Andy could slip and then he'd be gone. The idea frightened him.

Andy popped his legs up, one pink slipper missing. "Lost one."

The idea that one of the stupid pink slippers had plunged in Rez's place seemed absurd and he shook his head. "I'll get it back for you."

"Getting it back would entail stairs right? Not jumping?"

"Idiot." Rez snorted and pulled his own legs up from the emptiness. He swung them over the ledge and back to solid ground. Part of him cursed himself for his cowardice but another part was trembling in relief. He turned and tugged on Andy's hand that he still hadn't let go.

"Don't pull! I don't want to slip." Andy scrambled back over the ledge and didn't care if he crushed any of the plants to do it. He stumbled away to his blanket, his hand slipping from Rez's, to collapse onto his blanket. "Oh, oh my..." He sighed and unwrapped another one of his hard candies to pop into his mouth. "I'm terrified of heights. Rats are yuck,,I can deal with them but heights?" He shivered and pressed a hand over his heart. Rez seemed to be ignoring him. The distant, haunted, broken look was still lingering in the pink eyes. Andy may have talked the man back onto solid ground but he hadn't chased away whatever was rattling around in his head. With quick hands he gathered up his things and stood.

"Rez?"

That made the man frown.

Andy didn't care, he slipped his hand back into the other man's grip. "Let's go back in. I'll make us some hot cocoa and we can go to my room. I promise I won't say a word if you don't want me to but spend the night with me...so neither of us are alone?" He wasn't sure if he was hinting at more or not and didn't care. If Rez needed to push him against a wall and take him to chase off some of the demons, Andy wasn't going to say no. He was noble that way. "What do you say?"

Rez stepped closer, unable to breath again and scared silly but this time it was different and he wasn't sure just why or how. He put a hand on the back of Andy's head and leaned in to steal another kiss. He was looking for something and he wasn't sure what but he wanted to see if stealing the kiss, on his terms, made him feel better.

"What the..." Rez gasped as he pulled away and reached into his mouth. The candy was round and red and now sticky to the touch.

Andy rolled his eyes. "So that's where I put that." Only Rez frowned at the candy and put it back in his mouth. The frown deepened. "What? It's even sugar free..."

"What is this?" Rez asked as the candy clicked about his mouth.

"It's just a cheap-o hard candy. I suck on them while sketching."

Rez shook his head. "What flavor is it?"

"Oh, that one is anise, like licorice. Mick hates them but I like them."

"I can..." He swished the candy over his tongue and the strong flavor felt muted but it was there. "I can taste it." He covered his lips with his fingertips and tried to hide the smile that threatened to come.

Andy had no such worries, he grinned. "That's good! Do you like it?"

"I don't know." Rez answered with such seriousness and fished the candy out of his mouth again to stare at it. "I've never...I don't remember ever tasting it before. I can't, I mean the Shine...you can't taste..." He shoved the candy back into his mouth. "But I can taste this..."

"But..." Andy took the hand that had held the candy and sucked the sweet sticky residue from Rez's fingers. "Do you like it?"

The flavor in his mouth and the feel of Andy's own tongue licking the flavor from his fingers made him shiver and this time it was in a very good way. He found himself nodding. "Yes. Yes, I do."

"Good." Andy sighed and closed his eyes. He wasn't going to point out that this was one of those little small things that helped balance the scales between life being shitty and life being good. "It's a strong flavor but if you're starting to get a sense of taste back the rest can't be far behind. Let's go see if you can taste cocoa! Oh, or peppermint!"

"I... umm..." Rez was surprised at the genuine pleased delight he felt from the human. "I'll get your shoe while you make it." It felt like some sick trap but he didn't want to not risk it. He was surprised to find he was starving hungry for some contact with someone else, something even small like cocoa to keep the lonely pain away. More, he could feel the pain, fear and shakes still there, pushed down but the brokenness wasn't gone and he didn't want to be alone when it came back, even if it was Andy that would be there.

"Deal!" Andy nodded and forced a smile but all he wanted to do was throw his arms around Rez and hold him close. Now, at the least, there was a chance he'd get to do that.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Seventy Seven

"I don't even want to know how you explained that to the guards." Andy grinned as he twisted the cap back on the bottle of schnapps. Rez stood in the doorway to the kitchen the pink fuzzy slipper clutched in his hands and his eyes wide and serious.

"I...I should just..."

"You should just shut up and try this." Andy moved around the counter top and pressed the mug of hot chocolate into Rez's hand, snatching away his slipper before Rez could offer it. "Go on... try it."

Carefully Rez sipped at the drink more because he was too tired to fight over it. The first sip he registered as hot and he knew it was sweet but really couldn't taste it. The second cautious sip lit up something across his tastebuds. "Hmm."

"Can you taste it?"

"Minty..."

"Strong minty. Peppermint schnapps in the hot chocolate, a generous amount of it too! Figured the alcohol would help the flavor stand out and really I think we both could use a drink." He scooped up his own mug. "Come on..."

"I don't know..."

"Shut up, drink your cocoa and come with me. I told you, I won't pester you, you can sit there and hate me, or read, whichever would amuse you more." He dropped the slipper and shoved his bare foot into it and was prepared to have to drag Rez with him but as he moved from the room the man followed willingly. It might have been a smarter idea to talk Rez into watching a movie or something but Andy didn't want to sit out in the main room.

"Don't mind the clutter..." He mumbled as he moved and turned on a lamp, the light defused with a red scarf tossed over the shade. The lamp was sitting on a box he kept supplies in; brushes and tubes of paint that he just didn't have the space to store.

Normally Andy didn't notice the clutter but suddenly he saw it. He never unfolded the futon mattress any more, he kept it folded along one wall, a pillow tossed on top and blankets mussed up on top. It was sad but he tended to just curl up on top of it and sleep there on the small narrow space than lay out the bed.

"Wow, so yeah, I've never thought about how this would look to someone else. Kind of sad, huh?" He sighed and began to move about the cluttered room picking up random bits of things.

"Normally I have a room all warm and fuzzy looking but really one wall is all swatches and crap for the club's design and the rest is just my clutter since I've no space for it and it looks really bad." He grinned but Rez stood in the doorway clutching his mug and looking more than a little shellshocked. "Must seem like an absurd amount of space, given how small your room is."

"I like my room."

"Least you have closet space." He shoved the last handful of stuff into a bin and used the side of a fuzzy slipper to push the last of the rest toward the wall. "There now, help me get the futon laid out?"

"I should..."

"You should help me so we both can flop down and veg out." Andy plucked the mug from Rez's hands but when he got too close the man flinched away. It suited his purpose, Rez slipped a little further into the room and that let him shut the door. "Grab a corner?" He ignored the flinch and moved to get the futon out.

Rez didn't help much but he wasn't on the roof trying to fly and he wasn't throwing things or cussing him out, so Andy was going to take it. The futon flopped out into the space he'd cleared

and Andy moved by himself to get the pillows and bedding out. When it was done he sat down and lifted Rez's mug up to where the man stood.

"Why are you being nice to me?" Rez paused before taking the mug again but he wanted to taste more of the peppermint.

"Because maybe...maybe I don't want to be alone tonight either. Look, don't make anything of it okay? Just take the damned cocoa and sit down." He pushed the drink a little more toward Rez, straining to stretch the extra inch and sighed when the other man finally took it. He made it a point to ignore Rez as the man moved to the far side of the futon and sat down.

"I've never been good at being alone. Odd for an only child, huh? My mom moved us to Paris when I was a kid, a couple of years after my father died. She had this crappy studio over a Chinese restaurant but within a few weeks it seemed like she knew everyone. She was teaching classes and always had people over at night for parties. I'd take part in her classes and pretend to be sleeping during the dinner parties but really would be awake just to listen to how clever everyone was. But those were her friends and not mine. Then she met this man and he's... well..." Andy sighed a little. "His name won't mean anything to you but he was a count and years older than she was and he was always coming around to see her art and then to see her. I liked him, he took us to live at his estate and I know they were lovers but he was a good man. He's the one that taught me to pitch a ball. I mean he knew I was queer even before I had a word for it but...it was like having a dad. He had peacocks on his estate and he saw to it I had tutors. We were happy there."

"What happened?" Rez asked softly.

Andy sipped his cocoa and was glad for the spirits in it. "Same story that's as old as time... he needed children of his own and couldn't marry my mother even assuming she could give him children. A marriage was arranged, we were quietly moved to a studio outside of London, far far from him."

Rez snorted.

"I don't think poorly of him. He paid for me to go to college and he didn't have to do that. When my mother wanted to come back home he paid for us to come here. He even writes me occasionally, not sure he writes my mom though. Not sure what his three kids would think of me though. Not that I'll ever meet them." He forced a grin. "I'm too old to be bitter about something that happened when I was fifteen. Just think though, if he'd met my mom sooner I could be a count instead of a nobody. You've any family?"

Rez just shook his head.

"No uncles or cousins or siblings?"

"No. Shine addicts don't have kids, my mother started using after I was born."

"And Shine addicts don't have parents..."

"We...an addict is dead to their family. I'm sure she did but..." He shrugged.

"And no idea about your father?"

"Her pimp for all I know."

"I'm sorry she wasn't a better mother." It sounded lame. "Mine may be self absorbed but I've never doubted that she cared about me."



"My mother cared about me, that's why she sold me to Red Moon."

"How the hell do you figure that?"

"Who else will buy the child of an addict? No other house would take one and it would have been worse if she'd died and left me on the streets. A lot worse..." Rez's eyes focused on his drink and he took a moment to down a few more swallows of the cooling chocolate. "Least at Red Moon I was fed and warm."

"They beat you, and sold you and made you an addict."

"Everyone has a place."

"Fuck that shit." Andy put his mug down. "Sweetheart, they were wrong, what they do is wrong. I'm not a fool idealist that thinks we can get rid of prostitution in any community, not just the I/S one or that we'll get rid of drug use because, honey, we won't. But if I go out and sell my ass or get high, it's my choice, no one made me."

"No one made me..."

"Bullshit and you know it! What would they have done if you'd refused?"

"No one refuses."

"What would they have done? Killed you?"

"No, can't earn money from a corpse. They'd have just...done it all anyway."

"That's called slavery. Slavery means you have no choice, no options. If you've no choice, you were made to do it, even if you didn't fight them."

Rez shook his head. "I don't know."

"Well I do!"

"I miss using. Things were easier..."

Andy snorted but he didn't mean it in a mocking way. "Sweetie, just cause you're too stoned to care doesn't make it easier, you just don't notice it. And look, you're starting to taste things again, that's a good sign!"

Rez shrugged again and put his mug down too. "It doesn't matter. I'm tired."

Before the other man could suggest leaving Andy nodded. "Sleep suits. Need something to wear? Boxers work for me...or are you commando?"

"I..." He considered leaving but he really didn't want to be alone. Andy wasn't being nice to him to fuck him and he was offering to let him stay the way I/S stayed together to save space, to sleep and as friends. It wasn't something he was used to but he found the quiet of the night sometimes oppressive. He was used to sleeping on a bunk with thirty other people in the room, all snoring and breathing and moaning. Or he was used to sleeping beside a client, waiting for them to wake and want him. His little room felt very alone sometimes. "I'm wearing boxers."

"Good." Andy stood up and moved to dig up his sleeping pants. He stripped his shirt off and paused before dropping his pants. "Don't watch! I'm not wearing anything under these." He shooed with his hand and waited while Rez frowned and closed his eyes. "I put this on after my shower." He stripped the simple pants off and pulled on the softer ones he slept in. "Bet you

thought I slept in a nightie, all pink silk and lace.”

“Hm.”

“Well I don’t. No point in being pretty with no one to see and no one can see you in the dark. Besides, generally if anyone is here to see me? We aren’t wearing clothes.” He smiled lewdly and wiggled his eyebrows. Only Rez didn’t tell him to fuck off he just sat there with an emptiness to his eyes. “Don’t worry, I won’t molest you if you don’t molest me.” He slipped under the blankets and sighed. There was no point to fussing at Rez, he’d either leave or lay down and Andy reached up and flicked the light off.

He yawned in the dark and stretched, his spine popping a little and tried very hard to ignore his guest. The darkness loomed for long moments before Andy heard movement. It was small, careful, shifting movements and the soft rustle of fabric. Then the blanket lifted a little and the futon shifted as Rez slipped under them. They didn’t cuddle and Andy hadn’t expected that but it still made him smile when Rez curled up on the far side of the bed. The soft sounds of the other man’s steady breathing combined with the vague feel of someone else in the room slipped Andy easily down and into sleep.

He woke when his hand slipped out from the blankets and smacked not against the wall he was used to sleeping near but something softer and more alive. That startled him awake from the start of a very pleasant dream of Mick and Toshi, only Toshi’s hair kept turning purple. He would have just yawned and settled back in to drift asleep with the hope of returning to the dream but what he’d smacked made a small, hushed guilty sound.

Andy forced his eyes open but the room was dark. “mmm Rez?” He muttered and slipped his other arm out from under the covers. He found the small toggle switch near his head and flipped it. Dim, red tinted light glowed. It was enough to see by in the darkness but he had it set up in a small display, a small red light and a light table underneath a clear plastic bottle of water. He’d been playing with reflections and such with the set up.

It worked just as well as a night light and he rubbed his eyes with a heavy hand before he squinted to look at Rez. Rez didn’t need the night light, he was sitting on up on top of the blankets, his hair loose around his bare shoulders and his eyes wide and sad. Worse, the only thing the other man could have been doing in the dark was watching him.

“Were you watching me sleep?” Andy frowned and rubbed at his mouth to check and remove any drool.

Rez only shrugged. “Didn’t mean to wake you.”

Drool check done, Andy reached out and patted the nearby naked knee. “Didn’t...geesh you’re freezing, get under the covers!” He lifted the blankets and was even willing to share his warm spot.

“Had a craving...” Rez muttered but he didn’t refuse the invitation.

“So you what? Watched me snore?”

He turned and propped himself up on an elbow. The small red light didn’t hurt his eyes and it let him make out the human in far better detail. “You look different.”

That made Andy fuss at the scraggly bits of hair that had slipped from the simple pony tail he’d pulled his damp hair into. “I look a mess. There, happy, you know my secret. The real reason for the fluffy clothes and make up and odd hair... I’m nothing without it.”

Rez reached out and ran the back of his knuckles across one of the artist's cheekbones. "You don't need all that shit."

Something about the tone mingled with the surprisingly tender touch and Andy knew he had to look as wide eyed and shellshocked as Rez had all night. Before he knew what was happening Rez leaned down, drawing close for a kiss. Andy stopped him, slipped his fingers up to press to the other man's lips.

"You don't have to do that. I didn't ask you here for anything."

Rez nodded against the fingertips. "I know." Andy was maybe the only person he'd been physical with who had never expected it, or assumed it. He caught the slender wrist and eased the hand away to free his mouth to deliver the suspended kiss.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Seventy Eight

There was no biting, no forceful, frantic demand. The kiss was so soft that it made Andy wonder if he was awake or caught in some other too vivid dream. Rez didn't do anything gently, not when he had his wits about him and certainly not when it came to kissing. He'd always devoured Andy's mouth, consumed him and that had been aggressive but good. This kiss was an entirely other creature and it left Andy sighing and squirming a little on the soft futon.

"What was that for?" He sighed and cracked his eyes open to find Rez still watching him. The I/S didn't answer him, instead he reached a hand out and rubbed a bit of Andy's hair between his fingers. "What?"

"It's soft."

The words were barely spoken and Andy wondered if he wasn't dreaming, maybe he'd wandered into Rez's dream. He reached back and pulled the tie from the loose tail. With a shake of his head he let the length spill out around him. "Straight as a board unless I do something with it and yes, soft, thank you, I take care of it. Sad truth of it is, it's as ordinary as everything else about me, not like yours..." A hand petted his loose hair, a simple soft touch of fingertips only and Rez leaned down again to place a fluttery kiss against Andy's mouth.

"Nothing about you is ordinary..." Rez sighed. "Annoying, irritating, frustrating..."

"Hey!"

"But not ordinary."

"I'm not annoying...."

"Shut up and hold still."

The words held just enough lust and just enough amusement that Andy shut up and held still. He wasn't into the whole command me around, beat me, use me thing like Mick was but he was more than happy to have things a little rougher. He could shut up and play along, even if it seemed odd that Rez wanted to be almost gentle. If he'd been in such a dark place that he'd be willing to leap from a rooftop, Andy figured he'd want a little cuddly make out time after being talked down. He could understand it, it just felt odd knowing the feather soft kisses brushing against his mouth were from Rez.

"Mmm...Rez....you know...oh...we don't have to...oh yeah....to...to be closer..." He was worried about using the cuddle word because the idea of Rez and cuddle in the same sentence seemed like an oxymoron. Worse, as much of a slut as he may be he wasn't a big enough one to take advantage of someone when they were down. Rez didn't need to mix sex into the situation if he needed some physical closeness.

"Shut up and hold still." Rez repeated and pulled Andy's hands from where they were resting on his shoulders, halfway trying to push him back.

Andy sighed and let his hands clench into the blankets. Rez was doing bad, wonderful things to his neck, his ear, his shoulders and all of it so soft that he couldn't believe it was Rez hovering over him. A hand touched him, stroked the skin of his shoulder down his arm to his elbow so softly that Andy made his mind up. If he was dreaming, he didn't want to wake. If this is what Rez needed, Andy was willing, more than willing.

Only Rez's soft kisses slipped away and the body, still chilled and not nearly as warm as he should have been, moved away. Andy opened his eyes but the hand petting his skin moved to the ring in his nipple. The touch was careful, the way a child would turn a fragile birds nest about to inspect it but the tenderness only made it feel better. Andy moaned and bit his lip, his legs shifting on under the blankets.

"I don't understand why you humans do this shit." Rez said just above a whisper.

There was no mocking in the tone and Andy tried to get his thoughts pulled back together to answer. "It...oh God....it feels good." He sighed. "Hard to think with you pulling on it. Mmmm but....don't stop...I/S don't... oh...don't pierce?"

Rez shook his head but Andy's eyes were closed. "Would heal around the metal... why just one? If it feels good..." he let his hand wander over to the unpeirced nipple and was surprised that the artist reacted almost as strongly to that one as the adorned one. "Why not do both?"

"Oh... because that's not mine, that...I did the one for me...oh you horrible tease...god I'm horny as hell now.... Mmmm oh the other one? Over my heart... that's for him, my him, the one guy I'll grow old with... and oh fuck me... if you laugh I swear, ah shit... swear I won't blow you later....ohhh please..." All his thoughts fled because Rez dipped down to lick in soft, teasing laps at the pierced side while cruelly tormenting the other side with tender touches.

Rez sighed and the breath rushed over the wet pebbled nipple and the metal ring through it. "I don't get it."

"Huh....oh it's...oh...like always having someone playing with them. Feels good....oh...fuck Rez..." He gathered up all his melted brain cells and got one hand to slip up and brush against

Rez's chest. Andy didn't consider himself tan, he liked the sun but protected his skin out of simple vanity but he looked almost golden against Rez's milk paleness. He liked that contrast and he was starting to wonder if he had pale skin fetish, first Mick and now Rez. The very fact that he was thinking about Rez in the same vein that he'd think about Mick was a touch worrisome but not a thought to linger over as his fingers found one pink nub and lightly rolled it between his fingers.

Rez's breath caught and he jerked away. "Don't!"

There was such an edge of panic to the single word that Andy pulled his hand back. "I'm sorry."

"No...I...it's just..."

"Shhh, it's okay sweetie, we all have different spots." He smiled gently and tried to look behind the shocking vulnerability in the pink eyes. "I like mine played with, you don't, it's okay."

"No...I..."

"It's okay." He saw the disbelief and uncertainty and it hit Andy hard. For all his cussing, anger and grumpy meanness, Rez really had never been able to say don't or worse express what he did and didn't like. "We'll find your spots, when you want to go hunting them." He let his hand wander up to brush loose purple hair back from the man's face. "Isn't a spot on me I don't like touched....but as you've said, I'm a slut." He let the thread of hair trail through his fingers.

"I don't...I don't really..."

It was a stumbled attempt to take back the insults and Andy chuckled. "I don't mind it, I am a little. It helps with the loneliness. I don't deal well alone, I... you know other than heights? Nothing scares me but being alone, really alone. So yeah, I'm a slut." He sighed and arched a little because Rez had stopped petting and kissing him. "Right now especially...you've got me all wound up..."

He locked onto the too large eyes. Andy wasn't sure he wanted to push their contact any further. Rez seemed too vulnerable, too uncertain to share anything more intimate and the rough sex they'd shared before required more energy than the other man seemed to possess at the moment. There was no way Andy could just roll over and go to sleep, his skin was tingling, his heart was pounding and those eyes, those wide, pink falsely innocent eyes were watching him. It was okay, he could take care of things on his own, it was okay so long as those eyes kept watching him.

The hand he'd been using to toy with the bold purple hair dropped, the strands slipping away. Andy was used to touching himself, he liked it and wasn't ashamed of it. He liked being showy and he liked being watched but Rez's eyes didn't leave his face as his hand slipped down his own chest. The ties on his pants came loose easily and he sighed as his hand slipped inside the fabric.

Only just as he was about to really take matters into his own hands, a strong grip closed around his arm and pulled his hand free. Andy moaned a little in regret but didn't protest it. If Rez didn't want him touching himself, he wouldn't debate it. At least not tonight, not when things were so fragile because the truth was Andy was feeling a little fragile too.

Rez didn't release his arm but moved to gather the other one up too. The man's hands weren't large, but Andy's wrists were thin and he wasn't fighting. That made it easier for Rez to wrap one hand around both wrists and hold his hands still, crossed, over his chest. He wondered if it was just by chance or design that Rez held his hands where his own fingers could tease his nipples, toy with his piercing, all without having to strain against the hand holding him still. He didn't move, not even a flicker of a finger and neither did Rez. For a long moment they lay there in the

dim red light but those pink eyes kept watching him.

“Rez?” Andy asked, unsure and uncertain and aching. If Rez didn’t want to play with him and he wasn’t supposed to play with himself, he was going to have to excuse himself for a few moments.

The man’s lips trembled but didn’t quite form words. It gave him an odd look somewhere mixed between pain and hunger. Instead of speaking the grip on Andy’s wrists tightened and the lips stopped struggling to form words. They pressed into a thin line that normally meant the man was unhappy and about to curse people out but this time there was no swearing. The only action Rez took was swift and sure, without pause for thought. His free hand slipped down Andy’s chest, over his stomach and shoved roughly under the cotton of his pants.

The hand was hot and it curled around him without hesitation. “God...please...” Andy moaned and licked his lips. Rez was watching him, intently, and he wanted to meet those eyes but he struggled. The hand teasing him was skilled, stubborn and single minded. It didn’t help that he didn’t want to fight against it.

Without thought, his fingers fluttered against his own skin. They teased whatever flesh he could reach and it made his face toss to the side and his spine arch. Rez didn’t even pause, he followed the aimless, hungry motions of Andy’s hips with ease and his eyes never glanced away. Every time Andy managed to get his eyes to open he fell into a sea of pink that was as hungry as he was. It felt perfect to have those eyes devouring him. He felt perfect.

“Oh...fuck me... I like...oh oh...you watching...” He arched again into the teasing hand and gasped as the only answer Rez gave him was to squeeze his length harder. It made him shiver and pushed him too close to the edge when that shiver pulled a low, soft moan from Rez as well. That made Andy question just how strong the fabled I/S empathic sense was, because he hadn’t ever really asked anyone but each time his own pleasure spiked, Rez’s breathing grew more ragged.

One thing Andy was good at was a strong imagination. Too many nights he only had his mind and hand for company and he’d grown very skillful at weaving very solid fantasies. The fact that his hands were being held in place while Rez, of all people, was roughly, hungrily, jerking him off made the fantasies easier. He started small, Rez having snuck in while he slept to tie his hands still and touch him but his mind quickly wove that into Rez blowing him and the memory of that hot mouth swallowing his length made them both moan.

Andy opened his eyes and the raw lust in Rez’s own made him wonder why he wasn’t being fucked silly. It sunk in slowly that Rez wasn’t taking him because he was enjoying watching almost as much as Andy was enjoying being watched. The moment he understood that, he nearly came, right there but the desperate, close to coming, groan came from Rez’s throat. That made him lick his lips again. His feet slid up under the covers to push flat against the futon and he pushed his cock harder into Rez’s hands. His bent knees fell apart, wide, inviting Rez to do anything he wished.

“Oh...Rez...God...the things I’m....oh...thinking...” He tried to picture himself delivering the promised return blow job. Tried to imagine how hot Rez’s length would be against his tongue, how the other man would moan and writhe as he succumbed to Andy’s skills. That melted into Rez’s tender kisses, the gentle way he’d been touching Andy with almost awe and from there his mind spun being pressed down over cardboard boxes and roughly taken.

“Oh....” Rez gasped and his own legs slid a little apart, his knees drifting away from each other where he knelt on them.

Andy opened his eyes to see how hard Rez was panting for breath but those eyes were still open and locked on him. “mmm I’m...God...Rez...I’m...” The hand stroking him understood and

instead of stopping and backing him away from the edge of release, it moved harder, faster, begging him to fall. He was so close but he wanted just a little more, just another thought.

It bubbled up from the darkest back corners of his mind. Rez could so easily lean down and bite him. Venom would fill his veins, make his skin burn with lust and need, make everything brighter, sharper. Only in this fantasy, Rez didn't slip between his thighs and take him, it was Andy that would surge up. He'd pull Rez's hands from his body and roll the man under him. All that creamy pale skin would be his to explore and he'd find all the hidden spots that Rez would like teased. Than and only than, he'd take Rez, slowly, for hours as the venom drove him on. He'd worship the other man, tangle them both up in his crazy purple hair and the entire time he'd keep his eyes locked on those wide pink orbs. It was just a fantasy but it swallowed all of his senses and Andy went from walking that edge to falling over it.

As he gave in and let go, shivering at the thought that he was coming all over Rez's hand, he barely heard moans that weren't his own. The hand on his wrists trembled, tightened, held on and the dull pain of the grip that could easily leave bruises only made the sharp pleasure of release brighter. Rez's hand still on his length but his grip didn't loosen and Andy let himself go. As he came he pushed his hips up, thrusting himself forward, fucking the other man's hand as he imagined fucking his body in his fantasy and it was painfully good.

As pleasure faded Andy lay on the futon, panting for breath, sweaty, languid. Neither one of Rez's hands had moved and he liked that. The pink eyes still watched him but now Rez's lips were parted and he was panting too, trying to catch his own breath. Andy twisted one of his wrists a little and the hands holding him released him. Neither one moved very far but now his cock softened under the other man's hand instead of inside his grip and his arms were free to stretch a little.

"Mmmm..." Andy sighed and stretched like a very contented cat on the futon, arms raised up to his head, body still shivering with the happy glow of pleasure. When he brought his arms back down he slipped one out and over to where Rez was sitting. "Give me a minute to catch my breath and I'll return the favor...." He let his hand snake across a thigh and higher to press into Rez's own groin.

"No!" Rez jerked away from the exploring hand but it was too late. Andy's fingers were already in his lap and he knew he was blushing bright red.

There was no hardness under his hand, hungry or otherwise but there was a warm wet spot on the front of the cotton boxers. It took Andy's sex hazed thoughts to understand. Rez wasn't hard because he'd already come as well. Without being touched because both of Andy's hands were held to his chest by one of Rez's the whole time and Rez's other hand had been busy. Which meant that Rez had climaxed just from watching him and that was the most erotic thing Andy had ever even thought of and if he just hadn't come so wonderfully, he would have gotten hard again.

"You..."

"Shut up." Rez snapped back.

Only Andy understood the rude, angry snappish tone was a defense now, a means of protecting himself. "Make me." He whispered back but there was nothing Rez could do. His angry bluff called, Rez dropped his eyes to look away in an expression that felt very much like shame. "Rez...you came from watching me? And...and from feeling me..."

"It wasn't like that." He shot back and started to pull away.

There was no way Andy was going to let the other man get away with that. Before Rez could even slid a little bit away he surged upward. One of his hands caught one of Rez's legs and the

other caught a shoulder. He pulled and physically slid Rez closer. Before Rez could react, Andy tossed a leg over Rez's and cupped the back of his head with his hands.

"It was like that." He stated but Rez shook his bowed head. Andy bent down and pressed his lips to the hidden pair, ignoring the shame and embarrassment that oozed from Rez to kiss him softly. "It was... and it was beautiful." Rez shook his head but Andy just pressed his forehead against the down turned head. "Which of us is more fucked in the head here? Hate to break it to you sweetheart but that would be you."

"Bite me."

"Later." Andy grinned but pieces started to fall into place and understanding took shape and the grin faded. "That's what a lot of this is about isn't it? They did horrible things to you, fucked up your head but good so you don't know up from down about really basic stuff and now here we all are just poof expecting it all to be okay. It's not okay is it?" Rez didn't answer and just ducked his head further down. Andy slipped a hand down to press to Rez's groin and the softened flesh below the cooling stain. "This would have gotten you in trouble before, wouldn't it? They would have called you names and said you liked it...wanted it...Did you want it with me, Rez?" He whispered against the purple hair.

"Yes." Rez whispered back. "God...yes..."

"Did you want it with them?"

"Never!"

"That's why this is beautiful and everything before is shit. Don't let the shit take what is beautiful..." He wanted to hold Rez so badly his arms ached but he doubted the other man would let him. Rez didn't seem like the sort to cuddle. "Okay?"

There was no answer in words, Rez trembled against him, shaking like a leaf now and Andy was starting to worry that maybe he'd pushed the other man too hard. He was starting to think he should go find Toshi or maybe call Grandma Rose or someone that had more experience with things than he did when Rez moved. It was stiffly, as if he was fighting with himself, but he moved. Gradually, awkwardly, Rez's arms came out and around Andy's back and pulled him closer. The move was so surprising that Andy didn't even register it as a hug for a good dozen heartbeats but when he did he sighed and relaxed into the embrace. That eased some of Rez's own tension and as their bodies melted together Andy moved Rez closer, pulled him nearer, held him tighter.

"Shhhh....it's going to be okay now....it is...shhhh..." Andy whispered as he petted a hand across the long brightly colored hair. "It's all going to be okay now..."

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## Chapter Seventy Nine

It had taken some wrangling to get Rez to strip off his dampened boxers but Andy gleefully kicking off his own pants helped. He snagged a sock and cracked open the bottle of water from his sketch box, made the fabric wet and quickly cleaned up.

"What?" He asked to Rez's frown. "Sock is mostly clean and the water is fresh. Do you feel like wandering to the bathroom like this?" He offered the damp sock and waited.

Rez sighed but accepted only he turned a little away to strip and clean up as well. "I should go back to my room..."

"No, you should lie down so we can get some sleep. Toshi is still going after that kiddie sex house tomorrow and I know you'll go with him. It'll be a long night and you're going to need some rest now." He slipped back under the covers but watched the strands of purple hair glide across the pale skin of Rez's back. The man was truly beautiful, not in some child's Easter egg drawing way but with the rich unbelievable colors of an orchid.

Until the orchid turned around and glared at him. "You've got a stupid grin on your face."

"I know. Can't help it, sue me. Now, lay down. Incubus or not you're still a man and all men sleep after..." he paused to yawn. "After sex."

"That and you really are stupid." Rez muttered but he didn't stand up and he didn't try to leave. All he did was slide under the blankets and start to settle in.

"Indeed...I am..." Andy yawned again and sighed happily as one of Rez's feet crept across the space between them to rub a little against one of his own feet. It could have been accidental but when Andy slipped his leg over, Rez draped his own over the top of Andy's. "I warn you... I snuggle." He stretched and made a show of it but carefully rolled over on his side and into Rez's personal space.

Instead of being smacked or pushed away, Rez sighed and moved his arm out of the way and let Andy roll against him. It wasn't like Rez had asked to be cuddled, and he made it clear he was only grudgingly allowing Andy to do so but Andy wasn't fooled. It took all parties being willing to really cuddle and Rez's body molded around his own.

"So smooth..." Andy sighed, stroking a hand down one of Rez's arms. "You'll have to tell me which lotion you use....did you wax the hair out first? I did, let it grow out, waxed it off, used the inhibitor lotion since..."

"No." Rez answered crisply.

"How'd you get so smooooth?" Andy sighed and petted the man's hairless arm again.

"I thought you were tired."

"I am, but...tell me..." He muttered softly and knew he sounded like a sleepy demanding child and didn't care.

"Half a year before I was sold, they lasered it off, all but eyelashes, eyebrows and enough below to prove the color is real. Now go to sleep."

"Lasered? But...they told me I was too pale and it could burn me and you're way paler than me..."

"It did burn, it's why they did it so many months before."

"Jesus, Rez, that's....that's sick..." He tried to picture having his body hair lasered away and the burns it would leave behind. Presumably Rez meant it when he said all of his hair but those places and Andy found himself wincing.

"If you're not going to fucking sleep, I'm leaving."

"No..no I'm going to sleep..." Andy held his pillow in place and suddenly wanted to cry for Rez.  
"I'm sorry, Rez."

"What for now?"

"Being human."

Rez shook his head. "Stupid slut, go to sleep."

Andy nodded but he pulled Rez closer. He tried but Rez's breathing leveled out and fell into the steady patterns of sleep long before Andy managed to slip away himself.

He woke when he found the bed empty and cold and the dim light from the hallway fell on his eyes. "Rez?"

"Go back to sleep."

He snuffled a little in half-awake bleariness and propped himself up on an elbow. "Leaving?"

"It's after dawn, people will be getting up."

"Oh." For all the warm, touchy-feely cuddling, even Andy wasn't sure he wanted everyone to know. He wasn't sure just why but he didn't like the idea of even Mick knowing. He nodded in understanding. "Yeah..."

Rez paused in the doorway. "Last night?"

"Yeah?" Andy suddenly felt uneasy. Rez's tone was odd but it was impossible to see his expression in the dark.

"It doesn't change anything. I still fucking hate you."

The words were harsh but said with a gentle tone. The heavy weight of unease lifted and Andy felt the breath he'd been holding rush out. "Bunny boy, if it had, I'd be upset."

"Fuck off." Rez whispered back and shut the bedroom door behind him.

Andy flopped down on the bed in the dark, alone, and laughed a little.

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Toshi shook his head and shifted his shoulders a little underneath his suit jacket. Mick had long since noticed the small fidgety gesture and knew when Toshi was in cold cooperate mode it was about the only sign of his nerves.

"I'm only doing this for you."

"Nonsense." Mick smiled a little. "You're too smart of a man to allow stubborn pride to keep you from doing what you know is right. Half hour, hear them out, if you don't like them they're out on their ears. Okay?"

One of Toshi's hands reached up and traced the links of the necklace Mick wore. "Okay." He hadn't asked for too many details and figured he was best off going into this meeting without anything to cloud his judgment. It was a level of how much Mick believed in this small group of human law enforcement that he'd allowed the pair to come to the meeting at their building instead of picking a neutral location.

He took a deep breath and opened the door. Both men inside instantly hopped to their feet and came over to greet them. One was quite a bit older, his military short hair was more gray than brown and his face was grooved with frown lines. The strength that had been in his shoulders was softening with age and a touch of a belly was starting to sag over his belt. The suit he had on was simple, plain, cheap and he wore no tie. The other was young, older than Mick but still not old, square jawed with small eyes caught in a constant squint, he had an indefinable likeable feel about him. Like a childhood friend's older brother that always took the time to pitch a ball around when he didn't have to.

"Gentleman." Toshi greeted with a nod but before he could move to sit down the older man came forward and offered his hand. No human ever willingly offered to shake his hand and Toshi paused, surprised before accepting.

"Mr. Ranvier, it's a pleasure to meet the man that stole the best Goddamned police office I ever trained."

"Toshi, this is Sgt. Truro and Agent Ore. Sgt. Truro was my commander at the Academy. Saw too it I got a good partner when I was assigned."

"I'm retired now, instead of being on a beat somewhere, I'm working part time with Pete now on his task force."

"Mine in name only, I promise, while we're working here Jimmy's running point." The second man grinned and it made his eyes even smaller but his face even more likeable. "Thank you for agreeing to see us, Mr. Ranvier." He offered his hand too, without a pause for worry or thought. "Must say I didn't expect you to agree."

"There is a great deal of mistrust among my people for humans in general, and authority figures in particular." Toshi nodded and shook the man's hand before waving to the chairs and trying to get everyone seated.

"Oh, well, yes, but I was thinking more because of your position." The grin grew wider and took on an innocent charm. "Not too many men with real power give two thoughts to things like this. If more people with money did, well, we might be making faster headway."

Toshi wanted to dislike the man and wanted a reason to kick them out. "The Ranvier family has always tried to use our position and good fortune to make things better."

The grin died at the icy tone and a look passed between the two men as they sat down. It was Truro that recovered first. "He don't mean it like that, just, your family has too many causes already and one man and one company can only do so much. We're just pleased one of your causes is going to align with ours."

"What can I do for you gentleman?"

"Well, Mick isn't talking about details but we can connect the dots what with that press conference yesterday. We're guessing you're going after Sunshine House."

Toshi folded his hands on the table top. "And if I am?"

"We'd like in." Ore nodded. "I head a group that is working to end child prostitution. You'd think it would be a matter of finding a location, raiding it, shutting it down, but it's not. The economy is still flatlined, times are still quite desperate. Bribe someone enough they'll turn away from anything. The few times we've gotten the warrants to raid a location, it's been packed up and moved before we got there. Not going to rat it out of most places but here, we've got a shot at it."

"How do you figure?"

"You know about Sunshine House, we know about it, but it isn't just Sunshine. The Canadian camp is out in the middle of nowhere, travel in and out isn't easy for the average tourist. Most of the other camps are still too unstable, you're as likely to get murdered as anything going near them. Here? Here is an ideal situation for the sex tourism industry. Your people are well contained in an urban setting with established stability. There are human-run clubs as well as freelancers in the yard. Walk into any travel agent's office in the world and ask the right questions and they'll sell you a package to come here for the express purpose of having sex with an I/S."

"And your group wants to stop that?"

"A consenting adult having sex with another consenting adult for money? We'll never be able to stop that and frankly, Mr. Ranvier I think we both know a lot of people won't make their rent or be able to buy food without it. That doesn't mean I'm willing to stand by and turn a blind eye when people are selling children. People book trips to come here and book the Sunshine House as their hotel and it's on Committee land and I can't touch that but right here, right now, there are a good three to five child brothels established in the city selling human children."

"You want my help going after them?" Toshi glanced to Mick but none of this seemed to surprise him.

"We'd like to offer our help to you when you move on Sunshine House. You'll be showing off the humans you catch there, right?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, I can, we can, see that they're charged. Traveling with the intent to have sex with a minor is a crime."

Toshi shook his head. "Not when the minor is an I/S."

"I know, it's an absurd law but with the other child brothels in the city? I can get them charged because they could have intended to go to one of them. We can get them on assault charges if they so much as sneeze at me or one of my people. Hell, I'm even willing to bust them on any drug possessions that might turn up. I'm willing to prosecute them for trespassing on Committee property, damaging Committee property, anything I can make stick I'll try."

"And what do you want out of it?"

Ore leaned forward. "A chance to piggyback the other brothels in on the publicity this will stir up. It's much more difficult to be bought by these sleazes if the media is paying attention. I can file for warrants on two other brothels the next day, maybe move on them before they scurry away. Maybe get some of those kids out and into real foster care."

There was a desperate plead to the man's voice. Toshi only sensed honesty and a hungry need for action. It was the feel of someone that had been trying to do the right thing for too long and found all the doors slammed in his face. He didn't miss the worried look Truro gave Mick but Ore never looked away from him.

Toshi turned to catch Mick's eye. "Your thoughts?"

"I wouldn't have asked you to meet them if I didn't think it would be a win/win situation for everyone."

"My people aren't used to working with humans."

Truro nodded. "We're willing to go with you under any conditions you set, in any function you deem proper. If Mick's working with your folks, they're well trained."

He wasn't sure he could say no when their motive was to try to save more children. In fact, Toshi knew he couldn't. Alec had been in the foster system, Mick too, and either one could have been snatched away and dropped in one of those brothels. He stood up. "So be it, but you coordinate with Mick, you take orders from my people. This is our operation, but if Mick thinks you can play by our rules, you can come along for the ride."

Ore's face lit up in his friendly, likeable way. "Thank you!"

"Don't thank me, this is going to annoy very powerful people and now it'll come down on your heads too. Mick? Set up the details with them?"

"Yes sir."

Toshi paused in the doorway. "And for what it's worth, gentleman, I'll help you shut down those other brothels too, if I can, but my focus is on my people. Understood?"

Ore nodded. "Understood."

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Chapter Eighty

It was close to one in the morning and Rez wished he'd stayed home. He sat in the back of one of several vans that Mick had brought in, herded together with other civilians. Most of the dozen or so other people were human and from Mick's Commune family. People brought in that had

experience working with children, people who had volunteered to foster the Sunshine House kids and try to raise them properly. They'd all stay in the van while the guards and fighters moved in ahead of them. Rez didn't mind that but he did mind sitting alone with so many human strangers, all of them trying not to stare at him.

The van doors opened and Mick stood in the opening. "Rez."

"Yeah."

He tossed his head toward the outside.

Rez moved to climb out but Mick paused in the doorway. "Once we've secured their guards and the owners, someone will come out and bring the rest of you in. Until then, stay put." He glanced over the humans, some he knew but most were strangers from other Communes, before he was satisfied with their nods of agreement and shut the door.

"What?" Rez asked as he stood in the darkness.

"Here, the sounds been adjusted for your hearing." Mick handed Rez the earpiece. "Yours has an open mic on it and you'll be synced in so keep the chatter down. Also, Toshi thinks it'll be best if you keep your sleeves pushed up so the kids can see the tattoos."

Rez frowned but he pushed the sleeves of his shirt up. Even with the warmer summer days he'd been wearing the long sleeves to hide the symbols etched into his skin.

"Thanks. Still want to help?"

The image of the boy that looked similar to him came back to his mind. "Yeah."

Mick didn't question again. "You move in with the second team. Kesses and his unit are holding the main floor, stay with them and keep your head down until all hostiles are accounted for. When you get the all clear to fan out, follow the units up to the rooms, they'll secure the clients but you're going to be the non-scary I/S without a gun telling the kids to go to the holding room. Got it?"

"And if they won't go?"

"Would you have disobeyed?"

Rez wouldn't have, because if he'd disobeyed a direct order they'd have beaten him silly.

"Exactly. Don't worry, family will be there to keep an eye on them and they'll be guarded."

He shrugged. "Wasn't worried, I just don't want to get my ass shot off."

Mick grinned. "Your tender backside is safe. Think I'd be letting Toshi move with us if it wasn't?"

"Like you could keep him out."

"Yeah yeah." Mick nodded and moved them to the other vans and the gathering of people, humans and I/S, that stood waiting.

The I/S were in the uniforms Mick had introduced them to. They looked tough, slick and efficient. Each one had their hair tightly braided back, a sharp slash of color against their black clothes. Each one had the same shoulder holster harness that had been adapted to carry both their handgun and the long knives they used for training.. All of the I/S guards were alertly calm and looked as deadly sleek as the weapons they carried.

As a contrast, the dozen human agents weren't nearly so uniform. The men and women were in various combinations of uniforms and civilian clothes. Some were past retirement and some were more soft than deadly looking. They all wore bulletproof vests, bulky obvious ones not the sleek well hidden ones Mick had outfitted his people with. While they all stood around waiting, doing com checks and last minute reviews of weapons, neither party did more than glance at each other.

"Audio check." Mick spoke softly but the mic on his earpiece picked it up and instead he whispered right in Rez's ear. Around him everyone nodded that yes they'd heard. "Alec?"

"Here." The human answered over the earpiece.

"Visual check."

"All feeds streaming smoothly."

"You ready?"

"Hooked in and set up."

Alec was home, or somewhere else at least, at a computer. He was coordinating everything and logging all the footage from the tiny cameras mounted on each of the assault team, some of the men had as many as three cameras on them. All small, lightweight and virtually unnoticeable, they'd have a record of every action and visual recordings of every room they entered.

Mick checked his watch. "Unit one, move into position and wait for my mark."

Six of the I/S guards nodded and peeled away. They moved as silent as a night breeze across the fifty yards between them and Sunshine House and even Rez lost sight of them halfway there. He found himself holding his breath and wishing he was home.

"Unit one, in position."

"Confirmed. Alec? Cut power."

"Surge cascading....twenty second window until backups kick in starting...now."

"Go, Unit One it's a go."

"Confirmed."

Alec came over the earpiece again. "Back up power restored, sixty seconds until their security systems reboot." Nobody spoke. Rez wasn't even sure anyone was breathing. "Twenty seconds until reboot complete."

"Come on..." Mick whispered but he'd turned his own mic off. "Come on..."

"System rebooted." Alec reported.

"Security office is secured, synching the computers now."

Mick's breath rushed out. "Confirmed Unit One. Alec?"

"Need another second or so....there's a secondary firewall....okay got it. I'm in and am looping their feeds, disabling their alarms...you're good to go and be careful."

"All units move in...move in!" Mick whispered across their mics and all around Rez people started to obey. They would have scurried to the building without him if Kesses hadn't caught his elbow and moved Rez along with him.

Twice on the way across the building he nearly stumbled and fell but Kesses' hand on his arm kept him on his feet and moving. It wasn't that he couldn't see, Rez just wasn't really looking where he was going. Part of him half hoped he'd fall and break his leg and have to stay behind. Sadly, with the larger man's careful steadying and his own surefootedness he didn't fall, let alone hurt himself.

Soon he was being pressed against a wall as others poured into a back door, guns drawn and moving like rolling death. Toshi was one of the last in the line and didn't look too happy about it but even he wasn't willing to debate the issue with Mick. Over the earpiece Rez heard voices, sharp and crisp and he was glad he was safely outside.

"Hostile two down."

"Target one acquired."

"Hostile four eliminated."

"First floor secure."

"Moving on apartments."

Kesses' tapped Rez's shoulder and got their small group moving. The back door had been smashed in and hung broken on its hinges. The back entrance was never fancy, plain grey painted hallways, cold cement block walls, concrete floors. Kesses and his group lead Rez down the hallways with sure confidence. An industrial looking door opened and they stepped from cold and clinical to something that could have been an oversized living room.

Plush sofas and wide overstuffed chairs sat around in clusters. Coffee tables had books and toys neatly lined up, waiting to be played with. A television screen had a game system hooked up to it, the controllers sat neatly to the side with the stack of the games. It looked cozy, inviting, until Rez spotted the folders sitting on some of the tables that had the files on the workers. It wasn't a room for fun, it was a room for a client or guest to get to know the child they'd rented, a place where clients could talk while their children played together since they weren't allowed to go away from the building with them.

Rez pulled the earpiece off and moved to Kesses. "What now?"

The large guard glanced around but eased his grip on his weapon and muted his own mic. "They're finishing up securing the lower levels and bringing the human doctor folks in. They'll set up in the cafeteria downstairs and we'll move the children in lock down there. As we sweep the rooms any of the children up with clients will be brought down. It was thought you might be a good bridge between the doc folks and the kids." He tilted his head a little. "Cafeteria is secure, we've the go ahead to move on the first group of kids." Kesses watched with a critical eye as a human cop and one of their guards secured the front door. "Put your earpiece back in, if things get nasty you'll need the heads up."

He wanted to fuss but instead just nodded and slipped the little device back in place. They moved with swift confidence across another obviously public room with comfortable furnishings and toys before hitting a door marked "Staff Only" and disappearing into a cold, unadorned hallway. Something in the emptiness and the humming harsh overhead lights made Rez feel sick. All clubs were the same behind the scenes. He knew that but he hadn't expected to feel so trapped, so sickened, at such small subtle things.



They passed other doors but moved directly to one side door that opened to another hallway and a surprising maze like feel that Rez understood. None of the doors on the main hallway would open directly to anyplace important just in case someone snuck in. The doors in the second hallway were set further apart and had light switches on the outside, as well as locks, and a window set high on the door. Rez knew they were dorm rooms.

Kesses moved their small group to the first room. None of them stood directly in front of the door but he moved in a quick careful jerking motion to pop over and peer in the window. Rez saw the man's eyes dart quickly, scan the room through the darkness inside, before he moved to the side of the door again. He held up his hand, counted down from three fingers, two, one and at his clenched fist the guards moved.

The light switch was flicked on and the small group poured into the room, guns drawn. Rez heard their shouts but his focus snapped onto the startled gasps of children. He didn't wait for an all clear to follow. Guards didn't stay in the room with the workers and no worker would ever dare risk raising a hand to anyone but another worker.

Lights out was most likely at midnight or earlier. Most of the kids had obviously been asleep and now sat up in bed, clutching blankets, and on a bed or two, each other. The ages ranged from all gangly elbows and knees early teen to barely old enough to be out of the nursery. They all looked like him, with wide, brightly colored eyes and waist length rainbow colored hair and Rez knew the fear in those eyes.

"We're clear." Kesses announced as his people regrouped and began to really see the children sitting frightened around them. "Shit, they have them crammed in here like cattle." Thirteen rows of metal bunk beds, two beds to a row filled the room and gave them almost no room. Over fifty children were expected to share a space barely large enough to fit their beds and one bathroom. "We're not going to hurt you." Kesses announced, the gun still in his hand. "You need to get up."

The children only cowered in response.

Rez frowned. He wanted to go home and not have to feel the raw, blind fear that children projected so well. He could smell it, their fear scent was strong in the room and it was visibly upsetting the guards. It was easy for them to be rude and smug to him, easy to brush Rez's past as a Shiner whore off as something he did or a choice he made. It wasn't so easy to dismiss it when it was round faced children.

He took his earpiece off and made sure his sleeves were pushed up. "Pay attention!" He snapped and made sure he showed no sympathy or gentleness in his voice. "This house has been taken over. Fall in for inspection!" Wide eyes darted around to each other and Rez refused to feel sorry for them. "NOW!" He shouted.

The room scurried to life. Blankets were tossed aside and barefooted children hurried to line up beside their beds. All of them, girls and boys, wore the same cotton sleeveless shirts and loose pants in plain pale industrial blue. Lined up for inspection, none of them even lifted their eyes from the floor.

"Rez..." Kesses said softly when he came over. "They're children...."

Rez looked eyes with the taller man. "No, right now, they're property and whores. If you tell them everything is sunshine and fucking happiness they're going to be too scared to move." He felt the doubt from the other man. "Trust me, I know, I was them."

Kesses shook his head and stepped back.

It wasn't like Rez wanted to be mean to the kids, far from it. While he didn't seem to feel the empathic need to wrap his arms around them and cuddle them like some of the guards were, he

didn't want to kick them when they were down either. He just knew that it was going to take a long time before any of them could understand kindness.

"New rules, so pay attention. It's going to be a long night, get slippers or socks on, put some clothes on if you're cold, bring your pillow and blankets and the pillows and blankets of anyone that is working tonight. You're going to be moving to the cafeteria. Expect to spend the night there. Additionally, there will be several human doctors, be nice to them or I'll be pissed at you. Do you I make myself clear?"

A round of 'Yes Sirs' broke the heavy air of the room.

"Good, now move!" The room broke into hurried movement around them and Kesses raised his eyebrows.

"You didn't make them cry."

"No."

"Good...." He nodded. "Now just two more rooms like this and the support staff room and we can move to help the squads hitting the rooms."

The idea of being up there, breaking into a room, maybe seeing some pervert human piece of shit doing things to some kid made Rez shake his head. "I'm not a fighter, I'll stay in the hallway. Like hell I'll get in the way and get shot by accident or something."

Kesses wasn't fooled. He nodded. "Wouldn't want that."

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Home

Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Eighty One

"Holy shit." Epps whispered as he was almost pushed by his escort into a cinder block wall room that had no windows and was filled with wide eyed, frightened I/S children and a small handful of adults.

His escorted snorted and moved away but Toshi had spotted Epps the moment he arrived. He was drying his hands from where he'd washed blood away and dropped the towel on a table as he passed.

"Epps, I'm glad you were able to be reached so quickly." He offered his hand to the stunned reporter.

"What's happened?" He'd gotten the phone call from Alec requesting him and rushed to meet his escort with no real clue what to expect. It certainly hadn't been a sex club and one that had obviously been ransacked, in fact that was pretty low on his list of things he'd expected to find and even that was higher than a room full of kids.

"This is, was, Sunshine House. A brothel like most of the clubs here in the Yards only this one sold children. We've shut it down. Thought you might like to document it, Alec is putting together some of the raw footage we've collected for you as well. All I ask is that you be gentle with the kids and listen to the human law enforcement guarding the clients we captured. Beyond that, you have access to just about everywhere." He glanced behind Epps to where Mick was moving toward them and tried not to smile. Mick dressed for a full on assault was sexy but now without the worry of some hidden guard popping up to shoot any of them he felt sexy too. In a room so filled with the scent of fear and the pressure of tense worried nerves Mick's icy winter shock was refreshing.

The cold crispness sharpened and grew brittle when Mick saw Epps as his eyes narrowed. "Everything secure, we're waiting for you." He reported with just the right amount of sharp authority to his voice.

"Mick..." Epps tried to catch his attention but the frowning glare Mick turned to him would have caused a lesser man to run away. "Fancy meeting you here." Epps tried to grin.

Mick frowned more and Toshi knew better than to linger. "Excuse us for the moment but please feel free to look around just take one of the guards with you." He moved them away as Epps agreed more to get his already too tightly wound up lover off and doing something than to avoid the reporter.

"Is it wise to allow him to poke around?"

Toshi shrugged. "No one will let him anywhere sensitive, or where the bodies are stacked." They'd had to kill the thugs working as house guards, some had surrendered but they couldn't risk them causing trouble now or down the road. He wanted to say something to Mick about cutting his biological father a little slack but knew his lover in the mood he was in wasn't going to listen. Mick was stubborn, he'd let Epps into his life or not as he willed and no amount of nagging urging could convince him otherwise. Instead he flicked channels to talk to Alec and pretended he didn't see Mick frowning over personal issues. "Alec?"

"Yeah, here, all's well?"

He nodded even though Alec couldn't see him. "Better than we expected. Meeting still a go?"

"I've confirmation from all the major houses. The room is lit and table is set up. Guards here will escort them in, check for weapons and make them wait... ah... yes, everything is solid and secure and ready to go. They should be arriving shortly. Our eyes are saying cars are being brought around at several of the locations but none of them seem to be in any rush."

"Good, no ones tipped them off. We'll be over shortly."

"Okay."

As Alec cut the line Toshi heard the man exhaling a little too hard. He was smoking which betrayed his nerves when his voice was steady and level. "He's smoking."

Mick shook his head. "Being left to co-ordinate everything makes him nervous." He caught Toshi's arm and stopped the man. "You don't have to do this. We'll take care of it."

"I know. It's nice that you think me so innocent."

Mick glanced down. "I don't mean it to be overprotective..."

"Yes you do."

"I just... you have enough burdens to carry."

"This isn't a burden. Some people shouldn't be allowed to take up space. This won't even be a blink on my conscious, I promise."

"Okay."

"We've secured them all?"

"All twelve yes. Not sure which one has the final say, they're all staying pretty tight lipped. Two of them had lovers with them, they've already been disposed of."

"Good." Toshi was bothered by that but it wasn't his fault they preferred to sleep with someone so vial.

Mick stopped them again when they had reached the room the human managers were being kept in. "Some of the guards got a little rough. I didn't stop them, some of the things we saw upstairs? I wanted to kick them around a bit myself. If you're not happy about that, don't blame them, it's my doing."

"So long as one is left breathing, what's a few kicks to the ribs compared to what we're about to do? You've volunteers?"

"Had to turn people away. Ore and some of the others figured it out and he asked to be part. Told him no and made sure all the other humans are keeping an eye on the clients."

"Good." Toshi had been very clear that this was an I/S situation on I/S land and the human law enforcement was there as a side note only. Which allowed them to do things their way and that didn't have anything to do with evidence, courts or jails.

They crossed the last bits of hallway to a door guarded by two of his people. They still had weapons drawn but didn't appear on edge. Serious and steady, capable even but not jumpy and that made Toshi offer them a small smile and a nod as they opened the door for him. The whole of his guards had performed perfectly, a testament to their training and skills and the drills Mick had put them through and he was quite proud.

The room had been cleared out or was empty when they'd taken it over. Toshi had left details up to Mick and didn't ask for anything beyond a secure location. The twelve humans that had shared the day to day responsibility of running Sunshine House had all been caught, some in their beds asleep, some working and their dress reflected that. All of them knelt in a line, hands bound behind their backs, ankles shackled, most had bruises, cuts and other minor wounds. Some part of Toshi was surprised that all twelve were men, he'd expected at least one woman, maybe more. Inside the camp, most brothel managers were female, it was considered traditionally a woman's job but he wasn't dealing with I/S and humans had different rules.

"Have any of them talked?" Mick asked the I/S he'd left behind.

"No sir."

He nodded and glanced to Toshi but he didn't see unease or uncertainty in the ice blue eyes, just cold hate. That was all Mick needed to step back and let Toshi handle things.

"You know who I am." Toshi started softly, some of the humans darted eyes up to him, so openly stared at him with angry eyes. "There is nothing I wish to know from you. I have this house, I control it and all the information in it. I know what you must be thinking but there will be no negotiating with your bosses. There is no compromise on this issue. You are scum, filth polluting my Yards and I am here to scrap you away. There is no bargaining, no bartering, you all will be dead before morning. Your death will not be clean but I promise it will be quicker than if I handed you to the children you've tortured." He wasn't just poking them to be mean, his words give him the clue he needed. One more than the others was frightened to die and his fear spiked in the room. Toshi pointed to the man. "Save him for me, make him watch the others."

The guards that had been waiting nodded. "Yes sir." Two of them pulled the one Toshi picked out to the side and one lingered to hold him there. The man was both relieved and more frightened but Toshi's attention had already moved on.

He caught Mick's eye and then the guards, both were waiting for him and Mick moved to get a firm hold on the man that had been pulled aside's shoulder, freeing up the I/S guard to step forward. At Toshi's slight nod, the guards moved. Knives were drawn. It was almost as if each guard or pair of guards had already picked which human they wanted and they moved with an almost dark glee.

Within a heart beat clothing was cut away and soft, vulnerable flesh followed. Blood flowed and screams bounced around the small room. Toshi watched it all coldly without looking away but beside them the man that Mick was holding lost his control and pissed himself.

"I should address the children." Toshi said when the door to the room filled with carnage was finally closed behind them. Mick had turned the care of the human they'd spared over to a guard, one that would blindfold the man and see he was delivered where he needed to be. The guards had delivered what he'd wanted, something horrible for punishment to those that had run Sunshine house but even Toshi had been surprised by their casual brutality.

"Maybe a glass of water first?" Mick suggested and he was glad he wasn't the only one a little ashen from what they'd just done.

Toshi nodded. "Yes, sounds good." He sighed and let Mick lead him toward the cafeteria. Neither of them spoke as they walked, or looked at each other. He was glad when they didn't go directly into the main hall of the cafeteria but through a side door that led directly to the kitchen.

Inside several skinny, teenagers moved around but they didn't feel nearly as fearful as Toshi had expected. When he spotted Grandma Rose he understood why. Human or I/S, the woman had a way with frightened children, adults too he admitted, and if anyone could get the kids settled down it would be her.

"Bless me are you two alright? Are you hurt? Should I call one of the doctors?" Rose fussed and hurried over, drying her hands on a dishtowel.

"We're fine." Toshi answered and wondered how much blood had gotten on them. He glanced at Mick and while his lover was splattered he didn't look like he'd walked from the set of a horror movie either.

"Water?" Mick asked.

"Of course, Shelia dear?" One of the skinny girls nodded and moved to the large fridge to fetch a couple of bottles. "I have them making hot cocoa and wrangling up some snacks. Everyone's pretty frightened, thought that might help settle them down." She smiled gently but her eyes

stayed worried.

"Thanks." Toshi spoke softly to both Rose and the girl as water bottles were handed to them. With unspoken agreement Toshi and Mick moved away from Rose and the children to an unused corner of the kitchen. Mick leaned against a stainless steel countertop but Toshi hopped up to sit on it as they cracked open their water and sipped it in silence.

"It needed to be done." Mick finally said.

"Yes."

"Not a good way to check out."

"No." Toshi took another sip.

"They deserved worse."

"Yes." Toshi downed a deeper swallow now that some of the taste of blood was gone from his mouth. "I'm going to offer to let the children see the bodies if they wish."

That made Mick glance over at Toshi. "You're sure that's a good idea?"

"Not going to require it, just going to allow it. Might give some of them some sense of justice being done to see it instead of just being told."

"Or give them nightmares."

"They already have nightmares."

Mick thought about that and finally nodded. He raised his water a little in mock salute and agreement. They stayed there for a long time, silently finishing their water and caught between pride and a sense of rightness at what they'd done and the sheer disgust that they'd allowed such a place to continue for so long.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Eighty Two

"Rez." Toshi raised his voice a little as he moved to catch the other man's attention. He hadn't really known what to expect from Rez and had been surprised by how well the man was working out getting the kids in place and organized. It would have taken far more time to get the house

contained and ordered if Rez hadn't known just what level of harsh commanding voice to use and what phrases and words they responded to best. That didn't mean he was willing to startle the purple haired man, Rez was almost vibrating with nervous energy.

Rez glanced over his shoulder at his name being called and straightened up a little as Toshi grew closer. It was an unconscious reaction to an authority figure, one he thought he'd purged himself of. Being in the house, seeing such raw vulnerability and cold acceptance in eyes so young, had nudged him back to his own past a little bit. "Yes sir?"

"How're you doing?"

"Your humans are learning quickly how to deal with the kids. Can't cuddle an I/S whore, have to just snap out orders or you'll confuse them."

"I mean how are you doing."

"Oh." Rez shrugged. He glanced from Toshi across the room to the boy that had such hauntingly similar coloring to his own. "Some of these kids have some serious injuries. See the one like me?"

Toshi had to scan the room but he nodded. "Yes."

"His jaw's broken, it's healed badly. They're going to have to re-break it."

"He could be your brother." Toshi didn't miss the way Rez's jaw clenched a little at the comment.

"He's not."

"Go home." He rested a hand on the tense shoulder. "Isn't more you can do here tonight, they're putting the kids to bed in groups. Things are settled. Mick and I and some of the guards are moving to the meeting. Go home, get some rest, unwind a little, you can come back tomorrow."

"Sir..."

"Consider it an order. They're going to need you here tomorrow and you won't be of any use if you're exhausted. Uncle Yasun is sending over guardians to work with the human fosters, you can help transition them."

He didn't want to stay but he didn't want to go either. He didn't know squat about parenting but it was going to be a while before any of the kids needed that. Right now they needed bosses and managers to continue to control their lives so they understood what to expect. Uncertainty, not knowing or understanding the rules, that would confuse them and frighten them.

Finally Rez nodded. "If you're leaving as well."

"I am. Don't you agree that they are in good hands?"

There was no way he could disagree, not when clumps of kids sat about with wide eyes sipping cocoa and munching on apple slices. They looked shell shocked but none of them were cowering. "They are."

"Finish up what you have to, but go home sooner than later. I expect you to be there when I return."

"Yes, sir." He was simply grateful to not be included in the next meeting. Rez was happier being a nobody and he didn't envy Toshi having to walk into that viper's den.

Toshi patted the shoulder again and turned away. Mick was hovering near by and he nodded. "Home, I need to change before we do this."

There was no questioning, no asking if he was certain. Mick just nodded and followed, a fair sized group of waiting guards moved to shadow them without any spoken orders and Toshi was too set on what they were going to do to ask. That was the good thing about Mick, he knew he could trust that everything would run smoothly.

It didn't take long to get home and Toshi found a sick desire to stay there. He liked living his own life and not having to do anything more. His own life was enough, it should simply be enough but the nature of who and what he was made that impossible. It was his hope that once everything was finished, he could return to his quiet isolated little life.

"Are you showering?"

Mick shook his head. "It'll be better if I look like I've come from all that. I'll clean up when we get home." He glanced to his watch. "How long do you need? We're getting tight on time."

"Not long. Don't want them to wait too long, now do we?" He forced a smile but didn't linger.

And it wasn't long until Toshi stepped back into the living room. Mick had set up on the kitchen table with his computer and comm, checking statistics and information. He seamlessly altered layouts and plans to the changing situations. Some people had hobbies, Mick had blueprints and angles for sniper fire.

"Ready?"

"Mmhmm, whenever you are baby..." Mick's voice died off when he glanced up.

Toshi hadn't just cleaned up, he'd showered and changed. His hair was blown dry to fall in a straight, black curtain down his back, glossy and smooth. They'd discussed what Toshi should wear, some suit, something professional looking and commanding but Mick hadn't really been prepared to see Toshi looking so perfect in a suit that cost a small fortune. It wasn't just cut nicely, it was tailored for him. His tie had to cost more than some folks made in a week.

"You're going to ruin that suit."

"It's just a suit." Toshi turned the sword he held over in his hands. "It's not really the same as a traditional Japanese sword, close, but not the same. It's wider here, see and a little more slender here. My great-grandfather had swords made for all his children, to remind them of their heritage. Just as he made them learn to use them and to fight in the old ways. This was my great uncle Hoshi's sword, he died with it in his hand. When I saw Uncle Yasun again, after I came to live in my father's care, he gave me this sword. He's kept it here for me, I've never worn it, never used it."

"Until now."

"Until now." He sighed, the sword was so much more weight than mere metal. "It's everything my grandfather wished of me."

Mick closed his computer and stood. He settled a hand over one of Toshi's. It felt steady below his own. "You aren't here because of what he wanted."

"I know." He slipped his hand away and quickly attached the sword in its sheath to his belt. The breath he drew chased away lingering doubts but it was touching his fingertips to the chain of metal and warmth of flesh on Mick's neck that settled him more. "I'm ready."



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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Eighty Three

Toshi was silent on the car ride, short as it was, to their club. Mick let him retreat into his thoughts, knowing his lover needed the space to steady his own mind. This was an easy choice for him, support Toshi or not, it was a no brainer really but it wasn't so simple for his lover. They'd pushed a snowball over the edge of a tall hill and it was tumbling downward now, gaining speed and size as it went. If they weren't careful, if Toshi wasn't careful, the small things they'd started would consume and crush them.

They pulled up to the back of the club, an area Mick had done everything in his power to secure. It would be easier when they had workers living in the apartments there, when the guards had moved fully over. They were only days, weeks at the most, from leaving their cramped little space behind even if the club sections were still longer away from being completed. Alec was already here, he'd monitored everything from his new office. It did seem fitting that their press conferences and other less public meetings be made here since this was going to be the anchor for their lives.

One of the waiting guards moved and opened Toshi's door without being prompted. Mick hopped out on the other side quickly and scanned the grounds. He spotted the other guards only because he knew they were there. There was no doubt they were alert and watchful, they were taking this as deadly serious as they needed. It made him wonder if something happened to Toshi how they'd react. Mick knew he'd never forgive himself of the guilt but the guards would take it just as personally. He squashed those thoughts, he couldn't think things like that, not now, not when he needed to focus.

"We're all secured, sir. Your guests have arrived, they're waiting for you."

"They're guards?" Mick asked, he'd seen the cars lined up at front, each one parked a little away from the other.

"Have been dismissed and they've been searched for weapons. They weren't happy about it but they didn't think there was anyone they could complain to. They acted like we were trained monkeys. Alec-san secured their trust and left them alone."

Toshi nodded. "Good, and the other?"

"Is being held inside and is waiting as well."

"Thank you."

Mick watched as Toshi tugged on his suit a little and checked to make sure everything was laying perfectly. He even went so far as to sooth a hand back and make sure his hair was still falling in a perfect shower. When he stopped fussing and nodded at Mick he looked amazing. Cold, distant, powerful, dangerous and almost otherworldly, it was something they all were responding too, standing a little straighter around. The man Mick knew, the one that tumbled into their bed, his hair scattered into tumbled knots and with a quirked half smile, was gone for now. He'd been tucked aside, hidden, buried under the mask of the man he was when Mick had first met him. Unreachable and unconcerned only while the Toshi he'd first met had been hiding, this one was dangerously present.

They moved into the building from finished hallways and areas to the rough still disturbed minor chaos of the clubs main buildings. The lighting here was installed in the secondary areas but not hooked up yet and industrial portable lights tossed bright spots and deep shadows.

There was no worry of ambush, this was their territory and secure. Toshi moved as smoothly and surely as if the club had been their home for years already, every corner and turn already a part of his being. He carried no hesitation with him as he stepped from the somewhat darkened hallway into what would soon be the center of their club's dance floor. It was fitting he was using the center club, the one open to I/S and human alike, to hold these meetings just as it was fitting that that dance floor was built over the old Pony Club so long burned down.

Lights had been set up to make the center of the room well lit but none of them would shine directly at any of the people. No matter where Toshi or the guards stood, no harsh light would shine in their eyes but it was a comfortable level of light for the humans that had gathered. They sat around a large table, one Toshi had ordered for a conference room that would serve for future meetings. Chairs had been placed around and all but the one end of the table had a human seated.

They were all male, the oldest was old, white haired and obviously respected by the others. He'd placed himself at the far end of the table, at the chair at the head and no one had disputed his right to sit there. The rest were younger, middle aged to mid thirties and each carried his own sense of self importance with him. They all were dressed in suits nearly as nice as Toshi's and they talked among themselves like old friends.

The room fell silent at their footsteps and the laughing smiles of friendship disappeared from their faces replaced by seriousness. These were the men that ran the Yards for years, openly so since the Committee backed down. Even before that they bribed the right people and had the most influence. These were the men that would either fall into line or go to war.

"Gentleman." Toshi acknowledged when no one said a word as he stopped in front of the table. He had made the choice to stand at the end instead of having a seat for himself. "Thank you all for indulging me and accepting my invitation on such short notice and at such a late hour." It was a kind thing to say since none of them really had a choice to refuse, not unless they were ready for open conflict.

He waited but no one said a word. They just sat there, scowling at him like he was some filthy bug that had wandered in. Worse, Toshi could feel their resentment and distaste. It wasn't that they thought themselves better but more that they knew he was weaker than they were, less capable and so not to be trusted.

"I will not waste any more of your time. As of this evening, I have assumed full control over the Yards, all buildings and personal contained there in. You are guests on my property, gentlemen."

"On who's authority?" One of the middle aged men asked. Toshi knew him by site, knew which club he worked at but had never met the man.

"By Sakamoto-dono. This is not up for debate. We are all businessmen and while I have assumed authority the rules and laws that will be put into place and enforced are not difficult ones. They will be detailed to you before you leave but there are several items I must stress personally. From this point on, no worker in any club will be forced into drug use. No sex worker, human or I/S will be under the age of sixteen. Medical care will be provided to any worker who becomes injured and no I/S will be owned or forcibly held by any longer." He felt their anger brewing.

"This is absurd. I'm not going to sit here and listen to this bullshit." One man declared and stood up. He was barely to his feet before two of the I/S guards moved forward and made it very clear his staying wasn't optional.

"Sit down." Toshi didn't even raise his voice but the tone he used was colder, harder. The man glanced at the two guards, to Toshi and at several of the men at the table before he reluctantly sat down. "I can overlook all of what has occurred in the past and each of you may start with a clean slate as of right now. However, one house can not be given such liberties. You will notice the absence of any representatives of Sunshine House. Allow me to remedy that now."

He didn't have to ask or gesture. There had been no way to rehearse anything but it wasn't necessary. Everyone was well trained and well informed. No one was there blind or ignorant of what they were doing or starting. The guard that had been put in charge of the man he'd spared from Sunshine was simply waiting and she dragged the still shaken and openly disturbed man into the room, into the circle of light.

That gained some attention, like him or not, approve of Sunshine house or not, the humans that ran the brothels all knew each other and worked together. None believed such treatment could come to one of their own since they'd ruled the Yards without dispute for years. Toshi watched the shock, well hidden but present, spread about the table and let the man stagger toward friendly faces.

"Thank God, thank God, they're animals...they...they the others...I..."

Toshi moved. It was easier to not think about it, to let training and necessity take over. The I/S made sword slipped from its sheath and for the first time since his great-uncle had been murdered it cut into flesh. One smooth quick motion, unexpected enough that those seated closest to where he stood pulled back, the steel flashed and blood bloomed. He could have just as easily taken the man's head off, made his death quick and sudden but he didn't have that luxury. Instead, Toshi let the blade bite just the tender flesh of the frightened human's throat, just deep enough to sever vital structures.

Blood sprayed out in a sudden rush, splattering droplets across Toshi and his fine suit, across the expensive table and the important humans that sat nearest. The man from Sunshine House clutched his throat, his eyes wide and unbelieving that he was already dead. He staggered forward, red running between his fingers, making awful gasping gurgle sounds as he tried to reach his associates that he assumed would be able to save him. He fell against one or two of them and they merely pushed him away leaving only his blood behind.

Toshi stood silently, calmly, as his victim took a long time to stop thrashing about. He slipped a pristine white handkerchief from his pocket and methodically wiped the blood from his blade. It made the white cloth colorful in an almost beautiful way. When he was done he dropped the cloth on the table and slipped the blade back into its sheath to stand and wait as the Sunshine House man finally slipped from the table to the floor, dead or unconscious and the difference didn't matter.

"No more blood must be shed. The choice will be yours, gentleman, follow my simple rules and we all make money. Cross me and, well, you don't know me but maybe you begin to see."

The table sat silent for a moment, looks were shared but the silence was broken by solid, firm clapping. "Bravo." The eldest at the end of the table announced. Unlike his younger peers he wasn't looking uneasy or uncertain but smiling wide. "You've certainly inherited your father's flare for the dramatics."

"I assure you sir, I am quite serious."

The smile fled. "Welp, do you think you can walk in here and have us fall in line like dogs? This is our territory. We know the place of I/S whores." He pushed a button on a small computer and slid the device, screen up and running, down the length of the table toward Toshi.

The sound was up and even before it came close enough to see, it was pretty clear that whatever was playing was on the level of porn. The screen slid to a stop and everyone around it glanced at it. Black hair slid over a slender narrow back. The humans in the room, because the camera swung around a little and it was clear that there were several people there, were laughing, saying crude things around the moaning.

"Cock hungry whore likes it... don't you bitch?" Black hair slid to the side and the tattoo on the slender boy's back was unmistakable.

The older man at the table sat with his elbows on the table and his fingertips pressed together. The smile he wore was knowing and smug. As the content of the explicit video was understood by the rest of the table, the other humans grew silent, uneasy, some even glanced from their eldest to the dead man on the floor. Toshi didn't glance up from the screen but his face remain unchanged.

Toshi may have stood as steady as a statue without so much as an extra blink when presented with a video of his younger self being so abused but Mick couldn't do the same. It wasn't a thought, there was no logical progression of understanding and anger. One moment he was watching the video and the next his gun had fired. He didn't even remember drawing the weapon until the crack of the shot echoed in the room.

The bullet hit the man while he was still smiling smugly. The impact rocked him back from his chair to land on the floor and Mick was almost to him as the others around the table stood up in shock. He hadn't hit the club owner in the head, not from any conscious thought but Mick was moving on rage and instinct.

His bullet hadn't missed. It had lodged in the man's shoulder just as Mick had aimed. The shock of the initial impact was wearing off and the older man was scrambling back from the tangle he'd made with his chair. His hand covered the wound and rage filled his eyes.

"How dare you! Do you know who I am? I'm going to..."

Mick fired again. Two shots in quick succession without thought and the man stopped scrambling backwards as his knees were shattered. He howled in more pain now than anger but Mick wasn't thinking. It wasn't until his gun fired again that Mick really knew what he was doing. It was called Nine Red Stars and had been a common means of execution for the ganglords of the Yards when they'd moved in decades earlier. A bullet to each knee, one to each elbow, one to each shoulder, one to the groin and sometimes it stopped there, leaving the victim crippled in more ways than one, that was Seven Red Stars. Mick didn't stop at seven, his gun fired again in rapid order and another bullet lodged in the man, this one in his chest. It could have been a kill shot but he made sure it wasn't. Technically, the old man still might be saved if taken for medical treatment right away and Mick paused.

He glanced back over his shoulder to the other end of the table where Toshi stood. The ice blue eyes were still lowered on the video but he had no doubt Toshi knew what was going on around him. Without an order to stop, Mick fired one last time. This time the bullet shattered the man's

head and killed him. When he glanced around to the humans now on their feet, some with hands reaching for weapons they hadn't been allowed to carry, whatever was in his eyes made them pause and still.

"Gentleman." Toshi spoke over the cursing vulgarity and moans of the video and equally deafening silence in the post chaos of Mick's attack. When eyes again swung to him, he very deliberately reached out and turned the computer off. "As I was saying, from this moment on, I'm willing to offer each of you a clean slate, a fresh start, with no need for further bloodshed. Do not confuse this with weakness or sympathy or fear. I will be delighted to shut you down and replace you with those happy to follow my few orders to the letter. You have one week from today to be in compliance, delay is not an option. This isn't a negotiation. Failure to comply will not be tolerated. The Yards are tremendously profitable, your choice is simple. Keep making money for your bosses with a few minor regulations or, well, get to know me a little better the way your friends have.

"I will assume we have an understanding. Each of you will have a copy of the new regulations awaiting for you at your respective establishments. If you have any questions about compliance you may always contact Mr. Orwick for clarification." No one had sat down and they all looked startled enough to cause little trouble. It was when they got back to their own secure strongholds and thought about it that would prove the turning point. They'd either fall into line or become outraged once they had gained some distance. "Goodnight, gentlemen."

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Eighty Four

It took a little encouragement and some prodding and pushing from the guards to get the group moving but once started they cleared out pretty quickly. Mick hadn't moved. He stood over the body of the man he'd just shot, gun still in hand, breathing hard. The video had been shocking and disturbing but it wasn't anything Toshi didn't know. He'd always suspected there was some sort of image or video of him from that time, hazy half memories had been enough to suspect. Having it pushed under his nose was something he could deal with, it was the reality of his past. He could fall apart over it later, when he was safely home but Mick had taken it harder.

"Mick?" Toshi asked softly in the silent room, his ears still ringing from the gunshots.

Mick drew a deep breath and holstered his gun. He couldn't speak, couldn't manage to get the words out. He shook his head and moved from the corpse. He hurried away from the room, moving blindly to get away.

Toshi let him go, let him scurry past knowing some distance would be needed. Movement from

the other end of the room caught his eye and he glanced up to see some of the guard returning. "We're fine, can you see to the mess?"

"Yes, sir."

He slipped the small computer from the table and into a suit pocket before he moved to follow Mick away. His lover hadn't moved far, he'd stopped at the nearest wall deep in the unlit shadows of the big open space and had his forehead pressed to the recently hung drywall.

"I'm sorry." Mick said as he felt Toshi draw closer. "I know you didn't want... want more blood...I...I just..." He found it hard to breathe again. His hand balled up into a tight fist and he hit the dry wall, cracking it, making his hand hurt but he needed the pain.

Toshi slid his hand over the tense fist. "It had to be done." He didn't feel it was the time or place to point out that the man Mick had shot to pieces wasn't one of the men in the video. It was enough that the man had been in possession of it and had tried to use it as a weapon against them.

"How can you be so...so calm...I just...they..." He gasped for breath and slid down the wall to kneel on the floor. "I can't protect you!"

There would be time for the dark shadows of half recalled memories later. In this moment Toshi was consumed by Mick and the man's love for him. He had no doubt that a great deal of Mick's reaction was rooted firmly in his emotions. Intended or not, it brushed aside the clinging touch of the video and Toshi found himself smiling softly as he knelt beside Mick.

He rubbed a hand over his lover's back. "You do protect me. You put down this threat pretty soundly. You're right though, you can't protect me from my own past, no one can. Things were done and neither of us can take them back and that isn't your failing."

"I should have...banned computers. I didn't think...and then I just saw red...I. didn't mean..."

"Shhhh of course you did because you do protect me." He ruffled the slightly too long hair a little. "It's okay."

Mick shook his head. "I should be the one comforting you." He glanced from the wall and was surprised to find the sweet, small smile on Toshi's face.

"You are." He sighed and sat down and put his back to the wall Mick was facing. It didn't seem to matter if he got dust on his suit given the blood already on it. "You bought me the time to compose myself. I've suspected about evidence but to see it..."

"How are you so calm?" Mick's voice had grown desperate. He wanted to claw at the wall in his anger or go and kick the still corpse a bit. "How can you see that and not scream in rage?"

Toshi closed his eyes a moment but he found the images from the video waiting for him there. It made him hurt not angry but he was grateful for Mick's anger. It made his own hurt feel more valid to have someone else be outraged.

"The boy in that video is not the man beside you. He was alone, lost. I am neither. He hated what he was and I have learned, am trying to learn, to embrace all of what I am. That video will sink in later, I'm sure, and it'll feel real but right now? All I feel is grateful to you in my life."

"I'm sorry."

"Hush." The reality of what they'd just done, what he'd just seen was starting to seep in past the cold shell he'd been wearing. Oddly, it was Mick's anger that was making everything connect and

it was slowly becoming real that he had a video of himself being so ill treated in his pocket. His hands were starting to shake. "It's been a long day. I think we've done enough damage for now. Want to go home?"

Mick sighed and turned to put his own back to the wall. He nodded. "Please." He stayed sitting as Toshi pushed off from the wall and stood up. "Toshi?"

"Hmm?"

"I'll do it again. I can't stop it. Some other bastard shows he's connected to hurting you in anyway...." He shook his head. Part of him knew he'd killed the man in a rough, painful way but part of him had wanted it to much, much worse.

Toshi offered his hand to help Mick stand. "I know." The human slid his cooler fingers out to twine around Toshi's warmer grip and together they got Mick to his feet. Toshi knew Mick wouldn't be able to stop himself should something like this happen again. More than knew it, he was counting on it because he wasn't sure he could ever so defend himself. He gave the hand he held a squeeze but didn't let go as they moved to find their way home.

If Toshi hadn't made it a direct order to be home before him, Rez would have spent the night at Sunshine. There was simply too much to do, too many things that had to be explained and pointed out to the humans. He had to admit he was impressed with them, they seemed to be quite comfortable with children and the fact that these children had a history and didn't look like them didn't even factor in.

It had taken some convincing but he'd managed to assure both humans and children that going back to the dorms to sleep was okay. The plan was to sort out rooms into shared bedrooms and make the building more like a group home instead of a hotel. The humans thought that had to be done right away. It wouldn't have been a bad idea if the kids had ever known what a real home was like. Seeing as they didn't, separating them into rooms they only associated with harm would frighten them. It hadn't been an easy thing to explain but in the end he'd managed. With a barked order, and it was a little unnerving that they were all looking to him like he was their new manager, the kids broke down into their groups and went to their bunk beds for the night without fuss.

That had left him alone with the guards and the humans. The guards were staying quiet, keeping to themselves, doing their job but the humans clustered in groups and talked excited together. He was too far away to hear them really but from the looks they were tossing his way he could feel the questions brimming in them. They meant well, he felt no malice in them, he just really didn't want to deal with it all. It was that more than being tired or Toshi's order that had him leaving the house to go to his own home.

He didn't know that guard that escorted him home and he was glad for it. Their building felt empty too with most of the guards on duty and working elsewhere and everyone else out and about. The only person who should be home was Andy and Rez had no plans to find the human when he found the living room empty and the apartment lights low.

There was a light on under Andy's bedroom door but Rez ducked his head and hurried past. He was tired and dirty feeling and all he wanted was to shower and fall into bed and hopefully sleep. He pulled open his room door and flipped on the light as he kicked off his shoes.

On his pillow was a small round, red crinkly plastic wrapped hard candy. That was it, nothing else had been touched or moved or changed, just that round candy sat waiting for him. He bent down and picked it up with suspicious fingers. When it didn't bite him he sniffed at it but he didn't need to get it that close to smell the strong anise flavoring. It was one of Andy's, the same flavor he'd

first tasted in a kiss, and it churned all of Rez's emotions up to find one waiting for him.

Andy had been thinking about him. It was as obvious as if the man had been hovering at the door, the candy was just a quieter, far more subtle, statement. The human had been worried about him and left him a little, sweet, reminder. It was an invitation too and one Rez almost took. He almost slipped back out into the hallway and back to the light shining out from under the closed door he'd passed by so quickly before.

He just couldn't do it. He felt vulnerable and a little broken and very much like he was made entirely of sharp edges. It wasn't an unknown feeling, he dealt with it by being alone. Or, before he had his own space, as alone as he could get. He knew he'd be snappish and snide and angry if he had to try to be okay and he wasn't sure he'd be able to explain to Andy why. So he stripped his clothes off, they smelled like fear now, and slipped into his robe with no intentions of letting the human know he was home. Before he left his room, he unwrapped the candy and slipped it into his mouth with a sigh. It would have to be enough.

The lights were off in the shared bathroom and Rez was glad for it. That meant that no one else was home and that Andy had been in his room for a while. He flicked them on, gathered up his towels and such and moved right to shower. His robe slid from his shoulders more because of gravity than any action he took and he hung it on a waiting hook. The water was hot, one advantage of no one being home and he washed up quickly. Only being clean wasn't enough, he stood under the running water, his hair washed now, his skin soaped and rinsed, and let the water pour over him. It just wasn't hot enough to wash away some of the things he'd seen or some of the touches of his own memories.

He heard the door open and shuffled footsteps and he hoped that Andy would just go piss and leave him alone. The shuffling steps stopped outside the shower room. Rez sighed and kept his head under the water.

"I thought I heard the door." Andy spoke carefully, Rez was half curled up under the water like he'd been hurt. "Everything go okay?" Rez didn't move. "Are you okay?"

"Go away." Rez finally forced out.

"Rez?"

"Leave me alone." He snapped. "Please!"

Andy drew a deep breath. "Well, now I know you're not okay." He kicked off his slippers and stepped into the tiled shower room. "You saying please and not fuck off? Come on now, let's get you out of here before you go all gross and prune." He moved closer trying to avoid getting wet and wondered if he could reach under the flow of water to turn it off. His shirt was short sleeved so he reached forward without too great a fear of soaking his clothes.

Only a hand closed over his wrist and stopped his arm. Rez had caught his hand and with a quick tug had Andy pulled under the streaming water. He gasped, startled as his clothing soaked to the skin and began to stick to him. "That's not nice!" He sputtered and tried to shake water out of his eyes and mouth. Andy pulled on the hand holding his wrist but it didn't let go. "Ha ha, so funny."

Rez didn't say anything, no mocking words or tossed out barbs. He held onto one of Andy's wrists and held the human under the streaming shower as his other hand reached back and pulled the tie from Andy's hair. It fell about his face, wet and heavy and stuck to his skin. The water and the surprised uncertainty made Andy look as vulnerable as Rez had been feeling and he found he liked that, a lot.

Andy stopped sputtering and gasping at the shock of suddenly being soaking wet, in his clothes,



and really saw the look in Rez's eyes. He stopped struggling. The moment he gave in, the hand on his hair slipped to the side of his neck and held him in place as Rez darted in to roughly steal a kiss. Andy didn't fight that either, even when the kiss was bruising rough and Rez nibbled on his lips like he might bite again and the reason he didn't fight was because he didn't want to, not even a little bit.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Eighty Five

The sharp taste of licorice surprised him. He'd left the candy on a whim but hadn't really expected Rez to accept it, let alone eat it. It made Andy feel warm and tingly and in ways that had nothing to do with so much pale, naked, wet skin pressing against him. It no longer mattered that he was now fully dressed and soaking wet, that taste of acceptance made him shiver. He moaned into the almost brutal kiss and wrapped his arms around Rez's waist.

There was bare skin everywhere. Smooth and soft, all exposed and there for him to drag his hands across. The ends of Rez's hair tangled down to wrap around his fingers when he moved to pet and touch and the wet strands offered an interesting counterpoint. He'd never had a lover with long hair before. Andy had always been attracted to men more butch than he was and that sort never had ass length hair, unless they were I/S it seemed. He tried to imagine what it would be like to have all that hair falling around him, lost in a purple haze while being taken and it made him shiver.

"Oh..." Rez moaned as lust and desire poured from Andy and overwhelmed him. The human was shockingly good at that. All I/S fed desire to each other while sharing pleasure, it wasn't something that could be easily stopped when both people had that innate sense of things. Humans rarely projected anything other than their own selfishness, what they liked, what they wanted never what could be together. Andy, it seemed, was different and it made Rez tremble to know that the artist was thinking about them together, sharing pleasure together.

Andy was so lost in his woven fantasy of fluttering purple hair that it took a few rapid heartbeats for it to sink in that Rez was no longer molesting him. He opened his eyes slowly and fell into unnaturally massive bubble gum pink. It wasn't lust he saw there, not really, but hurt, deep, broken, hurt. The kind that didn't find an outlet in words, the kind desperate to have someone notice. "Rez..." He whispered and the sound of the shower nearly stole the word.

He slipped one hand up, away from Rez's back to brush the side of his face. The touch was gentle and he saw the hard anger Rez always hid behind waver. For just one moment Andy saw the other man teetering, stumbling, needing to fall apart and break down but not being able to. "It's okay." He whispered again, as soft as the water. It would be healthier of Rez let go even if

only for a moment and as much as Andy's body had instantly responded and craved the contact between them, his heart wanted Rez to let go.

The pink eyes slipped closed and when they opened again just as slowly there was only hardened pain in them. Rez pulled his head a little to side, jerking away from the gentle touch he wasn't sure he deserved and knew he couldn't stand. He batted the tender hand away and pushed forward to devour the parted lips again.

It didn't surprise him but part of Andy was disappointed. Rez needed to crack, to snap open and let some of what he carried drain away. He knew the other man really didn't need sex, he needed a warm blanket and a shoulder to curl up against. He needed someone to pet his hair and tell him it was going to be okay and to let himself believe it if only for a little while. It was the truth but not an easy one to keep in mind when Rez's hands left his face and neck and began trying to peel his wet, clinging pants away.

The fabric was heavy with water but didn't want to simply behave and fall away. Andy shimmied a little and Rez yanked roughly and together the cloth fell with a wet slap to the tile at his ankles. He could feel the sharpness of Rez's eyes on his now bare skin. He'd always known he had a touch of showy look-at-me exhibitionism in him but something about the way Rez looked at him was better than being watched, wanted and adored by a room full of people. There was a desperation to the falsely innocent and gentle pink eyes, a hunger that hid below the pretty exterior and it turned his knees to water to be the focus of so much.

Strong hands turned him and pushed him toward the tile wall. Andy's hands slapped out and caught himself against the warmed surface. It wasn't that he minded the rougher treatment, a lot of times he quite enjoyed it, but that soft little nagging voice kept reminding him that this wasn't really what Rez needed. The voice fell forgotten and silent as hands traced across his back, his hips, his ass and pushed his legs apart. Hardness slipped between his legs, gliding in the falling water forward to rub and tease Andy's own arousal, offering a small, tiny, unspoken warning that Rez wasn't kidding or fooling around.

It was the only warning he got, that rubbing tease a heart beats pause. Bruising hands gripped his hips and held him still as that hardness slipped away only to return to push roughly into his body. Andy wasn't expecting to have sex tonight, he hadn't even thought about it, his body was tight and even forcing himself to relax he stayed tight. Rez moaned, a low, broken growl as he pushed all the way deep into Andy without pause for adjustment or care.

It hurt and Andy jerked away from the invasion a little bit. Something of the discomfort most have echoed in the stifled gasp that escaped him but it didn't ease or stop Rez's actions. It didn't hurt enough to have him asking to stop, it just was rough, raw and Andy wasn't surprised that he was okay with that. The water from the shower fell over his back and hips, slid from Rez's own skin to glide against him but all of his world had focused down to one single action.

The hands on his hips dug in tightly as Rez stilled, deep, fully inside of him. They clasped tightly, as if worried Andy would pull away or protest such a forceful joining. Instead of pulling away, Andy arched a little, rubbing slightly against Rez, welcoming anything the other man offered. For all his fluffy girly tendencies he wasn't a weak man or one that would faint if sex wasn't gentle sweet sunshine and light.

It must have been what Rez was looking for. The hands let go of his hips and slipped up his sides. The shirt he still had one was glued to his skin and made Rez's dragging fingers feel odd, tingling. The cloth caught the touch, rolled a little under it, added a new layer of torment and Andy wiggled a little under the tickling tease. Higher the fingers trailed, over his shoulder to the bare exposed skin of his arms and down.

He expected Rez to find his arms, or his wrists and grip them, hold his hands in place like he seemed so apt to do but the exploring hands didn't stop on his arms or wrists. Instead they

slipped further down, forcing Rez to nearly press his chest, bare and naked, to Andy's cloth covered back. He didn't stop until his hands were pressed over top of Andy's own and even then he continued to force, to burrow tighter, until his fingers slipped between Andy's own.

That made the whole thing feel dirtier than just rough sex in a shower. Everything else about Rez maybe denying what he really needed but not his hands. His hands found and curled around Andy's clung to him with a hunger that had nothing to do with sex. Andy's own fingers curled up against the tile but really there was nothing for him to grip, Rez was holding onto his hands and all he could do was give him what he needed. If all the other man had to hang onto was his hands, Andy would give him that happily.

Any thought to high minded care dissolved. As soon as those slender fingers, so deceptively weak looking, curled tightly between Andy's own he was quickly reminded of what they were doing and it wasn't holding hands. Rez wasn't gentle, he wasn't careful and Andy was okay with that. There was no teasing, easing into it thrusts, not gentle slow taking leading up to a good hard pounding, this was a rough fuck. It held more to do with denial than care, fear than pleasure and each hard, long, deep push forward into his body screamed of all that Rez was struggling to contain.

Andy closed his eyes and pressed the side of his face to the cooler tiles. Rez was curled over him now, his chest pushing against Andy's back as his hips snapped quickly. It did hurt but he was quickly adjusting and riding a high that surprised him almost as much as it seemed their joining was surprising Rez. The hands curled around his tightened, clinging tendrils of purple wrapped around Andy as Rez tucked his face to his shoulder. His breath was a hot panting moan against his ear and Andy quickly grew painfully hard again.

He tried to adjust his feet and couldn't. Rez's own legs were tangled with his own. Some small, tiny, part of Andy's mind giggled with irony and delight when it sunk in how trapped he really was. If someone walked in he could easily say he'd been held captive, hostage, and unable even to adjust his legs for balance. Part of him hoped someone would be home and walk in, it would serve them right given how many times he'd caught Mick and Toshi making out in the shower. Beyond that, part of him needed others to accidentally learn of what they were doing. Something about Rez felt destructive like a beautiful but violently strong storm and Andy was worried that unless something changed he could be washed away in that storm without something to anchor to.

Just like a violent summer rainstorm that flashed and fussed and was quickly gone, Rez too was unable to sustain such for long. Andy knew part of it was rooted in him. The I/S could be tumbling almost anyone into a rough, quick sex but he wasn't. He was falling for him, nearly every time the two of them were really alone, Rez was drawn to him, moved by him, desired him and it made the groaning moans of release that drifted into his ear sweeter than any music. The hands clenched tighter to his own, the hips snapped harder into his body and Andy felt the slender man shivering as he came.

They hung there for a moment. The only sounds the hissing whisper of the cooling shower and their panting breaths. Andy was shivering, still hard, still wanting, but glowing on the top of a cresting wave and not yet swept down. He felt a teetering moment when Rez nuzzled his shoulder with the side of his face, almost tenderly, as he slipped down from his release. Andy didn't need to be able to see the other man to know when he began to think again. The hands against his own jerked a little before quickly pulling away. The soft nuzzling of the man's face disappeared with a sudden emptiness and as if Andy had suddenly become something radioactive, Rez wrenched his body away.

It left Andy half pressed to a tile wall, naked from the waist down, freshly, almost brutally, fucked and still shivering with his own need. He scrambled his fingers against the tile, they felt empty now, and pushed himself away. His legs felt weak, he was still panting, but he got himself turned and pressed his back to the tile. The wet shirt clung to him and the tile and made him feel like

maybe he'd been glued in place.

He panted for breath and licked his lips, his legs parted a little and his hands lowered now to press to the tile behind his hips. Rez had stepped back to stand under the shower, the hot water washed him clean, soaked his hair fully again and made him look rather like a sad half drowned cat with his too large eyes that carried a blank shell shocked look.

"Rez?" Andy gasped and didn't want to beg, didn't want to ask but didn't want to be left as he was. More so, he didn't like the shocked almost horror in Rez's eyes.

The large pink eyes darted around the otherwise empty shower room before they settled on Andy. They swept over him, quickly, and whatever they saw there made Rez take a step back. One step became another and that carried him out beyond the flow of the forgotten shower.

"Rez?" Andy pushed off from the wall but Rez was already moving. He stood there and watched as Rez stumbled backwards, too startled and rushed to bother with his robe and he only grabbed at a handful of towels as he staggered by because of the water dripping from him. "Rez."

The only answer was the bathroom door thumping shut. Andy stood under the cooling water and let it stream across him. He felt a little cheap and common. Not that he snubbed a quick fuck when he could find it or that he sometimes really liked feeling cheap and common but this was different. The water went from lukewarm to cold as the thoughts tumbled into place.

He reached out and turned the shower off. It felt different because he'd been with Rez. It wasn't the quickie aspect or even the fact that Rez hadn't given too thoughts to anything other than his own pleasure. It had been the shocked look of horror that filled the pink eyes afterwards that got to Andy. He wasn't sure if it was because of what they'd just done, again, or if maybe some part of Rez knew what he needed and knew he'd yet again used sex to avoid real intimacy. All he knew was seeing that look after what they'd done made him feel sick.

Then it made him angry. He wasn't some stranger in a club and he wasn't someone that had no connection to the I/S. They were, at the very least, friends and he'd just been treated like some stranger in a bathhouse. Rez was using him to push his demons back, to live in his bubble of denial and Andy wasn't the kind of man to be used lightly. Especially when said use would cause him to sit lightly and walk funny for the next few days.

He was shivering a little from being soaked and only half naked when he finally made up his mind. There was a lot of things he'd take and do for strangers, more he'd do for his friends but he wasn't, not ever, to be taken lightly by either. He sure as hell wasn't going to be dismissed by anyone, or written off, not when the lingering flavor of anise tickled his tongue and his fingers still shivered with the feel of another pair clinging to him.

The wet shirt stripped away with a wet squishing sound and he dropped it next to his discarded pants. He'd have to come back for them later but right now he was too angry to care. It was easier to wring water from his hair than to fumble for a towel and he shrugged his way into Rez's forgotten robe. The cloth smelled like the man and the desire that had fled in the wake of emotion and cold water rushed back as that scent enveloped him.

"Bitch still isn't getting away with it..." Andy muttered and shoved his feet into his pink fuzzy slippers.

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From The Ashes

Chapter Eighty Six

There was no doubt where Rez would run off to. The man lived in two rooms, his bedroom and the roof and he wouldn't head for the roof while wet and naked. Water still dripped from his hair but he didn't care about that as he hurried in his silly slippers down the hall to the closed door. He didn't knock when he got there and when he turned the knob he found the door wasn't locked.

Rez glanced up, startled and looking terribly young and vulnerable. He'd pressed himself into one corner, curled up almost into a ball with his knees drawn up tight to his body. His hair was uncombed and hung wet about him, dripping onto forgotten towels that merely sat against his bare skin. The look he wore about broke Andy's heart and he nearly turned around and left. If he hadn't still been so hard he might have but the dull aching throb of want reminded him of why he was there.

"I'm not your whore!" He snapped out. He was almost sorry for picking that word when Rez flinched at his angrily tossed comment. "I'm not some stranger! I need to know what the hell is going on between us."

Rez didn't speak, didn't even try to speak, and just sat with wide eyes, tucked in his corner.

"If we're just fuck buddies, fine, peachy, but you need to tell me that. Annoying as you are, as much of a bitchy snide bastard as you are, I'm starting to like you. Maybe too much and I know how that'll just piss you off but I keep seeing these little flashes like maybe you like me too. So here's the thing, right now, not later, right now you've got to make a choice. If we're just fuck buddies fine, I'm cool with that but if maybe we're something more, something real, like maybe you know lovers or something awful like that, then you need to make that choice and tell me." He gasped for breath and wondered if he was that angry or that worried about what Rez would say. There was no need to worry; Rez just sat there, watching him with tragedy painted over him. "Come on now bunny boy, this is easy, it's multiple choice. Which am I to you? Lover or whore?"

Rez's hands slowly unballled from the fists he had been holding them in and he rubbed the palms against the towel draped across his lap. The pink eyes lowered but didn't dart around and most of the earlier horror and shock seemed to have disappeared. Andy braced himself to be told to leave. He told himself he would be okay with that. It was an easy lie to believe but the truth was he was quickly growing attached to the I/S and didn't want to be sent away.

When Rez finally moved it was slowly. He rocked a little and got his knees under him but he didn't stand. Instead, he crawled the few steps over to where Andy stood with his back to the bedroom door. When he was kneeling right in front of where Andy stood, his hands slipped out to ghost a light touch over his feet, higher up to his ankles. The touch drifted up under the robe to wrap around Andy's knees.

It wasn't an answer he'd expected and he was confused. When he glanced down, Rez was looking straight up at him. His eyes, already so disturbingly large and endearing seemed somehow bigger like they could swallow him whole with a glance. A dirty corner of his mind

shivered at the pose, the touch, at how close that too hot and far too talented mouth was to parts of him that ached with want.

Rez licked his lips and held Andy's eyes. "I could be your whore." He finally whispered. "I'm good at it, you'd be happy."

The dirty part of his mind wanted Andy to tangle his hands into the wet strands of bizarrely purple hair and direct Rez to just how he could be a whore. It was tempting and if they were lovers playing a game, it would have been delicious. Only this wasn't a game to Rez, it was deadly serious real and Andy couldn't give in to that baser side of his mind.

For a moment, Andy wondered if he was back in college. Something similar had once played out between him and Mick. The words were different, the situation vastly different, but the feelings were much the same. Mick, like Rez had struggled with the concept and idea of any form of intimate emotional relationship but easily and comfortably used sex as a way to disguise it. As their friendship had deepened, he'd freely told Mick how much he cared about him and Mick had no idea what to do with that knowledge.

Rez was different. Mick had been young and had at least several years of a caring family before Andy found him. Their relationship was love, yes, but friendship love. Rez was years older, had been isolated from real interaction for far longer. Worse, what Andy was suggesting wasn't friendship, not really, and that wasn't something an I/S with the healthiest of backgrounds dealt with well. Andy knew Rez wanted him to stay, wanted some connection, or at the least, some chance of a connection to form between them but he was clueless how to do that. So instead, he offered himself the only way he knew how and it was almost heartbreaking enough to wilt his lingering desire.

Andy let his hand slip forward, not to roughly grip the wet hair like he wanted to but instead to glide his fingers across the tense and worried face. The touch made Rez frown, openly confused by his offer not being instantly accepted. When Andy knelt down, lowering himself to be on eye level, the worried look turned into a frown.

"Bunny boy..." Andy sighed. "I don't want a whore. I want a friend and a lover and a partner."

Rez pulled away from the gentle touch and dropped his eyes. His chest hurt and it was hard to breathe. "I don't know how to do that."

"Well, I do. If...if you want to try..." He shook his head and had to glance around the small room to keep his composure. Unlike his own bedroom, everything here was neat, tidy and ordered. "You annoy me to no end. You keep molesting me every chance you get."

"I keep molesting you?" Rez protested. "The fucking molestation seems mutual!"

"You're a royal nutcase, grumpy, mean, hateful, cold..." He could almost see the vulnerable hungry part of Rez running for the hills and the cold mask slipping in to take its place. "But I like that. I can't believe I'm saying this but I like you, a lot. I feel..." He swallowed hard and didn't want to hide or lie. "I feel less alone when you're around. And I get that you might not feel the same, that this might just be what it seems to be, a couple of people being fuck buddies, but if it's not, if you have any semblance of similar feelings for me, who knows? We might just be able to build something nice together. But you have to make that choice, right now, right here, or I'm walking away because while I may be a cute fuck toy? I won't be toyed with."

"But... you would want...I..."

Andy shook his head. "I don't have the slightest clue what you're trying to say." He smiled gently but Rez was looking down again and missed it.

"You...you'd really want more?" He forced out around a clenched jaw. "You don't just want to fuck me?"

"Well, I'd like to fuck you, you're dead sexy, but yeah, it's not just that. I like who you are, beyond being my smutty, smutty sex bunny."

"You do?"

He nodded. "Shocking, huh? Even when you're being a bitch, I feel all warm and fuzzy inside from it. So what should I do? Should I stay as your lover or just go away as your fuck toy?"

A one-syllable word shouldn't be that difficult to force out but Rez struggled with it. Not because he didn't know what he wanted but because the idea seemed so strange. If he said go he knew it would hurt. Every day he seemed to need the nitwitted artist a little more, came to count on his care and concern a little more. He'd never had a real friend before, let alone a relationship and part of him craved that deeply. That part of him would bleed if he sent Andy away but if he said stay, the results could be equally devastating.

The artist was human after all. He wouldn't get it, there were just going to be things he simply wouldn't understand. It wasn't just a gulf of cultures and personal histories to try to span but ones of nature and biology. If he took the risk, if he gave in to that hungry need for something to connect to, to hold to, and said to stay, what would happen if the differences proved too great? He'd have let someone in and been destroyed by it.

It had only been a matter of a few dozen hours earlier that he'd been willing to fling himself off the roof. This choice was an equally dangerous thing to fling himself into and maybe just as final. He tried to tell himself he didn't need anyone, but that lie hurt even when only said inside his own head. He'd always had Shine before to keep him numb, to keep him happy and to make the days easier. He'd never been stuck with this gnawing sense of being alone and overwhelmed and utterly, painfully, lonely and now he didn't know what to do.

Could he risk so much with a human? What if he didn't and Andy maybe really could and did understand him? It would be a rare thing to find, someone he found attractive that understood. More than understood, he might have found someone that got him, which was a huge deal since Rez was still trying to figure that part out himself. The choice felt too large. Having to make it made him feel torn to pieces.

He shook his head. "I can't." He finally managed to whisper but instead of frustrated anger from Andy, all he sensed was a soft gentleness. Hands, gentle fingertips, brushed across his face.

"Don't over think this, sweetie. Either way, we can still be friends but you need to make a choice now. Stay or go? Don't think about it, which do you want?"

If he didn't let the what ifs and maybes chew him up the answer was easy. "Stay." The word made him shiver, made him want to throw things and scream. It made him want to run away, to disappear into the Yards and the troubles and pain he knew instead of the unknown one small word could bring down on his head.

"Really?" Andy couldn't stop the word that slipped out. "Because I was really thinking you'd tell me to piss off, not saying I wanted you to, just the opposite, I just didn't have any plan what to do if you said to stay."

"Shut the fuck up."

That made Andy clamp his jaws shut but he was smiling. He had been babbling. "I can stay?"

"Moron, I just said that."

Andy sighed and leaned in to gently brush his lips to Rez's mouth. The kiss was sweet, innocent and nothing like the desperate hunger from the kisses stolen and shared in the shower. "Yeah, you did. Give me a few minutes, okay? Going to go take care of some things but I'll be right back."

A hand snaked up Andy's leg to cup his half-aroused cock and make him gasp a little in surprise. "Take care of this thing?"

Andy only nodded but the bold hand didn't go away.

"Stay." Rez heard himself whispering again and nervous fear shivered across his body. He knew what he wanted but wasn't the least bit sure it would be accepted.

"But..." Any thought to protest, any thoughts at all, melted because Rez pulled away.

The towels that had been only loosely draped over so much milk pale skin had fallen away and Rez turned on his knees. It presented a round, creamy pale, beautiful ass, lean slender back, the curve of his thighs and legs to Andy as he shuffled a little on all fours across the narrow room to reach a shelf. The sight wasn't just erotic, it was beautiful. Andy felt his mind memorizing the way strands of still damp and wet purple hair curled over Rez's skin, the way his too-skinny body curved and moved. One hip jutted out to the side as an arm extended and Andy wanted to do more than paint, he wanted to sculpt.

He was so lost in the idea of forming something solid into the lines, angles and curves of Rez's body that he missed whatever it was the other man had turned and stretched to retrieve. Rez didn't turn back around, he simply handed the bottle back toward Andy and remained facing away.

The bottle was a solid weight in his hand and even though he knew what it was because he'd purchased it for Rez before the man came back from de-tox, it took his mind a moment to understand. The near full bottle of lube and the pose Rez continued to keep quickly made sense. Blood rushed to his groin and he gripped the lube so tightly he was afraid he'd cause the lid to pop off and send lube squeezing everywhere.

Rez glanced over his shoulder, surprised that Andy hadn't moved. "Stay."

Pink eyes stole his breath. "You want me to..."

Rez nodded slowly and lowered himself down to all fours, putting his hands on the futon below him. He could see the lust in Andy's own eyes and feel the want in the human but wasn't sure why he wasn't moving. With long earned grace, he arched his back a little and let his legs slip apart. It was one of his better, fuck me hard, poses and he wasn't sure why Andy wasn't accepting.

Very carefully, Andy placed the bottle down beside him. He let himself run his hands across Rez's legs, up over his thighs to stroke over the roundness of his ass. That made those wide pink eyes close and he was surprised when the Incubus arched into the touch. It would be easy to slip forward and take Rez. The man seemed to want it and the offer had him wanting badly to accept. The only thing that stilled him, that gave him pause, was that every human just took Rez. It was what he was, what he'd been and Andy wanted more than just a fuck buddy.

Andy let his hands slip from Rez's ass to his hips. He tugged a little bit and pulled until Rez sat up and half turned to look at him. "No." He whispered but his body was screaming yes. "You don't have to. I like to be taken; do you like to be taken Rez?"

He thought about the blueberry haired man in the men's room and Kesses and felt himself



blushing. "Sometimes."

"But you'd rather top?"

He nodded. "Sometimes."

"See? We're a good fit, I only like to top occasionally. You don't have to, not with me. I'm happy with how we've been; just don't leave me hanging like this all the time." He tried to smile and pretend it didn't matter when all he wanted to do was pin Rez down and rub himself against all that pale skin.

Rez glanced away. Andy's words were rejecting him but his body, all the things he wasn't saying, was screaming to accept and he knew which to believe. "I want you. I want you to fuck me; I want to know what it feels like. I've thought about it..." He stopped because he felt his skin flushing in embarrassment.

The confession and blush made Andy want to pounce. "You dirty smut bunny!" He purred and leaned in to whisper in one ear. "I'll take you if you want but only when you want, how's that? Sound fair?"

The whispered purr stole a small hushed gasping moan from Rez. It was just what he'd wanted and didn't know how to say. He found himself nodding.

"Good. Then we're going to do this my way." Andy answered and very carefully placed a small, light brush of a kiss to Rez's neck.

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Chapter Eighty Seven

"Your way?" Rez managed to whisper. He let the slender hands adjust him so he was sitting directly in front of the human but he couldn't help the uneasy worry doing something a human's way brought up.

"My way." Andy repeated. "I want to learn what you like." The small, little frown his words brought to Rez's mouth made Andy smile. He leaned over and kissed that frown, not trying to force it away. He liked that small frown. "Like..." He whispered. "I know you like your neck kissed, but not how, or how you like it touched. I know it's a sensitive spot for an I/S..." He trailed his mouth over and down to lay feather soft kisses to the pale column.

The breath hushed in a gasp from Rez's throat and as Andy brought his hands up, trailing lightly along his back, to rest between his shoulder blades, he felt his body melting into that touch. He didn't want to have to explain or speak, he just wanted to give in and feel. It might be a mistake to put so much trust into human hands but he didn't want to fight anymore. Rez was tired of thinking, tired of worry and stress and he just wanted to melt.

The kisses were so much lighter, so much tenderer than he was used to. It wasn't something he thought he would crave often but to have it on demand would be perfect. A hand trailed up over his shoulder to carefully, softly, pet the side of his neck not being teased with soft, wet, kisses. It didn't matter that it felt good or that he was in his own room or that it was Andy, some part of his brain twitched a little and he heard himself sigh.

"Yeah, like that, mmm that's what I like....give me more...." The mumbled nonsense words always worked on humans only this time as they fell from his lips they didn't.

Andy pulled away. "Stop that."

"Stop what?" All the sweet honey tone to his voice dissolved as soon as his mind remembered it was Andy kissing him.

"Ohhh baby....that's it....give me your hard cock baaaaaby...." Andy mocked in a false breathy voice. "Stop the shitty porno talk. I'm not a client and it doesn't suit you."

"I thought all humans liked that shit?"

"Dirty talk is sexy but only if you mean it. I don't want you faking anything with me, okay? Just..." He ran his hands down Rez's arms and was almost glad for the frustration. That little annoyance was helping him keep his control. "Just be yourself. Dirty talk if you want to but only because you want to."

"But..." He glanced away and frowned more until hands brushed at his hair and made him look back up.

"I'm a lover, not a fuck buddy and not a client. Okay?" He may have been shooting himself in the foot because Andy suspected that Rez trying to be sexy would be mind blowing. He just didn't want the seduction act for the sake of requirement instead of because Rez wanted it.

When it occurred to Rez that he'd gone into whore/client mode it occurred all at once. It made him feel dirty and not in a good way, but in a used, unwanted, sullied way. It made him feel more than a little sick to his stomach. He could live the rest of his life sober and may never really get beyond the idea that he was a whore, that's what made him sick. He nodded and had to glance down again to clear that feeling away.

"Okay then, am I kissing you too softly?"

That made Rez shake his head and some of his hair fell over his shoulders. "I..."

Andy waited but Rez didn't continue. "You what?"

"I feel like I can't breath if you, if anyone, is too rough." Most humans thought that if a light touch felt good, a heavier one would be better. On some that might have been true but Rez wasn't one of them. Too harsh a touch ruined it and made him feel trapped and choked.

Andy nodded and kissed a soft trail to Rez's ear. "That wasn't too painful to admit, was it?" He felt Rez shaking his head but didn't stop his tender assault until the paler man was once again pliant and shivering with each kiss and touch.

It was only then that he eased Rez slowly backwards, down onto the futon. The lusty, spoiled, rotten, bratty side of Andy wanted to flip Rez back over to how he'd posed and take the other man, end all the teasing but he didn't. Just because he was behaving a little more than he wanted to didn't mean he could stop himself from touching all that milky skin. It was soft and flawless and everywhere, flushed in spots, twitching with the movement of breath and blood in others but all of it was beautiful.

"Now.... I know you don't like these toyed with...." He let the tips of his fingers flutter every so carefully over Rez's nipples and both liked and didn't like how the man started to pull away. It was a silent testament to how much Rez had been required to accept before and how far he'd grown in a handful of short months. "Let's find out where else you like to be touched...." He smiled warmly, without having to force it, as the somber, far too serious pink eyes watched him.

"You don't have to... you know." Rez finally muttered out as Andy's hands traced the sides of his ribs. A spot that he knew was ticklish on a lot of humans but didn't bother him, in fact, he liked it. "You can....can just..."

"Fuck you?" Andy sighed and was drinking in being able to watch Rez respond to his touch like an almost tame housecat. "I could...but this is....this is so much more fun..."

It was almost a look of resigned fate that settled on Rez's face but Andy wasn't fooled. He had his hands on the man's body, on his skin, he could almost read the other's emotions with that touch. He felt the conflict, the need to keep things cheap and simple warring with the want for more. Andy felt it and understood. He knew there was no rush and the care was deeply wanted even if the eyes went shut.

He took his time, hoping to be able to put the knowledge to good use at a later date but knowing that anything could happen. Andy might not ever be given this chance again, and he planned on savoring every second. It surprised him, once Rez gave in to the idea he fully surrendered to it and let Andy touch, scratch, tease, lick, nip or torment every inch of flesh he could find. Rez did more than surrender, he let Andy know in subtle, almost shy, gasps and small flinches what he liked and what he didn't without any effort made to force his reactions or diminish them.

The results surprised Andy. Long slow soothing touches, almost like petting made Rez nearly purr. It didn't seem to matter what or where so long as the touch was gentle, soft, and in long repetitive strokes. It was just a physical pleasure, not necessarily a sexual one but when Andy alternated the soft soothing touch with light scratches of fingernails the reaction quickly became sexual. Rez didn't like his nipples toyed with but his navel was a happy divot of nerve endings that made him gasp and writhe.

Other more obvious places, Andy found similar reactions. When he tried to kiss and suckle Rez's balls, carefully, he felt the slender body tense in a reaction he'd learned was dislike. Rez would allow it but didn't necessarily enjoy it. Only when Andy moved lower to kiss and pet the trembling, pale, inner thighs the body dissolved again and Rez wiggled and moaned ever so slightly. The inside of his biceps were the same way, a hidden, unexpected erogenous zone that Andy wasn't sure Rez even knew he had. The inside of his thighs, the small of his back, the inside of his arms, the sides of his ribs, his navel, the back of his neck all became spots Andy hunted with patience and care and Rez lay still and accepted each new discovery with growing impatience.

"Stop...." Rez gasped out. "Stop fucking teasing me!" Andy had one of his legs extended and raised and was almost painfully slowly kissing and nipping the hollow behind his knee. It left him laying there, exposed, legs parted but untaken, shivering from another new discovery.

With each tremor, each twitch of desire he pulled from the other man, Andy's own desire had grown. He hurt now, needed, but what had started as a half teasing game had grown and

consumed him as well. He needed to finish his exploration because each new spot discovered was one less thing Rez had hidden from him. The game had become something far more, something that felt sacred and special and larger than either of them.

"Shhhhh..." Andy whispered and while he wanted to slip between those spread legs he didn't hurry to finish. It seemed to take a small forever to make it those last distances down to Rez's toes and Andy smirked over them, not at all surprised to find them as cute as the rest of his lover's body. It was only once he'd finished his careful exploration that Andy gave in and found the forgotten bottle of lube in the tiny room.

"Finally!" Rez sighed and tried to sound bored. It didn't even sound bored to his own ears, it sounded hungry, wanting, maybe even needy but not bored. He tried to hide the obviousness of his emotion by moving to crawl off his back and get his knees under him.

He didn't get that far. As soon as he was half way seated Andy moved and caught his hip and arm. He as much pulled as nudged and squirmed until Rez found himself suddenly and quite unexpectedly sitting on Andy's lap, facing him, straddling his legs. It pressed their too long neglected lengths together. Rez couldn't help himself, he was surprised by the position and stunned speechless by the sudden contact, before he knew what he was doing he'd moaned and rubbed himself hard into Andy's groin. It would have been embarrassing if the human hadn't moaned louder and instantly gripped his ass to encourage him to do it again.

That would have been almost a perfect resolution to the night and Rez almost gave in to it. He would have and some small part of his mind whispered that one day he would do just that, after, maybe long after; he knew what it was like to be taken by the artist that had so plagued his thoughts. Andy must have held similar notions because the hands on his ass tightened before they released him and quickly fumbled with the lube. When the hands returned again, they were trembling as slick fingers traced the cleft of his ass, seeking his entrance.

"No more fucking around!" Rez snarled and would have bitten in a non-venom way just to show his frustrations.

"Oh...." Andy sighed. "Don't want to....hurt you...."

Rez rolled his eyes. "Stupid fucking human." He wanted to be angry, he didn't want this to be tender but even with his snapping for a faster, quicker joining, Andy was still very carefully touching him. He sighed and leaned forward to claim a kiss, letting it quickly suck them both into the rougher, more urgent passion they were both more comfortable with. "Won't hurt me...." He whispered against the shivering lips. The touch faltered. "I won't fucking beg you." If Andy stalled much longer he'd just take himself on that lean, pretty length, dry if he had to and damn the consequences.

"You're sure about this?" Andy paused, struggling for control and breath. He had to check, when he opened his eyes he fell into Rez's own and the emotion there surprised him.

"Yes, now shut up and fuck me already." Rez muttered but what he wanted to do was fall against the lean chest, be enfolded in the graceful arms and surrender. He wanted to but couldn't do it, not quite, something was holding him still and back.

"God..." Andy grinned and shook his head. "You're the bossiest bottom I've ever met!"

"Well you're the wimpiest top...." Anything more Rez was going to say was cut off with a quick kiss. It drew him in to lean against Andy, rub against him without being directed to. He didn't do it to please his client or to get the act finished sooner but simply because it made him feel good. That was a luxury he wasn't used to.

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Chapter Eighty Eight

The kiss broke and Andy tugged at him a little to pry them apart enough, just barely, to slip a slick hand between them. Rez understood and slipped further back knowing that lube applied to cock meant he was going to be taken soon and all the talk talk bullshit was at an end. He didn't stop with a few inches and started to slip off of Andy's legs.

"No!" Andy sighed and used his non-slippery hand to catch Rez's arm. "Stay..." He had to pant the word out now. Actually stroking himself had made all teasing control fly away.

"But..."

Andy shook his head. "Like this...I want to....oh...watch you watch me....want you in my arms....while I....oh God...."

Whatever mental image was dancing behind the artist's eyes was strong and one he liked, because it poured pleasure out and made Rez shiver and go all boneless with need. He could have protested, could have refused the intimate position. Andy had said he was supposed to speak up and say when he didn't want to do something, when he wanted to do something else. He'd never liked being taken this way, held trapped in his clients hands and arms but he stopped pulling away. He stopped fighting the gentle tugging and let Andy draw him close all because he wanted arms around him this time.

He lifted himself up on his knees and a lean hand curled around his waist. He found the artist's other hand still lightly stroking, teasing his own length and Rez batted that hand away. They'd teased too long, played too long and Rez wanted it now. They hovered there, the tip of that long, graceful length just barely teasing, pressing against Rez's entrance. If their situations had been reversed, Rez wouldn't have passively waited for Andy to lower himself downward. He would be rough, he'd force his way into that tight body and not care until later but their places were reversed. For as much as Andy wanted to take him, he was staying still and letting Rez make that step. It wasn't a choice humans ever gave him.

It was a choice that was easy to make. He didn't want to be slow or careful, Rez let gravity and need pull his hips back down. There was a tense moment when his body refused to relax before Andy slipped into him and then all he felt was that first, full, deep taking. It was what he'd imagined it would be, hot and sexy and more. The long length filled him without pain, without being forceful, as if they'd been made to join this way. Rez arched his back and his hair tangled along Andy's legs and he wondered if he felt as perfect to Andy when he was doing the taking.

He was gasping for breath and struggling to give his body a few heartbeats to adjust to the new pleasures. It surprised Rez that he stayed hard, he always tended to go at least a little soft when first taken, even when Shiny. Now that he was sober he'd found his body would go limp and lose interest but he still needed to be fucked. It wasn't like that now, now he was seated across Andy's legs, panting, struggling to hold back the need to come just from that first quick joining.

It surprised him that he wasn't the only one. Rez opened his eyes mostly because it finally occurred to him that Andy wasn't touching him any longer. The human was leaned back, supported on his braced arms and they were trembling. His hands were clenched on the bed into tight fists. His mouth was parted as he gasped for breath and his eyes were closed, eyes Rez had once thought of as small and unexpressive like all humans but now found he missed them when denied.

"You...you okay?" He managed to ask softly, suddenly worried. Andy was silent and he was never silent and his coloring looked odd. When he didn't get an instant answer Rez ran a hand across Andy's chest, his fingers trailed over the piercing that so fascinated him. The touch pulled a loud groaning moan from Andy. Louder than the man had ever been during their stolen play and Rez found he liked that sound, a lot.

"So....so....fuckin'....so hot..." Andy groaned out, panted. The teasing touch grew bolder on his nipple and he lost it. Only his hips snapping upward didn't really do anything but lift Rez up a little. It wasn't enough and he didn't want to wait any more.

Every shift, every twitch as the human squirmed and moved made Rez feel almost faint. He was gasping, trying to breath, by the time Andy's arms came around his waist again. This time there was no room for thought or debate, he needed to be held in those arms. It was the only thing that kept him grounded as he let the touch guide him. He moved on his own to lift his body, slipping that perfect length from his body, only to plummet back down again.

It was perfect. It was better than his fantasies or his dreams. It was almost everything he needed. Rez shivered and found himself falling forward as his body moved to take himself on another slow rise and fall. He didn't fall far, just far enough to tuck his face against Andy's neck and whimper as his body was again filled. Arms wrapped around him, hands gently petted him, wanting sighing moans danced around him and it was suddenly everything he'd ever needed. Gradually, without thinking about it, his hands came up and wrapped around Andy's shoulders.

Andy pulled at him a little and Rez didn't want to leave the spot he'd curled up against. He gave in gradually and soon was far enough away that Andy's mouth was able to cover his own. Hands cupped the side of his face, lips teased his own as he continued to rise and fall like ocean tides under a full moon.

The kiss broke apart, crumbled with the falling weight of their moaning. Purple hair had spilled everywhere as it dried and Andy brushed it back only to find the pink eyes squeezed shut. There was no cynical frown now, no cold empty mask covering Rez's face. For once, Rez just looked like a heartworn, lonely, too skinny man that had survived too much and teetered on a breaking point. For all his grace and beauty during the day when he was hiding what he really felt, Andy thought right now was when Rez looked the most beautiful. It stole his breath to know that this man wanted him.

The thought almost shattered Andy's control. He trembled and was shocked at how close he was, how soon. The slow teasing rise and fall Rez was doing was pushing him toward madness and he needed to be deeper, harder, rougher in the tight and stunningly hot body. It wasn't an actual thought, he just needed Rez under him. Andy tried to pick the skinny man up.

Only Rez weighed more than he looked and didn't easily be moved anywhere. It wouldn't have been an issue if he'd moved with him but it was Rez's nature to resist. He went all stiff and heavy

but Andy had them half way onto the futon from sheer will alone. When it sunk in that Andy wasn't trying to stop or get away but only wanted to move them into a new position Rez stopped trying to cling and tried to help. Which tossed elbows and knees into ribs in a most ungraceful display.

Eventually Rez found himself on his back, legs folded and held still, Andy over him. Damp, light brown hair hung down as Andy slipped lower to claim a kiss as he slipped back into Rez's body. He moaned into the kiss at the new angle and felt his body trembling. His fingers scrambled across Andy's body to catch his lover's face.

"Hard...harder..." Rez gasped out when Andy caught his eyes. The artist nodded against Rez's hands and he let him go. All he wanted to do now was hold on and let go.

He didn't need to ask twice. Andy seemed to need it hard and fast as much as he did. Rez touched and clung and petted as he willed but made no effort to guide Andy any. There was no need, the human seemed to know where and how and what angle and it left Rez a moaning, writhing puddle. Before he even knew what he wanted, Andy gave it to him and he was able to lay there, close his eyes and surrender.

Pleasure attacked his senses and Rez arched up as a new wave crashed over him. He'd long since lost any sense of how loud he was, if he was even moaning at all. It was almost as good as being really Shiny but without the dirty shame that tended to go along with it. As he settled from the arching, writhing mindless thrashing the pleasure caused his body to do, he opened his eyes.

It was the first time he'd really noticed how pretty, how warm, Andy's liquid brown eyes really were. Small, he was only human after all, but they were like having honey poured down over him. Getting lost in their depths was like being wrapped securely in a blanket, held close, maybe even a little like being really loved. As the thought settled into him and made him forget to breath, Andy thrust deeply into his body and hit that spot.

That was it, that was too much and Rez had to close his eyes as he came. He couldn't watch those open, inviting eyes as he fell apart into pleasure that should have been illegal. He didn't even need to touch himself, something about Andy made that almost unnecessary and he tumbled over into a shivering release. His hands tried to pull the human closer, deeper, tighter, try to cling to him and not ever have to let go. His legs wrapped around Andy. It didn't matter that he had Andy encased in his embrace, he was the one that felt fragile.

As it was he was still shivering, gasping as he spiraled down from his own release and still holding Andy way to tight as the human trembled as he came. The whispered fluttering of the human's breath on his skin didn't feel like an invasion but an embrace. When Andy softly moaned his name it made everything feel far too real. No one moaned his name. Most humans didn't even care if he had a name or called him pet names they made up but Andy came, lost in pleasure, sighing his name.

Neither man moved. Neither one even dared to risk words. They simply stayed there with Andy almost crushing Rez below him and Rez clinging to him. Andy had to be the first one to wiggle a little, his arms were growing tired, his legs were shaking and he wanted to flop down without smashing his lover. Rez's clutching hold was slow to release him but gradually the grip eased and Andy slipped to the side on the narrow futon and lay still, struggling to catch his breath.

"Oh....oh my...." He sighed as the sweat on his body began to cool and he found long loose sections of purple hair plastered to his body. It took a bit of effort but Andy managed to lean up enough to glance over.

Rez was laying where he'd been placed. His legs were still parted but his knees had slipped together while his ankles splayed outward. Purple hair was everywhere and the milk pale skin was flushed and pretty. It was gratifying that Rez was out of breath too, that he panted for air as

much as Andy was but it worried him that the other man simply lay there. His eyes were open but didn't seem to really see anything.

"Sweetie?" Andy brushed the back of his fingers across Rez's still face but it gained no reaction. "Rez?"

The tender touch made him feel suddenly raw. Rez felt his arms folding up to cross over his chest and his knees drawing up. He wanted to roll onto his side and put his back to Andy and hide. That would be easier. It was a mistake, thinking that he could have more, it was just a dangerous, stupid mistake and he couldn't deal with it. What Andy had spoken of, what he'd seen in those warm brown eyes wasn't something Rez could ever have.

He didn't get to roll over or curl up and hide in his own misery. Andy was there tugging and pulling and pestering him again. He fought it at first before he gave in and let the artist move him around. For once Andy was silent and Rez was grateful, he couldn't have allowed himself to be pulled against the other body if the man had been talking. It was in silence that he held onto his control and released that same control enough to let himself curl up inside of Andy's arms.

There was no hushed words of comfort, no teasing words of conquest. Andy just held him close. One hand petted across Rez's head and shoulders in long, soothing strokes and the other just gently held him close. It took a small forever before Rez gave in and went back to clutching at Andy again, returning the soft embrace with his own desperate one.

Together they stayed there, naked and sticky for a long time. Andy made no move to rush things or rush him and Rez lay still. Maybe it was all a mistake but while that hand petted him he didn't care. He knew what they had wasn't normal by human standards or I/S and it floated in the gray zone between both their cultures but maybe it was in that gray area that they could make it work. He could lie to everyone but laying there, tucked in Andy's arms, safe, wanted, he knew he wanted it to work, maybe even needed it to work.

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From The Ashes

Chapter Eighty Nine

Laying like that they were warm and snuggled and Andy was pretty sure they drifted to sleep for a short time. He couldn't swear by it because there was no way to really gauge the time but it felt like it. He certainly couldn't tell if Rez fell asleep, the man was tucked so tightly against him that he couldn't see if the pink eyes were open or not. Not that he was going to complain, a snuggly Rez made for a nice change.

"Hey....sweetie..." Andy finally broke down and petted the mostly dry purple hair.



"mmm?" Rez muttered back.

"We're stinky and I've no clothes....shouldn't sleep like this."

Rez sighed.

"Promise, quick showers, braid your hair back, snuggled under covers in less than fifteen minutes, promise."

"Whatever." He agreed mostly because he was too tired to fight and really did prefer to clean up before sleeping. Sex hadn't been on his list of evening activities. He'd already been tired when he came home and now all he wanted was to curl up and sleep. Oddly, he found he preferred the idea of curling up with Andy to curling up alone.

It was cute in a way that would get Andy punched if he dared to mention it, to watch Rez mutter and pull away to sit up with a groggy sleepy yawn. "Stay here or get some clothes or something, I'm going to borrow your robe to run to my room. Okay?"

"I'm...." He had to stop to yawn. "I'm going to shower."

Andy leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to the yawning lips. "If I leave, you'll let me come back, right?"

It took a moment for the question to make logical sense but when it did Rez shook his head and stood up. "Dumbass. Hurry up I want my robe back."

"Okay." He stole another kiss and felt all warm and fuzzy from being called a dumbass. "I'll hurry." He stood, moving stiffly and more tired than he'd expected to be, and slipped the robe back on before he disappeared from the small room back into the hallway.

For being tired and still worried over Mick, Toshi and Alec, he was in amazingly good spirits. Even if he was going to be sore tomorrow and trying to hide bruises and the like he felt good. It wasn't just because of the really good sex, he could find that elsewhere, this was something else. As he slipped his own robe on and tossed Rez's over his arm with a shirt and pants to sleep in, it occurred to Andy that he felt like he did when he was starting to really fall for a man. It was a worrisome thought, that he might be feeling more than friendship because he wasn't sure he wanted to get his heart broken by a man he had to work with.

"Well, I'll just have to see to it that it doesn't work out that way." He said softly in his suddenly lonely room. There was no way he could convince himself not to feel or care, it was as natural to him as breathing. His only option was to prepare himself for it not being serious or not lasting. That wouldn't spoil what they had and he'd be braced for when Rez got all bitchy and really meant it.

With extra robe and fresh clothes Andy left his bedroom still thinking about why the hot sex and cuddling after with Rez was making him feel so good. He was thinking so hard he didn't see Toshi until he'd nearly stepped on the man. "Jesus H. Christ on a pogo stick! Don't do that!"

"Sorry."

"You scared the bejeppers out of me! I didn't know you were back yet."

"Back, showered and about to go to bed. Mick's already half asleep."

Andy nodded but didn't like the way Toshi was watching him. "Everything go okay?"

"It went well enough, had a few bumps in the road but I didn't expect it to be flawless."

"Nothing serious I hope."

"Nothing Mick couldn't handle."

"That's our boy." He smiled but the odd look on Toshi's face only deepened. It was only then that Andy remember that Toshi might be able to smell Rez on him. "Well, I'd kiss you but you're all clean and I'm dirty.... So go get some sleep. Tomorrow will be another long day, I'm sure. I'm up to my eyeballs in final touches in the workers dorm and the like and I'm sure you're swamped too. So shoo, go rest....but you'll have to tell me all about tonight tomorrow when we're both more rested, okay?" He knew he was babbling like a guilty child but he couldn't help it as he flattened himself against the wall and tried to slip by hoping that Toshi wouldn't figure out what had happened while they were gone.

Toshi watched the odd, manic smile flutter across Andy's face as he scurried down the hallway. It would have confused him if he hadn't picked on the smell of sex and Rez. That combination smelled very nice, even if he had no personal attraction to the purple haired I/S, the mix of Andy, sex and Rez smelled right combined together. He almost stopped the human, or followed after him, and asked about it but Toshi didn't. Most I/S knew what to do in situations where their stronger senses picked up on things they otherwise shouldn't know, Toshi did in a very minor childish way. He'd been severed from his people while still a young teen and he'd been trying to figure out the rules on his own since. Being around Rez, being around the house guards, had shown him the gaps in his experience and he'd learned one thing above all. If it didn't effect him, to ignore it.

One thing he did know and didn't need custom and culture to tell him, was that what he knew had to be shared with Mick. The man was so much a part of his life he couldn't imagine not telling him the tiny tidbit of gossip he'd just learned. More so, Andy was Mick's best friend, their relationship hadn't changed that and if nothing else Mick would find it amusing to learn. It didn't help that it would be a welcome distraction. He didn't want to think about the night or the troubles the morning would bring and Mick was spending too much time thinking about both.

"Hey." Toshi greeted as he slipped into their bedroom. Mick was seated on the floor, a lamp next to him shining down on his hands. It was a focused light and kept the room at a comforting dimness.

Mick glanced up from where he was taking apart his gun and cleaning it. He should have done it before showering but Toshi had offered to let him help wash his hair and there had been no way he could refuse. "You know, on the force? I'd still be eyeball deep in paperwork for discharging my side arm. Even if no one had been hit. Now I just have to clean the thing."

"Are you complaining?" He lowered himself down with a sigh, feeling more weary and far older than he should.

"No, not really." In a way the paperwork was like asking for absolution. The incident would have been reviewed and ruled on and he'd have known what he'd done was right. Now things were more hazy and while he knew he was legally dead wrong for having coldly murdered someone, emotionally it felt like the most perfect action in the world.

"So, you know how you said you thought Andy had a lover among the guards?" Toshi started carefully. He wanted to distract Mick from his lingering thoughts.

"Yeah." He glanced up from where his hands were busy just because he liked drinking in the sight of his lover.

"Well, I know who it is..."

That raised his eyebrows. "Oh yeah? Should I ask or are you going to make me guess?"

"I'm not sure I should say, I only know because I smelled him on him."

"Which means he had a recent encounter so who was home, ah let's see..." He tried to run names and assignments across his mind.

"It's not one of the guards."

Mick looked up from where he was re-assembling his handgun. "Not one of the guards...but that would mean Alec and I doubt that highly or..." It seemed impossible but as Mick let his words trail off Toshi nodded. "Rez? You're sure?"

"As sure as I am when I've had you. I know both their scents well and Andy and Rez had recently...well...couldn't be anything but that."

"But they've been at each other's throats from almost day one."

Toshi shrugged. "Maybe they like that."

Mick frowned. "But those scratches on Andy, the bruises...and why wouldn't he just tell me, tell us?"

"Who knows."

"But why hide it? Even if it was casual, it's not like he's never had other lovers, even ones I haven't liked..."

"You don't like Rez?"

Mick waved the question off. "I don't dislike him, but I'm not sure I like him with Andy."

"Are you jealous?"

"What?" Mick asked a little too sharply. "Of course not. I... well maybe I am that he didn't tell me." There was no point to lying to Toshi, the man would sense it and assume he was upset for deeper reasons than the real, more petty ones. "He's never not told me before when he's started a new relationship." He got thinking about the bruises and how skittish Andy had been that morning. "You don't think it's something..."

"Rez wouldn't hurt him." He wasn't sure about a great many of things about the former addict but he did know that much.

"I don't think he would deliberately hurt him either but Andy is a little soft hearted about things. It's one of the reasons he befriended me when we were in college."

"He's a smart man, I'm sure everything is fine."

"I should say something to him."

"No, you shouldn't, if they wanted us to know one of them would have told us. I'm not supposed to know, it was just an accident that I noticed."

Mick shook his head but he didn't agree. His hands moved easily and finished putting his gun back together. It was only then that he managed to get the words to line up and behave. "Andy knew about Sal."

"Rez isn't Sal..."

"I know, I know, it's just, Andy knew. I didn't have to tell him, he knew and he sat me down and told me he knew. I denied it all but he knew and we both knew the truth and it felt good that he cared to tell me the situation was messed up. That meant something to me. Even if all it boils down to is Andy or Rez thinking we wouldn't approve, one conversation can lay that to rest. If it's more, if things aren't good with them, he'll know I know."

"And maybe that'll mean something."

Mick nodded.

"If he's not upset, I support that choice fully, if he's angry that you're prying I told you not to."

"Brat." He teased but the word made him smile. "Toshi..."

"Oh." He sighed. "Back to the serious tone."

He wiped gun oil from his hand. "I'm just...I guess I can't talk you into going back into seclusion and tucked safely away in some bunker somewhere?"

"I'm not doing this for myself. You know that right?"

"I know, build a homeland, make a future, your grandfather's plans, I know..."

"No." Toshi shook his head. "I'm doing this so we can have a future together, a real one. So we can live as any other couple would. I'm doing this so Rez can have that too but mostly I'm doing this for us."

"If you get hurt..."

"I promised I'm staying right with you, right here by your side. You're stuck with me." He tried to smile but didn't like the vulnerable sadness he felt in Mick. The reminder of his past was bad enough but Mick was taking it hard. He'd always known he was a whore but this had been the first time Mick had been forced to face the truth. "That video, it didn't... didn't change anything between us, did it?" He watched Mick put the gun cleaning kit back together and snap it shut. "If you want some time to think about things, I'll understand."

"Now who's being stupid and worrying about nothing?" He could tease but Mick also could see the real fear in the large blue eyes. "You just saw me snap and kill someone, brutally kill someone, without thought or remorse and you're worried what I now think of you when it's nothing I didn't already know before? If anything, seeing how you handled it? Makes me even more grateful to have met you."

Toshi let the breath he'd been holding finally escape. "Good, because I really, really need to curl up next to you tonight." Toshi watched the coldness dissolve, melt away when Mick wasn't scorned or mocked for being vulnerable.

A small smile tugged at Mick's lips. "I think that could be arranged."

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Ninety

Andy woke up as his pillow slipped from his arms. "mmm hmm..." he mumbled and clung but his pillow stubbornly kept moving. That forced him to open his eyes and he saw Rez moving in the dim light of the small room. "Rez?"

"Shhh." Rez shushed and he stroked a hand across Andy's sleepy head, brushing hair back from the tangled mess it had become. They'd braided his hair back but Andy hadn't bothered with his own. "Go back to sleep."

"You're leaving?" The gentle touch surprised him but he wasn't going to debate it.

"Yeah, want to check on the clinic before going over to Sunshine today."

He started to struggle out of the blankets. "I go too."

"It's early, go back to sleep."

"But..."

Rez leaned down and kissed the sleepy mouth. "Go back to sleep."

It sunk in that Rez was getting up and leaving but he was letting Andy stay in his room, sleeping in his bed, drooling on his pillows and he suddenly didn't feel so abandoned. "You sure?"

"Dumbass."

That made Andy smile and he fluffed the pillow under his head and snuggled back down. "Mmm you're sure." He said around a yawn and let his eyes drift shut. He didn't mean to fall back to sleep but the warmth and comfort and smell of Rez all around him dragged him back down.

When he woke up again, the room was totally empty this time. The small clock showed it was later but not late by any means and earlier than Andy normally liked to get up. He'd been enjoying not having to work a 'real' day job when money was tight and not having to wake up early to do it. It was just difficult to sleep when there was so much pressing on his mind. Oddly, for all the worries, the thing that woke him up the most was a nagging thought that Rez had most likely skipped breakfast and would lunch too if he wasn't nagged after.

That was an annoying enough thought to keep him from drifting into happy blissful sleep. He rolled onto his back and stretched. "Fuck him once and I'm thinking like a housewife." Andy groaned and scratched his side. They hadn't bothered to undress from their showers to sleep but the layers of cloth had only seemed to make Rez more comfortable, more willing to snuggle and Andy didn't resent the cotton as much as he otherwise would have.

Once he was awake he sat up and turned the light on, the room was dark with no windows to

creep in sunlight. He felt a little bad about that until he remembered what he'd seen of the brothel he'd been to, it didn't look like the workers saw much actual natural light. It made him wonder how Rez was going to respond to having his own small suite of rooms in the workers dorm. They were building several smaller apartments for the managers and such and Rez would take one of those, Andy guessed he would too but where he was going to end up living hadn't been discussed.

For now, Rez had a converted closet and Andy had been comfortable in the small space. Slept well and woken up alone in Rez's space, Rez's private space and Andy suddenly itched to snoop about. It already felt like he was inside the man's diary, trusted to be part of something personal and private but even Andy couldn't justify being nosy and poking into the shelves and storage containers. Just because he was going to behave didn't mean he was tempted and he figured the best cure for that was to leave and remove the temptation.

Leaving meant sneaking out. He wasn't sure who was still home or if anyone would notice but he didn't want to be caught creeping out of Rez's bedroom like some bad one night stand. He cracked the door open and peered out, listening but no sounds reached the end of the hallway. That made him bold enough to open the door further and still he saw and heard nothing. It was a pretty good bet everything was all clear so he tried to stand and sneak out, ninja like, only the blankets were caught on his feet.

"Shit!" Andy cursed and fell with a thud from where he'd half stood up, forward but the half open door only slammed away from him and down to land in an ungraceful heap on the floor. "Damn it!" He rubbed at the palms of his hands and kicked his feet free. "Stupid blankets..." It was only as his feet slipped free that he remembered he was trying to be stealthy and how stupid it all was. With a shake of his head and no longer caring if anyone saw, he stomped from the small room back to his own.

He was still cussing as he tossed his robe into his room and gathered up fresh clothes for the day. There was no thought to dressing fancy today, he found jeans and a t-shirt and didn't worry about it. He was going to be climbing around the construction site anyway and getting dirty and really he was sore. Rez had been rough, not that he was complaining too loudly but he promised he'd whine about his aching backside to the I/S later that night.

Dressed and otherwise cleaned up, Andy started to think about lunch again. He needed to find his own breakfast first but he'd have to pester at Rez about lunch. Or maybe it would be better to call Grandma Rose and remind her to pester Rez. That way she could fuss at him and deal with his scowls and Andy knew she would see to it he actually did eat. That would work well and as he wandered to the kitchen he made a note to call over.

His eggs were scrambled and the pan hot when Mick wandered in. "Morning Sunshine! Eggs?"

"Those are yours aren't they?"

He shrugged and started cracking more eggs. "Going to scramble them anyway. Did Toshi eat?"

Mick hopped up to sit on one of the counters so he could see Andy's face as the man fussed about the stove and sink. "Yeah, he was up early, had breakfast with Alec, they've a teleconference meeting this morning." He shifted his weight and tried to figure out how to bring the subject up. "Rez was off early too, he's spending the day over at Sunshine House."

Andy was very careful to show no reaction as he cracked another egg. "Oh." He tossed the egg shell away and started to whip the fresh eggs to scramble them.

"Andy..."

"How was your meeting last night? Toshi said it wasn't anything you couldn't handle."

"They'll be trouble today or tomorrow, hoping it holds off until after the press conference. The pressure from that might make some of the more stubborn more willing to behave. Hard to start a war when the Yards are swarming with reporters all looking for a fresh angle to the story." He noticed the change of subject and normally would have let his friend get away with it. "Andy..."

Andy sighed. "Must you use that serious tone? Really, I'll be careful, I've two guards on me everywhere I go and I'm just going over to the construction site today."

"I'm not fussing, I mean I would but I know you get how serious this is." He frowned and watched the way Andy poured the eggs into the pan. "Andy, you know you can tell me things, right?"

Andy glanced over and didn't like the serious frown on Mick's face. "Of course, sweetie, we whisper secrets to each other all the time."

"I..." He figured the best thing was to be direct. "I know about you and Rez."

For a heartbeat he forgot to scramble the eggs and they bubbled alone. "I don't know what you could mean." He recovered and stirred the eggs, breaking them into chunks.

"Andy, Toshi smelled him on you last night."

"Cat's out of the bag, huh?" He glanced over and flashed a grin but Mick still looked worried.

"We've seen bruises on you, scratches, were they from him?"

Andy sighed and stirred at the eggs while he thought about it. Just why were they keeping their relationship from the others? He wasn't sure but it had seemed important.

"Is he hurting you?" Mick asked carefully, as gently as he could.

"What?" The soft tone surprised him as much of the words and startled him enough that he actually laughed. "Oh, no, no not like that, oh..." He shook his head. "He's just working out a lot of stuff right now and things can get a bit...urgent."

"Andy, he's no right to hurt you, it doesn't help him any to let him hurt you."

He pulled plates from the cabinet. "He's not hurting me." The amusement was quickly fading and he split the eggs between the plates. "He's not." He said to the disbelieving look Mick gave him. "Mick, you're a dear to be worried about me, you really are but it's okay. Rez and I... it just sort of happened and happened again and then we started talking a little and... and he's not hurting me."

"You two have been at each other's throats and now Toshi says you two have had sex?"

"He doesn't mean it. He's more messed up than you were and that's saying a lot. He doesn't know a thing about how to interact with people now and he uses that bitchiness but he doesn't mean it. He hasn't hurt me and you really can't rape the willing." He pushed the plate of food at Mick and leaned against the counter with his own eggs. "I appreciate the concern but really, it's fine."

"I just...you didn't tell me. I just, you've always told me and I've always told you except..."

"Except for when Sal was beating the snot out of you?" Andy sighed and put his plate down and went to stand between his friend's knees. "Oh sweetie I'm sorry, I didn't think about how it would look to you if you found out. I didn't tell you because it was anything like that, I swear. I just..." he sighed and had to think about it. "It's not my secret alone to share. Rez needs this I think, he

needs to figure this out, us out, if there is an us, without the pressure of everyone knowing about it. I mean we're almost friends now but if he can't deal with it, he shouldn't have to know you all know he couldn't do it."

Mick wasn't sure he believed the reason but he did believe Rez wasn't hurting him. "That's why you didn't tell me."

"That and well, it's just sort of happened. I..." It hit Andy in that moment why he hadn't told Mick and it was in trying to explain why he hadn't that he got it. "Mick, I like him."

That made Mick smile. "You get attached too easily."

"No." Andy shook his head. "No, I... Mick I really like him." The sudden understanding of how deeply Rez was already under his skin stole his breath. "I mean really. I... and it's Rez, of all people, it's Rez and what if he does spaz and doesn't want to continue this, whatever this is? What if it stops and you all know and I..." That would be the worst part, knowing they all knew and trying to pretend Rez had only ever been just a friend and never so much more. "I'm falling for him Mick and he doesn't know up from down yet and if he stops it I just, I didn't want you to know."

"You're falling, for Rez?"

Andy nodded. "Stupid huh?"

Mick held his judgment and shook his head. "If he makes you happy it isn't. I just don't want him hurting you."

"The happiness is always worth the hurt." He grinned but it felt forced. "He needs a friend so badly, Mick."

"Don't you fall in love with him because he needs a friend."

"Why not!" He tried to look offended. "It's why I fell in love with you!"

"I'm special."

Andy snorted but quickly dropped the teasing. "He's different when we're alone, I like what I'm seeing, what he's becoming." He shrugged. "That's worth a little risk. Just, please, forget you know okay? You and that sneak Toshi too. It's okay, just leave it until we can figure it out. Okay?" He didn't know what he was doing yet, didn't know where what they had was going, it was all too raw and new and the last thing he needed was trying to explain it all.

"If he hurts you..."

"Yes, yes, you'll break his legs and what not." It made Andy smile. "It's sweet of you. So agreed? You forget we had this awkward horrible conversation and tell Toshi to keep his sniffer to himself? Least for now?"

Mick nodded. "Yeah, I'll tell him. We just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"You just wanted to make sure." Andy corrected. "Worry wart, Toshi is smarter than that. And who says Rez was abusing little ol' me? Maybe I've been taking advantage of him! Maybe I'm the bad guy here."

"Shut up and eat your eggs."



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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Ninety One

"And the worst of this tragedy is the lack of justice that can be dispensed." Agent Ore said, looking very dour on the television screen. "These men should be facing felony child molestation, sex tourism and other very serious charges. Instead they'll face charges of vandalism of Committee property and perhaps will be charged with bestiality. I/S, adults and children alike, have no current legal protection and are considered property and livestock. This is an atrocious crime. These men will be out and home far sooner than they deserve. Nine of the men we've arrested work in the education field with children. Two are clergymen. One runs an outreach center for troubled youth and several are politicians and one is a high ranking member of the Containment Committee itself. These are men that will soon be back beside your own families all because the victims of their crime look different than your own children." The camera pulled back from his outraged expression to show the men they'd found, some literally with their pants down, dressed now in orange jumpsuits and shackled. "The moment these men step foot back on human territory I will personally be leveling charges against them but they will not see the justice they so deserve."

Ore paused and had to glance down to compose himself. "I am a father of three but I feel like the father to every abandoned, lost, mistreated child my work brings me in contact with. It is my life's mission to shut down child brothels and try to grant some hope to the most vulnerable among us. There are child brothels in this city, sharing in the tourism dollars brought in by the filth that come here to rape an I/S child. It shouldn't matter if the child is I/S or human, it's wrong. Anyone with a conscious should be sickened that this has been allowed by the Containment Committee. Thankfully, for those enslaved I/S children and all of our children, the Yards are now under the control of Toshi Ranvier without who this raid would not have been possible. He's stepped in when no one else..."

Andy tisked and turned the screen off. Several dozen young I/S faces swung around to spot him and they all grew serious and worried at seeing a strange human. Rez turned too and frowned at finding Andy, wearing red fishnet stockings, black clunky heels, a green silk pixie like skirt and a skin tight black cotton spandex shirt. He Lifted the small child, a girl with bright blue hair and yellow eyes no more than five years old, from his lap so he could stand up.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Watching the news will stunt their growth. I think they get the fact that the bad evil men are going to get their nuts cut off. Right kiddies?" He smiled but the children watched him with caution. "Anyway they should be watching cartoons."

"But what are you doing here?"

Andy hefted his satchel of paint swatches and other work supplies. "Being fabulous of course."

Rez snorted. "Twat."

"Indeed. I was over at the site and everything is wonderful without me, furniture is all moved in and everything looks grand and I said to myself, self, what should I be doing since I've made this drab space lovely and self said, come over and help these lovely children build their new home." He tossed his hands out. "So here I am. Has everyone been assigned a room yet?"

No one nodded.

"For the most part yes, most are sharing a room, or will be eventually."

"Well, so long as everyone knows where they'll end up. How about you all show me where you'll be living and you can pick out paint colors and what type of bed you'd like and stuff like that, hmmm?" He pulled out a big ring filled with paint swatches and a catalog that showed a good dozen different types of single beds. "We've light woods and dark and metal and simple and fussy and single and bunk beds and I'll never be able to make a choice without some help."

Rez frowned and the children looked to him. "I don't know what is planned."

"Well, paint and furniture and new sheets and pillows won't just magically appear. Someone has to order them and that someone is me. Once they get here there are lots of helpful hands to make each room over into a new space. We'll need desks too for school work and some of the larger rooms will need to be made into classrooms and we'll need a computer room too... so who wants to show me their new room first?"

"He's a ridiculous human but harmless and won't hurt you. Go on, go find your roommates. Go to your rooms and be honest with him with what you'd like. Werner? Go with Andy and make sure he doesn't get lost." Rez nodded to the oldest girl in the room and she nodded and didn't smile but stood up. No one else moved. "Get on with you, man doesn't have all day!"

That set everyone scurrying and seeing so much color hurrying around made Andy smile a little. "You do make cute little kids."

"Hm, Toshi-san know you're here?"

"It was Alec's idea. We'll need rec rooms too and most of the kids need some new clothes. He said to make a list of things the kids would need. It'll do them good to help make over their new space, we can even paint one half of a room one color and one half another so every kid has a sense of their own area. Don't look so pissy, it'll be fun. Did you eat lunch?"

"Grandma Rose made us all eat lunch."

He struggled not to grin. "Good."

"Some of the kids are still with the doc-men, some were pretty badly hurt..."

"I'll make note and go see them before I leave. The guards are going to come over on their off time and help haul things out, the old beds and such. There will be plenty of help. Are you staying here?"

He shook his head. "Can't, the five will be out of detox soon and I have to watch over them, get them learning what I need them to know, get them moved in over at the dorm. I'll be moving there too I guess."

"We all are, at least in the next week or so. I'll be odd not being shoved in those tight rooms anymore, tripping over each other."

"It'll be good to get away from your stupidity." Rez snapped back.

"Goodie, I've been missing being a slut!" He liked the way Rez frowned harder at that. "Werner my dear? Let's start with your room, hmm? What colors do you like?" He handed the big ring to her. "You're as pretty as a princess we could do pink and white."

"I like black." She muttered.

Andy nodded. "Black it is!" With a last wink he followed her away and left Rez standing alone, scowling but with nothing he could really fight over.

"That went well." Andy announced to the empty room, large and lit by the last sunlight of the day. His satchel over his shoulder was heavier but most of the notes he took on his computer.

Toshi glanced up from where he was talking with Alec and smiled. "Tell them," he finished to Alec. "That I don't care how bitchy they are. If I even hear a rumor they're forcing Shine use on their workers I will shut them down. They can allow it but forced addiction will end and any worker that wants to get clean will have the chance. No exceptions."

"Right." Alec nodded.

"And, Alec, remind them if I start finding more corpses in the Yards from them killing the workers that want out? I'll shut them all down. Every last one of them."

That put a tight serious look on Alec's face. To shut them all down would mean a war and that would not be pleasant. "I'll tell them. Hey Andy, get me the info for Sunshine when you get it all filed and indexed okay?"

"Of course"

Alec smiled now and shared a knowing look with Toshi. "I'll be here if you need me."

"Thanks Alec."

"Welcome."

"What a doll some of those kids are! Once it sunk in I actually was there to help them they really warmed up and you wouldn't believe it. They're crawling over Rez. Still jump to obey him when he barks out orders but the little ones all want him to hold them. It's the cutest thing I've ever seen. Rose says to tell you they've their people in place and the I/S caretakers your uncle sent over and meshing just fine." He knew he was babbling a little but he was really hoping Toshi didn't mention the whole having sex with Rez thing. "Where's Mick at?"

"Over seeing the fine tuning on the security system on the dorms. Once that's done they're move in ready, thanks to your work."

"Shush, all I did was shop. Hardly work." He smiled.

"Walk with me?"

"Sure." He could feel the whole, why are you having sex with Rez conversation looming as he started following Toshi from the buildings the club would occupy toward the buildings that would

have living space.

"The club will be done in a couple more weeks, ready to be opened once we're finished and staffed. The worker dorms are done, the club offices are nearly done. You know the apartment being made for Toshi and myself?"

"Yes."

"And the smaller apartments for managers over by the dorms?"

"Yes, they'll be nice."

"You know that Alec is moving into an apartment over the offices, yes?"

"The one that connects to your rooms via a hallway, clever design and the office between to interconnect them is nice. Though I should warn you the whole work from where you live can make it so you work too much and even if Mick will forgive that Alec needs time to go courting Pia. Poor straight boy needs to get laid more."

Toshi hid his smile. "I know, they have a date tonight actually. Nothing fancy but they're having dinner at the clinic."

"Good!"

"You know I haven't expressly said where you'll be staying, and I'm sorry for keeping you in the dark about it."

"Oh it's no bother. I figured I'd have one of those apartments, Rez another and whoever you get to manage other aspects will find in the rest." They'd gone up in the elevator in the living spaces to the private hallway Toshi and Mick's apartment branched off of but they went further down the hallway.

"I want your thoughts on this space." Toshi opened the door way and let Andy walk in ahead of him.

"Oh the big void space." Only it wasn't a big empty space any more.

Tall windows lined most of the space and caught the evening light. The floors were wood, sanded, polished and sealed and very lovely. The corner that butted up against the rest of the building was a story and a half and metal stairs followed the windowless wall. The walls were left raw and unfinished, unpainted. To Andy's left was a nice sized kitchen with an island work area and over head lighting. Across the open space was a small bathroom. A wide industrial door hid an elevator lift and a small door beside it let out onto a small balcony patio with it's own private stairway.

"There's a full bathroom upstairs too." Toshi said as Andy walked in and looked around.

"Well... if we walk in the kitchen it's plenty large enough to for on site catering of company. I know you've said you wanted a space for entertaining and hosting things that wasn't in your private space. Upstairs could be used as an office, in fact both could be, the lack of windows will help that. Hmmm windows will need some tall curtains to be pulled but man, you can't beat the view. The camp from one side and the Yards on the other? Very nice!" He turned around the large, empty space and nodded. "Could do just about anything with it. The lighting will be a bit strong for I/S eyes during the day but curtains and filters can help with that. I bet it gets great light!"

"I hope it does, because it's yours."

"Silly no one owns the morning light. I'd bottle it if I could, it makes everything look pretty."

"No, Andy, I want this to be your apartment."

That stopped Andy in his tracks. "What?"

"I want this to be your apartment, it was supposed to be a surprise. Upstairs is large enough for a good sized bedroom, we've put in a walk in closet with plenty of space. I had Mick make sure of that and a really nice bathroom and down here could be closed off to be a private living area. All the computers will interconnect with Alec's apartment and ours so we're all only a button away but aren't tripping over each other. The kitchen I took from one of your specs you drew up of what people need and should have and the rest of the space you can have for a work studio."

"What?"

"Anything you want, any supplies you want. Any storage or new equipment, anything, you make a list and we'll get it. Rugs, furniture, pants, whatever, the light should be perfect for your painting and there's even a vent fan to keep the fumes down. The elevator is oversized so you can get anything in and out."

"What?"

"That is, if you like it. I know it's kind of big but I wanted space for you to spread out. Mick said you've never had a real studio space and really with a little work you could close off the private areas here and actually use the space for a showing. And I was thinking, maybe, I could talk you into giving art lessons to some of the I/S community? We've some people with some amazing talent but very few chances to learn more."

"Toshi...." Andy let his satchel fall from his shoulder. "You can't be serious."

"I am. And the side hallway out here? Connects to the hallway that runs in front of the manager apartments. In case, you know, you need to come and go from there, discreetly. I know it's not as done as the rest but I didn't want to make choices about colors and layout and the like since I don't know a thing about art or what you'd need but really, make a list and I'll have it finished. You do like it right? Mick and I, well, Mick, Alec and I, all put our heads together and thought about what it should be like."

"Like it? I... I love it, I... it's too much thought I can't accept this."

"Of course you can."

"It's larger than the space you have for you and Mick."

"But that'll just be us there, and we've extra bedrooms for kids and such but we won't be working from it like you can here. Trust me, we've plenty of space. Why do you think I made it so we had the largest living room and dining room? I'm counting on everyone coming together at our place a lot. I'll miss it if we all rattle around up here like peas in the bottom of a bucket."

Andy had to flutter a hand in front of his face. "I can't cry, my make up will run!"

That made Toshi grin. "So it's settled, you'll move in here and make it a studio."

"Yes!" He snuffled and sniffed and clicked over on his heels to throw his arms around Toshi's neck. "Yes! Thank you, it's too much and too thoughtful and too perfect and I've never even dreamed of having anything so nice and yes!" He bubbled and only managed to shut up because Toshi leaned forward and kissed him.

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Chapter Ninety Two

It was supposed to be a friendly kiss like they tended to share but Toshi felt it spiral out of his control. Andy was just everywhere and mixed with his scent was the lingering smell of Rez. It made the artist smell sexy and good in a very deep, surprising way. It didn't help that Andy melted into the kiss, molding his body to Toshi's.

The silk of Andy's skirt was a nice quality but when Toshi ran his hand over Andy's ass he could feel the fishnet pattern of the stockings under it between silk and skin. Part of his mind knew he should call Mick because it felt like they were a breath away from pulling clothing away and doing more than kissing in the wide open space. They'd gotten busy with politics and work and hadn't ever gotten around to that threesome Andy had promised.

"Oh." Andy broke the kiss and leaned back into the strong hands. "God damn Mick for teaching you all my kissing secrets." He sighed. "I want to sweetie I do, I really, really want to but I can't. Not yet anyway."

Toshi brushed the loose brown hair back and nodded. "Because of what you're growing with Rez."

"Yeah." He sighed.

"If he makes you happy, I wish you luck." He managed to sound calm even though he was still trying to catch his breath.

Andy stroked his fingers across Toshi's face and smiled. "Doesn't mean we won't have our one day. I mean it is Rez and he is I/S and I am a slut. I just want to figure out what we have first."

"I understand."

And Andy was certain Toshi really did understand, he was grateful beyond words for that. "Thank you." He leaned into the arms holding him and hugged Toshi close. "Thank you for being so nice to me."

"You deserve it." Toshi sighed and held Andy tight against him, telling himself that the close hug was all they could do when something in him wanted so much more. "I want you to keep doing what you love. I don't want you to give that up to work here. It's important to me that you don't surrender your art."

"Means so much to me that you get that." Andy whispered. "Thank you, thank you so much... and I promise not to go over board on decorating..."

That made Toshi laugh. "Nothing you've done so far has been overboard. Get what you like and need and make it a home."

He sighed as Toshi petted him once more before releasing the hug. Andy had to snuffle a little to keep the happy tears at bay but when he looked over the absolutely perfect space he almost lost it. "It's really mine?"

"Really yours."

"Wow."

"Alec has the keys and the passcodes and such but I'll leave you to figure out what you need. I'm sorry to run off like this...."

"Shush, you're busy, go on with you." He grinned. "I've some planning to do."

Toshi nodded and smiled back at the happy grin but really didn't linger. He was already going to be late even if he hurried. If he stalled too much longer Alec or Mick would show up to hurry him along and that always annoyed him.

Andy had the dignity to wait until Toshi had left the large, echoing, empty space before he literally kicked off his shoes and ran full speed for the steps up to the raised bedroom area. The bathroom with its large shower and soaking tub made him squeal with glee, the closet made him want to pass out with joy. Only as he scurried down the steps to get his computer and swatches he was surprised to find his thoughts weren't on colors or furniture but on how badly he wanted to show Rez.

"What did you want?" Rez snapped as he came into the large open space in the club's living areas. Toshi had assigned him an apartment today and he was on his way to see it for the first time when Andy had called and asked him to come meet him. He'd told the human to piss off but as soon as he'd arrived he went right to find him.

Andy was sitting in the middle of the open space, paper and swatches all spilled around him as he continued to tally up the supplies needed for Sunshine. He'd kept his heels off but forgotten he was in a skirt and Rez tried not to stare at the long, red fishnet covered legs that splayed everywhere and led up to hitched up and tangled green silk.

"Rez." Andy sighed and scurried to his feet with only a little awkwardness from having sat on the floor so long. "How was your day?"

"Fine. What did you want?"

He waved to the space and spun around a little. "What do you think?"

It took him a moment to look past the stupid human's dramatic swirling to the room around them. "It's big and open." The windows fascinated him and he wanted to go stare out of them.

"Toshi built it for me."

That made Rez frown. "What does one person need with all this space?" Several, large, I/S families could live in the studio and still have plenty of space to spare.

"I'm going to work from it, it's perfect and more than I need and wait until you see the closet upstairs and the tub!" He hurried over and caught Rez's hand and tried to pull him toward the stairs.

Rez didn't move but the scent of his lover, a term he was only barely comfortable with, drifted to him and made him frown. He pulled his hand from Andy's and caught the human's wrist a touch rougher than he needed to. While Andy was still confused he gave the arm a sharp tug and pulled the human closer, caught his other hand around Andy's waist and kept him from escaping.

The scent was unmistakable. "You could have at least tried to get his scent off of you."

"What?" Some of the giddy joy at being able to show and maybe share the space with Rez faded at the frowning serious tone.

Rez leaned forward and softly scented the human but he hadn't been wrong. The smell of arousal and desire and Toshi was clear. "Is this how you pay for a such an apartment?"

Any excitement he was feeling faded and he pulled his arm out of Rez's grip. "Fuck you!"

That only made Rez scowl a little more and snort softly, mockingly.

He pulled away hard and managed to step out of the other man's grasp. "I'm not a whore and I think we both know which of us that label fits better on!" Rez's accusation had hit a nerve and pissed him off but as soon as Andy had spoken he wished he hadn't.

The frowning scowl left Rez's face. It was replaced by a closed off, cold, empty mask that gave nothing away. A neutral expression that was more horrible than any frown could be. He said nothing but his shoulders tensed and squared and his eyes narrowed.

"Rez, I didn't mean..."

"I'm busy, I've a blow job in an hour and an orgy before dinner." He spat out and turned to go. It hurt not only because it was the truth but because of who the words had come from. He'd let Andy in and close and he should have known better.

Rez only made it half way to the door before Andy caught him. Arms tossed around his shoulders and chest and a face pressed to his back. "Don't go, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it." Andy sighed into the purple hair. "I'm sorry. I kissed Toshi, yes. I love him, him and Mick both, they're my closest friends, and Alec but you don't need to worry about me kissing him." The body stayed tense under his arms. "I am a slut, I like kissing my friends."

Rez shook his head.

"Don't go. Please don't."

Rez swallowed hard but seemed to lack the strength to knock the slender arms away. "You love them." He forced out. "But I'm just a whore."

Andy's heart broke. "No, no sweetheart, no please, I love them as friends, as brothers I..." It was easier to love them. They wouldn't hurt him. He understood them. There was little risk in loving them. "I don't know what we've got here, I... I just know all I wanted to do was show this to you and see if you liked it and see if you wanted to move in here with me." The words tumbled out. Below him the shoulders tensed further. "I mean, keep your apartment and all, not asking you to give up your space but we could share here, this could be ours. And you're not just anything...not



to me.”

Rez wanted to push Andy away and leave. He wanted to end it all and tell the human to piss off. It would be easier and simpler, not to mention safer. The worst thing was knowing he didn't want to. Even the thought of walking away and never interacting with the stupid human again made him hurt like really bad withdrawals.

“That outfit is fucking absurd.” He muttered. With the grumbled complaint he felt Andy relax against his back and almost chuckle.

Andy slipped his hands down the still tense chest, across almost tangible uncertainty and hurt, to catch Rez's wrists and slide his hands backward. It didn't take much to get the other man to reach back and touch silk or to slid further back from there to rest on his ass. “I think you like my absurd outfit.” The hands tightened over his silk covered ass and crushed Andy tighter to Rez's back. Very carefully Andy pressed a kiss to the side of Rez's neck and with that soft kiss felt the man's tension drain away.

He took that to be a cue to move from clinging to Rez's back to standing in front of him. His arms naturally fell to around Rez's waist and Rez's hands went back to petting the silk over the rough textured fishnet covered backside. “If you're in this with me, you're in it and can't go running off like some offended bitch if I say something stupid. Stand there and tell me I said something stupid, okay? Though in all fairness you were nasty to me first.”

He couldn't quite say he was sorry but Rez did look away.

“Toshi isn't paying you yet is he?”

“I'm....” It was difficult to think about something stupid like money when all he wanted to do was put his hands under the ridiculous skirt and feel the flesh bare around the fish net lines. “I'm I/S and a member of his house...”

“What's that mean?” Andy stepped closer, pressing his hips a little into Rez's body.

“He provides food and shelter and I work, though he is more generous than most, he is paying a salary...” Somehow his hands had slipped from over the silk to under it.

“As you said, Toshi is generous...he wants me to be happy so he gave me this space and I was happy so I kissed him.”

Rez frowned again and his hands stopped petting.

“If you don't want me to do that, you have to say so, we can be exclusive if you want....”

“I want...” What did he want? Did he want Andy to himself? That was such a human concept and didn't feel right. Worse, he thought about the blueberry haired man and how attractive other I/S were and knew he'd eventually, maybe, one day, want one. That was making a big leap and assuming that he was going to be staying with Andy for that long. He didn't want to be the only lover in the artists life, what he wanted was to be the most important one. “I want to watch you kiss him.”

It wasn't what Andy had suspected was about to come out of the pouty down turned mouth. “Really?” He asked and could have slapped himself for leaving any room for doubt. “You want to watch me kiss Toshi?” He asked again, his lips barely brushing against Rez's own.

Rez used the grip he had on that fishnet covered ass to pull Andy closer, slipping him between his own parted legs to grind their matching erections together. “Yes...” He whispered back and meant it. The idea of seeing Andy kissing or dancing or more with someone else, knowing he

was being watched and being all sexy, glancing over to meet his own eyes, was one of the sexiest thoughts he'd ever had. "But I want you to go home with me."

Andy chuckled and pulled away a little. "You want me to be your little slut."

Only the amusement wasn't quite reflected in the pink eyes. "I know you're human and that isn't how humans behave."

"Not all humans behave the same. So long as you play with me and I with you I'm not the jealous sort. I must admit I like you getting all bothered at smelling someone else on me. Will you do that again? If I go kiss the first guy I see and rub all over him, will you fuck me silly when we get home?" He was playing and knew he was but he liked the spark of feral lust in the otherwise worried pink depths.

"Yes." Rez hissed out and guided Andy to rub his groin harder into his own.

The teasing play was going to far and unless Andy wanted to christen the new studio on the bare wood floor something had to be done. He lightly kissed the now hungry lips and drew away. "Than I had better be ready when we get home."

Rez groaned and knew he was being teased but liked it too much to protest more.

"Come see the bathroom. I was thinking you could have a third of the closet space and we could put a desk for you down here in the corner so you can work too." It was difficult to step away and lead them on a tour of the space but Andy wanted the tease too.

"Better damned well be ready when we get home..." Rez muttered and followed, more fascinated by the stupid fishnet covered legs and swirling green skirt than the fancy studio. "Better so be ready."

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Blurring The Lines:

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Chapter Ninety Three

Toshi had never once seen real fear from his uncle. On very few occasions he caught the sense of the man being afraid or a small scent of it but that fear had never risen to the surface to be easily noticed. He would have been happy to go his entire life without seeing it but he wasn't so lucky. His uncle was afraid, more, his uncle was terrified.

"I don't think I can do this." Yasun finally admitted. He'd been carefully bouncing his weight from one foot to the other, a small habit his father had broken him of as a child, and not even noticed he was doing it. His hands had fussed at his suit, at his hair and at the note cards he'd written out and now slipped from clutching in his hands to hiding in a pocket.

They'd originally planned for Toshi to introduce the man but Alec was out before the room full of human reporters instead. They hadn't wanted Toshi's reputation to overshadow the event. More, they had wanted him on hand to keep Yasun steady. The man was too well aware of his position to show worry or fear to all but a small few and those few trusted advisors were deep within the camp, far from human contact. It was Alec that warned that if Yasun didn't have someone to be more at ease around, his head would likely explode.

"You can do this." Toshi soothed. "There's nothing to it."

"I've never even seen so many humans!" Yasun hissed out, peering out a small crack in the curtains they'd put up in the main club grounds. "You didn't tell me it would be so many. You said a handful or two."

It had been a lie Toshi thought of as a half truth. The moment the press announcement went out that Yasun would speak the requests for press passes had flooded in. Dozens, hundreds in total and Alec had enlisted Epps to help sort out who to allow and who to deny. They'd still whittled it down to over a hundred people, all with equipment and cameras and it looked like some bizarre animal's feeding frenzy with Yasun as the main course.

"You've never once spoken a word outside of the Camp. Even the photographs and images of you are limited. Humans want to know more. The interest is a good thing. Grandfather, for all the respect he received from certain human elements, would never have filled a room like this. Humans were too frightened of us still."

"I can't do this."

"Yes, you can."

Yasun shook his head. "What have I to say to them? Why should they listen? I..." He sighed. "I'm phobic of them, always have been. Since Father was killed I'm worse. How am I going to do this when every time I look at one of them I see the humans that tortured me?" Large lavender eyes swung around and silently pleaded with Toshi. "How do you manage to do this?"

No one, Toshi included, had guessed the root of Yasun's fear. Every I/S was a little frightened of humans. Those that lurked around the Yard or worked in clubs grew accustomed to them but most I/S lived and died tucked deep into the camp, never really even seeing a live, in the flesh human. Yasun was so composed, so proud, so everything their people needed to look up to, that even those closest to him forgot that he might wake from dark nightmares in the middle of the night too with human faces on his tormentors.

Toshi didn't rush to answer but gave himself a chance to think. "I am part of them but it was...difficult to adjust." Alec had helped with that in those first days, so sick himself and so non-threatening and then he'd been off to rehab where all he wished was for one of the humans to kill him while they treated him with quiet indifference. "You have met good humans, Alec, Mick, Andy, the people from the communes..."

"Individuals that I could take one on one not this mob!"

"There are guards all around and I/S faces to look to but Uncle, they will not harm you."

"I don't fear physical harm...I...it's not logical and they're going to see me as a freak. I'm not going to speak well or properly. I'll shame our people and not be the leader they need. I wasn't

supposed to be the one..."

Toshi put his hand on his uncle's shoulder and tried to will peace and calm into him. "You are the one. Nothing you do will bring shame to our people. Be yourself. Speak with sincerity. Do not worry about human reactions but speak with the voice of our people, tell them the truth they've never learned." It felt silly, him giving advice to his uncle when everytime he had to speak to the human press or even attend a teleconference he felt a little sick to his stomach. "Be who you are and you'll be fine."

Yasun drew a breath and squared his shoulders. "Be who I am, I am Sakamoto Yasunari, leader of our people."

"No." Toshi smiled as gently as he could. "You are my Uncle Yasun, the man who raised a half breed no one else was willing to touch. The one that taught me everything important I ever knew when precious few would even speak to me. You are a good man, with a just cause. Be that man and all will be well."

That seemed to melt away some of Yasun's anxiety and he nodded. He cupped the side of his nephew's face as he heard Alec offering the final introductions. He was in no rush to make his appearance. "Thank you."

Toshi bowed a little. It was precious little comfort but they needed Yasun to play his part. They all had a place and Toshi was learning most everyone had doubts or uncomfortable moments in theirs. It was small comfort to let someone he loved do something he was so deeply frightened of.

The room was silent as Yasun made the walk to the octopus like collection of equipment. Cameras clicked but none flashed and Yasun took careful, measured steps. His suit wasn't a designed name but it had been perfectly tailored for him by an I/S and it contrasted strongly with his abnormally large eyes. His hair hung down his back as he always wore it, loose in a lavender shower to his waist where it was gathered together and braided to fall to his knees. It made him look exotic and made the suit seem overly styled.

Yasun stopped and in the center of the slightly raised area that had been added for the press conference and froze. The room was filled with humans and their scent and the oppressive nature of their feelings. It wasn't a hostile feeling, per se, but it wasn't welcoming and he knew a good two thirds were thinking of him as some overly intelligent animal.

"Good...good afternoon and..." He made the mistake of glancing up again and forgot what he was saying. He had to clear his throat and his thoughts. "Thank you for coming." Yasun reached into his pocket for his notes, he hadn't quite written out a speech word for word but he had jotted down what he'd wanted to say. "There...there have been many..."

Someone in the clustering crowd of humans coughed and another cleared their throat. Yasun glanced to his notes and to the sea of small eyes all watching him like he was some simple idiot. He felt a sick knot of fear and nerves in his stomach and he glanced to the side to where Toshi stood looking serious and worried.

Yasun closed his eyes for a moment and slipped the notes back into his pocket. He drew a slow breath and opened his eyes and tried to meet each pair of human eyes watching him. "My grand parents were from Japan. They met on the transport they were herded into like cattle when they were taken from their home. When they arrived here, my grandfather traded things for books. He'd skip meals and trade his ration for things other people had brought but no longer wanted, trade a pair of shoes for a textbook. One of them was a book of speeches given by people over the last several centuries. It was one of his favorites. He read it to my father and my father read it to me and I am reading it to my children."

"I was always impressed by the fancy big words and how my father's voice made them echo. It wasn't until I found myself in the position I am now that I understood what those great men and women were saying. I am not a great orator. I know I can never speak the way they did but they spoke with the conviction of truth. I stand here today and speak to you with the conviction of truth.

"My people, here and elsewhere, have suffered horrible injustices, unspeakable acts and crimes. We will no longer tolerate this. All beings with a soul should no longer tolerate this. We have been beaten, murdered, raped, tortured, experimented on, starved and deprived of even the most basic of rights. All with no recourse.

"It is a tradition that started with the Alphas, torn forcibly from their homes, broken from all they knew, moved to random spots across the globe. My grandfather lived and died with the dream of one day seeing his home again, of seeing Japan again. He taught my father Japanese, I was taught Japanese all because he hoped we'd one day see Japan again. What he didn't take into account is that this is my father's home and my home and my children's. The Containment Act will be dissolved and it will leave my people in limbo. Most no longer even speak the language of their home countries, most do not even know where their Alphas lived. We can not be returned to our countries of origin. These camps, these temporary camps, are our country of origin.

"I stand here today to call upon the leaders of this world to come here and meet with me and my people to find a just solution to this situation. One that will be fair for all parties. This isn't a local problem or an I/S problem but everyone's problem. Together, we can find a solution. I will be honored to have the chance to show the beauty of my people's culture to the citizens of the world that have only known of us from lies and innuendos. I have a proposal...one that many will find shocking..."

"He's doing well." Mick whispered when he slipped up beside Toshi in the small curtained off area to the side. It was only a few paces from where Yasun stood looking serious and very approachable.

Toshi nodded. "He's still scared."

"But he's doing well."

"They won't know what to make of him."

Mick nodded as his eyes scanned the crowd again. "That's good though, it'll...it'll..." Mick's words died off and he frowned.

"What?"

"Shit." He whispered and started to run toward the stage.

From out in the crowd someone, Toshi assumed it was a guard, shouted the word they all dreaded. "GUN!"

There was a cracking pop sound and human shouts and screams. The world seemed to have gone into slow motion and Toshi's eyes scanned the crowd to a man that had been operating a camera but now was holding a handgun and shouting words he couldn't hear. Movement was suddenly everywhere. Humans ducked or ran for cover or scurried to get their cameras with their live feeds aimed at the shooter. A rainbow of color darted from subtle spots along walls to surge forward, a mix of Toshi's guards and Yasun's and all moving at once.

He could smell the gunpowder now but Toshi stood frozen by shock. More popping cracks echoed around the large, high ceiling room and for a single moment he forgot he was in his own club. For a single moment he was in the Pony club, with shouts and gunfire and blood all swelling around the panic he was too Shiny to really feel. His eyes darted to the stage as the shots echoed around with deafening loudness and he saw Yasun being tackled by Mick and the two going down into a tumble of legs and arms and too long hair.

That was all he was able to see. Three guards swarmed him and forced him down. They covered him with their own bodies and pulled weapons. More gunfire sounded, filling the room with the horrible acrid smell that clogged his nose and made him feel sick. His guards had guns drawn and Yasun's who still refused to carry the weapons had drawn blades. Someone ran hands over Toshi's body, slipping across his head and down his shoulders and arms, his chest and legs all searching for wounds.

"Are you hit?" Someone shouted at him. "Sakura-sama, are you hit?"

"I'm fine!" He batted at the hands. "I'm fine!"

Shouts began to drift up. "Clear! CLEAR! Secure the humans! SECURE THE ROOM! GET DOWN, GET DOWN NOW!"

Toshi struggled to get out from his protective circle of guards but they were trying to pull him away. "No, no!" He shook off their arms and glared at them, suddenly regretting not being armed himself. "Who's hit?" He thought about Mick and Yasun and felt sick. "Is anyone hurt?" There were still humans shouting and crying in fear and guards screaming orders but no more gun fire.

They stopped trying to pull him away but didn't let him go. Toshi struggled to see out into the crowd but there was so much movement it was difficult to focus. A voice cut over the others and his ears focused on it.

"I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm not the target!" Alec shouted and Toshi spotted the human struggling from his own collection of guards, none looking too happy that he stepped from their protection to hurry out onto the small raised stage.

Toshi couldn't see the floor, couldn't see around his own guards and the guards blocking the raised area. He pushed forward and hands caught him, held him where he was safely from the direct line of fire should more occur.

"Jesus..." He heard Alec curse and Toshi struggled to keep from attacking the guards to go out there. Mick had trained him, trained them to keep him from doing something stupid. They'd knock him out before letting him go out and get shot. "Code Red Omega, repeat, Red Omega!" Alec declared. "MOVE!"

The order was passed around and Toshi almost went faint. He was desperate to get out there but his guards were moving him away. Following the command with well practiced precision. Code Red was critical, an attack that resulted in injuries and would require the room being secured, any strangers contained and held and the injured moved to the clinic. Code Red Omega was an emergency plan. It was for multiple casualties hurt beyond the current care offered by the clinic. It meant both human and I/S down. It meant that they were going to be rushed to a human hospital and the doctors from the commune would be picked up and taken to them to work there. Mick had even secured the use of an entire hospital floor should it be required to securely lock them down. Code Red Omega was a thing of nightmares and the worst case Mick could plan for and Alec had called it.

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Chapter Ninety Four

"Let me GO!" Toshi shouted but the guards kept moving, almost physically dragging him away. He didn't want to fight his own people but he needed to reach the main room and would fight if he had to.

"Please, Sakura-sama, please, not until the room is secure."

He didn't know the guard but the man was tall and broad and Toshi had no doubt that the guard was capable of knocking him on his ass. It was one of his uncle's men and he saw and felt the fear and worry in him, felt how badly the man wanted to go and learn what had happened too. More, he saw how desperately the man didn't want to have to hurt him and that and that alone settled Toshi down.

"The moment it's clear, the moment!" He ordered and let them take him further away to a small room they could more easily guard. Inside he paced and tried to prepare himself for seeing his uncle laying dead or Mick. His mind stumbled onto that thought and fell apart. He didn't know what to pray for, either man being hurt let alone killed would rip him apart.

A small eternity passed and Toshi couldn't stand any more. He threw open the door and glared at the guards. "Enough of this. We're going back."

"There could be another shooter, sir."

"I'll risk it. Coming?"

They exchanged a look but their own desire for news pushed them to agree. "Yes, sir."

It had felt like he'd been secured to the side forever but it couldn't have been more than a few moments. Mick had drilled and trained and briefed everyone to the point of tedium and it had seemed overkill at the time. Now, with a crisis breaking around them everyone moved like a well oiled machine. There wasn't the mad chaos Toshi had expected, just an eerie calm.

He was only half way down the hallway when Alec caught up to them. "Oh, thank God you're okay." He wiped at his forehead with the back of his hand and smeared blood across his skin.

"I'm fine, they made me leave."

"Good, good. Mick won't go until he sees you."

"Go?" His heart stopped. "He's hurt?"

Alec held up his bloodied hands. "It's superficial, I think but he needs to get to the hospital."

Toshi's mind caught on superficial, tumbled the word over his brain a little and was able to carefully keep thinking. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine...I...yeah, I'm okay." Alec nodded as he followed beside where Toshi hurried. "Guards got everyone cleared to the other side club and have them in holding."

"The shooter?"

"Dead."

Toshi hadn't expected the man to be taken alive. He nodded as the guards with him fanned out and entered the main room ahead of him, he ignored them and followed without pause, eager to stop being sheltered and protected and to do something. The lighting was still bright in the room but the space was virtually empty. A body lay back where the reporters had been and blood was pooled around him.

Mick was half laying on the raised area, almost on the spot he'd tackled Yasun. He had his hands pressed to the chest of a bleeding I/S guard trying to hold the man's bandage tighter as he was being moved to a stretcher. Another small group of I/S guards hovered with another stretcher, two to carry the load and two to stand guard but Mick was pointedly ignoring them.

"Mick!" Toshi shouted and rushed over, falling to his knees on the floor slick with blood. "You're hurt, are you okay, where are you hit?"

"It's nothing, are you..."He reached out with bloody hands and started to try to pat Toshi down.

"I'm fine." He caught the hands and glanced over his lover. His pants leg was cut open and someone had tied a length of cord around his upper thigh Mick's shirt was torn too and pulled open. "You were wearing your vest."

"Good thing for it, caught one in the back. Don't fuss the leg is a clean shot, just hurts. I wanted to get everyone off ahead of me and to make sure you really were okay. I'll go over once things here are secure."

"No, you go now."

"It's nothing."

"Shut up and go! Now." Toshi over rode Mick and waved to the guards. They had been waiting nervously, convinced that the human would just keel over dead if left alone too long.

"Toshi I..."

He swept in and kissed the man's lips. "Shut up and go so I know you're okay. I'll be over as soon as things are secure here. Promise. I can't do what I have to if I'm worried about you bleeding here."

Mick frowned. "I don't like it."

"I don't care, go, consider it an order."

"I'll be back if you need me."

"Go!" He moved back and let the guards heft Mick onto their stretcher. Even as he was being



carried away, trying not to wince, he was spouting off orders to the guards around him.

Toshi stood alone for a few heartbeats. Blood around his shoes, smeared now on his person and clothes. Far too many eyes were watching him. "I want to know who that man is and how he got a gun in here and I want to know now!" He snapped out more to give people something to do.

"Toshi?" Alec spoke carefully, moving to stand beside him. "You need to make a statement."

"What?"

"I know, I...the guards have cleared a handful of the press already and moved them to a conference room but you need to make a statement."

"Not now."

"No, now." Alec corrected and earned a harsh look from Toshi. "Most of the world just saw Yasun being gunned down. That means a good bit of the I/S population did too. You need to go on right now and tell everyone that things are under control and while he's wounded, he's alive and will be okay."

"Is he alive and will he be okay?"

Alec looked down. "He was alive when he was taken out of here but it doesn't matter, people need to think he's okay."

"I can't."

"You have to."

"How many are wounded?"

"Your uncle, Mick, three guards, a reporter got shot in the arm..."

"What aren't you telling me."

"Epps. He threw himself into the line of fire, after Mick moved into the way."

That surprised Toshi but then the man had been hovering around all for just the chance to know his son. "Will he make it?"

Alec shook his head. "I don't know if any of them will make it. One of the guards was...well if he wasn't dead when I saw him he'll be dead before he reaches help...I...his head..."

Toshi put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Call my father, make sure he hears from you what's happened. He'll want to make a statement."

"Okay."

"I'll make that statement but then we're going over to the hospital. Is there someone to over see sorting things out here?"

"It's taken care of. I put in a call to Ore and his people, figured we could trust them, they're coming over to help. Some of Yasun's advisors are coming by too."

"My aunt?"

"They said they already had someone sitting with her and the kids but she insisted on being

moved to a secure location. She's frightened."

"I can't fault her on that...I..." Toshi glanced down to the blood he'd gotten on himself and the blood that had been spilled in room around him. "Maybe building here was a mistake...this place is cursed."

"Toshi..." Alec scolded. "You don't believe that."

"If my uncle dies, here, of all places...I...God..."

Alec caught Toshi's eyes and tried to look more stable and steady than he felt. "He's not dead and thanks to you he actually has access to the best medical care any I/S can have. He won't have to endure a surgery three quarters awake like you did. Go on, make that statement so we can get you over to the hospital. I have a secure car waiting."

"Andy and Rez and Sunshine house could be a target too!" The thought hadn't occurred to him until just that moment what and who else might be in danger if the attack was anything coordinated and who among them was the most vulnerable.

"Security is already being tightened on everyone. It's okay."

"I..."

"Do you want me to stay here and over see things?" He knew Toshi well enough to know it wasn't just that he didn't want to make a statement but also that he didn't want to leave the spot he was standing in and leave the evidence of such sudden and horrible violence behind.

"Would you mind?"

"Not at all. We'll figure out how and who and I'll call you as soon as we know anything."

He knew there were things to do, things that he had to do but Toshi couldn't move. "Alec." He glanced to his hands and they were shaking, trembling. He was skating on the edge of breaking into small sharp bits and wasn't sure he could hold it together long enough to make even a short statement.

Alec glanced around the room and while people glanced their way no one seemed too willing to approach them. Ore's people hadn't arrived yet, Yasun's advisor was still en route and while the guards were searching and securing the area and press there wasn't much for either of them to do for the moment. "Here." He reached into his jacket and slipped the metal flask from his pocket. "Consider it medicinal." He screwed off the cap and handed it to his friend.

The metal was cool in his hand and it shook as badly as the rest of him but he raised it cautiously up to sniff at the contents. They were sharp and a little smoky but Toshi knew the smell of good whiskey. "You're carrying a flask?"

"Thought your uncle might need a nip." He forced a tight grin. "Turned out I needed it more."

That was all the encouragement he needed. The whiskey burned and settled like fire in his stomach but he forced down several long swallows. The alcohol leached outward and made the broken parts of him feel a little more tightly glued together.

He took one last swallow for good measure before handing it back. "Thanks."

Alec nodded and capped the slender silver flask before slipping it back into his jacket. "Don't mention it. Can you do this?"

"I can try. I should clean up."

"Toshi... go as you are...I..." He closed his eyes hating that he was thinking about angles and politics at a time like this but it was easier than thinking about his friends and family bleeding, maybe dying, beyond his control.

He glanced down to the blood stained on his shirt sleeves and his legs, the red tracks of drying blood in the creases of his hands. "I understand." He drew a long breath, told himself Mick was okay and refused to believe that Yasun might not be okay. "Have the car ready, I'm leaving as soon as this is done." For once, he didn't care if the press remembered to turn off their flashes or not. He just moved to the side room the cleared reporters were stashed in and tried to order what to say.

"Mom... no mom....no...no...MOTHER!" Andy finally snapped into his phone as he ducked from the car that had picked him up from their apartment. He'd seen the shooting on the television, it had been playing in the background, but the house guard hadn't left him leave to go to the club. They'd almost sat on him to keep him in the building but promised as soon as a car was brought he'd be taken to the hospital directly.

He'd almost caused himself bodily harm having to wait. The news didn't help. Reports had drifted in stating several people had been killed and then none and then some and multiple injuries and no one had a clue what was really going on. He'd watched as Toshi had stood in front of the cameras looking shell shocked and glassy eyed, blood on him, and announced that everything was under control and that his uncle was alive and would be fine.

Andy had known he was lying. That had been the worst part. He didn't know if he was lying about Ysaun because the man was dead or simply because he didn't know if the man was alive. Or worse, he couldn't tell if Toshi looked so shocked because Mick was down too.

He'd tried calling, of course, but Toshi wasn't answering and neither was Mick and Alec's number went to voice mail. He hadn't expected to get through to the lawyer anyway, in a crisis Alec would be attached to his phone running damage control. For once he cursed it all and paced, near frantic to get to the hospital.

The car and extra guards finally arrived for him and he'd hurried to leave. Only to be delayed again as the guards made him put on a flac jacket that clashed with his outfit and made him feel heavy and weak. They simply refused to let him leave the building without it and he was in too much of a rush to go to protest too loudly. Besides, he had no desire to be shot.

It was as he was sliding into the car that his own phone had started to buzz. He'd pounced on it but it was only a friend. That call had been sent to voice mail, but the phone had gone off again and again after that. It seemed like everyone that he'd ever given his number to was calling him for gossip or to generally see if he was okay and all he wanted was for the line to be free for important calls.

Until his mother had called and he figured he'd better answer it or she'd skin him alive the next time they saw each other. Only she wasn't letting him get a word in edgewise and he wasn't in the mood. The car rolled to a stop and Andy glanced up.

"Shit." He let the phone sag down from his ear and he could hear his mother spazzing over his swearing and not knowing why. "No, nothing, it's just, there's a lot of reporters here..." He was suddenly glad he had that bullet proof vest on, he'd be a sitting duck scurrying from the car to the side entrance to the hospital. "No, no I'm fine. I'm fine. I was like a mile away. I'm fine...I....no I don't know about Mick...look Ma, I have to go..." The guards were climbing off motorcycles and out of the car and looked ready to break the arms or necks of any reporter that grew too pushy. "I

won't know until I go inside and I have to hang up to do that!" He snapped and she chewed him out. "I'm sorry, I know you're worried, I am being careful....I love you too..." He hung up on her.

With a deep breath he opened the door. The guards moved to circle him and help clear the way to the door but the reporters still swarmed forward. They shouted at him and asked questions. Cameras went off with flashes that made him flinch and the guards twitchy. Andy didn't stop, he didn't look up, he just kept his head down and focused on forcing their way to the door and the safety offered by the secured entrance.

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Chapter Ninety Five

There was a hospital administrator waiting for him inside the secured doorway but the man grew flustered as the I/S guard followed and fanned out around them. His eyes were round and he watched the movement of so many people that looked so different and forgot to speak.

"Hey." Andy snapped his fingers to get the man's attention. "Focus, don't speak just turn around and walk me to my family. Okay?"

"But...we can't have...the Committee doesn't allow..."

"Fuck the Committee. Look at me, look at me. There now, just take me to the right place and you can scurry away." He wasn't in the mood to deal with stupidity. Mick's arrangements had been made as a worst case scenario and while the hospital had agreed, that didn't mean some of its staff was ready. Andy had to snap his fingers again to get the man to look at him. "Just walk."

"Y...yes sir..."

If the man hadn't agreed, Andy may have hit him. It was as simple as that, his tolerance was gone. Luckily for both of them the man gave the stern looking guards one final look before he turned and started walking toward the elevators. It took a key to get the lift to accept the floor button he pushed but in short order they were going up, the elevator silent but for the man's shuffling uncomfortable nerves.

The doors opened and the guards in side moved forward. They barked out a word Andy didn't know and it was followed by a response from the hallway before the first one stepped out of the elevator. Andy pushed around them and wasn't at all surprised to see the guards there looking grim and visibly upset.

"Where are they?" He asked and ignored the looked that went from the door guards to his own

babysitters.

"Down the hall, make a right, than the next left." One finally answered.

"Thank you."

"I...I...I should..." The administrator stuttered and pointed over his shoulder to the elevator.

"Shoo." Andy hissed at him as he turned to hurry down the hallway. Most of his guard didn't follow but he did notice one lingered, staying a few feet behind him. Even on a secured floor, with them guarding every entrance, no one was taking any chances. He didn't care, he was sick to this stomach and needed to find Toshi. For once he hated his fancy shoes and wished he'd thought to worn ratty old sneakers so he could run.

There was no way he could miss the place, guards stood around at the hallways and again near the room. All of them nodded him by and Andy hurried as much as he could. The room wasn't just one room but more of an open exam section that had it's dividers pulled back so there was no sections to lurk or linger in.

He expected the room to be crowded with wounded and medical staff with people in paper gowns and masks snapping out orders but the room was empty. One of the exam beds was missing. Standing near the empty spot, blank eyed and still, was Toshi. The half breed looked so still, so solemn that Andy felt his stomach flip over in fear.

"Toshi?" He said carefully and blue eyes lifted and focused on him.

Toshi sighed, deeply and focused a little more. "Andy, you're okay."

That was all the invitation he needed. If Mick was dead or critical he'd be cut to the core but Toshi would be destroyed. He braced himself for the bad news and rushed over to take Toshi into his arms. "I'm here." He whispered into the dark hair as the body slowly eased into the embrace. When he pulled away he placed a quick kiss to Toshi's lips before he moved to pull over some of the hard, stiff waiting room style chairs. "Sit. Are you okay?" He would start there but he needed to be sitting down for bad news.

He let himself sit down more because Andy had sat. "I'm fine, they've practically wrapped me in bubble wrap, they won't let me do anything."

"And Mick?" Andy felt his hands dig into the chair's arms.

"He's going to be okay." Toshi reached over and pried up one of the clawing hands. "His vest took a couple of hits but the doctors don't think he broke any ribs. He got shot in the leg. They took him to surgery to close it up and see how much damage but the doctors said they don't think there is much, no arteries cut, no bone break. He didn't want to go for surgery but I refused to let them treat him with only a local."

"Oh thank God." Andy sighed and squeezed Toshi's hand. "I knew you were lying in that statement. What else? How's your uncle?"

"I don't know. I...they haven't said much. Shot, twice in the stomach but he's alive. They can't... there's no way right now to transfuse an I/S...we've never been blood typed...." He drew a breath.

"What else?"

"Three guards were shot, two minor but Sharkey..." he shook his head. "Clean shot to the head, he was dead before he hit the ground."

"Sharkey?"

"One of my Uncle's men."

"Jesus."

"A reporter took a shot in the arm, they're being treated at another hospital..."

"And? What is it?" Something cold shivered over his spine. "Is it Rez? He was supposed to be over at Sunshine but did he come by? Is he okay? I've been trying to call him but he's not answering..."

"No, no, Rez wasn't there...Epps jumped between the shooter and Mick. He's...he's bad, doctors aren't even saying much. Alec called his ex-wife to bring his kids by, they aren't even sure he'll make it out of surgery. So it's bad, things are bad but Mick is going to be okay and Yasun....he has to be okay."

"It could have been so much worse." Andy answered automatically but his thoughts were off and worried about Rez.

"Mick planned this in case we were hit with a bomb. If he'd brought in a bomb instead of a gun it would have been much worse."

He nodded but glanced around. "Toshi, dear, where's Rez? Shouldn't he be here by now?"

"They're looking for him but it's almost full dark, it'll take a while."

"What do you mean they're looking for him? Don't you know where he is?"

"When the guards went to secure him, he was gone. Don't worry, they'll find him."

"How can you be so casual about it? I know he's not the easiest of people but he's missing and people are trying to kill us!" Andy felt panic crawling up his spine as a thousand horrible images crossed his mind. "He could be hurt, shot, somewhere, waiting for help and dying or kidnapped or....or anything!"

Toshi took up Andy's other hand. "Andy, he's not a target, he's an addict. He's slipped off into the Yards to Shine. As soon as his guard spots him they'll call but the Yards are volatile right now and they have to move slow."

"How do you know? What if you think he's just out looking to use but he's hurt and alone and..."

"I know!" Toshi snapped back but caught himself and drew a slow breath. "I know because all I want to do right now is go out and use myself. I want it so badly I can't stand it. It's all I can think about, I can almost taste it. I have Alec doing everything I should be doing and the guards have orders to keep me in this room by force if necessary! That's how I know!"

"Oh Toshi, I'm sorry, I didn't think...I....what can I do?"

He rubbed at his forehead and forced a small tight, bitter grin. "Just sit with me."

"I can do that."

"When they call about Rez? Take care of him okay?"

That resolved one worry before he could even start chewing it over. "I can do that too."

Toshi was pacing again and shivering a little, but he hadn't asked for the third time if it was cold in the room, by the time the nurses wheeled Mick's bed back into the secured space. His leg was bandaged and elevated and he was secured in blankets and still more awake than asleep.

"How is he?" Toshi demanded, nearly attacking the man with his need for information.

"He's fine. He's a very lucky man. He'll need to stay off of it for a while and rest. I'd recommend a wheelchair for a couple of days but he should be able to get around on crutches soon enough. He's lucky, missed everything vital, was a clean shot and it should heal just fine. Give him some time, he's still out of it." The doctor nodded as the rest of the staff locked the wheels in place and made sure everything that had to be hooked up to the stationary monitoring equipment was.

"And the others?"

"Your uncle and Mr. Epps are still in surgery but at this point, no news is good news. Ms. Mendoza's status has been moved from critical to stable and is being watched by one of your specialists. Mr. Stolzfoos is stable as well and is already asking to be discharged to go home."

"I/S have a fear of human medical facilities, it's not personal."

"Mr. McKale saw to it the staff was informed of this before hand." The doctor glanced to where Mick was laying, nodding to a nurse's question. "Don't let him work."

"Good luck on that one." Toshi sighed but his phone rang and he stepped away to answer.

Andy stood alone for a moment but as the doctors and nurses moved away he went to take up a spot near his best friend. "Hey you."

"mm Andy?"

"Gold star answer sweetie." He brushed the auburn hair back. "You in any pain?"

"Hmmp can't feel anythin'..."

"Well, that's because you got shot..."

Mick nodded sleepily.

"Whatever you're on, you should share." Andy teased because Mick was never, ever mellow.

"Andy." Toshi called his name and motioned for him to step away. "They found him."

"Rez?"

He nodded.

"I'm going to the Yards to get him."

"Andy, maybe you should let the guards snatch him and bring him to the apartment. You might not want to see him like this."

"You think I don't know what he was? Or what he's doing if he's high in the Yards?"

"Knowing and seeing..."

"I'm not afraid of it." He gave a lopsided smile. "Of him or you. Stay here and keep Mick comfy,

call me as soon as you hear anything, I mean anything, and I'll call if I need help with Rez. Deal?"

"Thank you."

Andy nodded, hugged and kissed his friend again and left. There was no need to explain, the word had already spread among the guards. They fell in around him and hurried him back away, back out from the press of the media and into the protective car. That left Andy alone and for the first time without the pressing fear of not knowing who was dead or alive. He sat in the back of the car as it pulled away and suddenly it hit him. He was part of and witness to history. It didn't feel like history, that was something coldly impersonal in textbooks and classroom lessons. There was nothing cold or impersonal about it. No one ever bothered to teach that side of events.

For all the desire for a news story, the press had clustered around the club and the fenced in line that broke the Yards up from the rest of the city. None were quite willing to venture into the Yards themselves and most had parked toward the end that had the market bazaar instead of the end that brought out the addicts and whores. The days events and publicity didn't deter the stream of humans that wandered in for sex, drugs and nightlife. Taxis still went almost to the edge, dropping off and picking up people and cars still made their steady progress to and from the main clubs. It was just past full dark and already the Yards were making a roaring business. Somewhere in all that, was Rez.

The car pulled up to one of the little guard huts that were set around the Yards and populated at night. Andy slipped out before they could open the door for him. It made his guards frown. The car was armored and while inside he was mostly safe, he was supposed to stay safe until they told him it was okay to get.

"What?" He scolded back to the frowns. "It's the Yards, how safe can I be?"

One of the women sighed expressively. "We need to go on the bikes."

"Least we aren't walking." It wasn't just his shoes he worried about now but he needed to get to where Rez was and bring the man home.

There was no helmet for him and he doubted he would have bothered to pull one on should it been offered. It was dark, this corner of the Yards was dimly lit at best and he wanted to be able to easily watch for flashes of purple hair. They rolled slowly along the wider corridors and bits of purple did catch his eye but none of them were Rez but the attention he was gaining wasn't making his guards comfortable. Humans stopped to stare, well aware of how few rode motorcycles in the Yard. I/S too, most too skinny or obviously broken into groups of pimps or dealers, they watched in wide serious eyes at the human they knew was in their Sakura-sama's household. All of them looked to him like he knew just what was going on and Andy had to look away because he really didn't.

They finally rolled to a slow stop and Andy hopped off. He moved directly to where Kesses stood, frowning and unhappy. "Where is he?"

"Andy-san, I know you want to help but you should rethink going to him right now. Let us deal with him."

"I know what he's doing. I'm not the one that needs protecting."

Kesses' frowned softened a little. "Okay then. He took off the last time he saw us but he's cornered now. We'll grab him if he tries to dart. We may have to restrain him."

"I don't care if you have to do the samba with him, just help me get him home."



"Will do, you're sure you're ready?"

"I'm ready."

He said he was ready and Andy really believed he was to face Rez but he wasn't to walk around the Yards. It was a different place at night. The desperation was almost thick enough to touch and the humans that jostled by them alone or in small groups all nudged and laughed in crude levels of vulgarity. He was starting to understand when Rez said there were worse things than having been bought by a house.

They were quite a bit away from where Rez was hiding, the distance was needed to keep him from hearing the motorcycles. Kesses motioned to where a female guard hovered toward the side. She nodded back and he turned to Andy. "The shacks here, see? The gap between then dead ends against the back of another hut on the other lane. He's back in there....with..."

"With a trick."

"Yeah. The latest one."

Andy shook his head. "No, the last one."

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Ninety Six

He pushed past the taller guard and moved without worry into the small space. He was braced for seeing the worst but he was a little too late for that. The man was human with a military or police style high and tight hair cut and tall. His eyes flicked to Andy and he grinned.

"I slicked him up good for you." He laughed. The man glanced behind Andy to where Kesses hovered and he shrugged. "Unless you've got your own and want the space. Have to toss this sorry slut's ass out first, he's too fucked up to walk."

Andy would have hit the man, if he knew how to hit without hurting himself, but Kesses beat him to it. He didn't even see the tall guard move before the human was slammed into the fragile and poorly built wall of the nearest hut, an arm twisted painfully up and an arm across his throat.

"That sorry slut is worth ten of you." Kesses hissed and tightened his grip on the struggling man. "Give me a reason...." He'd been on a short fuse and simmering all day and almost needed to beat the shit out of someone. Only a slender long fingered hand lightly rested on his arm.

"He's not important." Andy spoke softly and nodded to the end of the small space.

Rez was a shambled pile on the filthy ground. Kesses frowned and released the human. The man was stupid enough to try to throw a punch, one that was quickly deflected. With quick jabs he returned blows before catching a firm grip on the human and physically tossing him out into the walkway. He turned back around in time to see Andy crouched down, carefully trying to brush purple hair away to see the face hidden underneath.

The gentle touch roused Rez from whatever stupor he was in. He pulled away while reaching out to violently shove Andy away. Andy fell, landing hard on his hands and ass and cursing a little under his breath. If Rez knew who it was he'd pushed away he gave no sign of it but Kesses stayed back, waiting to grab the man if he tried to run.

"Ow, damn it Rez, knock it off!" Andy snapped.

Rez didn't listen, he scrambled to his feet trying to pull parted and in some places torn clothing around his body but his hands were clumsy. His foot caught something and it spun away from him, glass clinking against the stones and torn up pavement. As it spun closer, the bottle stopped, almost empty but for a few swallows of amber liquor rolling around. It wasn't an old bottle and of far better quality than likely found in the yard.

"Great, he's high and drunk." Andy sighed. He brushed his hands off and climbed to his feet.

Pink eyes blinked and slowly focused. Rez glanced from Andy to Kesses and back again before he stepped back to lean against the wall of the building behind them. He stopped trying to clutch his dirty and tattered clothing closed around him. His pants sagged on his hips, held up by a whisper and a pray and his shirt fell open. He licked his lips as he let a hand trail across his pale, smooth stomach.

"Both 'gether....which wants which end...or would you t...take t...turns?" He slurred out. "Come on..." He tossed his head a little to try to get his hair to fall back over his shoulders and his pants slipped a little more. His hands trailed higher, up to his neck that he started lightly stroking.

Andy glanced over his shoulder to where Kesses stood. The man was a little too slack jaw, forgetting to frown in displeasure at the display Rez was making of himself. His eyes were a little too intent on watching the trail of fingers against pale skin. Andy would have been blind not to notice the raw lust barely hidden in the I/S and in that moment mixed with Rez's words, he knew. He knew the guard wasn't just a kind man who often volunteered to be assigned to Rez out of duty. Andy suddenly knew the two were lovers.

He glanced to Rez, half thinking the man would deny it but instead found Rez sucking on his own fingers with his eyes locked onto Kesses'. "Great." Andy sighed. "Isn't this just fucking great." He felt like a fool and felt like he might burst into tears like some heart broken school girl. There were a lot of things he could deal with and accept with a stoic face but a broken heart wasn't one of them. "Generally boyfriends get tired of me before they cheat on me!" He was angry too and it blended well with the embarrassment. "Be a whore if you want, I'm going home."

He didn't get far, before he could even reach the walkway Kesses stopped him. Strong hands caught his shoulders and Andy tried to shake them off. The grip didn't so much tighten but grew more stubborn and pulled Andy back into the space in front of the tall man.

"It's not like that." He hissed out but his eyes darted over Andy's shoulder to where Rez had his eyes shut now and his shirt all the way open. "He hasn't betrayed you."

Andy shook his head and tried again to pull away only Kesses didn't let him go. The strong hands shook him a little. The motion as well as the carefully controlled almost gentle strength surprised

him and Andy stopped trying to get away. For a moment he stopped feeling stupid and hurt.

"He cares about you."

"How would you know!" Andy snapped back.

Kesses smiled a little and remembered the dropped panties. "I do. Look, you aren't running from him being like this, you're running because he and I...just...don't, okay? Ask me and I'll try to explain it in terms a human can understand but don't think he doesn't care about you."

He really wanted to be hurt and angry, really did but there was something sincere and far too honest in Kesses' deep voice. Andy crossed his arms over his chest, resisted the urge to slap at the guard or claw his eyes like a possessive girl and gave in. His being hurt was important, but not important enough to leave a friend stoned and drunk in the Yards to be strangers sex toy.

"Fine, lets get him home but don't think this means I've forgiven either of you!"

"Wouldn't dream of it." Kesses almost wanted to pat the human like he was some well trained dog but was worried Andy's temper would only grow worse at the gesture that could easily be seen as condescending. Instead he just let go of Andy and they turned together, braced for whatever lewd, suggestive behavior Rez had cooked up while they'd been distracted.

It wasn't necessary. Rez was on the ground again, not caring that his pants had worked loose and he was half exposed. He'd chased after the lost bottle and was downing the last bits in careful swallows. His legs were splayed and he looked like a doll that had just had it's strings cut, a doll pissed off to find the bottle empty. When the bottle magically didn't refill he flopped down, head thumping back against the wall.

"We're taking you home." Andy announced but the pink eyes stayed closed. "You don't think we got lucky enough to have him pass out do you?" Andy asked of the guard hovering behind him.

It wasn't Kesses that answered. Rez's eyes popped open and he swung out with the hand that held the bottle. "Go the fuck away!" The bottle hit the side wall and broke, spraying glass over the small space and onto Rez but the man didn't even flinch. "Leave 'e alone!"

Andy skittered back from the broken glass and before Rez could move again dipped down and in to slap the pale face. "Stop being a twat! You want to earn the title of biggest whore in the world? Fine you've earned it, now shut up and stop it! The whole world is coming apart at the seams. We have to keep it together! You hear me?"

Rez dropped the broken neck of the bottle to free his hands up. He covered his head with his hands and arms and half curled up looking miserable but otherwise didn't respond to Andy's rant.

"Fine." He sighed. "Don't know why I'm debating it, you don't get a choice in this. You're coming home and if you fight me, this lug," he tossed a thumb over his shoulder to where Kesses hovered. "Will knock you out cold and carry you home. You get it?"

If Andy was hoping Rez would crumble and sob and beg for forgiveness and ask for a group hug, he would have been deeply disappointed. Rez just gave up even more, curled deeper into his own misery and self loathing. When Andy reached for him this time, he didn't pull away or lash out. It took only a little tugging to get him to move and a little more to force him to get to his feet with only a little swaying. There was no worry about him running, he could barely walk in a straight line.

"Whew, he smells like he bathed in the whiskey. How much can you all drink without getting like blood alcohol poisoning?" Andy complained as he let Kesses slip an arm around Rez. His mind took a moment to wonder what else Kesses had slipped around Rez and he had to stop himself

from thinking things that weren't helpful.

"We've a high tolerance. Faster metabolisms, we burn it off faster but if he's had too much he'll just..." Kesses didn't get to finish.

Rez almost turned green looking, wretched, gagged a little and promptly puked over Kesses boots.

"Ugh." Andy sighed and was glad he was far enough away to avoid the splatter. "One less thing to worry about." The female guard that had hovered to the side hurried over. She gave Kesses a worried look and tsked at Rez but neither made any Shiner Whore jokes. "Can we get him on a bike?"

She slipped in on Rez's other side. "Don't you worry none, Andy-san, we'll get him home in one piece."

Andy was never more happy to see a motorcycle than he was in that moment. There was a quick debate among the guards in short phrases and whispered slang but soon Rez was being bundled in front of one of the other guards. Andy couldn't say if he was pleased that it wasn't Kesses' that would hold the purple man in place or not, he just wanted to get them home. The guards must have had the same thought because they didn't return for the car but rolled straight back to their building.

Kesses and one of the female guards helped haul the now almost insensible Rez up the steps but at the door the hulking man paused and spoke quickly to the woman. She glanced into the apartment, to Rez and only then nodded and left. Kesses hauled the limp body into the apartment most of the guards never even dared to think about entering.

"If he were human I'd pour black coffee down his throat but I know how much I/S hate that. Should do it anyway, serve him right." Andy muttered.

"Strong tea will work too." Kesses offered.

"So will a cold shower. Can you...?"

"Just show me where to drop him."

"Thanks." Andy grudgingly answered and led them back through the apartment to the bath room and the open shower waiting there. He caught Kesses looking around with an expression of surprise on his face. "What?"

"Nothing." He shook his head. "It's just...smaller than I expected."

Andy snorted as Kesses lowered Rez to sit on the tiled floor.

"Andy-san..."

"It doesn't matter, he never...never promised anything...I'm just human." He cut off the conversation, unable and unwilling to hear details.

"Andy-san, it wasn't just the Shine he was addicted to."

"You don't owe me an explanation." He almost snapped back while trying to pull Rez's shoes off.

"At the Red Moon he knew what he was, what the rules were but here...part of him needed what he knew while he settled in."

Andy snorted. "Needed to be a whore?" His tone sharp and sarcastic.

"Yes, because it was all he knew and he could go out and find a stranger or maybe a friend."

"Noble of you, someone should nominate you for a humanitarian award." He snipped back as he tried to peel the torn shirt from Rez's body but a hand slipped onto his shoulder and made him stop and glance back to the tall guard.

"You didn't want him going out into the Yards anymore than I did."

He wanted to fight and scream at the calm, logical man but he was too honest to do that to simply hide his own selfish hurt. "I want him to not need to hurt himself like that."

"He's getting there. He doesn't even desire me, not really, he hasn't betrayed you but he's never done the whole partner to someone thing." He didn't like how Andy crouched next to Rez, no longer hurriedly stripping the other man, just kneeling there with his head bowed. "He doesn't come to me for pleasure, he comes to me to be hurt."

"This conversation really isn't helping any." Andy whispered.

"You need to hear it. He comes to me to be used, to go back in his head to that thing he was."

"Please, I don't want to do this."

"He's been growing out of it. I didn't know why before but last time he actually let himself enjoy things. When we were done, he dropped something."

"Please."

"It was a pair of your underwear, Andy-san. He was able to move out of that need to be hurt because he was thinking about you."

"Jesus, what a mind fuck." Andy went still and silent, his head bowed a little. "I'm still just a human." It was foolish to get attached to someone that was from a culture that didn't believe in love. Rez was an even worse bet than a normal I/S.

"We don't do monogamy well but we do form attachments, even to humans." The only reaction he got from the artist was a long, deep, sigh. "Would you like me to help with him, Andy-san?"

He leaned back and glanced up and saw only gentle concern on the man's face. "No. I can manage him." It would have been easier to give Rez up both long and short term and surrender his care to the concerned guard but Andy wasn't ready for that. He shrugged. "It's kind of in the boyfriend code that when your partner falls off the wagon you clean him up."

Kesses nodded but paused before he turned to go. "He doesn't smell like Shine. Liquor and drugs and sex yes, maybe Chill or Rattle but nothing sweet like Shine."

The news almost broke Andy apart. He wanted to sob with a sense of relief almost greater than when he'd learned both Mick and Yasun were okay. Instead his shoulders sagged a little bit and he closed his eyes. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." The guard spoke softly before he left, leaving Andy alone to deal with the barely conscious man.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Ninety Seven

Andy waited until the bathing room door thumped shut before he even felt like he could move let alone try to move. His mind shied away from the raw truths that felt more dangerous than an assassin's bullet and focused instead on the very real situation at hand. Rez muttered when he pulled on his shoulder but otherwise didn't respond and Andy had to tug and yank at him to get him to move. He didn't stop pulling on the drunk man until he was laying on the tile floor, directly under one of the showerheads.

He could be nice about it but Andy wasn't in the mood to be nice. He stood up and stepped to the side before he reached carefully over and turned the shower on, full blast and full cold. It was a testament to how drunk he was that it took Rez a few seconds before he responded and a few more seconds to get his body to react to the cold water and pull away.

"Fucking hell!" Rez snapped out and pawed at now sopping wet purple hair to see who had doused him. He scrambled back out of the shower water shivering under the icy temperatures.

Andy spared him and turned the water off. He wanted to shout and scream but doubted it would do any good. "You're home."

Rez sat as a soggy pitiful mess on the tile floor.

"Take a shower, I'm going to make some tea."

As he left a small, sad voice drifted up. "Should have left me there...."

"Shut up and wash the stink off." Andy snapped and hurried away to make the promised tea. The apartment was filled with a heavy oppressive silence that it never had before when empty and it made Andy feel trembly and weak. The stainless steel of the kitchen was a cool counterpoint to his own fevered emotions but as he waited for the tea to brew he struggled to hold back a fit of weeping. Just as he was sure he wouldn't be able to hold himself together, Toshi called. It was a solid reminder that if Toshi wasn't in a thousand parts crying, he could make it through too. He took the news and the tea back to the bathroom braced to deal with whatever mood Rez was in.

The shower was off but the room was humid and steamy. Rez sat inside the shower room, his clothes piled into small wet mounds around him from where Andy had peeled them away and he'd dropped his pants beside them. The last foamy bits of soap bubbles clung to the drain but Rez sat almost where he'd been left, vacant eyed and shivering. Andy remembered the careful conversation Mick had made him listen to about signs of a Shine addict using again or craving hard and close to using. Being cold was one of those signs and Rez was shivering even though the water had obviously been run scolding hot.

"Here." He set the mugs down on the long bench outside of the shower room and gathered up towels. Rez didn't move and didn't look up, he sat clutching a handful of cash, crumpled bills now as wet as he was. "It'll dry."

Rez flung the money away from him and it stuck to the tile walls. "Don't want it, was trying....trying to figure out what...how many..." He shook his head and half curled over his legs. His shivering grew worse.

It was hard to remain hurt and angry in the face of such open self loathing. Andy knelt down and draped a towel over the pale shoulders. He gathered up the cash, peeling it away when it stuck and folded it up inside of the discarded shirt. "It doesn't matter."

"Stop being fucking nice to me!" Rez snapped. "You know what I am stop it!"

He lashed out and caught Rez's face between his hands and forced the other man to look at him. "Stupid fool! You think I didn't know? I mean really know what you were? Or that you might fall off the wagon and do it again? I'm not an idiot. It doesn't change a fucking thing. Don't you get it?" Then it occurred to him that maybe Rez didn't get it, he was I/S and not human. More, he'd never even had the example of parental love or friendships to guide him. The thought made Rez fucking Kesses seem small and his hurt over it petty and tears choked his voice. "Love doesn't just stop because the person you love does something stupid or isn't perfect. It doesn't stop if they're fucked in the head either. I'm pissed you'd do this to yourself but I still love you." The words tumbled out and the day had been too rough, the night too raw to hide or lie.

Pink eyes studied Andy for a long time as he sat there shivering. Finally he moved, his left hand extended out and he dropped his eyes. "I didn't...I..." Rez turned his hand over and it took everything he had to open his fist. The tiny plastic bag was sealed tight and the pink powder inside was still dry. "I wanted to...I didn't..." He groaned as he felt fingers slipping over his hand and the burning weight of the drug disappeared with them. "I want to....God I want to..." He'd stolen the bottle of whiskey from the stores at Sunshine house and started drinking to keep himself together until he could score some Shine but he'd kept drinking to keep from using it once he'd found some. After that he hadn't been picky about things, tricks or other drugs and was sick from both.

"Let's get you dried off." Andy answered softly. Rez didn't fight him as he tugged on a slender arm and got the man to stand on shaky legs. "Should have grabbed your robe, it'd have been warmer." He muttered as he tossed a towel around bare hips and helped guide Rez out to sit on the bench where the tea was waiting. "Drink it." He ordered as he pushed a mug at Rez and moved to try to dry the tangled purple hair. "Are you sober enough to hear some news?"

He was shaking and thought he might puke but he nodded. If the worst had happened he'd need to stay stoned or drunk or locked in a small room to keep from pulling the implant from his neck and using for real.

"Yasun is out of surgery and alive. He's unconscious, but as stable as can be expected."

"He'll live?"

"They don't know, not yet. It's too soon, he lost a lot of blood. Mick is fine, shot in the leg so he's going to be a bitch on crutches for a couple of weeks. One of Yasun's guards was killed, a couple more wounded. Epps was pretty badly shot too, he's still in surgery." He dropped the towel. "It's bad but we'll get through this."

Rez had only a sip or two of the tea before setting it aside. He sat, shivering cold rubbing at the tattoo on his forearm. "I can't go back." He confessed as Andy started to work the knots out of his hair with a comb. "I can't."

"Hmm? What're you talking about?" He glanced over the purple head and saw the way Rez was methodically rubbing at the red moon symbol as if he could wash it from his flesh if he just rubbed hard enough.

"I can't. I...if Toshi-san...if his house falls..." He was struggling to breath now. "I'll be sold I can't...I can't go back...I can't..."

"Toshi gave you your indenture papers didn't he? Even if the worst had happened you aren't owned by his house, you're a free man."

Rez shook his head. "It won't matter... I'm marked. It won't matter...too old for a house they'll just sell me to someone...I can't go back."

The comb caught in Rez's hair and Andy stopped fussing at the current knot. The fear seemed silly to him and ungrounded but to Rez, from the world Rez had come from, it was far too real. "Because of the red moon tattoos?"

Rez nodded, his hand still rubbing at the mark. He remembered getting the marks, he'd been at the Red Moon less than a week but he couldn't remember what his arms had looked like without them.

Andy came around the bench and crouched down so he could look into Rez's eyes. "I won't let anyone take you. I promise. Neither will anyone else."

Rez shook his head. "Won't matter."

"So let's change that."

"What?"

"Drink your tea, sober up and we'll go change it."

He shook his head. "Can't laser it off, I've looked, no one will try it on an I/S and the ink stays. It has to be cut off..."

"Not that..." He'd looked up the ways to remove a tattoo from an I/S as well, knowing the red moons bothered Rez and found no one willing to even try and quite a bit of testimony to the differences in I/S skin from human skin from the Committee's own experiments. "Tell me if you want this life or not. If you want to stay here, with me, or not. I won't stop you if you really want to walk back to the yards." It broke his heart to say that but he'd had enough addicts and drunks in and out of his life to know that no amount of wanting them to be sober could make them be sober. "I can deal with you falling off the wagon occasionally if I know you want to be here but you have to tell me."

"I don't..." Rez shook his head. "I don't deserve here...I....I should be in the Yards..."

"Fuck that! Which do you want? Make a choice."

Pink eyes, large and far too innocent for all they'd really seen, raised up and locked onto Andy's. "I want you." He was still too drunk and stoned to keep the words from slipping out but as soon as they did he felt his stomach turn over. He pushed himself to his feet and staggered away, struggling not to become ill on the floor. He slammed the toilet stall door shut behind him and locked it. He couldn't stand to wretch and puke and have Andy hold his hair or something tender like that.

Andy wasn't surprised to find the door locked but he pushed on it anyway. It didn't give and he was left to hover outside to listen to Rez gag and retch. The sound and the stress of the day



made Andy struggle with his own rising bile. It made him grateful when Rez finally went silent. It was another few moments before the toilet flushed and the door unlocked. Rez staggered out, naked, and moved to the sink to wash his mouth out.

Andy let him finish and turn the sink off before he followed and stood beside the shivering man. Rez was still partly leaned over the sink, letting the water drip from his face. Gently, carefully, Andy stroked the tips of his fingers over Rez's cold bare shoulder. The naked man flinched a little but when the touch didn't bring any pain he held still. Andy let his fingers wander over the shoulder to brush heavy wet hair back before trailing down an arm to pry the hand away from the tight grip it had on the sink. It took a little coaxing but Rez soon released his grip and it took more tugging to get Rez to turn so Andy could wrap his arms around him.

The body was cold and shivering and very tense in his arms. Rez made no move to reach and hold him back but neither did he try to pull away. It would have suited Andy just fine to hold him all night like that, close and sheltered but that wouldn't ease some of the deeper fears that continued to haunt them. With a last soothing pet to the slowly drying hair he pulled away.

"Drink your tea, get dressed, we're taking care of those marks tonight." He whispered into the overly silent bathroom before pressing a kiss to the troubled forehead. "Can't look too drunk or they won't do it."

Rez didn't ask, just nodded and agreed. He gathered up towels and wrapped one around his waist and another around his still wet hair but he moved slowly and with the overly deliberate care of someone well and thoroughly trashed. He took up the mug of tea in both hands and moved very slowly, very carefully, out of the bathroom toward his bedroom. Seeing him moving so deliberately almost made Andy change his mind, they could sleep it off tonight and go in the morning.

Only the morning would bring in more reporters and problems. Mick would be awake enough to demand they stay put and take no chances. There would be more things to do like moving them to the new apartments sooner rather than later so they weren't so spread out. The other I/S in detox would be brought out of it soon and that would keep everyone busy. Fixing an ownership tattoo on Rez wouldn't seem less important but he knew if they waited it would be pushed back behind more urgent problems until something else went wrong and this time the fears drove Rez to actually use again. It wasn't a chance he'd take when it could be so easily avoided.

There was no avoiding taking the car. The guards had fussed about even letting them go out but Andy had simply been stubborn and made it clear that they'd have to physically restrain him, hoping that Mick hadn't woken up enough from the drugs to give that order yet. He must have guessed right when they were bundled into the car instead of sat on or locked into a small contained room. It worried him that Rez never once asked where they were going and he didn't like how the slender man curled up on his side of the car, folded up onto himself and looking miserable.

The drive from his old apartment wasn't that far, a little too far to walk but not bad by bus. From the yards the trip felt like it took forever. It wasn't likely the shop would be closed but it was late and they didn't keep regular hours. When they finally pulled up out front the lights were still on and he breathed a sigh of relief even if the guards that almost stormed inside to secure it would piss off the owners.

"You change your mind?" Andy asked when Rez had barely glanced to the shop they'd stopped in front of.

"Looks dingy."

"It's fine, just a cheap rent area."

"They won't work on an I/S."

"Stippy is an artist, don't let the neighborhood fool you. He won't say no. If you don't want to...we can go home."

He shook his head. "We're here now."

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter Ninety Eight

"You still look drunk." Andy scolded and Rez only scowled back. He hid his smile at a more Rez like expression as he slipped from the car.

An old neon light blinked the words Tattoo and Piercing with an annoying hum. The splash of color was the only outward sign of what the shop was, beaded curtains blocked the storefront windows and covered the door. It wasn't the shop that the trendy went to but Andy knew his art and he knew where to go to find the best. Bells chimed over the door as he pulled it open and held it open for Rez to come inside with him.

They didn't make it further than the main room. It was a small place with a floor that wasn't dirty but so old that the dirt of too many feet had permanently made it look grungy. The chairs that lined the walls were old and battered with a look about them that said they'd maybe sat there forever or had been pulled in from the street side trash. The walls were lined with photos and sketches in a colorful array of samples all flashing with harsh black lines or soft reds or the metal flash of a newly pierced part. The lights were bright and they made Rez squint and feel sick, that's why he missed seeing the huge human right away.

The man was a mountain. Tall enough to dwarf Andy and twice as wide. It wasn't all fat, the strong arms popped from the shirt he wore and made it very clear he was capable of living and working in such a rough neighborhood without fear. His head was shaved bald but his face was hairy with a long beard. Rez almost didn't notice the decidedly unhappy look and feel of the man because he was lost in studying all the colorful designs that had been marked into the man's skin.

"No." The mountain said.

Andy tossed his hands out. "Stippy! That is no way to greet an old friend."

"No. I don't want no trouble, Andy. None and having these bug eyes crawling over my place after all the shit that's hit the fan today? Well that's asking for it." The guards all stiffened a little at the

insult. "So you just take your faggoty ass and get gone." When Andy took the insult to his own person without notice or offense the guards relaxed a little, the man may have been a bigot but for Andy to not mind he was a harmless one.

"Stippy! Who else can I come to for such delicate work? Of all the folks in this city who did I go to when I wanted my own tender flesh altered? Hmm? This is too important for anyone else to do."

The man folded his arms over his chest and didn't look impressed. "What is it?"

"A cover up job." He pulled the paper from his pocket. "A firebirds feather with some flames. It looks simple but it'll be difficult to do well."

The design was attractive enough that he did stop frowning to study it. "Where?"

"One on each forearm."

"Which freak gets it?"

"This one." He nodded to Rez.

"Hm." Dark eyes studied the sketch and studied Rez. "For someone just on the news going on about being sober he looks stoned out of his skull."

"He's sober enough to know what he wants. It's been a bad day Stippy, cut us all some slack. You can play dumb all you want with everyone else, I know you aren't. You know what marks mean to them. I don't need to tell you the importance of what we're asking you to do. It's late, if you're going to be a bitch about it I'll find someone else. They won't have your skill but they'll get the job done." Andy firmed his voice up and sounded as serious as he ever got.

"Hm. Ink'll take nice on something so pale, the colors will really stand out."

"I trust you'll make it beautiful."

He glanced to the guards. "See to it they don't steal me blind and I'll work on this one."

"Thanks Stippy."

"Hm. Well, you going to stand there all day, boy, or come back here and sit your ass down?"

Rez hesitated for a second but with an encouraging nod from Andy he followed the large human back into the shop.

For all the man's gruffness he was as skilled at his craft as Andy had promised. Rez sat where he was placed without a word and without a flinch let the new design be etched over the old. As the pattern grew, only slightly larger than the original red moons he'd worn for most of his life, the guards even drew in closer to watch. Most had never seen someone actually being tattooed and itched to learn more. When it sunk in to Stippy the nature of their interest he started telling and sharing stories that made the time pass quicker.

"There, all done. Didn't hurt did it?" He gruffed and stood up from his stool to bandage the second of Rez's arms.

"Thank you." Rez said, speaking for the first time but he was looking at Andy not Stippy. Andy smiled softly and nodded just a little bit.

"Alright folks, anyone else before I call it night?"

Andy's small smile lit up into a brighter one. "That should do it! Thanks so much Stippy, I knew I could count on you and it looks so beautiful. We'll just pay you and get out of your hair."

"Wait." Rez broke in. "Not yet...I..." He closed his eyes and drew a breath. "We're not done yet."

Stippy raised his eyebrows. "What else did you want done?"

"Not me. Him." He nodded to Andy.

"Me? Sweetie I can't make up my mind what shade of lipstick I like on me from one day to the next. Ink is a bit too lasting for flightly little me."

"No." He shook his head and glanced to the huge human. "He needs his nipple pierced."

"What?" Andy felt the blood drain from his face and swore his heart stopped beating when pink eyes settled on him. "You can't mean..."

"I mean it." He pulled his eyes away from his stunned lover. "Do it." He ordered the human. It was only after he'd opened his mouth that it occurred to him that Andy might not want Rez to be The One as he said. "If you want to." He added on quickly.

"Yeah I do, if you're sure you do?"

"I'm sure."

"Fag boy speakie English?" Stippy mocked back. "Am I shoving metal through flesh or not?"

Andy nodded. "Yeah, you are." But his eyes were locked only onto Rez as he wiggled and stripped off his shirt. Stippy just rolled his eyes as he wiped down the un-pierced nipple with alcohol and started to make tiny little pen marks to line up where he was going to shove metal in. The guards around them whispered quickly and quietly to each other unsure if letting Andy do it was letting him get harmed or not but wanting to see the process too much to stop it.

Finally Andy rolled his eyes as he was directed to sit down in a reclined chair. "Settle, it's okay, more than okay." That didn't stop him from flinching as Stippy caught his nipple in the forceps and stretched it out a little, flopping it back and forth as he lined up the needle. "Cold!" The needle paused. "Wait." His eyes darted from Stippy to Rez.

"What now? I want to go home sometime today."

"Rez, can he help?"

Stippy glanced between the two and for once didn't make some crude, awful comment. "Of course. Come here, boy."

Rez moved closer with uncertainty but he crept closer.

"Give me your hand, boy."

"What?" Rez questioned but he offered his hand.

Stippy took it and curled Rez's fingers around the needle. He kept his hand over top of Rez's and he checked the alignment again. "Straight through, one push, don't hesitate."

Rez's eyes were even wider than normal but at Andy's slight nod he swallowed his protest. He may not understand the whole piercing thing but it was an important sign to Andy and he

understood that. Just as Andy hadn't quite understood why the tattoos he wore had to go, he'd just made them go away. He drew a breath, held it, and forced the needle forward. For one odd second the needle just pushed and didn't go through but the skin broke and he felt it in his fingers. After that, the metal moved easily and in a heartbeat was sticking from the other side.

"Good." Stippy said and let go of the forceps.

"It didn't bleed." Rez wanted to touch the needle that stuck from Andy's flesh but Stippy frowned at him.

"Needle's in." With slick, well practice movement he twisted and moved and the needle was suddenly replaced with another little ring.

Andy winced at that but otherwise didn't complain.

"You know the drill." Stippy grumbled as he cleaned and covered the new piercing. "Uncover it, keep the antibiotic cream on it, wash it in an anispetic soap twice a day for a good two or three minutes, don't pick at it, spin the ring when you're cleaning it, no bodily fluids on it until it's fully healed, don't pull on it until its healed and it could take six months or more to be fully healed up so don't rush it."

"I remember." Andy nodded and sat up, a little light headed but unwilling to show it. He shrugged back into his shirt and hid another wince but it really wasn't a pain he minded. Stippy grumbled about the late hour as Andy paid and got them back into the car outside without any further drama.

Until his phone rang and he sighed at the number on it. "Mick, sweetie...no...no...Mick...we're fine...it wasn't foolish...no...I'm not a child Mick, I know how serious the situation is....we're fine....yes heading home now....no...no...put Toshi on...Mick...put Toshi on or I'm hanging up....good...." He rolled his eyes at Rez as the car started to roll back toward the Yard. "Toshi? Sweetheart you know I love you both right? So you know I'm saying this from a place of love...sedate him. If you don't knock him out he won't sleep tonight and there isn't anything he can do....good...no no we're fine...Rez is fine, he's home now...we're good how about on your end?" He nodded and listened and felt the weight of Rez's eyes on him. "Good, you rest too and we'll bring you a clean suit in the morning, you just stay there. Alright, love you, bye." He clicked the phone off. "Toshi already had a doctor giving our boy something small to make him drift off to la la land. He'll be awake and obsessing all night otherwise. No change on Yasun or Epps or anyone but Toshi is staying over there tonight, with Alec so he's not alone. Which means you're stuck with me, buddy." The pain over his heart suddenly made him uneasy and uncomfortable. "You really mean it?" Andy asked, the false light tone disappeared.

There was no doubt what Andy meant and Rez nodded. "Yeah, if I'm...I'm acceptable." He closed his eyes and felt himself shivering, shaking again and he wanted to run away and get lost in Shine and indifference. "I like how I feel around you."

"And what would that feeling be?"

It took him a long moment as the car rolled past the human city to find the right words. "Safe." He finally answered. "Safe and not alone, even if I'm..." fingers covered his lips.

"You're mine." Andy finished. "We need some rules first."

"Rules?"

Andy nodded. "Rule one, when shit hits the fan like this we stick together, buddy system. We'll keep each other from doing dumb shit, deal?"

"Dumb shit like me using?"

"Or me sitting in a corner to scared shitless to move." He nodded. "You sober enough to know what you're agreeing to?"

"Fuck you." He was coming down, his body burned off alcohol fast and whatever he'd smoked earlier in the night to avoid snorting Shine had lasted only long enough to get him well and thoroughly drunk.

"Good. Rule two, we play together."

Rez had to focus to think about that one. "You mean no fucking others."

"No, I mean no fucking others alone or with the other one uninformed. Don't lie to me, don't sneak around on me. If I have a problem with you banging someone I'll let you know. I'll do the same for you, deal?"

Rez thought about Andy and Toshi, thought about how the smell of the more powerful man on the human lover he'd grown so addicted to drove him crazy. It wasn't a crazy in a bad way and he knew he'd like to watch that scene, knew Andy would enjoy being watched. It also took away his worry about trying to conform to human ideas of sex and relationships.

Finally he nodded. "Deal. What else?"

"You move into that loft with me. We'll wall in a section and it can be your space that when you're in there I leave you alone cause I know I can be a pain in the ass and a bother and all that sometimes."

The offer as one of the conditions and rules Andy wanted to establish surprised him. "I don't need a walled in space. What else?"

The car cut into the night for several blocks before Andy was able to speak again. "When I'm old and ugly, you'll still be here? Even if we're just friends..."

Rez saw it, the fear Andy had confessed to him on other dark nights, one that ate at him as well. That gnawing dread of being all alone with no one that understood or cared to understand, alone, forgotten and ignored. "Dumbass." He muttered and it wasn't the tender words he wanted to say, the confession of his own desire to fit and belong somewhere but it was enough.

The cold, sharp fear fled Andy's eyes and a smile flickered across his face. "Good, it's settled." He reached across the car seat and pulled at Rez's shoulder and kept tugging until the man allowed himself to be drawn near. It was stiff and awkward at first but when Andy didn't pull away or end it Rez gave in.

They molded together with Andy's arm around Rez's shoulders and Rez let go and rested his throbbing head against Andy. One of his hands crept slowly and almost timidly out to circle Andy's waist and when it wasn't pushed away or mocked he clung there, needing the warmth and shelter of not just a silly, absurd human but of his lover.

"Didn't it hurt?" He finally asked as the car turned into the Yards.

Andy shrugged. "Naw, I'm tougher than I seem."

Rez reached up and touched the so recently abused nipple and even with his care and the padding of fabric and gauze, Andy still flinched and hissed in pain. "Liar."

"Bitch."

“Slut.”

“Bunny.”

“Twat.”

Andy chuckled. “I love you too.”

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Chapter Ninety Nine

“Turn that off!” Andy ordered as he sailed in to the hospital floor that Mick was tucked in. The television was on and Mick was sitting up, watching the press conference he wasn’t supposed to have known about.

“Anyone touches it and I’ll break their arm!” Mick snapped back but he ignored the doctors that were working on his leg and locked eyes with Andy. “You knew about this?” Something the doctors did made a crunching sound and Mick groaned in pain and went three shades paler.

“For the love of God they aren’t cleaning the wound without pain killers are they?” Andy ignored the threat and moved to Mick’s bedside.

The doctors didn’t answer and Mick only continued to grit his teeth and glare at the screen.

“Mick, don’t be stupid, let them give you something.”

“No! Every time they do I’m asleep for hours.” He winced again but pointed to the screen. “You knew about this?”

Andy glanced to the monitor and sighed. Toshi was walking around the I/S market in the Yards, the press following him like a flock of ducks and his guards moved around the whole group looking unhappy and very serious. Toshi had his sunglasses off and his huge blue eyes seemed welcoming and kind in the bright afternoon sunlight. The camera loved it and each time Toshi stopped at a stand or booth or blanket to show off the craftsmanship of his people the Andy could almost feel the audience watching be drawn in more. The actual conference hadn’t started yet, Toshi had invited the press to join him for a walk through their market where he would speak of what had happened the day before.

“Yeah, I knew.”

"He's not even wearing sunglasses, it's two in the afternoon, he's going to be blind in that sun, he won't even see it coming! Why didn't any of you tell me!"

"Because Toshi said you'd flip out and he needed to do this. The guards are being careful."

"It's a flesh wound, I should be there." Mick winced and shook his head. "He shouldn't be there. What's he trying to do? Get himself killed too? There's no way to secure the market, there's too many side ways and alleys and all those booths anyone can..."

Andy put a hand on Mick's shoulder. "It's okay. He went over all the risks but he wanted to show that he wasn't afraid."

"He should be afraid! We screened the press for yesterday a dozen times, no one should have been there that wanted to kill anyone. We searched all the bags and equipment and still someone got in. He may as well have a target on his forehead doing this stunt!"

"Mick, he can't ask world leaders to come to this conference for independence if it's believed to be dangerous. This is why he didn't want you to know until it was over."

"I should be there."

"And what? Hobble around on crutches when you can barely make it to the bathroom on them without getting light headed from the pain? You'd be in the way, you trained the guard, they wouldn't have let you go."

Mick groaned. It was rooted in the horribly sharp pain from whatever it was the doctors were doing to his leg but it expressed his helpless sick feeling too. Toshi was off making a target of himself, daring anyone else to take a shot at him and Mick wasn't there to protect him. "If anything happens..."

Andy sat on the edge of the bed. He took the remote and turned the volume up a little. Maybe if Mick concentrated on that instead of his leg it would hurt less. Than again, watching the screen seemed to only be making him more high strung and upset.

Toshi paused and turned from one stand to look at the press that followed him. "The shooter's name was Harve Eli Stonshjick, he'd had a rough time of it. He lost his job over two years ago and hadn't been able to find steady work. About eleven months ago his wife left him and took their two kids with her. Six months ago he became involved with a human purity group and became sucked into their hate spewing. He did not work for KBLX and was a last moment substitution for their normal technician. My family and myself all offer our deepest sympathies to his family. Mr. Stonshjick may have lost his way and been consumed by hate but he was still a son, a husband and a father and his loss will be felt. It is my belief and the belief of my family and I would hope that of all I/S that most humans are good people. A people with compassion and concern for others and ones that value justice and fairness and freedom.

"Because of this faith in humanity I would like to extend the offer my Uncle was unable to extend yesterday. I'd like to personally invite representatives of the world's governing bodies to come here and meet out people for yourself. An invitation to come here and walk this market, to see how my people live and to discuss our future. Together we can set aside racism and hatred and together address the injustices my people have endured and the stability of our future we'd like to build." Toshi paused and tried to look warm and inviting and yet still firm and like a leader. As soon as he paused the press started to shout out questions but Toshi just smiled. "Please, I'm here to pick up candy for my nieces and nephews. This shop down here on the corner? They make the best rice candy you'll ever taste and my Uncle always brings some home to his children. I've promised him I'll see to his weekly treat for him. You're welcome to come along with me."



Andy tsked at the way Mick was frowning. "Don't give him a hard time over this, he had to do it and he didn't tell you because he didn't want you all knotted up with worry."

"Hmp." Mick shook his head.

"You won't let them give you something?"

"I'll live."

"Stubborn. Do you need anything? I'm going over to the clinic to help Rez get the first five settled in at the club. He's even more of a bitch when hung over, believe it or not."

"I'm fine." He almost snarled out and then remembered it was Andy and not his fault. "I'm sorry, I'm..."

"Hush." Andy leaned down and kissed his friend. "I understand. Mick...I..." He paused, unsure if he should say anything.

"What?"

"Epps' ex-wife is here with his kids. If...you know, you'd like to see them and Papa Mike is fussing about the wounded I/S because he isn't sure you'll let him fuss about you."

Mick hadn't wanted to think about that and most of his awake time had been eaten up with worrying about other things. The close call on his own life didn't bother him but the idea that it could have been Toshi not Yasun as the target was killing him. It was a sick gnawing in his stomach because everything good he'd ever found had eventually left or been taken from him and part of him expected that to hold true for Toshi as well.

He softened his temper and nodded. "Thanks. Hey?" He called out as Andy stood up.

"Hmm?" But seeing Mick wince again made him want to look away.

"How's Rez? Really?"

Andy thought about how Rez had taken forever to get to sleep but once he had he'd curled up in his arms like a wounded child. "He's going to be okay. You, mister, I can't say as much about, do what the docs tell you and don't protest or I'll have to come back and sit on you!"

Mick just rolled his eyes, or would have if he hadn't winced again.

The doctors stitched, prodded, stapled, glued and cleaned the wound on his leg for a while after Andy left. It was okay, he needed to be awake to scan the crowds of the market around where Toshi was walking, as if his extra set of eyes might see danger from a time delayed news feed when the dozens of guards on the ground would miss it. It was a false sense of control but one he needed. He watched until Toshi smiled again and was guided into a car with dark tinted windows and armor plating.

That meant that Toshi was safe. The car could survive almost any strike short of a missile and it wasn't likely that any of the hate groups could get their hands on that kind of fire power. It was more of a relief than when the doctors had finished and bandaged his leg once more. He was exhausted from pain and worry but too tightly wound up for sleep. His nerves were trembling like after a fight and he wanted to pace and move around and burn off that false high of energy.

It hurt to move. The shot had gone clean through his leg and did as little damage as a bullet could do but it still hurt with a burning fire every time he moved. That didn't stop him from getting

the crutches under him and getting out of bed. He needed to move and needed to get used to the pain because he wasn't going to stay in bed or off his feet for long. There was too much to do and staying on the side lines was too difficult.

The guards in the hallway gave him a hard look but he frowned back at them and they kept their fussing thoughts to themselves. He needed to get used to being mobile on crutches and the hallways of their closed off sections made for good practice. It was something he could do, some actual action he could work on instead of the gnawing feeling of helplessness.

He was halfway down the hallway before it sunk in that he was moving toward the room set up for human casualties. He'd planned for them to be segregated just to make care easier but Toshi had demanded Mick be kept in the most secure section, the same section of hallway Yasun was being cared for in and not in the slightly less secure side section. He paused at the closed doors and almost turned around. He didn't want to see Epps' happy perfect family with all rallied around him.

Want to or not, he pushed the button to open the doors and waited while they swung back. With a sigh he moved through the doorway. He told himself he was only moving to practice and nothing more. He told himself he was just checking on Epps because the man had been wounded on his watch. It didn't matter both felt like lies. The reality was that Epps had another family, one that had mattered and something inside of Mick needed to see it to make it real.

The guard at the door frowned at seeing him on his feet but she kept her protests to herself. Neither did she ask what Mick was doing in the hallway, she just nodded with her chin down the corridor knowing why he'd be there. Mick nodded his thanks and kept going. He was here now and wasn't going to turn around. The hallway turned a corner and he followed it past an almost deserted nurses station to the only room lit up.

One wall was glass to allow easy observation without disturbing a resting patient. The curtain inside was pulled back and Mick stopped outside to peer in. Epps was on the bed. He was hooked up to a half a dozen machines and looked pale and limp. The quick disarming smile was gone and in its place was a breathing tube. Pushed to the side were several black pieces of luggage and on one of the small tables was a small stack of young adult books, the thin ones with the colorful covers and stories not quite grown up enough for a teenager. His father had been shot and could be dying and the man's real family had arrived to do what real families did in times of crisis.

"Hello?" A woman's voice spoke softly in the silence of the hallway and footsteps echoed.

Mick startled and nearly lost his balance on the crutches. He had to juggle them a little and managed to get turned enough to see the woman coming up beside him. She was in her mid to late forties with plain brown hair cut to a simple style that wouldn't require a lot of fuss. She had on eyeliner and mascara but only lip gloss on her lips. She wore slacks and a nice blouse and simple, understated jewelry. There was no mistaking who she could be and she wasn't the fabulous beauty Mick had been expecting.

"I'm sorry, I'll be on my way." He turned as best he could on the crutches and was surprised by his own growing exhaustion.

"Wait...please..." She called after him but didn't move closer. "You're Paul's son, aren't you? Teresa McKale's boy?"

Mick stopped and clutched the hand supports on the crutches so tightly he was surprised he didn't break something.

"It is you. You look a lot like Paul and Donny, our son. They went down to get some food, one of your guards followed them. That should have made me nervous but oddly it made me more willing to let them go off alone."

Mick didn't turn around, he didn't want to see all that he'd never had. "I should go."

"Stay, please?" She stepped closer. "There's a little lounge here, they have coffee..." She pointed over her shoulder. "I just put a pot on... I'm Jen by the way, I don't know if he's told you my name. We're divorced but still friends, we talk all the time. He's called me almost every night and told me about you. Have a cup of coffee with me?"

He wanted to leave, to run as far and as fast as he could. The last thing he wanted was to join what could have been, or maybe was, his stepmother for coffee. Like it or not, Epps was his biological father and fate hadn't given him the time to accept and deal with that fact. In a few years he might have been ready to meet the woman and her children but he wasn't sure he was ready now.

"I won't bite, I promise."

Mick sighed. "I could use a cup."

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Chapter One Hundred

Jen smiled brighter. "Good, I could use the company and you look like you could use a chance to get off your feet."

He followed her to the small side lounge and dropped himself roughly onto a lounge. It was wide enough that he could prop his leg up beside him which stopped the throbbing a little. That didn't stop him from groaning a little.

"I saw on the news you'd been shot. It's not too bad is it? Sugar? Cream?"

"Blacks fine." He waited until she poured the dark brew into a paper cup and brought it to him. "It's through and through, it'll heal okay."

"Have you been shot before?" She fussed at her own cup before sitting down.

Mick shrugged. "Couple of times."

"Like father like son. Must be genetic. I keep my fingers crossed that Donny gets my homebodiness and not his father's sense of wanderlust and danger."

"He's not my father." He blew on the too hot drink. "I mean he is but he's not." Mick shook his head and looked for a place to put his coffee down. "I should go."

"I'm sorry, don't go because I'm pushy. I know this will take time... here just let me show you something before you go....it's in my handbag...hang on a moment..." She placed her coffee on the table in the center of the room and hurried out.

It left Mick alone and with the perfect chance to escape. Instead he kept sitting there, holding his hot coffee, blowing on it slightly trying to cool it down to drink. He'd sat down and now felt involved and unable to leave.

She returned sooner than he would have liked, a leather wallet in her hands. Instead of taking her seat again she moved to pull another chair closer. "Paul's wallet. I made the mistake of looking through it once. He's a good father, an excellent reporter but he was a lousy husband....never quite get the whole don't sleep with other women around the world thing. Anyway, while I was snooping I found this..." She dug into the wallet and pulled out photos of their own children. "Tucked behind a picture of our kids, it's a letter from your mother."

Mick didn't accept the old, well folded, paper. "Do you know anything about me?"

"Not really." She smiled gently. "I know Paul's said the greatest regret of his life is that he didn't take this letter seriously and find out if you really were his."

"I'm not his." He hissed out. "He ran off and never looked back."

"That sounds like Paul. I haven't told my children yet but the doctors say the odds are about even for him."

"He was told if something happened to get down, to stay down and out of the way." Mick frowned. He'd been wearing a vest, the odds were pretty good that he'd have been only a little more worse for the wear, a few more bruises on his ribs, maybe another limb hit but Epps had been unprotected and the man had leapt into the line of fire.

Jen shrugged. "He's a father. Someone was trying to shoot his son." She offered the letter again.

It wasn't thinking about Epps that made him pause now but rather his mother. The less Mick thought about his birth and parents the happier he was. There was too much unresolved about his mother, things that could never be healed or fixed and he didn't like lingering on it. Worse, thinking about her made his throat feel tight and made it more difficult to force words out. Now it looked like there were fair odds of his father dying before he'd have a chance to resolve the troubles between them.

"Keep it." He finally answered and put his coffee down on the table untouched. "I...I can't do this now. I can't...if he dies..." Mick drew a breath. "When he's better, we'll figure this out but I need some time."

"I can understand that. I haven't...we haven't told Donny and Sue about you, not yet. Paul wanted to wait and I didn't want to tell them about a brother that they might not ever meet. Would you like to meet them?"

He caught a glimpse of the pictures she held that had been inside his father's wallet. Smiling, young faces with neatly combed dark hair, faces that would look something like his own if he really cared to see. Siblings that were his by blood not by adoption or chance. Siblings he'd have nothing in common with while his adopted ones all shared similar backgrounds.

"I can't make that choice right now. When the dust settles...maybe." He found himself unconsciously touching the chain necklace around his neck. "Maybe."

"That's better than a no. They'll simply die knowing their big brother is someone so famous."

"I'm not, I just work for someone who is." Mick wasn't even sure if she knew the nature of his relationship with Toshi and figured the whole, big brother likes to bang guys, conversation could wait. "I should get back." He struggled to stand up but when she moved to help he blocked her and preferred to struggle on his own until the crutches were safely under him.

"Mr. McKale?"

He stopped as he swung out into the hallway.

"Don't judge him too harshly. Paul's a different man now and he really does care about you."

It would be so easy to fall into that and let go. It would be easier to pretend he wasn't angry and hurt to his core from his past. Everything could be okay now, his birth father was here like some long delayed answered prayer and cared about him. He could close his eyes and pretend all of the bad wasn't there.

"He doesn't know me." Mick answered. He'd never been good at lying to himself. It wasn't something he wanted to debate or discuss, least of all with her. As he shuffled his way from the room not even the pain in his leg could keep him there.

Luckily, his would be stepmother didn't follow as he made his way to the door and beyond. Neither did the guard comment or try to help, he wasn't in the mood for that and didn't like taking his moods out on people that didn't deserve it. He wanted to go back to his room or back to his apartment, back to Toshi and the relationship they shared. The world seemed easier to manage that way and the last twenty four hours had him longing for easier, simpler.

Only when he came to his room he kept moving. It wasn't that much further until he reached the third section, the one he'd planned set aside for I/S casualties. Yasun was tucked between where he was supposed to be resting and where the other I/S were being treated. There was an area set up for research and care, a place he knew his family was holed up doing what they could to treat a people who had never known true medical care. He knew what he was looking for and knew he couldn't go back to resting quietly like they wanted until he found it.

It wasn't a long search. The door pushed easily open and he swung in on his crutches. The tables were covered in computers with black screens and hard copy papers. Empty coffee cups were stacked together as silent testament to the long hours spent trying to save lives and treat the wounded. Most importantly, a tall, shaggy haired man with an overgrown beard was seated, studying the files on his computer screen.

Papa Mike glanced up when the door opened but when he saw Mick standing there he stood up as well. "Amun." He cleared his throat and wiped his hands onto his shirt. "You look better than I'd feared. I hope you can forgive it but we looked over your medical reports."

Mick shook his head but the words stuck. He stood for a moment, trying to balance his weight on arms that were rapidly feeling weak and wobbly. When he was certain he'd never be able to say what he wanted he hobbled forward.

"Easy, if you fall you'll pull open the wound." Mike warned and had to reach out and get his hands on Mick's shoulders to steady him.

Only Mick wasn't looking to be steadied, he stumbled forward until he'd thumped into the taller

man's chest. He remembered the first time he'd let Mike hug him, how small he'd felt enfolded in the man's arms, how his deep happy laugh echoed through his body. Even growing bigger and older, Mick still felt eleven years old and protected as those arms wrapped around him. Mike only paused a second before he sighed and pulled Mick close, he even ruffled the auburn hair and rubbed the tense back the same way he had when Mick was a child.

With a sniffle and a rub at his eyes Mick pulled away and Mike smiled. "You always did ambush people when you wanted hugged. Does this mean you've forgiven me?"

"I...I'm going to be angry for a while." He admitted while he studied the floor.

"I can understand that."

"You knew, you all knew, and you let me go on feeling so...so... but you're my father, my family. I don't want you to go anywhere."

"Not even if you ask me to." Mike grinned.

"I need some time."

"Okay."

Mick glanced up to the too long hair and too shaggy beard and how his father's clothes were rumbled. Outside of his lab he looked even more like the mad scientist but to Mick the man looked like home. "I need to know you'll still be here if I take that time." He couldn't force himself to not feel hurt and angry but he knew he could swallow it and hide it. If he did that he was frightened of what it would fester into and he wanted to just give himself the time he needed to let it purge on its own.

"You take whatever time you need. We didn't hide this from you to hurt you. We did it trying to protect you. I'm sorry, we're all sorry. It's about killed Rose to know how much we've hurt you."

All he could do was nod.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine. How's Yasun?"

Mike shrugged. "If he were human he'd be dead but he's not. He's fighting."

Mick felt his control pulling around him again, gathering tight to his heart. It was brittle and painful but it allowed him to function. There was a time when he'd worried that he could feel nothing, that the abuse and isolation of his past had broken more than his bones. It had been a lingering fear, one that had kept him silent even after the words were freed from his throat. As a child he'd made Rose swear not to tell anyone he could speak even after he gathered the nerve to share his voice with her. It was too much of a risk, he worried that if he spoke they'd see how damaged he was, how not normal and send him away.

It was an entirely different fear now. Now he knew he could feel, too much sometimes. He cared deeply for his adoptive family even if it had gained him no end of mocking in college and on the police force. He loved Andy as a brother he'd never had and his feelings for Toshi had grown to the point where he felt choked by them, consumed by them. He loved them all so much the worry for their safety and fear of their loss woke him in the night, chilled and panicked.

He knew now that the control and coldness he pulled around himself wasn't a sign of feeling nothing but rather the opposite. To function, to do all the things he had to do he needed that coldness, that distance. Otherwise it was all too much. It would be too great a burden to know

that his wrong choice, his flinch or pause, could result in someone he cared so deeply for being harmed. He was grateful for the distance and control he carried but right now he cursed it. Right now all he wanted was to sit near his father and watch the man work like he had as a child.

Mick cleared his throat and glanced up from the floor. "He'll make it, he's the toughest man I've ever met. Don't let the long hair fool you."

"Son?"

The softness in the deep voice made him look up and meet the warm brown eyes.

"You do what you need to do to find your answers with Mr. Epps. It won't change anything between us. Nothing in this world can make me stop loving you." One shoulder shrugged. "Not even you. You're my son."

That hit Mick like a fist to his stomach. He knew they claimed him and offered him family and a home but things were always so clinical. It was a distance he'd needed as a child and one he thought he needed as an adult. The clinical acceptance of his parents was one thing, being flat out told he was loved and claimed as a son was something else entirely. He wasn't sure if it was the recent close call or if it was just the shake up of Epps arrival but he didn't care.

Mick's lips barely quirked up in a grin but his eyes glossed over with a smile. "Don't get mushy on me." He muttered back. "I have to go get off my feet, this leg is killing me." His avoidance wasn't misunderstood and he saw the amusement in the too often distracted eyes. This man knew him.

"I'll be by to see you later?"

That made him nod. "I'll look forward to it." He turned and got himself to the doors and paused. His back was still to the scientist that had adopted him. "Dad." He tacked on softly but didn't doubt for a moment that the man heard. Mick ducked his head and moved quickly from the room, hurrying back to his room and hoping beyond hope that he'd find Toshi had returned.

Next Chapter

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter One Hundred One

The controlled calm of the hospital was a strong contrast the chaos of the reporters that had swarmed around the building. Their numbers had grown over night from those stationed in the city to crews from across the globe. They'd been forced to park their equipment vans a good space back but that didn't stop them from hovering too close to the entrance he had to use. Andy was guided from the door and questions started to fly at him.

"I'm flattered and I do like the attention," Andy called back as he moved quickly for the open car door. "But you vultures need to buzz off." He shook off the lingering questions but as the door was closed behind him something odd caught his eye.

Off to the side, standing alone and behind the press of reporters, were two men. They were dressed nicely but not in a reporter on air stylish nice. Instead they wore simple suits and dark sunglasses that almost but not quite blended in. They weren't pushing forward to toss questions at him. They just stood there, watching and occasionally one leaned over and spoke to the other and the man would jot something down on a small hand held computer.

"Hey." Andy leaned forward toward the front seat and the two guards seated there. "Those guys? Off to the side in the suits?"

That made the guards frown. "Don't worry about them, Andy-san."

"But, they aren't reporters. Shouldn't you...I don't know they're lurking."

The pair exchanged a look and the woman behind the wheel shrugged before the man answered. "They're Committee. They're here to watch us."

Andy's head swung around trying to catch another glimpse of the pair but the car was moving now and he couldn't spot them. "But..."

"It's okay, Andy-san, they won't make a move right now." The woman answered with a smile in her rear mirror.

"Like to see them try..." Her partner muttered.

He wanted to protest more but was afraid to. All of the guards were tense and unhappy and most were looking for a fight. If the Committee had any brains they'd stay lurking in the background for as long as they could. With Mick down for a bit and Toshi distracted with family concerns and the weight of an entire people on his shoulders, the guards would happily take the chance to rip the hated members of the Committee to small parts. While he knew he was safe with them, Andy didn't feel like poking at the guards tempers any, they had enough to deal with at the moment.

They drove with their motorcycle escort across city streets. The long colorful hair sticking out from the helmets of the motorcycle riders drew notice. People actually stopped and stared and Andy studied them. Were they angry or concerned, or fearful maybe? He couldn't tell as they drove by but no one threw anything or cursed at them, if anything he thought they might have worn expressions of concern. If ever there was a city that shouldn't hold onto the lingering fears of plague and illness connected to the I/S community it should be there's. After all, so many of them wandered to the market now if only to gawk and so many more into the Yards and clubs for sex and drugs.

It had been his city for most of his adult life. Andy had been comfortable walking the darkest street at the latest hours because he believed in his city, and had Mick with him most of those times. Now, after only a few months, as they rolled from the city streets to the more industrial neighborhoods that hovered closer to the Yards and into the Yards proper he felt like he was going home. The city still felt like his but now as if he'd outgrown the person he had been. Life wasn't just about paying the bills and making rent. It wasn't even about getting a showing or finding time from work to paint, or the money to buy paint. It wasn't even about going out and being noticed, maybe being loved. He was part of something so much larger now and it had changed him in ways he'd never expected.

The car rolled to a stop and Andy slipped out before they could open the door for him. He knew they preferred the formality but he didn't and only tended to allow it in areas that weren't secure.



If they weren't safe outside of the clinic, with it's workmen still moving around and I/S wandering by to stare at the building, they weren't likely to be safe anywhere. He smiled as brightly as he could given that he was worried sick and short on sleep.

"Thanks!" He nodded to his escort and moved to go into the clinic before they could open that door either.

The bottom floors of the clinic were almost done. Workers turned and watched him, human and I/S alike. It wouldn't be long until they'd be able to open to treat flus and broken bones and anything else that came in from the camp or the human population around it. They wouldn't be a full hospital but Toshi had seen to it they'd be awfully close and Mick's family were providing the specialists. Every day, every time he came over, more faces were around and from their have vacant distracted look and short phrases using long words, Andy knew who they were.

"Andy." Pia nodded and smiled as he came out the door to the stairs, the elevators weren't working.

"Heya sweetie how's things?"

Her smile became a little distant. "About the same for you I'd imagine, been better."

"Alec sends his love and such."

"No he doesn't but I know he would." Her smile brightened. "How is he?"

"Stressed, tired, worried from what I could tell. He gets all twitchy when he's trying to juggle too many things."

"I can imagine."

"And he needs a shower and a shave....if you've ever had any desire to see him almost scruffy..."

That made her laugh and her eyes sparkled. "Once you collect your ducklings I'll be free for a while. I'll go over and take everyone food."

"He'd like that." He glanced around. "Where should I go?"

"Oh, down this hall to the back room. Can't miss it."

"Thanks." He paused. "Is Rez..."

"He's here, grumpy but here. Adam is bringing the last one out in a moment and they'll be ready. Will you need help getting them settled? They're in rough shape."

"We'll manage, the guards are going to pitch in. I'll call if we need you."

"I'll keep the phones on."

The smile he gave her this time was not as bright but a lot more real. He followed the hall back to what was obviously a lounge or some form of living room. Sturdy sofas and chairs sat in loose clusters and tvs mounted high on the wall should have been soothing. Only the screens were blank and the sofas held half curled and very miserable looking I/S. Andy's eyes went to the only person in the room he had even a fragment of a relationship with.

"Heya Snow, you look awful."

She lifted her head from her hands. Her blue wavy curly hair was limp and flat and still damp on the ends and her orange eyes were red rimmed. "Artist-san."

"Don't worry." He tried to sound soothing. "First couple of days are the worst. Soon you'll be home and can sleep all you want until you feel better."

She nodded bleakly. It didn't help that she was wearing casual, borrowed clothes. The shorts were baggy and plain and the shirt was far too loose across her shoulders and hung on her. Even if she'd been dressed to impress and show off her elegant coloring and frame, she'd still have looked like something that should have been dead for a few days.

Rez was not in the room and neither was his green haired friend. Before Andy could go looking for either man the door opened. Rez held it, his hair still pulled back into the braid Andy had woven for him that morning and he still looked hung over. For as bad as Rez looked, Jos looked worse. This coloring made his skin look off, a touch too green from all the glossy hair, and he moved like everything hurt. His hair was loose and still wet from his obviously recent shower.

Rez's pink eyes instantly locked on to Andy and instead of walking with Jos to one of the empty, comfortable chairs he touched the man's elbow and nodded to it instead. Jos followed Rez's eyes and frowned at seeing the human but he didn't protest the offer of a seat. Instead he shuffled over and dropped himself heavily into it.

"Hey." Andy said softly as the purple haired man joined him. "How're you feeling?"

Rez shrugged. "Wasn't sure you'd come."

"Miss this? Not for the world." He teased and glanced about the room. "They look bad."

"They'll live." He muttered but all he wanted to do was drag the human away to some side room and do bad things to him until he was willing to return the favor. Seeing and feeling so many I/S all on the edge and sick from early withdrawals made his only close call feel closer. "They don't know, you know, about all the shit that's been going on."

"Good idea. Headache any better?"

Rez's only reply was a look that could have stripped paint from the walls.

"I'll take that as a no." He glanced across the room and the only person bothering to look back at him was Jos. "Want to get them moving? We need to get our rooms moved too. Alec wants anything we want right away packed and moved tonight. He's having people come in and move the rest while we sleep. So it won't show up to be unpacked until sometime tomorrow and with it will be the stuff in storage so it's going to be a mess. The loft isn't finished either but I do have people working on it and the furniture should arrive in a couple of days."

"I don't care. Just stop yammering." He snapped back. "Bad enough I've got to deal with their shit today when I think my heads going to roll off!"

Andy only chuckled. "Welcome to the rest of the world sweetie. No getting high the next day to take the edge off." He stepped away from the grumpy man and clapped his hands. Everyone, including Rez, groaned. "Listen up, I know you're feeling like shit but you can't stay here. There's a car downstairs, we're going to move there and they'll take you to your new house. We've set up some rooms for you, you've clothing there and the like. I'll make us some food and you all will eat, I know you don't want to but you will. After that, you'll be in lock down for the next week. The guards will have orders none of you are to leave. If you do leave, you've lost your chance. This first week is going to be the hardest. The club isn't running yet, you'll only have two jobs, to learn and get your education up to a proper standard and to take care of yourselves as newly sober people. Sound good?"

The group was still too used to obeying and doing as they were told to protest and but Rez rolled his eyes. It didn't take much to get them moving and into the cars. Jos rode with Rez and Andy, Snow as well and Andy was left pretending he didn't notice the looks he was getting. Rez didn't have to pretend, he set his head back against the seat and tried not to become ill.

It took the better part of the afternoon to get everyone settled in. The hard part was convincing them that the semi private rooms of two or three beds were theirs. After that they had to convince them that the shared bathroom was only for the people in the small set of rooms. It seemed out of the realm of their understanding that they'd have the luxury of such privacy or of a bathroom that wasn't communal. Andy failed at convincing them they needed some sort of sheet of instructions for their day to day life but he did successfully lie and tell them the net and television access wasn't hooked up yet. The truth was, Rez had it disabled so they'd have at least a day to settle in before finding out that someone had tried to kill Yasun. It didn't seem fair but he couldn't debate the issue. Rez was so much further along in his recovery and it had shaken his resolve.

"What're you smirking over?" Andy asked over his pot of boiling water. He was going to make a bland pasta, something with vegetables and unlikely to upset systems already so out of whack. He'd just dumped the pasta into the water when Rez came into the floors kitchen wearing a smirk that meant trouble.

"I'm making them set the table."

"And that's worth a smirk why?"

"Because none of them have done that before, or eaten a meal proper like you and Toshi-san do. If they're going to do this, they're going to do it right." Rez slipped up behind his lover and wrapped his arms around his waist. "Come into the pantry with me." He whispered.

Andy half turned and frowned. "What?"

Rez licked the curve of one delicate ear. "Come into the pantry with me." He whispered into that same ear and felt the shiver that darted through the human.

"Rez..." Andy put the spoon down and turned in the man's arms. "You know I'd like to..."

It wasn't quite a rejection but hurt still crept across Rez's eyes before he could chase it away. "But?"

"It's not our pantry and they'll think they have to...you know it'll leave the wrong impression." It was part of the truth. The whole truth was he knew Rez was only asking because he was sick and off balance and while sex might burn off nervous energy, what Rez needed was cuddled and comforted whether he liked it or not. "Don't give me that look, you know I'm right." He smiled and wrapped his arms around Rez to keep the man from pulling away. "We'll finish up here, go over to the apartment and pack somethings, go over to the hospital and check on everyone and go to our loft. We'll see if the bed's been delivered yet and if it has I'll let you do anything you want."

"Anything?"

"Anything." He leaned in and kissed the tip of Rez's nose which made the man frown more.

Rez pulled away from the silly kiss but instead of snapping back his hand slipped up the artist's chest to lightly brush over the still very sore newly pierced nipple. "Good." He nodded as if the idea to wait to full around had been his own and ignored the soft grin it called up from Andy.

He turned to go, hoping to impart some basic advice to the five newly sober former Shiner

whores while Andy was still cooking only he stopped. Jos stood in the kitchen, his face pale and he clutched a handful of paper napkins tight in his hands. His mouth was open a little and he quickly snapped it shut.

Jos sniffed and stuck his chin out, his too proud to give a damn look. "Once a whore..." He turned and quickly left the tidy and until a few moments ago never used kitchen.

"He doesn't mean that." Andy instantly countered.

"He does but he's talking about himself." He caught the worry from the human and shrugged out of his arms. "It's okay. Get lunch done, I'll deal with him."

Rez didn't wait to see Andy's nod of agreement he just stepped away and left. Jos of all the newly detoxed people was likely to cause the most trouble. Rez didn't have a personal relationship with any of the rest, he'd picked them because of that. Only he did with Jos, they'd been borderline rivals since they'd both been put up for sale and while they didn't quite like or dislike the other, they had history. It was something he'd been bracing himself to deal with since he'd dropped Jos off at the clinic. Only he hadn't been braced to be so turned inside out by events and hung over at the time.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter One Hundred Two

Rez didn't wait to see Andy's nod of agreement he just stepped away and left. Jos of all the newly detoxed people was likely to cause the most trouble. Rez didn't have a personal relationship with any of the rest, he'd picked them because of that. Only he did with Jos, they'd been borderline rivals since they'd both been put up for sale and while they didn't quite like or dislike the other, they had history. It was something he'd been bracing himself to deal with since he'd dropped Jos off at the clinic. Only he hadn't been braced to be so turned inside out by events and hung over at the time.

The small group was gathered around the table. It was set, but it was a sad effort at setting it. The forks were askew on their napkins and the cups were on random sides. Rez shook his head. "Have some pride, straighten this mess up." He snapped out but his eyes fell on Jos. The man had sat down and was rubbing his forehead with one hand. "Jos, I want a word with you in the other room."

"Later, Rezzy, when you're not so busy and I don't feel like such shit."

A small part of Rez wanted to retreat. It screamed at him that he was nothing, a Shiner and a

whore and had no place snapping out orders to anyone. It was a tiny voice but one that lingered. He ignored it. His anger spiked sharply and the other four all felt it, if Jos noticed he ignored him but Rez was okay with that.

"It wasn't a request." He snarled and before Jos could snap something pissy back Rez had a strong handful of the man's hair, close to the roots at the top of his head and was dragging him from his chair.

"Hey! What the fuck? Rezzy stop it..." Jos squealed but he quickly stumbled to follow where he was being dragged. One of his hands came up to grip Rez's own but he didn't try to strike out to gain his freedom.

Rez didn't drag them far, just out of the room. Once they were alone he happily released the handful of green hair and let Jos go. Jos stumbled a little but easily kept his feet as he rubbed at his abused hair.

"What the hell?"

"Shut up." Rez cut him off. "Don't you ever dismiss me again, do I make myself clear?"

Green eyes blinked slowly and Rez could almost see the other man thinking. "Rez?"

"I stuck my neck out for you, don't make me regret it." He understood the confusion. The times their clients had requested they interact, Rez hadn't exactly been the dominate one. No one wanted to see a man with Rez's coloring being a hard top. "It sounds like a fucking cliché but it's the truth, this is the start of the rest of your life. Everything you've been, everything we've been, is gone and it's just now. And now? I'm boss here. If I tell you to hold your breath you'll fucking well not bitch at me."

"Rez." The voice was less confused now and more lost sounding.

"I won't have you sniping at me and don't you think for a moment our history will effect a second of our future."

Jos sighed and shook his head. "Nothing changes, Rezzy, this is just an interlude."

"Things change." The words would mean nothing but Rez pushed up the loose sleeves of one arm and let Jos see the altered tattoo. It was swollen a little and weeping a little and glossy from the ointment he had to keep on it but it was still intricate and beautiful. "Things change."

"But..." Green eyes darted back to the room he'd just been dragged from.

"What I do and who I do it with is none of your fucking concern." He answered back with more anger and defensiveness than he'd intended. He caught himself and remembered how he'd felt in those first days. That settled him enough to draw a breath. "No one is making me, I'm with him by my choice."

"He's human!"

Rez shrugged and couldn't imagine he'd changed so much. "So is Mick-san, would you like to deny Toshi-san the right to share space with anyone? Or call him on his choices?" Memories of words echoed back at him. "I don't care who you fuck when you're felling better but you're not selling it anymore. Do I make myself clear? I won't have any of my staff selling their asses while working here."

Jos's mouth snapped shut and he looked at Rez like maybe he was seeing a madman.

"Am I going to have trouble with you, because of our past?"

A pink tongue darted out and wet dry lips but the move wasn't meant to be sensual, Rez could feel the confusion and nerves pouring off the other man. "Yes, sir." Jos finally whispered.

"Good. Now, let's eat." He didn't wait for Jos to follow but the man did anyway. Something would need to be said to the group and he was getting far too good at public speaking.

Andy was placing a serving bowl of pasta onto the center of the table when he rejoined the room but his eyes were locked onto Rez. "Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine now." Rez answered and he meant it casually, meant it about Jos and the situation and enforcing the new concept of the current rehabbed five's reality but it meant more. It struck him how much more, he was fine now as well. He'd weathered the withdrawals to a point that he knew he could manage and faced the raw fact that with a gunshot his leader, his house and his life could shatter. Last night might have been a few dozen steps backward but he'd not taken a hit and bonding with Andy had moved him almost back to where he'd been before he'd fallen off the wagon. It was more than just using and it had taken seeing Jos and the others to really understand how far he'd changed. He'd earned the alteration to the ownership tattoos on his arms. More, he almost didn't detest the person he was becoming.

Andy saw the shadows behind the falsely cheerful and perky pink eyes but they seemed more contemplative than self destructive. "Good, because food's ready." His own bright cheerful comment earned him a few half hidden groans but no one outright protested having to eat. Andy took up one of the plates and began to fill it with a small but proper portion of pasta.

"Listen up." Rez said from where he stood, unwilling to sit yet. "Each of you have a new life here but what you make of it is your own doing. No one will keep you in this building or in these rooms and you're welcome to the courtyard outside but it's torn up right now. If this is too tough for you, you can take your sorry asses away anytime you want, just don't come back. Your job right now is to get healthy, that means eating three meals a day, one of which will be together at the table like this. You're a family now, the people you share these rooms with are your family. Don't fuck over your family. Other than getting straightened out and eating, you'll all have to take classes in a few weeks. You're stupid and useless to Toshi-san as you are, he won't tolerate ignorance and neither will I. That's it, no whoring, no drugs, no instruction sheets, no beatings, no abuse. There's clothing in your rooms, those are yours. When you start working for Toshi-san you'll receive pay, with that you can buy shit you like. He's giving you a chance to have a real life like none of us have gotten so you can either take it or fuck it up, choice is yours. Stay sober, do a good job, cause me no headaches for three months and you'll become part of his house." He brushed up a sleeve and again and showed off the newly altered mark. They needed to know, needed to see that there really would be a fresh start where even the permanent marks of the past would be washed away.

"Couple more things..." He glanced to Andy but the human didn't seem willing to stop him. "You are the first five, there will be another five, I'll expect you to be sensible enough to get their heads on straight. Prove to me you can manage and you won't be waiting tables when the club owns but helping me. Are we clear?" He watched the heads bob in agreement and wondered if they really did understand yet. "Also, some shits been going on. Some dumbass tried to kill Sakamoto-dono. He's going to be fine, Toshi-san is fine, Mick-san got shot and a couple of other folks but it changes nothing. You do your job, I do mine, Toshi-san does his and the world goes on. Got it?" There were worried looks now but no one protested. "Good, now eat."

Andy's smile didn't waver at the gruff barking command for food, if anything it softened a little. He saw behind the roughness now, behind the short temper and snappish ways and what he saw there was worth holding close. It left him with no doubts that the current group in recovery and any others that came through would be in good hands with Rez. More, it left him no doubts that he'd placed himself in good hands too.

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A hand shook his shoulder and Toshi startled awake. The too bright lights of the hospital made him squint but he didn't need his eyes to see to know the feel or scent of Andy. "I'm awake." He announced as he sat up in the chair and rubbed at his mouth and eyes. "I'm awake."

"Sure you are sweetie. Here, come lay down on the loveseat, hmm?"

"What time is it?"

"A little before one."

"During the day?"

Andy nodded. "You need to get some sleep sweetie, where's Mick?" He knew if Mick had seen Toshi nodding off in one of the uncomfortable waiting room chairs the other man would have strapped the half breed to a bed so he'd stay put long enough to sleep.

"He's having lunch with Epps and his family. Didn't see the point of him sitting here while we wait for Uncle Yasun to get out of surgery, not when he's still so close by..." He struggled to hold in a yawn and wasn't surprised to see Rez hovering in the near by doorway. "Today's Thursday, right?"

Andy nodded.

"Alec's just been telling me where I need to be. He's a small army of people helping him keep track. What a couple of weeks..."

"It'd be better if you got more than two hours of sleep at a time."

"Not enough hours in the day for that."

"I'll..." Rez broke in. "I'll go make us some tea."

"Thank you Rez-san." Toshi nodded, the task of fetching tea had fallen to Rez when the pair showed up at the hospital. "Aunt Hope keeps asking me how Uncle Yasun is doing but she refuses to come here to see him. She thinks I'm lying when I say he's gradually recovering. If Papa Mike had developed a painkiller as good as his sedative we'd be able to wake him up more, could have him call her so she stops driving me crazy."

Andy sat down next to his friend. "She's just worried."

"Everyone is worried. I'm meeting with Uncle Yasun's advisors every day, I've had meetings with allies every day, my father's called me almost every day and now I'm playing baby sitter to these delegates? It's...it's..." He stopped himself from complaining. "It's good, we need this."

"We don't need you killing yourself to do it. You're one man." Truth was they'd all been running themselves senseless. Andy and Rez had taken over final construction of the club, Alec was doing just about everything and Mick was driving everyone crazy with his limited mobility.

"Things are moving too fast. I keep asking Father to stop strong arming delegates into coming here before anything is planned but he won't listen."

"It's not that, well...not entirely." Andy smiled. "This is a good photo op for most of them. See

how tolerant they are, they're walking through an I/S slum and not wearing a mask and gloves and all that bullshit. Be glad public opinion is swinging so much in our favor." Andy personally didn't give a damn about an I/S homeland if it meant watching people he loved kill themselves or be killed in the process.

"I find myself thinking about my grandfather a great deal, about all the seemingly stupid and senseless things he had me learn. He said to me once, find out what your opponent is frightened of losing and let him know you'll take it from him but also find out what he desires and promise to deliver it. My uncle is so much better at this than I am." He yawned and tried to hide it. "Mick told me about the tattoos you had done on Rez."

He shrugged. "Rez would like to offer it to anyone else that's gotten clean and stayed with your house. If that's okay with you."

"I think it's a grand idea. Both the tattoo mark and the two of you."

"Thanks." Andy couldn't help it, he could feel himself blushing a little.

A little shuffling of feet behind them announced Rez's return with steaming paper cups filled with tea. "Thank you." Toshi nodded as he accepted the much needed caffeine.

"Were your ears burning?" Andy asked as he smiled and accepted his own tea.

"Why the fuck would my ears be burning?"

"Because we were talking about you."

"Hm." Rez shook his head and took a seat a little away from the other two men.

"Toshi approves of the tattoo cover ups on the others."

"Good."

"And he approves of us."

Rez covered his surprise by sipping at his too hot tea and then having to hide how much the drink burned his mouth. When he finally managed to speak he addressed Toshi not his lover. "I had his nipple pierced."

Toshi raised an eyebrow and glanced to Andy but the artist was blushing red like a shy virgin. "Oh?"

"He's mine but if you want him I'll share him."

"Hey! Don't I get a say in this?" Andy squeaked.

All Toshi could do was chuckle and that was good because there had been far too little to laugh about in the past few weeks.

"No, you don't, shut up slut, I know you want him."

"Hey!"

The silent laughter almost caused Toshi to slosh the hot tea over his hand.

"You can have him, but I want to watch. The slut likes being watched."



"Like you don't like watching! Pervert." Andy snipped back but the pink eyes were sparkling with amusement, not malice.

"Oh, well, once things settle down, I may just take you both up on that offer."

"What offer?" Mick asked from the door way, balanced on his crutches.

Andy groaned and shook his head. "I'm not going to sit here like a slab of meat to be divvied out to you beautiful men. Mick sit, take my tea, I'll go get another and you can all talk about me while I'm gone. Figure out who has me on which days..." He teasingly muttered as he brushed past the confused Mick but the echoing of Toshi's laughter made the joke well worth while.

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Chapter One Hundred Three

"You're sure you want to do this?" Mike asked but he already could tell that neither his son or Toshi would change their minds.

"I'm sure. He needs to be seen by others as alive and on the road to recovery. They're not believing my word alone." Toshi answered but he didn't like it either. It was a fine line for his uncle, already so weakened, to wake him enough to be aware. They couldn't safely mix painkillers with the sedatives they were giving him so if he was awake they'd be unable to control the pain and with the recent surgery to repair damage they'd hoped would heal on its own, pain was a high likelihood. Pain with his uncle's level of blood loss could very easily slip the man into shock and if that happened it wasn't likely he'd survive. Waking him was a huge risk but one Toshi knew they had to take. "Do it." He nodded.

Mike sighed and made the adjustments to the drugs dripping into the ashen and contentedly unconscious man. "I'll be monitoring him closely, if I think it's pushing him too far I'm putting him back under."

"Fair enough. How long until he comes around?"

"Few minutes, maybe more, you burn off drugs faster so..." Mike shrugged which wasn't much of an expert opinion but he'd been doing a great deal of winging it lately. Theories and sound testing had to go out the window when lives were on the line. Theories had to become fact and there was no room for mistakes.

It took only a few moments but it felt much longer to Toshi before Yasun stirred at all. It was a small fluttering of his eyelids, a change to his breathing at first but it was a sign of life Toshi hadn't been sure he'd see ever again. He sat on the edge of the bed and took up one shockingly cool hand. There was no strength in the fingers he curled his own around and that disturbed him more than all the long days of drug induced coma. Yasun's hands were always strong and ready for anything.

"Uncle?" Toshi asked softly and was answered with a muttering grumble that could have been words. "Uncle, you need to wake up."

Yasun sighed and turned his head to the side.

"Uncle, you have to wake up." He said again but with more force. "I need you to wake up, please Uncle."

It took some more pleading and coaxing but as the drugs quickly faded from his body Yasun's awareness took its place. Eventually the dusky lavender eyes opened, squinted shut again in the deliberately dimly lit room and fluttered open more carefully. A dry tongue licked at dry lips and the hand Toshi wasn't holding moved to cover the bandages that sheltered the wounds below.

"Nephew..." Yasun's voice was creaky and broke.

"Here." Toshi moved a straw close to the parched mouth. "Sip slowly and sparingly, they don't want you to have anything in your stomach."

Yasun nodded and obeyed but the small amount of water felt good. He sighed and his eyes focused on Toshi. "You look about like how I feel Toshi-kun."

That made Toshi smile and as soon as he placed the cup down he wrapped his other hand around his uncle's. "That's because I've been trying to do your job and I am lacking it seems."

"I doubt that." The hand over the wound rubbed the bandages slightly. "I am not dead."

"No, but nearly so."

"How bad is it?"

"Most of your liver had to be removed, you'll have to be careful while it regrows, your spleen, some of your intestine, a bullet knicked a lung and collapsed it. Nothing that won't return to normal with time. You lost a great deal of blood and have had to have several surgeries. That's the most serious risk, Papa Mike doesn't want you to go into shock from the pain, we've kept you in a coma."

Yasun shook his head. "I can deal with pain."

"Yes, but your body may not be able to. Uncle, we can't transfuse you. Papa Mike and his team will work on that but right now they can't. You're only alive because he removed the hemoglobin from I/S red blood cells and put that directly in you and that's a bad fix but a fix. We can't keep you awake for long, do you understand?"

"Yes." He closed his eyes and forced himself to not press against the throbbing wound. His mind was growing more clear as the drugs gradually drained from his body but the pain was getting sharper as well. "Toshi-kun..." He forced his eyes open and was glad to see Mick near by. He doubted his nephew would survive the human's loss. "My children?"

"Are fine and safe and never once in a moment's danger."

"My wife?"

"She is also well and...well, we've brought in a screen and a camera, if you feel up to it, you can speak to her but it needs to be brief, your council needs a word as well."

That caught Yasun off guard and hadn't been what he'd expected. "I'm at a human hospital?"

"Yes. I...Mick and I...we had a plan in place in case something should happen. Don't worry about that. Are you up for this?"

He didn't think he was but instead he nodded. "I will be." He forced his eyes to focus on the black screen. "I'd like to speak to my wife."

It only took a few seconds as the connections were already in place and simply waiting to be clicked on. Toshi left his uncle's bedside to turn the equipment on but also to help diminish some of the ill weak look around Yasun. The man already looked too pale and sick, he didn't need to be seen with people hovering by his side like he might die if he accidentally sneezed.

Mick had explained to both Hope and the gathering of trusted family houses that Yasun would be groggy and still needed a great deal of rest. Both groups had understood and promised not to task the man too badly. Hope kept her word, she nodded at seeing her husband, asked if he was well, promised their children were fine and all was well before promptly excusing herself. She saw what she needed, that her husband was alive and didn't waste any time or energy on emotion beyond that. Toshi knew that would come later, his aunt had been running on nervous energy since the shooting, waiting for someone to kick in the door and kill her and her children as his uncle's first family had been slaughtered.

Yasun's advisors were less willing to give up their time. They were all very respectful and concerned, not just for their leader but for their friend. In as few words as possible they briefed him on all that Toshi had been doing, how he'd been guiding human leaders and delegates around their land, arranging for them to meet school children and to go to places humans never went. It wasn't so much that they disagreed but it was pushing awfully hard, awfully fast and Toshi was a half breed. It took only a few words from Yasun to reassure everyone and promise that he'd be back on his feet soon, or at the least in greater contact.

It was Toshi that made apologies and claimed that his uncle had a doctor waiting to tend him. He didn't let Yasun or the other advising families get a word in edgewise, he just said he was sorry and severed the connection.

"Toshi..." Yasun protested but he was having more trouble breathing.

"That was enough, you need to rest." He glanced over his uncle to where Papa Mike was frowning in worry.

"How're we doing?"

"Doing?"

"The delegates?"

"We need five more to attend for a binding vote and two thirds agreement for our resolution to pass. It's a long shot, but public opinion is swaying to our side."

"Will we get them?"

"I don't know if we'll get those last five delegates to attend and the vote can't be predicted yet. It won't even be called for debate for another week and that's assuming we get enough here for a

binding vote. But Uncle, your only worry right now is getting stronger. We have things in hand and the sooner you recover the sooner you can return to work and free me of this craziness. I swear I don't know how you do it." He smiled gently but really meant it.

"I'm fine..." Yasun protested as Mike moved to put him under again.

"You'll be more fine if you rest without being in pain, at least for a little while longer." Mike soothed in his deep rumbling voice.

The groggy heaviness started to return and Yasun shook his head a little to clear it. "Toshi-kun... Toshi..."

"I'm here."

"Your grandfather....he'd be so proud of you...."

The fading words shoved a bruised proud ache into Toshi's chest. He swallowed and glanced to Mike. "Is he fine?"

One broad shoulder shrugged. "He's been shot."

"Papa." Mick scolded softly.

"His blood pressure is lower than I'd like and his body temp is quite a bit lower, however both are better than I would have expected to find. If we keep infection away he'll be fine. We're going to keep him under and still until some of his numbers improve."

"How long?" That was the big question. How long until Yasun could be seen in public? How long until he could take up some of his work again? How long until he could speak to the delegates that were coming to their camp to meet the man that was almost martyred? How long until Toshi could fade into his own life and the relative obscurity of being a half breed and son to the richest man in the world?

Another vague shrug answered him. "A couple of days, another week? The Committee was never too concerned with how quickly any I/S healed, trauma care and recovery wasn't high on their list of experiments. Once we get his stats up we'll keep him half awake but groggy until the pain level is manageable."

"Thank you." Toshi spoke softly. "If you...for the care and the research. We can't lose him, I can't. Thank you."

Mike nodded. It wasn't lost on him who Toshi's biological father was or who had raised him. His eyes flickered to his son that hovered silently near by. "It's my pleasure. Consider it penance for helping to invent the original implant the Committee uses on your people." He glanced between the two men and cleared his throat. "Well I'll leave you two for a bit, check on the others...blood gasses and volume levels and such..." He muttered as he hastily excused himself from the private room.

That left them alone and Toshi wanted to ask for reassurance. He wanted to ask Mick if he believed everything would be okay. Some small part of him felt like a child again caught in an uncertain world where he was so different and yet could turn to his uncle or grandfather and be comforted. Only he wasn't a child anymore and found himself too far caught in adulthood to bring himself to ask for words that were mere speculation.

He didn't have to ask. As he stood taking in one more look of his again unnaturally sleeping and still far too pale uncle, Mick moved to stand closer behind him. It wasn't his lover's way to speak or to sugar coat the truth of their lives. Mick had seen and been through too much himself to give

into false comfort. Instead he slipped a hand, silent and strong, onto Toshi's shoulder. That was all but that was all that was needed.

It had taken a week to build the bleachers for the human guests to sit on but Toshi had insisted on them being built. Humans wouldn't be comfortable gathering around in a crowd to watch the competitions any more than I/S would be comfortable literally rubbing elbows with a human. So for the first time the challenge circle had stands and places to sit with a good view and for the first time almost all the delegates were in attendance, along with their aids, advisors and a good handful of media and press.

Toshi had been struggling to show them I/S culture. Things they'd understand, not just the I/S mindset of throw nothing away and waste nothing. He knew from living in their world that the bits of broken metal and electronic equipment that would be found and wired together to hang in the sun or plastered onto walls to give them texture and color when paint was rare would only look trashy and cheap to their eyes. He'd arranged for them to meet artists and craftsman, teachers and medics, cooks who could turn anything from canned food to caught rats into delicacies. He'd even gone so far to have them visit teahouses and bathhouses and private homes to try to impress on them how crowded but civilized they were. Always these trips were done in small groups, small tours but Toshi had wanted an event to get everyone into one place at one time.

It had been one of his father's advisors that suggested a competition. The morale of the guards at most of their houses was sketchy at the moment, bruised by the assault they couldn't have prevented. They'd recover faster if they could have some friendly competition between houses and styles and more, show off their strength to humans that had only seen them fail. He'd agreed but faced with the reality of it now almost made him wish he hadn't.

The day was overcast, which was good because it had drawn a huge crowd of I/S. They'd come to watch the humans as much as the fights. With them had followed street food vendors who wove around and hawked their wares. The center of the square had originally held some fountain or other before the plague had wiped the world clean. Toshi's grandfather had it filled in and leveled and now worked as a raised ring. The houses often held friendly challenges between themselves and individuals as well. Occasionally the ring held other competitions, who could play the best music, which person could make a crowd laugh harder, competition wasn't limited to fighters and the I/S soul loved the challenge.

It made him feel better to see some of the delegates being bold enough or comfortable enough, to step from their stands to approach vendors and purchase the same foods the I/S crowds were enjoying. Not all of them by any means but more than he'd expected and he let his eyes scan the courtyard. They stopped on one tall man with a shock of white hair and a proud nose.

He sat down next to Alec and sighed. "Father's here."

"What?" Alec's face darted up from the computer screen he'd been working on. "He's supposed to be overseas."

"Well, he's here now." The older Ranvier scanned the stands and caught Toshi's eyes. He slipped a hand behind him to take his wife's hand and waved to his son. "Great, he brought my step mother, which means he wants us to play family."

"It'll play well in the media." Alec reminded him softly.

There was no debating that and Toshi gritted his teeth, smiled warmly and waved for his father and step mother to come join them.

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Chapter One Hundred Four

It took a while, as Luke Henri wove his way around the crowd far too many people stopped him to share a quick word. His father always nodded and smiled but he only slowed his movement. If he'd stopped they would have sucked him into conversations about economics and politics and all that Luke Henri swore he knew nothing of but influenced around the world over with a mere phone call. There was no doubt to how the man was moving, he was set on joining Toshi and Alec and nothing was going to stop or even slow him.

Toshi stood and shook his father's hand. "Father, I didn't know you were in the country." He spared a smile for his step mother and took her free hand to help her over the steps to their spot on the benches. She moved gracefully in her heels but the last thing he wanted was for her to fall.

"I was flying in a few gifts for you." The older man nodded to the far corner of the stands.

Toshi glanced down and felt his eyebrows raise. "The last two delegates we needed! Thank you."

"Their excuse of lacking transportation was bullshit." He chuckled as he settled down on the bench with a groan. "It amused me to see the shock on their faces when I taxied into their pathetic national airport to pick them up. You've a full house now, son, what you do with them is your call."

"Thank you." He hoped the sincerity was obvious in his voice. There had seemed no way to get the last two delegates they needed for a vote and Toshi had been worrying himself sick over it.

"Where's that Scots-Irish mutt of yours at?"

"Mick had a doctors appointment, they're hoping he comes off the crutches today."

"And Yasun?"

"Weak but healing."

"Good, he's tough, he'll be fine." Luke Henri glanced around. "Look there, Michelle, see that vendor? That's the ice milk thing I was telling you about."

The younger and very pretty woman followed where her husband pointed and her smile brightened. "I'd like to try it. Would you like one too?"

"Hm, here..." Luke Henri fished out his wallet. "Find Robert and give him the cash, tell him to get it to the vendors. No point in sitting on all this cash since some stubborn fool refused to let me help sponsor this shingding."

"Father." Toshi protested.

"Go on, get us all one and see to it the vendors know they'll be compensated but everyone will have a good time today." He passed the cash over to his wife. "Tell them children and I/S first, the humans can cough up their own cash."

She took the cash but patted the side of her husband's face. "That's my good man."

"Father." Toshi protested again.

"What? I had cash in my wallet."

"You never carry cash."

Luke Henri shrugged.

"If you don't mind, Mrs. Ranvier, I'd be happy to escort you?" Alec offered as he stood up.

"Why I would be honored, thank you." She smiled warmly as she took Alec's offered arm and together they made their way back down the bleachers.

"Robert's a good sort, ex-military. George hired him, fellow's like a ghost. Never see him, barely know he's there. You look awful."

"Too much work and not enough hours in the day."

"Hmm." Luke Henri glanced about the crowd and pretended he didn't notice that they were being watched by I/S and humans alike. "Do you need help?"

"I'm managing."

"Good, knew you could swing this. You'll get that country yet."

"I'm trying." Toshi answered as casually as he could but his father shifted a little again, a subtle sign of being uncomfortable. Since their fight and Toshi's new found strength to stand up to him, their relationship had improved to the point where just being near him wasn't enough to set the older man off. He doubted it was because of the location. Luke Henri had been smuggling himself into the Camp long before it was legal to come and go and had been happy with his I/S mistress. "What's on your mind, father?"

"What makes you think I've something on my mind?"

"You wouldn't have come here just for the display and the competition. What is it?"

"I've heard word from Bridgit's doctors. She's pregnant."

The news should have been good. He'd carried out his father's greatest wish and provided an heir. Now if something happened to him the Ranvier name would go on. The news didn't make Toshi feel like a proud soon to be father, it just added another worry to his list of concerns. "Is she healthy? Are there any early complications because of my bloodlines?"

"Everything looks fine so far. She's healthy, it's just, right now? She's carrying twins."

"What?"

"Two heartbeats. They're saying not to get excited because one might abort but it's likely she'll deliver twins."

A double dose of worry. "Good, two heirs. I'm happy for you, father."

"I know I pushed this on you."

It wasn't a conversation he wanted to have. "It's alright, I understand."

"I don't care that you'd rather dally with that mutt of yours. I'm an old man, Toshi."

"I know and you want to see an heir before you die."

"No... you miss my meaning." Luke Henri glanced to his son and then around the crowd again. "I didn't get to see you grow up. I missed that. Your grandfather kept that from me. Can't say as I blame him, I would have claimed you and taken you away from him but I missed that."

He'd never thought about it and certainly didn't think his father felt the loss. "I've always assumed..."

"What? That I didn't care. You're my son." The older man sighed. "You're her son. We might be less uncomfortable around each other if we could have met sooner."

"Maybe."

"Look, son, I'm not accustomed to asking for things."

That made Toshi snort because it was the truth. His father didn't ask, he ordered and if he couldn't order he worked and made it happen.

"Don't snort at me, boy, the apple didn't fall from this tree."

"Yes, father."

"It's just, I don't ask simply for myself."

"You haven't asked for anything yet."

"Have you wondered why Michelle hasn't left me yet?"

"You mean why you haven't replaced her yet?"

"Same thing."

"No I hadn't." He tried not to think about his father's marriages. The man had more ex-wives than any one man should and there were wives that Toshi had never even really learned the names to let alone met.

"She's infertile too. Her first husband left her because of it, broke her heart."

"I thought it was because she's decades younger than you and quite pretty."

"She's beautiful and smart but so were most of the others. Michelle is different. I've never lied to her. I've even told her about your mother. I care about her, she's my friend first. Do you have that with your Scots-Irish boy?"



Toshi nodded. "I do." He tried to pretend it wasn't his father he was having this conversation with.

"Good. Very good. I'm not an easy man to live with and she's a saint for putting up with me." His eyes found her, in the crowd, kneeling down to hand out sweetened ice treats to wide eyed I/S children that approached her with uncertainty. "She wanted us to adopt. It's the only thing she's ever asked me for."

"And you told her no."

"If I hadn't adopted a child in all these years I wasn't going to add to the line now. It's my own stubborn pride, she'd make an excellent mother."

"What is it you want, father?"

"I've pushed you to have these kids. I know I have and I know you're busy with your own life. It's a great deal to ask, a great deal, but if you could see it in your heart to let Michelle help with the children. She will be their grandmother after all and it's not like a nightclub is all that bad of a place to raise a family. I'm just saying the tykes could benefit from a female influence. Also it would mean a tremendous amount to her, it'd be kind of you."

"I haven't given it much thought, being a father in actuality and not just in the abstract. It doesn't feel real."

"Well, you didn't do the mechanics of fatherhood. It'll feel real when you've an infant in your arms."

"How long did it take for you to feel like a father to me?" It was far more personal than he'd ever dared to ask but his memories of those early days were clouded with so much pain and misunderstanding that he had no clear guideline to go by.

"The moment I saw you."

"Liar." Toshi accused.

"I am not. It's the truth. You were so hurt." He shook his head but forced a smile and waved to a woman he knew several rows below them in the bleachers. The conversation may have been uncomfortable but he was careful to keep it from showing to casual eyes. "Even hurt you had stubbornness and anger in your eyes. It was the same look my father used to give me."

"I didn't know."

"That's because I'm a bad father."

Toshi didn't feel like defending the man because in many ways he had been. "I want to be a father to these children but I've no desire to be a father in general. I'm not ready. I've lost so much time already, dealing with things, not dealing with them..." He shook his head. "That sounds selfish."

"It sounds human."

"These children? They're going to be even more caught between worlds. It won't be easy for them."

"They're Ranvier, they'll be fine."

"I want to be a father to them. I want them to know this side of their heritage too." He waved to

the world around them with all its colorful hair and eyes.

"I wouldn't ask you to not be a father to them, just let Michelle baby sit."

Toshi glanced down to his stepmother, a woman closer to his age than his father's and found her now surrounded by children. Their parents were nervous but whatever she was saying to them had them at ease and smiling. "Father, I don't think that will work."

Oddly, Luke Henri didn't get angry and didn't try to convince Toshi. Instead the man just nodded. "I understand. It's why I haven't spoken to her about it before I spoke to you. I bulldozed you into fathering them I won't bulldoze you into how to raise them."

"Father, if you'd let me finish, I was going to say, just having her babysit isn't good enough. My life is busy, yours is busy. I can't picture Mick knowing what to do with an infant. I don't see why we can't share the responsibility of raising them. I think I'd like for you, both of you, to be part of their lives."

It wasn't often that Luke Henri was surprised or struck speechless by being surprised so when it happened it took him a moment to recover. "Do you really mean that?"

"I do. I was raised with caregivers and Uncle Yasun and by my grandfather and, to a lesser extent, my grandmother and I turned out well enough. Most children here are raised by extended family not simply by one or two people. I think we could come to some agreement that would allow them to spend a great deal of time with you and Michelle. Your house is certainly better laid out for children than my apartment will be. It'll certainly be easier for the two of you to travel and take the children to see their mother as well." The more he thought about the idea the more he liked it and the more right it felt. It wasn't as simple as his father pushed for the children so he should raise them but more an issue of a couple that wanted small children and had never been given the chance to have them.

"I'm not trying to push you out." Luke Henri answered as he regained some of his composure.

"I know. Would you have had time to raise children when you were my age?"

The older man shook his head. "I didn't have time to be a good father to you ten years ago. At your age I was sleeping four hours a night and working the other twenty. Now I can make the time. RI has enough bright sorts on the payroll that I can shuck some more work off onto them and onto you too." He nodded. "You're certain about this, one hundred percent? Because I don't want to tell Michelle and have you change your mind. It'll break her heart. She's already talking about guest nurseries and helping you pick out baby clothes and if a tutor or a private school would be a better choice. She's driving me batty with it all."

"She wants to be a mother." The woman in question was carefully making her way back up the bleachers to the small little isolated corner, a bowl of sweet ice in each hand and Alec following with a pair of his own. "Yes, I'm certain. If we all can be adults about it I think it'll work well." Toshi stood and smoothed out his suite before he moved to meet his step-mother and take the treats from her hands.

"They say the first competition will start shortly." She said brightly but her eyes darted between the two men. "You two weren't fighting were you? Today is supposed to be a good day. You promised you wouldn't cause trouble Luke Henri." Michelle scolded with a light teasing to her voice.

"I instigate nothing." He teased back.

It was a candid moment that Toshi almost never saw. He had no doubt that his father cared for his wife and that she adored his father but how they were together alone was difficult to tell. It

was a small glimpse at the man he was only just starting to get to know.

"Michelle? My father told me that Bridgit's expecting twins." He caught the surprise in Alec's eyes and the carefully hidden smile.

"I know. Isn't it fantastic! They're going to be adorable. She says she doesn't want to know if they're boys or girls but they aren't identical, we know that already. The last time we talked she said she was going to leave names and such up to you, if you'd like any help, in any way, please let me know. I'd be delighted to help however I can."

"About that, I was talking to father. My life isn't going to be one conducive to raising small children. What with all that Uncle Yasun and the I/S community are trying to do here and the rebuilding we're going to start in the camp on top of the night club and the workload I already have. I was wondering if I could impose on you and Father and ask if you two could take an active hand in caring for my children?"

She hadn't sat down yet and stood frozen in place. "I..." She glanced from her step-son who she barely knew to her husband who she did know. "This was your doing."

Luke Henri gave a very convincing fake innocent look that no one believed.

"You promised me you'd not badger him. I'm sorry, I swear I only asked if it would be proper to offer to help you. Your father is a stubborn man and goes too far."

Toshi felt it more than saw it. His step-mother had been a model at one point and was quite good at keeping her real feelings hidden but he could feel them. The sharp hunger for a child, the pain at being denied and the fragility over being so close and not being able to have her own. It wasn't a desire he understood but it was one he could respect. "He didn't, for once father was quite tactful. You've never been inside the Camp? Look around, every child is raised by a group, not by a parent or two. It's always extended family and friends, it's our way. I think that would work very well for my children and I agree with my father. You'd make a wonderful mother and frankly I haven't a clue what to do with a baby."

"It's not hard, I could show you." She answered softly.

Toshi smiled. "I'd be grateful for the lessons but it doesn't change the fact that I'd like you and my father to have a very active role in this. You'd be doing me a favor. If you wouldn't mind?"

"Mind?" Her chin quivered. "It would make me so happy." Without hesitation she pulled Toshi into a hug and kissed the side of her face. "Thank you, thank you."

It was the right choice. Toshi had no doubt about that. While he didn't mind the idea of having children, he felt no emotional attachment to them. Michelle already loved them, and most likely had loved them from the moment she got word that Bridgit was pregnant. That's what children needed and the idea that his offspring would grow up in several homes with a half dozen people to care about them felt perfect.

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Chapter One Hundred Five

Toshi tried not to stalk across the hospital hallways but it wasn't easy. He hated the place, hated the way it smelled, hated that people he loved were stuck inside of it. It wasn't the buildings fault or the guards or the medical staff but he wanted to snap at all of them and try to blame them.

He stopped first to check on his uncle. They'd been allowing him long and longer periods of wakefulness as the days had gone by and Toshi had been trying to squeeze in every moment his uncle was conscious to try to get his advice. His luck wasn't so good and Yasun was again sleeping, of his own accord or with the help of medication Toshi couldn't say. It was working, however, the man's coloring was better and when he was conscious he wasn't spending all his energy trying to hide how much pain he was in.

With that checked on he moved to find Mick. It took asking one of the guards but the man directed him not to Mick's room but Epps'. Generally, Toshi had been leaving Mick alone while his lover visited with his father and his father's family. Mick didn't need any further distractions and Toshi had wanted him to have the space to react in any way he needed without worry. It was a system that had been working for them but Toshi was going to make an expectation to it today.

Only as he reached the room he stopped. He heard laughter coming from it, not free spirited laughter but the kind that people who weren't yet fully sure of each other made. It was progress and Toshi didn't wish to disrupt things if Mick was settling in with his family even a little bit. He hovered near the doorway, undecided about going in.

"I can hear you there." Mick's voice called out. "It's okay."

Toshi stepped into the doorway and all eyes turned to him, most openly stared. "Sorry to interrupt."

"How did you know?" Jen asked, her smile never faltering but her eyes going a little wider at who lurked in their doorway.

"I heard his footsteps." Mick answered. "Toshi tends to sulk around the apartment so both Alec and I have learned his footsteps."

Mick was propped in a chair, his leg propped on another but instead of his pair of crutches was a single forearm crutch. "I just wanted to let you know I was back and see how it went." Toshi glanced around again but suddenly felt horribly awkward and out of place.

"Get your ass in here." Epps grumbled from the bed. He was still pale, still had to be propped up to sit but the breathing tubes were gone and he had fought off the infection that had almost killed him.

"Paul." Jen scolded but his children snickered.

"Really, I don't mean to intrude." Toshi caught Mick's eye and it really was enough to have that look to sooth him.

"It's okay, really." Mick spoke and to prove it he hauled his leg from the only empty chair and

patted it's seat.

"I...okay." He gave in because Mick had asked him but he moved cautiously into the small room. He sat down and almost before he could settle in Mick propped his leg back up over his lap.

"Toshi, this is my..."

Jen smiled. "Ex-step mother, hello, I'm Jen."

"Nice to meet you."

"And my half siblings, Donny and Lori."

Toshi smiled and nodded but was afraid if he spoke directly to the pair they'd react badly. Epps was used to him, Jen had the gracious good manners to not outright stare but the kids were a different story. What struck Toshi the most wasn't their watching him but how much like Mick they looked. Their hair wasn't red or auburn but brown but they had similar noses and mouths and it looked like the boy, Donny would grow up to look quite a bit like both his father and half brother.

"You'll have to forgive the monkeys from staring." Epps spoke, his voice still raspy. "They haven't ever met... you know..."

"An I/S? I understand."

"No." Jen corrected. "The whole family's made friends with some of your guards it's just, we're simple people. Paul goes around the world and meets all sorts but the three of us have never met anyone famous."

"Oh."

"And you're family too, it's just...off putting."

"I keep telling them that you aren't like that but they don't believe me." Mick shook his head. "Doctors say I'm healing fine but I'm supposed to use the forearm crutch to keep some of my weight off that leg for another week or two."

"Good." The careful laughter that had tumbled from the room before he'd arrived had disappeared and Toshi felt badly for that.

"How'd today go?"

"God, I wish I'd been there. This is my story and stupid numbskull Berts is covering it." Epps complained.

"You just focus on recovering and stop being so stubborn." His ex-wife scolded and earned a petulant sigh in reply.

"It went well. House Inoue's fellow, the big one? He showed well."

"The older fellow?"

Toshi shook his head. "No the young one that's just coming up, fresh faced, he's good. Everyone was thoroughly impressed but I'm worried people will see it as more a display of something antique and not the arts that they are. I just don't think everyone understood."

"We are just human after all." Epps teased.

"I'm sure enough got it for it to have worked. I'm sorry I missed it, I wanted to see it."

"Father showed up."

"Luke Henri Ranvier?" Jen asked and at Toshi's nod she looked star struck and awed again.

"With Michelle, he paid the vendors to give treats to the children in the crowd."

"Stubborn goat."

"Well, don't hold a grudge, he brought in the last two delegates we needed."

Mick nodded. "Good but what aren't you telling me?"

It took a second for Toshi to know that Mick really did mean for him to speak freely. If his lover was trying to build a relationship with the family he should have been and yet never was a part of he'd do all he could to encourage that. "Bridgit's pregnant. Father said she's carrying twins but it's too early to know for sure."

"Twins? Oh congratulations to her! Who's the father?" Jen asked happily.

"Toshi is." Mick answered for him. "I'm sure your father was delighted."

Toshi felt the change in Mick, the cold distant and very careful retreating behind his own masks. It was unspoken but Mick had been carrying around a small worry that once Toshi had children there would be no room for him any longer.

"Well, congratulations." Jen answered smoothly. "We just assumed from how Mick talks about you..."

"It's not like that." Toshi answered. "She's basically a surrogate. My father was concerned about the continuation of the family given that Mick is male. Father and I came to an agreement."

"He'll stop pushing you into breeding?" Mick raised an eyebrow.

"I don't think I could get that lucky. Michelle is going to take on the bulk of the child care. She's never been able to have children of her own." He needed Mick to understand that he wasn't pawning his children off on someone else to raise. "It seemed a better idea that hiring a nanny to come into our apartment, or always begging Andy or Alec to baby sit."

"The idea of Andy with an infant is terrifying." Epps confirmed with a chuckle. "He's the fluffy one I was telling you about."

Mick was frowning. "You don't need to do that. We'll make something work."

"We'll have to because I don't know one thing about children and they will be at our place occasionally. Did you want them full time? I just thought...with all that will be going on with the Containment Act and the Camp and the club..." He glanced around the room and wished he'd kept his mouth shut. "If you'd wanted to be a full time parent we can make it work. They'll understand."

"I just thought that you wanted..."

"I like my life. Father's the one that wanted children so badly. We actually had a moment and Michelle cried when I asked her."

"It's what you want?"

"I already have everything I want." Toshi answered firmly and his hand deliberately touch the bracelet he wore.

The moment hung heavy until Epps snorted. "God's sake just kiss him already!"

Mick's head snapped around. "What? No, no...I'm not...I..."

"Please. I'm fourteen and I can tell you two are getting it on all the time." Lori mocked and rolled her eyes.

"I'm not...we're not..."

"Mick?" Toshi cut off his stuttering protests. When his lover turned to look at him he leaned over and kissed him. It wasn't deep or long and he didn't linger with it but he did deliver the promised kiss. "Shut up. We'll figure out how to split up the time but if they help we have more time and that's what I want."

"If you'd marry him I'd get to be a granddad." Epps teased.

"Don't be a jerk, Paul." Jen warned. She turned to her children. "And don't you two go getting any ideas, your father can wait to be a grandfather, a long time, a long long time, well after you're married."

"Mom." Lori rolled her eyes again.

Mick groaned as he lowered his leg to the floor and hauled himself to his feet. "I should go, I'm supposed to be working." He got the forearm crutch in place and tapped the side of the bed with it's end. "Don't be difficult, old man."

Epps snorted. "Least you know where you got it from."

Jen stood and lightly hugged Mick. She kept her hands on his shoulders and brushed a kiss to the side of his face. "He'll behave." She pulled away quickly before the warm gesture could be fussed at and offered her hand to Toshi. "It was nice to finally meet you, Mr. Ranvier. Mick talks about you all the time, when he talks at all, and congratulations to both of you on the news."

Toshi accepted the hand, still always a little startled when humans made the offer of contact. "Thank you and please, call me Toshi."

That made Jen look to her ex-husband and a smile lit up her face. "First name bases with one of the most famous men on the planet, lookie at us." She teased. "I'd be honored to, thank you and don't you be a stranger either."

There were nods and smiles and soon Toshi was safely back out in the hallway with Mick. "The leg really okay?" He asked when they were alone.

"Sore but it'll be fine. Your father really behaved?"

"Shocked me too. He's putting a lot of pressure on the delegates to be fair, if not favorable. He's pushing far harder than I expected him to." He held the door open as Mick moved smoothly on his crutch through it, moving back to the more secure areas were Yasun was recovering. Toshi let the door shut behind him but his feet stopped. "Mick?"

"Hmm?" He turned at the seriousness and was again surprised by how exhausted Toshi looked.

"We haven't...I've been so busy we haven't really spoken for weeks. Are you okay? With Epps and your family..."

"Yeah, I talked to Papa Mike and Grandma Rose and told them I needed time and I told Epps I still can't stand him but we're going slowly." He shrugged. "I do have questions for him."

Toshi moved closer to where Mick stood. "And Andy and Rez? You haven't said anything since they told you."

"All I've wanted is for Andy to be happy and if Rez can do that I'm all for it." He didn't need to add that if Rez was just screwing with Andy's head he would not be amused.

Toshi moved even closer, close enough now to be within the other man's personal space. "And us? Are we okay?"

Mick met and drowned in blue eyes. It stole his words and made him shiver. All he could do was nod his answer.

"Good, because I can't do this without you." Toshi whispered almost against Mick's lips. "With you by my side I can do anything." The kiss was gentle and soft, a brush of lips to lips and nothing more but Toshi didn't retreat. He tugged until Mick stumbled against him and he pulled the man into a hug. His hands wrapped around Mick's back and he drank in that perfect scent, gaining more rejuvenation from the casual contact than he could for a full night's sleep.

Mick's arms took a moment to slip up and return the embrace. They'd been so busy running around and so consumed with worries that it had been days since they'd touched in such a way. Toshi was staggering into the hospital late, exhausted and falling asleep as soon as he laid down on a cot the hospital had brought into Mick's room. That was if he made it to the cot, almost as many nights he fell asleep as soon as he sat down.

It wasn't something conscious Mick hadn't known what he was missing until the man's arms folded around him. He'd been running on nervous energy as well, sick with helplessness and fears and doing everything he could from a stationary place to secure everyone from every conceivable attack all while trying to mend his own personal family life. He'd been feeling twisted up inside and tangled but all it took was that simple hug to make everything feel possible again. It awed him and more, it awed him that he had the same effect on Toshi.

"I love you." Mick whispered so softly he wasn't even sure Toshi's hearing would pick it up. The confession made him tremble, frightened to admit the truth even to himself. He wasn't sure what kind of reaction he expected from Toshi but he prayed the man wouldn't make a big deal about it, at least not there in the hallway and Mick already felt far too fragile.

Toshi's blood froze at the words but it wasn't from fear. He was certain he'd misheard the low whisper and the idea that maybe his stressed out brain had manufactured what he wanted to hear worried him. It wasn't until he felt the jittery nerves from his lover that he knew he'd heard right and it made his whole body shiver. He tightened his arms and pulled Mick closer.

"And I you..." He whispered back, wanting to say more but holding back.

It was just what Mick needed. He felt the nervous fear drain from him and his body molded tighter to Toshi's. With a sigh he tucked his face tight to his love's shoulder and together they simply held on.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter One Hundred Six

It had taken a week and a full crew working overtime to convert the warehouse into a conference hall. Alec had seen to it and while some of the decorations were hastily thrown together and the fabrics were as often as not glued instead of sewn, he'd pulled it off. Now there was tables for each delegate, with places to plug in equipment and spread out papers but everyone was close enough that the important people felt like they were sitting down to a private discussion. In the back there was an overflow of press and media as well as assistants and aids to the delegates. The room was buzzing it was so filled but had held onto a sense of intimacy.

Mick had come to the site to check and double check the security but most of his time had been spent reassuring the security forces of the various delegates. Some of their demands were valid, some were silly and some just needed to be comforted that no one was going to shoot their official. It had given him headaches and he'd felt guilty but he'd happily passed the most absurd off to Alec to sooth. It had been worth it, they'd gotten everyone in one place for the start of the discussion of what to do with the I/S community and how best to address the past abuses they'd suffered.

Toshi hovered near by, behind the scenes, nervous about going out in front of so many people. He was on the phone and pacing back and forth, frowning. Alec wasn't there yet and from the snippets of the conversation Mick was picking up it was Alec he was talking to. Finally he couldn't stand it and as Toshi paced by he reached out and snatched the phone from him.

"What's going on?" He asked and ignored Toshi's protesting cry.

"God, Mick, you've got to calm him down." Alec instantly answered.

"That would be easier if you were here."

"I can't, I'm... one of the clubs is causing trouble, I've got to go over and remind them that the accounting paperwork has to be delivered on time, no exceptions."

That made Mick frown. Most of the clubs had fallen into line, especially with the focus of so much media in the small space. One or two had required a careful conversation with those higher on the food chain, crime bosses with more power than the folks set to running the clubs themselves. It had been teleconferences that Toshi had handled beautifully and they'd quietly reached agreements. That didn't mean that with everyone's eyes on the conference that some bright idiot wouldn't cause trouble.

Mick knew what had to be done. "I'll go get those papers, you get over here."

"But..."

"Tell your escort what you need but get on a bike and get over here. I can't help Toshi through this the way you can and you can't crack skulls like I can. Let me go, I'll straighten them out, you just do what you do best. Okay?" Alec was stretched thin, trying to do more than any one man should and while he wanted to resolve compliance with new regulations as peacefully as possible, Mick knew an occasionally bullying worked just as well.

There was a pause. "Don't be too rough with them."

"I won't."

"Okay, I'm on my way. Ten minutes, tops."

"I'll tell him." He glanced over to where a very pissed off Toshi was still glaring at him for stealing his phone. Mick carefully hung up and meekly handed it back. "Alec's on his way over. I'll need a couple of guards. I'm going over to remind them to behave."

"I... you can't. I can't do this alone. I can't go out there by myself." Toshi's eyes grew wider. "You need to stay here."

"Baby, I'm not any use here. We'll wait until Alec gets here and then he'll go out there with you. I'll go take care of this but of trouble and be right back. I'll be back here before you know I'm gone. Okay?" Toshi had been worried sick about having to go out and face the delegates in a formal manner. He could show them around and talk to them casually but sitting in a formal manner, trying to document what his people had endured, trying to push for their freedom was too much.

Toshi drew a deep breath. "Okay."

"You'll be fine. You know what to say."

"But I shouldn't be the one saying it."

"It'll be fine." He reassured again and stepped away. One of the guards was always close at hand and Mick moved close to them. "Alec is coming over, I need five guards able to go with me and a baseball bat, aluminum if you can find it."

The guard didn't answer with an instant agreement but their eyes went a little wider. "I know just the thing." He grinned a little in wicked amusement and moved to pass the orders on.

Mick shifted his weight from his good leg to his healing let. It hurt but it held him and he knew it was just the remaining soreness. He propped his crutch against the wall and made himself ready. A gun would be a hard push, it would escalate things and make them want to reply with other guns but an aluminum baseball bat was a different story. It would get the point across nicely, make it clear that Mick wasn't going to tolerate stupid power plays on his turf and that he was wasn't going to ask nicely more than once for compliance. The weeks had been so filled with stress, worry and fear he found himself quite eager to go over and crack some offices with a few good swings.

Alec arrived just under ten minutes later. He was finger combing his hair into place and straightening his tie as he hurried into their waiting area. "It's a good thing I/S have better vision than us mere humans because we were going so fast all I saw was a blur around me." He grinned and took back his suitcase from the guard that had escorted him in. "How is he?" He asked softly of Mick.

Mick shrugged. "Nervous."

"Hmm." He shrugged his jacket shoulders back into place and nodded. "I got this, go on, but be

careful. This is a touchy lot but they're dense and their workers are already scared silly."

"I'll be careful." Mick moved to stand where he could catch Toshi's eye. "I'm leaving, Alec's here. I'll be back as quick as I can. Less than an hour I promise."

Toshi pulled his eyes away from where he'd been watching the talking, buzzing and living crowd all gathered and waiting for him. Mick's worry, Alec's fussing, were touching but he knew what he had to do. He was frightened but there was no choice and their care soothed him. "It's okay, you do what you have to do, I'll do what I have to." He smiled a little and turned back to watch the crowd.

Mick lingered a little before he shook his head. As he passed Alec he whispered. "He's snapped under the stress."

Alec snickered. "Haven't we all?" He watched the auburn haired man leave and was again grateful Toshi had found someone that so fully understood him. When Mick was gone Alec moved to where Toshi stood. "Well."

"Indeed."

"I'll be with you."

"This isn't going to work. All this work and it's going to fall apart. They have no respect for me."

"That's not true."

"Okay, they've no respect for me speaking for the I/S people."

"It's a voice, and that's a start."

Toshi nodded. "Well, they've waited long enough. Let's do this."

"Okay." Alec turned and signaled to the guards, they'd send word to all the security and almost before they could step out into the main room the word was spreading. People stopped conversations and returned to their tables. The chatter slowly died away to a murmur and then away to nothing by the time they reached their own spot. Even Alec had to admit so many eyes of so many powerful people, people who had the ears and voices of their own countries, all turned to watch them was unnerving.

He dropped his briefcase down on their surface and popped it open. Inside was talking points, highlighted, outlined and ready to go. He carefully slipped the sheets of paper out onto the table. If Toshi hit a snag he could simply glance down and remember what had to be conveyed.

Toshi saw all the information Alec had gathered and put into a simple short sentences and it made the seriousness of what he was doing sink in. He gave his friend a nod of thanks as Alec sat down and suddenly felt very alone. All the other tables had several more people at them, they all were human. He'd almost begged his uncle's advisors to attend but they'd refused.

He drew a breath and cleared his throat. "I wish to thank everyone for taking the time from your busy schedules on such short notice to attend this conference. I would never have asked had it not been an issue of such far reaching and urgent importance. The very fact that we must meet in what was until a few weeks ago a warehouse only helps to illustrate the space constraints the I/S people are living under. Many of you have had the opportunity in the past days to see first hand but overcrowding isn't the only concern faced. For generations, an entire race of people has been abused, neglected and mistreated. In some regions of the world this mistreatment borders on genocide." He paused to draw a breath and glanced to the papers below him. Before he could continue a murmur rose from the crowd and the murmur spread slowly across the

group.

Toshi had a moment of anxious fear. The whispers from the crowd weren't panic but concerned and that could mean someone was walking toward them with a bomb strapped to them or a gun or any manner of insanity. Or it could mean something more innocent, a delegate could have stood and left, boycotting the actual conference and taking any hope of success with them.

His eyes scanned the room but saw nothing out of place. It wasn't until he glanced to the side, to where most of the humans were now looking that he too felt shock sweep him away. It wasn't an attack on either a person or the conference or anything bad but it was the last thing he expected. Just inside the door Toshi had entered the room through was Papa Mike and Mama Ruth on either side of Toshi's uncle where he sat in a wheelchair.

The first try Yasun made to get out of the wheelchair failed and when Mike moved closer to help haul him to his feet he held up one elegant hand and refused. Only a small fraction of his pain showed on his face as he stood but it was unmistakable. Once on his feet Yasun paused, soothed out the well crafted I/S made suit he wore and made no effort to hide the IV needle still taped to his hand.

He wavered a bit on the first steps he made. Ruth shook her head and pulled the wheelchair back, out of the way but Mike moved forward and took Yasun's elbow. The two spoke softly but Mike shook his head and held on. Toshi about tripped over his own feet he moved so quickly to reach his uncle's side.

"What are you doing?" He hissed to the man. "Trying to kill yourself?"

"I'm doing my job." Yasun whispered back.

Toshi looked to Mike and tried to find sense in the human. "Why would you let him out of bed?"

"He said he was coming with our help or without."

"Stubborn, stubborn...we can't...I can't..."

Yasun paused and put a hand over the one Toshi had over his arm. "I'm fine. I'll stay seated and won't go beyond what I can bear. I promise but this is my duty to carry, not yours."

"He should have stayed in the wheelchair." Mike muttered.

"I will walk to my place."

"Yes, you will." Toshi nodded and caught Alec's eye. He didn't need to explain anything, the blond was already moving to rearrange their papers, places and microphones so that Yasun could sit and be the center of attention.

Yasun grimaced as he lowered down into the chair but once there if he was in pain it didn't show on his face. He waited until Toshi took the spot beside him before he leaned forward to speak.

"You'll have to forgive me for not making an appearance sooner. My wounds have not been cooperative. Also, please forgive me if these sessions will not be as long as originally planned. I'm not sure how long my strength will hold out during the day. I am deeply honored to be able to host you here, on the doorstep to my home. It has always been my belief that humans, like I/S, are at the heart of their nature good people." He paused for breath and slipped into his role as leader and diplomat with such ease most would have assumed he spoke to large rooms of humans everyday.

It left Toshi caught between two conflicting emotions. He was unable to express how grateful he

was to be off the hook. To no longer have all the weight of so much on his shoulders alone made him feel almost giddy. It was tempered with his worry for his uncle's health. The man really hadn't been out of bed more than a step or two in his recovery but here he was, dressed, upright and focused. If they gained their independence at the sacrifice of Yasun's life it would not be a victory.

A piece of paper slipped across the table and stopped in front of him. Written across it in Alec's neat hand was a simple message. "It's going to be okay." Toshi read it and it sunk in that yes, maybe, they really would be.

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Blurring The Lines:

From The Ashes

Chapter One Hundred Seven

Mick hurried back into the warehouse the required documents tucked under his arm. He'd split his knuckles open and hadn't noticed until they'd made it back to the conference. It left him juggling files while he tried to fish out his handkerchief. He was dabbing at the small amount of blood, staining the sharply white cloth with dots of red, as he came back into the holding room.

He stopped because the room wasn't empty. Luke Henri stood there, his white hair as perfectly in place as his very expensive suit. His height made it easy for him to look down his long nose at people even if he wasn't trying and his bright eyes were locked on the conference floor, watching. He turned at the sound of footsteps and smirked a little.

"Wondered where you were. Figured you were staked out in the rafters with a high powered rifle waiting to take out anyone that disagreed."

Mick raised an eyebrow. "I hadn't thought of that."

The frank answer made the older man snort in an amused chuckle but his eyes were drawn to the conference again.

Curiosity pulled Mick to see as well. "Yasun's here?"

Luke Henri nodded.

"He looks like death."

"But he pulled himself from the grave to come and fight with what could be his last breath for the safety and freedom of his people. The public will eat this with a spoon and beg for more."

"It won't do any good if he kills himself." Mick glanced around and considered ordering the guards to remove Yasun back to his sick bed, even if it was against his will.

"He'll be fine. You haven't seen how horrible an I/S can look when recovering."

It took a moment for Mick to remember that Toshi hadn't only been an addict, he'd been shot as well when he'd been taken to a human hospital. Luke Henri's first look at his son would have been while he looked so ill.

"They'll win the day doing this. Might take time to smack the group in line but they'll win now. Think of it...a homeland for the I/S people."

"I didn't expect you to be an idealist, sir."

Another bitter chuckle bubbled up at Mick's sarcastic tone. "Like hell, Ranvier Industries will be first in line as employer and supplier. We're going to make a mint on this."

"Better than having to bootleg it in." Mick mocked back, well aware how a good third of the Ranvier fortune, if not more, was based on smuggling supplies into the I/S camp.

"Less likely to get shot at. Run into troubles yourself?" He nodded to where Mick was finishing dabbing blood from his knuckles.

"I wasn't allowed to use the ball bat on their stubborn skulls."

That earned him a full out laugh. "To be young again and using blunt force marketing techniques." Luke Henri studied the deceptively soft spoken man beside him. "I'd offer to pay you off to leave my son alone but I think you'd hit me."

"I might." Mick warned.

"And I don't think your interest in him is his money."

"It's not."

Luke Henri nodded and turned to watch the conference again, waiting to see if Mick would break the silence. When he was reasonably sure Mick was going to let things remain as they were between them he continued. "I like the changes I've seen in my son this past year. I'm betting that's your doing."

"No, Toshi's worked very hard. You haven't made it easy on him."

"That's because I'm a rotten father." He kept his eyes on the circus in the other room. "I was trying to protect him."

"He can protect himself."

"Hm now, yes, and if he can't you'll bloody your knuckles in his defense."

Mick deliberately didn't answer.

"My father gave me a fortune and a work ethic but all I did was grow what was given to me. My son is building a nation."

"You almost sound proud of him."

"I am."

"You should tell him."

"Maybe I will." Luke Henri sighed and turned to study the man beside him. "Back when I was your age and the world was still in pieces, I saw this boxer. Scrappy fellow... Black Eye Flannigan, Scots Irish mutt like you. They put him in the ring with this huge Portuguese fighter Filho Siliva two weight classes higher than him. He was like a mountain of flesh, and no one expected Flannigan to make it past the first round. He got the life beat out of him but every time he got knocked down he'd get back up. Never seen a thing like it. The more Siliva try to knock him out the more angry and stubborn Flannigan became. And the longer the fight the less Siliva had to punch with but Flannigan still was hitting like a mule. He knocked Siliva out cold in the eighth round. Everyone was furious because they'd put a lot of money on Siliva."

"But not you."

"Hell no. I made enough money I covered Flannigan's medical bills. Was the best fight I'd ever seen. You remind me of that fighter, too stubborn to know when to lay down and give up. I'd be a sight happier if Toshi had found a decent girl but if he's going to shack up with a man at least he picked one that won't give up on him."

"I'm not going anywhere." Mick wasn't sure if this was the welcome to the family speech or not but it would make things easier on Toshi if he thought his father approved of their relationship beyond something casual.

"Good because I'm trusting you not just with my only child but with my grandchildren. My family is all that matters to me, the rest is just games."

There was a sharp deadly glint to the older man's tone and Mick took it seriously. The lines around his eyes and the shock of white hair, the age he now carried in his frame all made for a deceptively grandfatherly appearance. It was a mistake to assume age had mellowed Luke Henri Ranvier. He may not have much need to pick up his own baseball bat to close a deal but the man was still quite capable of it.

Mick pushed aside the subtle threat. "Toshi's family is my family, even an old coot like you."

That erupted deep laughter from the older man and he reached a still very strong hand out to grasp the back of Mick's neck and shake the shorter fellow a little. "Whelp!"

The move was almost fatherly and certainly warmer than Luke Henri had ever expressed toward Mick. Because of that he wasn't going to protest but Mick winced as his balance was pulled off guard by the gentle shaking and his leg protested. "Well, I try."

Luke Henri laughed harder. "I'll have them bring chairs in and drinks and we'll sit and watch a nation being built. What do you say?"

"I promised Toshi I'd be here for him."

"And I promised Yasun I'd be here to offer him advice when they go on break, so chairs and drinks it is."

It was the closest to admitting that Luke Henri had maybe conspired with Yasun to make the sudden appearance at the conference. Mick suspected but it wasn't his place to criticize. Yasun felt his obligations as deeply as they all did and if he'd been willing to solicit help from his old ally it wasn't his place to comment. It made Mick feel more secure in the outcome of the conference. If Luke Henri was backing them in subtle ways and the not so subtle ways of owning so many media outlets they were almost promised success. Mick nodded and kept his mouth shut as he accepted the invitation to join what was basically his father in law sitting in the wings while

history was being made.

Andy pushed open the loft door and pushed his hair back from his face. "Hey, Rez, I'm home." He called out. The summer sun was hot and humidity had settled in. They'd get a storm tonight for sure and Andy liked storms. "I brought food, you need to eat!" He shouted into the large space.

They'd split up today when Pia at the clinic had called asking for someone to come over. Rez had been busy dealing with Jos, Snow and the others and everyone else was swamped with the conference so Andy had gone. He dropped the take out on the counter of the still sparsely furnished loft.

"You'll never guess why Pia called."

The door to the balcony opened and Rez stepped inside. He pulled sunglasses off and didn't look the least frazzled by the heat. "What are you babbling about?"

Andy rolled his eyes. "I brought food and don't make a face at me, you need to eat. Did you get your ducklings to behave?"

"Had to smack Jos upside the head again but they're eating like they've been told. What did Pia want?"

"Oh, the clinic? It's got like a dozen addicts wanting to sign up for treatment. They've been arriving all day, she didn't know what to tell them."

That would mean it was addicts from the Yards and those were people Rez hadn't thought would ever want to get clean. "What did you tell her?"

He shrugged. "What could I? I told her to take their names and how they could be reached and we'd find them as there was spots. But the response is amazing, it won't be everyone but..." He shrugged. "And go turn on the tv..."

"What?"

"Don't give me trouble go turn it on."

Rez moved to find the remote while muttering about stupid humans. "What channel?" But as soon as the screen flipped on he knew it didn't matter, just about every channel had it airing live. The conference was being broadcast live but instead of it being Toshi at the center table it was Yasun. Rez felt the blood drain from his face. "What's he doing?"

Andy moved to stand beside Rez and slipped a hand onto his shoulder. "Winning you a country. Everyone is talking about it, he showed up out of the blue. Cynics are saying it was all a publicity stunt but seeing him like this, looking so sick still, it's hard to buy that nonsense. Most are going on about how noble and brave it is and that'll reflect well on all of you."

"But he..." Rez didn't want to fuss but everyone in the camp was protective of Yasun.

"He's fine, I called Mick when I saw."

It sent a thrill of excitement through Rez. "He's really going to be able to do it. We're going to be free."

Andy nodded and kissed the side of the scowling face. "I picked up food from the market on the way back, come eat."



"Wait." Rez snatched out and caught Andy's wrist. "I... here..." He tugged a little and nearly pulled Andy off his square heeled shoes.

"What?"

"Just shut up and come with me." Rez sighed but it got the human moving. When they reached the door to the balcony he pulled it open and motioned for Andy to go out ahead of him.

"God, it's hot out here!" He whined but Andy stepped out onto their own private porch. "We should get a grill... I...oh..." The porch was empty since they'd been too busy to think about things like chairs and decorations but today Andy found something had been added.

"Devil's Trumpets." Rez answered.

"You brought me flowers."

Rez frowned. "You were drawing them, said you liked how they smelled. Now you can draw them here. Dumbass it's not like a fucking fancy bouquet. I just got Kesses to split the pot when they cleared off the roof. If you don't like them I can give them back."

"Shut up." Andy snapped back and pushed his lover back into their loft and kicked the outside door shut. "Shut up and kiss me." He whispered and didn't wait. Before Rez could stop him he tumbled into his arms and claimed the grumpy man's mouth.

For all his protests of it not being a big deal, Andy knew he was lying. If he'd had any doubts they dissolved when Rez's lips parted below his own and his arms pulled him far closer than they needed to. The kiss broke but Rez didn't let him go, instead he moved to nibble Andy's neck.

"Wherever we live, we'll have a pot of Devil's Trumpets growing." Andy promised. The words stopped the hungry kisses and Andy pulled away. He saw the worry and lingering fear behind the pink eyes and doubted if a hundred years would be enough to full chase that away. "Rez..."

"What?"

"You're going to have a country."

"Don't jinx it."

"And if you don't? You'll always have me." He took one of the man's hands, prying it from where Rez was holding onto his hips and pressed it flat over his heart. Andy covered the fingers with his own hand and pressed Rez's palm tight enough to his chest so he knew the man could feel the ring of metal below his clothing.

The reminder chased some of the worry away and he shook his head. "You've got a fifteen second head start to make it to the bed or I'm going to fuck you where ever I catch you."

Andy raised his eyebrows. "Fifteen seconds you say?"

"Fourteen..." Rez corrected and let go of the artist.

"Well, I'd better hurry." Andy laughed and kicked off his heels.

"Twelve....keep talking..."

With another laugh Andy turned and took off toward the stairs that led to their bedroom. He was pretty sure Rez didn't wait those last seconds before chasing after him and he was glad for it. Rez caught him at the top of the steps and nearly tackled him. They stumbled the last few steps

to the bed and fell in a mix of hair and limbs onto it's soft surface. Andy caught a hand in the long spill of purple hair and pulled Rez away enough to see his eyes.

"Rez?"

Rez frowned at being stopped. "What?"

"Everything's perfect."

"Damn, the heat's fried your brain."

Andy laughed again and let go of his grip on Rez's hair. "Maybe... but I...oh right there...I like it..."

"Stupid slut." Rez whispered but his voice held warm affection.

Reality said that life was never and could never be perfect but Andy didn't believe it. Rez stripped his clothing away and soon replaced the silly grin he wore with gasping moans and a look of needing lust. They still had to finish the club and open it, nothing Yasun was doing was written in stone but there was hope everywhere and Andy was surrounded by a cloud of lavender hair. As the television below them talked to itself about the future, Andy held tight to all he'd ever wanted.

The end...