

BLURRING THE LINES

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Original Slash Yaoi Fiction

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When Mick told his parents he was gay, they didn't even blink, when he told them he wanted to be a cop, they freaked out. But he was good at his job until he was bounced off the police force on made up charges.

Toshi was caught between two worlds, the quarantined mutated I/S society of his mother's world and the high class world of wealthy human life from his father. Comfortable in neither his heritage or his life, Toshi hides behind duty and clings to what little privacy he has.

When Mick accepts the job to keep the reclusive half breed alive, neither man's life will ever be the same again.

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Part One

"Come on, Mick, don't be like this." Andy called out as soon as he pushed past the front doors of their apartment building.

Mick, dressed in the casual jeans and t-shirt he almost never wore, hefted the last of the carefully taped and labeled boxes into the back of an older, well maintained car. Andy knew the casual clothes had been bought in college, at his urging, and the man wearing them now had filled out a bit more since then. The simple act of loading the car was nearly indecent given how tightly the cloth clung to the other man.

Mick, as always, was unaware of the image he was providing. It made Andy smile to himself and force out the raw honest truth that it wasn't simple charity that had him and their room mates wanting the other man to stick around. Two years younger than the rest of them and not yet twenty seven, with dark auburn hair that shone like a copper penny in the sun, fair skin with freckles so small across his nose as to almost be invisible, topped off with expressive hazel eyes and classic features that lit up when he smiled, Mick was hot enough to stop traffic. That was if he didn't dress twice his age and take everything so seriously.

"Mick," Andy was dressed in casual clothes too, a pink cotton school girl skirt, pink fuzzy slippers and a black t-shirt with the word 'Bitchy' emblazoned across it in gold glitter. "Don't leave us." He waited until the younger man glanced over his shoulder to twirl one of his pigtails around his finger, fully aware how he looked.

All it earned him was a thin, small, grin, not the full thousand watt smile such clothes and silly behavior normally gained. "Andy, we all agreed when we moved in together. If one of us couldn't make rent, they'd move out."

"Well, yeah, but we did that to protect you from us lazy ass artist types. None of us expected you to follow that. Come on, you'll have another job in a couple of weeks, we can cover for you. With Samson's newest fling kicking in his share we don't even really need yours, we talked about it. Stay." Truth was, they could only float Mick for a month or two it was a gamble but that's what

friends did.

"I know full well none of you can afford that. Things happen, that's life." He shut the car door with a little too much force.

"Than stay, we can get you work down at Hardy's. You know you can bartend again, swallow your pride and stay." Andy moved closer to where his friend leaned against his car and he could see the internal battle between desire to stay and responsibility.

"I didn't go to college to bartend forever."

"Well, you didn't become a cop to be kicked around by bigoted assholes either but shit happens, sweetheart. Now, open that door and let me help you carry those boxes back upstairs."

Mick reached across the distance between them and slid a hand to the back of his friends neck before swooping in to place a quick kiss on the so far unpainted lips. "And let you break a nail? Never. Thanks for trying, Andy, I do appreciate it."

"Where will you go? The housing market right now isn't exactly grand. I'm not going to stand by and let my best friend be homeless, or worse sleep in one of those awful flophouses."

That made Mick laugh but the smile was still missing. "I have enough mothers Andy."

"Well, if any of them actually mothered you I wouldn't need to. I'm serious. Where do you think you'll go?"

Mick just shrugged. "I'll be fine. If things get to bad I'll go home for a bit."

"Great, like that makes me feel any better."

"I've got to go Andy."

"Shit, you're a brat." He tried pouting but that didn't work either. "You'll have your phone on? I'll worry if I call and you don't answer."

"Of course."

"And you'll come by and still be our friend?"

"Of course."

Andy sighed and studied the too serious face for any signs of an opening, when all he found was quiet and unhappy resolve, he knew he'd lost. "I still say you're an unforgivable brat, but I hate good byes so." He leaned forward, stole another kiss before quickly hurrying back inside the building. Nine AM, before breakfast, and already he felt like the day was ruined.

Mick stayed where he was leaning against his car and rubbed at his eyes. "Do you have something to say to me or do you just like listening in to private conversations for fun?" He asked without looking up, feeling the other man's eyes still on him.

The man that had hovered a good distance away but still well within easy earshot, jumped a little startled and the paper he'd been pretending to read crinkled in his hands. It was the first real look Mick had gotten of the fellow and he was surprised at the age. The man had to have been close to his own age or a few years older. A shock of sandy blonde hair was cut short in the back and left to fall in short strands around the top, it was a style very popular at the moment with their age group. Tall, close to six feet, and lean without being underfed, the man was attractive in a plain, over look-able way. It was the suit he was wearing that caught the most attention, far too well cut

to be anything anyone in the neighborhood could afford. Far too well made to be anything most anyone could afford, let alone a twenty something kid.

The blond was only startled for a moment, his composure returned quickly as he folded the paper over and tucked it under an arm. With an air of unconscious habit, he straightened his suit jacket and reached down to catch the handle of a well made, but well worn, hard sized leather brief case.

"A.R. McKale?" The blonde questioned as he approached.

"If you had any question as to who I was you wouldn't have been hovering over there." Mick stayed where he leaned against his car.

A smile lit up the strangers face, warming his eyes. "Very true, my name is Alec Orwick. My intention wasn't to spy on you but I didn't wish to interrupt."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Orwick." He didn't let the smile and open, disarming face work on him.

"I was wondering if I might have a moment of your time. Buy you a cup of coffee?"

"I'll tell you the same thing I've told your fellow members of the press, I don't have anything to say that anyone wants to hear."

The bright smile flashed again. "I'm not a reporter, please, just a few moments?"

Mick had always trusted his instincts and the young man across from him wasn't setting any of them off. He tossed his head down the street. "There's a coffee shop down on the corner. I've a little time."

"Wonderful, thank you so much."

They walked in silence down the street. The neighborhood was anchored in three shops, the local grocer, the local bar and the local coffee shop. The rest of the stores, pawn shops, small retail storefronts and the like were all extras, it was those three that held the neighborhood together. It was to those three that just about everyone eventually found a connection and crowd to gossip with. The only reason Mick had any connection to any of the three centers of gossip and community was because Andy and Samson had coffee monkey's on their backs.

The take out counter was busy but the tables were almost empty, too far from the college to support a morning lingering student crowd. Mick led them to a back corner that was empty of other customers and far away from the bustle of the counter. Before either of them could settle in one of the girls had slipped over to meet them.

"Aw, Mick, I'm glad you stopped in." She leaned in and placed a kiss on the side of his face. "We've all been worried you'd leave without stopping by."

"Hey, Jinny. Shouldn't you be helping with the rush?"

She waved it off. "Boss lady can't fire herself. Can I get you your normal?" She eyed the stranger in his too nice suit. "And something for your friend?"

"Regular's fine for me whatever he wants, he's buying."

"Just a coffee, thank you." Alec offered up to the waitress but he was watching Mick settle into a chair across from him.

"Now, what can I do for you Mr. Orwick?"

"Mr. McKale, I'm Mr. Toshi Hoshimoto Ranvier's personal assistant. Are you aware of Mr. Ranvier?"

The casually dropped name wasn't where Mick thought the conversation might have gone. "Who isn't aware of him, the half human, half incubus illegitimate son and only child to Luke Henri Ranvier, the richest man in the world."

"There's some debate as to whether or not Luke Henri Ranvier is the richest man in the world but essentially, yes, what you say is true." Alec's words stopped at the movement from the counter.

Mick hopped to his feet and hurried over to where Jinny was carrying two coffees and a small plate with a blueberry muffin. "Thanks."

"I've got it." She always protested but he always helped. "He's cute, but fellows dressed like that," her lowered voice died off, leaving the warning unspoken.

"It's okay Jinny, thanks." He ignored her little disbelieving tsk as she turned back to the counter. "So," he settled back down and watched as the blonde added sugar to his coffee. "You work for Toshi Ranvier."

"Yes, as I'm sure you can imagine, his position of heir and only child to such a wealthy man makes him quite a public figure. Add in his mixed heritage, well, the press hounds him and he receives numerous threats to his life a day. Up until this point, all they've been is threats."

"Several weeks ago, someone attempted to shoot Mr. Ranvier. They missed, but not by much."

"There wasn't anything in the papers about it."

"No and there won't be, it's been kept quiet. The police have been slow to investigate. Honestly, they've done nothing and it's my belief they wouldn't be too upset if the shooter succeeds next time. Mr. Ranvier's father is rightfully concerned, he maintains a security force of almost two dozen and has long been unhappy that his son refuses such measures."

Mick stopped toying with the muffin, leaving the increasingly smaller crumbs alone. "So what is it you want from me?"

"They've reached a compromise. Mr. Ranvier's father will settle for a smaller security force if carefully selected. The standards he set were high, add in the difficulties of finding someone sympathetic to Mr. Ranvier's mixed bloodlines, understanding of his intensely private ways and willing to work with his reluctance for any security measures, finding suitable candidates has been difficult. I've been making inquiries for weeks and there's only been a few names that appear over and over again. Yours is one of the few."

Mick sipped his coffee. "You haven't heard, I got bounced off the force."

That only made Alec smile again. "You underestimate my skills at research. There's very little I don't know about you. I know you're an Inky. I know you started college at fifteen, graduated top of your class with degrees in both psychology and criminal science. I know the federal government attempted to recruit you but you entered the police academy instead. Graduated the top of your class there as well, started working on your master's degree, dropped out when you made detective a year and a half ago. I've studied your case histories, filled with accommodations. I've spoken to the citizens you've interviewed, especially those in the I/S community. I'm fully aware the charges brought against you were completely unfounded and used as a means to remove you. What I don't know is why you refused to fight those charges."

"You've done your homework but I'm not an Inky."

The smile returned, hiding the bright interest. "Forgive me, raised in an Inky Commune. Both have the desired effect that you are a little more understanding of other people's difference than the average person in security or law enforcement. I also know enough about you to know you respect directness. I've been charged with hiring the security force to keep Mr. Ranvier safe, you are my top choice. You're smart, well educated, have a tremendous record."

"So? There are plenty of others better qualified than me. I've never worked personal security before."

"True. Mr. McKale this isn't just about who can analysis threats. Mr. Ranvier does wear an inhibitor but like most I/S, he misses little. Someone equally qualified but even slightly uneasy around him will be noticed. He's resentful of having to add on a security force, it'll be counterproductive if he's unable to trust them."

"How large of a team are you putting together?"

"Well, that depends. If you refuse I'll be hiring three others, if you accept my offer, it'll just be you."

Mick laughed. "You're crazy."

"No, please, hear me out." He brushed his so far untouched coffee aside and set his case on the table. The latches popped open and he started to pull papers out. "My proposition to you is this;" a paper slid across the table. "This is the salary figure ranges, there is room for negotiations."

Mick nearly swallowed his coffee wrong but Alec ignored him and kept going.

A second paper followed the first. "A list of standard benefits Mr. Ranvier offers his employees." Another paper appeared. "You'll have an expense account of course and will be reimbursed for anything you require. Additionally, you'll be provided an apartment that interconnects with Mr. Ranvier's penthouse in Darsel Plaza. It's not very large but it has a private entrance, it's the twin of my set of rooms. You'll have access to the in house staff which you can take advantage of or not as you wish. You'll have a private office to work from as well."

"If you refuse, I'll hire two on call bodyguards and one analyst. It won't work as well but it should keep him alive."

"I was right, you're insane. The low end salary numbers are twice what I was making."

"Mr. Ranvier is a very good employer."

"Than to add all the rest in? Just what kind of duties would be required?"

"You'd be expected to sort the threats we receive, file out the crackpots from anything serious. It'd be your job to check security at any event he attends, to see to it that it's adequate and to make it adequate if it isn't. You'd be required to escort him when he goes out, which isn't often. Additionally, you'd be expected to investigate any serious threats. They'll be bonuses if your investigations lead to arrests. Primarily, it'll be your job to keep him safe."

Another paper slid across the table. "You'll be asked to sign a confidentiality contract, it's a standard form that all personal employees must agree to. Also, as a member of his house hold," A thick stack of papers joined the pile. "You'll be under a sideline jurisdiction of the Containment Committee."

That raised Mick's eye brows. "How so? I thought they had no authority over humans?"

"True, but because Mr. Ranvier technically has access to the private apartments that interconnect with his own, they can be searched. I've worked and lived with Mr. Ranvier for six years, in that time they've searched my rooms twice. Generally, they just check the land line records to make sure Mr. Ranvier hasn't accessed them and at most, they do a walk through. I've been blood tested a few times as well. It's annoying but for me, it's acceptable."

"I've never had an interest in private security."

"I'm aware of that which is why I'll say one thing formally and a second informally. The first is this, the original contract of employment is for thirty days. At the end of the thirty days you can walk away. If we both agree to renew the contract, it can be dissolved with three weeks notice by either party at any time. If something occurs, I might be able to have a system in place to replace you before that three weeks but it's taken me almost three weeks to get to this conversation so I want to give myself the same amount of time again." The employment contract appeared from the briefcase and joined the stack.

"The informal second thing is this; Mr. Ranvier is almost a shut in. He rarely goes out, rarely has company in. Most of the events he is forced to attend are very secure already. He's capable of taking care of himself. Yes, we receive a fair number of threats but most are empty. You'll have time to work on any side project you might want to. I know for a fact that Mr. Ranvier will fully support any private investigations you might wish to pursue." The brief case snapped shut.

"All I'm asking, Mr. McKale, is to give this the thirty days." He dropped a twenty dollar bill on the table, twice or more the total for the drinks and muffin that sat uneaten and handed over a crisp business card. "Read over the paper work, think about it, then call me. That's my private line, I can always be reached there. If I don't hear from you by two, I'm contacting the other three. I want this resolved today." Alec scooped up his case and paper. "Thank you for hearing me out, Mr. McKale. I look forward to your call."

Alec slipped out of the coffee shop and didn't look back. Anyone else would have been fooled by the carefully guarded expression, Mr. McKale wore but Alec had picked up a few things living with Toshi for so many years. There was very little other humans could hide from him. He saw McKale's shock at the entire offer but he also saw the curiosity and the interest in those hidden hazel eyes. There was a reason why he needed to come down and meet with this man personally and it had worked out beautifully. There was no way McKale wouldn't be calling, it was only a matter of when.

Part Two

Mick sat with his picked apart muffin, cold coffee, and small mountain of paperwork for a good ten minutes after Alec Orwick had left. The Ranvier Corporation owned most of the city in one way or another and it was controlled by its iron willed CEO totally. Everything he'd ever heard about Luke Henri Ranvier made it clear he wasn't a man to cross but little was said about his son. Mick never followed gossip but Andy and Samson did and the only things other than the man's parentage that Mick knew was that his father was ferociously protective of him. The opportunity to work for the family that had, debatably, more power than the government was tremendous. It wasn't an offer to take lightly and the answer to accept or refuse would lie in the stack of legal papers before him.

"Want me to heat that up for you?" Jinny asked, she was close enough that it made Mick jump slightly. He'd been so lost in thought that he hadn't heard her approach.

"Thanks, and Jinny, can I borrow a pen and some paper?"

"Of course love." The twenty dollar bill disappeared as she gathered up the cold cups of coffee.

At ten of ten, Alec's phone rang. "Yes?"

"I'm in, at least for the thirty days."

A thousand pound weight suddenly felt removed from Alec's shoulders. "Good, from what I saw of your car you're already packed up. Do you know how to reach Darsell Plaza?"

"Of course."

"Use the East Hansel Street entrance to the parking garage, the attendant will be expecting you."

"Okay."

"And, Mr. McKale, thank you for agreeing." Alec only half listened to the automatic 'you're welcome' Mick mumbled out before hanging up. His attention had been drawn to the slight sign of movement near his open office door. He hung the phone up and turned back to the papers on his desk. "It's taken care of."

"Wonderful." The less than enthusiastic reply came from the edge of the doorway. There was a rustle of fabric but by the time Alec glanced up all that he could see of his employer was a swish of long black hair.

Alec grinned to himself, quite pleased and returned to the morning reports.

Darsell Plaza was considered by most in the city as a sign of hope for the future and a symbol of the chaos of the past. One of the makers of the virus that so ravaged the world was Darsell Pharmaceuticals and anything bearing the name quickly became a target. It didn't matter that the Plaza that so closely shared names was owned by a former transportation baron and hadn't been anything more than apartments and office space for decades, the building had been stormed.

The old news footage had captured a very medieval mob scene. Angry people, many of them ill, burning and looting as they went, striking out at the only symbol they could find. They hadn't managed to tear the building down, but they did manage to damage it beyond easy repair. And so it sat, empty, hollow, like the city around it, as the years slipped away.

Mick had been a small child when the Containment Camp that had been established on the outskirts of their town had been opened up. It was Ranvier Industries that had won the contracts to privatize so many of the Camp's day to day functions. That hadn't surprised anyone, what had was when Luke Henri Ranvier had moved his corporate headquarters to their small city.

It had brought a fresh influx of money and jobs, not enough to fully reverse the effects of the depression that had lingered since the plague years, but enough to really brighten things. Things were still too costly, money was still too tight, but there was money now and people were buying things again. Jobs were scarce but there were jobs to be found.

When Ranvier had purchased the barren Darsell Plaza in the downtown district people had laughed. When he tore it down a disconnected sense of cleansing swept the city. Mick had been six when they'd broken ground to re-build. He was almost twelve when they'd finished. It was the tallest building in the city, not a huge boast given Darsell only had forty stories but it still dominated the sky line. Modern, secure, it was reborn clean and fresh, a physical promise to the better days Ranvier Industries were slowly bringing about.

Then, Luke Henri Ranvier had announced the building's name would remain the same. A small

museum and gift shop was opened in the lobby documenting the original buildings destruction. As he so often did, Ranvier had soothed and comforted with one hand while slapping in a harsh reminder and forced responsibility with the other. The community accepted it but they didn't like it. To make matters worse, the building was kept private. Several of the apartments were occupied by high ranking Ranvier employees but none of the office space was directly used by Ranvier Industries, as if he'd been afraid to trust his company to the city's unstable temper.

It was a building that represented a world that Mick didn't belong in. He'd watched it be torn down and recreated, a massive mirror for the city around him but he was outside both changes. Never did he imagine he'd be visiting Darsell, let alone planning to move in.

The attendant at the parking garage directed him to the private section and Mick rolled past him. He followed the unmarked directions to a second series of gates, this time not secured with an attendant but rather with locked keypads and cameras watching everything. The gate swung open at his approach, confirming that someone, somewhere was actually paying attention.

The cars inside the secured parking region were far nicer than the old heap Mick had but the section he'd been directed to was oddly deserted. A nice, well maintained motorcycle sat by itself in one of the spaces. Built into the wall was a locked door that Mick was willing to bet had a nice set of tools behind it. A single, non descript, black car sat in another space, the kind of car that came with a driver. Neither bike nor car looked like they received much use but both looked well maintained.

Near by was an elevator and standing in front of it was Alec Orwick and a half dozen men in work clothes. Mick pulled into one of the spaces close to them and shut the car off. He gathered the legal papers from the seat beside him before he popped the car door open.

"Mr. McKale, I'm pleased to see you again. If you don't mind, these gentleman will take your boxes upstairs. I'll see to it that by this afternoon you have access codes for the gates, locks and elevators." Alec couldn't help grinning, and he offered his hand in welcome.

Mick glanced at the car where the workmen were quickly loading the numerous boxes onto hand carts. It made his belongings look small and few. "It's Mick, no one calls me anything but Mick." He accepted the hand. "I figured the thirty days couldn't do any harm and I've time on my hands. Your papers."

Alec accepted them and led them to the elevator, the workmen obviously were lingering to not take the same elevator up with them. "Fine, Mick it is, than please, call me Alec. Let me show you your rooms and than we'll see if we can find Toshi-san to introduce you."

Alec glanced over the papers once the doors of the elevator shut. "I'm surprised you called so soon. I would have thought you'd have wanted a lawyer to review these."

"What I had questions on I ran past my brother."

"Your brother's a lawyer?"

Mick nodded. "Two of my sisters and one of my brothers. I'm surprised you didn't see that in your check of me."

"Well, your family is extensive. If I'd followed up on every member I'd still be researching."

"True. Some times even I forget what they all do."

"Another advantage to being an only child." Alec's grin widened and the doors opened saving Mick from replying.

Alec stepped out and held the door. "This is the private entrance to our floor." He pointed down the hallway. "That's my apartment door and over here is yours. I almost never come in this way." There wasn't a lock but a keypad and he quickly moved to tap in the code. The door clicked and opened. Inside he flipped on the lights and stepped aside. "It's furnished but you have a redecoration budget if you'd like to change it. Just let me know, anything you want tossed in storage can be easily removed."

Mick walked into a living room that opened directly to a kitchen. The single room was larger than half of the apartment he'd shared with two, sometimes three or four others. The furniture was neutral, well made but with no personality. The kitchen was cutting edge and functional. It was too much space for one person.

"In here," Alec moved toward one of the two other doors in the large main room. "Is the bedroom."

Mick followed to a bedroom almost as large as the main room, set with a huge bed, a closet bigger than a bedroom should have been and a small work station off to the corner.

"Bathroom's in here. Only real downside to these apartments is no windows, they're internal rooms but you really don't notice it too much."

Mick kept his mouth shut over the bathroom, set with separate shower from the soaking bath tub, large mirror and counter. The entire apartment was finished in blues, tans and gold, making it pleasant but impersonal.

"Who stayed here before?"

"No one, it was meant to be a guest quarters but it's never been used." Alec hurried out to the main living room as the first of the handcarts of boxes was arriving. "That door there leads to Mr. Ranvier's main living space. Come on, I'll show you around."

Mick paused, uncertain about following. "I should wait, I'm not really dressed to meet my new boss." He'd forgotten the old clothes he'd been wearing until the newness, the crispness of the apartment reminded him.

"Nonsense. Come on, let me show you around."

Alec opened the door that lead to the main living area. "Most days my door stays unlocked. There's little worry of either Toshi-san or myself entering your rooms without permission. This is the main living space."

Mick followed into what would have been an up scale, if normal, living room. The furniture had an extra touch of style that only items of expense carried but other wise looked soft, comfortable and lived in. The large panel television attached to one wall would have been impressive to most anyone else but Mick had grown up around technology addicts and was used to seeing such things. There was next to nothing personal about the space. No newspapers or magazines lay scattered about the end tables, no photos hung on the wall, there were no mementos sitting on the bookcases. The closest thing to personal were the dozens of books that lined the shelves along the wall.

The space was split in two and like in his own rooms the kitchen opened directly to the living space, an informal arrangement Mick was surprised to find repeated. The kitchen seemed smaller than it should have been for the grandness of the room, scaled down and again, informal.

The room was dominated by the outer wall. Floor to ceiling the wall was a sheet of windows. Tinted but without blinds, they stood forty stories up and gazed out over the city below them. It

was an awesome sight and seemed out of place with the casualness of the room it in cased.

"Wait until the sun goes down, the view is astounding." Alec nodded to the windows before pointing to a third door on the same wall as the one that held the doorways to their apartments. "Toshi-san had that suite turned into a mini-gym. It's not extensive but it serves our needs. I talked him into a lap pool last year. Door on the other side leads to Toshi-san's rooms. Stairs there lead down to the offices and public space."

Mick followed Alec to the well disguised but oddly unadorned spiral stairwell. It occurred to him that the entire collection of rooms had an almost minimalist approach to things and the stairs continued the trend. Just styled enough to be less than Spartan but a far cry from ornate.

The stairs turned them down to a repeat of the living space above. Only this time the furnishings were classically elegant and far less comfortable. The colors went from tans and soft earth tones to rich, deep blues and greens accented in dark woods. Chairs and sofas clustered together in convenient conversational groups, highlighting the still impressive view out the wall of windows. A formal dining room with a large dark wood table so highly polished it shined sat behind half closed French doors.

"There's a second kitchen back behind the dining room. In theory this is where Toshi-san does his formal entertaining. That's Toshi-san's office. My office is the front half of his." Alec pointed to the closed door. He'd left it open when he'd gone down to meet Mick. "This here will be your office."

Alec led them to the door closer to the one that lead out into the main hallway and opened it. "Again, if you want to redecorate feel free. I took the liberty of setting it up. We've been using it mostly for storage."

The room wasn't large but it was certainly more space then he needed. There was a small round table off to one side with several generic office chairs around it. A wide, dark wood desk was set so the person using it would face the door, file cabinets were placed within easy reach. A tv screen was again mounted to the wall and a computer workstation was set up. The colors and style reflected the same general, classic rich tones and styles of the bottom floor.

"It should work fine. Thank you."

"I've filed the mail we've received by date. I'm sure you'll work out your own system from there."

"How does the mail work? Do you receive it all or is it sorted?"

"The building mail room sorts and scans for obvious threats. Than we receive it in two stacks, those on the list of personal contacts and those not."

"I'd like to receive the second stack directly."

"Of course. I," Alec had developed a sense of where his employer was. It was almost essential with how quite Toshi moved around. "Well, looks like you'll get to meet sooner than later. Toshi-san?" He barely heard the suppressed sigh and the quiet footsteps moving from office to kitchen froze.

"Yes, Alec?"

Mick turned surprised that anyone was behind them. His hearing was excellent but there'd been nothing to give the other man away. He saw the man standing between the offices and the dining room. In one hand he held a stone ware mug obviously heading to find a refill of whatever had been inside, the other, curled into a loose fist. Mick could see little of the man he'd now be expected to keep alive expect a waist length curtain of black hair so glossy it reflected the light.

He quickly noted the simple dress pants and casual button down shirt both finely made but the man's feet were clothed in tabi socks.

"Behave." Alec warned in a voice too soft for Mick to hear but knew Toshi would catch the very softly whispered warning. "Mr. McKale, I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Toshi Ranvier." It was a force of will not to grin and darken Toshi's mood further. His friend was so glum looking at having been caught slipping like a thief for another mug of tea that he nearly laughed. "Toshi-san, this is Mr. A.R. McKale, the security agent I spoke to you about."

Mick kept his hands at his side and bowed to nearly thirty degrees.

"Hajimemashite."

Toshi found himself bowing back on instinct. Caught off guard and surprised, some of his unhappiness at the entire situation was put on hold. "Ohayo gozaimasu. You aren't Japanese."

"No, my command of the language is limited too, sir." Mick stood from his bow and it was only from long exposure to the I/S community that kept any visible sign of how startled he was from his face.

Mick wasn't sure if he was expecting a half breed to simply look more human or less but there was little doubt the I/S heritage was dominate in the man before him. The eyes were far too large, nearly double the size of a standard humans and they carried the extreme colors of an I/S. Toshi's eyes were clear, sky blue, nearly crystal and combined with the larger than human size it was the feature that dominated his face. The shape had just the hint of an Asian form, coming to a slight almond point and only accenting the color and size. His skin was golden but several shades too light to be purely Asian. He was a handsome man, strong featured and exotic. Not tall but neither short, Mick guessed they were of similar heights.

The oddest thing was his hair. While it may have become trendy for many in the I/S community to dye their hair in shades of dark brown and even black, their eyelashes and eye brows still showed their natural colors. Toshi's hair wasn't a dye job. The midnight black length of his hair matched his eyebrows and eyelashes and was the only outward sign of his mixed blood. He was a stunning man. Powerful, graceful and Mick found himself startled by the sheer presence of the half breed. Mick was suddenly very grateful that he knew the other wore an inhibitor so his very uneasy thoughts wouldn't cloud the first impression he presented.

"Well," Toshi glanced from Alec to the far younger than he'd expected security officer. "It was nice meeting you. Now, you're fired, go away." He caught Alec's harsh look as he turned away to continue to the kitchen for more tea. The amusement he found in Alec's reaction to his rebellion was almost going to be worth the lecture it was sure to produce.

"Don't listen to him, he can't fire you." Alec forced out when Toshi had cleared the dining room and disappeared into the kitchen. He turned to face their new recruit, expecting to find uncertainty, worry or even anger on his face but found only the same unreadable distance the other man wore so easily.

Mick drew another slow, easy breath and deliberately forced himself to relax. "I thought he was my employer."

"Well, he is but I run his household. Technically, you work for me because other wise we'd never be able to hire anyone. Toshi would fire them all on the spot. Why don't you go back upstairs and get settled in?" He forced the warm smile back on his face and had little doubt the other man saw through it.

"Sure." Mick wandered back to the stairs. "This is going to be fun." He mumbled to himself as he made his way out of sight.

Part Three

"All I'm saying is you could attempt to be nicer to him." Alec clung to the side of the lap pool and let the water float his body.

Toshi was across the room, doing his best to ignore the continuing lecture as he finished his morning run. "Alec."

"I mean, come on, he's been here for two weeks and you've said maybe a dozen words to him."

"A dozen would be generous." He mumbled and kept his focus on his pace and not on his best friend.

"Would it kill you to be a little more civil? He's a good man."

"Is he good at his job?"

"He's already worked through two years of back logged information, profiled twenty four serious threats and filed a report agreeing with you that the man that attacked you last month was working alone. Yeah, he's good at his job."

"That's all that matters. You and father got what you wanted, I don't have to like it."

"Has he been such an intrusion?"

Toshi ran on. He couldn't fairly debate the other man's presence, like all things, Alec had done his job amazingly well. The newest member of their staff was quiet, kept to himself and rarely even was seen. He worked and then retired to his rooms. The changes he'd installed to the penthouse and building security were logical and efficient. Toshi could find nothing concrete to complain about other than the fact that another one of his few luxuries, his privacy, had again been eroded away.

"No, he's caused little fuss."

"But you're still going to treat him like he doesn't exist."

Toshi hit the off button and stopped the treadmill. "What? What do you want from me? He's here, I've agreed to everything you've wanted. You aren't going to guilt me into being nice to him." He snapped before heading out the door, disappointed that the well balanced hinges in the apartment didn't allow for them to be slammed.

Alec released the side of the pool and turned up the current. Toshi only got snippy when he was losing a fight. It was a good sign.

It was more of a sense of movement not something Mick actually saw that made him glance up from his computer screen. It was late, Alec had left his office hours before but like most nights Mick couldn't swear just when Toshi had finally left his desk. The man was as silent as a cat and twice as good at fading out of sight. It would have been eerie if Mick wasn't used to the way I/S naturally moved.

But now he looked up and there, hovering in the half opened door way, was Toshi. It startled him and Mick found himself sitting a little straighter in his chair. Shadow fell on the other's face and made viewing his expression impossible. The moment lingered, neither man certain enough to speak.

"Can I help you?" Mick finally asked.

Again a long breath of silence stood in the empty apartment.

"You shouldn't work so late."

"I just want to make sure everything is secure before tomorrow."

"It's just a bank meeting." There was a slight rustle of fabric where Toshi shifted his weight.

"Don't work too late." He warned again before fading away from the doorway.

Mick sat in silent distraction, the bank's blueprints now forgotten. Two weeks with virtually no contact with the man he was supposed to protect and now this. Was Toshi getting used to his presence? Was he uneasy about venturing out tomorrow? Mick didn't know enough about the other man to even begin to guess at his motivations. Mysteries and mysterious people required further investigation, further consideration, Mick didn't like being left guessing.

The next morning Mick found himself standing by the door, waiting. He was too well disciplined to do much more than stand and wait but his annoyance level was rising. It took a force of will to not glance to his watch or shift his weight from foot to foot as the moments slipped away. The only concession he granted himself was a slight readjustment of the suit he wore. It was brand new and cost more than he had been spending in rent a month. Over all, he couldn't complain about the money spent. He'd be expected to look respectable to accompany Toshi-san on his outings and he'd have to compromise and not sacrifice mobility for style. The suit was worth every penny for how well it fit and still allowed him to do his job.

"I should have warned you." Alec began as he joined Mick at the door, worn leather satchel and sunglasses in his hands. "Toshi-san is always at least ten minutes late when he has to go out on these errands."

"That surprises me, he doesn't seem the sort."

"Well, he's not, but when his father sends him out like this he digs his heels in just enough to annoy the people he's meeting. It's a touch passive aggressive but who can blame him?"

"I don't understand."

Alec only smiled sadly. "The bank manager hates I/S. So, naturally, Mr. Ranvier sends Toshi-san to do his negotiations and to review their paperwork."

"So he stalls, I see."

Alec only shrugged and joined in the waiting, only now, Mick didn't look ready to fidget his way back to his office.

It was almost another five minutes before Toshi finally came down the steps to leave. His face was expressionless but the too large eyes missed nothing and something around his mouth hardened at the sudden reminder of his new bodyguard.

The suit he wore was flawless but Alec still brushed a little lint from the lapel as he handed over the satchel and sunglasses. Toshi shooed at Alec and the entire scene had a look of almost a ritual to Mick.

"The morning figures?"

"Arrived a half hour ago. I'll have them sorted and on your desk before you get back." Alec

stepped back a little. "Constance Barrington sent another invitation to her upcoming dinner party. It's a week from Wednesday."

"Why are you even asking me?" The large blue eyes swung to and studied his assistant.

"Amanda Sentz will be there."

"I didn't know she was in town." The briefest look of interest crossed Toshi's face, a glimpsed shadow of concern before he drew a breath. "Even she isn't worth enduring one more of Constance's dinner parties."

"Should I see if she's free to come by for tea?"

Again the glimpse of interest that quickly faded. "If she was interested in seeing me, she would have let me know she was going to be back in town. This meeting shouldn't take too long, we'll be back shortly."

Mick followed Toshi from the apartment and in silence rode down the elevator. He was very careful to stand slightly behind his employer and to follow him, trying very hard to merely disappear. It left him little to do besides stare at the fall of that impossibly shiny black hair and try to remember where he'd heard the name Amanda Sentz before.

The driver was waiting in the secure parking garage. Mick had reviewed his file. One thing he'd been surprised by was the total care Alec had given to hiring employees at all levels. Mick really did try to find flaws or faults with any of the staff but not only were each highly skilled, they all seemed extraordinarily loyal.

They rode in silence. With traffic they arrived at the bank twenty minutes late but Toshi made no effort to hurry. Mick had never been to the downtown, main branch of the First Merger Finance Savings and Loan but it was appropriately impressive for such a grand old banking firm. The more modern offices were located in larger cities but due to Ranvier's part ownership and his location, top ranking bank officials were kept on hand locally to personally answer any questions that might arise.

A pretty and charming young woman greeted them at the door. "Good afternoon, Mr. Ranvier, I," her words simply died as soon as Toshi removed his sunglasses. "My, my name is Angela Torres, if you would please follow me to my office?" Her enthusiasm had faded in her surprise.

If Toshi took offense, he gave no outward sign of it. "Ms. Torres, you must be new to this branch. Please inform Mr. Marsh that I'll be awaiting him in the conference room." He ignored her and started toward a room off to the side of the main branch lobby. It was glassed in but the blinds inside were pulled shut.

"But," The young banker stuttered and moved on her heels to follow. "Mr. Ranvier, Mr. Marsh was pressed for time. He left the office five minutes ago."

Toshi stopped. By now most of the patrons in the branch had notice him to varying degrees of interest and repulsion. Some outright stared, either at the I/S that moved so freely in their world or because they knew or guessed who he was, it made Mick twitchy.

Toshi ignored them all. He focused on the well dressed woman and literally pinned her in place with a glance. "That, Ms. Torres, would be an unfortunate happenstance. I've been approached by four other banking institutions in the last month alone. The only reason we remain here, with you, is because my father is a nostalgic man. His faith in people is a touch old fashioned, I doubt he would be amused to hear our meeting was canceled because Mr. Marsh had more important things to attend to."

Toshi kept his eyes locked on the now frightened woman a moment longer before sliding them to where Mick stood. "How much time is in my schedule?"

Mick thought quickly. He knew Toshi's schedule down to the moment but that wasn't what he was being asked. "I may be able to juggle a few things to free up, say, a half hour to wait."

The slightest of smiles cracked Toshi's face but faded before he turned back to the woman. "There, I have a half hour. If Mr. Marsh doesn't remember his priorities and appear for this meeting, the nature of our relationship may be forced to change. Now, please excuse me, Ms. Torres but I will wait in the conference room."

She followed after them, snapping her fingers at one of the secretaries as she hurried by. When the two men reached the conference room she paused in the door way. "Can I bring you anything while you wait?"

"Nothing but privacy and you have twenty nine minutes. I suggest you find your boss." Toshi answered as he sailed into the conference room, leaving Mick to shut the door behind them and directly on Ms. Torres' face.

"Thank you."

The words surprised Mick. "You're welcome."

"I hate these people." Toshi sighed, tossing satchel and sunglasses onto the table as he settled into one of the chairs. He absently rubbed at a spot between his eyes where a headache was forming. "So what do you think the odds are of Mr. Marsh showing up in a half hour?"

Mick shrugged. "Better than average. I'd bet he's in the building."

"That'd be my guess. Offensive little man. When he finally does turn up, watch when I try to shake his hand. It's something I always find amusing."

It took nearly twenty minutes before Mick spotted a man approaching the conference room. Mr. Marsh was pushing sixty with thinning white hair and a sour look. It was obvious his opinions of I/S were dated and steeped in rumors and stories instead of facts.

"Mr. Ranvier." Mr. Marsh's eyes glanced at everything but the man he was addressing and glanced to Mick unhappily.

Toshi waited just a half a moment too long to be polite before rising when the banker came into the room. "Mr. Marsh, I'm pleased you were able to be located."

Toshi offered his hand. Mick watched as the man recoiled slightly, paused, looked disturbed before forcing himself to accept the offered handshake. Toshi's expression never changed but Mick had to hide his bitter grin. Mr. Marsh unconsciously wiped his hand along the side of his pants as soon as the contact was broken.

"I'm sorry for the miscommunication earlier. I was under the impression that our meeting had been canceled." Mr. Marsh had enough engrained manners to wave vague to the seat Toshi had already begun to take before settling himself down across the table.

"I'm certain it was just a misunderstanding. Fortunately, I'm a little more forgiving of such situations than my father." Toshi began to unbuckle his satchel. "Now, about these quarterly reports, I've noticed a few things I wanted to discuss with you."

"This should be done in private, don't you think?" Mr. Marsh glanced to where Mick stood silent by the wall.

"This is private. Now, about these figures,"

The unmistakable pop of a gunshot echoed from the main lobby. Following in its heels came screams and a great deal of shouting. Mick was instantly at the windows, back pressed to the wall and glancing out behind the blinds without disturbing them. The gun he'd been wearing in the comfortable shoulder holster was out and in his hand. When he glanced back into the room, Mr. Marsh was on his feet but Toshi hadn't moved.

"I see at least five, masked, armed most likely just a robbery."

"Just a robbery!" Mr. Marsh sputtered and pushed past Mick.

"Wait!"

Mr. Marsh ignored him and threw open the conference room door. The noise flooded in, a few more gunshots cracked in high pitched threat over the din of human fear. The door swung shut behind Mr. Marsh but Mick watched as the armed men quickly snagged the officer and pulled him aside.

Mick moved quickly to where Toshi sat and started pulling at the tie he wore. "You need to get this off, the jacket too."

"What?"

"Trust me!" The tie was sliding freely now and Mick quickly shoved it into the satchel, hurrying to re-latch the buckles. He grabbed the jacket from Toshi and threw it into the far corner. "Roll up your sleeves."

Confused, Toshi obeyed but pulled away as Mick quickly moved to unbutton the top three buttons of his shirt. "What're you doing?"

"Trust me." An I/S simply didn't revel the hollow of their throats unless they were of a very specific sort. "Hurry, roll up your sleeves." Some of the chaos outside was settling down.

The panic outside their room meant less to Toshi than the hands so close to his throat. He studied Mick for a moment, weighed what he'd learned of the man and knew what he was suggesting. With a quick nod he glanced down and began to roll up his sleeves. He was willing to play along until a hurried hand at his collar accidentally allowed fingertips to graze over the bare skin at the hollow of his throat.

Mick glanced up at Toshi's hissed intake of breath and the sudden way his body stiffened. The half breeds breath was now coming in quick, short gasps and when those cold, wide eyes met his own the pupils contracted, dilated, and contracted again. The hollow of the throat was a sensitive spot on most humans, on an I/S it was triple the sensation.

"Sorry." He managed to force out and swore he wasn't going to blush. He reached up to the far too controlled hair and ran his hands through it. Tossing the long shower of black forward to tumble over Toshi's shoulders in a far more casual way. It softened and helped hide his face. "Now, can you act like a, well like,"

"Like an addict?"

Mick did blush now. "Yeah, sorry."

"I think I can manage that."

The door kicked in behind them, catching Mick with a hand still fussing at Toshi's hair and only further adding into their illusion. An armed man stormed in, shouting for them to get down and Mick used the hand he already had on Toshi to force the other to the ground.

"Down, down get on the ground now!"

Mick took in the semi-automatic gun and the plain mask the man wore and then looked beyond it to the thin way the skin of the man's wrists were stretched over bone. Desperate times lead to desperate attempts to make things better, it made the men more dangerous but also more likely to be reasoned with.

"Alright, alright, we're down just don't hurt us." He protectively kept one arm over Toshi.

"Move now! Get out there and join the others, move!"

"Don't hurt us, just don't hurt us." Mick whined back and pulled Toshi along.

"Keep your hands out, move!"

Mick pulled them along but instead of moving to the line of customers and employees huddled under the teller counter, he moved them to the counter in the center. The island was used by customers to fill out paperwork but it was separate, allowed him to watch the entire room and had the most direct route to the door. Under the far counter, Ms. Torres knelt, tears streaking down her face and her hands red with blood. She had the head of the security guard in her lap. The elderly man was unconscious, bleeding but Mick was pretty sure he was still alive.

The group of six had split off. Three of them kept an eye on the front, three were behind the counter. From what Mick could see and hear, they had a young teller and were making her fill bags, if everything went well, they'd leave in moments.

"What's taking so long!" The man nearest Mick shouted.

"Boss man says he can't get into the safe." A voice behind the teller counter shouted.

"He's lying. Hey! Hey Boss man! You want us to start shooting people? Huh? Choice is yours boss man!"

Beside him Toshi squirmed where he knelt but he managed to turn his head slightly. "Marsh." He whispered but the name carried his contempt of the man and his certainty that the man would rather see them all shot than allow the robbers into his safe.

Mick didn't care about the bank, didn't care if everyone in the room including himself, were shot, so long as Toshi walked out unharmed. So when the only person whose safety he was concerned with arched his back and tossed his head back against the counter, moaned slightly and ran his hands through his hair he knew it was going to be trouble. Obviously, Toshi wasn't going to accept that his safety was the only important thing.

It didn't take too long until the nearest robber noticed not only that one hostage squirming but that the hostage was I/S. He came over and kicked at Mick, ignoring Toshi's increasingly obvious display. "What's his problem?"

Mick glanced up and forced a knowing grin. "He shines to adrenaline. Something like this will keep him shiny for days."

"Make him settle down!"

"I don't think you want me doing, that, here. You know how they get." He paused and looked the

thief over. "Well, maybe you don't."

Toshi's stray hand ran across the hollow of his throat and he licked his lips. "He doesn't know, daddy."

Mick about died. He prayed the robber was too distracted to notice how red he was starting to blush or if he noticed he'd chalk it up to the flush of fear and desire. He was very grateful he'd placed them out of direct sight to the entire room because there was no way he'd be able to explain Toshi's behavior as anything other than what it appeared.

Only it was an act, the reserved, quiet, dignified man he'd seen for weeks was only acting. He wasn't really the creature of sexual fantasy that most shine addicts were but the performance was flawless. Mick had to force the blood flow back to his brain to try to figure out what Toshi was looking for. He was fishing for something beyond merely not being recognized.

Toshi's head languidly rolled to the side, exposing the long column of his neck to the robber. "Let me show him, daddy?"

Now it was cold fear that settled in his stomach and drove any sense of lust away. It was risky but from the snatches of conversation he'd been hearing at least two of the three behind the counter had gone down to the safe. He wasn't sure he could stop three but the odds were better than four.

"You think he's interested in you?"

Toshi's hand snaked out and wrapped around the robber's leg. The man was breathing hard now, not even paying attention to the world around him. "Oh, my yes. Please, daddy?"

The robber snapped his eyes to Mick and took in the suit he was wearing. "You own him?"

Mick shrugged. "I just rent him. If he wants to play with you, I won't stop him. Trust me, after this I'll be lucky to stop for meals for a week. You're sure you want to play now, baby?"

Toshi turned his head fully away from the robber and while his voice stayed the drifting, dreamy tones of an addict, his expression and eyes were dead serious. "Trust me, daddy, let me play with one or two of them."

He nodded. "Okay, baby, but be careful. They're in a hurry." Mick glanced up to the robber. "I'd take a friend with you, he can be a bit, aggressive, when he's like this."

The robber paused and glanced around nervously before reaching down to snatch Toshi's arm and scoop him up. He rose to his feet with boneless grace and languid care, letting his hair fall and cover his eyes. The robber whistled out sharply. "J.C.!"

"What?" One of the thieves from behind the counter called back.

"Come on."

"Awww, can't you two stay focused." A third whined.

"Shut up!" The one holding Toshi shouted back. "If you two can't watch them you shouldn't be here. Come on, J.C.!"

Mick watched as the two men dragged Toshi off to the conference room. Toshi didn't fight the pull on his arm but he had the distracted, unaware gait of one drunk or senseless. Or of an I/S high on shine and then fed the emotion that supercharged their addiction, it was a good performance.

It was also not something any bodyguard should have allowed. The clock was ticking now, there was only a moment before harm really could come to Toshi and then he'd have failed. Mick reached under his jacket to the small pouch clipped to the back of his belt. By practice and feel he unsnapped it and fished out the slender tube hidden on the top.

There weren't any laws preventing him from owning such a weapon but ownership was limited. The cylinders had to be custom built and then custom loaded each time they were discharged. It was too highly skilled and too costly for the general population and police force to have. Mick had a hobby of such weapons and he had the skill to recharge the tube without sending it back to the manufacturer.

He kept low and crouched along the island wall. The robber out in front keeping his gun trained so lazily on the room at large was a dozen paces away from him. The man kept glancing from his partner still filling bags to the closed conference room door. His distraction allowed Mick to point the tube at the man's lower leg. With a wicked grin he pushed the button, there was a slight hissing of compressed air and the small needle dart flew the few feet and imbedded itself into the man's leg.

"What the hell?" The man yelled.

"What's wrong?" His partner answered, roughly pulling on the woman that still was emptying drawers of cash.

"Something bit me! I, Christ that burns! Something bit me!" The man reached to rub at the sore spot on his leg. His eyes rolled up and he collapsed to the ground, out cold.

Mick dropped the tube into his pocket and slid forward. He pressed himself into the line of other hostages huddled back from the now unconscious man. They recoiled almost as much from him as they did from the body in front of them.

"Billy! Billy you alright man? Shit!" There was a shuffling behind the counter. "Keep filling those bags and don't try anything stupid or I'll blow your head off!"

Mick waited, coiled up on the balls of his feet and counted the seconds off in his head. It'd been over a minute since the door to the conference room had shut, he was running out of time. The second robber came within sight, his attention focused on his unconscious friend. Mick waited, watching, until the man started to kneel to check to see if his friend was alive.

There was little the second man could do, half kneeling and off balance, when Mick surged up from his feet. Mick's fist swung out and caught the man hard on his face. The mask splintered and the cheap plastic sliced like blades into Mick's hand but the blow was strong enough to knock the man down. There was no time for thought, Mick drew the handgun he wore from its holster and cracked the butt down on the man's head. The robber groaned and then went slack and as limp as his friend.

Mick's gun disappeared back into its holster and from the pouch at his waist he pulled out a slender stick wrapped in plastic. He tore the plastic away and the hard rod inside instantly went soft and flexible at the contact with the air.

"You, and you," he nodded to two men kneeling near by. "Help get that wounded man out of here. The rest of you get out of here, as quietly and quickly as you can. Call the police if you haven't already." He stretched the rod to its full length and lined up the men's wrists. A bondable cuff wasn't made to restrain more than a single person but it could be stretched to wrap around four wrists instead of two. The soft material wrapped around a hand from each man and when he pressed the ends back along the length of the rod it sealed itself together. Within moments, the rod hardened and was as secure as metal. Mick checked the fit, it was too tight but it would have

to do.

Mick glanced up and no one had moved. The girl from behind the counter stood holding the bag of cash. "Get going! Go, now!"

That got them moving and as he turned to the conference room they were quickly rushing to the door. The two men he'd asked were carrying the wounded security guard between them and the bloodied Ms. Torres followed. It was almost two minutes since the conference room door had shut.

There was no time for subtle methods. Mick drew his gun and rushed the door. With a firm kick he smashed his way inside, frightened of what he might find. A body crashed into the wall beside the door and slumped to the floor. Toshi stood near the table, his leg just now lowering back from the kick he'd delivered to the last of the two men in the room. He soothed his hair to have it fall down his back again and looked unaffected as ever.

"I guess Alec was right when he said you could take care of yourself."

Toshi shrugged. "Well, their sort aren't difficult. It's almost too easy. We should tie them up."

Mick was already dragging the two men closer together to bind their wrists as well. "You should get your jacket back on and get out of here."

"Do I even want to know where you've had those b-cuffs hidden?"

Mick grinned. "I only carry three of them. Get moving."

"You're going after the other two?"

"Marsh seems like the sort to get himself killed on principle." He paused and glanced up. "Do you want me to let them shoot him?"

For a moment, Toshi almost agreed. "No, not really."

"Good, now move. The police should be on their way."

"I can hear the sirens."

"Get going." He didn't wait to see if Toshi listened, half knowing he wasn't going to. "At least stay in here out of sight."

He drew his gun again and moved with long practiced ease down across the lobby to behind the counter. There he scooped down and picked up the three forgotten bags of money and a handful of change from one of the open drawers. The bags he slung over his shoulder and the change stayed tightly clutched in his fist.

The blueprints of the bank were sharp in his mind and he had a good idea of where they'd dragged Marsh off to. The safe was down the hall and to the right. If they were smart they'd have one man guarding that right hand turn and the other with Marsh getting the safe open. Mick crept down the hallway as quietly as he could manage but the voices bouncing up from the end would have covered far more noise than he made.

"I know the deposits are still in there, old man, open it up! Is it worth dieing for? You want us to shoot someone in front of you? Do you really want there blood all over you?" There was a meaty dull crack and the whimpering sound of muffled pain.

"Careful, Jake, don't hit him so hard." A voice near the corner bend called out.

Mick slowed down and pressed himself to the wall. When he was within a few feet he let one of the coins in his hand roll past the corner, then a second one and a third.

"What the hell?" He heard the man whisper out.

Mick rolled another coin but he was watching the corner and watching how the man that turned it was watching the rolling coin. His mask was pushed up but he didn't see the remaining handful of coins that got tossed in his face. The robber reacted on instinct, throwing his hands up at the coins suddenly all around him and stumbling backwards. Mick hit him, hard. First in the solar plexus with enough force to woosh out the breath from the man's lungs and then again to the face. The man went down, hard, and Mick risked cracking another skull open and the quickly delivered blow knocked the man out cold. The b-cuffs went on smoothly and easily with only one person. Mick put away his gun.

"Johnny? Johnny!"

"He can't answer you right now."

"Christ! I've got a hostage, I'll shoot him, get back!"

"Look, I'm not a cop, and I don't work for the bank. Okay?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Doesn't matter, I'm nobody. Your friends are out of commission and the police will be here very shortly. I've got a deal for you. I'm tossing something your way, it's not going to hurt you, okay?"

"O-okay."

Mick side armed one of the bags of money around the corner. "I've two more here. How about this, I come around the corner, I'll have my hands out to the side. Option one is you can shoot me and go to death row for killing me. Or, option two, you can hand over the old man to me, take that bag and the two others here at my feet and walk out of here. I know it's not the haul you wanted today but you won't have to split it six ways. It's enough money to disappear with. No one's been killed yet, you can still walk away. What do you say?"

"I don't know!"

"Time's running out, Jake. I can hear the sirens. What will it be."

"Okay! Okay, come around the corner and don't try anything funny."

Mick held his hands out from his body and up near his head. "Why would I try anything? I don't care about the money." He moved slowly around the corner, waiting for the bullet to slam out and hit him. "I hate banks, I'd love to see you get away with this, but you need to let the old man go and get moving."

He was fully in sight now and Marsh sat on the ground, his face bloody and most likely his nose broken. The man holding onto his upper arm with one hand and a gun with the other had his mask up as well. It didn't surprise Mick that the man was his own age or younger. Sweat was running down his face and his eyes were wide, the man was scared and it was written all over his face.

"There now, see, I don't want to hurt you. Let the old man go, take the bag, take the others and hurry or the police will catch you."

The hand that gripped Marsh's upper arm tightened then suddenly let go. Mick held very still as the man moved to pick up the bag of money. He wasn't sure either himself or Marsh even breathed as the bag was snatched and tossed over a shoulder. The robber was around the corner in a flash, there was a rustle of fabric as the other bags were grabbed up. The last Mick heard was a snuffled sigh of relief as the man disappeared down the hallway.

He moved instantly to where Marsh knelt. "Are you alright?"

Marsh nodded. "Fine, fine, thank you so much, he was going to kill me. Thank you!"

Mick shook off the man. "Stay here and don't thank me, thank Mr. Ranvier, he's the one that wanted me to act." He wished he'd been able to stay to enjoy the look of unhappy acceptance in the man's eyes but he had one more bank robber to stop.

He rounded the corner with his gun drawn, willing to shoot the last man in the leg if he needed to but when he reached the lobby, the last of the robbers was tumbled into an untidy heap on the floor. Toshi leaned calmly against the teller's counter, rolling his sleeves back down, the collar of his shirt re-buttoned. On the counter behind him were his sunglasses, jacket and satchel.

"I knew you wouldn't listen."

Toshi just smiled and shrugged. "Police are here."

And as if he'd announced them, they stormed through the front doors. There was shouting again for them to get down and show their hands. Police dressed in black assault uniforms and carrying rifles, three times more deadly than the smaller guns the robbers had held, circled them. Mick lost sight of Toshi as three of them grabbed his arms and wrestled him forcefully flat onto the cool marble floor.

"That's, Mr. Toshi Ranvier, I'm his body guard. He's not to be harmed." Mick shouted out hoping the inborn aversion to I/S would prevent them from throwing Toshi to the ground as well.

"My wallet, gentleman is in my back pocket. With my id you'll find my card from the Containment Committee." Toshi ignored the rough hands that stole his wallet away. "The man you have pinned is my body guard. He's armed, his identification is also on him."

Long moments passed of angry shouting and uncertainty but soon the truth was straightened out. Mick was seated at one of the teller's desks and had a paramedic tending the cuts on his hands that he hadn't felt until the whole thing was over. Toshi was seated on the other side of the room, denying all involvement and Marsh had been taken to the hospital.

"That's your story, you want us to believe you did all this, McKale?"

Mick shrugged. "It's the truth as I told you, Baker." It had to be one of the officers he'd served with and one that hadn't liked him even a small bit. "We were in the conference room when they came in. I asked Mr. Ranvier to remove his jacket and tie and appear to be connected to me in an effort to disguise who he was. I was afraid if the robbers knew his identity the situation would be worse. The ploy worked, they didn't pay him any attention as anything other than another I/S junkie whore. It worked a bit too well as two of them took him off to a private room. That allowed me to over come the two out here, than the two in the conference room and finally the two down the hall. Mr. Ranvier had nothing to do with this other than letting them remove him to the conference room and potential harm."

"Yeah, right, well, we've some more question about the details. You don't mind going to the station with us do you?"

Mick glanced to Toshi who sat ignoring the questions being given to him, the aloof rich boy act

was back. "Sure, what ever you want. Mr. Ranvier's driver is outside. I'll go with you if you see to it he's returned to his car and have a marked unit follow them back home."

Baker snorted in mild disgust. "Sure, whatever."

Part Four

It wasn't yet four in the afternoon when Mick arrived at the police station but it was after seven when they'd finally let him out. The only reason he wasn't still sitting in the small room was because four lawyers arrived. Dressed in suits and armed with papers and briefcases, they made it very clear they felt he was being harassed. The police wanted to either connect Toshi to the defeat of the attempted robbery or Mick to the robbers and weren't happy with the slightly altered version presented to them.

If they found even the slightest means to connect him to the robbery, they'd charge him. Even if the connection were dismissed later, he'd still spend the night in jail, if not longer. If they connected Toshi he'd be in violation to one of the many rules the Containment Committee placed on any I/S living outside the sovereign borders of their camps. At best he'd be further restricted and fined and at worst his right to live outside the camps would be revoked and he'd be forced to move.

By the time Mick was released and climbed into the back of Toshi's car, he had a headache, was hungry, thirsty and his hand was aching horribly. The press was already all over the robbery and the Ranvier bodyguard that had stopped it. Rumors were flying wildly and when he checked his cell phone there were no less than three dozen messages, all but four from family. The other four were from Andy and Samson worried that he'd gotten shot, or, more likely, arrested.

His family was easily taken care of. He called the first on the list of missed calls, briefly explained what happened, assured them he was fine and then asked them to please let the rest know he was fine. There were advantages to having a coldly pragmatic family, even if it was a huge family. He knew that within the hour every member would know he was okay and he'd be free to contact his parents directly, later.

Andy and Samson were a different story. The conversation with his sister took all of five minutes. It took more than that to get Andy to settle enough to even hear he was okay. Mick spent the rest of the ride home assuring Andy he was fine and refusing to gossip about what happened beyond that.

So when he finally reached the parking garage he was tired and ready to be home. He stood waiting for the elevator to open and felt the drivers eyes on him. The man, like all the staff hired to work around Toshi, was quiet and generally kept any thoughts to himself. Mick caught him staring.

The driver glanced away. "Thank you, for looking out for Mr. Ranvier."

The words surprised him, Mick nodded back. "Your welcome." The doors opened and he was able to escape into the elevator.

He wanted to go straight to his rooms and just be alone for a while but his duty wasn't over yet. Instead of the emptiness of his apartment he entered by the main door to Toshi's public living room. It was empty but the lights were on low and voices were floating down from above.

Alec appeared on the stairs, taking them two at a time. "You're home, come on up, Mick." He disappeared back upstairs without waiting to see if Mick was following.

Mick followed and when he cleared the second story and was able to see into the living space he was surprised at seeing strangers in the room for the first time. Toshi sat in one of the raised chairs that lined the flat extended counter top of the kitchen and doubled as a table. He'd changed clothes into stylish but comfortable, loose pants and shirt, his hair was pulled back into a tail at the base of his neck. It was the first time Mick had seen it restrained.

In the kitchen itself an aged I/S woman moved with efficient grace. She stood just over five feet tall and had massive silver eyes. Her hair was braided and fell below her waist in a thick, pale blue rope. The lines around her mouth and eyes were deep cut and worn into her flesh by a lifetime of emotion. There was little doubt she was Asian, or of Asian stock and the smells from the food she was cooking were enough to make his stomach growl. Mick knew her by name only. Hamada Yokina was on Toshi's payroll, she arrived monthly, some times twice a month, and cooked dinner.

Standing to the side where Alec hovered were two other men that Mick had never seen. One was a man of about fifty, his thinning hair trimmed short. Glasses sat on the bridge of his nose and his suit, while well made, was a touch old fashioned and out of date. His hands were folded in front of him and he waited patiently.

The second man, standing behind Alec, was younger, maybe in his late thirties or early forties and developing a slight paunch around his middle. He was dressed in medical scrub clothes and had a well stuffed bag sitting at his feet. Mick saw the doctor and his eyes went instantly to Toshi.

"Are you okay? They told me you hadn't been hurt?"

Toshi waved it off. "I'm fine, let Alec do what he says he has to so he'll go change and not be late for his date."

"Excuse me?"

"He has a date but he won't leave until he gets it into his stubborn head that he can."

Mick glanced to the counter top and the two place settings on it and wondered who Toshi was expecting if Alec wasn't joining him for dinner. "Okay."

Alec was trying not to blush, he cleared his throat and motioned to the older of the two men. "Mick, this is George Farinholt, he's one of Mr. Luke Henri Ranvier's secretaries. Mr. Farinholt, this is Mr. McKale."

"It's a pleasure to meet you sir, I hope the lawyers we sent were able to arrive in time."

"They speeded things up, yes, thank you. What's this about?" He asked Alec, not comfortable with the attention.

"Sir," Farinholt interrupted. "I know you must be tired so I'll be brief. I'm here on behalf of my employer, he wishes to send his personal thank you and gratitude for your actions today. Not only for the protection you provided his son but for the saving of the many lives in the bank."

The wording didn't miss Mick's notice. The father, just like Alec, was aware that Toshi hadn't remained a passive partner in the afternoon's events. "It's just my job."

"Indeed, he wishes me to say that he had reservations about the employment of one security officer but you've proven the system works very well. Mr. Ranvier wished to express his gratitude to you and to inform you that you will receive a bonus for the efforts above and beyond what was required of you. Also, if you wish, Mr. Orwick and I have informed the publicity department of the situation. With your permission, we'll allow them to handle any concerns or questions from the

press?"

Mick glanced to Alec and at his slightest of nods. "That would be fine, thank you."

"Well," Farinholt smiled warmly. "If you'll excuse me, I'll get out of your hair. Toshi lad, it was good to see you again."

"And you George, if my slave driver of a father ever gives you some time off come by, we'll have tea. I'd love to hear how your grandchildren are doing."

"Of course sir, goodnight." Alec ushered the older man out, leading him to the door.

"Mick, this is Dr. Lebo. If you don't mind I'd like him to take a look at that hand." At Toshi's nod the doctor smiled and moved forward.

"It was seen to by the paramedics."

"Now, I've come all this way, wouldn't want to waste the trip. Give me that paw up here under the light."

"Lee, nasy aquc!" Hamada-san fussed, waving her hand at the doctor who was unwrapping Mick's bandages on her clean counter.

"Hamada-san, easy ess." Toshi tossed playfully back at her, slipping into the slang patois of the I/S containment camp.

"George is off, I'm going to change and get going." Alec paused. "You're sure you're okay? Both of you?"

"Yes, now go." Toshi answered for them.

"You'll eat dinner?"

"Yes, go!"

"Alright but you'll call if you need anything."

"Damn it Alec, get going or you'll be late." Toshi laughed and the sound surprised Mick. In the weeks he'd been there, he'd never heard the half breed laugh.

Toshi waited until the taller man finally disappeared into his apartment. "I swear, he's such a baby about these things. All I've heard for half a year is about this girl and now, when he's finally worked up the nerve to ask her out, he's too fussy to go. How's that hand look, doctor?"

"Ouch, careful!" Mick hissed as the doctor poked an especially sore spot.

"Some of these cuts should have been stitched but it can't be done now. They should heal well enough. I'm more worried about this here. I think at least one, maybe two of the metacarpals might be broken. I can't be sure with out an x-ray but with the pain and swelling, it's likely."

"It's fine." Mick protested but the doctor hit a nerve again while cleaning the cuts and made him wince.

"No, it's not fine but I can wrap it up pretty well tonight but tomorrow you should come down to the hospital and have it checked out." The doctor began to carefully rewrap the battered hand, adding extra layers of protection.

"I'm fine."

"He'll be by first thing tomorrow. It's unforgivable that he wasn't allowed to have it tended sooner."

"I'm right here, I can make my own decisions about things."

Both men continued to ignore him. "If he's in too much pain tonight to sleep I've left some painkillers, don't take them on an empty stomach."

Toshi stood as the doctor was repacking his bag. "Of course, thank you Doctor. Apologize to your wife for me, I know you were in the middle of dinner."

The man smiled and clapped Toshi on the shoulder. "She understands, it's not like it was a long commute. Call me if you need me again."

"We will, thank you." He shut the door behind the doctor. "Dr. Lebo lives in the building." Toshi turned around and nearly tripped over the aged I/S woman. "Hamada-san, you're leaving too?"

She opened her mouth but her eyes slid to where Mick still sat at the counter.

"It's okay, he can be trusted."

"Sakura-sama, I should go. Eat every bite, you're too skinny."

Mick's jaw almost fell open. In all his dealings with the I/S community finding any that spoke even passable English was rare. Generally, it was those of the younger generation but the vast majority only spoke in their mish mashed jargon of slang.

Toshi leaned forward and placed a kiss to the old woman's forehead. "You worry too much about me. That's what I have Alec for."

She patted the side of his face before moving to leave. "I have to be home before curfew. I'll be back in a few weeks." She bowed, accepted his in return and bowed again as she slipped out of the door.

Toshi stood in the open doorway until the elevator opened, returned another bow and backed into the room before shutting the door. "Don't look so surprised. It's very useful to have the general population think none of us can speak properly."

"Makes sense I guess."

"Fake translators make a good living, it's a proper scam."

Mick stood. "Well, I'll go before your company arrives."

"My company?" Toshi stood confused but then understanding dawned. "Oh, no, I, I'm sorry, I was hoping you'd join me? I forgot to ask, I don't figure you'd want to."

"I, you," Mick stuttered before nodding. "I, I'd be glad to. It smells wonderful. Just, let me run and change, there's blood all over me."

Alone for the first time all day, Toshi sagged back against the wall. It was easy for Alec to push him to befriend Mick but it wasn't easy to accomplish. Alec, who was so nervous about dating but made friends like honey drew flies, couldn't understand the deeply ingrained shyness Toshi struggled with every day. He'd promised to make an effort and at least see if he could grow more comfortable around the other man, so he would try.

Mick changed quickly, pulling on the casual jeans and an oversized sweater, opting for comfort over style and hoping that he wasn't guessing wrong. The way Toshi-san had asked him sounded more social and not work related. It wasn't surprising, after the day's troubles, for them to at least have dinner together. He used to see the other cops stopping for dinner or a beer after work but he'd never been invited to join them.

When he re-joined the living room, music was playing and Toshi was in the kitchen plating the food. Mick paused and listened, surprised at the selection.

"Carlos Gardel?"

Toshi's head snapped up, he'd been too lost in thoughts to hear the door open. Not at all like him. "Yes, you know him?"

"He plays better every year."

Toshi laughed again. "Yes, you surprise me."

"One of my mothers is from Argentina. I grew up on Gardel. I'm more surprised you'd know him." He settled in at the counter by one of the plates. Pleased to see both chopsticks and a fork. Idly, he tried to balance the chopsticks in his left hand.

"There's a small contingent of I/S from South America in this camp. You'll see it in the food, it's not really Japanese or Chinese not American or Latin but a mix of all the styles and flavors. Gardel's played all over the camp, I don't know what he's singing about but I like the emotion in it."

Mick listened for a moment and smiled. "The day when you will love me, the lovely clinging roses will dress up my old house in their festive colors, the wind chimes will be ringing to tell the world you're mine now. The fountains madly singing how I am loved by you."

Toshi had paused from where he was placing out the dishes of food. "That's lovely. I didn't know you spoke Spanish?"

Mick shrugged. "Understand it better than speak it and it's Gardel. Mama Anna used to translate them all the time, that and anything she didn't want us to know she spoke in Spanish."

"Sake?"

"Sure, but be warned I'm a light weight. I almost never drink but if a day ever called for it, today's it. Thanks for the fork, by the way. Not sure how long I can mange with my left hand."

"I find myself continuing to be surprised by you, Mr. McKale. I expected you to be competent in your line of work but the rest, knowing Gardel, basic Japanese, how to eat with chopsticks? Are all Inkies as diverse as you?"

Mick toyed with his chopsticks. "I'm actually on the lower end of most of my family. Some of my siblings are so brilliant, my parents know things that I can't even imagine."

Toshi joined him on the other side of the counter and they ate sharing casual and superficial conversation and sake. Neither man was entirely comfortable but it was born from shyness not dislike and like rusty hinges they were slow to open. As the bottle of sake disappeared, the conversation grew more free and more comfortable, they settled on the sofa to finish the remains of the bottle and pick at the remains of the desert.

"Can I ask?" Toshi began. He found they both were asking permission before asking questions.

"Sure."

"What was it like growing up in an Inky commune? They fascinate me."

"I didn't really grow up there, I was eleven when they took me in."

"I didn't know that, I assumed you were born there."

Mick shook his head. "No, no one is ever born there. Our commune is seventy years old and there's only been four births in that whole time. It's a science thing, no need to produce children when there are so many without homes. I was a foster kid with them when I was eleven and officially adopted at thirteen."

"I'm sorry, that was too personal of a question."

"Don't be, I'd rather have someone ask. People hate us because they don't understand. It was science that nearly destroyed the world but it was also science that almost saved it, if they hadn't formed communes and locked themselves away so much would have been lost. They were only stupid thinking all of you I/S in the camps had developed an ideal way of living together."

"But in those early days, no one knew what it was really like in the camps. Can't really blame them for wishing for the best."

"Inkies can be twice as nearsighted as a normal person. They get very single minded. Sometimes, a couple of my parents would just disappear for weeks, they'd never leave their research. Sleep in the labs, eat in the labs, shower in the labs, it was crazy. Research, science, study, it's all that mattered. They're good people though." He refilled their sake cups. "Even when they found out that I wanted to be cop, they never questioned."

"Inkies don't become cops."

"Inkies do not become cops. At worse, the black sheeps become poets and artists and such, lawyers even, but not cops." He was smiling now. "They looked horrified when I told them but I know now they were just worried about me. People don't like Inkies. Cops don't like Inkies."

Toshi watched Mick's face grow distant. There was a look to his eyes that spoke of broken ideals. "Do you know how many half breeds there are globally?"

"I don't know, there's just under seven million I/S so I'd say a thousand, a couple hundred maybe?"

"There's ninety two of us."

"Wow, that's way less than I'd thought."

"Of those ninety two, sixty four are under the age of eighteen. There's only twenty eight adult half breeds in the whole world. Twenty one of those twenty eight are male. Eighteen of those twenty one males, counting myself as one of the twenty one, have been castrated." He looked to the shocked and slightly horrified expression on the humans face. "I'm only one of three adult male half breeds intact in the entire world."

"Why would they do that?"

"It's the reason why so many more males are allowed to live. It's much more difficult to sterilize a female. Think of how many I/S here in this city alone are shine addicts and by extension, prostitutes. Yes, it's very difficult for a half breed to be conceived but still there are hundreds of

conceptions a year just in this city alone. Only a few dozen ever are actually born, most half breeds are genetically unstable and die shortly after birth. If they live the week, their family will smother them."

"Oh my god."

"It's very rare a family will allow a half breed to live. Males have a better chance because they can be sterilized."

"Why? Why would your people do that?"

"It's not just the I/S, it's the human's too but less frequently will the mother be human. Both species are repulsed by the very idea of our two kinds mixing, its abhorrent. You've noticed, haven't you, that in the death threats I receive the vast majority are over my blood lines not my wealth?"

"Yes but I thought it was, like, a racial slur. People tend to doubly hate someone that's different and doing well, especially in such hard times."

Toshi shook his head and studied his hands wrapped around the sake cup. "No, it's my very existence they hate. I'm the only half breed in the world with black hair too. All the other's have red or brown, one of the children up in Canada has dark grey but it's not black."

"Toshi-san,"

"I'm sure you've heard that I was a teenager before my father learned I existed? It's a popular story in the gossip magazines."

"I don't read trash, but yes, I'd heard." Who hadn't heard? At the time it had been the hottest topic of conversation even in the closed commune.

"I was ill a lot that first year. I only saw my father five times and he couldn't stand to look at me once that whole year. Even now, he sends George over rather than come himself. There's only ever been two people that I've met as an adult that haven't required time to get used to me. Alec is one and you are the other. I just, I just wanted to say thank you. I know I've been avoiding you, Alec keeps lecturing me over it. I'm sorry."

"I don't accept." Mick nearly snapped back. "Don't you ever be sorry for reacting naturally and I don't ever want to hear you thanking anyone for treating you like they would anyone else. That's nonsense. I know what it's like to expect people to hurt you, don't ever apologize for being careful."

In one swallow Toshi finished the last of the sake in his cup. "I'm sorry, I'm drunk." He pushed himself up out of the soft comfort of the sofa but the room spun and he stumbled.

Mick moved quickly, springing to his feet and reaching out to steady Toshi only to find himself far more drunk than he first thought. The world tilted and Mick felt them both falling. He twisted and half dropped, half threw them toward the sofa. He braced himself for how badly this was going to hurt his hand and let them land in an untidy heap.

Only his hand didn't jar and didn't hit anything. Toshi's hand was wrapped around his wrist and held both their arms out of the way, safely above sofa or end table. Mick opened his eyes and stared into a mess of tangled black hair and Toshi's shoulder. It sunk in slowly that he was laying full out spread on top of his employer and he was drunk enough to not want to move any time soon.

The body below him was far warmer than it should have been and far leaner as well. There was

a nice solid strength to Toshi but far to little beyond that, he had an underfed quality that surprised Mick. Their heights were close enough that they lined up well, their legs tangled together. It felt good and he was almost drunk enough to snuggle into that warmth.

Toshi landed on the soft sofa but was quickly smothered by Mick's weight. He held firm to the wrist, trying to keep that damaged hand safely away but it let his sensitive fingertips feel the pulse beating under his grasp. Mick landed with his head pillowed along his shoulder and their legs tangled together.

And suddenly the scent of Mick was everywhere. Vaguely citrus from his shampoo with a touch of sandalwood from his soap but over and mixed with it all was the scent of Mick himself. Healthy, vital, and strong it was erotically human and pushed a button Toshi thought he'd long since lost. He sighed and his body arched up, sliding into a more comfortable fit to the body above him before he even knew what he was doing.

Mick pulled away slightly, startled and aroused at the movement below him. He balanced himself on his good arm and watched as Toshi settled in under him. The half breed's haunting eyes were shut and the thick length of his black hair spilled over his shoulder. Toshi sighed again, a sound that went straight to Mick's groin, and his luminous eyes opened to mere slits.

There they lay. Only a few inches separated them and all Mick wanted to do was kiss those lips, kiss that neck and see if Toshi would arch to display it for him the way he had that afternoon. He could almost taste the skin against his lips, feel the pulse in that oh so sensitive hollow of the half breeds throat. Mick's already too snug jeans were suddenly growing far tighter.

Then he remembered this was his boss and that they'd both had far too much sake and it was only the combination of both those thoughts that kept him from ravishing the body below him.

"Are you okay?" He asked and those stunning eyes fluttered open.

Toshi nodded, unsure of what to say.

Mick smiled but it wasn't a happy smile. "I think we're both drunk." He started to extract himself from the tangle they'd become. "I should go to bed, I don't want to be late for work tomorrow." Mick hurried to his feet and regretted looking back. Toshi was half sitting up and looked totally perfect. His face was flushed slightly, his lips were parted and he almost looked ready to beg to be pressed back to the sofa. "Good night, Toshi-san." He hurried to the safety of his room.

The door clicked shut and Toshi collapsed back down on the sofa. "I'm going to kill Alec."

Part Five

Alec was humming to himself a tune he couldn't remember the name of. His coffee was hot and he planned on enjoying it before Toshi woke up and complained about the smell. Coffee was one scent most I/S just couldn't stand and Toshi swore it was worse in the morning. Mornings just weren't mornings without one cup of coffee, so Alec made sure to down it in the half hour before Toshi arrived in their office.

"You didn't tell me he was gay."

Alec jumped about a foot and nearly spilled his coffee. "Jesus Christ, Toshi don't scare me like that! God, I'm going to tie bells on you!"

"You need to fire him."

Alec approached his friend carefully. Toshi sat behind Alec's desk, his head cradled in his hands. His hair was a tangled mess from having run his hands through it as he'd sat and brooded and his voice was hollow and empty.

"Good morning to you to. Thanks for asking, my evening was lovely, how was yours?"

"Alec, he can't stay."

Alec sighed and took the chair on the other side of the desk. He knew Toshi was distracted when he didn't even flinch at the pungent coffee. "What difference does it make?"

"They'll hound him. You know what it'll be like."

"He's a big, grown, boy."

"As soon as the first blood test comes back negative, they'll leak his name to the press."

Alec smiled. "Will his first blood test come back negative?"

"Of course!" Toshi's head snapped up but even he could hear his tone was too defensive.

"Just checking, I mean, he's good looking and I know how you like guys that can kick your ass."

"This isn't a joke and it's a real bad time to bring up my choices. He can't stay, they'll tear him apart."

"Okay, in all seriousness, I didn't tell you he was gay because it doesn't matter. It's offensive to assume that you and he can't work together without it becoming sexual. Saying he can't do the job because you're I/S is wrong. I've already informed the publicity department, they've already contacted several of the more respectable gay rights organizations. If anyone tries to make a big deal about it, we'll handle it."

"I know you can shut the press up in time but Alec, they tore you apart. They tore your family apart all because of a small string of I/S DNA in your code. A gay Inky recently forced to retire from the police? Even I can't blame them for how it looks. It's not fair to him."

"Good."

"What's good about that?"

"Nothing, but it's good that you're starting to think of him as a friend. Something I think he could use as well."

"Excuse me, what degree do you hold? I don't remember you being a shrink."

"Shut up." To Alec's surprise, Toshi listened. "Let me talk to him. Don't insult him by assuming being here isn't what he wants. I could have cut and run but it was worth it to me to stay. Respect him to make the choice for himself. Agreed?"

"Fine, but no sugar coating it. Let him know just what to expect by staying here."

"I will, now, for my sake, go get some rest? You're impossible when you're short on sleep."

It wasn't how Mick would have wanted to spend his morning but the Ranvier name made the trip to the hospital vastly different. He was slipped in via a side door and slipped out the same way, which seemed excessive until he was watching the morning news. To his surprise, the story of the robber was featured and he found himself on the news. It was disconcerting.

He was surprised to think of the main living space as home but he didn't stop to analyze it for long. The smell of coffee hit him and that was enough to have him off hunting it. He found it brewed in the down stairs kitchen, the first time he'd ever seen coffee in the working kitchen and helped himself to a mug.

He was only in his office a moment before Alec stuck his head in.

"Got a second?"

Mick glanced up. "How was the date?" He asked bitterly. He'd had some suspicions and done some checking while waiting around at the hospital.

"Whoa, bad karma has me surrounded by grumpy people. Bad news on the hand?" Alec slipped inside without being invited.

Mick just shrugged and waved the soft cast that now incased his hand. "So did any of my experience really matter? I mean how many younger gay men are there in security?"

The light expression Alec was wearing disappeared and he grew serious. "It's not what you think."

"So I get bored easily and I was doing some checking. Interesting that you hadn't spoken to the girl you were supposedly out on a date with until a few hours before you went out to meet her. Even more interesting that the two of you have been friends since college. Nice setup, the sake was an especially good touch."

"Mick, it's not what you think. Will you hear me out?"

"It'd better be good because as of now I'm done at the end of the thirty days."

Alec wanted to stand but took a seat and then waited until Mick finally sat down. "Did Toshi tell you how we met?"

"No, and this is important how?"

"It's important. My family has a sub-mutation, a nasty one. My great-grandfather died of the plague, my grandfather was a boy but he died of it to. Only it took him sixty years for it to kill him, by then he'd had three kids and out lived his wife. My one aunt died at thirty eight, my other aunt at twenty six and my father died at thirty five. I was ten, my mother had died when I was a toddler. They ran my code but well, they didn't find any relations so I was dumped in the foster care system. By the time I was thirteen I was dieing."

In spite of his anger at Alec and the sense that he'd been used, Mick found himself really listening. "What kind of sub-mutation?"

"I don't know the clinical name, something with two many numbers in it. It withered most of the internal organs, eventually they shut down and you die. I'm told it's quite rare. By the time I was sixteen I was given maybe six months before the damage was irreversible but they had a good working theory for treatment. If they could adapt an I/S mutation, stick it in me as gene therapy I'd either mutate further and live as something like the first generation I/S, fix my mutation and live or nothing would change and I'd die."

"The treatment worked?"

"No, they tried three times and it didn't change anything. Than they brought this I/S kid in to the gene ward, a half breed."

"Toshi."

Alec nodded. "Yeah, he doesn't tell my secrets I won't tell his. It's enough to say he was sick and badly hurt. He'd lost a lot of blood but it's difficult to transfuse an I/S, it's impossible to transfuse a half breed. I'm sure you can guess at the excitement the doctors felt at a half breed being handed to them, a black haired one made it even more exciting. They were treating him like a lab rat but he was too sick to care. One of my doctors got a look at some of Toshi's test results and figured my best shot was with his mutation code."

"Since you aren't dead I guess it worked."

Alec nodded. "It did, they think half breeds might hold the key to a lot of the fatal sub mutations. Anyway, the thing is they needed a half pint of blood to process my treatment. I was really sick and didn't have the time to wait for him to get better. By now he'd been in the hospital a week and was awake enough to be speaking. My doctors approached him, explained the situation and asked if he'd be willing to help as soon as he was healthy. He agreed but on the condition that they did it now and not wait.

"He really couldn't afford the additional blood loss. Shortly after, he developed a pretty bad infection, then pneumonia, he spent an extra month in the hospital because of it. There's no way to say that extra donation caused it but he would have been stronger without it. If he'd waited the damage easily would have been permanent for me. That's how we met."

"So you two became friends because he risked his life to save yours and this matters to why you hired me how?"

"God, I know you aren't that dense! He didn't risk his life to save mine, he didn't know me, didn't care about some random genetic loser. He was trying to kill himself. My doctor only took as much as he needed for the first treatment, no more and Toshi is a lot stronger than most half breeds. I agreed to one last try before I knew who the donor was and I didn't find out until the process was started and the damage to him had been done.

"After I found out I went to see him, to thank him and well everyone else in the ward was afraid to go near him. Only, when I got in to his room, I understood the why of his help. He didn't say two words to me, he looked worse than corpses I'd seen. I had every reason to never speak to him again but he was just so pathetic.

"The next day I took a book in and read to him. Three hours and in that time eleven doctors came in and out and nine nurses. They ran tests, checked monitors, they did things that caused him pain and not once in three hours did one of them even ask how he was feeling. Not once did anyone touch him gently or speak a single kind word to him, not even to say hello. He was a thing. I didn't blame him for ignoring me along with the rest of them. It got to me, so I went back the next day and read a few more chapters. Don't look at me like that, I'm not a saint, I was bored and sick. When I left the second day he looked at me for the first time and simply said thank you."

"I remember that he'd been hurt and that's how he ended up at a human hospital but not that he was that badly hurt."

"No one did. Ranvier can be ruthless when he wants things quite. By the time they'd run his DNA a few times and contacted his father and his father had run his code a couple of times, he and I had become friends. Then he was transferred to a private medical setting and the next day a whole group of lawyers showed up in my room. They offered me an apartment, a stipend and my college paid, also they offered to have me freed from the foster care system a year early. The only condition was that I never publicly speak of Toshi Ranvier."

"You agreed."

"Of course, wouldn't you? I mean I would have kept quiet anyway but the things they offered were all the things I'd spoken to Toshi about. My freedom, my own life, college, things I'd never dreamed I'd live to see. He had a hand in it so I accepted. A couple of months later I got a letter from him. We wrote back and forth, spoke on the phone occasionally, stayed in touch. When I finished school, he offered me a job."

"Okay."

"My reasons for being here aren't simple. Toshi saved my life. He's my friend, I'm his only friend. I'm the only person in his life that hasn't viewed him as a thing. I'm not being dramatic. He's reserved by nature, almost shy, and so wrapped up in what he's supposed to be that he never is. He's my brother, I love him. I'd walk over glass for that man but I had no idea what I was getting into when I moved in here."

"What do you mean?"

"The Containment Committee assumed I was his lover, they tested me for months. The press tried that route when that didn't work they took me apart in their gossip columns. It was a rough first year. People make assumptions when you work for someone as reclusive as Toshi is, add in the I/S angle and you're talking disaster." Alec sighed and looked over the young man across from him.

"Did I care that you were gay? No. Did it factor in, of course it did. Toshi's like most I/S, they're almost to a one bisexual and that creeps a lot of people out. Being from an Inky commune figured more heavily in because I thought it would allow you to be comfortable around him. The Committee is going to run your past the same as I did, they will know you're gay. They're going to assume the same thing you assumed. They will blood test you looking for venom, when they don't find any they will leak the potential relationship to the press. They'll come down hard on you, it won't be easy. You can get out right now and avoid that. Neither of us will blame you."

Mick sat and felt broadsided, his anger faded. "Was this just a set up?"

"No. I hired you because you're well qualified for the job and I was hoping you'd view him as a friend. More than that, I was hoping he'd view you as a friend, something a lot more difficult to manage. What ever happened last night he's thinking of you as a friend not an invasion of his privacy. He wants you to leave to protect you from the trouble that will come. I'd guess he wants you to leave before he gets comfortable thinking of you as a friend and then have you leave because of the awful things the press is going to say."

"I'm not that sort."

"I know that but he doesn't trust people easily."

Mick sat and thought but only one question surfaced. "That girl, he doesn't know about her."

It wasn't really a question but Alec answered. "No, he doesn't."

"Why?"

"Amy and I are just friends, we're both too busy with our lives to be more than that. When she wants to see me she calls and when I want to see her I call her. Toshi would make a big fuss. He thinks I should get married and settle down, raise some kids or something. He doesn't understand casualness in human relationships, he views it as indifference. To be honest, Amy is a little unnerved by Toshi and he'd want to meet her and be hurt when she refused." Alec smiled at how honest he was finding himself. "Does that make you feel better to hear?"

"Yes. Last night wasn't a set up?"

Alec smiled with less bitterness. "Well, in a way, yes but I swear to you I was only trying to make it easier for you two to talk. I never thought that anything more would happen. Did it happen?"

"What? No!" He felt himself blushing and prayed it wouldn't get worse. "I don't mind the publicity, I figured the gossips would sooner or later pick up on me. I won't work for someone that doesn't think I'm qualified."

"I think yesterday more than proved you're qualified. Now," Alec hid his grin. "How's the hand?"

Mick didn't mention the thirty days again and they passed with silent relief. He was watching for it now and saw how edgy Toshi started to become around him the closer the day got and then how he almost visibly relaxed when the date passed and he was still around. Like a child far to used to being abandoned, Toshi hedged his bets and waited before accepting anything. Neither man spoke of the encounter on the sofa but both thought about it more than they'd ever be willing to admit.

The evenings quickly became Mick's favorite time of day. He'd hear Alec leave his office and sometimes he'd hear Toshi following him. Tonight the pair left together discussing sales projects and outlooks in the half sentences of long term friends. The reminder of friends jogged loose the promise he'd made to Andy to call and Mick quickly finished up the last of the day's efforts.

"I said I'd be there, stop fussing." Mick had been at it for twenty minutes and was still going in circles when Alec slipped into his office. The blond made a motion to leave but Mick waved him in. "Andy, go get drunk or something and settle down. You're fabulous. They'll love you. You know this. No, no don't wear black. They're selling you as much as anything. Just be yourself." He was trying hard not to laugh now but to Andy the drama was very serious. "Look, I have a meeting. I have to go. No, don't you dare! I promise, okay, okay, I love you too, bye."

"Lover's spat?" Alec teased.

"Hardly, Andy's my friend. He's a total drama queen and a brilliant artist. His first show is in four days and he's panicking."

"Oh yeah? Which gallery?"

"Birvina Arts on 22nd street, it's a smaller gallery but has a great reputation. It's a good place to start. He's afraid I'll forget and not show up. If I don't go he'll be a basket case. I'll only be gone a few hours."

"None of that, you'll go and spend the whole night. That's a big deal, a first show. Would you mind if I go?"

Mick felt himself blushing. "I'd rather you didn't. Andy made me model for him for some of the stuff in the show."

Alec laughed. "Now I have to go."

"Oh God, please don't. If Andy doesn't kill me with embarrassment his paintings will. What can I do for you?"

The good humor dissolved. "Tomorrow is a medical day, you saw it on the schedule?"

"Yes, Toshi has to be at Mercy hospital by nine."

"Mick, he's never allowed anyone to go with him for this. I've been begging him for years to stop this but he won't."

"I don't understand."

"Tomorrow is lab rat day, two or three times a year he agrees to be experimented on, studied. There's a long tradition in the I/S community of people selling themselves to the medical community but he doesn't need the money. It makes his father happy to allow their doctors access to him so he agrees. I half think that he feels if he gives into enough of this torture that his father will love him, or at least be able to look him in the eye."

"Alec, you're ranting."

Alec drew a breath. "I'm sorry. Toshi is the only adult intact half breed in the world the medical community has access too. They submit proposals to a central processing doctor employed by Ranvier Industries. If the proposal has merit, they pass it on to Toshi, if he agrees they set a price and put it into the line up. I'm not allowed any say in it. Toshi doesn't receive the money, it's put in a medical fund for the I/S community. It makes his father happy because RI doctors and researchers get first access. They've made millions off of the discoveries from the research on him."

"So what are we talking about? Bend over and cough stuff?"

"Before I came to work for him, Toshi had undergone nineteen elective surgeries and allowed them to break or remove parts of seven bones."

"God."

"I've been able to talk him out of most of the extreme stuff lately but three years ago he let them remove a piece of his liver."

"You're kidding me?"

"I wish I was. I/S heal very easily, they regenerate as well. Six months and there's little sign of any abuse on his body but psychologically it's messing him up. It's partly why he won't allow anyone to go with him. He knows I disapprove. Yet, tomorrow, he's letting you go with him."

"And you want me to what? Stop him?"

"I wish but he won't agree to that. Just, stay near him, don't make it any more difficult on him by lecturing him but don't let them hurt him. He's going to be pretty sick when he comes home. The last time he was so sick three of us had to carry him upstairs." Alec looked truly torn and his hands sat balled up in useless fists. "I didn't want you being blind sided and I knew he wasn't going to explain things to you. Just, take care of him."

The next morning Mick waited near the door. He'd put on a black suit with a stark white shirt and a black tie knowing the image was intimidating. It was a subtle statement and one that he hoped would come across without being forced. If things had to be stressed he would take off the jacket and let the world see the black shoulder holstered gun he wore, that would do the trick.

Alec paced, visibly disturbed. He didn't even glance up when Mick joined him by the door.

"You okay?" He asked, stopping the blond's worried tempo.

"I'll be fine." He stressed. "I'll drink too much coffee and smoke too much but I'll be fine. I just

hate lab rat days.”

“You smoke?”

Alec forced out a grin at the shocked expression on Mick's face. “Only when stressed out and never around Toshi, he can't stand the smell. If he's not totally destroyed tonight he'll complain about it as soon as he walks in.”

“Another I/S thing?”

“No, just a Toshi thing.”

As if the name summoned him, Toshi carefully came down the stairs. Unlike the bank meeting, he was a few moments early. Dressed in casual slacks with a nice but non descript button down shirt, his hair brushed back and caught in a tail at the base of his skull, his face was expressionless. Even the wide, normally active I/S eyes were dull and so empty they chilled all they fell upon. His battered satchel was held loosely in one hand and in the other the sunglasses hung waiting for use.

He shook his head at Alec's obvious attempt to hide his disapproval. “I'll be linked in as much as I can.”

“Don't worry about that, we'll manage here.”

“Well, my shadow, we wouldn't want to keep them waiting.” Toshi said to Mick but his eyes were on Alec and stayed on him until he'd moved to go.

Mick followed and, again in silence, they rode down to the garage. The driver opened the door to the car without a word but Mick saw in the sable depths of the man's eyes his own worry. It was a silent conspiracy that made him feel ashamed to have joined.

As they rolled out from the dim garage into the well lit street Toshi slipped the sunglasses over his eyes. “I'm assuming Alec gave you the lecture?”

“Which lecture?”

“The ‘Don't let Toshi kill himself’ lecture.”

“No, I got the, ‘Toshi's a brain dead moron for doing this but do what you can to help him’ lecture.”

That made Toshi chuckle. “Good.”

“He told me how you two met. The day after the bank incident.” It was a subject Mick hadn't brought up but one that had been playing heavily on his mind.

“Oh?” Toshi turned his face away to stare out the window.

“He said you'd been hurt.”

“But not how?” Toshi's tone had grown as empty as his eyes.

“No.”

“It would have surprised me if he had. About that night, after the bank robbery?”

“Yes?”

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"It was a nice evening. I appreciated it."

Mick tried see Toshi's face but the angle was wrong. "I had a good time as well." Out of no where a flash of thought hit Mick, the feel of Toshi's warmth pressed beneath him. Only this time instead of running off like a schoolboy to his room, he stayed and his hand slid to the top of Toshi's pants. The image was strong enough to stop his breath and redirect blood to areas that couldn't be fussed with. Mick shifted his weight on the seat and prayed his arousal wouldn't be too obvious. In the end it didn't matter, Toshi never glanced back from the window.

They were taken in the same private side entrance that Mick had used when he'd gone to the hospital for his hand. Only this time they were met by a nurse and directed to a closed, private wing. Mick had seen to the arrangement, at no time would anyone not approved and on a very secure list be allowed access to that wing. At no time would Toshi leave that wing, all the facilities and equipment for the tests they wanted to run had to be on hand, right there and ready or the test would be canceled. Hospital security was posted at all entrances and exits and Mick had made it very clear to them how disappointed he would be if they failed. Then he'd made it very clear what he did when disappointed.

Even Mick couldn't find fault with the security when they arrived. He looked for it too, looked for any real excuse to cancel the day but they were careful. The hospital and doctors had already had a solid security plan in place and Mick's care had only made it stronger. They took privacy and security seriously and there wasn't a single fault he could find.

They were led to a fair sized exam room and in it waited only one doctor. Younger but still in his late thirties, the man was as dark skinned as Mick was pale. His black eyes were bottomless and his face was quick and fluid with expression. Despite himself, Mick like the man. He had an open welcoming feel and Mick's instincts instantly weighted it as genuine.

"Hello Toshi, it's good to see you again? Have you lost weight?"

"Dr. Zyzebo," Toshi inclined his head slightly. "I may have, I've been fairly busy but I am eating."

"Good." The doctor's dark eyes slid to Mick but he wasn't of the mind to ask.

Toshi saw the glance and instantly knew what the doctor was hoping for. "Doctor, this is A.R. McKale, Mr. McKale is my bodyguard and head of my security. Mick, Dr. Zyzebo is the contact physician for these tests. He oversees everything."

"Ah, yes, the super hero I heard so much about on the news." The doctor offered his hand to Mick. "It's nice to meet you."

Mick accepted but briefly, it didn't miss his eye that the doctor hadn't offered such contact to Toshi.

"I'd appreciate it, Doctor, if you keep Mick informed and answer his questions. His job is to keep me safe and he's less likely to protest if he's informed. Before we start, I have a gift for you doctor." Toshi had moved with long comfort to a side table that had been kept bare and placed sunglasses and satchel on it. He popped the latches and from inside withdrew a small, clear plastic container. With seeming unconcern he handed it to the doctor.

Mick saw something small rolling inside. It was bone white, slender like a small coffee stirrer and maybe an inch long. One end was blunted and slightly red, the other tapered to a sharp point. It

may have confused Mick but the doctor knew instantly.

"How fresh?" He asked in an awed voice.

"It shed out two days ago. Thought you might want it. I didn't wash it off or anything." Toshi glanced to the confused look on Mick's face and grinned. "Should we get started?"

The door opened as if on cue which may have been more true than Mick was willing to think about. Several nurses and doctors joined them and a small hushed fervor arose over the container and small point of bone. One of the people dressed as a nurse carried a small recording camera, something Mick knew would be there but still didn't like.

"You might as well watch Mick, I know you're curious." Toshi let the nurses sit him on a chair and he accepted a film covered collection cup from one of them. "Doctor, how many times are you collecting venom today?"

Zyzebo didn't even need to glance to the paperwork stacked so neatly behind him. "Four, if we can."

"Venom? I thought hybrids didn't produce venom?"

Some sick part of Toshi was enjoying this. Once Mick really saw what he was the undercurrent of attraction between them would dissolve. He forced his mouth open, stretching just the right muscles to force the fangs to extend ignoring the medical personal around him. His attention and eyes fully locked on Mick.

"His fangs are just like any other I/S. They sit in a slightly recessed cavity in the maxillary bone. Just like a full blooded I/S, they retract upward, folding together." Dr. Zyzebo placed his index fingers together, over lapping the distal joints, to form a straight line. "In certain emotional states the fangs extend instinctually. They fold down if you will." The doctor turned his wrist so the fingers pointed downward in a good imitation of fangs raising and lowering like windshield wipers. "All I/S can forcibly extend their fangs but it's not a natural position, like hyper extending your arm."

"But the venom?" Mick had already known about the fangs, even if he'd never seen them outside of autopsy photos. He knew the chemical make up of I/S venom from his police work but everything he'd ever read said half breeds would have fangs as dwarfed, useless extensions and their bodies wouldn't produce venom.

Toshi bit down onto the film, like a snake being milked, and two or three clear drops of venom dripped from the tips of the slender fangs. The container popped off of the fangs with a snap. Toshi grimaced. "We really need to come up with a way to flavor that film, it's awful."

Mick watched in awe as the doctors moved in to carry off the precious sample to label it but it was the way another doctor carefully asked permission to examine the fangs that Toshi still held extended that clicked in understanding. "The thing in the vial, it's a fang."

Zyzebo nodded. "The only other living hybrid we've been able to study was castrated. The venom is dormant until adolescence. By being castrated before adolescence, the venom never was formed. It's just one of the things we've learned from Toshi. Like the shedding of fangs, all I/S do it but we're rarely able to study it. X-rays show a series of fangs in constant readiness, most have five or six sets in various stages of development."

The doctor had pulled away from his mouth and Toshi let the fangs retract. "I only have three or four sets developing."

"And you shed them out like what? Like a snake?"

"Very much like that." The doctor answered. "That's the DNA code we think that mutation came from."

"It doesn't hurt. I'll wake up and it'll feel loose, itchy maybe and if I extend them, one will fall out and the first millimeters of the new fang is already there. Within a day or so it's fully in place. This new one just stopped being itchy last night."

"I/S do that with all their teeth. They're constantly growing new sets and will replace every tooth one by one over four or five years."

Toshi studied Mick for the repulsion he always found when people learned too much about just how different he was.

"That's amazing." Mick breathed out. "I didn't know."

"Toshi, we'll do fluid collection next and the change of clothes for the stress test are in the wash room as well. Once you're finished, we'll put in the central lines, collect another venom, run the stress test and collect the venom again. Okay?"

Mick was starting to think Alec should have been allowed to attend one of these days. Sure the legion of nameless doctors and nurses moving around were distant and clinically as cold as anyone consumed with research but Zyzebo wasn't offensive and the testing was obviously providing valuable information.

"Of course." Toshi stood and moved to leave.

Mick, by instinct, moved to follow until Zyzebo's hand caught his arm. "I don't think he'll be needing your help."

"What?"

"Semen and urine samples."

"oh." Mick prayed he wouldn't blush and that Toshi hadn't over heard. When he looked for the half breed the men's room door was already shut.

Toshi leaned against the small washroom's door and wished it had a lock. He'd heard the doctor's first comment to Mick as he walked away and it had shot to his groin like a bullet. Idly, he wondered what Mick would say if he knew he was going to help. The magazines stacked nicely on a pile weren't going to be useful this time but he had to give the doctors credit. This time they'd found a wide selection of ones featuring humans, men with men, women with women, mixed pairs, groups to varying degrees of dirtiness but mixed in was one of the newer and more difficult to obtain magazines featuring nothing but I/S models. Some with humans some with each other, men and women. It was a stack with something for almost anyone's tastes.

It wasn't the magazines that he wanted. The idea of Mick helping him was plenty. He leaned back against the door and let the image play out in his mind. Mick's hands on his body, Mick's lips on his neck and the one that was almost enough to turn his legs to jelly, Mick on his knees putting his mouth to better use. It was the shortest amount of time he'd ever needed to provide a sample.

Toshi took the extra time to compose himself. Indulging in the fantasies he'd spent weeks denying hadn't done much to settle the hunger he felt for the human. If anything it made the desire he felt stronger. One short fantasy wasn't enough, he wanted, needed, more. He wanted the real thing, which was so deliciously close by. It was a struggle to not become aroused again

but the upside was it took no force of will to extend his fangs and the venom was so strong that he didn't even taste the awful film.

Mick had to confess, the idea of helping Toshi wasn't a joke. His mind spun around looking for anything to distract himself with and his eyes fell on the vial of venom.

Before he could ask anything, Zyzebo provided enough distraction. "Mr. McKale, I must ask you something personal. Please know, I'm only asking for research reasons."

That set the hairs on his neck on end. "Yes?"

"Are you and Toshi, intimate?"

Gut punch, kicked while down. "No, we aren't." He answered in a tone as warm as ice water.

The doctor only nodded. "To your knowledge, has he been intimate with anyone?"

That was one easier to answer. No one came or went without Mick knowing about it. "No, he hasn't."

The doctor's face reflected his disappointment. "That's a shame. He's a very private man, we'd been hoping the reports from the Committee were wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"The Containment Committee tracks the sexual activities of any I/S living outside of the camps. They've only listed one encounter for Toshi in all this time and it was too brief a contact for us to take advantage of. You see, we want the chance to track a human's exposure to the venom."

"I wouldn't think that would be too difficult, just check out some of the clubs near the train yards. Plenty of humans there with venom in their veins."

"Yes, but from shine addicts. That's not a pure sample and we have no way of tracking the I/S donor. Also, we believe the level of neurotoxin in the venom changes dramatically depending on the situation. If Toshi had someone he was involved with, we could track that theory. We don't know near enough about the venom."

"I've read some about it. The research being done using venom as treatment for medical conditions." He had too, it was a favorite subject around his families dinner table.

"Yes, it can't be made artificially, not yet anyway. Every milking produces different combinations of chemicals, every donor's venom is slightly different. To make matters worse, it's almost a taboo subject among them and sources of venom for testing are very limited. Did you know they're like a snake in that they'll always have one bite left in them? They never surrender all their venom, it's a defense mechanism. The average dose Toshi gives us is enough to knock a strong man unconscious for hours. The amount we'll collect today total is enough to kill several people. He's amazingly generous with the venom he offers." Zyzebo offered the small container Toshi had brought to Mick. "See, the fangs are very small, very sharp and hollow. Amazing creatures."

Mick turned the container over and the fang rolled around in the bottom. It was fascinating and amazing but there was something in the doctor's tone that Mick just didn't like. "Toshi's a generous person. He doesn't do things halfway."

The washroom door open and Mick glanced up and got caught in the blue depths of Toshi's own

eyes. There was nothing cold about them now, the burned him. It wasn't until Toshi glanced away that Mick was able to see that the half breed had changed clothes. He now wore a pair of shorts and a loose sleeveless t-shirt.

As Mick watched, the nurses led him over to be weighed and his height was taken, followed by blood pressure, and temperature. Mick followed Zyzebo over to where the data was being written down.

"Well, Toshi, I was right, you've lost three pounds since the last time you were here. You say you're eating?"

"Yes."

"Hmm. Temperature is a good 100.3 on the low end but within range, excellent blood pressure as always. Three pound loss is acceptable with everything else showing normal. When was your last meal?" Zyzebo asked but a nurse recorded the information.

Toshi didn't even flinch when the central line for blood draws was inserted and than taped to the back of his hand. "About seven last night, same for water."

"Any alcohol, drugs, nicotine in the last week?"

"No." He ignored the nurse filling vials of blood as if he wasn't even there.

"Any sexual contact with anyone else."

"No."

"Masturbation?"

"Yes."

"How often?"

"On average or this week?"

"This week, for the sample."

"Counting today? Five."

That raised Zyzebo's eyebrow. "An increase since last visit."

Toshi just shrugged. "Springtime."

Mick felt himself blushing, the frank questioning was clinical but it was a dialogue he responded to. Dirty talk did little for him but this cold analysis felt like porn and made him feel the part of a voyeur.

"Any problems with your implant?"

"Other than the normal headaches? No, nothing abnormal."

Zyzebo touched the back of Toshi's head and without being asked, Toshi bowed his head forward to expose the back of his neck. He reached up and gathered the length of his hair to the side. There was nothing there for Mick to see but the doctor ran his hand across the base of Toshi's skull and settled on the first few vertebrae. Than there was a scalpel in the doctor's hands.

Toshi glanced over at Mick's shuffled feet. "It's okay, the skin grows back over the input."

Zyzebo's blade made a popping sound and a nurse instantly held a piece of gauze under the fresh wound to catch the small trickle of blood. The small hole was swabbed with a chemical gel before Zyzebo picked up a sensor. It looked like a wireless heart monitor but had a needle projection on one side. As Mick watched in uncertainty, the medical staff shoved the needle into the bleeding wound and left the sensor flush against Toshi's skin. While a nurse covered the sensor with a sterile pad and taped it in place, others began placing the more normal sticky backed sensors across Toshi's body. The only one he flinched at was the one off center of his throat, above his heart.

When Toshi stood up he wore a dozen of the sensors across his body but he grinned at Mick. "Fun, huh?"

"Laugh a minute."

He waved to the ones on his body. "They'll record everything from respiration to heart rate and blood pressure, blood oxygen levels, even what order my muscles work but the beauty is the implant sensor. The implant is a low level scrambler of my more primal central nervous system functions. It keeps the empathy blocked so I can live safely around humans." The words came out more bitterly than he'd wanted them to. "The upside is because it's already wired to my nervous system, by attaching the sensor they can track things down to what areas of my brain are functioning. It's handy."

"So what's next?"

"Next I go for a run. All the morning tests are standard and performed every time I'm in." Without being directed Toshi led them both to an attached room. It was sterile and empty but for the cabinets and countertops that lined the wall and the treadmill placed just off the center of the room. Toshi left Mick by the door and spoke with the doctor closest to the treadmill. Mick watched as he nodded in understanding before stepping on and waiting for the doctor to pick the pace.

A half hour later Mick was starting to get frustrated. They started out at a fast walk and quickly raised the speed up to a steady run but now it was on a full out sprint. Toshi was showing signs of growing weary and Mick became aware of how long ago he said it had been since he'd even had water. His worry aside, the sight of Toshi running full out, focused on pace and balance, breath flowing in a heart pounding pace and sweat making his golden skin glow, was one of the better ones he'd had in a while. It didn't help that the tip of that long black pony tail bobbed around the small of the half breeds back, accenting his lean form and steady pace.

The pace increased again and Mick was ready to call a stop to it. "Are you sure about this?" Mick asked Zyzebo.

The doctor only nodded, his eyes on the monitors. "Toshi is in excellent health, even with the implant in place."

"It's," Toshi huffed out, winded now. "It's okay, Mick."

Mick shut up. The pace increased again and this time held steady for several minutes before gradually slowing down. They lowered it back to a walk and then to a stop and Toshi nearly fell from the treadmill. He collapsed down and sat on it's edge, holding his side, his chest heaving in an effort to get enough air. His large eyes floated shut.

Mick snatched the towel from a waiting nurses hand and went to Toshi's side. "You okay?" He asked as he handed it over.

"Yeah," he puffed out. "I'm good. I like running." He groaned. "Though not normally that fast."

Mick got out of the way as more blood was drawn and more venom collected. He even saw one nurse collecting the sweat from Toshi's shoulders and arms. Mick began to see a pattern to how they were treating Toshi and lab rat wasn't too far off from the truth.

By the time all the sensors, except the one on the implant, were removed, Toshi was breathing normally again. "Can you get my satchel, Mick? I'm going to go shower and then we're off to the whole scan, x-ray part."

Toshi was gone all of ten minutes but returned with wet hair and this time wearing a hospital gown and robe, plain blue slippers covered his feet. He'd braided his hair this time and it hung in a thick, wet rope down his back. They followed Zyzebo to another section of the wing and Mick ended up sitting in a small observation room for the next two hours as every sort of internal scan that could be made, was made. He watched their treatment of Toshi and saw it was coldly distant, even rude at times but over all the experience wasn't nearly as bad as Mick had prepared himself to face.

An hour later he was regretting making such a hasty decision. Toshi was still in the same room they'd done so many scans in and Mick was still in the observation room but the scanning equipment was gone. Toshi sat up and was folded over his legs, the top of his head toward Mick. He was so bent over that Mick could see the top bumps and ridges of his spine. Toshi turned his face to the side, the cold empty look was back on his face and he had his eyes closed.

Mick watched as they swapped the area of Toshi's lower back and then proceeded to do a spinal tap without any sort of anesthetic. He saw the slight way Toshi's hands flinched when the needle was inserted in and the way his entire body tensed up. None of the medical team working on him noticed or if they noticed they didn't care. They drained out several small vials before removing the needle and carefully bandaging the wound. Toshi kept his eyes shut and Mick found he'd reached under his jacket and had his hand wrapped around the grip of his gun. He slowly eased away from the weapon.

Zyzebo spoke to Toshi as he was eased back onto the exam table. As he spoke he traced out a roughly one inch square on the inside of Toshi's forearm and Mick saw Toshi nod in agreement with whatever he'd been told. Then Zyzebo was gone and another medical team joined Toshi. None of them bothered to introduce themselves and Toshi laid still his eyes kept closed.

Mick watched as they strapped Toshi's arm to a restraint and began swabbing off a section both on the inside and the outside of his forearm. Zyzebo joined Mick in the observation room which saved Mick the trouble of hunting down the man.

"I thought there wasn't going to be any surgery today?"

"Oh, this isn't surgery. They're just going to remove two square inches of skin."

"What?" Zyzebo's tone was so casual that Mick honestly thought he'd misheard.

"They have a cutter that will only remove the skin, no deeper. It slices a one inch square and cuts that square into a hundred strips. All in one pass, it's very efficient. They'll take one from the inside of his arm and one from the outside. It'll be over in a moment."

It was true, Mick glanced to the other room and saw Toshi's entire body try to pull away and his face wince in pain. The metal cutter was lifted from his arm and a bleeding angry, perfectly square wound remained. As they bandaged up the injury, two members of the medical team began to separate out the hair wide strips of skin from the first cutter.

"But they didn't do anything to numb the pain!"

Zyzebo stared at Mick like he would a dull and ignorant child. "Of course not. He's a half breed, I/S don't take anesthetics well. They're avoided at all costs and something this minor doesn't really call for the risk. They're sturdy animals, they can take a little pain."

There was no desire to shoot the doctor but Mick really wanted to hit him. "Get out of my sight, now, before I do something we'll both regret."

The doctor smiled indulgently. "If you'd spent your entire life studying them you'd understand that while they may look human, they aren't. They shouldn't exist but while they do we need to use them for everything we can. By their nature they aren't human, if you look at it objectively you'll understand that."

"Get. Out. Now."

Zyzebo nodded slightly but kept the knowing smile on his face. "As you wish but one day you won't view them as sentimentally as you do now."

Mick watched in impotent anger as they cut the second square from Toshi's arm. Watched as his friend flinched in pain again and none of the medical staff noticed. He stood alone and silently vowed that Toshi would never do this again while he was employed to protect him.

"I guess it would be stupid to ask if you're okay, you look like shit." Mick asked as he pulled a chair up beside the bed Toshi was laying in. It wasn't a lie, Toshi was ashen and not even bothering to try to put on a good face.

The computer sat open in front of him but he was too sick to work. "It's the chemical." He waved at where the IV was slowly dripping into the central line in his hand. He was again being monitored but he was too sick to really care.

"And this is supposed to do what?"

Toshi shrugged. "Track my immune system response or something like it."

The IV began to beep and the nurse sitting and waiting for it to finish hurried over to remove it from Toshi's hand. "Now, they'll do blood draws every five minutes for a half hour and then twice more before I leave."

Before the final blood draw of the series, Toshi was already sick. When he'd vomited twice more as soon as the nurse had finished the blood draw he tried to joke it off. After the ninth time in less than fifteen minutes he was too weak to do anything and Mick had to hold his hair back. The doctors only seemed to notice Toshi's distress in the spikes and valleys of the monitors, and the carefully collected vomit.

Mick made a cloth wet and carefully pressed it to Toshi's face. The coolness caused Toshi to start a little but he sighed and relaxed a bit. Mick was starting to get really worried, Toshi's skin had gone ashen and clammy. He was trembling, his breathing was shallow.

Mick stopped the nurse when she came over to draw another, unscheduled vial of blood. "He needs help."

She glanced to where the doctors were clustered. "He's fine. The doctors just want some additional blood samples."

"It's alright, Mick, it's passing."

With Toshi's agreement, there was nothing Mick could do. That was the reoccurring theme of the day and it was wearing very thin. It wasn't Mick's concern or protest that delayed the next tests, they were concerned that Toshi would vomit in the middle of it.

When some of Toshi's color returned and he merely looked exhausted and bedraggled instead of half dead, he turned to where Mick sat near the bed with worried eyes. "Have you ever had a laparoscopic gastrointestinal exam, Mick?"

"Once, it turned out to be an ulcer."

"You're too young to have an ulcer."

He just shrugged. "I manage stress better now. Now, I just shoot the people that annoy me." He tried to make the tone teasing but his eyes drifted to the waiting doctors.

It was enough to make Toshi chuckle slightly but the amusement quickly faded. "To save you from shooting them, you should think about waiting outside."

"Is that an order?"

"No, just a suggestion. They're going to be cutting out tissue samples."

"Toshi,"

"It's okay, it won't kill me."

Mick made it past the insertion of the tube into Toshi's stomach. The tears that welled up in the too large eyes may have been an automatic reflex but they hit Mick like a fist. He made it past the gagging retching sound and the almost frustrated instructions of the doctors to just keep swallowing. He didn't make it past the first sample collection. It was bad enough that he knew what they were doing but to see it on the screen as they shaved off layers of tissue was too much.

An hour and a half later a nurse came out into the hallway. "We're done for the day, Mr. McKale."

"Good." He was immediately calling the driver and having the man get ready to meet them. Mick didn't knock, he was in the exam room as soon as he was off the phone and was grateful he hadn't waited.

Toshi was alone, wearing only his boxers and collapsed on the floor. He just sat there, on his knees, his stomach retching but there was nothing left to vomit. Mick was there instantly, one hand going to steady Toshi's shoulder and the other to gather up the loose braid.

"I'm sorry, Mick."

"They left you alone in here? They didn't even leave a nurse to help you?"

"I'm okay."

"Bullshit you are. You're freezing cold." Mick took in the still ashen color to Toshi's skin and reached to check his pulse. "Christ, you're in shock." His first thought was to call in the medical staff and his second was to grab Toshi and run. While he debated he reached up and snagged Toshi's socks and pants.

"Mick, I'm okay."

"You just shut up." Mick pulled the last sock on and began threading Toshi's legs into his pants. "Okay, I'm going to help you up. I won't let you fall."

Toshi just nodded and let Mick haul him to his feet. He clung to the other man for a moment as his head spun in dizziness but the feel of Mick tugging his pants up over his hips was enough to snap him into the here and now. Toshi moved to close his pants before Mick could. It wasn't until Mick helped him sit on the exam table that he realized how cold he felt. He gathered the discarded paper robe around his chest and back but didn't have the energy to pull it over his arms.

"Mick?"

"Shut up, we're doing this my way now." He had his phone back out and he dialed the number without having to look at the key pad. At the prompt he punched in the extension and then waited. It was picked up on the fourth ring.

"Papa Mike? It's Amun. I've got a situation. How well do I/S recover from shock? Blood loss, dizziness, faint, ashen and clammy skin, he's cold too and his pulse is rapid but weak. No, he's conscious and alert." Mick listened but he kept his eye on Toshi. The other man sat unresponsive, weak and empty and it was more frightening than when he was sick. "I can do that. One more thing, they put a sensor into his implant, it looked a little rough, should I check the wound?"

"They forgot to take the sensor out." Toshi's voice was weak but no longer shaky or raspy, it was an improvement.

"Shit, Papa Mike, he says they left the sensor in. How do I get it out?" Mick listened and nodded. "Okay. I'll call you later. Thanks, bye."

"He sounds nice, stoned but nice."

"You heard him?"

"Better ears."

Mick nodded. "Than you know he thinks you'll survive but we need to get that sensor out. Now, I can call a doctor or just do it myself, it's your call."

"I can do it myself."

"That wasn't an option." Mick slapped Toshi's hand away and moved the half unraveled braid away. The gauze pad peeled up easily enough and the offensive sensor was still stuck to the back of his neck like a leach. Mick found the two release buttons, pressed them in and tugged. There was an awful metal on metal sound and Toshi shuddered but it slid out easily. The wound bled slightly before weeping a clear fluid, just as Papa Mike had said it would. Mick re-banded the wound and his fingers made out the small disk implant under the thin skin.

"Alright, let's finish getting you dressed." Mick eased the shirt over Toshi's arms and let the other man fumble with the buttons while he knelt down to slip on and then tie the well polished leather shoes. Toshi was still fumbling with the buttons as Mick finished gathering up his satchel and sunglasses, in the end he brushed Toshi's hands aside and did the job himself.

To the hospital's credit they did have a nurse waiting with a wheelchair to escort them out. Mick dismissed her and helped Toshi into the chair himself, he didn't miss how the other man winced at nearly every movement.

The driver met them at the elevator, used to Toshi being devastated after one of these days. He just shook his head. "Oh, Mr. Ranvier." He murmured and helped Mick without being asked.

They bundled Toshi into the back of the car and Mick left the wheelchair where it was. After the way they'd been treated, they could send someone to fetch it. Mick crawled into the backseat and found Toshi thirstily downing a bottle of water.

"Easy or you'll make yourself sick."

Toshi nodded but quickly finished the water, he didn't protest either when Mick worked a blanket over his shoulders. He did protest when Mick began to push at his shoulders. "What?" He asked, confused.

"Hush and come here. You're still too cold." It took a little wrangling but Mick was flexible and stubborn. Soon he had Toshi not only wrapped in the blanket but stretched out along his side as well. Toshi lay weakly along his chest, his shallow breathing puffing out against the bare skin of Mick's neck.

There was nothing sexual about the situation but it was far more intimate than either man was really comfortable with. Mick told his head that it was no different than when one of his younger siblings was hurt or scared. Toshi clung to him with the same almost desperate need, like a man drowning.

Toshi lay there, too hurt, too exhausted, to protest. It was tremendous, it was wonderful, it was just what he needed when he felt so battered in body and soul but it also was terrifying. He waited, knowing sooner or later that awful undercurrent of sexual need would surge up between them and right now, hating that it would. No one touched him without it turning sexual, it was the nature of what he was. Soon, Mick would realize they were so closely pressed together, realize that he was vulnerable and the sexual spark would shatter this quiet intimacy.

It was too much. The contact was too nice and the anticipation of it being broken too painful. He began to tremble, hating the weakness but too exhausted to stop it. The tremors caused Mick to move and Toshi flinched from the contact. Only, it wasn't sexual, Mick's free hand began to stroke his hair. Gently, protectively and so wonderfully safe that Toshi couldn't help the sob that escaped his sore throat.

"Shhhhhh, it's okay, it's okay now. I won't let them hurt you again." Mick tightened the arm he had around Toshi's shoulders and pulled the man closer. "I swear, I won't let them hurt you again. I won't let anyone hurt you."

Bit by bit, Toshi reached out and wrapped his arms around the warm chest he was pillowed on. He clutched to Mick, clung to the warm comfort in body as much as he clutched to the whispered words promising safety. He believed those words, stupid as it was he believed them. The trembling turned to full out shivers, then to teeth chattering shivers and Mick just continued to hold him.

Toshi was half asleep as soon as he'd warmed up enough to stop shivering but he startled awake when they eased into the cool darkness of the parking garage. "I'm sorry." He mumbled as he pulled away, instantly missing the warmth he'd been sleeping against.

"Don't be, it's okay."

Alec was waiting at the elevator and he hurried over, opening the door and helping Toshi from the outside while Mick steadied him from inside. When they got Toshi to his feet, Alec paused, looking more than typically worried.

"The Committee is here."

Toshi froze. "What?"

"They're finished searching but they need you and Mick upstairs."

"For what?" Mick snapped, tired of it all and more than happy to find a target for his frustration.

"Just a blood sample from you but blood, venom, weight, temp and blood pressure from Toshi, like always."

"No. They'll have to come back."

"Mick," Toshi began.

"No, no, not today."

"It's their right by law." Toshi just moved to the elevator, forcing them to follow.

"It's a shitty law."

"But it's still the law."

Before his eyes Mick saw what little life the ride home had instilled in Toshi bleed away. They rode up the way they'd ridden down, in silence. Alec clutched the satchel against his chest and nearly crushed the sunglasses in his fist. When they reached the top, they didn't use the main door into the public areas but rode up the extra flight to the private living entrance, which was a good thing because Mick wasn't sure Toshi could climb a flight of stairs at the moment.

Alec rushed ahead to open the door and Toshi didn't miss a step when he saw the men waiting in their living room. The two housekeepers Toshi employed moved about the apartments, hurrying to put everything back in order but they glanced to Toshi with an expression of poorly hidden pity.

"As I'm sure my secretary has informed you, Mr. Henerson, I've had a very long day and I'm not feeling well so let's get this over with." Toshi spilled out with a voice that wasn't anywhere near as strong as it should have been.

Before Mick could protest, Alec caught his eye and shook his head slightly. He bit his tongue again and followed Toshi.

"Of course, Mr. Ranvier, this won't take long. Please, the scale." The oldest of the group with a hard liner look about him motioned to the unrolled portable mat scale on the smooth floor of the kitchen.

Toshi didn't even pause, he knew the requirements. He stood still as his weight was transmitted to Mr. Henerson's hand held unit.

"You're down three and a half pounds."

Toshi stepped off the scale and let the technicians take his temperature and blood pressure.

"That's still within the five pound range."

"Yes but it's a dramatic change for you. How's your appetite?"

"None existent like always but I'm eating."

"Temps down too, 99.9."

"It was 100.3 this morning, it's been a rough day."

"Even the 100.3 is a little low, Toshi."

"I'll wear a sweater."

That made Henerson snort.

"What's the big deal?" Mick snapped. "He's been through hell today."

"The big deal, Mr. McKale is that shine addicts loose weight and drop their temp when they're using, or about to use."

Mick actually took a step backwards. "What?" He glanced to Toshi but the other man just looked away.

"You didn't know? That's interesting."

"He's been clean for eleven years." Alec defended.

"No one is ever clean from shine. You're an addict to the day you die, even if you never take another hit." Mick heard himself answering. "That's why the drug's so difficult to get off of."

"Exactly." Henerson agreed. "I should have known a former cop would be well aware of shine. We've noticed that weight loss and a lower body temp are good signs that an addict is close to using again so we monitor those carefully." He glanced to the hand held unit. "Oh, blood pressure is down as well."

"I'm not using." Toshi finally answered.

"The blood tests will confirm that. We'll need one from you as well, Mr. McKale."

Toshi let the technician roll up his sleeve but his left arm was wrapped in bandages. The man moved to the right arm without asking.

"Any personal contact you want to report, Toshi?" Henerson asked but his eyes were on Mick.

"None." The technician was skilled, he found a vein and quickly drew off several vials of blood. He placed the venom collection cup on the counter by Toshi before he moved to draw blood from Mick. Toshi didn't even think about it, he just picked it up, forced his fangs out and bit the film.

"Not much venom this time."

"It's my fifth sample of the day."

"Right, so have you told your new," Henerson paused just long enough to weight the word. "Bodyguard, who your uncle is?"

"Don't." Toshi warned but there was little strength in the word.

"I bet he'd be fascinated, given how much Inkies admire your communities."

Mick glanced from Toshi to Alec to Henerson but the only one willing to look at him was the Committee agent.

"I guess you haven't told him."

Mick almost jerked his arm from the technician. "If you've something to say to me say it to me."

Henerson touched a spot on his hand held. "Very well, we found an interesting collection of pornography in your apartment. Club Party Men Four, Ass Backward, The Seduction of a Corporate Slave?"

Rather than be embarrassed, Mick laughed. "Yeah, since when is that a crime?"

"Including the largest dildo I've ever personally seen, what is it, fifteen inches?"

"Nineteen." Now it was Toshi and Alec staring at him. "And it's my fault you don't know how to have a good time on a Saturday night? Or did the big boy remind you of what a tiny wonder you're packing?" One of the housekeepers snickered to the other as they hurried by but Mick kept his eyes on the now red faced Henerson.

"They're items of questionable nature for an I/S to own. They need to limit and control their baser instincts. Pornography only encourages them to act like the animals they are."

If Mick didn't have a needle in his arm he'd have punched the other man. "Last I looked your jurisdiction doesn't cover my happy, gay ass. Now, if you'd like to come over, say next weekend? I'd be pleased to show you how humans can act like the base, primal animals they are." Even Mick wasn't sure if he was mocking the man's prudish views of sex and offering to enlighten him or if he was offering to beat the snot out of him.

However Henerson took it, his face went redder. "It was just a simple warning. I've seen the damage an out of control Incubus can do to a man."

"I'll take my chances." He rolled down his sleeve. "Now, what else do you need to finish your job?"

Henerson made a show of checking his hand held. "It seems we're finished with all that's officially required."

"Good. My employer is far more civilized than I am and since he pays me to look out for him it's my professional opinion that he is too ill to deal with your unfounded harassment any longer. Now, get the hell out."

Mick followed the small group to the door and saw they left without further comment. As soon as the door was shut he turned on Toshi.

"You're a shine addict?"

"It's not what you think, Mick."

"I wasn't talking to you, Alec."

"I was, for just over four months."

"What did you shine to?" Shine wasn't just about the drug for an I/S, the user became addicted to certain emotions as well.

"Pleasure, pain and an underscore of humiliation."

"Toshi?"

"It's okay, Alec, he's a right to know."

The combination sorted itself out in Mick's head. "You were a whore."

Alec flinched at the way Mick spat the words out but not Toshi.

"Yes, for four months and twelve days."

"How does one become a shining whore for exactly four months and twelve days? Did you get bored and take it up as a hobby?" Mick felt betrayed, he felt like he'd been lied to even if neither man had ever actually lied. Shine destroyed so many people, not just I/S, it was an enslavement that didn't take chains and the most destructive form of escapism.

"My grandfather was Utiaka Sakamoto, do you know the name?"

Mick took another step back. He glanced to Alec to deny it but the blond was studying his own feet. "Of course, he ruled the Containment Camp. Butchered the other gangs, brought all of the I/S under his rule."

"With the help of his two brothers and a sister but he's the only one that survived the fighting to have children of his own. He had four, two sons were born shortly after he gained power. His wife was murdered and several years later he took a mistress. With her, he produced a daughter and another son. It was his eldest son and heir that stepped up contact with the outside world. It was Luke Henri Ranvier that met with them personally and set up a black market smuggling plan. It's one of the reasons Ranvier is so rich, he was a smuggler into the camps before they were opened."

Mick felt his heart racing, felt his breath coming in short bursts and some small logical part of his mind knew he was over reacting. It had been too emotional of a day to be hit with such a confession.

"To solidify the deal between two such powerful families, my grandfather offered Ranvier the private services of a virgin I/S. A fourteen year old girl and a nine year old boy, Ranvier didn't know the two were Sakamoto's own children. He selected the girl and visited her a dozen or so times a year. She was one of countless mistresses he had across the globe but she was the only one of them to ever get pregnant. My grandfather knew Ranvier was desperate for a child, an heir, and he also knew he was a ruthless man when it came to business. My birth was hidden, I was raised by my grandfather and the youngest of his sons. I only rarely saw my mother, I was never told who my father was."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you need to hear it to understand. Because I'm tired of hiding what I am." Some of the emotion melted from Toshi. "Because I want you to know. My mother's family was yakuza before the plague, before the outlaw of the sword they were Samurai, the old ways run very deep for us. I should have been a shame to my grandfather, he had several full blooded grandchildren but I had black hair. I looked like Japan. He was amused by me. I was raised as a full member of the family, to be Samurai and to be yakuza.

"When I was fifteen, my grandfather's second son was tired of being second. He was always weak, he worked with drug dealers, he wanted more power. So he arranged for the slaughter of his elder brother, his father, my grandmother, all of his nieces and nephews. He killed his younger brother's wife and their three children and he took my uncle and myself as hostage. We were the price to seal the deal with the pimps and drug lords he was courting. The youngest son of Sakamoto and the half breed freak, the two of his children he loved above all others.

"My uncle had been entrusted by his father with names, places, codes that were necessary to run

his empire. Things he hadn't trusted his weaker second son with. My uncle was taken and they attempted to torture the information from him. My elder uncle hated me, hated my mixed blood, hated the way his father loved me. He sold me to his pimp friends and I was forced to take shine by them. While I was still covered in my grandfather's blood, they filled my body with shine and than raped me."

"Toshi,"

"No! You wanted to know, you'll hear me out!" There was rage in his eyes and pain as well. "For four months I worked in that club and they kept me shiny. Someone who knew me couldn't free me but he managed to free my uncle. My uncle raised those loyal and slaughtered his murderous brother and than he came and raided the club I was held at. There was a fire, a gunfight and I was shot and badly wounded. My uncle should have left me there to die, I was nothing but a shiner half breed whore. If he'd had a bit of mercy he would have let me die. Instead, he had me taken to that hospital knowing they'd identify my real father.

"So, yes, I am a shine addict and I was a whore. Henerson and you and everyone else has a right to find me disgusting, I know what I am. My father can keep some of the facts out of the press but he knows what I am too."

"Is that what today was about?" Mick almost shouted back. "Do you let them torture you in the name of medical science in some twisted pursuit of redemption? Cause that's sure as hell what it looks like from here!"

Toshi rose to his feet. "I don't need to justify my choices to you."

"No, you don't need to justify anything to anyone. You lock yourself up at the top of this tower like some fucked up princess in a fairy tale! What? You think because you don't have pure blood of either people in your veins you have to hide from both? I didn't think you were such a coward, Toshi Sakamoto."

Mick was aware that Toshi's reflexes were good and had the half breed been well there was no way he could have blocked the punch Toshi threw at him. Mick might not know more than basic martial arts but he knew how to fight. He caught Toshi's wrist and pulled the other man off balance but rather than let him fall he gathered the stumbling body against his own.

"You're not getting rid of me so easily, I can't be scared off with a little dirty laundry. I promised I wouldn't let anyone hurt you, I meant that, even if it's you trying to hurt you." Mick muttered into the almost unraveled braid of black hair.

Toshi struggled against the tight grip almost as much as he struggled against the tender words. Mick's grip eased just enough to allow him to pull a fraction away. Only he wasn't released, Mick leaned forward and very carefully pressed his lips to Toshi's. The kiss was chaste, as much a promise as any of the words the man had spoken. There was no pressing sexual demand but the kiss said enough to tell that Mick wasn't repulsed by him. The kiss was pure enough to promise something in Toshi was still pure. It was more forgiveness than he'd ever been able to offer himself.

As much as he wanted to give into it, he couldn't. He brought his knee up with all his remaining strength, knowing it was a cheap blow but about all he could manage in the swirling vortex his mind had become. Mick instantly let him go, his breath hissed between clenched teeth and he went down to the soft carpet. Toshi hurried on unstable feet to his private rooms, hating that the door wouldn't slam shut behind him.

"Are you okay?" Alec asked, kneeling beside where Mick was doubled over and his own body aching in sympathy.

"Christ, I expected him to hit me not neuter me." He groaned. "I haven't been hit that hard since I called my sister Ivory a bloated, man hating cow."

Alec managed a weak chuckle. "Who are you? What happened to the quiet man that's been shuffling about here for weeks? I thought Henerson was going to swallow his own tongue and Toshi, he never tells anyone his past."

Mick forced himself to sit up straight but his eyes were still watering. "I've a mean streak when I'm angry. Apparently, so does Toshi. Oh, man. So, am I fired?"

"No, but I thinking of giving you a bonus."

"Hazard pay?"

"Something like it. How was today?"

"Unpleasant, he won't be going back as long as I have a say."

Alec sighed. "Good, very good, thank you. Come on." He got a hold of Mick's arm. "Let's get you up, do you want some ice?"

"I'll be okay, I'm sure eventually they'll feel safe enough to migrate back out of my body cavity." He groaned as he moved but wasn't at all embarrassed to accept Alec's help. He glanced to Toshi's room door but figured he'd pushed enough for one day, he'd leave it as it was.

Part Six

Three days passed and Toshi didn't emerge from his rooms. By late afternoon Mick's patience was wearing thin but Alec didn't seem too worried.

"You're sure he's eating? I mean, he could be dead in there or sick?"

"He's fine. The housekeeping staff takes food in and leaves it on his desk, they come back and the dishes are empty. I'm telling you, he does this every time he's back from a lab rat day or after a Committee inspection. He'll hide and brood for a few days and when he finally does come out he won't mention it." He sipped at his coffee and went back to reading the news on his computer.

"Doesn't it worry you."

Alec shrugged. "The first time it did but he was fine. He just disappears to think I guess."

Mick snorted and finished his coffee. "I'm not as forgiving as you."

"What are you going to do?" Alec glanced up but Mick was ignoring him and headed for his apartment. "Mick?"

An hour later Mick reemerged from his apartment transformed. Alec knew he was staring but he couldn't help himself. It wasn't so much how tight Mick's pants were or the fact that they were black leather and they tucked into black motorcycle boots. It wasn't that he'd put gel in his hair and blow dried it to fall in playful waves about his face. It wasn't the faded punk rock band t-shirt he wore with the sleeves cut out to show off the strength and tone of his arms. It wasn't even the slight eyeliner that marked his hazel eyes or the lip gloss that was just a touch too shiny for a man. It was the look of pure mischief in his eyes that caught and held Alec.

"That motorcycle down stairs? Does it run?"

Alec only nodded. "It's Toshi's, he keeps it in perfect repair."

"Good. I'll need the keys."

"Mick?"

"What?"

"What happened to you?"

"I can't work all the time." He grinned and it was what Andy called one of his thousand watt smiles. Alec shut up.

Mick didn't knock, he tried to open the door to Toshi's rooms but found it locked. Technically he had the pass code to every room in the apartment but he didn't feel like waiting. He lifted a foot and kicked, the door held and he kicked again, harder, and this time it splintered from its frame and slammed open.

"We'll have to do something about how easy it is to kick in the internal doors of this place." He tossed to the open mouthed Alec before venturing inside.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting but the mood of the room was vastly different than the rest of the penthouse. The floors were highly polished, smooth dark wood. The few decorations were Asian in simplicity and modern in style. Ten paces from the entrance door was a set of sliding screens, they divided the room so that even with the door open, the rooms within were private.

The screens slid open and Toshi stood there, angry and framed in the brighter light of the outer room. "What the hell is going," his voice died, "on." came out in a muffled whisper.

Mick stood in the remains of the bedroom door looking like a rock and roll sin. His eyes glowed with a wicked light and he moved with a swagger in the heeled boots that only increased how powerful he appeared. Toshi froze, what stood in front of him was better than any fantasy he might be able to conjure.

It was a pause that Mick took advantage of. "This won't do." He brushed past Toshi and into the hidden room beyond, catching the stunned man's arm as he went. The inner room was almost Spartan, the floors were the same polished wood. Folded in one corner was a futon mattress and along one wall was a full, stunningly made, suit of traditional Japanese armor.

There were only two doors out of the room. One would be the bathroom, one the closet. Mick picked one at random and guessed right, he dragged Toshi in to the bath room with him.

"Hmm nice. Now strip and shower." The bathroom was as big as Mick's bedroom. The toilet was enclosed in a small private room of its own, the sink and mirror were along one wall but what was really nice were the bathing facilities. Not only did it have a huge shower, there was a Japanese bath present as well. The small stool sat near a drain in the slate tiled floor, beside it waited a bucket and ladle. In the corner was a soaking tub built into the wall like a round, plain spa.

"What?" Toshi stood unmoving and wide eyed.

"Strip and shower, or do you want me to do it for you?"

"What's going on?"

"I just kicked in your door, do you really think I'd hesitate to scrub you down?"

Toshi visibly swallowed and a small corner of his mind almost protested again just to see if Mick would carry out the threat. "Okay." He started to strip, praying Mick wouldn't stand around and watch. The loose cut of his pants had been able to hide his arousal at seeing Mick dressed that way but he didn't need the man to see him naked dressed that way.

Mick didn't stay and watch, as soon as he saw Toshi was obeying he left the bathroom. "Make it quick or we'll be late, or rather more than properly late."

Toshi showered as quickly as he could, half afraid Mick would do something else crazy to hurry him up. He turned off the water and wrapped the robe that hung waiting around his body before toweling out his hair.

"I swear, you're like what? One of the richest men in the world and you own a total of three pairs of shoes, eight slacks, ten shirts, and six suits. That's absurd. You don't even own any jeans." Mick called out from around the bedroom.

Toshi jumped, startled, when a stack of clothes landed on the counter beside him. "Put that on!" Came the barked order.

He picked through the fabric, a pair of worn jeans, a white V necked t-shirt and a dark blood red button down shirt that weren't things he owned, a pair of his own socks and the low heel ankle boots he used on the rare occasions he got to ride his motorcycle. He shook his head and started for his closet.

"What did I tell you?" Mick asked from where he leaned against the wall.

"But,"

"No, put that on."

"But you forgot,"

"A pair of those plain boxers you wear? I didn't forget, the jeans will be too low and too tight for you to wear them. You'll just have to go regimental tonight. Now get dressed."

Toshi wasn't sure if he was breathing too fast because he was angry, shocked or turned on. He felt himself nodding and giving in, retreating to the bathroom to quickly pull the fabric on over still damp skin. It was a good thing he'd rushed too because Mick barged in without knocking.

"You're hopeless, come here." Mick was grinning, loving that Toshi was too stunned to even speak. When the half breed was a few steps away Mick slid a belt off his shoulder and wrapped it around the lean hips. The jeans were positively illegal, they were too low and so tight he was surprised Toshi hadn't broken the zipper getting them on. He buckled the industrial belt so it hung at an angle and slouched, showing off just how low the pants really were.

His next improvement was to un-tuck the red shirt and unbutton it.

"No," Toshi pulled away when he saw what Mick was doing.

"Trust me." He started again and this time unbuttoned the whole thing. It hung like a blood red jacket and exposed the bright white V neck shirt under it. The V was perfect, it drew the eye straight up to the hollow of Toshi's throat. One of Toshi's hands came up to cover that vulnerable spot but Mick caught the wrist and lowered it. "Trust me." The teasing was gone from his voice now and he locked his eyes to Toshi's. Bit by bit the tension left the arm he was holding until

Mick could let it go. "Brush your hair out, I'll be right back."

Toshi obeyed on auto pilot and tried not to look at himself in the mirror. He felt exposed and vulnerable, he'd been feeling that way for days. Now he worried if he glanced up he'd see how cheap and whoreish he must look. It wasn't something he really wanted to think about so he focused his attention on the sound of Mick's boots as he came walking confidently back into the private space.

"Turn around." Mick ordered and waited until Toshi turned his back to him. The wet length of hair wasn't the easiest to manage but he ran his fingers through the top and sides, pulling it back to tie it off at the back of Toshi's head. The rest he finger combed in quick motions so it fell in softer lines than the stark straight back Toshi always forced it into. "Face me."

Toshi's eyes grew even wider when he turned around. "No."

Mick looked to the small scissors in his hand and smiled gently. "Trust me."

"No, my hair doesn't get cut, ever."

"A half dozen strands, you won't even notice it. Trust me." He didn't wait for permission but reached out and pulled free the slightest of strands from the tail. He held it taunt with one hand and ran one of the blades of the scissors along it. He did the same to the other side and a little bit to a smaller strand near Toshi's forehead and tried really hard not to laugh at how pained the other man looked. "Hold still." He dropped the scissors on the counter and took up the small round pot and the tiny, soft make up brush.

"Mick?"

"Just be grateful I lived with a pair of queens for so many years." He dipped the brush into the pot. "Close your eyes."

"This is silly, my eyes are too big as they are."

"They also stun people, show them off, don't try to hide them." He brushed over the outer corners of each eye, leaving behind the faintest dusting of silver. It was so slight as to be almost unnoticeable but when Toshi opened his eyes it made them wider, larger, sexier. Mick smiled warmly. "Now, hold still." He dipped the brush into the pot again and this time he swirled it around the hollow of Toshi's throat before dragging the brush up along his neck.

Toshi's breath caught and he half pulled away. Mick didn't even pause, he repeated the action, swirling the soft brush along the hollow before dragging it up the other side of Toshi's neck. "Tickles?"

"Something like that."

He dropped the brush and the small pot of silver onto the counter and bodily turned Toshi around so he'd have to see himself in the mirror. "Look at you." He murmured behind Toshi, knowing the man's stronger hearing wouldn't even have to strain to hear him.

Toshi did look but he wasn't sure he liked it. He felt displayed.

"Pretend you're seeing someone else."

Toshi really tried to look at himself judgmentally. The tiny bits of hair Mick had cut looked like they were naturally that way and they softened his face, the wisps made him look more relaxed than he ever felt. The jeans were indecently tight and hung so low on his hips he wasn't sure what held them up and the belt drew the eye right to his groin. The white t-shirt stood out against

the dark red and carried the eye across the flat strength of his stomach, up to the exposed hollow of his neck. There the silver was barely visible but it made that forbidden sensitive spot almost shine. The same could be said for his eyes. They'd always dominated his face but now they were all that could be seen and his odd black hair stood out against the red of the shirt. On anyone else, he'd say they looked confident and sexy but on him, he felt silly.

"I don't know." He glanced in the mirror to where Mick hovered behind his shoulder.

He raised an eyebrow. "Come on, we'll be late." Mick didn't wait, he caught Toshi's wrist and pulled the man along behind him, back out into the main living space.

Alec actually rose to his feet when he saw them. "Wow."

Mick scooped up the dark jacket that Alec had pulled out for Toshi and threw it at him before pulling on his old, battered, black trench coat. He fished the black leather fingerless gloves from the pocket and pulled them on as Toshi slowly got into his own jacket.

"Do I look stupid?" He asked Alec.

"No, stupid isn't the adjective I'd pick. I'm straight and I'd hit on you."

"That's a good thing?"

Mick threw a helmet at Toshi. "Yes, for tonight, it's a good thing. Come on."

"If I ask where we're going will you tell me?"

"No."

Toshi glanced to Alec and while Alec had a pretty good idea where Mick was stealing them off to, he kept his expression as clueless as he could. Before there could be any more protesting, Mick had pulled them out the door and Alec was able to give in to the happy grin that was about to break out anyway. How Mick had managed to get Toshi to do anything was unknown but the fact that he did was amazing.

"We're taking the bike?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how to ride?"

"Of course. Don't worry, I won't trash it. It's a real beauty, I was surprised." It wasn't the most expensive bike and wasn't new but it was one of the better models out there for a serious rider. It was sleek, powerful and handled well.

"In the camp, no one has a car. If you're lucky you've got a bicycle, if you're really lucky it's a motorcycle. My father worries I'll smash my head in on the pavement and it really isn't the best way to arrive for a meeting so I don't get to ride it often."

"It's perfect for tonight." And that was all Mick was going to say.

He hadn't planned on what it would be like to have Toshi straddling the bike behind him. For a moment he was so distracted he almost forgot how to start the bike, almost forgot what they were doing. He composed himself and got them on their way, concentrating on how wonderful the bike was and not how wonderful it felt to have the too warm body behind him.

Toshi hadn't been the only one thinking too much over the last few days. Mick had a good idea

of some of the psychological crap floating around in the half breeds head and while he was sure Toshi had been forced to see a shrink while in detox, he doubted the private man had shared much. There was one advantage to having been raised with and around dozens of foster kids, he'd seen more walking psychologically wounded than most people did in a life time.

The pieces added up now. Toshi's people had been abused and used sexually for generations, enslaved by shine or by sheer economics, over half of all I/S in the world earned their living selling themselves. To have been raised sheltered from that and then forced into sexual slavery was bad enough but everything Mick had seen now showed that Toshi did everything in his power to avoid any sexual situations. No one liked to feel powerless and out of control and so far that was the only way Toshi had known any sexual contact.

That was going to change. Mick might not be the one to do it but he was damned sure he was the one to help the other man gain some balance. As much as he was attracted to the warm body behind him, he wasn't going to make a single move to take their relationship beyond friendship. He knew how he was, he didn't do relationships well and that's what Toshi needed. A safe, secure, loving relationship, not a happy physical arrangement. Fortunately, Mick had Andy and Samson and while he didn't know many people, they knew everyone. Somewhere in their vast circle of friends there would be someone that could ease Toshi into a better sense of balance.

It was all well and good in logical theory. Mick ignored the sharp and hollow pain that cut into his chest at the idea of Toshi risking so much to someone that might not understand what a gift they were being given. It was just protectiveness. He'd hate to have to kill a friend of Andy and Samson's because they'd hurt Toshi.

They eased in and out of traffic. Toshi moved with graceful ease behind him, missing no turns and showing he knew how to ride. They moved from the nicer re-built downtown to some of the less than savory districts. Each turn carried Mick closer to his old neighborhood and he hadn't really known how much he missed these closed little communities. He eased the bike into the nearest parking garage and had to go two levels to find a space.

They pulled off the helmets. Mick wasn't surprised the keychain had an alarm tab and he armed it as they moved away from the bike. "I've told you about my old room mates? Andy and Samson?"

"Yes."

"Well, tonight is Andy's first one man opening. The gallery is across the street."

Toshi stopped. "I can't meet your friends dressed like this, let alone at an opening."

"This isn't the sort of opening you'd normally get invited to, trust me." Mick caught the other man's arm again and tugged him along. Not giving Toshi the chance to think and forcing him to move.

When they were crossing the street Mick slowed the pace. "I want to apologize in advance for anything they might do. Andy is a bit over the top normally and I'm betting he's wound up tighter than kid's toy tonight. And Samson, well, is Samson." Mick pulled open the gallery door and light spilled out.

A small group of people stood around the foyer at the base of the stairwell. They all held drinks and were dressed in varying levels of outrageousness. One of them, a woman with long white hair that hung loose to her knees, with a wrinkled face and too bright a shade of red lipstick cried out.

"Oh, Mick, Andy was worried! It's so nice to see you again! Might I add my son doesn't do you

justice anymore. When are you going to marry him and make an honest boy out of him?" She pulled away from the small group and came over to throw her hands up to the younger man's shoulders. She kissed each side of his face.

"It's good to see you Patty, how are you?"

"Prouder than you can imagine! Who do you have here?" She eyed Toshi with appreciation.

"Patty, this is my friend Toshi, Toshi this is Patty Fendle, she's Andy's mother."

She tossed her hand out to Toshi who actually paused a beat or two before taking it, he was so unused to people treating him as they would anyone else. "It's nice to meet you."

"Well, now I see why Andy can't hold your attention. Can't say as I blame either of you."

"It's not like that Patty, we're just friends."

"Nonsense, I've the sight. I know things. It's nice to meet you too Toshi, but I shouldn't keep you boys. Andy will be looking for you."

Mick leaned forward and kissed the woman good bye. "We'll talk later."

"Of course, my boy, of course."

Toshi followed Mick up the stairs and felt like the world had been turned upside down. "Mick,"

"Yeah?"

"She didn't even pause."

"No, she didn't."

"But,"

"Toshi, not everyone is as prejudiced as you're used to."

"Did she know who I was?"

"I'd bet from the moment you walked in."

"But,"

"Stop thinking and come on." He pulled his gloves off and shoved them into a pocket and when they reached the top of the steps, before they went through the open doors to the gallery, he checked both their coats and helmets.

The gallery was the entire second story and was, as all trendy galleries were, bare polished wood floors and unfinished ceilings and walls. The room was split up by moveable white walls and hidden speakers played a good mix of sensual jazz and wild club music. The space was filled with people and they were about evenly split between those clustered around the hung paintings and those that were just clustered around.

"We need to find Andy."

Toshi wasn't sure if he should stare at the people around him or the art they pushed past. The people seemed as colorful and artful as any canvas, they were dressed in a myriad styles, hair in simple plain lines or spiked out in a million directions. The men as well as the women were

painted up in degrees of subtle make up and even the one or two people he saw in traditional clothes topped it off with dramatic hats or vintage pin wave hair styles. Mick, in his black punk look, stood out in contrast and it wasn't just the dark shades that turned heads as they wove around the crowds.

"There he is, why am I not surprised." Mick muttered and pushed past another cluster of people. He made his way to a larger group standing around one of the few sculpture pieces. "Andy!"

The man in the center turned and his face lit up. Andy was dressed all out tonight, the skirt he wore was red leather and pleated in his favorite school girl style. He wore white ankle socks and red patent leather buckle shoes. The black mesh shirt he wore was skin tight and framed his nipple ring. Tonight his hair was pulled up into two horned spikes that peaked and then lazily stroked back his head. His lipstick was pink and his eye shadow was a honey amber color.

He came running over and tossed his arms around Mick's neck. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Mick laughed. "You're welcome, I thought it would match your shoes."

"I love it." He smoothed out the pleats of the skirt. "Thank you for showing up too. I was worried." His tone warmed and dropped the joking playfulness it normally carried as he placed a kiss to either side of Mick's face. "I see you brought him, I'm Andy," He stuck his hand out to Toshi. "I've been dying to meet you for weeks. He never says a word about you so I was starting to think he was making you up."

The pause before Toshi took the hand was less this time. "It's nice to meet you."

"Be nice, he's more like me than you."

Andy rolled his eyes. "Great, just what you need. Someone to encourage your reclusive habits. Isn't this the most darling skirt? Mick bought it for me, they delivered it yesterday."

"It looks very nice on you." Toshi managed to get out, feeling suddenly overwhelmed by all the noise and life.

"Mick, be a dear and get us some drinks. Let me show Toshi around a bit."

Mick made sure Toshi didn't look totally horrified at the idea before leaning in to plant a quick kiss on his friend. "Only if you behave."

"Scouts honor. Besides, Samson was looking for you. It seems a little bird let it slip to Sal that the show was tonight and now the little bird is feeling guilty. Don't be too angry."

"I'm not angry, I just don't want trouble."

"Only happy thoughts tonight, love, now go, I'm trying to have a word with the fine looking man here."

Mick sighed. "Ten minutes, tops and I'll be back."

"So, what do you think?" Andy asked almost before Mick was away.

"I'm sorry?"

"About the sculpture." He nodded to the form rising from the wall. A nude man, from the back, the knees emerged from the wall as if the figure was stepping from it. The front of the thighs and hips were flush against the wall. The model had arched backward, spine curving inward and

arms out stretched above his head. The fingers were splayed in a grasping motion, the hips looked slightly off balance as if the figure was about to reach backward into a handspring. Aside from the pose, the model was appealing to look at, strong, toned muscles, a well formed ass, slender and attractive.

"It's very dynamic. You captured the movement well. I like that you used a rough edge at the neck instead of including the head, it contrasts well."

Andy looked pleased. "You've studied art?"

"Only briefly."

"Well I couldn't include the head or else the model refused to pose. Mick is so shy that way." Andy enjoyed the surprised look that came to the carefully controlled man. "You didn't know?"

"No, he didn't even tell me where we were going."

"Ah, he kidnapped you."

"Something like that."

"I can't afford to hire models so I make my friends do it for me. Mick was the only one willing to pose nude that could hold that pose for any length of time. I'm most proud of that piece. Come on, let me show you some of my favorites, you'll have a chance later to ogle his ass."

"I'm not," Toshi floundered. "I wasn't,"

"Whatever darling, you aren't fooling me." He looped his arm around one of Toshi's and pulled the man along with him. Andy pointed out people, shared gossip which tended to mostly be about who was sleeping with or had slept with who and along the way he brought his favorite works to Toshi's attention.

They finally paused in front of one of canvases. Styled in sand and gold colors, with an antiqued finish, it was a portrait of an Egyptian Pharaoh. Full on regalia, holding the staff of life with the setting sun behind him and shadows stretching out over the grasslands. There was something about the face that made Toshi look twice and when it sunk in he smiled. "Mick again."

"Indeed. You're likely the only other person in the room to know why I painted this one. Even Samson doesn't know."

"I'm sorry I don't."

Andy again raised an eyebrow. "He hasn't told you his real name yet?"

"Armond or something. I heard him use it when he called home."

"No, not Armond, Amun. Amun Ra McKale. Amun with a u not an e, not the direct spelling of the god's name but pronounced the same. Amen Ra is one of the oldest Egyptian gods. The name means like, something hidden or that which is hidden, it's ironically fitting of dear Mick." Andy shook his head. "Who says Inkies have no sense of humor."

"They named him? But he was so old when they adopted him."

"He told you about that? Huh." Andy's mind wandered off for a moment before he snapped it back to the present conversation. "He doesn't know his real name. Cops found him with the body of his mother, oh I don't know he was like four or five. He didn't speak for years and, since they didn't find any record of his birth, they only had his mother's last name. He was John McKale

until the Inkies took him in. They're good people, they think everyone needs a specific name, they just get a little more clever with it than most."

"Oh God, I leave you alone with him for five minutes and you're showing him the Nile painting." Mick returned with a group in tow and three Champagne flutes in hand. He passed them out but Andy quickly snatched the one he kept and took a sip from it.

"You insult me, drinking ginger ale at my opening."

"Well, if you were providing better champagne instead of this cheap swill, maybe I'd be drinking." But he was teasing and it was easy to see, Toshi was with him and he couldn't afford to be drinking.

"Well, Samson, were you properly sorry to Mick. If that son of a bitch shows up,"

"I doubt he will." Mick cut Andy off, knowing full well that when Andy started a fight, it was up to him to finish it.

"I tried but he says I'm not his type." Samson was a woman but Toshi's sense of smell pegged the five foot five in heels woman as a man. Then he looked again, saw the hands and the slight Adam's apple and understood. "My God, no wonder you haven't been home to visit. If I had a hotty like him around I'd never leave too." Samson extended one of her, his, her hands and soothed back the black hair from her shoulders. "Hi, I'm Samson but you can call me yours. Ow!" Samson flinched from the playful blow the man behind her swatted out. "And this hulking fellow with no sense of humor is my boyfriend, Oliver."

"Ignore her, she's a terrible flirt and only is hitting on you because she knows Mick won't beat up a friend." Oliver offered his hand as well. "It's nice to meet you."

"Don't be so sure and for the tenth time, we're just friends."

"Than can I have him?" Oliver swatted Samson again. "Ow, hey save it for later."

Toshi was starting to look uncertain and a little worried so Mick laughed. "Don't mind her, Samson's Latin, it means she has to hit on everyone."

She snorted. "You're a fine one to talk, how many people here have you slept with?"

Mick prayed he wouldn't blush and didn't know why he would. "My share."

"Yours, mine, Oliver's and maybe even Andy's though Andy holds his own."

Oliver and Mick started snickering instantly and it took Samson a moment to hear just what she'd said and join them. Andy just pouted. "Who told you that? Nasty, awful rumors!" But he ended up laughing as well.

The little group soon split up and Mick stayed near Toshi for a while just to make sure he was comfortable. The patterns and movements of the room soon separated them but whenever Mick glanced to where ever Toshi was he found the man doing fine. People were careful and slow to approach him but once a few did the wall was broken.

Toshi got as much attention as anyone else but not because of his bloodlines or his name. In fact, several of the guests tsked and said what bad taste it was for Andy to have introduced him as Toshi Ranvier. Toshi did nothing to correct their assumption that he was a fake. He got hit on, a lot, but it was playful and casual not the heavy handed behavior of even his father's crowd. He was comfortable and for the first time, ever, he almost forgot who he was.

After several hours, Toshi found himself returning to one of the paintings. It was cast in candle light, the warm glow spilled over the two figures. They were entwined around each other, legs bare and connected, bodies touching. One was as black as night, a rich dark mahogany and the other was creamy pale. Neither face could be seen, the black skinned man's hand was grasping the white one's hair and had his head arched off the cloth draped bed, his face was buried in the side of the pale neck and only part of his chin and one squinted shut eye could be see. The white man's hand was clenched into the bed sheets, the only thing he could see of his face was a mouth held open in a cry of passion and the edge of a nose.

"You like it?"

Toshi had heard the man approach and wasn't surprised to find Andy again at his side. "I'm not sure."

"Oh?"

He had to think about it before he could understand what he was feeling. "It's well done, very erotic. The two men capture passion."

"But?"

"There's something sad in it. It's not the lighting, that's intimate not an image of shame but of privacy. There's something very sad in it."

All the teasing left Andy. "You're the first person tonight to see that."

"I'm sorry. I'm sure I'm putting too much into it."

"No, go on."

Toshi had to study the pose a bit more, the tangle of limbs. "There's no love in this. The dark one is controlling the lighter, the hand is too forceful, it's a consumption. It's still erotic but it's lonely." He glanced self consciously to where Andy was standing, watching him as if he were a strange bug. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He almost whispered out. "That's Sal, the pale one's Mick. I," Andy glanced around but for once there were few people around them and Mick was nowhere to be seen. "I love Mick, dearly, but he's got a screw loose I think. He's the king of the empty relationships, he'll date someone and without a doubt they'll start wanting more from him. They say he's distant, which he is, they say he's holding back from them, which he does. When they demand more, he backs off more and eventually they leave. The longest he's ever dated anyone is a three months, then they just give up. Normally, it's a one night stand or playtime with friends."

"I'm not sure you should be telling me this."

"Oh hush, I'm his friend I'm allowed to gossip about him. Besides, you're the only one here that doesn't know this already. So, Mr. Never-Let Anyone-Close brings home Sal one day. Sal who was as tall as me and twice as wide and most likely able to bench press my skinny ass. Sal, who was an elite member of the SWAT team and could put a bullet through your head a mile off. Sal who was as cold as ice and as emotionally distant as our darling Mick."

"I'm certain you shouldn't be telling me this."

"Hush." Andy glanced around again and still no Mick. "So, months go by and Sal's still around and it's obvious why, he doesn't really give a shit about Mick beyond how good looking he is and Mick likes it that way. Then, one day, Mick comes back from Sal's with a black eye. He said he got it at work but I knew. Then it was bruises on his arms, hand prints on his neck, a footprint on

his side.” Andy almost stopped when he saw the half breed suddenly clench his hands into fists.

“Well, Mick, being Mick, refused to admit it but it got so bad that when Sal was around if he felt Mick was out of line he’d just slap him in front of us. Sal was totally possessive, if Mick even looked at another guy he’d flip out. He was jealous of Samson for Christ’s sake. Than one day they were over and I was cooking and Mick came into the kitchen to get something and me, being the whore that I am, started joking around. I was teasing him, tried to hump his leg because he looked fine that day and Sal saw us. I mean it was harmless but he flipped out. Cracked Mick so hard he knocked him to the floor and than he hit me. Mick just went nuts. He broke Sal’s nose, his arm, a couple of his ribs, pulped his face. Sal didn’t stand a chance. Mick ended up breaking his hand, he still has problems with it but if I hadn’t pulled him off I don’t think he would have stopped.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing, they both were cops. We took Sal to the hospital, said we’d been jumped and Sal backed that story. As far as I know, Mick never spoke to Sal again but the man tried to get him back. Stalked him even, for months he called and sent flowers but Mick refused to see him. If I’d know all it would take to get rid of the bastard was a black eye I would have done it sooner.” Andy turned to the painting and studied it. “When I started that they’d only been together for a few weeks. They were stunning together, such contrasts, so untouchable. I thought it was that distance that added the emptiness to the painting but it was the anger, the loneliness as you said. You’re the first person to see beyond the sex.” Andy stood for a moment before putting a hand on Toshi’s shoulder and patting it slightly before he turned and walked away.

Toshi watched him go and saw the moment someone called him over how the serious look and mood fled the man and a cheerful happy face returned. He knew than he’d been given a rare glimpse not only behind the painting but of the painter.

Mick was having a nice conversation until a body fell against his own and arms wrapped around his shoulders. “If you’ll excuse us, please, I need to have a word with this man before the gallery closes.”

Mick tried to apologize as Andy dragged him off but it was difficult. He let his friend haul him to the back of the gallery and than push him inside an office. The lights were out but enough light filtered in from the gallery to light everything up well enough to see by. Andy shut the door and clicked the lock.

“What’s this about?” Mick managed to get out before he had his arms full of Andy. The man was suddenly every where, pressing him back against the wall, his mouth claiming him in a kiss that promised anything he wanted. Mick groaned and pushed a little at Andy’s shoulders. “You’re drunk.”

“And you’re hotter than a soul hung on the gates of hell.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Not drunk enough.” He pushed forward and stole another kiss, not the friendly, kiss in passing all their friends shared, a real, deep, passionate kiss. He felt Mick literally melt against the door and when he ran his hands across the front of those obscene leather pants found the one part that hadn’t relaxed. “These pants are amazing.”

“Aren’t you going home with George?” Mick managed to gasp out. It had been months now and he didn’t take to celibacy easily. The casual and occasional physical play he shared with Andy had always been something he could trust and count on.

“Why would that mean I can’t have you now? Or, let you have me, which is I believe your

preference." He bit Mick's neck at just the right spot and felt the other man shudder.

"I can't."

"How do you want it, Mick?" He whispered into the ear he was nibbling on. "Tell me, tell me how."

"I,"

He took the hands that hung at Mick's side and ran them down the leather of the skirt. "Do you want this?"

"I," Mick gasped out, "no, I,"

Andy groaned, knowing this mood and suddenly getting very, very hard. "You want me to top you?"

"Yes," the word was a whispered plea.

"That's what you want, you want me to put you over that desk and fuck you hard." The body under him shivered and moaned but didn't answer in words. As far as he knew, Mick hadn't allowed anyone top him since he broke up with Sal. "Only, you want it dark like this, so you can keep your eyes shut and pretend it's him." He was bodily holding the stronger man up now, Andy pulled him tighter and hugged his friend so tightly he was sure it had to be painful. "I hate morals. You'll never forgive me if I do it." He pulled away again, only this time the kiss he pressed to the lips below his own was soft and gentle. "You need to tell him."

"Andy?" Mick whispered as the body pulled away from his own.

Andy stopped in the doorway, the light framing his face. "George is going to thank you for this but I'm not feeling very grateful at the moment. Tell him, he really sees you."

Mick slid down the wall and gathered at the emotional crumbles he felt he had become. It had been a while but it wasn't just enforced celibacy that had instantly turned him on. Sure, Andy knew him well enough to know what to say and where his buttons were but it was when he offered to top him, pretending to be Toshi, that had shattered Mick. He didn't think he was so transparent but at that moment he would have begged anyone to take him if only he could pretend it was Toshi.

He took a few moments to pull himself together before he pushed himself to his feet. The gallery was closing and the people were leaving. By the time he left the office most of the crowd had made their way out and he found Toshi waiting by the door. He was already wearing his coat, helmet in hand and when Mick approached he shoved the other coat and helmet at him.

"Let's go."

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened, let's go."

"You're angry, something happened. Tell me."

"Nothing happened." Toshi forced out between clenched teeth.

"If one of my friends did or said something to you I need to know."

"None of them did anything to me, are you coming or should I go without you." Toshi didn't wait, he hurried down the steps and it was only by feel and instinct that he knew Mick was following.

He reached the bike first and had it started before Mick even got his helmet on. He was ripping out of the space before Mick could fully settle. He drove full out, not worrying if he was scarring Mick. He zipped up and down empty streets and rounded corners at wicked speeds. They made it home in half the time. Toshi hopped off the bike and didn't wait for Mick, unfortunately the elevator took long enough for Mick to catch up.

"Why are you angry if nothing happened?"

"I'm not angry."

"True, I'd say you're beyond angry and well into the realm of truly pissed off."

Toshi stayed silent.

Mick left him alone until they were past the apartment door. "I need to know."

He turned and threw his helmet at the sofa. "Fine, you want to know. I can smell him on you. I can smell you on him. I thought he was just your friend!" He knew it was absurd, he had no claim to approve or disapprove of a thing Mick chose to do but when Andy said good night to him he could smell arousal and desire and Mick. It struck a nerve. When Mick had returned, his hair tussled and smelling of the same and Andy, his fangs had come out.

The helmet dropped from Mick's numb fingers. He'd known I/S had a greater sense of smell but not that great. "Nothing happened."

Toshi stalked over and leaned forward. He ran the side of his face within inches of Mick's neck and inhaled. "Smells like something to me."

The very primal action of Toshi scenting him shot down Mick's spine like lightening. "Nothing happened, Andy is my friend. We've been lovers off and on for years but nothing happened tonight. Yes, he kissed me, but nothing more than that." He wasn't even sure why he was explaining himself.

Toshi moved forward quickly, too suddenly, because he caught Mick off guard and the man flinched. He bent his head down and away and hunched his shoulders up. Toshi caught his chin and lifted his face up. "I'm not going to hit you, I'm not Sal."

"Andy shouldn't have told you about that."

"But he did. I just, I can't stand smelling someone else on your skin. Someone not me." Then he did what he'd been wanting to do for weeks. He tangled the fingers of his one hand in a belt loop and cradled the back of Mick's neck with the other. Gently, he tugged the rigid body against his own and, at long last, kissed him.

He nibbled a little on a lower lip and Mick sighed out a whispery moan. The lips he was teasing parted for him and as much as Toshi wanted to claim the mouth being offered, he held back. He was already very aroused and he'd been angry before that, it'd be a little while more before he could force his fangs to fold back up and until they did he was taking no chances. The last thing he wanted was to start kissing Mick, really start to like it and have the human's tongue graze along those tiny points. The reminder of how different he was would surely end any of their careful explorations and Toshi couldn't face that rejection tonight.

Instead of a full on kiss he settled for a gentle exploration, that only made things worse. Mick's body finally relaxed and melted against his own. On instinct one of Toshi's knees slid between Mick's thighs and both men were nearly overcome at the sensation. Toshi found himself struggling to keep the kiss shallow and gentle so he withdrew, trailing his lips to Mick's jaw line

and than down to his neck.

He could still smell Andy. It drew out a growl, low and deep in his throat. Before he could stop himself, Toshi was licking each spot Andy had kissed, removing all trace of the other man and leaving his own scent behind. It wasn't until he was almost finished did he realize what he was doing, and how it would look to a human.

It took a moment for Toshi's actions to sink past the cloud of desire that was fogging his brain but when it did, Mick nearly came right there. Toshi found every spot Andy had kissed, he then licked it and gently suckled at it, nibbling it, effectively removing all trace of the other man. It was the most erotic experience of his life, he was too aroused to move, to even moan. He could only stand there, shaking with need, wrapped in the strong grip.

Then Toshi was gone, pulled away and no longer nipping and licking at his neck. Mick started to understand how he was gasping for air, close, almost, to hyperventilating. He opened his eyes slowly and drowned in a sea of blue. "Oh my god." He managed to whisper.

"I'm sorry." Toshi started to stroke the auburn hair back and hated himself, hated what he was, hated that he'd done something so unforgivably stupid, so totally animalistic. "I just, I don't have, I'm sorry. That was just,"

"Amazing." Mick whispered. "Oh my god."

"You aren't repulsed? I just," Toshi felt himself starting to blush, ashamed.

Mick growled now, his hips arched forward and pressed into Toshi's. "Do I feel repulsed?" Mick felt a little rewarded at how Toshi's chin raised slightly and he started to display his neck but those consuming eyes went shut and he forced his chin back down.

"We can't do this." Toshi finally managed to say.

"I don't make it a habit to sleep with my employers."

Toshi chuckled before leaning forward to nibble on those lips again.

"However, I could make an exception." He knew he was leaning too hard against Toshi but he couldn't help it, he wasn't sure he could stand without the support. Every time he tried to take the teasing kisses deeper Toshi pulled back and kept everything at the same horrible light playfulness.

"These jeans are too tight, I don't know how you wear them."

The random comment made Mick laugh. "I can help with that." He had the loose belt off almost before he was done speaking and his hands reached for the button of the jeans.

Toshi pulled away and caught the hands at his waist. "No!"

It wasn't uncertainty or shyness Mick saw in the wide blue eyes but actual fear. "I'm sorry."

"No, I, it's just, I've never, I," Toshi closed his eyes and sighed. "I've never done this before."

The words didn't make sense with what he'd been told. "But,"

"We should talk." Toshi kept his eyes closed, afraid to see the rejection on the other face.

There was a long moment while Mick's mind spun before he nodded. "Okay, but I'm not waiting until tomorrow or any such crap. Go, change into something comfortable, give me a moment to

change too and meet me back here. Okay?"

That startled Toshi into opening his eyes and was the last thing he expected to hear. "Okay."

Mick left Toshi standing there and as soon as his room door was shut behind him he was stripping off his clothes and heading for a very cold shower. It wasn't cold enough. He redressed quickly, pulling on comfortable boxers and loose flannel pants and a match to the V-necked t-shirt he'd loaned to Toshi. It was what he normally slept in but he added the robe he almost never wore to the outfit, feeling oddly uncomfortable with any more exposed skin than he needed.

When he came out into the living room, Toshi had been there long enough to make tea. He hadn't showered but he'd washed his face and braided his hair back. He'd changed as well into loose comfortable pants and high collared, long sleeve shirt. Unlike Mick in his plaid flannel pants and stripped robe, Toshi was all in uniform shades of grey.

Mick accepted the mug of tea with a nod of thanks and followed the silent Toshi to the sofa. He lowered himself down in one corner and watched as Toshi folded himself up in the other.

"Alec left a note on my door, someone will be here tomorrow to fix it. I can't believe you kicked it in."

"I can't believe you hid in your room and pouted for so long."

"I wasn't pouting. I just needed time to think."

"That's your problem, you think to much."

"What is it you want to do, Mick? I know working here was just a fill in thing for you, what is it you want to do?"

The change of topic caught him off guard. "I don't know, I haven't been thinking about it."

"Whatever it is, I'll see it happens but I don't think you should stay."

"Why? Because of tonight?"

"Yes. I'm too attracted to you, it's not fair and it's not safe."

"Do I get a say in this?"

"I'm trying to do what's right."

"No," Mick set his tea down on the end table. "You're trying to push people away. You can't even let yourself go enough to really kiss me."

"No, it's,"

"It's what?"

"I'm not human."

Mick actually laughed. "Well, the eyes give it away, I'm quick that way."

"I'm serious. I've never had this conversation before. I," he sipped at the tea to hide his uncertainty and buy time. "I was afraid if I really kissed you, you'd feel the fangs and stop. God, I'm so pathetic."

"It might have surprised me, I've never kissed anyone with fangs before but I'd like to think I'm smart enough to handle it." Mick paused but ventured forward. "Zyzebo told me you'd had a lover before."

"Are you certain about this?"

"Huh?" The quick change of subjects had Mick off balance.

"Do you really think you'd maybe be interested in me?"

There was no room here for casual answers or bullshit. "I don't do relationships well. Friendships I can handle but I've never been very good at more than that."

"I don't even have much experience with friendships."

"Are you just interested in me because I'm accessible?" Part of Mick didn't care but he needed to hear that it was as casual as it seemed.

"No, do you think you're the first person Alec's tossed in my way? Even my father is always having me introduced to very attractive, very willing, women. He expects me to have a whole mess of children. I've had plenty of opportunities." Toshi's head cocked to the side. "But, you'd have been happier if I'd said yes. I don't expect you to feel anything for me, but I am attracted to you. I, god this is awkward, I want to know what it's like to have a lover but I need to go slowly and I need to know, I,"

"You need to know if you can trust me."

"Yes."

"I won't deliberately hurt you."

Toshi studied his tea for long moments. "My father hired a secretary for me while I was still in college. Not really in college, they don't let I/S in colleges but he hired the professors to come to me and teach me. If they ever grant degrees to I/S I'll be ready, anyway, he didn't give me a say in it because he felt I had no idea what I'd need. The secretary, not the college. Which was true for the most part.

"The man he hired had been the executive assistant to the chief commissioner of the Containment Committee. Father felt it made the man especially qualified because he was used to being around I/S and wouldn't be disturbed by me. He gave the man total control over my day to day life and basically made him my keeper. I didn't know enough to know this was unusual and frankly, I didn't really care.

"I was still in that five year's clean window where so many I/S relapse so I was seeing a nurse daily and a psychologist weekly but other than them, he made sure I saw no one other than my teachers. The nurse never really spoke to me and the psychologist I never spoke to so I was really isolated. He taught me this was for the best, he arranged my schedule to enforce this. My father wanted me to make appearances in society and my secretary saw to it they were parties where I would only be welcomed because of my father. I was told to go, be silent and only speak if spoken to, which no one ever did. Gossip started spreading that I was dim witted because I apparently couldn't speak English.

"After a year, he started controlling everything. What I ate, what I wore, when I went to sleep and when I got up. I let him because I thought it was how things were done. He even started picking which classes I could take, what I could see or read. Then he started hinting that he did it because he owned me, that my father paid him to own me. Slavery is still a practice in the

camps, it didn't seem far fetched to me. I knew my father couldn't stand me so he'd traded me to a keeper." Toshi glanced up at the cold anger on Mick's face. "I know, it's stupid in hindsight but I didn't know any better."

"And your father allowed this?"

"No, he didn't know. He knew the man was controlling but believed it was at my request. It progressed to where I was serving him, fetching things for him in the apartment that sort of thing and than things started to take a sexual turn. He would make jokes, slap me on the ass, degrading but harmless things. I thought it was just another way of humiliating me.

"He used to make me drink a cup of coffee with him every night, after dinner. The smell is disgusting, I can't stand it, which is why he made me drink it. One night, I started to get, I don't know, lethargic? Not sleepy, just relaxed and I never felt relaxed in those days. Than he was on me, saying he was going to teach me my place. Going on about all an I/S was good for and I was too foggy to really fight back. So I bit him but he hit me before I could get enough venom in him. It only fueled him on and it took almost a half hour for the venom to knock him out. It had been just enough of a dose to kick in but not enough to work quickly.

"I had enough presence of mind to slap the panic button for the nurse. She freaked out and called my father but I'd passed out by than. I woke up in the hospital, the drug he'd given me had almost killed me. We don't take sedatives well. My father was there and he said that he'd taken care of the situation. Told me he'd been going through the secretaries notes and papers and found a journal detailing all that had been going on, where it had been headed. He apologized for putting me at risk. Than he made me promise to never speak of it again. I did and I haven't. It was his guilt over putting me in the hands of such a predator that's allowed me so much more freedom. It let me offer the job to Alec but I've kept that promise. I've never told anyone, not even Alec, but it still had to be reported to the Committee."

"What happened to your secretary?"

"I don't know, even the Committee couldn't find him. I'm sure my father did something fitting to him."

"Your father knew you'd been raped and he asked you to never mention it again?"

Toshi only nodded.

"But that's, that's," the anger nearly blinded him. "That's the worse thing you can do. I,"

"It's okay, I don't really remember it, just flashes and parts really and it's not like I wasn't used to it."

"You shouldn't have to be used to it!" He snapped but than saw how his tone caused Toshi to pull even further into the other corner and he forced himself to get control. The other man had confessed something he'd never dared speak of before, he wasn't going to hurt him for it. "My parents wanted to understand why I became a cop, this is why. Things like this are unforgivable. No one, human or I/S, should be treated that way. There are so many people being hurt out there that don't have a voice." He flinched from his own word choice and hoped that Andy hadn't been as big of a gossip as he normally was.

Toshi saw it but kept his mouth shut, what Andy had told him were things he maybe shouldn't have heard and until Mick told him, he was going to play dumb. "I'm I/S, people always use us."

"Doesn't make it right."

"I just wanted you to know. It's not like I'm a virgin, far from it, but I've never been with anyone,

not really.”

Mick studied the vulnerable look on the face across from him. “If anything we do interferes with work, we stop. Agreed?”

“Of course.”

“We’re going to play a game.” Mick grinned at the worried expression. “It’s called, let Toshi do what he wants. I get to kiss you but only on the lips until you invite me to do otherwise. You get to do whatever you want to me, at your own pace, but I wait for invitation.” He stretched on the sofa before crawling over the distance between them. Toshi still sat curled up in the corner, grasping his tea. Mick plucked the cup from his hands and then bodily moved the other man into a more reclined position. It was so similar to how they’d fallen that the irony wasn’t lost on Mick. He stretched out on top of and beside the warm body. “How’s that sound to you?”

Toshi knew his mouth was working but he didn’t seem able to form words. He shut his mouth and swallowed hard before trying again. “It sounds like a frustrating game for you. I might go too slowly.”

“I’ll survive.” Mick sighed and lowered all the way down, pillowing himself against the shoulder again. “Honestly, if you knew how many fantasies I’ve had about just doing this, you’d laugh at me.”

“Could we, just, lay like this for a while?”

Mick nodded. “As long as you want.” He felt the body below him shudder a little before the warm arms wrapped around him. One hand hesitantly stroked his hair, shyly. “Mmmm, that’s nice.” He murmured and was rewarded by the hand growing more confident. Bit by bit, they both relaxed and just settled into being.

Part Seven

Alec rose in the morning as he always did, showered and dressed for the day. He made it half way to the kitchen in the main rooms before he saw the mug sitting on the end table. It was habit to go over and collect it but he froze when he saw the bodies on the sofa. Mick and Toshi were dressed for bed, and Mick even had his robe on, but they were curled up together like kittens. Toshi was propped against the back of the sofa, half on his side, one arm up under his head and the other wrapped protectively around Mick. Mick was snuggled in, his head pillowed on Toshi’s chest, one arm tucked between them and the other gripping tightly to the thick length of black braid that spilled over Toshi’s shoulder.

Alec stood there, surprised beyond words. He’d expected the two to end up as lovers, the tension between them was growing almost unbearable, but he hadn’t expected to see such an obvious display of intimacy. It was more than he could have prayed for. He debated waking them but then changed his mind and just gathered up the forgotten mugs. He set them in the kitchen as quietly as he could and then nearly tip toed downstairs.

He made a cup of coffee in the downstairs kitchen and thought quickly. From his office he turned off the phones in the apartments and only then did he make a flurry of calls. He canceled all the morning tel-meetings, put as much of the work that had to be done on hold and then called the repair company about delaying the work on the door until late afternoon. What he’d seen upstairs deserved as much time and privacy as he could give them.

Mick woke slowly, warm and feeling safe. An arm was around him and he could hear the muffled beat of a heart under his ear. The body beside him wasn’t an unusual occurrence but the feeling

of security was and it started him the rest of the way awake. He found his hand was clutched around a thick black braid and then the entire night came rushing back. He mumbled sleepily and nuzzled back against the body.

"Are you awake?" Toshi whispered out.

The question only made Mick burrow deeper. "No."

"I need to move, my arm's asleep." Mick grumbled as his pillow repositioned himself but a hand soon was stroking his hair again and that was enough to earn forgiveness.

"What time is it?"

"Ten."

Mick started straight up. "I over slept!"

But Toshi caught his shoulders and pulled him back down. "Don't worry, I know your boss."

"But, it's late, Alec," he was staring around the empty living room and blinking into the bright morning sunlight.

"I'd guess he's downstairs, the mugs are gone."

"But he saw?"

"I think we were hard to miss."

"You don't mind?"

Toshi grinned and rolled Mick until he was flat on his back under him. "Should I?" He lowered his lips down to kiss the still half asleep man. One gentle kiss turned to three and Toshi started nibbling again.

Mick groaned. "No, I've morning breath."

"I don't care."

"Oh, God." Toshi hadn't been lying the night before when he said this would be a very frustrating game. He wanted to touch the body above him but didn't dare, he wanted Toshi to touch him but he wasn't going to ask. The kisses were growing more heated, more demanding and Mick finally relented and let his lips part.

Toshi's stomach growled, loudly. He froze and Mick opened his eyes to find the oddest look on the half breeds face. "What's wrong?"

"I'm hungry." One of his hands went to his stomach and covered it and then his face split in a huge, carefree smile. He dropped back down and kissed Mick, as fully and deeply as he'd wanted to the night before.

Mick was overwhelmed. As his mouth was invaded, the slender body above him writhed and dragged itself along his. He let Toshi control the kiss but he moaned into that hungry mouth. Then the warm length was gone and the lips were no longer on his own. "I don't understand."

"I'm hungry." Toshi took off at a dead run for the steps. "Alec! Alec!" He had to stop half way down because Alec was rushing to meet him.

Alec hurried up the steps but Toshi was already moving to the kitchen. "What? What's wrong?" Mick still sat on the edge of the sofa, his hair sticking out in a dozen directions and looked confused but not worried.

"Alec, call the cook, I'm hungry." Toshi laughed out. "Eggs, I want eggs."

Alec stopped dead in his tracks. "You're hungry?"

Toshi laughed. "Yes!"

Alec laughed now too and rushed over. He grabbed Toshi in a back slapping hug. "Forget the stupid cook, I'll cook! What kind of eggs?"

Toshi suddenly looked at a loss. "Scrambled, yes, scrambled, with toast and butter. No, oh, jelly, strawberry jelly. Do we even have strawberry jelly?"

"I think so." Alec started his search of the cupboards.

Mick wandered over, scratching idly at his side. "Okay, I'm confused."

"You're confused and he's hungry, it's the perfect combination! Mick, have breakfast with us?"

"Sure."

"Tell me we have some left over rice, I used to have a bowl of rice with an egg over it every morning."

Alec checked the fridge before he answered. "I don't see any, I can make some?"

"No, it's okay." His stomach growled again more loudly and Toshi laughed.

"If you're going to keep me in the dark at least give me some caffeine." Mick complained as he pulled himself up into one of the chairs around the counter.

"One of the side effects of shine addiction is no appetite. At all, none, food just holds no appeal, it's like eating cardboard. You don't get hungry, you don't crave things, every thing expect the strongest of flavors is bland. In theory, it isn't permanent but the average is about five to eight years after being clean. They'd pretty much told me to give up, but I'm hungry." He held his hands over his stomach again and laughed. "I almost don't want to eat just so I can feel this for a while."

"You're eating!" Alec scolded, cracking eggs while the pan heated. "It's a brain chemistry thing, they can drug you up to try to counter it but the side effects are almost worse than the disorder. It was just a wait and see situation." What Alec wasn't willing to say was that the doctor's tests had shown Toshi's chemistry had balanced out years ago. There was something holding the man back, keeping everything disconnected and shut down and it wasn't biological. The I/S mind body connection was so much stronger than in a human, there was little they could do except wait. Whatever had happened between the two men during the night it had clicked the right switches in Toshi's psyche.

"Congratulations, that's great news! I still want the caffeine."

Toshi ate enough for two people but fussed as if he'd eaten enough for four. Which, Mick figured, given how little the man normally ate at a meal might not be far from the truth. He slouched back in his chair and rubbed his stomach, smiling contentedly.

"Oh, that was good. That was so good." He stretched and forced himself to get up. "I better get

cleaned up.” As he slipped out of his chair one of his hands trailed casually across Mick’s arm. It was a subtle caress that stunned Alec speechless.

Mick was still finishing his eggs and toast, eating slower than any normal human would and didn’t even seem to notice the casual touch. He glanced up at the feel of Alec watching him. “What?”

“I’ve no idea what you did to him but I almost could kiss you for it.”

Mick made a face. “I don’t like blondes, sorry.”

“I’m serious. Thank you.”

It wasn’t a conversation Mick wanted to have, his own emotions were too tangled. He kept his eyes down and shrugged off the thanks, choosing instead to turn on the net news and read the latest reports. His eyes fell on one of the headlines and he pulled the story up.

The fork fell from his fingers. “Aw, fuck me sideways.”

He offered no explanation to Alec and bowed out to go get ready for the day. He showered, shaved and dressed on auto-pilot but his mind was a good distance off. It took a little bit of digging since a lot of his things still were in boxes as he’d only unpacked what was convenient but he found the file box. It tucked nicely under his arm and off he went to his office.

“Mick? You okay?” Alec called out as he slipped past.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He hurried along and buried himself in his office to avoid being questioned further.

Mick stayed in his office even while the repairmen installed the new door upstairs and the longer he stayed hidden, the more convinced Toshi was of the reason. The laughter of the morning and his lighter mood had fled but he hid it behind the mask of professionalism he always wore, inside, he felt tired. The fatalistic part of him was grateful for the few hours where things had been really good. Better than he’d ever imagined, really, and he hadn’t expected it to last long, not if he was being really honest.

By the time the repairmen were done and gone, Toshi couldn’t wait any longer. Instead of following Alec, he moved to Mick’s office. The door was cracked open but not as open as it was normally kept. Toshi drew a breath, knocked and pushed the door open.

Mick’s desk was covered in papers and the man himself was standing behind the desk, hands pressed to the surface, studying the strewn documents. There was a sense of frustrated anger to the air and not for the first time did Toshi curse the implant he had to wear. He felt so naked having to function as a human.

“Yes?” Mick snapped out, not even looking up.

That settled it. Toshi set his expression to one of neutral stability and plunged ahead. “I just wanted to tell you that I understood. If you can forget it, I’ll forget it, if not the offer still stands. I’ll help you get established doing whatever you want.”

“What’re you talking about?” Mick’s eyes stayed on the paperwork.

“Last night.”

He was only half listening and the parts of the conversation that sunk in struck like a gunshot.

Mick was sure the surprised pain he felt showed on his face. "You want me to forget last night?" The idea stabbed him. A small nagging voice in the back of his head began to grow smug and mocking of how secure he'd felt waking up curled along Toshi that morning.

"Alec told me that as soon as I was gone you hurried to your rooms. Then you came here and you haven't come out all day. I know when I'm being avoided. There's no need to do that. We're both adults. I understand."

The breath hiccupped out of Mick's chest when he understood what was being said. "No, Toshi, no, it's not that." He wanted to fist his hands into the papers under his hands. He wanted to soften his tone and stop being angry but he was afraid he wouldn't stay together if he did that. "I'm sorry, I didn't think about how it would look." Which just proved what a selfish bastard he was. He knew Toshi was vulnerable and far too used to rejection and what did he go and do? Run away and lock himself in his office all day and avoid even speaking a word to the man.

"If it's not about last night, what's wrong?"

"It's nothing. I'm sorry I worried you. I didn't mean it."

"Don't lie to me."

Mick ran a hand over his face. "Amanda Evans."

"I don't know the name."

"She's in a hospital bed, more than likely dieing, because of me." He waved at the papers in front of him. "My last case was a series of assaults in the train yards. The report I filed showed a trend to escalation. The different assaults were ruled unrelated even though there was ample evidence to connect them. It was put on the back burner until another assault came up but each time the attacks got more violent. I was working on Omar Gorgeas assault when I quit. He'd nearly been killed but hey, what's one more I/S shiny train yard hustler?"

He hung his head. "I let them push me off the force and nothing was finished and now Amanda Evans is going to die because I was too much of a coward to stand up for myself."

"You can't blame yourself for an assault someone else did."

"It was my responsibility. I knew they didn't take it seriously."

Toshi crept further into the room and started to read the papers scattered around the desk. "You're certain this new case is connected?"

"I can't be, I don't have access to the reports but yeah, it looks the same. Same district, same style of assault, it's one step up in violence, same general target, yeah, I'd bet money on it." He waved at the spread papers. "I've been going over my notes but it's old, it's all my old theories and hunches and I can't see things newly with old assumptions. I don't have the original forensic reports, the witness statements, I've got nothing!" He heard his tone grow harsher and stopped. "If I'd have stuck it out, fought the charges against me, maybe I could have got the bastard doing this. At the least, maybe Amanda Evans would be the last one hurt."

"Don't they have someone working on it?"

Mick snorted and shook his head. "Yeah, I know the man, he won't go out of his way. I can promise you that much." He drew a long slow breath. "I'm sorry, Toshi, I just need to go over this again and see if maybe I missed something. It's the least I can do."

There was a fascinating strength to Mick that Toshi could have studied for hours. The man was

normally so laid back, but he'd sensed that it was all an act. Now, maybe for the first time in the weeks they'd known each other, he was seeing below the surface. It was very similar to the man he'd seen in the bank that day, only that it had been tempered by his worry at protecting another person. This, now, was pure internal focus.

"Don't kill yourself with it, okay? You aren't a cop anymore."

"Don't I know it." Mick mumbled but when he glanced up Toshi was gone.

Toshi didn't wait, he found Alec in their office and paused in front of his desk until the other man sensed his presence and glanced up. "I need you to do something for me. It's not entirely legal."

Alec only grinned. "When's that stopped us before?"

"Thank you."

It was after six when Toshi knocked again at Mick's door and pushed it open. Nothing had changed except this time Mick was seated and taking notes as he read.

"Mick?"

"Hmm?"

"We need to disturb you a moment."

He put the pen down and nodded. "Of course." As they came into his office he rose to his feet without really thinking about it, running on the ingrained manners he'd always fallen back on.

Alec moved forward and smiled as he would to an unknown animal that might bite. "I need to get on your computer, is that okay?"

Mick waved to the screen. "Feel free."

Alec moved behind his desk and Mick made way, he tapped in rapid order on the keyboard, his eyes glancing from screen to hands and back again several times. When he backed away from the screen a new icon was there.

"Go on, open it."

Mick glanced to the two men and then launched the program. The screen soon was covered with thumbnail photos of naked men. "Porn?"

"Sort of," Alec pointed to a picture, third row down, six pictures in. "Bring that one up. Okay, now, somewhere on here they'll be a bad pixel, there, in the upper left corner, see it? Click it."

Mick did as he was told and it launched a password protection screen. Alec handed him a paper, the user name and password were random strings of letters and numbers. "Can you memorize something like that?"

"Of course."

"Good, it needs to be that complicated to be secure enough."

"What's going on."

"Just put it in."

The screen that the password unlocked was one Mick could navigate in his sleep. "This isn't possible."

"Now, don't get too excited, it can't access private terminals but all the information in the servers and databases are right there, same as if you were on one of their official computer connections."

"This is the police mainframe. How did you get this? It's supposed to be impossible to hack into."

Mick glanced to Alec, Alec glanced to Toshi and it fell to the instigator of the whole thing to explain. "Well, money can do a lot of things. We aren't the only ones with back doors into that database."

"What if they find out? What if they trace it?"

"They can't. The odds of them finding that worm are next to none and if they do it'll bounce their trace around the globe. The pictures on the front screen will change, the access will always be a bad pixel in that one frame. Will this help you go over the assault cases?"

"It'll let me go back to square one and it'll give me access to the new cases findings."

"There's more, you have a breakfast date tomorrow." Alec added, trying not to look smug.

"I do?"

"Amanda Evans died a few hours ago from her wounds. She's set to be autopsied at eight tonight."

Mick stared from Alec to Toshi. "How do you know all this?"

"Please, you know as well as anyone how dirty the police are. Everyone has their price. Don't you find it odd that a simple assault would be rushed to the top of the list and be autopsied so quickly?"

"They've done it before, it's normally followed by a very fast cremation."

"Yes, and you can bet Amanda Evans will be cremated by this time tomorrow." There was a look to Mick that Toshi didn't like, a distant sadness of some past thought.

"So who do I have a breakfast date with?"

"Dr. Parker Soung. He's assisting on the autopsy tonight."

"Dr. Soung, glasses, Indian fellow? Too skinny and always acting like he's hiding something? I've meet him a few times." Mick had generally worked days but that didn't always hold true. He'd made it a point to know the medical examiners.

"He is hiding something."

Mick shook his head. "He's the last of them I figured was on the take."

"Well, he is but that's not what he's hiding. He's gay and so far in the closet his lovely wife and three kids have no idea." Now Alec did grin smugly. "When I bumped into him while he was on the way to work I mentioned I was working with you, Mick. He felt you'd been given a bad shake because of your lifestyle. I didn't ask if he meant being gay or an Inky. When I told him you were still interested in an old case of yours, he volunteered to meet with you. Seems, he's a little tired of official record not matching obvious causes."

"And you did all this just this afternoon?"

"Well, at Toshi's request and he did let me off work to do it."

"Alec's the best in the business. We have one request in exchange for this."

"No," Alec corrected. "Two requests."

"Two than."

"Okay."

"The first is that you include us in this." Alec went on. "Toshi and I were talking and we want to stay up to date and to help you as you need it."

"Within limits, of course. I won't allow either of you to do anything that puts you in harm's way. Second?"

Toshi smiled now. "The second is simple. You need to catch the bastard."

Mick locked eyes with those insanely large blue pools and knew this was about more than his own guilt and regrets. People considered disposable were being hurt and it didn't sit well with either of them. "I'll do my best."

"Alec, can I have a moment?" It was a nice way of Toshi to ask his friend to leave.

Alec nodded. "Sure." He waited until neither man could see him to smile again.

Despite Alec's care, Toshi caught his happy expression as he moved closer to Mick's desk.

"I know you'll want to work on this. Alec and I are ordering in dinner. I'll make sure we order something that can be re-heated for you. I've ordered a movie, I'm going to watch it around eight. I thought you'd like to join me?"

"I'll be there. And, Toshi, thank you for doing this."

The sincerity in Mick's voice warmed him. Toshi bowed slightly before retreating from the office.

"You've got a crush on him." It had been hours and Alec had behaved the whole time. They'd stayed focused on work and he'd kept his thoughts to himself. Now, over pizza and beer, the words he'd been holding in all day spilled out.

Toshi glanced up over his slice. "I do not."

"You do to, otherwise you'd let him work on this case on his own without helping him. I know you, I see how you look at him."

"I'm worried, Alec, I really am."

"He's a good man."

"I know, it's just, well, aw, never mind."

"No, tell me."

"It's nothing."

Alec kept eating his pizza. "You know, I don't say this in so many words but you're not just my employer, or my best friend. For a long time I've thought of you as my brother. I mean come on, there's no one else who knows I wet my bed until I was five or that after my dad died I had nightmares about him for years. And who did I call when Mary Ellen Averheart made it very clear she was going to seduce me on our next date." That made Toshi smile a little so Alec pressed on. "You were the only one I told and the only one I needed to. Thanks to your advice I wasn't a nervous wreck. I know there's a lot in your head you've never told me and I'm okay with that. We all need our secrets but if you think telling me that you want to fuck Mick silly is going to shock or embarrass me, you're an idiot. I know you aren't an idiot."

"I guess I shouldn't try to lie and say I don't find him attractive, huh?"

"I wouldn't bother." He took a swallow of beer. "So, what is it?"

"Once, when I was about fourteen, I over heard some people talking about my grandfather. You know how I/S are, even those that marry have lovers. Monogamy is a human concept, it's almost unheard of in our community. Anyway, these people were gossiping about how my grandfather hadn't taken anyone to his bed except my grandmother since the day they'd met. They were going on about how odd it was until one of the them said that they were idiots because everyone knew she smelled right to him. That was all they said but it explained it to the rest of them."

"But not to me."

"Nor to me at the time. So I asked my uncle and he said it wasn't something that could really be explained."

"That helps."

Toshi smiled. "I felt the same way. He tried to explain it like love at first sight which is something we don't believe in. Only it's not love but a consuming desire to possess someone, not to own them but to be consumed and to consume them. I don't know, I just remember that how he described it frightened me and he laughed. Said I didn't need to worry because it was rare to find the person that smelled right to you and my being a half blood would make it even more rare. He said it wasn't something to take lightly, that it caused lovers to kill each other or kill others in jealousy. Which is why my grandparents were monogamous, they were totally consumed by each other."

"Mick smells right to you?"

"Yeah, he smelled good, but a lot of people do, but it was like as soon as I smelled him when he was a little turned on, the scent was right. I thought it was just because it's been so long, I tried to turn it off. Than last night, when I smelled another man on him." He just shook his head. "I didn't know if I wanted to kill the other man or if I wanted to take Mick and throw him down and wipe all thoughts of other men from his mind. Or if I wanted him to do the same to me."

"To consume him or be consumed by him."

Toshi only nodded, took another slow bite of the pizza and washed it down with a swallow of beer. "I'm ashamed to feel this way."

"I wish we could find you a therapist you'd feel safe talking to. It sounds to me like something your people respect so you shouldn't be ashamed if you've found it. I hate that you have to struggle with this." He thought quickly and fell into the only advice he could think of. "Mick isn't a coward, and he doesn't strike me as the sort of person easily scared off. Why not tell him?"

"What? That he smells right to me? He'd think I was crazy."

"Well, why not start with just telling him what you want to do to him. I mean, the background check I ran on him showed a list of names of ex-lovers as long as my arm. He isn't shy and maybe you won't brood as much if you get laid." Alec teased and pushed another beer toward his friend. "Here, get drunk. You're a light weight and it certainly can't hurt."

"I don't need to get laid! I need to get that mountain of paperwork off my desk and run away to some warm island somewhere."

There was a sullen, dissatisfied sound to Toshi's voice that Alec had never heard before. He knew his friend wasn't really happy working for his father's company but until lately he also knew Toshi didn't have the emotional energy to even think about it. The very fact that maybe he was starting to come out of his depression was delightful. "Well, I can shove you into a box, poke some air holes and ship you. It'd take the Committee a few days to figure it out." If it boiled down to Mick's presence, Alec would have to kiss the man.

Toshi laughed. "I wish. I really wish."

"Shit." Mick didn't notice the time until it was already almost ten after eight. He shut down his computer and re-stacked the papers into some sense of order before hurrying out of the room.

It was only ten minutes, he was just down stairs but his stomach knotted up. Toshi was so insecure in even their new, casual relationship that being late had to have him worried. It was thoughtless and he really didn't mean it, it had just happened. There was no way Toshi would still be waiting, he'd have started the movie or worse, retreated into his bedroom. He took the stairs two at a time.

At the top he froze, Toshi was coming around the corner from the kitchen, a bowl of popcorn in his hand. He'd un-tucked his shirt, it still buttoned up to his neck, and he'd pulled his hair up the way Mick had styled it the night before. The black length of it cascaded around his shoulders, the wisps that had been cut framed his face and Mick forgot to breath.

"We ordered pizza, it's on the counter. I'll get out some beer." He slid the popcorn bowl down on the end table by the sofa and moved back to the kitchen. "Are you hungry? I wasn't, Alec made me eat lunch even though I wasn't hungry and I was still full but it tasted really good."

Mick forced himself to behave and to breath. "Yeah, I'm hungry. Thanks."

"Want to heat the pizza up? It's got to be cold by now."

"Naw, I've lived on cold pizza. I'm sorry I'm late."

Toshi pushed the bottle of beer across the counter. "It's okay, I was pretty sure you'd forget and work all night."

"Lesson I learned early on, walk away from work for some down time. The reports all start to blur together, people that work for hours without a break miss things, they get sloppy." He took a bite of the pizza and chewed it to keep his tongue from lolling out at how good Toshi looked. The way the other man was watching his mouth while he ate wasn't helping any. It was putting very bad thoughts into Mick's head. In his effort to avoid noticing Toshi, he'd nearly swallowed whole two slices.

They settled on the sofa and the movie turned out to be an action thriller. For some reason Mick had expected a drama or comedy, Toshi seemed too refined, too cultured to be getting such obvious delight in the action movie. They dipped into the popcorn and Mick finished off his

second beer, Toshi nursed his third, until the popcorn was gone. It wasn't something Mick really thought about. Movie night in their old apartment always ended up with the room mates, as well as company, piled together once the popcorn was gone. When the popcorn bowl was empty and set on the floor so the left over kernels wouldn't be spilled, Mick slid over and snuggled against the other body.

His eyes never left the screen, and it wasn't until he felt the body under him tense rather than relax and mold around his own that he remembered this wasn't Andy and this wasn't his old apartment. "Sorry." He muttered, feeling his face slowly going red but as he tried to pull away, hands caught him.

"Don't, it just surprised me. Stay." Toshi tugged on the shoulder and arm he'd caught.

"Okay, but you have got to relax. This only works if you lean against each other."

It took a little trial and error but Mick eventually got the other man positioned where they both would be comfortably wrapped around each other. As he sighed and settled in it occurred to him for the first time that the slowly relaxing body around his own was so clumsy with such basic things like physical contact because he'd never had any. It caused a spot in his chest to ache and his stomach to feel tight. He found himself clutching onto the arm that was thrown over his shoulders and holding it tightly to him.

Luckily, the movie was heavier on action and less on complicated plot because Mick's mind was a thousand miles away. All the pieces had been right in front of him but he hadn't taken any time to really think about it. It wasn't just that Toshi had been used and hurt so badly in his past but that no one had ever reached out to him. It wasn't just that he felt pity for the man's isolation and what had to be loneliness. Here was a man that had every reason to stay shut away and he'd picked Mick to reach out to. It was humbling and it put a warm feeling deep somewhere under Mick's ribs that he wasn't used to feeling.

The movie ended and Toshi began to try to squirm his way free only to be stopped by the almost clutching of Mick on his arm. "I guess that means you want me to stay still?"

Mick raised the arm he was clutching and pressed a quick kiss to the outer edge of the wrist. "Toshi,"

"That's a very serious tone."

That made Mick grin. "Yeah, well," it was easy to talk laying the way they were. He didn't have to look into those overly large, consuming eyes. "You've been honest with me, I'll be honest with you. I'm not sure how to progress things, I've never done this either. You know, the whole, getting to know each other thing. I sort of go from hello to sex and if they're still around worry about learning their name." He sighed and clung to that arm. "I really like you, beyond the myriad of dirty little fantasies I've been having about you. Laying here like this? Well, I feel comfortable and it's not something I feel around anyone but Andy. Oh this isn't making any sense."

"Shut up and kiss me." The words whispered into Mick's ear and Toshi felt the shiver race through the strong, lean body.

There was no hesitation, Mick rolled the other man under him and claimed the kiss. He kept it light, teasing, still not sure if Toshi would let him feel the fangs he was obviously so self conscious about. He felt a hand snake along his neck and rest comfortably on the back of his head, fingers buried in his hair and another press to his chest. It was the perfect combination of submission and strength and it tested Mick's control, he struggled with the need to touch Toshi, to run his hands over the body so very close to his own, to drag his lips and tongue across that lightly golden skin.

Just when Mick was certain he couldn't see Toshi look anymore erotic, the object of his growing obsession moaned and his head lolled back. Mick pulled away just to watch him, the fluid, sensual way he moved and to keep from breaking their rules and going faster than Toshi was ready.

Those bottomless eyes cracked open and his head rolled to the side to stare up at Mick. The hand buried in his hair gripped tighter and pulled Mick back down only now it was Toshi kissing him and it wasn't teasing. It was too much, the total invasion of such a deep, full kiss. It short circuited Mick's brain and left him a moaning thing of need.

And then it stopped and Toshi's mouth was gone, leaving Mick to blink down at the man below him in confusion. "Now that was a kiss." He whispered out just to have something to say.

"Kiss me that way."

The order went straight to Mick's cock. He didn't think about the command or refuse. It wasn't until his tongue scrapped against something slender and sharp that his lust clouded mind understood. Toshi was letting them kiss deeply while his fangs were extended. Mick pulled back slightly, taking the kiss back to teasing more from surprise at the offer that had been made than the feel of those points. It only took a few heartbeats to gain his nerve to again kiss the now tense man the way he wanted to be kissed.

It would have been easy to avoid those fangs, to pretend they weren't there but Mick picked a more direct route. He let his tongue wander forward, let it caress up and feel out the shape and placement of the twin points. It took careful maneuvering but he mapped out the dimensions, traced the small hollow they folded up in, scraped along the sharp tips. The contact with the tips left a slightly metallic lime taste on Mick's tongue and it was only the question that brought up that forced him to break the kiss.

When he opened his eyes, Toshi was watching him with worried intent. Mick licked his lips slowly. "Is that venom I taste?"

Toshi nodded. "I can't taste it, we're immune to our own venom. Don't worry, it's just a trace amount and it can't be absorbed in through a kiss."

"I wasn't worried." He'd leaned in so close their lips brushed in light contact as he spoke. Toshi sighed and his mouth parted even before Mick could claim another kiss. Now that the entire over blown issue had been addressed head on, he made it a point to neither spend any more or any less attention to the fangs than he did on any other part of a really great kiss.

As the kiss grew more heated, the hand in Mick's hair slid down to his back and soon both hands clutched at his shoulder blades. There was a need to the way Toshi dug his fingers in and tried to pull Mick down harder on top of him, he found his arms straining to keep his weight off the slighter man. The choice was taken from him when one of Toshi's legs snaked around the back of Mick's thighs and pulled the man down. There was enough force in the pull that their hips crushed together, hard arousal found hard arousal.

With both his concentration and his balance broken, Mick fell out of the kiss. The delicious sensation was too much, he buried his face into the crook of Toshi's neck and groaned, fighting to stay still. The hips below his own arched up and again the contact between them shot fire up Mick's nerves.

"Oh, God, Mick," this time Toshi's whole body arched upward. Mick groaned at the contact and Toshi whimpered.

The sound was intensely erotic but held a note of some hidden emotion that seeped into Mick's brain. It reminded him of who he was with and how he was laying. He pushed himself up on

shaking arms and got his face out of the other man's neck. Toshi's face was flushed, his eyes half closed but the hands that had been clinging to Mick's back now had a death grip on the sofa.

Gently, Mick soothed the hair he desperately wanted to touch back from the flushed face. "I'm sorry. I forgot." He wasn't sure if he forgot how sensitive an I/S's neck was or if he had totally forgotten that Toshi was a half breed. In all honesty, he was so turned on he was lucky he hadn't forgotten his own name.

The rapid breaths began to level out before Toshi was able to nod. "It's okay. Are we still playing your game?"

"I'm trying but Christ, Toshi, I want you." He saw the hesitation dart across the expressive eyes. "I'll behave, until you tell me otherwise."

"I trust you. I'm pretty sure Alec's in his rooms for the night but in case he's not, what I want to try, we shouldn't do out here. My room is just a futon and I can't swear the Committee doesn't have some sort of passive surveillance in place. Would you take me to your rooms?"

The breathy, whispered request wasn't what Mick had expected. He shivered and his whole body trembled in the effort it was taking to hold himself above the other man. The only way he maintained his control was by closing his eyes and reciting multiplication tables in his head. "I'm not sure I'd trust myself with you alone in my rooms."

A touch of a hand on the side of his face opened his eyes and Mick stared down into the bottomless blue eyes below him. Toshi said the only words that were capable of convincing Mick to such a crazy idea. "I trust you."

Part Eight

There was a sure cure for a raging hard on, at least in Mick's world, and that was self consciousness. He flicked on the light to the living room of his apartment and tried to see the room with a stranger's eye. The boxes he'd moved in with still pretty much sat where they'd been stacked, one or two stood open, the contents cluttered inside. The kitchen was bare and used coffee mugs sat in the sink, two day old coffee sat ignored in the pot on the counter. Nothing was really dirty, he had refused the offer of housekeeping and tended to the day to day chores as his own means of unwinding at night to sleep, but nothing was lived in either. There was a heavy sense of being temporary, of being cold and unconnected.

"I wasn't expecting company." He managed to mutter out before he turned around.

Toshi wasn't studying the barren room, his eyes were fixed on Mick. His hands were very carefully unbuttoning the collar of his shirt. The heavy fabric had allowed him the luxury of not wearing any shirt under the formal button down and with each button he undid, more of his bare skin was exposed. He wanted to be bold but he stopped five buttons down, the fabric was now loose enough that it sat lightly on his shoulders.

Mick watched the gradual unveiling with rapt attention, suddenly grateful for the distance between them. He watched as Toshi finished with the bottom buttons still tightly closed. He watched as one of Toshi's long fingered hands casually caressed his own neck in silent invitation.

"You're sure about this?" He glanced over the man standing across from him and couldn't help but notice that a lot of the earlier excitement had visibly faded. Mick started running the multiplication tables again in an effort to back down his own desire.

A broken, hurt look settled onto Toshi's face. "When I was," saying the actual word was still very difficult. "Owned by the night club, they'd make us all wear wide collars because the guests had to pay extra to have them removed. It made them aggressive when the collars were off but the shine made it so you didn't really care. My secretary, he bit me." Mick watched as Toshi traced out the spots on his neck and shoulders, there was no sign of scars on his skin but it was pretty obvious the scars were still there. "Five times he drew blood."

Toshi shook his head and had to break eye contact. He studied his shoes. "It's a vulnerable spot to begin with and it's not fair that something so sensitive is so easily accessed." The dimness of the room, the shadows cast deeply by the single lamp that was on, made Toshi feel safe. Bright lights hurt his eyes and even the relatively lower wattage lights in the penthouse left him with headaches by days end. "I have nightmares, sometimes, about people touching my throat when I don't want them to, forcing it to feel good, forcing the pain to feel good. Sometimes, there's something wrapped around my neck and if I don't hold very still it strangles me."

He dared to glance up but Mick's face was expressionless, immobile. He scratched at his forehead and ran his hands through his hair while he struggled to get out what he'd been thinking about saying all day. "I guess that doesn't make much sense to you, I don't expect it to. I just, I was surprised by how much I like it when you've touched my neck. I don't know why you're interested in me," his voice took on a mocking tone. "I'm a nut case."

"No you aren't." Mick whispered very close by, startling Toshi because he had no sense of movement in the room. "You're human." With a care he rarely showed, he placed a gentle kiss on the other man's forehead before he slid his hand down the lean shoulder to gather a hand into his own.

Gentle tugging forced Toshi to turn around and leave or follow where his hand was being led. He knew where he was being taken and was only surprised at Mick's boldness. The bedroom was even more barren than the living room. Fewer boxes sat around waiting to be unpacked and there was less sign the room was habited.

Except the smell of Mick was everywhere. It wasn't the erotic scent of the man but a comforting safe scent. It was relaxing, like walking into a place not connected with the real world. Adding to the sense of unreality was the darkness, Mick turned on only one small lamp instead of the brighter lights in the room.

Now that they were here, Mick wasn't sure he wanted to continue. There was a fragile vulnerability to the other man that he wanted to protect and that desire over rode any other unfulfilled needs. He reached up and stroked Toshi's hair back from his face, letting his fingers linger on that too warm skin.

"You're sure about this?"

Toshi only nodded.

It would have been easy to move right to the exposed neck but that wasn't Mick's style. He might have slept around but he prided himself on being a good lover and, frankly, he enjoyed the build up play before sex almost as much as he enjoyed the actual act. This time it went deeper, this time he wanted to be careful and see to it every touch, every kiss was enjoyed by them both.

As he leaned in to kiss the other man's lips he slid a hand back, under the long weight of hair to cradle the back of Toshi's neck. He felt the round disc implant under the skin, felt the rough, newly healed spot of skin in the center and the tension in the muscles around it all. His other hand he rested lightly on the joint where shoulder met neck and again felt the too tense muscles under his hands.

So he kissed the lips that brushed against his own gently, softly. They lingered like that for long

moments, Mick demanded nothing. It was only when Toshi moved the gentle kisses deeper and made the moment more demanding that he took the embrace back to the levels before. It was here, in the familiar, that the tension slowly eased from the body under his hands.

Then, and only then, did Mick let his hands trail along that sensitive column. Gently he mapped out the contours, the little dip behind the ears, the corded muscles. He felt the pulse under the too thin skin and the sharp point of the chin. Very carefully and with a touch as light as a feather, he dipped his fingers across that protected hollow. With all the sensitivity he could muster he traced the edges of the bone, sliding into the soft depression and his care was rewarded. Toshi moaned into the kiss, the hands that had been grasping at Mick's shoulders went weak.

Carefully, he slid his hand up the back of that long neck and cradled the back of the other man's head, only then did Mick pull away from that hungry, demanding mouth. He kissed in feather soft brushes over Toshi's face, down to his jaw line, then back to the ear hidden under a fall of black silk. When his teeth nipped the earlobe Toshi's breath hitched in his lungs and he moaned again, softer this time but with a new level of urgency Mick hadn't heard before.

He let his mouth explore. Nipping, licking, kissing, sucking on the ear, brushing his lips to the flesh below it, tracing the hollow behind it. The skin he suckled gently was too warm but not fevered, he nipped at the pulse in the side of the neck. The nip drew an instant reaction, Toshi hissed, his breath caught and his head lolled to the side inviting further contact. The display of that long neck was one of the most erotic sights Mick had ever seen and his only regret was how low the lighting was.

Inch by inch he worked his way across the flesh displayed for him, testing, exploring, seeking the most sensitive spots in an already hypersensitive field. By the time he reached the juncture where neck joined shoulder Toshi was frozen in his arms. His body an odd mix of languid, fluid lines and tense desire. Then he was working his way forward, moving with purpose to the sensitized center.

When he reached the end of the collarbone he'd been nipping at Mick paused to glance upward. Toshi's hair was tussled, his too large eyes were squinted shut, his mouth hung open panting for breath. He waited until the lack of further contact sunk in and Toshi's crystal eyes opened as mere crescent slits before he slowly extended his tongue. While the other man watched he lowered his head back to the neck, dragging the wet heat of his tongue along the outer rim of the hollow. Toshi couldn't see the action, Mick's head was in the way, but he saw the movement, saw the source and his whole body shuddered in need.

It was teasing, it was cruel, it was delicious. "Please," he heard himself whisper. "More, please,"

The voice, normally so controlled, so careful, turned now to a rough scratchy whisper, shot along Mick's nerves and almost forced him to give in. He chuckled warmly, keeping his lips in contact with the hot skin knowing the vibrations would be an added level of stimulation.

"Not yet." He murmured.

He felt Toshi swallow hard at the denial, felt the whimper buried in the back of his throat more than heard it. He used the hand at the back of Toshi's neck to roll his head to the other side and expose the untouched side of his neck. Slowly he worked his way back the opposite collarbone, back to the untouched junction of shoulder and neck. In spite of his body's screaming needs he worked this side of the neck as slowly and carefully as he had the first. Moving with care up the strong muscles and tendons. Licking in wet lines along the pulse, nibbling on the jaw line, teasing the shell of the ear.

Then back down the jaw line to the point of the chin. He bite it, scraping his teeth along the bone but not hard enough to hurt. Not as hard as he sometimes could bite during foreplay, during sex. This was only meant as a subtle counterpoint, soft lips, wet tongue, sharp teeth, all working in

concert to keep nerve endings snapping. Both of his hands were at the back of the head now, fingers buried in the soft hair, he tilted the head to the most vulnerable of angles, straight back.

The full length of the front of the neck was exposed and Mick would have been blind or stupid to miss the sudden tension that swept the once slack body. When he looked, those eyes were open and unfocused, the lips he'd found such pleasure in kissing were pressed firmly shut.

Mick kissed under the point of chin as gently as he could before speaking. "I don't want to hurt you, tell me to and I'll stop."

The body in his arms shuddered and then a long sigh escaped the tightly sealed lips. Mick kept the gentle kisses raining down on the sensual spots under the other man's chin, neither retreating nor moving forward until he received an answer.

Toshi's answer came both verbally and bodily. "I don't want to stop." He whispered, hating feeling so exposed and vulnerable and yet more turned on than he'd ever been before. His arms caught Mick's waist and pulled their lower bodies together, hips pressing into hips, hard arousals rubbing together through rough fabric, legs entwined. With his lower body braced, he not only bent his head back into the supportive hands but he gave into the desire to arch his entire back. From waist to head he was a single bowed invitation that was quickly accepted.

The swath of flesh down the center of Toshi's neck became the target. The area he'd ignored before now received total focus. As his mouth worked its way downward, the body he held relaxed. When he nipped at the adam's apple the soft moaning returned. Slowly he teased his way down until his breath alone was brushing across the so far ignored hollow. The cool air across the heated skin pulled a hissed breath from Toshi.

One of the hands holding to his waist disappeared and Mick glanced up. Toshi used the hand to cover his mouth, to try to hold in the moans and whimpers he couldn't control. It was something Mick would have stopped ordinarily but tonight, with so much having already been accomplished, he'd let Toshi hide at least a little bit. Later, when they'd grown a little more comfortable, he'd pull that hand away and free all the delicious sounds waiting to get out.

He bent his head back down and this time, as his tongue traced the depth and breadth of that so very sensitive spot, Toshi's muffled whimpers peaked and his knees collapsed. Mick caught the slender body with ease but it forced him to stop the careful attention he'd been lavishing. Toshi clung to his shoulders, gasping for breath, unable to stand and still he tried to arch backward.

Mick backed them up until Toshi's knees hit the edge of the bed. The limp form didn't protest being lowered down and Mick followed him. His knee slid those long legs apart and he settled comfortably between them. Toshi lay where he'd been placed, half hanging off the edge of the bed, his spine still arching and his head lolled back to expose the center length of his neck. He was beyond thought, it was only the embarrassment at making such noises that had him covering his mouth.

There was the comforting weight of Mick's body pressed along his, the scent of the man mixed with the scent of desire and need. Toshi was lost and when that very talented mouth returned to its sweet torture, he knew he was losing control. Each moment tore away a little more of his sense of self, each heartbeat melted him a little further into a creature of need.

"Mick," he gasped out. "Mick, please, oh god."

"I like hearing you call my name."

That hadn't helped and Toshi groaned. "Mick, I, oh, no, oh we should stop, oh god."

Mick stopped but he stayed a hairbreadth away from that hot skin. "Do you want me to stop?"

The question required a little too much thought for what he was really capable of at the moment. "No," he admitted. "But we should."

"Why?" Mick kissed that sensitive hollow again and delighted at how the body beneath his bucked upward.

"Because,"

"Why?"

"Because," Toshi had to swallow hard and try to remember how to put thoughts into words. "Because I can't stay like this." That didn't even make sense to him.

Mick stopped and stretched out so he was eye to eye with the half breed. He stroked the damp hair back from the lovely face. "It's okay to feel good."

The gentle touch, the careful words gave Toshi a touchstone to ground himself upon. He opened his eyes and fell into concerned hazel. "I don't want to hurt you."

Mick swooped down and planted a kiss on the end of Toshi's nose. "You heard Samson, I'm a slut, you can't hurt me. Remember our game, you can do anything you want to me."

A bitter loneliness, cold emptiness, settled into those hazel eyes but under it was a hunger that stole Toshi's breath. It was a need to match his own. There was a challenge that spoke to all that Toshi was keeping locked away.

Mick had no warning. Toshi arched up under him and suddenly he found himself flipped, sprawled out on his back with Toshi straddling across his hips. Slender hands slid up his arms and clamped tightly to his wrists but Mick didn't fight them when they pulled his hands above his head. He let Toshi place them and didn't move a muscle when the firm grip disappeared, not sure if it was a request for submission or simply a way of making himself feel more secure, knowing Mick had to behave and not touch with his hands tucked away. Frankly, he didn't care, the position was vulnerable and, impossibly, making him even harder than he had been.

Toshi put his hands on the strong shoulders and leaned forward. He hovered above Mick staring down at the so carefully controlled face below him. "I can do anything I want?"

Those normally cold eyes were aflame and in the crystal blue depth was something predatory. Mick found he could only nod, words wouldn't form. The nod made Toshi grin and that look, so different than the day to day expression he wore, made Mick lick his lips in either desire or fear.

Toshi kept his weight where it was, on his knees which were pressed tight to the sides of Mick's hips and on his hands which pressed most of his weight down on his shoulders. He kept his body in as little contact with Mick's as he could manage, trying to regain some control when all he wanted to do was strip the other man naked and fuck him until he screamed.

Instead, he flipped his hair so the black curtain of it fell across Mick's shoulder and lowered his head down. Very carefully, feeling those eyes on him, he surrendered and let instinct rule. He drew his face across Mick's neck, inhaling slowly, deeply, taking in the scent of lust, Mick, and his own mark.

He paused by Mick's ear but didn't touch it. "I like the way you smell with me on your skin." He whispered, the words would have shammed him at any other time. Now, in the dim bedroom, they were okay to utter.

Mick's breath shuddered. His hands clenched up into fists. His arms trembled with the desire to

move but he stayed very still. Part of him knew they should stop, part of him was frightened of what would happen next. The part of him that made the final choice was the side that desperately needed whatever interaction he could find with this strange man.

Toshi scented him again, this time drawing himself down ward. The tip of his nose occasionally bumped against Mick's neck, his collarbone, his throat almost in a nuzzle. Down he went until below his eyes was the hard outline of an erect nipple raising the fabric of the dress shirt. He didn't think, he just acted and let his head dip down so he could nuzzle that hungry spot.

The contact was light but Mick jumped underneath him. Toshi liked that reaction so he slid his face along that nub again and, again, Mick twitched, fighting his invisible, mental, restraints. It was too much and Toshi gave in to one of his fantasies. He opened his mouth and sucked in that hard spot. Letting the fabric grow wet and abrasive before he swirled his tongue over it.

Mick's whole body jerked but there was no direction to it. "Oh my God!" He wasn't sure if he was trying to pull away from the contact or press tighter against it. His cock ached now, throbbed and he thrust mindlessly upward looking for any contact but Toshi's body was just too far out of reach. When his hips settled back down and that wet mouth left his chest he whimpered and didn't care.

Slowly, Toshi nuzzled back to Mick's throat only he didn't kiss or nip the flesh. His sensitive lips found the top button at the collar and pulled it into his mouth. The sharp point of his teeth did the rest. He bit down and the threads snapped with a popping sound that filled the room. Below him, Mick watched as he turned his head to the side and carelessly spit the button across the room. He nuzzled his way to the next button and that one too was severed and cast aside.

By the time he reached the button over Mick's naval, the strong man was nearly sobbing from his desire and his restraint. Toshi mouthed the fabric over that flat, strong stomach and using only his mouth, pulled the shirt out of Mick's pants. With it bunched around his stomach, he bite off the last buttons, caught the side of the shirt in his teeth and peeled it back.

He was disappointed at finding the cotton t-shirt underneath but the sight of Mick dissolved the disappointment. The white cotton, clinging to the tight, hard body, heaving up and down with each panted breath, was more erotic than bare flesh would have been. It was another layer to tease, to unwrap. It reminded him of just how far he wanted to go tonight and set the boundary.

Toshi slid his hands down from those straining shoulders and along the sharp plains of ribs. Across the flat of the stomach and up, he let the tips of his fingers tease the begging nipples but only tease them. He lowered his mouth back down and properly tormented both hard nubs under the white cotton. He kissed up to the other man's neck and with ever more rough kisses, nipped and teased the skin until the fair color flushed red.

The shirt slid easily upward and Toshi tangled it along those upraised arms, wrapping them up in the now ruined shirt. Once he was sure Mick was almost to his breaking point, he slid his body hard against the humans. Mick cried out and his legs fell apart without having to be directed, welcoming Toshi to lay fully between them and fully on top of him. It was more than he could have hoped for and he thrust his hips down, hard, against the hips below his. It was a rough stroke, hard and long but Mick's mouth parted in a long, silent moan and his hips raised up to savor the pressure along his aching body.

"Mick," Toshi whispered, burying his face in the man's neck. It was a way to hide, because he'd never be able to speak the way he needed to if Mick was watching him. "I've been fantasizing about you since almost the first day I met you."

The words pulled out a moan and the hips below his tried to raise up but Toshi was controlling this and they gained little friction.

"Do you want to know a little about my fantasies?"

Mick wanted to answer that yes, he'd like to hear them if Toshi felt comfortable sharing. He wanted to tell the other man that he too had been plagued by ceaseless dreams and sudden daydreams about him. What he managed to get out was a strangled, single word. "Please."

"I have a fantasy about you, on your knees, sucking me off." The words normally would have made him uncomfortable but now they turned him on as much as they were turning on the body below him. He gave in and let his body go, the thrusts downward against the other man were light at first, teasing. "Sometimes, it's not so nice," he whispered and the dry humping grew harder and more demanding. "Sometimes I fantasize about just telling you to shut up and open your mouth. Grabbing your hair, shoving myself down your throat and using you."

It was talk that should have been like ice water on Mick but instead, to Toshi's surprise the body below his arched hard. One of his legs wrapped around Toshi's hips and pulled the other man down against him even harder.

"I fantasize about slipping into this room at night. Waking you up slowly with my hands and mouth. Filling your veins with venom so even the lightest of touches feels a thousand times stronger. Than, taking you slowly. Sliding in you so softly, inch by inch, taking you so gently. I dream of what it would be like to have you that way, for hours."

He reached between their hips as he whispered and his hand slid past his own arousal toward the twin below him. It would be so easy to rub himself a few times and come but he knew what he wanted, he wanted to feel Mick come first, he wanted to come with the smell of release heavy in the room. His sensitive fingers traced the hard, throbbing bulge and began to rub, squeeze it, in time to the hard rubbing of their hips. Mick threw his head back and his entire body writhed, his hands gripped into the bed and the shirt tangled around his arms made a ripping sound. He was gasping but no sound came out.

"But than, I fantasize about coming into your office in the middle of the afternoon. Forcing you face down on your desk, tearing your pants open and just fucking you. Hard, fast, gripping your hips so tightly it will leave bruises. Pounding into you with such force the edge of the desk will bruise your stomach." Confessing that fantasy almost carried him over the edge and from the short, gasping whine that escaped Mick's throat it had the same effect on the other man.

"More, Mick, I want you to do all that to me as well."

That was too much. Mick thought he was going to die, the words hit his brain and traveled to his cock and the world shattered. He thrust up from the bed with enough force that for a moment he was suspended on his shoulders. Then he was coming, and it didn't stop, he fell off the edge of the world and kept falling. The shirt around his arms ripped and he didn't notice. His whole body was consumed in unspeakable pleasure and he fell back on the bed, his arms wrapped around Toshi's shoulders, his body exhausted, shuddering and with a hot wet spot growing on the fabric of his pants.

Mick held the man above him close, he could feel the warm hand that had stroked him so easily to complication was now working his own arousal. Toshi was buried along his neck, moaning softly, his hips pressing down in rhythmic thrusts, teetering on the brink of falling into the same consuming orgasm that Mick had just survived.

The moans took on a pained, almost desperate sound. It was a sound Mick understood, he knew the other man was almost there but he couldn't quite slip over the edge. With anyone else he'd just brush their hand aside and replace it with his own, or he'd roll them over and let his mouth slip them over the edge. This wasn't anyone else, he hadn't been invited and was now very limited in what help he could offer.

He pulled the man tighter against him. "Come for me," the words wrung out a louder, just as desperate moan. "Come for me, Toshi, I want to feel you come, come for me." He whispered and the soft demand was enough.

Toshi bucked and tried to bury himself against the body below him. He wanted to scream, to call out, but he swallowed it and the sound came out in whimpered whines. It was a shuddering breaking, a hundred thousand times better than any of his own fantasy driven explorations. Strong arms held him steady but didn't restrain him and it went on into eternity.

Then his breath was slowing, his body became more steady. Mick was still holding him close, stroking back sweat damp hair from his head. He lay there, exhausted, vulnerable, exposed, wrapped in the warmth of another body and the heavy scent of sex and floated on a haze of contentment he'd never felt before. This was right, this was where he belonged. He could have stayed there, unmoving, forever.

Mick kissed the side of the dark head he could reach, Toshi's face still buried along his neck. "You okay?" He whispered when the other man hadn't spoken or moved and long moments had passed.

Toshi sighed and drew a long, slow breath. "Yeah." He whispered out so Mick wouldn't worry but he had no intentions of moving.

That quiet confirmation removed the last concern from Mick's mind and let him surrender to the heavy relaxation covering him. He wasn't in any rush to have Toshi move and as long as the other man wanted to stay tucked against him, he was going to allow it. Idly, he stroked the long hair into neat lines and just held on.

For as close as they were becoming, they weren't lovers and for as well as Toshi had slept last night, snuggled on the sofa, he couldn't sleep where he was laying. Bit by bit he began to stir until he was pulled away enough to face Mick. The sight of the other man almost had him snuggle back in. Mick's hair was sticking out in every direction and his lips were still red and a little puffy, his eyes were heavy and the lines of careful control and cold detachment he normally wore on his face had melted to show the man underneath.

It made Toshi smile, softly, warmly and it crinkled up his eyes. He leaned down and gently kissed those lips before pulling away. "I'm going to go."

"No, stay."

"I should go. Get some sleep, what I said, I meant, I," it was so much more difficult to speak now that the passion was spent. "I want you to think about it with a clearer head."

"Toshi,"

"No, think about it some. I'm sorry about the shirt,"

Mick laughed and reached up to caress the worried face. Toshi was slipping back into his habit of thinking too much, back into the restrained unhappy man he was day to day. "I'm not."

That brought the secretive, sexy grin back to Toshi's face. "Anyway, I'll replace it."

Mick waved the offer off. The last thing on his mind was one shirt.

"Get some sleep, you've got that meeting tomorrow. I'll leave the bike's keys out if you want to take it."

That surprised Mick, the sweet little motorcycle was obviously Toshi's secret pleasure. "Thanks."

Toshi leaned down and kissed those lips once more, softly, before sliding away. He was out the bedroom door without looking back, afraid if he saw Mick sprawled out across the bed he wouldn't be able to leave. When the outer door clicked shut, Mick collapsed back on to the bed, almost too happily spent to shower and change for bed.

The Lines

Part Nine

Toshi was almost three hours late getting to his office the next morning. Somehow, not surprisingly, he forgot to set his alarm and he was tired enough that he slept without waking. Slept soundly, with neither dream nor nightmare to disturb him and he woke feeling rested and renewed.

Since he was already late and didn't really care to rush, he took his time. He skipped the faster shower and opted for the more relaxing bath. Washing his hair and skin off on the small stool before clipping the long length of hair up and plunging into the scolding hot water. He soaked for a few moments before climbing out to repeat the process. Three times he washed off and climbed into the almost unbearably hot water. When he finally dried off to dress his skin was red and every muscle felt as soft as butter.

He wandered into the office late with a mug of tea in his hand. Alec didn't even glance up from the paperwork spread out before him.

"Late night?"

Toshi grinned. "Something like that."

"Good movie?"

"Good enough."

"Mick took your bike."

"I told him he could."

Now Alec glanced up and studied his friend before he too smiled. "You're in love with him."

Toshi snorted. "Please, we don't believe in love."

"Believe in it or not, you're in love with him."

"Why? Because I let him take the bike?"

"And the stupid grin you're wearing but yeah, because of the bike. You let Benny do anything he wants to the car but he's not even allowed to wash the bike. Yet you let Mick ride it without you, very odd. He left a note for you, it's on your desk."

He wanted to run and snatch it up but he kept his composure and approached the sealed envelope with no more excitement than he would any other. "I let him take the bike because he looks good on it, it's impressive as all get out and he's a good rider. If this doctor fellow has any attraction to Mick he'll be tripping over his feet to answer his questions once he sees him on that bike."

Toshi's sharper hearing heard Alec's muffled laughter but his focus was on the note and his mood was forgiving. Mick's careful hand writing was across the front of the envelope he slit open, in tight small print he'd written Toshi's name.

Inside, neat as if he'd written with a ruler under his hand, Mick had left a message that held far more meaning than the mere words.

"Toshi,

Regarding our conversation of last night concerning future interests, I wanted to state that upon further consideration and very level headed thought, I must inform you that I believe I am up to such a challenge. I'm sorry to tell you, you've failed to scare your body guard off with such bold ideas. I look forward to implementing the aforementioned ideas and to the next opportunity to further explore them.

A.R. McKale"

The formal, direct note could have been about a new security code or a new means of making his travel safer but there would be no mistaking, on Toshi's part, the real meaning. Mick was protecting him even in the words he wrote. But, oh those words! It caused his heart to skip a beat and he re-read the simple lines just to make sure he hadn't misunderstood.

"Good news?"

It took effort not to smile. "Well, it's not bad news." His eyes fell on the growing stack of work on his desk and that helped chase the stupid grin from his face. "Who do I have to bribe to get out of work today?"

That snapped Alec's head up. "You really want to take the day off?" Toshi never took the day off, ever. He did something everyday, seven days, non-stop for years. It was the same schedule his father kept, as if by following his father's example, somehow, it would earn his approval. What Toshi didn't remember or his father for that matter, was that unlike the older human, Toshi wasn't allowed to travel. Unlike his human father, his work wasn't sharing drinks and conversation with other powerful persons or attending formal functions, or even, traveling across the globe to secure new avenues of business. Toshi's work was the same in office numbers and paper work, day in and out with no change. It was enough to make Alec snap and he liked paperwork.

Toshi sighed. "I do but I won't. I wish I could get a travel pass, even a few days away would be nice."

"We could apply again."

It was a pipe dream and they both knew it. It was almost impossible for an I/S living outside the camps to get a travel pass. If there was any history of shine addiction, the possibility went from slim to none, no matter who the I/S was or how much money they had. It was a leash and one that Toshi rarely complained about.

He forced a small smile that was bitter to see. "It's okay, where would I go?" Most vacation resorts refused service to I/S and it wasn't like Toshi had dozens of friends around the world to visit.

"RI owns a few islands."

"Come on, let's get this mess sorted."

The bike almost purred beneath Mick as he slid in and out of the quiet city streets. The sun wasn't up yet, the first pinkish rays of dawn were coloring the eastern sky. The earliest of commuters were about and the night shift workers were heading home but most of the city was still tucked in warm beds. It was a nice time of day, before things took on such a crowded, depressed grey feel.

There wasn't much open so early but like in any city there would always be twenty four hour diners. This one was close to the Metro stop but nowhere near the city morgue nor the sort of neighborhood a city medical examiner with a wife and kids would live in. Mick guessed it was on Dr. Soung's Metro line and most likely a place he stopped at for an early morning supper before going home to sleep. He pulled the bike into the diner's small parking lot and shut it off, hoping the alarm would be good enough to protect it and not wanting to have to explain any damage to Toshi.

Inside the diner was mostly empty. The booths that held customers were clustered tables of workmen and women, sipping strong coffee. One or two tables had the diner requirement of the all night party drunks, pressed against each other and laughing loudly. None of them concerned him, it was the dark skinned man sitting alone in a back booth, smoking, that caught his attention.

"Det. McKale, it's good to see you again." Soung's English was unaccented. His night black eyes scanned the diner for watching faces as he rose to his feet and offered his hand to his guest.

Mick smiled, brightly and not at all ashamed to play up the man's quiet preferences to his best interests. "Dr. Soung, please, just call me Mick, I'm not a cop anymore."

They slid into the booth and Soung took another drag from his cigarette. "Nasty affair, can't say as I blame you for taking the bait they offered." He exhaled as the waitress came to take their orders but all Mick wanted was coffee. "Juice, and a bowl of oatmeal with raisins please." But Soung's attention was on his company not the pretty waitress.

Mick waited until the woman faded away before speaking. "I didn't want to cause my family any extra embarrassment."

"Tell me about it, my mother still tells people I work as a medic not a medical examiner. Too much like a doctor she says, and that I work with the dead? What would people say, it's ghoulish."

"My family was the opposite, they were shocked I wanted to be a cop. I think we both understand about not risking more than we have to when it comes to protecting our families."

Soung stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. "Best you got out while you could. A third of all the dead cops we get are shot in the back, I didn't want to see you in my office that way." He gestured with the lit brand. "You don't mind? Nasty habit but I smoke when I'm nervous and I've been nervous all night."

Mick waved it off. "I don't mind." The coffee came and Soung nearly jumped back startled. He covered the motion by sucking another drag. "Thanks for meeting with me."

Soung hunched over and rubbed the back of his neck. "I always admired you." He lowered his voice to whisper. "You're out. You don't hide where you're from. You never hid that you were clean. That's one of the reasons they wanted you out, you know, they don't trust anyone not on the take."

Mick sipped the coffee, it was bitter in his mouth. "Yeah, I've learned that."

"I never wanted to be like this. I thought I'd be making a difference, I mean come on, look at me, I'm not really hero material like you. I just wanted to help guys like you do what's right and now here I am, as dirty as the rest but damn I like my job. I like my life."

Mick tried to smile warmly but it felt fake.

"So, you're working for Ranvier, huh?"

"For now, not Luke Henri but the son, Toshi."

"Yeah, I heard about that bank robbery." Soung's eyes lit up. "You must be amazing when you're working."

"I'm just like you, I only want to make a difference. We just have two different angles we're working."

Soung snorted. "I'm no where near you." He finished his second cigarette and would have lit a third but his oatmeal and juice arrived. "I wasn't really surprised to hear you'd be looking into the Evans murder. I mean she was killed on your old turf."

"I'm not sure it'll lead anywhere but I want to look into it. Do you have anything for me?"

"Do I ever. Officially, the cause of death is listed as cardiac arrest as a complication from surgery."

"But?"

Soung glanced around the diner again before reaching into the booth next to him and under his coat. He slid across the table a small plastic sample vial. "That was supposed to have been destroyed. I found it embedded in one of her wounds."

Mick palmed the vial and discreetly studied it. Inside was a quarter inch long black point, thin and look vaguely like a thorn. "What is it?"

"Damned if I know. I didn't have any real time to study it but I've never seen anything like it. I mean it might be a thorn, I even thought it might be a blackened I/S fang but it wasn't consistent with the wounds." He pushed his oatmeal aside and shook a cigarette out of it's box.

"Do you need this back?"

"No! As far as anyone's concerned nothing's left to contradict the official reports. I'd like it kept that way." His eyes roamed nervously. "I found some odd shit here, Mick, stuff that I don't know what to make of. I shouldn't even be talking to you."

"What kind of odd shit?"

He exhaled in an frightened puff. "At first I thought it was I/S venom, her blood was packed with it, but this is something different, something unknown. At least I don't think it's known, I only have what's in the database to go by, I'm not an expert or anything. I ran it against known toxin profiles. Squat, no hits, nothing, no poisons, no meds, no drugs, not even snake bites match. I sealed some of it up for you, it'll be good in it's carry box for another day." He fished under his coat again and produced a thick, yellow folder. The metal clasp at the top was strained to hold it shut. "I put in there the official reports and what I actually found. I don't know if it'll do you any good but they were really demanding on the official results."

Mick eased the folder off the table and tucked it beside him. "Do you get this a lot?"

"Yeah, we change a lot of the results but normally it's small things."

"Like the trajectory of a bullet so a person's shot in the front not the back?"

"Yeah like that. Never this much, never this different." He shifted in his seat and turned his lighter over and over again between his fingers. "I shouldn't be here. I'm glad to hear you're still doing what's right. I'd be glad to help you out on other cases but this, this smells bad. You know?"

The man wasn't just nervous, he was genuinely frightened. "I'm sure Amanda Evans' family would thank you."

"It's not her family I'm worried about." His dark eyes focused on Mick. "We both know something's are hot enough to burn not only yourself but your whole family."

"Well, maybe this will help cool things off some." Mick pulled a paper from his pocket and slid it across the table.

Soung opened it carefully and frowned at the short list of names and addresses on it. "What's this?"

"Discreet, less public places where a man can go and enjoy the company of others of like mind. The last two are private but if you mention that code name you can get in the door."

Soung's hand was shaking enough that the paper trembled. "I've never heard of any of these."

"If you had, it wouldn't be a safe place for men with families and jobs to relax. You'll have to become another link in the chain of discretion. I think I can trust you to do so."

"You can, I," Soung swallowed and nodded. "Thank you."

Mick dropped some cash on the table and slid from the booth, the fat envelope tucked under his arm. "No, thank you for doing what was right. Just, pace yourself, some of those clubs can be a little, overwhelming." He let the wide smile return but he didn't linger.

He wanted to rip into the envelope like a kid on his birthday but he didn't want to risk it outside the diner. So, Mick dropped the information and small vial into the bike's slender saddle bag before zipping off and away into the increasingly heavy traffic. Inside his skull, his thoughts were buzzing almost as quickly as the bike under him, he needed a secure place, some place private.

The neighborhood around him had changed and when Mick stopped thinking to actually look around he wasn't surprised to find he was back in his old stomping ground. More than that, he was heading for the park, a small green field with a few trees and cheap equipment for local children to play on. Not willing to debate his subconscious mind, Mick eased the bike to a stop along the curb outside the tiny green space. He left the illicit material in the bike's saddle bag and armed the alarm before walking to join the park's solitary occupant.

"Shouldn't you be up in your ivory tower with your prince charming?"

"Morning Andy." Mick slid onto the bench beside his friend.

Andy never looked up from his sketch book. His eyes moved with practiced ease from the rusting hulks of playground equipment that on his paper looked poetic in the morning light. This wasn't the Andy most people saw, dressed in simple, worn jeans and a baggy college sweatshirt the only accessory being the rolled up cuffs and the slender, almost delicate exposed lengths of his wrists and hands. Even his hair was simply brushed out, left to fall in natural waves below his

shoulders. There was no make up, no glitter, no odd colors highlighting his hair. The normal, almost extravagant appearance was stripped away leaving a rather ordinary man, minus the carefully shaped eyebrows.

This was the Andy Mick had become friends with. The one very few people saw. On first glance their circle of friends had shaken their heads at their friendship, the two seemed on surface such polar opposites but most of their friends never saw beyond the masks the two men wore with such casual ease. Andy, for all his bubbly enthusiasm for life often grew melancholy and distant, quite and still and Mick, in private, was far more outgoing and silly than his serious, reserved appearance ever revealed. It was only in stolen, quiet moments like Andy's early morning efforts to catch the right light that the outside world had a chance to see what the friends saw in one another.

"What's wrong?" Andy asked as Mick pulled his legs up, tucking his heels into the edge of the bench and folding his knees almost under his chin. Andy promised he wasn't going to drool, it had been long enough that he'd forgotten, almost, how flexible Mick was.

"Who says anything's wrong?"

Andy didn't glance over but he smiled. "Oh, I must be mistaken, I've only known you forever, fellated you for years and popped your cherry for your sixteenth birthday, I guess I don't know you."

"I'm fine."

"Which is what you always say. You never join me on my never ending quest for morning wood, I mean light, unless something is on your mind. I always ask what's wrong, you say nothing, I say bullshit, you say you're fine. We go in circles for a half hour or more until I can pry out of your pretty head whatever's bothering you. So, let's cut the bullshit and have us just skip to the happy ending." Now he glanced over. "Or should I guess? Hmmm I'm psychic, I see a man, he's about five ten, as slender as me, long black hair, crystal blue eyes to die for, more money than God."

Mick squirmed a little, repositioning himself on the bench but he kept his eyes out over the play ground. "How'd the show turn out?"

"Brilliantly, just like you said it would, now don't change the subject. Did you fuck him?"

Mick prayed he wouldn't blush. "No."

"Than why do you have that look on your face." Andy turned back to his sketching, letting his hands and eyes move in their almost meditative motions.

"What look?"

"That look, the same look you had the first time you fucked me. That evil, please sir I want more, hedonist fuck bunny look."

Any other day, Mick would have laughed. Today, he just sighed. "I haven't slept with him. Well, no I slept with him but it was just sleep."

"He's a tease." Andy wiggled his eyebrows at his sketch.

"Worse, he snuggles."

"Oh my God!" Now Andy did laugh. "That's it, he's too good for you, I want him."

Mick didn't join in. "I really want him, Andy."

It was the serious tone that caused Andy to put his pencils down. "So? What's new."

"What do you think of him?"

"Oh, are you asking for my approval of a new boyfriend?" Andy folded his hands over his heart and had to flutter one hand in front of his face. "I think I might cry."

Mick reached over and lightly punched Andy's arm. "Knock it off."

"Seriously? You really want my thoughts?"

"You're the one that just talks to hear himself speak. If I didn't want to know I wouldn't have asked."

"I'll assume you mean beyond his very high fuckability rating." He leaned forward to look up and over at Mick. "I think he's a gentleman. Which is a change from your normal sort. I think it's a good thing Sal didn't show up because I'm betting he would have knocked him flat. He's reserved but even I could see he was angry when I told him."

"Yes, about that,"

"Tish tosh! It's not like it was a grand secret." He gathered up his pencils and turned back to his sketches. "I think you can trust him." He continued cryptically.

"Trust him with what?"

"With yourself, sweetheart."

Andy had a way of giving advice and then pulling away. He didn't really care if anyone ever listened to him so when he'd said what he'd wanted to say, he pulled back. Mick was observant enough to see it, he saw the way his friend's focus grew a little sharper on his work and he knew there was nothing left to say. It wasn't a coldness, on the contrary, it was in the silent, tightly focused moments that Mick felt the closest to his friend.

"I need to look over some papers, mind the company?"

"So long as you don't bore me with your tedious cops and robbers bullshit, no." The sharp, quick witted mocking was back in Andy's voice but the mouth that spilled it out was smiling.

"Promise."

Mick hurried home but the heavier traffic snarled his efforts and his temper. By the time the elevator opened to the penthouse's main doors he was ready to strangle someone if he didn't get something done. Toshi's office door was open and he slipped inside catching neither man by surprise.

"Alec?" Mick found he couldn't look at Toshi, not without staring or drooling or pouncing or something else equally embarrassing.

"Yes?"

"How soon can we get something to my family?"

Alec slid a glance to Toshi before he answered. "By late tonight, if you can have it ready in the next half hour."

Mick hit the door frame lightly, pleased at something getting done properly. "Perfect, thanks!"

Alec put in the call to the courier service and wasn't surprised when Toshi brushed past him. Toshi, who only a few months ago was going all day and barely speaking, was now seeking out contact with someone else. The combination of retreat and advance the two men were sharing was engaging them both and Alec was as tickled as a schoolgirl.

Toshi found Mick's door open and he was leaning over his computer terminal. His motions stopped when he caught the shadow of movement in his doorway but the distracted distance faded and Mick waved Toshi inside.

"Hang on a second." Mick hit a button on his keyboard and a low beeping escaped the computer system. "I'm connecting to home."

"Mick, it might not be secure. I can't promise that the Committee doesn't have these rooms monitored."

"Oh, about that." Mick pulled open a drawer and fished out a small box. Inside it was a dozen or so small electronic things, wires and disks, all unidentifiable to Toshi. "I've pulled these out of the rooms. I didn't think you'd mind. I sweep for them about once a week. They only showed back up after the Committee left so your staff is secure."

"They were monitoring me."

Mick shrugged. "It was all pretty passive, thermal that sort of thing but a couple of them could have been used for audio. I spiked a feedback so if anyone was listening, they should be deaf now."

The computer beeped a different tone and Mick held up his hand.

"Amun? Twice in as many weeks, I'll about fall over." The man's voice was warm but he spoke with a slow, careful manner. Now that Mick was listening for it, he had to agree with Toshi, Papa Mike did sound stoned.

"It's only been a week, Papa Mike."

"Oh? Has it? Hmm, I was finishing up a project." His voice died off as if the sentence explained how he'd lost such track of time. "Your I/S friend, is he well?"

Mick glanced up and locked his eyes with Toshi's. "He's quite fine."

"Good! So if you aren't calling about him, what's on your mind, son?"

"I'm sending you some files."

"Ah, hence the secure line."

"Yeah."

"Yes, not yeah, don't butcher the language."

Mick almost ruined the scolding by laughing. "Of course, Papa Mike, I'm sorry."

"Files are here, this is peculiar."

"I thought as much but you know how weak I am in organic chemistry."

"Nonsense, your scores were acceptable. It was only that you didn't apply yourself." The line was silent for a moment. "Where did you get this?"

"Can you look over those findings for me, Papa Mike? The doctor that ran the tests is competent but this looked a little beyond his field of study."

"Of course, I'd be able to learn more if I could have actual samples."

"They'll be in your hands by tonight. "

"Oh? Excellent. Give me a day or so to run some tests and I'll call when I know more. First rule of research?"

"Without a doubt. Thanks, Papa Mike."

"Of course, of course, just take care of yourself."

"I will."

"Talk soon."

The line beeped again as the connection was severed. Mick moved to box up the samples but his eyes lingered on Toshi. "Papa Mike."

"He still sounds stoned." Toshi smiled softly. "What's the first rule of research?"

"Keep quiet what you learn until it's safe to announce. Honestly, I don't think he's stoned, he's just distracted. Would you mind if I borrow the bike again this afternoon?"

"Did the morning go well?"

"Well enough, it's left more questions than answers. I have to go to the scene, down in the train yards. The bike will be easier to handle down there but I'll understand if you don't want to risk it." Mick tried to keep his concentration on the task at hand and not on the man standing in his office. If he let himself slid into those blue eyes he'd start remembering those whispered fantasies about his desk. Or, worse, he'd start making up new ones about just how useful Toshi's tie would be knotted around wrists instead of carefully tied around his neck.

"No, I don't mind but I'm going with you."

"No, you aren't."

"Yes, I am."

"Toshi, it's the train yards. It's not a safe neighborhood for anyone let alone Luke Henri Ranvier's son."

"Maybe not but it'll be perfectly safe for Sakamoto Yasunari's nephew."

Mick frowned. "Okay, but if I think there'll be trouble I'm taking you out of there."

"Deal."

As a cop, Mick had often been given cases that overlapped or occurred in the train yards. It was an area most of the other officers didn't want to work and one where Mick felt he could make a

real difference. He'd approached it as he would have any other district and didn't mind that half the people he dealt with were I/S.

For all the police presence in the train yards, they were mostly for show. It had been nearly fifteen years since the last I/S trying to slip out of the camps had been shot and killed and fifteen years since the camps had officially been deregulated and movement allowed. The train yards had been a buffer zone around the camps for decades before and after the camps had been opened. It still wasn't clear if the quarter mile wide strip around the camp belonged to the sovereignty of the camps or to the country around it and likely would be years before it was settled.

Because in later years I/S were able to roam the train yards in relative safety from the Committee's gunman the yards had become a place to co-mingle. From almost the start, it was a place of black market trading, a way to ease things into the camps and sometimes things out. It was where the first sex clubs opened and where the I/S not willing to be owned sold themselves on the streets. It became seedy and dangerous and that very reputation drew people to the train yards. It was a place where anything could be bought or sold, lives could be lost and no one, not even the police, gave it any attention.

That was until some of the upper end of the cities more trendy took a fancy to shopping the rag tag I/S market place. Part farmers market, part flea market, one section of train yards slowly became civilized. Humans began to set up stalls to sell produce and wares to I/S and human alike, and while the market's stands remained segregated, that small corner became slightly civilized.

And suddenly the police were criticized for turning such blind eyes to the violence that lurked beyond the market. Which made at least a showing of law and order a requirement and ended up with very few officers being assigned to cover the rough district, but not smother it.

Mick had often felt he was the only one to actually care. He'd grown frustrated at seeing I/S being beaten and assaulted and told to do nothing about it while being forced to investigate a human who had his wallet lifted while seeking out a whore. It was only his conviction that change happened slowly and it took good men doing a good effort to effect change that kept his faith in tact. Bit by bit, the I/S he encountered trusted him a little more and he was certain that by the time he retired, if not sooner, he'd have really made the place, if not safer, more fair. Which was a rosy, idealistic thought and not consistent with what the rest of the force wanted from him.

For all his faith in the better nature of the average person, the almost strangle hold he held to the concept of equality, Mick went to the train yards armed. With Toshi along, he wore not only his hand gun tucked snugly along his side but a second, smaller pistol tucked into his coat pocket. He'd keep his eyes open and his senses alert and not let anyone get behind him if he could avoid it. He knew which toes to not step on and which feathers must remain unruffled.

Toshi complicated things. Yes, the man had proven he knew how to handle himself in a fight and for all the big words of being raised by the Sakamoto family, Mick wasn't laying good odds that the other man had any more street sense than a child. He'd been raised by a powerful family, tucked away and safe and now he'd spent his adult life tucked away and safe. It didn't seem fair tossing the man into the train yards but if he was going, Mick was going to see he stayed safe.

"You're not wearing that."

Toshi glanced down at his clothes. He'd taken off the tie but that was it. "Why not?"

"You're going to stick out like a sore thumb." Mick had changed into black khakis and a plain blue t-shirt and knew he'd still be over dressed for most of the train yards inhabitants.

"There's no hiding who I am, not to the I/S community. If I dress any more casually they'll think

you kidnapped me. Trust me.” Toshi eyed the other man, his coat in his hand but for the moment standing in the well cut black pants and plain t-shirt. The black leather of the shoulder harness framing the strength in his body. If his hazel eyes weren’t so stubbornly set, so coldly logically, Toshi would have considered distracting the other man.

Mick just shook his head and rubbed at his eyes. “We’re going to get shot. I just know it.” He grumbled to himself as he pulled on his coat.

By the time Mick guided the bike into the outskirts of the train yards, the morning market crowd had faded away and the night illicit crowd had yet to appear. The barren quarter mile strip was surrounded by the rusting link fence that still had sections of razor wire curling about the tops. A few checkpoint buildings remained, gutted now and empty and scattered across the empty landscape were the makeshift small buildings tossed up by the merchants. Closer to the concrete wall that encircled the camp, old factories and warehouses had been converted into clubs.

The spot he was looking for was by the train tracks. Originally, it had been a means of transporting the first generation I/S and in later days it had been an easy way of shipping in food to those forcibly quarantined. Now, it was an open air market of a different kind. There had been no money in refurbishing the old storage buildings and processing centers. They’d crumbled, torn apart for useful parts and now served as skeletons of their former selves. The corners provided dark shadows for tricks to be turned and drugs bought and the husks of buildings provided a meager shelter for those that worked the district and couldn’t afford better.

For all it’s squalor, it was perhaps the only place where I/S and human worked, lived and survived side by side. It was more integrated than any other place. Glued together with poverty, addiction, and sex, the levels of race blurred in an impossible effort to just survive another day. The adults didn’t get to Mick, they may have had limited choices but they had choices. It was the kids that hurt, always human, they scurried around the city like rats and clustered in small groups in the train yards.

There were no street signs, no names to the buildings, no lasting landmarks to mark location by and Mick had to stop twice to use GPS to find the spot of Amanda Evans’ assault. Not surprisingly, when he rolled up the area was empty and in a spot known for it’s prostitution. He kicked down the stand and turned the engine off. He pulled his helmet off and left it propped on the bike.

After checking the coordinates again he found the spot near a make shift building made of cast off wood and tarps. “A newer invention, a place to do business in.” Mick waved to the building. “Generally small groups, some with pimps some not, put one up and share the maintenance.” He pulled out a flashlight and began carefully searching the ground near the building.

Toshi was slower off the bike. The train yards hadn’t changed much. The same dull gray buildings sat empty. The same sex clubs huddled together inside their plain concrete walls. It brought back sharp memories and not happy ones. Even the smell of the air was the same, stale dust, decay, hopelessness with undercurrents of urine and blood tied together with fear.

That scent made him cock his head to the side and inhale deeper. His eyebrows crinkled up but the scent wasn’t something he could pin down. “Mick?”

“Hmmm?”

Toshi let the scent guide him. He moved closer to the make shift building. “Where was she attacked?”

Mick glanced up and froze at the distracted look that met him. “Over here, why? What do you see?”

"I don't see anything." Toshi answered sharply but took a deep breath. "It's a scent."

"Okay. For the nostrily challenged among us, what kind of scent?"

Toshi held out his hand and closed his eyes. It was elusive, fading and like a voice in another room, difficult to sort out.

"Toshi?"

"This isn't easy!" Now he did snap.

"Sorry."

"I'm just a half breed. I'm not as good at this as a full blooded." The slight breeze shifted direction and the scent faded. It, at least, gave Toshi a direction and he moved in slow steps toward the fear scent. There was no doubt now, it was coming from the make shift room. He pointed toward the building. "In there."

Mick eyed the room suspiciously. "I don't think you should go in there."

"I won't need to." He moved without fear to pull back the draping tarp. Inside was a plain empty room with a wood skid set on the bare earth and blankets over it. It was just tall enough to stand up in and barely long enough to lay down in. Small, plastic bags, just large enough to hold a few hits of shine, lay scattered around forgotten.

The scents hit him like a sledgehammer. The heavy scent of mold and mildew, dampness from the spring rains was the base but those weren't bad scents, just earthy. Mixed in was an oppressive combination of blood, cum, lust, sweat, pain and shame, the scents of the prostitute's trade. Wrapped around it was the sweet scent of shine, cloying like the sticky fingers of a child, it was faint but fresh. As nauseating as those scents were he would have been okay but the fear scent almost took him to his knees.

Toshi stumbled back from the small building and managed to make it a few feet away before he became violently ill. There were hands on him, holding his hair, grasping his shoulder and it was too much. He lashed out without thought, struggled against the grip and didn't stop thrashing until he'd broken free. The momentum stumbled him forward, the confusion tripped his feet and he fell roughly to the hard packed earth.

"Easy, easy! It's just me!" Mick caught a hold of the other man's face and forced him to look at him. "It's just me."

Toshi's heart felt like it was going to pound out of his chest but his eyes focused on the face. "Mick."

"Yeah." He smiled a little bit, trying to look comforting. "You okay?"

"I think so." Toshi nodded absently. There was a red mark on Mick's temple. He reached and touched it. "Did I?"

Mick just shook his head. "I wasn't fast enough and you pegged me with an elbow. It's nothing, you're sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine." He started to climb back to his feet and dust himself off.

For all his saying he was fine, Mick wasn't buying it. The already wide eyes were impossibly larger, the pupils far too large for the light of the late afternoon but it was how Toshi's hands were shaking that worried him the most. "What happened?"

"The scent, scents, it was just a little strong."

Mick saw the lie.

"There's a fear scent there. It's from an I/S named Tin Tam."

"Fear scent?"

Toshi forced himself to breathe regularly and his eyes blinked fast a few times to clear some of the emotional shock. "Yes, scent's important to us." He forced a weak smile at that but Mick wasn't buying it. "When we're very frightened, we leave a fear scent. It's like a fingerprint. It's distinct, once we catch another person's fear scent we never forget it."

"And it tells you their name?"

"No, it's like a snapshot, you can see their face but if you don't know them it's just a face."

"So you know this Tin Tam fellow?"

Toshi only nodded. "It might not be him. I'm just a half breed but if it's not him it's a close relation."

"You're certain?"

It wasn't a scent he'd ever forget. "Yes, very. For him to be that frightened, he thought his life was at risk."

He would have had to have been a blind man or stupid not to see the fear in Toshi. It made what he asked next even more difficult and he hated himself for it. "How can I find this Tin Tam?"

Those sad, tragic eyes focused on Mick. "I'll take you to him but I get to drive."

The night of Andy's gallery opening, Toshi had proven he was a top class rider and while the idea of racing about didn't worry Mick, he wasn't sorry to see Toshi piloting the bike with more reserve. They didn't go far, back out to the main road and then to the fourth street entrance into the camps.

They rolled past the remains of the rolled razor wire that had once circled the four foot think wall to the two lane check point. It was one of three entrances into or out of the camps, the wide service entrance of the train yard being one of the three. Talk had been going for years of cutting a fourth into the wall but for all the lip service to the idea that the I/S no longer had to be contained, neither side was too willing to open a fourth hole.

What once had been an armed checkpoint now was more like the entrance to a private, gated community. There were no rifles in hands but the Containment Committee members working the gates all wore side arms. The signs warning about restricted access were gone and in their place came warnings of Camp Sovereignty. A slow stream of traffic came and went. Most were delivery trucks running goods into the Camp, the rest were I/S on bicycles. People like Hamada-san that had managed to find work outside the camps.

They only had to wait for two trucks before they rolled up to the checkpoint. The young woman eyed them over and demanded their id's. She looked over Toshi's twice before handing them back.

"See to it you're out before curfew Mr. Ranvier or I'll have to report this." She warned.

Toshi nodded. "I know the rules." He eased the bike away slowly. It was an engrained fear of the checkpoints and the often trigger happy people that worked them. Every I/S had grown up on those stories and none of them took any chances around the checkpoints.

Mick had been inside the Camp walls a few times and this time didn't do much to improve his opinion of the place. It was the worst of public housing, plain, dreary gray buildings stood a universal ten stories high and housed three hundred, two bedroom apartments per building. They clustered together, four around an open square patch of green and covered most of the camp. Tucked in, here and there, were stores, teahouses, bathhouses, restaurants, all the buildings of any city. They'd taken over the remains of the city blocks that had been quarantined, their buildings were older, with more of an eye to style over function. Over the years, every free space had been claimed by squatters or shopkeepers and there was literally almost no room to breath inside the wide concrete walls.

All around them were the wide eyes of the I/S. The street traffic was thin close to the wall and even today with the razor wire buffer zone gone, most still avoided those few yards of ground. As they made their way toward the buildings, the foot and bicycle traffic increased. It was very rare to see another motorcycle and the wide eyes turned their way only to quickly look elsewhere.

It occurred to Mick how out of place he was here. There was only, maybe, a hand full of humans inside the wall at any time. The law that granted the camp sovereignty had been intended to bypass any potential human rights issues but now it granted the camp residents autonomy. If they wanted to, they could hang Mick by his heels and there would be no legal recourse. It was an odd vulnerability, one that he wasn't used to. He watched the faces of the people they passed instead of thinking about it, lost himself in the colorful display of long hair and wide, crystal rainbow eyes.

It didn't take long to navigate the camp, and from Mick's sense of direction they'd moved back toward the train yard entrance. They pulled up beside an older building, not a public works one and Toshi kicked down the stand and turned off the engine. He pulled his helmet off and set it on the bike.

"Why didn't we just come in through the train yards?"

"Because the Committee doesn't allow me to use that entrance. They're more lax over there, they only stop humans so they can't track my movements. Come on."

"But, the bike?"

Toshi smiled thinly. "No one will touch it." He ran a hand over the smooth dark green paint. "The paint job has my family crest worked into it. No one will touch it."

"I can't see anything."

"That's because you have a human's eyes."

He led them around to the front of the building and where a store front or plate glass should have been it was covered in wood. There was no signs out front but a swirling, interwoven pattern was painted around the door frame. Toshi pushed the door open and a blast of light and warm, scented air swept out over them.

The smell was the first thing that told Mick it was a restaurant but it was unlike any that he'd ever been in. The door didn't open into a central room filled with tables but instead let them into an entrance room. The light was dim but warm and inviting. It gave a strong impression of walking into someone's private home, not a public place. He glanced around at the plain, simple decorations. The walls were plain wood but the same elaborate, interwoven design was repeated around the room and over three closed doorways. Under their feet, the plain floor was covered in

simple, woven mats and folded paper mobiles danced in the corners. Music played somewhere and a woman's laughter floated out to them and mixed with the general, distant sounds of muffled people and life.

One of the doors slide open and from the other side a woman joined them. She moved in small, graceful steps and slide the door shut behind her. There was no doubt she was I/S. A long braid fell down her back in a thick rope of pale pink and her wide, silver gray eyes slide from Toshi to Mick and back again. Flowing, multi-hued kimonos hung from her body and she slide with graceful ease to stand in front of them.

"Konichee, Sakura-sama." She said softly as she deeply bowed at the waist to them both.

Toshi bowed back but not as deeply. "Hello, it's okay, he's with me."

She bowed again. "Yes, Sakura-sama."

He returned her bow. "Would you please let Mamita know that I'm here?"

"Yes, Sakura-sama." She bowed again and with careful, measured steps backed away from them before turning and slipping back out the sliding door.

"Where are we?" Mick finally asked.

"It's a teahouse. Our version of one any way, I'm sure it's vastly different than real Asian teahouses. All of the old ways have been adapted. It's one of our strengths."

Mick was saved from answering by the door sliding open again. Only this time it wasn't the younger Succubus but an older woman. Age was difficult to judge on an I/S, they tended to maintain a fairly youthful appearance far longer than a human. From the sheer weight of the woman's personality, Mick guessed she could easily have been the younger woman's mother. Her silver white hair hung loose and flowing down to her waist and her silver eyes added to the wintry appearance. The elaborate Asian kimonos wrapped around her body added color to her paleness.

She moved to almost the exact spot the younger had and stopped. Her bow was as deep as the younger girls. "I am honored, Sakura-sama."

Toshi returned her bow, bowing deeper to her than he had to the younger woman. "It is I that am honored Mamita-san, for the gift of your valuable time."

When she rose from her bow her eyes slid to Mick but she was too polite to say anything.

"It's okay, Mamita-san, he can be trusted."

She snorted lightly and broke the graceful image of a lady she'd been weaving. "No, he's human, no human can be truly trusted but you, Sakura-san, your judgment can be." Her head tilted to the side as if she were listening to a sound only she could hear. "Hmm, I shouldn't be surprised to find you care for the one as cold and as lovely as winter." A smile tugged at her lips. "Your uncle will be pleased to hear you've finally taken a lover, even if he's human."

Mick prayed he wouldn't blush.

Toshi bowed slightly. "I'd prefer if my uncle didn't hear."

"Your uncle hears everything."

"I know."

"I have a room being made ready for you. Would you prefer male or female attendants?" She motioned to one of the closed doors.

"Actually, I'm looking for someone."

Mamita didn't look the slightest surprised. "Ah, so it wasn't my sesame noodles that brought you here after so long an absence?"

"I wish it were. Could you tell me, please, has Tin Tam kept his promise?"

Her spine stiffened. "Of course. He should arrive shortly. Would you like to have him sent back to you when he arrives?"

Toshi bowed. "Thank you, Mamita-san."

"Please," she waved to one of the doors. "Let me show you to a room and have tea sent in for you."

They followed the graceful steps of the woman and the gentle sway of her white hair. The hallway's floor was wood and so highly polished that the shine made it look almost like glass. The plain, plaster walls were so carefully color washed that the variations and patterns became an abstract beauty. At even intervals plain sliding doors were set, and moving along the quite hallway were several other I/S. Each person, whether male or female, were wrapped in kimono and they moved to the side and bowed as the party passed, balancing wood trays of tea and food.

Mamita stopped at the last room in the hall and slid the door open with a bow of her head. Toshi eased inside without waiting and Mick followed. The room was lit was clever, small lamps covered in color paper that defused the soft glow. The sparse furniture was accented with brightly colored pillows and a low table sat with a waiting china tea service. Fragrant steam rose and filled the room with the aroma.

"Sakura-san, the attendant to serve?" Mamita-san softly asked by the door.

"None, please, I wish a quite word with Tam alone. Please see that we aren't disturbed once he arrives."

She bowed slightly. "I shall attend to it."

"Thank you, Mamita-san. One last thing, if Tam shouldn't arrive tonight, do you know where I might find him?"

The woman drew in a breath and her eyes settled on Mick for a moment. "Most days he goes from here to a bathhouse."

"Which one?"

"Geinvonii's"

Toshi nodded and lowered his eyes, unable to meet the knowing look in the older woman's gaze. "Thank you."

"If I may serve?" She bowed again and slide the door shut, blocking out any sound from the rest of building.

Mick raised the lid on the pot and the tea inside made his nose itch. Toshi batted his hands away and distractedly poured tea into two of the small ceramic cups. "You may as well sit and have a cup, it might be a while before he shows up."

Mick lowered himself down onto the cushions and would have been blind to miss the tension in the other man. "Toshi, what's going on?"

"What do you mean?" He asked but he wouldn't meet Mick's eye.

"Don't play dumb, it doesn't suit you. Who is this man? What's with this promise and what's with this bathhouse that has you upset?" He knew he sounded like a cop questioning a suspect but it was the only tone he really knew. Andy used to scold him for it.

Toshi wrapped his hands around one of the small cups and let the warmth seep into him. "Tam and I have a history but it's a history, not a present. He's a shine addict, he's promised my uncle that as long as he's using he'll come here, once a day, and eat a meal. Bathhouses, in the Camp, aren't like your clubs. They started out as bathhouses literally but evolved more into social clubs. Some still are for bathing but at others you can find anything. Geinvonii's is known as a place to shine, he must be Tam's new dealer."

The words, spoken so flatly, sunk into Mick's mind slowly and he knew he couldn't ask Toshi to track this man down to where shine was dealt. Not only would it break the Committee rules, it would break the fragile balance the man obviously had with his own addiction. Even if Mick hadn't promised to protect Toshi from harm, he couldn't have pushed the issue. The best lead he'd had, ever, on these assault cases would die if an addict didn't keep his promise. It was a very thin promise to hold such hopes.

The tea had grown cold in Toshi's hands and Mick's still sat untouched. The silence was heavy but neither man could find a word to break it. All of the past weeks progress toward a deepening relationship withered in the face of the foreign surroundings and the strained situation. Both men fell back on what they were most comfortable with, keeping their thoughts securely locked away where no one, not even themselves, could reach.

The soft knock on the door should have been a gunshot for how it made both men start. The door slid open, a servant knelt in the hallway but neither man glanced twice at her. Their attention was fixed on the I/S standing in the hallway, hovering in uncertainty at the threshold before he took the single step that carried him inside. The door nearly slid shut on him.

Tin Tam was tall, easily six feet if not more, he wore plain blue jeans and a rumpled but clean red t-shirt. Unlike most I/S Mick had seen, Tam's hair barely hung to his shoulders, the thick ragged ends of smoky grey were pulled back into a tight tail and he met Mick's careful study from wide, expressionless, golden eyes that were obviously of Asian descent. It was pretty clear that Toshi was underweight, his lean frame held nothing extra, but Tam was flat out emaciated. His golden skin was faded, almost ashen and so tightly stretched over bone to nearly give the impression of skeletal. It gave the skittish man an almost ethereal look.

There was no pause, Toshi rose to his feet as soon as the door slid open and the motion caused the Incubus to flinch back. Tam covered it well and turned it into a bow. "Sakura-sama. You wished to see me?"

Toshi returned the bow. "Tam-san. Please, join us for tea?"

The thin man shook his head. "I'm not hungry. You look good, Toshi-kun." Tam nearly whispered and Mick would have been blind to miss the poorly hidden look of longing in those golden eyes.

For Toshi, the use of his real name and the affectionate suffix almost was enough to undo him.

He glanced away. "Thank you, it's expected."

"And you've always done what was expected of you." There was a bitter distance in his tone, softened by warm affection.

"Please," Toshi asked again, trying not to sound begging. "Join us."

"What is it you want, Sakura-sama? I doubt you came all this way to catch up on old times."

"True." Toshi drew a deep breath and his shoulders squared. All the emotion that had been in his eyes faded and he retreated back behind the empty, cold mask he used so well. "I picked up your fear marking near where Amanda Evans was attacked."

Tam tossed his head toward Mick. "He's a cop?"

"No, he works for me."

The half truth of the statement pressed an unpleasant smile to Tam's face. "I'm sure he does." His nostrils flared a moment. "He smells like a cop, and like you, Sakura-sama."

The taunt wasn't going to shake Toshi. "He was a cop. He actually cares about what happens in the yard. Did you know her?"

Tam shrugged. "We shared space." It was an I/S way of saying they'd been lovers. "You know me, I've developed a taste for humans." He eyed Mick again. "Something I think we share."

"Do you know she's dead?"

Tam obviously hadn't heard. His mouth snapped shut and the taunting stopped cold. His golden eyes blinked quickly in shocked surprise but if he felt loss or grief it didn't show. "No, I hadn't."

"You were there, what happened?"

"I didn't see anything. I was inside."

Mick stood up slowly, careful of his movements. Tam looked ready to bolt and Mick didn't want to be the one to spook him. "Tam-san, I want to find whoever did this to Amanda. Can you tell me what she used?"

Tam's eyes studied both men but his look softened, defeated. "She wasn't fussy. She'd glow on shine or shot up heroin." He shrugged. "She'd do parties and use whatever they used. I didn't crowd her."

"Is it possible she might have been using something new?" Mick asked carefully, knowing his balance in the room was precarious.

Tam's eyes narrowed. "Don't you listen, human, I didn't crowd her."

"Tam," Toshi broke in. "You know more than you're telling."

The man shook his head. "It's no secret. Everyone in the yard's edgy, you can make a big deal about a human finally getting it but this same things happened to three I/S, no one's cared. People are scared. Didn't you see it? There were dozens of rooms around ours and by morning they'd cleared out."

"Tam, I don't understand."

"I wouldn't imagine you could." Tam snorted. "Something's hunting us, I smelled it. It was dark of dust and earth and rot. It sounds of whispery scratching and it tore off chunks of Amanda and ate her. I heard it, I smelled it, it's going to get me too." He smiled bitterly. "But you think that's the shine talking."

"Tam,"

"That's all I know, did you want anything else from me, Sakura-sama?"

Toshi just shook his head.

"May I leave, Sakura-sama?" He bowed with the request.

"Tam, if you ever want to stop, I'll do everything I can to help you."

"May I leave, Sakura-sama?" Tam bowed again and ignored the offer.

Toshi nodded. "Yes, thank you for your time, Tam-san."

Tam bowed, Toshi bowed and the man quickly escaped.

"You two," Mick wasn't even sure he should ask.

"Had a history. It's nothing now." Toshi's eyes were as cold as ice. "I'm sorry it wasn't more helpful, Mick. I didn't know he was so far gone. It's getting late, we should go."

As they were leaving, servants again parted and bowed to them but Mamita didn't re-appear to show them out. Toshi was silent, lost in thoughts or memories but when he reached for his helmet Mick covered his hand. "Let me."

Toshi just nodded. He pulled his helmet on and climbed on to the bike. As Mick pulled them away and headed for the exit back to the city, Toshi's arms clutched to him far tighter than they needed to. He barely responded when he was asked for his id on the way out and once they'd cleared the Camp, Toshi tucked his head against Mick's back and closed his eyes.

Part Ten

He didn't stir again until the bike slowed down and eased to a stop. It wasn't in the garage and Toshi looked around the neighborhood they were in confused. The bike was obviously parked and Mick was pulling off his helmet.

"Where are we?"

"I need to ask Andy something, come on up."

Toshi blinked. "This is your old apartment?"

Mick nodded and smiled. "Yeah, come on up."

"I don't know, I,"

"Come on." Mick snatched at one of the long fingered hands and entwined his own around it. "Come on."

With that cool hand wrapped around his, Toshi couldn't refuse. He allowed himself to be led into

the building and up three flights of stairs. The place was clean if outdated, the elevator stood with an out of order sign that looked as old as the building. The paint was cheap but intact, if ugly, and the residents obviously went out of their way to keep the place in good condition. Some of the apartment doors even had decorations pinned to them.

Mick led them down the hallway to apartment three twenty two. The brass numbers on the door had been painted in red and white strips that suspiciously looked like red nail polish and white out. He had a key but rather than just walk in, he knocked.

Voices moved inside and as one grew closer to the door it was clearly Andy's. "All I'm saying is that shade of red is a little garish, I didn't say it looked bad on you!" Andy was shouting over his shoulder as he pulled the door open. He turned, wearing only a pink bathrobe, pink slippers and with his hair in curlers, and froze. His eyes grew wide and he let out a high pitched, girly scream and slammed the door.

"Well, I guess that answers my question." Mick muttered under his breath and knocked again. "Sorry about that." He tossed to Toshi who looked startled and his eyes held wider.

The door pulled open a second time only now it was Samson in the door way. Her hair was up in a pony tail and she was in a halter top and jeans. "Sorry about that, Jesus, Andy is such a queen!" She shouted loud enough for Andy to hear. She leaned forward and kissed Mick. "Come on in baby, don't stand in the hall."

As Toshi passed, Samson snagged his shoulders and placed a soft, quick kiss to both sides of his face. "Come on in, don't mind Andy, he doesn't like being caught in curlers by such handsome men."

The apartment was small, the kitchen stove only had two burners and was directly to the side of the front door. The living room was a smaller television and a pair of older sofas, a battered end table and a few mismatched lamps. The walls were painted in swirling murals of color and people obviously something of Andy's doing and it cheered up the tiny space. There were three doors, one stood open to show a small bathroom and one was open to a neat, if tiny, bedroom. The third door opened and Andy sailed in. His curlers now covered in a bright scarf and the robe tied far tighter than before.

"Well, how sweet of you to drop in." He smiled. "What brings you by?" He asked as calmly as ever, as if he hadn't just screamed and slammed the door on their faces a moment before.

Samson rolled her eyes and waved him off before swishing down the short hallway to what was obviously her bedroom.

"I wanted to see if you were going out to the clubs tonight. I see that you are."

"Of course! I have the dearest blue and white pinafore dress, just like the one in the Alice in Wonderland book I have. I'm going to wear my hair in ringlets." He glanced to Toshi. "It's not like I always have my hair up in curlers, you know."

"When are you leaving?" Mick interrupted.

"Within the hour. Samson is going to wait for Oliver to get home from work and then meet me at Sleaze." He raised an eyebrow. "Why? Do you two want to tag along?"

"Of course."

Toshi's head snapped up at Mick's answer. "What?" He glanced from Mick to Andy and back again. "No, not of course, no."

"It'll be okay, we won't stay out long but come on, when was the last time you went out dancing?" Mick smiled lightly, carefully.

"That doesn't have anything to do with it." Toshi almost hissed out, hating the slight edge of panic in his voice.

Mick heard that sharpness and he turned his careful smile on Andy. "Excuse us a moment, please." He snatched up one of Toshi's hands and pulled him, stumbling, toward Andy's bedroom.

"Of course darlings. Take your time."

Toshi let himself be almost dragged and then shoved into the adjoining bedroom. Before he could recover his physical balance, let alone his emotional, Mick had shut the door tightly behind them and flicked on the light switch. Only, the light wasn't overhead but three lamps about the room came on. Each one was draped in sheer fabrics, casting rose, blue and amber glows instead of harsh white. He blinked and glanced around the room. The ceiling was painted dark blue and dotted with stars that upon closer inspection were actual constellations. The walls were painted in towering, slender, white birch trees. The thick green forest surrounded them and winding dirt paths twisted off between small white flowers and waving ferns. It was such a realistic illusion of a fairy tale woods that Toshi had to look twice to absorb the plain, battered furniture. A simple, wide, bed, a plain dresser, a few banged up night stands and a folding screen that had unidentifiable clothing tossed over the top.

"Toshi," Mick's careful tone snapped the half breeds attention on to him. "I need to go out. There are people, contacts, of mine that I can find easier at the clubs than I can during the day. If I come knocking on their doors in the middle of the afternoon, they aren't going to tell me a thing but if I stumble across them in the clubs, they'll spill everything they've heard. Trust me, these sorts hear every rumor, every whisper of what happens on the streets. It's their soap opera."

"That's fine, I'm going home." There was no room for debate or discussion in Toshi's mind.

"Why not come with us?" He searched those sad, cold eyes and knew the answer that wouldn't be spoken in plain words.

"I can't."

"Why?" Mick reached out and slid his hands to either side of Toshi's face, letting his fingers curl around the base of the man's skull, wrapped in the thick weight of his hair. Under his fingertips he felt the angry circle of the implant just under the skin. "What ever that Tam fellow did to you isn't worth you hiding away for the rest of your life."

Toshi physically flinched from the words, a motion Mick's hands let him feel as well as see. "Tam's innocent, if guilt lies between us it's on my shoulders."

"I doubt that."

It wasn't easy shaking off that tender touch, not because Mick was holding him tightly but because he wanted to bury himself into it, not pull away. "It's not something I want to talk about."

Rather than pushing, Mick knew when to retreat. "Than I won't ask again but the original statement is still true. If you go home, I know you, you'll sit and brood. Yes, Tam's an addict. Yes, he's horribly thin. Yes, his addiction is killing him but there's nothing anyone can do for him if he won't do it himself. I don't see how going home and hiding will change anything, expect it punishes you." He reached out and brushed loose, silky black strands back from the strained face. The touch almost burned Mick's fingers. He wanted desperately to really bury his hands in that hair but so far he hadn't been given permission.

"I don't know, Mick. I'm not comfortable in crowds."

"Have you ever been to a dance club?"

"No."

"Than how do you know if you'll like it or not? Trust me, I fought Andy tooth and nail until he forced me to go. This is my world, Toshi, I want to show it to you." That was a low blow and even Mick knew it. It was plain the half breeds comfort zone was a narrow one and Mick was willing to use any weapon at his disposal to ease Toshi back into a semblance of a normal lifestyle. He'd even use guilt if he had to. Guilt seemed to be something Toshi responded strongly to.

"I don't know, I," Toshi sighed and had to look away from those warm hazel eyes. "After today, going into the camps, the scents and Tam, I just feel so, I, hell, I don't know."

"Will going home and brooding over it make you feel better? Or will it just let the feelings linger? We both already know the answer so try something different. If you hate it, I promise, I'll talk to the people I need to and we'll leave, and I'll never ask you to come out to a club again." He took things a step further and brushed a careful kiss to Toshi's lips.

It was the kiss, something about how gently Mick could kiss him, that just unraveled all of his will. "You'll keep your promise?" He whispered.

"I will."

"Okay, I don't know why I'm agreeing but okay."

Mick chuckled warmly in the diffused light of the bedroom and pressed another soft, undemanding kiss to Toshi's lips. "Thank you."

When Mick tried to pull away, Toshi nipped out and lightly bite his lower lip. His breath froze and blood surged almost painfully downward. It wasn't the bite, or not totally, but the intensity in those massive flawless blue eyes. Mick fell into them and drowned. His heart fluttered and he was instantly hard. Such a simple movement, such a small nip of sharp, strong teeth along the tender flesh inside his mouth and all Mick wanted to do was slid down to his knees.

The vision was overpowering. The desire consumed him. He felt lightheaded with the need to press his face to Toshi's groin. To trace out his hardness with the same lips that had just been nipped and make that length even harder knowing he was the cause. It was an itch, to slide down that zipper and push aside those stupid, plain boxers he knew Toshi was wearing and let the heavy length of the other man's arousal fall into his hands. How much hotter would the tip of that length be on his lips? The man's skin burned him normally. Mick almost moaned at the thought.

Even if he wasn't bold enough to actually fall to his knees and open those well tailored pants he would still collapse down and let his mouth trace the proof of Toshi's own desire. Mick could almost feel the lean hips in his hands, feel how he'd slid his hands across the fabric covered ass and pull the other man tight to his hungry mouth. He would show the other man nipping than, he would tease him until he was moaning. He would tease him until he was as weak in the knees as Mick was feeling and than, only than, he'd work that length until the fabric of the pants would grow hot and sweet from Toshi's release. Mick could taste it, cloying to his tongue, and knew he would suck every trace from the fabric.

The wide blue eyes blinked. "We can't." Toshi whispered almost as if he'd read every dirty little fantasy that had raced across Mick's mind.

"Well," It made Mick wonder how transparent his desire was on his face. It made him wonder

what dirty little fantasies had consumed Toshi in the same moment he'd been lost in his own. "Technically, we could but I can't promise Andy won't have his ear pressed to the door the whole time."

Toshi shocked Mick by chuckling. He leaned forward and stole a quick, simple kiss before pulling the human into an embrace. It was natural now, to hold that cooler body close to his own and he pressed his desire firmly against Mick's hip. "You undo me." He whispered into the auburn hair he was hiding his face in. He nuzzled into that soft hair before drawing a slow breath and pulling away. "Come on, if you're going to make me do this, let's do it."

The inadvertent innuendo of Toshi's words sent a shiver down Mick's spine but he stepped away to open the bedroom door. The brighter lights of the living room chased away some of the desire and, to Mick's surprise, Andy wasn't lurking by the bedroom door. Instead he came out of the bathroom, minus his robe.

"God, what is that?" Mick laughed and was afraid to glance behind him to see how horrified Toshi was.

"What?" Andy turned swiveled his hips to look at his own ass. "This old thing?" He stood before them with his hair falling in bouncy ring curls, his lips painted into a bow shape with pink lipstick, gold glitter over his long fake eyelashes, two smudges of overly pink rouge on his cheeks and wearing only a pair of white cotton panties. There was no doubt they were panties but they were panties designed for a six year old girl. What was tucked into the tight white cotton wasn't parts belonging to any six year old girl, however. When Andy swung his ass to show off to his friends, it fully exposed the lines of fluffy ruffles that covered the seat of the panties, topped off by being tipped in pink.

"It's cute." He wiggled his backside at them and flounced his ring curls.

"It's something." Toshi spoke softly but even Mick could hear the restrained laughter in his voice.

"Awww," Andy started to pout.

Mick laughed louder now. "I don't know if I should spank you or fuck you."

"If luck is with me, sweetheart, I'll get both before the nights out." Andy flipped the curls that fell around his bare shoulders, the dull metal of his nipple ring a kinky contrast to the innocent childish panties. "Tell me, both of you, is it too much?"

"On you? It's fine." Mick confessed, on another night he'd have confessed openly that Andy's fem boy style was a turn on, occasionally anyway.

"How about you Toshi? To much?"

Toshi swallowed and felt himself blushing but he refused to back down. "On Mick, it'd be absurd. On you, it works, your mission should be successful."

Mick's jaw nearly dropped and he turned to stare at the man behind him.

Andy leaned over, sticking his ruffle covered ass out, and blew Toshi a kiss. "Thank God someone appreciates me. OW!" He yelped as Samson smacked her hand across the ruffles as she slipped by.

"Put some clothes on you tart! You'll scare the roaches."

Andy stuck out his tongue behind her back.

"If you're going to stick that thing out you should put it to good use." Samson called without having to see the action to know what Andy was doing. She returned a moment later with a can of soda in one hand and leaned against the doorframe. "So, you two joining us or not?"

"For a little while, yes, it won't be all night."

"Not dressed like that you aren't!" Andy tsked and rolled his eyes. "Samson, love, can you let Mick borrow that shirt of yours? You know, the black one with the," and he drew his hands across his chest. "You know which one I mean?"

She raised an eyebrow. "It'll be tight on him."

"And that's a bad thing because? And get him a better belt too, those pants will work fine. But you, Toshi dear, you look like a salary man, it's sad, truly, truly sad." Andy just shook his head. "Mick, go change, I want to get out of here sooner rather than later, leave Toshi to me."

He pushed between them and caught Toshi's wrist as he slipped by and virtually dragged Toshi with him back into the bed room. There was no point in stopping Andy, the man was like a steam roller sometimes and honestly, Toshi could handle himself. Or at least he hoped he would as the bedroom door shut and blocked the two men from sight.

Andy moved straight to the closet door, threw it open and disappeared inside. "Did you know that a decade ago, when I was still a mere infant, this crappy town had only three dance clubs. Sleaze was one of them and is still, in my thinking, one of the best. The city was less than a million people then and growing and now, here we are at almost three million folks, not counting the million two I/S in the Camp. You know how many dance clubs there are now?" Andy emerged from the closet with a blue dress, a crisp white pinafore, and fluffy white tulle slip. He tossed the set on the bed. "You know how many dance clubs there are now?"

Toshi shook his head as Andy disappeared into the closet again.

"Seven. Seven! It's absurd and one of them is Token, that just opened up last year. That one's utterly exclusive. Only the top of society or the prettiest of pretty people are allowed in. No I/S are welcome. It's absurd. This pathetic little town has an opera house now, but no place for regular people to go, no common ground. I don't count bars, every corner has a bar to get drunk in and I certainly don't count the night clubs sad excuses for whore houses that are everywhere. For as strong of an art community and a deviant society as this city has, it's unforgivable." He emerged from the closet again with a stack of clothing in his hand but rather than toss them on the bed he slipped to stand next to Toshi.

"Hmmm, I'm taller than you but you're all leg." He dropped a pair of dully glossy black pants onto the bed. "You're as skinny as me though, these should fit." Beside the pants pooled a dark eggplant velvet shirt. He slipped inside the closet to put the other selections away but when he came out Toshi was only standing there, turning the pants over in his hand. "What?"

"What is this?"

"It's vinyl, pleather. You know, fake plastic leather? Who am I kidding, why would you know about the cheap knock offs. I bought them ages ago but they're too butch for me. Mick used to wear them when we'd go out but he looks too hot in them, it caused fights so I stole them. They'll be just as hot on you, now, get your pretty ass behind that screen and change. Trust your Cousin Andy." Toshi didn't move and Andy shook his hands at him. "Go on now, I can't see you behind the screen and it's not like you've got anything I haven't seen already. Unless there's some Incubus difference I don't know about?"

Toshi gathered up the fabric and without further pause or protest disappeared behind the screen. Andy really meant to behave and he had really forgotten that the two mirrors in the room would

show a hint behind the screen if someone was standing just so. He really didn't mean to be standing in that exact spot but he was. As he eased the frilly slip up over his hips he caught the movement of a body behind the screen in the mirrors, caught a sight of flowing, long black hair.

The blue dress fell over his shoulders and stopped barely long enough to cover his panties. Andy glanced again into the dual reflecting mirrors and saw a wide expanse of light golden skin lined by black silky hair. The flesh he was able to see in peek a boo glimpses was lean but well toned in long, defined muscles. It was enough to make Andy pant and his panties shrink. He reached for the white pinafore and glanced once more.

Behind the screen Toshi was easing the skin tight vinyl pants up over his legs and Andy had a clear view of the top of the man's ass and the delicious muscles of his lower back. None of that mattered, Toshi's hair slid over his shoulder and revealed a tattoo etched into the small of his back. It froze Andy's hands because even in the dim light he wouldn't have missed that design.

The marking was the size of the palm of his hand and swirled in blues, greens, reds and gold fire. Escaping from the flames was a red, gold and black fire bird, a phoenix. Its wings were spread, its beak was parted in a silent cry and its talons were outstretched. It was a marking used by the Sakamoto family, generally tattooed on their members as a plain black outline of a phoenix. Only high ranking leaders were allowed to have the flames and only the highest and most valued members were allowed to use colors. Toshi was too young to be a high ranking leader which left only one answer in Andy's mind. It was a property marking, at some point, Mick's new boyfriend had been owned by someone of very high rank and very powerful. Owned by someone part of a family not known for sharing what was theirs with just anyone.

The black hair fell in place and covered the tattoo breaking Andy's concerned gaze. He quickly pulled on the pinafore and tied it in place and used the motion of pulling on his white knee socks and black buckle shoes to cover his sudden uncertainty. Mick always had a taste for dangerous men, men that would hurt him and normally Andy kept his mouth shut but this time was different. This time he was pretty sure his friend was falling in love with the half breed, it tore at Andy.

Than Toshi stepped out from behind the screen and Andy knew what his choice was. The man was stunningly attractive and Mick was a big boy. Some fires were worth playing with, even if they burned a body alive. Toshi was definitely hot enough to burn anyone, the pants clung to every curve and barely clung to his hips. They were just long enough to reach the top of the black riding boots he'd been wearing but it made his legs look impossibly long. The black curves of the legs drew the eye up to the showcased triangle of bare flesh just below his naval and just above the black waistband. The dark violet shirt only had three buttons, one over the breast bone, one over the solar plexus and one just barely above his naval. The velvet pooled over the golden skin like a caressing hand, the long sleeves fell loose on the slender, lean arms. The open collar showed a second small triangle of flesh right at the hollow of his throat.

"Well?"

"Almost perfect, come here, sit on the bed." He snatched up his hair brush, a hair tie and a simple white ribbon before Andy climbed up to kneel on the bed behind the tense man. He ran the hair brush through the thick glossy hair and the other man didn't even flinch at the contact. "You're used to someone combing your hair?"

"A long time ago, yes."

Andy dropped the comb and gathered up the front and side sections of the thick length. With deft, quick fingers he separated the hair into six sections and began to plait them together. The braid was elaborate and he pulled in more hair from the sides as he worked his way back to the crown of the Toshi's head. From there he simply plaited it out, tied it off with the holder and wrapped the slender white ribbon around the raven black hair.

"There, see what you think of that?"

Toshi ran a hand across the braid and nodded. "Thank you."

"One more thing." He dived off the bed, not caring if the tulle and dress flipped up to show the frilly panties. Into a drawer he dove and came out with chained dog collar. "For you." He handed it to Toshi with an evil grin.

Toshi accepted it without thought but almost dropped it when he saw what it was. "I won't wear that." His voice was cold enough to freeze water.

"Not for you to wear silly, for you to put on Mick."

"I don't think he'd like that."

"Please, I'm his best friend. Every time he swallows he'll feel it and think of you. He gets hit on all the time at the clubs, it'll mark him as less available." Andy winked before flouncing out of the room.

The chained collar was cold and heavy in his hand but he couldn't deny that the idea of putting it on Mick was delicious. The difficulty would be putting it on the other man and not instantly using the collar to direct the man around, like, toward the bedroom. It didn't take much thinking to talk himself into doing something he wanted to do anyway.

It wouldn't have mattered if he'd left the collar in the bedroom, the way Mick was dressed demanded the chain around his neck. Toshi actually froze, from the waist down Mick was still in his black dress pants, now accented by a black leather belt covered with a half dozen D rings. He'd done nothing different with his hair, nor was there any make up Toshi could see. His shirt however, should have been illegal, flat out, there should have been a law.

It was at least two sizes too small and was only saved from splitting into rags by being made of a stretchy material. It was dark navy blue, almost black, the sleeves were short and clung to his strong deltoids. Across the front were slashes, unstitched around the tears so the fabric curled up and only further accented the pale flesh it exposed. Five cuts dashed across the shirt showing in teasingly unsatisfying detail a hint of a single pink nipple, the flat curve of a pec, a round corner of rib and the flat ridges of stomach. All it would take would be one stray fingertip to explore the entire width of the human's chest. It turned Mick into pure eye candy.

Andy whistled through his teeth when neither man moved, obviously equally stunned with each other. "I know who all the boys will want to be with tonight and it won't be my ruffled ass. You two are hot, hot, hot. I have to paint you one day soon, there's no refusing."

Toshi's mouth was dry, he crossed to where Mick stood without really hearing Andy's chatter. He opened his hand and let Mick see the collar slowly warming in his grip. There was no mistaking the shuddering look of lust that crossed Mick's face before he regained careful control of his expression.

"You don't have to wear it." He heard himself whispering. "Andy suggested it."

Mick's eyes darted to the smug look on his friend's face. "You're an evil man."

"What?" He batted impossibly long fake lashes. "Me?"

"It's okay." Toshi started to close his hand around the collar.

"No," Mick covered the metal and hand with his own. "I think it'd look good on." He raised his chin slightly and let the too warm fingers clasp the metal around his throat, he could feel the

slight tremors in those normally rock steady hands. "How does it look?" He whispered out when Toshi's fingers lingered on his neck and started making Mick think of things they couldn't do.

Toshi nodded. "It looks great."

"Well, than, kiddies," Andy tossed an arm around both men's shoulders, half afraid they were about to drag each other back into his bedroom and lock themselves in for the night. "Let's be off."

He ushered them back out into the hallway but paused when he caught sight of Samson in her bedroom door, shaking her head. "You're a bad man, Andy." She hissed out, nodding to where the other pair had already gone from sight.

"Please, like you didn't get a hard on watching that pretty little scene."

She snorted. "I didn't say I didn't enjoy it, just that you're bad. You deserve to be spanked."

"I'll look for volunteers later. You two will catch up?"

"Within the hour. Just, behave."

Andy flipped up his frilly skirt as he slipped out of the apartment.

Taking the bike was out of the question. Two on it was a tight, comfortable fit, three was simply impossible, if intriguing. It forced them to hail a cab. Than another, and another. Each one looked Andy over, passed right by Mick and than refused to allow Toshi inside.

"No," the last cabbie had insisted. "It's my cab, no bug eyes allowed!" He was pulling away from the curb even before Mick could get the door shut.

Andy hit the back of the car as it pulled away. "Hey! Blow me you fucking ass!" He shot the cabbie the finger, which was silly looking given how he was dressed.

The playful teasing, the lustful glow, was gone from Toshi's eyes. "It's okay. Why don't you two take a cab and I'll follow on the bike?"

"No, bad idea, beside we left the helmets upstairs." Mick pulled his phone out from his coat and hit one of the speed dial numbers. "I have a good cab company number programmed in. God knows, I've had to toss drunks in the back of enough of their cars over the years. Hang on," Mick took on a listening expression.

"That's why I hang out with him." Andy nodded. "He's like a freaking campfire scout or something, he can pull a solution out of thin air."

"Hey! Johnny, how's the kids?" Mick nodded. "No, I'm okay, no seriously. Yeah I know, it's been a while. Look, I'm out front of my old apartment, can you send a car around?" He listened again. "Ten minutes, great, no, it's just three of us but we're having trouble because one of our group is I/S. I knew you'd feel that way, see your guy soon. Thanks Johnny." He clicked the phone shut.

"That wouldn't have been Johnny Akrins?"

"Yeah."

"Who's Johnny Akrins?" Toshi asked after the knowing look that passed between the two friends.

"He's just someone I know."

"Biblically." Oddly, Mick seemed a little embarrassed at the mention of his past.

They stood around in awkward silence until the cab pulled up. The driver put the window down and shouted out to them. "You have got to be the group Johnny said I had to find in less than ten or he'd skin me." The man smiled. "Hop in, where ya headed?"

"See," Andy smiled brightly while Mick handed him into the back of the cab. "There are still some gentleman left in this city."

Part Eleven

Sleaze was in an neighborhood of mostly commercial shops and office space. There were few apartments in the area and what few there were quickly were snatched up by those looking for lower rent. The whole area was one step below the district Mick and Andy had lived in but still a few levels up from abject poverty and the crime that smothered some areas.

The club sat like a fat mother hen in it's square building surrounded by it's neighboring constructs. An alley cut along it's one border but other wise it jugged tight to the rest of the block. Cars clogged the front and parking was impossible. The entrance was well lit and a hand painted wood sign hung above the bouncer guarded entrance.

The large man held his ground against the line waiting to get in. It wasn't a huge wait, maybe a few dozen stood quietly in line, but it wasn't something Toshi looked forward to. He eyed the line while Mick paid the driver. Almost entirely male and younger, the clothes ranged from blue jeans and t-shirts to almost as outrageous as Andy's Alice in Wonderland dress.

When he sensed movement beside him, Toshi started walking toward the line only to find his arm caught by Andy. "Nuh huh love, that's for common people and we aren't common."

"But?"

"God, how can you be as rich as you are and not know anything!"

There was no time think of anything to say in reply, Andy was just being Andy and he was off and running. Mick just tossed his head to the living wall guarding the door and followed him toward it.

Andy threw his hands in the air. "Bitty! How's Tricks?" He had to stand on tip toe to kiss either side of the man's face which made Bitty well over six feet tall.

"He's good, it's his night off. I didn't think you'd show up tonight. I heard the show went well." For being such a large man, his voice was unusually high pitched.

"It was fabulous! What about me isn't?"

Bitty laughed. "If there's a thing about you that isn't, I ain't seen it yet."

"Sweet boy!"

"Hey, Mick, haven't seen you about for a while." Bitty smiled warmly at Mick and his teasing flirtation with Andy instantly was forgotten.

"Been busy."

Bitty's eyes slid to Toshi and his smile widened. "So I see. Cute toy you've picked up."

Toshi felt his jaw tightening but he didn't say a word.

"He's not my toy, Bitty, I'm his." Mick winked and smiled.

That made the big man giggle, not laugh, giggle like a small child with a bad secret. "Missed you coming around Mick, you're always good for a laugh. Well, any friend of yours and Andy's is a friend of mine. Go on in, it's busy tonight. Any of you see anything in the line you like?"

Andy waved the suggestion off as the meaning sunk in to Toshi. If they said the word, one of the waiting people would get in simply because they liked the look of them. "Please, when have we ever elevated the little people?" Andy rolled his eyes up in mock thought. "Wait, elevating the little guys is what I do best?"

Bitty giggled in. "Get on with you."

Andy just laughed with him and sailed inside but Mick paused as he went by. "Thanks Bitty."

"Anytime Mick." Toshi didn't like the affectionate way the large man smiled at Mick but he said nothing and followed the two men inside the club.

And instantly wished he could step outside. The noise was overwhelming. He walked into it like a wall and they weren't even close to the dance floor. The darkness was broken by flashing colored lights that played around the room and the distant smell of smoke clung to the shadows. People were everywhere, moving, talking, drinking, swirling in a frenzy that actually sparked a touch of fear in his stomach. It was too similar, too close to his past and he wanted to turn around and leave.

"You okay?" Mick leaned in closer to him.

"It's loud." He wasn't even sure Mick would be able to hear him.

"It takes a moment to adjust but really it's not so bad over at the tables."

"There's a lot of people."

Mick just smiled. "That's the point, come on, I'll buy you a drink."

They followed Andy along the edge of the dance floor where literally a hundred or more people bounced and slithered to the pounding music under the swirling lights. Along the wall various pictures of people, clips from movies and shows flashed up in the darkness and then faded away, adding to the chaos. Fortunately, they turned away from all that and into a darker, quieter side of the club. Here there were booths and tables on various levels and risers but Andy moved to one in particular, off in a corner and a little more private.

He froze when he saw someone sitting there. One hand stuck to his hip and his elbow jutted out. "Oh, Steve you are not sitting in my booth are you?"

"Hi Andy." The man that slid out of the booth wasn't ugly but he was plain and looked more like an accountant than the sort that would wear black leather, which he had on, awkwardly. "I was just holding it for you." But his eyes slid from Andy to Mick. "Hi, Mick, I haven't seen you around for a while."

"Hello, Steve." Mick motioned for Toshi to slide into the booth beside Andy.

"I was looking for you, I read this wicked article on DNA sequencing last week. I thought of you,

you know, from how we were talking about the,”

“Steve!” Andy snapped. “Stop! The poor man’s here to relax not talk shop! Now go, make yourself useful and get us drinks.”

Steve stuttered to a stop but than smiled and nodded. “Okay!”

Mick was rubbing a hand over his eyes. “You know he’ll want to drink with us all night.”

Andy just shrugged. “It’s not my pants he wants in.” He leaned over to Toshi. “Steve is one of Mick’s groupies.”

“He is not!” Mick protested.

“He’s one of many. Don’t worry, even Steve will get the hint you’re taken sooner or later.”

“I’m not, I mean,” Mick glanced to Toshi who looked as embarrassed as he felt.

“We’re not, it’s just,” Toshi mumbled as well.

“Oh, please, you two are cute together. I don’t care if you’re a couple yet or not you look at each other like you are. Even Steve will see it and he’s half blind.” Andy glanced up. “Steve! You’re such a doll! Come sit by me.” He patted the spot in the booth next to him keeping the man from sliding in next to Mick.

Toshi could see where this night was headed and he didn’t like it. Their table became a central meeting place, people came and went. They sat and shared gossip and a small minority flirted openly with Andy but the bulk of their guests were openly vying for Mick’s attention. Something the auburn haired man failed to notice or pretended not to notice. He was polite to everyone, friendly with some but never did a thing to encourage their attraction or discourage it. It left most of them with a vague sense of hope, at least until how Toshi and Mick interacted sunk in. Than, they quickly found excuses to be elsewhere. It made Toshi want to toss an arm possessively around Mick’s shoulders or snarl at the unwanted strangers that Mick wasn’t interested. He did neither but under the table, Mick’s cooler hand slid into his own.

By the time they were finishing their second drinks and Mick’s first still sat almost untouched in front of him, Samson and Oliver breezed in. She was in a flirty dress with giant red cherries all over it, her dark hair pulled up on the top of her head to show off her graceful neck. Oliver was someone Toshi found he was growing to like more and more. He didn’t try to be something he wasn’t, he was dressed in plain blue jeans with a simple, band t-shirt tucked in. Tonight he wore glasses and it gave him a studious, careful expression. He smiled warmly at the group and slid in beside Samson. He nodded to Toshi and shared the conspiratorial grin that two boyfriends of a close group of friends shared. Both still trying to find their place in the tightly woven knit of the existing friendships, and it was a welcoming that Toshi hadn’t expected to find.

Mick squeezed his hand and Toshi turned his attention to the man beside him. “You okay?”

He nodded.

“Okay, if you don’t mind I’m going to try to find some of those people.” He spoke almost directly into Toshi’s ear, his hot breath tickling. “Can I talk you into dancing with me later?”

“I don’t dance.”

“Everyone dances.” He pulled away and spoke louder. “I’ll be right back.”

Toshi watched as Mick faded into the crowd but a flash of light lavender caught his eye and

when he followed it he found a wide pair of pink eyes staring back at him from a milk pale face. The Incubus nodded at him and slid back into the crowd.

"That boy, I'd kick his backside for abandoning you like that." Andy sighed as he slid closer to Toshi.

"It's okay. I thought I just saw an I/S in the crowd."

Andy glanced around. "You probably did. There's usually three or four floating about in Sleaze."

"Working?"

"Mostly. Most of the I/S community won't socialize with us lowly humans."

"Excuse me." Toshi slid from the booth and left Andy behind.

He wasn't entirely sure what he was looking for, he slid about the perimeter of the room. Mick had been right, he was getting used to the noise and now he was able to pick out bits of conversation as he slid past groups. While the crowd still had him unnerved, no one approached him, no one harassed him and he eased into the feel of the club. Just the sheer voyeuristic pleasure of watching people made it worth while. He caught sight of two more I/S, one with flowing pale yellow hair and bright green eyes and a third with flame red and peach colored eyes.

"Sakura-sama."

Toshi turned at the whispered voice, too softly spoken for a human to catch among the noise and saw pink eyes flash from the shadowed corner. He slid over to the darker spot and easily made the lavender haired Incubus out in the darkness. The man bowed slightly. "Konichee, Sakura-sama."

Toshi returned the bow. "Konichee," He let his tone fade off since he didn't have a name.

"Rabin, Rabin Rez."

"Konichee, Rez-san."

Rez's eyes scanned the crowd behind Toshi. "I wasn't expecting to see you here, Sakura-sama, I wanted to offer a proper greeting from all of us."

It had never occurred to him that the I/S that moved about the human world would have a quiet, unspoken community. "Thank you."

"If you require anything?"

It wasn't just an offer of help, Toshi understood and the hunger it struck in him wasn't as strong as he'd expected. "Thank you, no, I'm out with friends."

"Human friends." He nearly spat the word.

"Yes, human friends."

"Be careful, Sakura-sama, humans are rarely friendly."

He wanted to protest that it didn't have to be that way but the words dried on his tongue. For Rez, his contact with humans had been as a thing to their pleasure, not as an equal and friend. There were no words to convince the man otherwise.

"Tell me, Rez-san, what do you think of this place?"

"What? The club?"

Toshi only nodded.

"If I could keep different company, it would be nice. Can you imagine, a club of I/S swirling around together? How beautiful we'd be." His voice grew wistful.

"But the noise?"

He shrugged. "It's not bad when you're dancing." He smiled. "You've never been here before."

It wasn't a question but Toshi answered anyway. "No."

"Dance, and you'll understand." Those pink eyes ghosted back over the crowd. "I have to go, my keeper will be missing me." The word was bitter but he smiled around it. He bowed and brushed past Toshi, sliding by without touching and quickly disappearing into the crowd.

Toshi slid deeper into the shadows and not for the first time hated the implant in his neck. The crowd moved with a life of its own and he sensed nothing from them. The scents were too complicated for him to sort out without the input of emotion to help pinpoint them. They looked joyful, peaceful, there was desire and sex but not a glimpse of violence but without the emotions to sort through he couldn't promise anything. It felt different from the club he'd worked in but then again he'd never looked at that club with an outsider's eyes. It confused him and it was a bad night to be so off center.

"There you are!" Mick broke past the crowd and pushed his way over. "I was worried, Andy said you left the booth almost an hour ago."

"Has it been so long?"

Mick only nodded. "Yeah, it has."

"I was thinking."

"Well, it looks painful, come dance with me."

Toshi paused. "Did you find the people you needed to?"

"Some, yes, we'll talk about it later." He caught the other man's hand and tugged. "Come on, dance with me."

For the first time, Toshi saw how the crowd was dancing. "I don't know, I,"

Mick was ignoring him and dragged him out to the edge of the crowd. He paused, felt the beat of the music and then began to move. Mick closed his eyes and let the music slide into him, let it move his hips and body. He pulled himself closer to Toshi and let his hands settle on the other man's shoulders.

"Don't think about it, just let the music move you."

It wasn't the music that was moving Toshi, Mick became a sensual, otherworldly creature. It wasn't fair that he could move that way, it added a whole new level to his secret fantasies. Bit by bit, Toshi's distracted and uneasy thoughts melted as the beat of the music pounded against his chest and he watched the way Mick slithered. Bit by bit his own body began to move, clumsy at first, self consciously but he was moving.

Mick opened his eyes and smiled. "There you go." Without asking, he stepped forward and let his body slid along Toshi's in time to the music.

The crowd disappeared. The jumbled mix of scents and smoke vanished. There was only Mick and the beat of the music. The feel of his body sliding along his own, the smell of him filled the air. He closed his eyes and let his thoughts go. Songs changed but the feel, that floating sense of rightness, stayed the same.

"You're so beautiful." Mick whispered and ghosted a kiss against Toshi's neck.

That broke the spell. His movements stumbled at the shock of desire that splashed against him. "Sorry!" He cried out as soon as he'd stomped on one of Mick's feet. "I told you I can't dance."

"You were doing fine."

Toshi stepped back, suddenly embarrassed. "I need to find the washroom."

"Want me to go with you?"

"No, stay, keep dancing." Mick obviously enjoyed the activity and Toshi just wanted to escape. He was going to need a moment to settle his racing heart.

"You sure?"

Toshi nodded and slipped away, embarrassed that as they'd danced they'd moved deeper into the crowd. He slid away as quickly as he could and ignored the hungry glances tossed his way. It took only a little searching to find one of the busy men's rooms. He emptied his bladder and washed his hands, ignoring the glances tossed his way as much as he ignored the obvious drug use going on. The cold water across his hands was nice and it settled some of his nerves but he still had to splash some of it on his face before he felt ready to face the general crowd again.

"I thought I might find you in there trying to cool off after that pretty little display." Andy was lounging near the men's room.

Toshi just gave Andy a cold look, one that normally sent people scurrying to get away from him. Instead the man just grinned.

"Come here, you should see this."

"What?"

Andy pointed to one of two stairwells, "Upstairs, you'll see."

Toshi followed, he'd noticed the twin stairways that switch backed and emptied out near the bars on both sides of the room and he'd seen people coming and going but he hadn't explored upstairs. As he followed Andy he saw a small space under the lower flight of stairs that opened almost against the wall, a small storage spot. Only when he peered inside he saw a man lurking there and the smell of drugs on him was heavy. It was a quiet little cubby hole to do business and yet keep it out of general sight. Andy didn't even seem to notice as he climbed the stairs with a saucy twitch to his skirts.

The upstairs balcony stretched out around the entire building and was far enough away from the first floor dancing that by standing at the railing you could easily watch the people moving below. There were tables and a third bar was doing a brisk business and the entire far wall was sealed off in glass, showing the DJ at his job. Andy led them to a quiet section of railing and pointed down below.

"Look."

It didn't take much to understand what he was pointing out. Mick was in the center of the crowd, dancing. His head was thrown back, his body moved in a far too sensual manner, his eyes were tightly closed. As Toshi watched, one of his hands slid across his chest and Toshi wasn't the only one watching for the small, sexy gestures. As he watched, a tall man with short brown hair broke from the crowd and eased forward. Slowly he started to dance near and then with Mick and Mick allowed him.

Andy watched the grip Toshi had on the railing go white knuckled. "He's exceptional. I try but really, look at me, I'm ordinary at best. He's not only handsome but he's so smart and such a gentleman," Andy sighed and watched as Mick let the crowd carry the man he'd been dancing with away, only to have a new partner slide in close. "What's worse, he's totally unaware of it. Oh, he knows he's not ugly and he knows people respond to him he just doesn't see that as noteworthy. It doesn't mean anything to him, I really do think he'd be just as content if people ignored him. That indifference only makes people more attracted to him."

"You love him."

"Hmm?" Andy glanced to where Toshi was still watching Mick dancing below them. "Of course I do. If he came to me tomorrow and said Andy, darling, I can't live without you, I'd marry that boy in a heartbeat. But he won't and he never will. Won't change that I love him, but, I'm not in love with him. I think, in that twisted little psyche of his, he loves me too. But never, not once, in all the years I've known him have I seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you."

Toshi's eyes drifted to where Andy stood by the railing but the human wasn't willing to meet his gaze.

"What I know of you, I like, Toshi, but if this is just a game to you and you break that boy," Andy shook his head and his ring curls bounced. "I don't care who your father is or who you've been connected to in the past," he let the words carry deeper weight, hinting at what he'd seen. "I'll find you and cut your balls off, dip them in chocolate and feed them to hungry lesbians. Do we understand each other?" It was difficult to look intimidating with ring curls and pink bow lips but Andy managed to look stern, bordering on serious.

It was a force of will not to laugh. The afternoon and night had carried so many emotional ups and downs than to be presented with the absurdity of such a threat, he really wanted to laugh. All that slipped by was the tiniest of smiles and a rich warmth filled his voice. "Andy, this isn't a game to me."

The serious expression stayed on Andy's face for a moment before he broke into a wide smile. "Good!" He patted Toshi's arm. "I didn't think it was but it's a friend's job to threaten new boyfriends. Now, darling, let me go get us some drinks and we'll pull chairs over and watch the show."

It turned out to be a great idea. They sat, sipped at the cool drinks Andy had picked out and talked art and politics. From their vantage point they could watch the dancers below and Toshi began to find a perverse pleasure watching how Mick moved, watching how he never lingered with one person for very long. Sweat was starting to bead on the pale skin and dampen his hair and it made Toshi want to go down there and lick it off. It made holding a serious conversation difficult but, fortunately, Andy required very little interaction to keep a conversation going.

The drinks were empty in their hands when Oliver and Samson came stumbling up to join them. It wasn't alcohol that had their balance off. Oliver's neat shirt was un-tucked and Samson's hair was loose about her shoulders. Both of them had a flushed look to their skin and the smell of sex was heavy on them.

"There you two are! We spotted Mick dancing but wondered what happened to you." Samson called out as they pulled chairs over to join the pair.

Andy just raised an eyebrow. "I saw you dancing and I think we know what happened to the two of you. For shame!"

Oliver just laughed. "Can I get fresh drinks?"

Toshi asked for water but the rest agreed and much to his surprise, the small group fell into easy conversation. For the most part, Toshi kept his mouth shut but he wasn't excluded for it and when he did speak, they actually listened. He guessed it was because Mick was quieter too.

The thought of his almost obsession drew his eyes over the railing but Mick wasn't in sight. He scanned the crowd but again saw no sign of the human. Which simply meant he'd stopped his almost trance like dancing to make a trip to the men's room or to the bar and if Toshi was very lucky, he'd be joining them shortly. The thought of Mick, now flushed from dancing and sweaty, joining them was enough to bring a small blush to his own face. He tried to turn back to the conversation but kept being bothered by a nagging sense to find Mick.

Steve stepped into view, moving with such haste that he was almost tripping over his feet. He ignored the others in the group and went right to Andy. Andy just stared up at the awkward man. "What is it, dear?"

"Bitty sent me, I," he glanced to the group before leaning close to whisper into Andy's ear. "He thought you should know."

The pleasant mirth on Andy's face dissolved, his jaw tightened but he forced a smile. "Go thank him for me Steve. Please."

Steve nodded, seeing the tight unhappy anger poorly hidden by the pleasant smile. "Sure, sure thing." And he hurried away.

"Fuck!" Andy stood even before Steve was fully gone and moved to rail. His eyes scanning below him. "Where's Mick?"

Samson had stood at the cursed outburst and moved to the railing. "What's happened?"

"Sal's here."

She instantly started cursing in Spanish and crossed herself. "I don't see him." But whether she meant Sal or Mick wasn't clear. "Come on, Oliver, come on, we have to let Mick know."

Andy was nodding. "If you find Sal first, keep him busy."

"Right."

Toshi didn't feel a need for words or drama. He pushed his chair back and went to search the crowded club for Mick.

Part Twelve

This is what Mick had been needing. He hadn't been to a club since he'd been driven off the force and the tension and strain had only been building. The walking arousal that was Toshi didn't help matters much and he hadn't been fully aware of how stressed he was until the music

took it away. It was better than meditation, letting go and being carried away by the beat. Bodies moving along with his, hands touching him carefully and none of it mattered. Whispered, lewd, suggestions were easily turned aside, too demanding of a touch was easily escaped from, it all dissolved and he could dance for hours.

The honest corner of his mind was glad that Toshi had retreated. Dancing against that far too warm body, feeling that silky mass of hair falling over him and not really being able to touch wasn't Mick's idea of relaxing. If it had been foreplay, that would have been a different story. He'd have kept Toshi out on the dance floor at all costs, until those blue eyes were glazed with desire and it was Mick being dragged to some place private.

The thought of the other man broke his near trance and he glanced toward Andy's table. It wasn't empty but there was no Andy, no Samson and no Toshi. He let his eyes rove as he danced and finally caught a glimpse of blue dress and, beside it black hair, up on the balcony. Well, that changed things, Toshi was obviously safe and being introduced to the joys of voyeurism, one of Andy's favorite pass times. The idea that Toshi had been lurking up there the whole time, watching, tripped his feet again.

"What's wrong baby?" The man currently dancing near him called out.

"Nothing, gotta take a break."

The man reached out and ran a hand across Mick's face. "I'll come with you."

"No need, I'll be right back. I just want to dance tonight."

The man visibly pouted. "Don't be gone long."

"Never." Mick smiled but slipped around the moving bodies. He wove his way around people to reach the men's room. Inside he ignored the drug use and emptied his bladder as quickly as was possible. Logically, he knew he wasn't a cop any more and logically he knew the drug laws just weren't enforced anymore but he hated seeing it. He washed his hands and went in search of a bottle of water.

Only, as he slipped back toward the bar, he didn't want to go back to dancing right away. He could get a water upstairs as easily as down and then he could sit with Toshi to drink it. That made him smile, just the thought of asking the other man if he was enjoying the show was enough to put a warm ember in his stomach.

He was almost to the stairs when a hand settled on the back of his neck and another caught his wrist. There was no warning, one moment he was walking freely and the next he was being slammed into the wall with enough force to knock his breath out. The hand on the back of his neck tightened and his arm twisted up almost to the point of snapping.

Mick bucked against the grip and felt a warm body behind him. The smell gave it away, gun oil and spent gunpowder, stale coffee and old cigarette smoke and the indefinable scent of strong male. The person holding him was a cop, and one recently off duty, un-showered and straight from work. Mick could think of a few laws he'd broken lately, and a few people on the force that would love to beat him slowly with a heavy object but he could also name a few that would find scaring him like this funny.

He pulled against the grip just to test it and was slammed hard into the wall again. "Miss me love?" A warm, deep voice purred into his ear. Once upon a time, one of the few real pleasures in Mick's life had been laying across that wide chest and listening to that deep voice rumbled inside like rocks dropped into an old well.

He wanted to curse, wanted to kick and bite and scream but he'd vowed he'd never speak to Sal

again and he wasn't going to break that promise now. The body behind him pressed along his back, the perfect height for Mick to just drop his head back against a shoulder, the perfect strength to surrender to.

"It's time the two of us had a little chat. If you fight, so help me, I'll shot that pretty boyfriend of yours." Cold fear slid down Mick's spine at the thought of Toshi being hurt because of him. "He's so pretty in that dress, I'd hate to get blood on it."

What washed over him wasn't what really could be called relief. Mick feared almost as strongly for Andy's life as he did Toshi's but the idea that he'd instantly confused Sal's meaning distracted him. Just when had he started thinking of Toshi in those terms? As a friend, sure, as someone he was head over heels in lust with, of course but the word boyfriend implied so much more. It was enough of a distraction that he almost didn't feel his arm being released.

The grip on his neck guided him toward the cubby hole under the stairs. The dealer there slid out and smiled. "What can I get for your boys?"

"You can get the fuck out." Sal growled.

The man wasn't phased. "This is my office, find your own."

Sal flashed his badge. "I'm not moving in on you, I just want some privacy. Now, back off, stand over here and do your sales. If we're disturbed, I'll drag your dealing ass in and forget to drag it back out. Now, move."

The dealer held out his hands. "Anything I can do for the cities finest." He moved without further protest to the edge of the narrow walkway between the stairs and the wall, leaned against the wall and ignored them.

"Inside." Sal whispered and forced Mick to duck his head to slip into the small storage space. It was dark in here and the quarters were close but not too close to keep Sal from hitting him.

The strong backhand hit the side of Mick's face hard enough to stumble him backward but he kept his feet. He was grinding his teeth together hard enough that he thought they might shatter but he wasn't going to give in and say a word. It was his silence that was driving Sal insane, it was one of a limited number of weapons at his disposal.

"All this time and you're still a whore. I saw you out there, letting that trash paw at you." The look in those hazel eyes, even in the near darkness, made Sal crazy. That silent, stubborn defiance drove him further than anyone had ever taken him and all it took was one glance to fall back into addiction.

"I knew you were a stupid shit but I had no idea you were this stupid." He moved close to that silent body, pressing Mick back against the support walls of the stairs. "Why did you leave the force? All you had to do was call me. All you had to do was come back to me and it all would have gone away. I always was attracted to the pretty, dumb ones."

Wide, strong, calloused fingers traced his face and Mick pulled his head away. The hand that had been touching him so gently snapped out and caught his throat. The grip was firm but not strangling. He should fight, Mick knew he should. Just as he'd known the hundred times before but just like those hundred times he couldn't. His limbs felt like lead, his mind froze and he just took it. There was a predator in Sal and it reduced Mick to prey, a feeling he hated but had no way of fighting.

"Say something!" Sal nearly shouted. "Tell me you hate me, tell me you love me, tell me you want me to be sorry or change, but just fucking say something!" Sal shook the body he held like a rag doll, using his grip on that slender neck.

The defiance was still in those hazel eyes but the body was going limp. Mick was surrendering in flesh if not in spirit and Sal saw it and it made him hard. He didn't understand it, not sure he wanted to understand it, but when Mick dissolved like that and gave in when he wanted to fight, it was better than any drug Sal could take. It made him want to hurt Mick, hear him cry out in pain, make him cry out in pleasure. In it was a test, how long would the pale, quiet man hold out before begging. Neither man was ever sure if he was begging to have the pain stop or continue, begging to make the pleasure end or last.

His grip tightened and Mick coughed under him. "Say something." Sal ordered, his lips almost brushing against the clenched, angry pair. "Anything." He whispered before pressing a kiss.

It was like kissing a wooden doll. Even the warmth had faded from the flesh. It was the challenge, the game, the thing Sal had been missing. He'd get the response he wanted, no matter what it took. The hand on the pretty throat tightened slightly and his other traced the open slashes of the slutty shirt. Rough calluses slid along tender flesh and it pulled a muffled protested grunt from Mick. That was closer but not there, not yet. Without teasing, without offering warning, Sal found the slash that came oh so close to showing off one of those pink, vulnerable nipples. It was child's play to reach inside and pinch the tight bud far rougher than was necessary.

The pain was sudden and surprising. Mick gasped and pulled away, only the tight grip on his neck held him in place and there was no time to gasp. Sal's mouth took instant advantage of his parted lips, his slick, wet tongue forced it's way inside Mick's mouth. He wanted to bite it off but Sal had planned for that and now gripped his jaw as well as his neck. Any efforts to bite would give the stronger man plenty of warning.

Mick closed his eyes and wished he'd been drinking. Sal's tongue forced it's way around his mouth, probing, thrusting, violating, promising all he really wanted to do. It made Mick feel small, helpless, weak, and he hated himself for feeling that way, not Sal for making him feel that way. If he'd been drinking, he'd care less, it would hurt less, he'd hate himself less.

Sal's hand was still on that abused nipple. Teasing now, stroking, rubbing, hurting with just the right level that it felt good. It sent tiny shivers of desire across Mick's body. His face flushed in embarrassment and shame. It wasn't the kiss as much as how much he hated having to accept it, it wasn't the pleasure from Sal's touch as the occasional pain he felt he deserved, it wasn't the smell of bullets and gunfire as the musky scent of Sal under it, it all combined and slowly, he was getting hard in response.

Sal broke the kiss and his free hand gripped Mick's crotch hard enough to hurt. Instead of causing the growing erection to dissolve, it actually made him a little harder. Sal chuckled and rubbed his own hard length against Mick's side. "You always were such a slutty, kinky boy. Maybe you won't speak to me because you're afraid if you open your mouth you'll be begging me again. You want this, I can feel that you do."

Mick shuddered and closed his eyes.

The grip on his throat tightened. "Say something!" Sal pulled Mick back and slammed him into the wall. Mick's head cracked backwards, smashing hard against the wall and landing on an uneven surface. Sharp pain exploded, his ears rung and for a moment he couldn't tell if his eyes were open or shut, everything was blackness.

The tightening on his throat snapped him back aware. "Fine." Sal hissed out. "If you don't want to talk I can think of better uses for your pretty mouth." He was fumbling now with his belt, getting his pants opened one handed with far more ease than an unpracticed man could.

"Will you be a good slut and behave?"

Mick shook his head, the closest to speaking he'd let himself come. He would bite if Sal pushed the issue. The grip on his throat tightened and now it was almost impossible to breathe.

"Will you behave?" Sal growled.

Mick shook his head no again and clutched weakly at the wrist slowly strangling him.

"You've had half the cocks in this city down your throat but you'd rather let me strangle you?"

The grip tightened further and the dog collar bit into Mick's neck. There were dark spots in front of his eyes now and his throat was a sheet of fire. He wanted to swallow and couldn't. Cold acceptance settled over him, the fear was gone. Distantly, he wondered how long it would take for someone to find his body.

Then the grip released and Mick would have dropped to the floor, coughing and gasping for breath, if Sal hadn't held him pinned in place. "Why do you have to be such a fucking difficult whore? Fine, if you won't behave, we'll play another game."

Mick was still coughing as he was turned around and he knew what was happening, he just couldn't bring himself to care. Sal fumbled with the belt but quickly had it open and the cool air that suddenly rushed across Mick's ass was shocking. He tried to pull away but a hand caught his arm again and twisted it up painfully. If his head wasn't so fuzzy, Mick might have let Sal break it in an effort to get away but now his movements were random and uncoordinated, ineffective.

He felt Sal's hard length press against his hip and the warmth of the man's chest press to his back. "Relax, you'll like it." Sal whispered and then came the crinkling sound of foil. Sal was obsessive about condoms, neither of them had ever lived in a time of sexually transmitted disease but Sal rarely fucked without one. Andy had used to tease that he needed it to dull the sensations and last but Mick was a cop and he understood.

Mick heard the foil drop, felt the shift of the grip on his arm as Sal slid the latex on one handed. He tried to get away but nothing was moving right and there was no where to go. Something blunt, wet and slick slid against his ass and cold terror sent shivers across his body.

Mick broke his vow. "no." He whispered out around his sore throat.

The sound of his voice caused Sal to groan and he bucked forward. His erection wrapped in the slick latex slid easily between Mick's thighs, running under the bottom curve of his ass and nestling against the back of his balls. "Say it again, baby." He moaned softly, right against Mick's ear. He pulled out and shoved a knee between Mick's, spreading the pale legs apart. "Say no like you used to. I want to hear you scream it as you come. I want you to mean it as much as you meant it than, you fucking whore."

Mick's body was trembling now, shivering in cold or fear or bitter anger. "I always meant it."

Sal laughed, aching now that he'd won and Mick was talking. "Sure you did baby, that's why you were so hard for me." He ran a wide hand across that smooth, pale ass, loving the contrast. "Brace yourself babe."

A growl near the entrance to the cubby hole froze Sal. "Who ever the fuck you are, you'd better go now before I snap your neck."

"Let him go."

Mick opened his eyes and wasn't sure what was worse, letting Sal use him or letting Toshi see him like this. There was no doubt it was Toshi standing there, the body was in dark shadows but the dim light caught in those perfect, clear blue eyes and caused them to glow.

"Get the fuck out of here bug eyes, I'm too busy to play."

"Remove your filthy, God damned hands from him."

Sal laughed and let go of Mick to tuck himself back into his pants but he made no effort to close the fabric. "What? did Mick forget to pay you? How much does he owe? I'll pay it." Mick tried to stay standing but his legs just wouldn't hold him, he slid down to his knees.

Toshi threw a punch, literally seeing red. Sal easily blocked it.

"So you want to play too?"

In another day, another place, Toshi might have enjoyed the larger man's fighting. The cramped space called for careful movements and well timed balance and Sal not only held his own he was quite good. Like Mick, Sal was more of a street fighter, more of a boxer than anything close to a martial artist but his movements were fluid and effective. Even past the sheer rage he felt, Toshi could appreciate the man's skill and in spite of his greater bulk he was as fast as Mick, if not faster.

The close confines kept the fight to punches. They both tossed them out and blocked with smooth ease. Arms and hands twisting in the dark, an element that should have aided Toshi but didn't seem to be hampering the human any. Any enjoyment Toshi might have felt about really being able to let go was gone in the face of his need to hurt the other man.

Sal threw a punch at Toshi's head, not holding back, knowing it would connect. Toshi saw it and slid his head to the side, letting the man's fist stir the air where he had been. Sal's hand pushed past the thick curtain of black hair, he opened his fist and grabbed a handful. Rather than be upset, Toshi smiled and Sal suddenly felt very exposed.

Kicking was virtually impossible in the small room but Toshi didn't need to fully kick out to effect the other man. As he slid sideways to move his head, he struck out with one booted heel. Lifting it not out to kick but in a small, tight arch that caught the heel of his boot into the open waistband of the other's pants. As his leg came down, so did his pants, tangling around Sal's knees.

When the hand in his hair pulled, Toshi didn't fight against it. He let the other man yank his head down and toward him. It pulled him, if painfully, into the other man's space and he swung out, impacting a punch to Sal's solar plexus. The larger man's breath rushed out and the hand tangled in the thick hair shuddered open. Toshi flipped his hair out of reach and brought the web of his hand hard into Sal's throat.

Sal tried to move back and stumbled in his own clothes. The force of the impact to his throat and his already unsteady balance tripped him and he fell, hard to the floor below. He was coughing now, shocked and surprised more than he was really hurt. As soon as he caught his balance and his breath he was going to haul the I/S outside and pulp him.

Toshi didn't let him get back up. As soon as Sal landed he had a booted foot to his now softening groin. He leaned weight down on the sensitive flesh mercilessly and when Sal howled. One of the cop's hands reached to pry at the abusing ankle, Toshi just snapped down and snagged the wrist. He twisted that into a vicious joint lock, one equally as painful as the lock Sal had on Mick previously. The more the other man moved, the more painful the hold became.

It took a force of will Toshi didn't know he had to keep from smashing the flaccid sex below his boot. He could see it, clearly, how his boot would impact again and again leaving ruin behind. There was no doubt if he started he wouldn't stop and soon would be smashing down on the soft abdomen so vulnerable to a brutal assault. He likely wouldn't stop until he'd kicked the man to death and for as horrible as the idea was, it wasn't enough to stop the rage he was feeling.

Sal squirmed again and Toshi leaned more weight into twisted arm and pinned genitals. The man bit back a cry and suddenly beating him to death wasn't enough. He wanted to bite him. To a human it would seem a step down in violence but there was nothing an I/S could do that was more violent than inject a lethal dose of venom. It took a killing rage, an anger like Toshi had never felt before, to even be able to deliver such a dose into another person's flesh. Sal would be dead within moments, they'd find him unconscious, with his pants around his ankles and no one would ask questions. His fangs ached to bite and he stepped down harder just to hear Sal cry out.

"Can I kill him?" Toshi managed to gasp out. Not sure if he was hoping Mick would stop him or allow him.

"No, don't." Mick whispered in the darkness.

Toshi actually whimpered at the denial, stopping was almost painful. He moved like a viper, switching the joint lock to a lower one and pulling his foot from the man's battered groin. He dropped instantly down, his shin pressing into Sal's throat. It was a dominate pose, more intimate than just standing over the man. He could strangle the man like this without even trying and as the breath crushed out of Sal's body, he'd stare up at Toshi through the V of his vinyl covered legs.

"Why Mick doesn't want you dead, I don't know, but he's made his choice. So, we can do this two ways." Movement from where Mick was sitting caused Toshi to glance over. The human had worked his boxers back up but the fabric of his pants was tangled below him. Toshi's eyes fell on the red angry mark on Mick's face. "Did he hit you?"

Mick shook his head. "It's nothing."

Without pause or comment, Toshi hauled back and hit Sal. The wet, dull sound of the impact got lost in the sounds of the club. "There, now we can continue. As I was saying, we've two choices here. I can get up and you can leave holding on to your delusions that Mick cares about you. You can slink back to your friends and try to hide the truth that one skinny little I/S beat the snot out of you. They'll know and they'll laugh at you and your pride will hurt. It'll make you want to come teach us a lesson. If that happens you'd better kill me first because if I ever hear you've hurt Mick or his friends again I'll get the pleasure of hearing you beg for death for months. So, assuming you're smarter than you look you'll kill me first, which will royally piss off my family. I'm sure you've heard how seriously we I/S take family. In either case, you end up in a world of hurt." He leaned his weight down on the soft throat.

"But there's option two. This is a simpler one. I get up and you leave. I don't care what lies you tell your friends but you lie to them. You protect your delicate little pride. You stay out of Mick's life, you stay out of my way and we pretend none of this happened." He twisted the arm just a little more. "So, what will it be? Option one?" Toshi leaned a little of his weight off the man's throat.

Sal shook his head. "I'll go." He gasped out.

Toshi was off of Sal as quick as a cat and out of arm's reach. He stood, waiting for an attack but Sal just rubbed at his throat. With a wince he stretched out his arm and worked his pants back up over his hips. As he was standing he spit on Mick. "What a fucking weak ass pretty little whore you are, hiding behind a Frankie freak."

"Please, let me kill him." Toshi begged Mick but his eyes stayed on Sal.

Mick just shook his head but knew the threat was more aimed at Sal than him.

"This isn't over, Mick. You belong to me."

"Get the fuck out of here!" Toshi shouted now, not caring if anyone outside the cubby hole heard.

Sal smirked as if he hadn't been knocked flat on his back and almost murdered. His dark eyes slid across Mick and then Toshi, almost more hungry now than before. As he stepped out into the brighter club, he blew the pair a kiss.

Toshi waited all of a dozen heartbeats just to make sure the other man wasn't coming back before he knelt beside Mick. "You're bleeding. Where?" The smell of Mick's blood had been heavy in the small storage space and it had made keeping control harder. He'd never understood the desire to kill someone before. Even those hours after he'd seen his grandfather murdered and before he'd been glossed up on shine he'd been emotionally cold, empty from the shock and hadn't considered revenge. There had been plenty of times over the years when he'd wanted to kill himself but he'd never wanted to kill anyone else. It was something he didn't know was inside of him until that moment.

"I'm fine." Mick forced out, kicking out his leg to untangle the fabric. "I hit my head."

Toshi's hands were there, feeling along the back of his skull, spreading through his hair. They found the swollen, tender spot and carefully probed it. "It doesn't feel too bad but I bet it hurts."

"Toshi, I'm sorry, I'm supposed to protect you. I,"

"Don't." He caught Mick's face between his hands and forced him to look up at him. "You protect me from the world's nuts and I'll protect you from that specific nut. Agreed?"

Mick found himself nodding but as Toshi's hands started running across the arm that had been so painfully twisted he found himself shaking again. "Stop." He pulled away from the gentle touch and quickly wanted to hide it. "Help me up?"

Toshi wasn't fooled but he nodded and helped steady the human as he found his feet. Mick swayed but the steady hands on his shoulders held him in place as he pulled up and then fastened his pants. Mick wanted to fall against that comforting, warm body, to hide his face in the fall of that thick hair but he couldn't. It was too much, too close, too needy and he couldn't do it.

"Thank you." He muttered and blushed at how lame that sounded.

"Come on, let's get you a drink and find Andy before he has a fit."

Mick silently thanked any god that wanted to take credit for Toshi's understanding. Any fuss right now and he'd shatter, no questions about it, he'd simply break apart into a thousand un-repairable fragments. He couldn't do that now, maybe not ever, but definitely not in the middle of Sleaze with Andy and Samson waiting to see if he was okay, not with Toshi watching from those knowing, solemn eyes. He needed to keep moving, to find a distraction and a drink, well, that sounded perfect.

Outside the club now seemed cold to him. The people were too close, the music too loud but Mick knew it was just that his nerves were frayed. Slumped along the wall was the dealer Sal had ordered away, knocked out cold and his coat spread wide. It didn't take a massive leap of logic to guess that Toshi had been a bit rough with the man and the other club goers had taken advantage of the situation to help themselves to some free samples.

Mick rubbed at his neck and let Toshi guide him up the stairs. At the bar he leaned against the wall and away from the crowd. Toshi pressed a tumbler of an amber liquor into his hand and Mick downed the whiskey shot in one swallow. It burned in his stomach and the empty glass was replaced with a fresh, second shot. Without debate, Mick downed that one too.

"Want another?"

Mick shook his head. The alcohol was spreading already, settling his nerves, chasing away the unease. Or maybe it wasn't the alcohol, maybe it was just being around Toshi.

"Here, turn around and let me see that cut." Toshi cracked open a bottle of water and poured some of it on a thin stack of napkins from the bar. Mick didn't fight him and didn't pull away when the cool water cleaned at the wound. "It doesn't look like it needs stitches. Here." He pressed a plastic cup full of ice into Mick's hand. "I don't know what hurts worse, the head or the face."

"The head. I'm used to the face."

"What's a Frankie? Should I be offended?" It was a slur he hadn't heard before.

"Frankie, like Frankenstein's Monster, cause your DNA is so scrambled."

"That's a new one to me."

"Actually, it's an old one. From the first generation I/S, he prides himself on being an historian."

The slur didn't offend him. "Feel better?" Toshi started to wash a little at the small cuts on his knuckles that he hadn't felt until that moment. He wasn't used to actually hitting people.

"Yes."

"Good, because here comes Andy."

Mick found himself clenching his jaw again but he kept his face neutral. He reminded himself that Andy meant well and tried to brace for the impact.

Except Andy didn't burst at seeing them. He was twisting the loose fabric of the pinafore around his hands like a nervous housewife and his face was truly worried. "Are you okay?" His eyes slid across the sore red mark on Mick's face and down to Toshi's bruised hand.

"I'm fine." Mick forced out.

"Oh are you? Is that blood?" Andy reached out and grabbed at Mick's head.

"Ouch, Christ, stop that, it hurts." He pulled away and tried to fade into the corner of the bar.

"What happened? Did Sal do that?"

Lying to Andy hurt but not as much as telling the truth, Mick paused and teetered on telling Andy everything. Not just about tonight but about everything he knew about Sal. The words clung there and his mind stopped thinking.

"He's just dehydrated." Toshi tossed out into the silence. "I found him in the men's room, he'd lost his balance and cracked his face against the counter. He hasn't had anything to drink all night and all that dancing, well, he was stupid. I just wasn't watching him close enough, he lost his balance again on the steps and cracked his head in."

Mick almost burst into tears. The relief was crushing.

Andy raised an eyebrow and stuck a hand on his hip. "Oh, really, and just how did you bruise your hand than?"

Toshi shrugged and glanced at the small cut. "I must have banged it into the steps when I caught him." He made his face look innocent, knowing the large blue eyes played that look well.

"Bullshit."

"Hey!" Samson called out as she dragged Oliver up the steps behind her. "Oh my God, you'll never believe what I just saw?" The words fell out over themselves. "Oh Mick, you look like shit."

"Thanks."

"It makes more sense now." Oliver's voice was lower, calmer than his girlfriends.

"What makes sense?" Andy snapped.

"Oh! We saw Sal, going into the men's room. His eye was almost swollen shut! Someone popped that bastard good!" Her head bobbed in her excitement.

"Fell on the steps huh? Bullshit! That fucker hurt you again didn't he?" Andy knew his voice was getting loud but he didn't care. "Fucking fucker fuckhead!"

"Andy!" Mick snapped. "Shut up!"

Andy shut up and looked hurt until he saw the truly lost expression on his friends face than he just looked worried.

"Just, leave it alone. I'm okay. I just want to leave it alone."

There was a long uncertain silence in the group until Andy broke it. "Well, we're leaving. There's no way we're staying here with that bastard downstairs."

"No, this isn't going to ruin the night." Mick protested as he wrapped some of the ice in the thin napkins and held it to the back of his head. He still felt light headed, a little dizzy but it wasn't anything that was going to stop him.

"Than let's at least go to another club."

"Where?" Samson tossed in. "I bet as sure as the sun follows rain that Sal has eyes at every club around. Andy's right Mick, let's just go home."

"I know one club that would be safe." There was a look to Mick that worried him, one he knew. Except when Toshi felt like how Mick looked he did almost anything he could to escape from people. Obviously it had the opposite reaction in Mick, he looked as if he'd go mad if he had to be alone.

"Oh? Where? Sal's a cop."

"Token. You said it was very exclusive."

Samson's head bobbed again. "There's no way they're going to let us in there. They don't take freaks, fags or I/S."

"They'll let us in." It actually amused him that they'd so quickly forgotten just who he was.

Looks were passed around. "You really think they will?" Andy asked, needing to get Mick away.

"I know they will."

Oliver smiled. "Okay than, we'll go get the car. Meet us out front?"

"They're not going to let us in." Samson was still protesting as he pulled her away.

Andy watched them head out before he glanced over Mick again. "You're sure you want to stay out?"

"It's not a party until someone bleeds, right?" Mick forced a smile but it was empty.

Andy still wanted to put a spiked heel up Sal's ass but he had no false faith in his fighting skills. Sal would snap him in two and not even notice, it didn't change his desire to retaliate for his friend. "It's a good thing you've a thick skull." He moved toward the stairs. "Are you stable enough not to fall going down them this time?" He hated buying into the lies but the cloak of normalcy was something Mick needed.

"I'll manage."

Andy touched Toshi's arm as he followed Mick past. When those wide blue eyes landed on him Andy mouthed two words. "Thank you."

Toshi bowed, a very small smile touching his lips before following close at Mick's elbow.

When they slipped out the door Bitty's quick eyes didn't miss the damage that had been done. "Jesus, Mick, you okay? Did Sal do that? If he did I'll have to,"

"He's fine." Andy broke in, he leaned in closer to the big man. "You know how he dances and he was drinking like a fish. He slipped on the stairs, cracked his face in."

"Oww, that had to hurt."

"Yeah but he's fine. We're going to check out some of the other clubs tonight. Thanks for your help Bitty!" Andy waved and made sure the big man got a peek at the ruffled panties under the short hem of his dress but he didn't stick around to chat.

Oliver had pulled the car up and Andy slid in first. Not surprisingly, Toshi gently pushed Mick inside next before sliding in himself. Mick still clutched the cup of ice in his hands, he hunched over his knees. Toshi felt Andy staring at him and when he glanced over the other man nodded toward Mick and raised an eyebrow.

Toshi wasn't comfortable with public displays of affection that involved him. Andy nodded to Mick again and then very obviously turned to glance out of his window. Reaching across those inches to where Mick was sitting was almost painful. He kept waiting for something, someone, to yell at him or mock him, but nothing happened. His fingertips brushed against Mick's back but instead of pulling away, the other man actually arched a little bit into the touch. Encouraged, Toshi began rubbing his hand across Mick's shoulders and when he still wasn't yelled at to stop he tugged slightly on them.

"What?" Mick asked but there was no harshness in his voice, just emptiness.

Toshi just tugged again, harder, until Mick relented and let himself be pulled backwards to fall against that warm body. Very carefully, Toshi draped an arm around Mick's shoulders and just let the other man lean against him. He soothed a hand across Mick's hair for a second, a ghost of an embrace before dropping the contact.

In the front seat, Oliver nudged Samson and she turned quickly to glance back. The sight of Mick actually leaning against anyone other than Andy for comfort made her smile. When she glanced to see if Andy was jealous, all she found on his face was a matching grin. She turned around and

flipped on the radio, letting the music fill the car and keep the gentle moment intact.

Part Thirteen

Oliver had driven past Token shortly after it had opened, Samson had wanted to go there so badly it had hurt. It had become pretty clear, pretty quickly, that the likes of them wouldn't be allowed inside. Tonight didn't appear to be any different. Token was set in the more upscale downtown regions and had taken over the better part of the block's corner. Around it were trendy bars and restaurants but they were side notes, everyone wanted inside of Token and the couple hundred people that waited in line outside was visible testament to the club's success.

Toshi stroked a hand across Mick's hair once again before removing his arm and leaning forward. "Just pull up to the valet."

"You're sure? I mean this isn't a bad car but it's not really the sort of thing a guy like you rides around in."

"Your car is fine, Oliver." Toshi said warmly. It would end up in the papers as well as the gossip magazines. His sharper vision could make out the small flock of photographers that hovered near the door to the club, he'd been counting on them.

Oliver just shook his head. "If you say so."

When they pulled up the valets actually paused before coming over. Toshi didn't wait, he opened his door and gracefully rose from inside. It would have been impossible to miss the curious glances from the people in line and the equally confused glances of the photographers. They were whispering among themselves, trying to settle out his identity.

Toshi didn't wait, he opened Samson's door for her and offered her a hand out. Mick was already out of the car and Oliver was on his way around the front. "Don't ding the fenders." He smiled at the valet.

"Why, thank you!" Samson glowed at the gentlemanly offer and accepted the hand out of the car. As soon as she was on her feet, she was reaching for Oliver's arm. "There's no way they're going to let us in this joint."

"Don't be so sure about that." Toshi smiled and offered the same gesture to Andy. The whole point of just not taking Mick home was kicking in, instead of hovering nearby, Mick was scanning the crowd. Instead of falling into hidden and unhappy thoughts about old lovers, he was thinking like a cop and security officer.

"Thank you, Toshi!" Andy slid out of the car. "Wouldn't want my skirt to flip up and show the world my panties." He grinned as he straightened his blue skirts so the ruffles on his ass would show. It didn't miss his notice either that Mick was slowly snapping out of his depression, nor did he miss why. Andy leaned up and kissed Toshi's cheek. "You're a doll for doing this."

"It seemed only right that the two most beautiful members of our party be treated accordingly." Toshi teased back, feeling better now that his ploy was working.

Andy just patted his arm before taking Oliver's other arm. "I don't have a date, darling, you don't mind sharing?" He addressed Samson, not Oliver.

"Of course not, sweetie."

"Mick?"

Mick turned and nodded at Toshi. "Looks good."

"Thank you."

Toshi led the way across the fifteen feet or so to the door and by now the photographers were catching on. One or two were even starting to snap a few shots. There was no thought to being fair and waiting his turn here, he led the small party straight to the door.

The door blocked by two men that made Bitty look small. "We don't serve I/S here." The taller of the two warned.

"You'll serve me." Toshi had pulled out his wallet. "Tell Mr. Spyker I'm here and while I respect his rules, I won't be kept waiting."

"Toshi!"

He turned automatically at his name and flashes went off, blinding him. He tossed a hand up automatically as he turned back to his group. "Don't tell them your names unless you want them camped outside your apartment door for the next month."

"Toshi! Out on the town tonight Toshi?"

He turned and tried to smile past the sharp lights. "Just a night out with friends." That felt odd to say.

"Hey! Pretty boy in the dress, what's your name?" One of the group called out.

Andy just posed a little and smiled. "Why, I'm Alice, have you seen the white rabbit?"

The photographers laughed and pushed, tossing out more questions and taking more pictures. Toshi finally had enough. "Mick, can you kill the flashes?"

"Of course." Mick nodded and stepped closer to the corralled group of photo hounds. "Ladies and gentleman, Mr. Ranvier respects that you have to earn a living and doesn't begrudge you doing your job, however, please bare in mind his eyes are twice as sensitive to light as ours. I'm only going to request once that you turn off the flashes. The next flash I see will be taken as a threat to Mr. Ranvier and I'll be forced to do my job, which won't be a nice thing for your cameras. Fair?" He made sure he met each person's eye before.

"McKale?" One of the men in the back called out. "Are you the new bodyguard we've heard about? A.R. McKale?"

"Yes. Now, excuse me."

"Mick!" they called out now, "Mick did you really take down those bank robbers?"

"Are you gay, Mick?"

"Are you and Toshi lovers, Mick?"

"What happened to your face, Mick? Did you get into a fight tonight?"

"What about that underage hustler that got you kicked out of the police?"

"Mick!"

He kept his face neutral. "You of all people should know you can't believe everything you hear. Now, I'm working." But the cameras kept clicking and the flashes stayed off.

Mick joined Toshi by the door. "Thank you, they never remember." The empty helplessness that had been clinging to Mick was gone.

"You're welcome."

A tall, slick, trendy looking man pushed past the two mountains guarding the door.

"Toshi Ranvier! My eyes can't be seeing this!" The man called out and opened his arms to Toshi but didn't quite touch him.

"Hello Vance. Would you be kind enough to tell your guard dogs I can come in."

Vance Spyker, renowned owner of Token, turned to his doorman. "No I/S expect for Toshi Ranvier and his party. Make note of it boys. I never want to see this man waiting outside ever again."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Spyker, sir."

"Toshi, I'm sorry, I never thought you'd come by. Come in, let me put you at the best table and send up drinks to make up for this mess. The vultures weren't too bad to you were they?"

"No, Mick got them to shut off the flashes. You're doing well, Vance?"

"Very, as you know I'm sure. You'll see a tidy profit off of us at the end of the quarter. You haven't been here before, right?"

Vance led them inside. The space was larger, better laid out, than Sleaze. The light displays were more sophisticated, the decorating scheme more trendy and stylish in chromes and bright blues. The music was better mixed and the bars more spacious and unlike Sleaze, waiters and waitresses in sexy, small outfits carried drinks to tables. The dance floor was packed with the same writhing mass of people, better dressed and with far more women than Sleaze ever claimed. Vance led them to one of three staircases that curved in gentle arcs up to the second floor.

"No, I haven't had the chance."

Vance nodded. "You'll be pleased. Most of the second floor is VIP, only the bar nearest the DJ booth is open to the public. You won't be disturbed. We've security around all the entrances to keep the press out."

Samson and Andy clung to Oliver which was a good thing since they weren't watching where they were going. Their heads swiveled around, pointing out fish tanks filled with exotic, colorful fish that swam around the backs of the bar as much as they were pointing out the exotic, colorful collection of the cities elite.

"Is this your new bodyguard?" Vance eyed Mick over, taking in the slashed shirt as well as the swollen bump on his head.

"A.R. McKale, Mick, this is Vance Spyker. He's a friend of Alec's from college."

Mick nodded his head but his eyes were still studying the room.

"Are you armed, Mr. McKale? We don't generally allow weapons in here."

"No, I'm not tonight. You've cameras, obvious ones and hidden I see, about the club? As well as plain clothes security?"

Vance looked sideways at him. "Very good, I'll have to speak to security, no one's supposed to notice the plain clothes ones."

Toshi smiled. "Mick's very good at what he does, don't worry too much about it."

"Indeed! Will you want to check on our security measures, Mr. McKale."

"Mick's here as my friend first, as my security second. Unless he sees a serious lack I don't want him working tonight."

"I won't need to, but thank you for the offer."

"Anytime." Vance turned the corner past a velvet roped barrier and another mountainous security guard and led them down a hallway of carefully closed off rooms. The tables sat sunk down and allowed the occupants to view the dancing below or slip into the back of the table away from prying eyes. People walking by could see in but they'd have to stand on one of the plush, comfortable sofas to view into the next room. By it's location, the most private would be the one along the far wall and that is where Vance was leading them.

Standing at the entrance to their booth was a very pretty young woman, dressed as a waitress and holding a tray in front of her. Vance waved to her. "This is Pia, she's my best waitress. Anything you want, she'll get for you."

"Thank you, Vance."

"No, thank you, Toshi, it's an honor to have you come by. Would you like me to bring the books to the table or would you care to join me in my office?"

Andy and Samson wasted no time, they tumbled with laughing giggles into the small room and leaned dangerously over the railing. Oliver was a little more cautious, and he kept a hand on both of the balls of the energy. Mick was glancing about the walls and ceiling not the crowds below.

"No, Vance, I'm sorry. I've already gone over your files last week. Everything's fine, I just wanted to bring my friends here."

Vance sighed and visibly relaxed. "Oh, that's a different story. Pia, make sure these people have an exceptional time. Mr. Ranvier never takes time to relax, it's a true honor that he's chosen us. Get them some champagne to start, the best in the house."

"Yes, Mr. Spyker."

"Anything I can do, let me know."

"Thank you, Vance."

Vance left and the small group was alone in the room. "Are we secure, Mick?"

Mick nodded. "If they're monitoring, it's subtle."

"Holy shit! I can't believe we're in Token!" Samson cried.

"What I can't believe is that you own this joint." Andy leaned against the railing and wondered how many of the people below bothered to look up.

"Part, I own about half and that's Alec's doing." He didn't like talking about money or what he actually owned. The reality was, his own private finances were extensive. Half his days were spent tending his private wealth.

"Oh! Look," Samson pointed to the dance floor. "There are men dancing together and look women. Hedonism." She sighed. "We aren't going to get tossed out."

Mick glanced to the people and felt a knot in his shoulders letting go. The walls were a different color and the people were dressed in more expensive clothes but this was something he could understand. There were even a few dozen people dressed as outrageously as Andy. He glanced to where Toshi still stood near the entrance to their booth and grinned.

They drank a glass of champagne, even Mick downed his glass, and Andy, Samson and Oliver hurried off to dance. It left the two of them alone. Toshi poured Mick another glass. "How's the head?"

"Sore." Mick had to look away from those impossible eyes. "About earlier,"

"I don't need to know. But if he'd done what he was about to do," he couldn't quite bring himself to say the word. "He wouldn't have walked out of there."

Mick just nodded and kept studying his shoes.

"Do you love him?"

The champagne went down in a few quick swallows. "No." It sounded false even to his own ears. "Love is just a thing people hide behind."

"I'm going to kiss you, if that's okay?" He'd been needing to since he'd seen Sal hurting him.

Mick pulled back a little. "We shouldn't, just because I don't think they're monitoring doesn't mean they aren't. It wouldn't do to have tomorrow's headline be something like, 'Ranvier and bodyguard caught on film making out.'"

Toshi grinned. "I don't care." He moved into Mick's personal space and pulled the other body close to his own. His lips nipped at Mick's, teasing. "Besides, if they do, I'll sue them into the stone ages."

Sal's very presence froze him in place, Toshi's melted him. The difference was stunning and caused Mick's sore head to spin. The warm, grasping hands around his waist held on to him without hurting. The long legs that tangled with his own supported and were supporting. The lips that brushed against his own were hot, soft, patient. They teased, nipping, kissing gently, waiting for the invitation deeper. When Mick groaned and opened his mouth he expected Toshi to slide that welcome, probing tongue into his mouth. Instead the tables turned and Toshi surrendered the kiss to Mick. It sent a tremor of comfort, of need, down his spine and his hands came up to cradle the sides of Toshi's face. His tongue grazed past the tips of those fangs and this time there was no surprise, it just felt right.

He broke the kiss and pressed his forehead against Toshi's. "I want to touch your hair. It's driving me crazy." He whispered.

It was such a simple request but it carried such erotic power. Toshi actually shivered and what attempts he was making at keeping the kiss friendly and light, dissolved. He needed, he ached, it was too much and so far from enough.

"Than touch it." He whispered back so softly he wasn't even sure he gave his answer voice.

He must have because Mick's hands slid from his face back and into his hair. They ran across his scalp and tangled in the long length. Over and over those hands ran through the dark length and each pass grew a little rougher. Each time Mick's hands tangled in his hair, Toshi had to swallow a moan of need. He wasn't sure what he wanted, he just wanted.

As if Mick had read his mind, the hands in his hair gripped almost painfully and bent his head to the side. All at once there was the shivering fear of vulnerability chased away by the intense tingles of pleasure radiating from where Mick's lips and mouth were teasing the side of his neck. Mick's mouth bit the junction of neck and shoulder hard enough to sting and gained a cry of sheer need. It just escaped, so sudden was the pleasure that ripped across his body that there was no way he could have stopped that needy sound from getting out. His only saving grace was the fact that the song playing currently had a lot of cries and moans mixed in, making the music erotic and sexy.

Mick wasn't fooled. He groaned, low in his throat. "I love hearing you." He slid his hands down the length of the silken hair to where the tips brushed against the small of Toshi's back. It was the closest he'd come to really touching the other man and it made him hungry for more. "Toshi, I," He glanced into the glazed eyes and had to look away. "We should stop."

"What do you want, Mick?" Toshi asked, his heart beating as hard against his ribs as if he'd been running.

"We can't, Andy," he glanced to the open back of the private space. "Samson,"

Toshi pressed his body full length against Mick's and shut his protests off. "What do you want?"

He glanced over and fell into those eyes, his heart stopped and his stomach flipped over. Between his legs, he ached. "I want you to take me. Hard." The words spilled out.

The tension between them was a physical force, it constricted their breath and held them together. "You want me to use you."

Mick found himself nodding. He felt the blush creeping up his neck, unable to stop it under the scrutiny of such an intense study. Toshi crushed forward and claimed his mouth and Mick just whimpered and gave in. There wasn't a nerve ending in his body that wasn't alive, he shivered, trembled, but escaping such consumption was unthinkable. He clung to that shower of black hair and gave in.

Only, Toshi stopped and pulled away. Not just a few inches but physically away. Mick watched, confused, as Toshi headed for the small entrance and glanced around the corner.

"Pia!" He called out to their waitress and stepped back into the booth to wait.

There was no way the girl could miss what they had been doing. Mick's face was flushed and his pants were visibly tented. Embarrassed, uncertain, Mick stood and held onto the railing, watching the dancers and keeping his back to the entrance of their room. Below, he saw Andy lost in dance in the center of the crowd, men and women both trying to get close to him.

"Yes, Mr." Pia's voice dropped and froze but not because she suspected what had just happened. She saw the cold, hungry emotion in Toshi's eyes and mistook it for anger. "Ranvier." Her voice finished, and she glanced nervously to where Mick stood, back turned.

"Pia, I need to have a conversation with my bodyguard. A private conversation. See to it we aren't disturbed. What I need to say shouldn't be overheard by his friends. Do you understand?" His voice was cold, demanding, it was his father's voice and the girl nodded meekly.

"Yes, sir. I'll have security see to it." She glanced again to Mick and didn't envy the man. Whatever he'd done, he was about to be royally chewed out for it but at least Mr. Ranvier was kind enough to keep it private.

"That'll be all, Pia."

"Yes, sir." She disappeared from view and Toshi knew they were now alone. The security guard would be placed a good ten feet down the hallway and no one would get by until he said so.

Their privacy ensured, Toshi moved to stand behind Mick. The pulsing music driving with the beat of his heart, as he approached Mick stood up straight, not turning, just waiting. Toshi didn't touch him, he stood as close as he could without actually allowing a single spot of their bodies to come into contact. When he spoke, his voice filled Mick's thoughts.

"You want me to just use you."

It wasn't a question but Mick found himself nodding anyway. "Please." He wanted to step that half inch backward and press into Toshi's body, ached for it.

"I told you before, I'm not Sal."

Mick shuddered and his grip on the railing tightened.

"I want to use you, claim you, but not tonight. Not because you think you deserve it because of him. When I take you that way, it'll be because of me, not him. Do you understand?"

The voice alone was almost enough to make him come. Mick found himself unable to speak so he nodded, disappointed and even more turned on all at once. Warm hands settled on his hips and pulled him away from the railing. When they'd stepped back away from where the people below could see them those same hands turned him around. Their bodies were so close Mick could feel the heat rolling off of Toshi but they still weren't touching. A hungry, demanding mouth covered his and Mick didn't make Toshi tease this time. He opened his mouth and gave away anything Toshi wanted to take.

Toshi slid a hand up Mick's body, running his fingers across soft fabric and silken skin, until he reached a shoulder. He used more force than he really needed to push Mick down onto one of the plush sofas and before the other man could settle he was on top of him. With the slightest of nudges from his knee, Mick's legs fell open and Toshi laid down hard on him, legs between his, hips pressed into hips, erection grinding into fabric covered erection. It was almost enough to make Toshi change his mind but he didn't want Mick that way tonight and the privacy of the small room didn't allow for the gentle, slow, love making he really wanted.

"I am going to use you, we need to do this quickly before Andy gets bored and tries to come back. Open your pants for me." Toshi was nibbling on an ear, whispering in it. His hands were roaming across that responsive body, a touch here along Mick's ribs drew out a gasp, a quick slid across an already hard nipple made him squirm. Privacy wasn't the only thing that was going to make their session shorter.

"What?" Mick managed to gasp out, confused by the request and his slowly functioning mind.

"If you want this to go forward, open your pants. Other wise we stay like this. Show me you want to continue, let me touch you."

"Oh, fucking God." Mick groaned and his body arched up to press into Toshi's, only Toshi pulled away, denying him. The physical contact almost wasn't needed, that smooth voice asking for permission was almost enough. Almost.

Mick fumbled with his pants and opened them as quickly as his numb fingers would allow. He started to push them down but Toshi's hands stopped him. Mick surrendered to another kiss and cried out as a hot hand slid across his lower stomach, slipping downward to duck inside the fabric. Then it was there, the graceful, slender hand trapped between the fabric and his aching cock. A demanding swish across his weeping slit, a strong downward stroke that slipped from head to base and Mick arched off the sofa, his mouth fell open but no sound came out. He clawed at the sofa before he was able to find and tangle one hand into the showering fall of black hair.

Toshi had never seen anything so beautiful as the look on Mick's face. The man was trapped under him, lost in sensation, his mind was shut down. It made him ache to see it. He stroked that velvet of steel length again, squeezing, twisting just enough and watched the display below him. There was regret now that he hadn't just agreed, if Mick was this stunning just stroking him, how much more breathlessly amazing would he look while Toshi was taking him? The thought burned him and he forced his hand as far into Mick's pants as he could go and found he could only manage to slide the tips of his fingers over the sensitive spot under that hard length. He stroked again and reached and this time managed to cup those secreted balls, hidden away and so hot to the touch.

Mick's eyes flew open at the touch. "Please!" He called out.

"Please what?" Toshi wanted to hear him ask to come. Mick's voice was so broken, so needy.

"Please," Mick swallowed and licked his dry lips. "Let me touch you." The request tumbled out without thought and Mick knew that it was what he wanted. He needed to feel that same length in his hand. Stroke it as he was being stroked. "Please."

Toshi shuddered, swept off by the unexpected request. He felt himself nodding and started to remove his hand from Mick's pants.

"No." Mick whined. "Let me." He barely waited until Toshi nodded again before his hands were unsnapping and sliding down the zipper of those crazy vinyl pants. Toshi's erection fell out, hard and heavy, so aroused that it nearly curled up to touch his stomach. Mick didn't wait, the hand on his own desire was driving him and the half hidden sight of the forbidden cock he'd been lusting after demanded action. He reached between their bodies and slid the length across his palm.

Toshi gasped, his hand faltered and he saw a flaw to this plan. There was no way he was going to be able to retain any focus with Mick touching him. But, what a touch! It sent fire across his spine, down to his toes. It made his fangs ache to bite and his body need. He doubled his efforts inside Mick's pants, stroking, teasing, increasing the pace and not letting Mick be able to concentrate enough to do more than tease his own arousal.

Toshi lowered down to where the writhing body was gasping silently. "Time's running out. I know you're close. I want it, now." He heard the raspy growl in his own voice and he gave Mick's throbbing cock another hard stroke and hot warmth flooded against his hand. Toshi quickly slid in his free hand and used it to keep stroking, to keep teasing as Mick bucked and writhed beneath him, mouth open crying out soundlessly, his head thrown to the side.

The hand around his own cock had stroked in time to Mick's release and then fallen still. Toshi hovered, waiting, sliding his left hand out to stroke back some of Mick's now sweat damp hair. Mick murmured and his hips twitched lazily, slowly his eyes cracked open. "All of that and I still have this in my hands." He squeezed Toshi's arousal and watched the Incubus's eyes dilate. He began to stroke, not teasing now, needing Toshi to come as well. He needed to map out that hard length, to learn its curves and contours, learn what felt good to Toshi and what felt great.

Then a hand closed over his, sticky, slick and hot and if Mick hadn't come with such mind blowing totality he was sure he'd be hard again. Toshi kept his eyes locked on Mick's as much as

he was able and slid the come sticky hand that he'd removed carefully from Mick's pants around the hand teasing him.

"Time's running out." Toshi whispered and began to show the slightly too careful hand how he liked to be touched. The smell of Mick was heavy, the smell of release and sex mixed with his own need swirled around him. Mick started to get the hint and stopped being so gentle, Toshi's eyes rolled shut and he cried out again. This time the music didn't cover for him.

"That's it," Mick whispered and let Toshi use his hand.

Toshi collapsed down sideways alongside Mick and buried his face again in Mick's neck. He felt safe there, hiding, comfortable, it was quickly becoming a habit to come that way. "Oh, God, if you'd any idea of how often I've done this thinking about you." Toshi groaned and stroked himself with Mick's hand faster.

"Shut up and come." He slipped his hand loose and scrapped a well trimmed fingernail lightly across the head of Toshi's cock.

Toshi cried out louder than ever and came. The cooling fluid on his hand grew hot again and in those final strokes, now two hands instead of a double layered one, he bucked against the sensation. He slowly settled against Mick, sighing. It took a moment for the emotion to really make sense but Toshi understood that what he was feeling was happiness.

When his hand moved he didn't think anything of it. When his fingers and hand were swiped with something hot and wet his eyes flew open. Any wonder at feeling so totally happy fled in the sight of seeing Mick licking his hand clean. Those hazel eyes were shut and his tongue was dragging across each finger, one by one, sucking the length into his mouth to swirl his tongue around. Mick half opened his eyes and locked onto Toshi's dumbfounded expression.

"Oh." He gasped out.

"Is this okay?" Mick asked between long, slow licks.

Toshi just nodded.

"Good. Next time, this is what I want to do." He finished with a final swipe of his tongue along the sensitive center of Toshi's palm.

Toshi could only nod again and let Mick slid out from under him. Mick dipped the cocktail, the name suddenly made him smile, napkins into the melting ice of the champagne bucket and quickly cleaned himself off before closing his pants. When he turned Toshi was still watching but unmoving, Mick dipped some fresh napkins in the bucket and used them to stroke over Toshi's softened arousal instead of using his tongue.

Toshi gasped. "That's cold."

Mick grinned wickedly and added an extra swipe for good measure before he leaned down. "Better hurry up, time's limited." He whispered before claiming a kiss.

The tongue that slid into Toshi's mouth was gentle, teasing and tasted of the bitter musky release. The taste sent a shiver across him, teasing in memory and being chased by the present. Instead of pulling away, retreating from those so rarely examined memories, he swirled his tongue around Mick's licking away every hint he could claim.

Mick broke the kiss and pressed his forehead against Toshi's again. An action he was finding as a good replacement for nuzzling into that too sensitive neck. "Thank you."

Toshi half chuckled. "I should be thanking you."

"No, I really needed this. Thank you."

There it was and Toshi understood. He stroked a hand across Mick's face before pulling away. "You're welcome, even if thanks aren't needed." His legs felt too wobbly to stand but he forced his feet to hold him so he could tuck himself back into those tight pants. "Do you think anyone noticed?"

Mick stopped fussing at Toshi's hair and figured it was as straightened as it was going to get, and went to glance over the railing. He spotted Samson and Oliver easily, they were dancing tightly together but Andy wasn't in sight. That made him nervous, until he saw Andy pressed to a wall across the room, with a dark haired man who was apparently counting the rows of ruffles across his ass by touch.

Mick chuckled. "Well, unless someone heard us, I'd say no."

Toshi rubbed at his stomach. "Let's go send away the guard and find something to eat. I'm starving."

Mick laughed outright. "I'm pretty hungry too." He left it at the obvious and kept his amusement at the double meaning to himself.

Part Fourteen

Alec had been surprised at hearing from Mick that he was dragging Toshi out for the evening but he was more surprised when the door lock logs showed the two men hadn't made it home until the early morning hours. It made focusing on work, the only one of the three to make it to the offices before eleven, almost impossible. When Mick finally did slip quietly into his office Alec stood up to go see him so quickly he banged his knees into his desk.

"Morning." Mick greeted from behind his desk, setting the mug of tea he was drinking down to straighten out the day's mail.

Alec leaned in the door way. "It's almost noon and Toshi's still in bed? What did you do to him last night?"

"Not enough," he grinned but shook his head at the awed look on Alec's face. "Don't worry, he was a little drunk. I put him to bed to sleep it off and turned off his alarm. A freaking billionaire and he gets up at six in the morning, it's disgusting."

"Well, I had fun reading the morning papers today." Alec pulled the handheld from behind his back and punched up the articles. "Front page of a Star Daily, Toshi Ranvier's Night Out. There's pictures too. 'Reclusive billionaire Toshi Ranvier was spotted last night entertaining an unidentified group of human friends at the famous night club Token. Thought to be the first I/S past the front door of the exclusive playground of the very rich and famous, speculations abound today about the place of I/S in modern society.' Then it goes on for four pages about the mixed results of human and I/S interaction. Four pages Mick, including two columns speculating about your relationship with him and your past."

"Slow news day. What about it, the Star Daily wouldn't know hard news if it bit them."

"The wire picked it up. By tomorrow it'll be in almost every paper in the world in one form or another. And get this, the Journal's gossip column has pictures of you and Toshi, and this tidbit. 'TR, the wealthy young mixed blooded heir to a fortune, was spotted at Token last night. With

him was a member of his staff, AM, that he referred to as a friend not an employee. TR was seen to be parting with his group of friends, which included an unnamed woman and two men, one of which was wearing an Alice in Wonderland dress. As the night drew on, the group ordered in Chinese food and shared it with several other members of the VIP suites, notably of which were musician CD and Actress BL. Insiders say the party went on for hours and TR was seen dancing with the most beautiful women in the club. Does this mark a change in the all work and no play mentality of TR? Is he finally planning on taking his place in the hip, trendy, young blood of society? This reporter doesn't know but is willing to bet his friend AM is to credit for the sudden change.' What happened? And what happened to your face?"

Mick was smiling now and even the ache in his head and the sore bruise on his face didn't dampen it. "He had fun, Alec, he really did. Next time, you're coming with us."

"You really got him to dance?" Alec slid into the office, fascinated by the changes he was seeing.

"Really did, once we got him a little more drunk he danced for hours."

"Our Toshi?"

"Yes, the same Toshi."

"Amazing. Next time I'm going with you."

"Only if you bring that girlfriend of yours."

He considered it, weighed in the changes he was seeing in Toshi and wondered if Amy would be more comfortable around him now that he wasn't so ridged. How much of her unease at meeting Toshi was due to his bloodlines and how much of it was due to his money? "Maybe," Alec nodded. "You aren't worried about what they said about you?"

"Should I be? If they outright lied I'm certain your lawyers will be over them. If it's unpleasant but true what does it matter. Let them say whatever they want, it doesn't matter."

Alec shook his head. "The sky is going to fall. If the world ends, come get me in my office." He was laughing lowly as he slipped back to his work and waited for Toshi to show up. This was too ripe of a situation to not offer some gentle teasing over. He'd be remiss as a friend not to.

By early afternoon Mick had sorted out what absolutely had to be done to fulfill his obligation as Toshi's security officer. A little voice nagged at him for even thinking about doing other things on work time but he dived into the porn program without regrets. He spent the next few hours going over the old cases, looking for anything he might have missed. When a hunch nagged at him, he set to following up on it.

"Hey you." Toshi knew he was half hiding behind the door frame but he felt oppressively shy. The last few hours of the night before were a blur. He remembered having fun, relaxing more than he'd ever believed possible. There was knowledge of dancing, a lot, and he remembered going back to the apartment to change. Vaguely he remembered making it home and Mick's hands undressing him, taking off shirt and shoes but the rest was lost to hazy fog. Since he'd woken up tucked under the quilt, comfortably on his own futon, still wearing his pants, he was pretty sure he hadn't missed anything good.

Mick glanced up and the look in his eyes frightened Toshi. "What's wrong?"

"Do you think you can find your friend Tam before he shows up for dinner?"

That melted the shy uncertainty. Toshi stepped into the office. "Why?"

"Toshi, I," Mick swallowed and glanced at his desk. "I think I might have put his life in danger."

A cold chill slid across Toshi, like icy fingers dragged up his spine. "Tam's a smart man, he's lived his lifestyle for years. What makes you think he's in danger?"

"My theory has been that all of this is over a new drug. It's the original working theory I had a year ago. Last night I asked around again and no one's heard anything about a new drug but they had heard odd stories. Some of it was similar to what the earlier assault cases tried to tell me. Clicking sounds in the dark, odd smells, scraping sounds, nonsense stuff really, I mean you can't always assume that what a junky hears or smells is real."

Toshi held out his hand trying to slow the tide of words that poured from Mick but the other man didn't seem to notice.

"So I thought I would follow up. Find the people again, ask the questions again, see if anything new might connect." His face twisted up in guilt.

"Okay."

"Toshi, they're dead."

"What?"

"They're dead, all of them. A car accident, a drive by shooting, a robbery gone bad and one's boyfriend was accused of killing her. He hung himself while in police custody. Toshi, every one of them is dead and more, the people that were near by when the assault happened died with them or were found dead as well."

"How many are dead."

"All of them! Too many for it to be just chance! Toshi," he clawed at his desk. "I found those witnesses. I documented where these people lived."

"You can't know that this isn't just a string of bad luck."

"It's not bad luck!" He shouted back and wanted to hit something, like himself.

"Okay but there's nothing to suggest Tam's at risk. He said there had been I/S that had been hurt or killed in the same way, surely some of them are still alive. We can track them."

"Tam's at risk. He was involved with a human, people notice that. Even if he isn't tracked down because of me it won't take much to find out about him." Than Mick said the words that unnerved Toshi the most. "They can find him."

"They who? I thought you said this looked like a single person just getting more violent."

Mick rubbed at the ache in the back of his head, ghosting over the sore wound. "A single assailant working alone can't convince the Medical Examiners office to change results. Something else is going on, something bigger."

"That sounds like paranoia."

Mick actually laughed and it sounded strained even to his own ears. "If you've seen a third of the shit I've seen it would seem plausible to you as well. Do you believe me?"

Toshi drew a breath and than slowly nodded. "Yes, I do. Let's go find Tam."

Traffic downtown at that hour was snarled. Toshi had insisted on driving the bike and Mick's uneasy, nervous squirming behind him made concentrating on the ride difficult. Fortunately, they spent a good bit of time stuck in stop and go gridlock.

"Is there anyway we can get around this mess?" Mick shouted over the traffic.

Toshi scanned the traffic. "Hold on." He whipped the bike around the truck in front of them and broke about twenty traffic laws. They swerved in and around stopped cars, he hopped them up across sidewalks forcing pedestrians to jump back. They cut down back alleys and slipped around overflowing dumpsters. He drove the bike as only an I/S could, with the sharper vision and faster reflexes all focused on not smashing their too soft bodies into the too hard pavement. Mick held on and moved only as it was needed to make turning the bike easier, there was something disturbingly erotic about how Toshi handled the bike that almost overwhelmed his sense of urgency.

It took over an hour from when they left the garage to when they reached the train yards. Mick's head was pounding now, from the blow the night before, stress, guilt and what felt like three g's going around the corners. Toshi pulled the bike over, still blocks away from the entrance they had to use to get into the camps.

"What?" Mick asked and tried to stare off to see what the other man was looking at. The rougher area of the train yards, and Mick suddenly understood the location of Amanda Evan's and Tin Tam's small shelter, was off in the distance. Mick strained but saw nothing there to make stopping important.

"There's something going on."

"I don't see anything."

"I do." He turned the bike around and headed for that distant image.

They'd gone over two blocks, slower now than Mick knew Toshi was capable of, before Mick's human eyes were able to make out the line of a dozen motorcycles. They were lined up in easy order and they were within a stone's throw of Tam's small shelter. A little closer let Mick make out the two dozen I/S milling around. Most appeared to be on guard, watching not the shelter but the landscape around it. Dressed in blue jeans and dress pants, dark colors and light, button down shirts and t-shirts but all their hair was loose to their waist. The colors of their long hair varied from pale pinks and blues to smoky reds and grays, their eyes were just as exotic.

They looked serious and Mick scanned them as best he could for weapons but saw nothing. Only, how they stood hinted to him that even the smallest of the women, she looked barely five feet tall, was more than capable of protecting herself. He wasn't sure they should be getting any closer, just like humans, I/S were more dangerous in groups.

Toshi didn't turn around, he simply slowed the bike down and eased it within clear eyeshot of the group keeping watch. One of the women waved them over and a man called out something over his shoulder but the wind carried the words away. He stopped the bike a nice, safe, distance away from the nearest I/S, turned off the engine and dropped the kickstand.

Mick was off the bike and had his helmet off as quickly as he could manage but Toshi didn't move any faster than was necessary. The guards bowed to Toshi but didn't say a word, Toshi returned it carefully before turning to Mick. "They won't hurt us."

The shortest woman, five feet tall with hair the same orange as an autumn leaf and eyes as clearly green as Toshi's were blue moved toward Mick. Without a word or asking permission, she reached out to pat down his coat. He batted her smaller hand away.

Faster than he could see she kicked out and smashed his knee. Mick stumbled but held his ground, darting back from the follow up punch she threw. As she braced for another attack he pulled the handgun from its shoulder holster and aimed it for the woman's forehead. She froze.

"Mick, hold!" Toshi snapped out, waving the other guards to hold their ground. "She's just doing her job."

"So am I!" He snapped back. There was no way he was going to let himself be disarmed, not when Toshi's life was his responsibility.

"Ieta, Jenit." A strong male voice called out.

The short woman's lips thinned but she relaxed her stance and bowed slightly before backing up and returning to her spot. Mick lowered his gun but wasn't quite ready to put it away, or slide the safety back in place.

"Forgive her, her job isn't to trust humans." The man that spoke moved from near the small shelter. Even standing with the best posture Mick had ever seen, the man wasn't more than five eight, lean but not slender or skinny. His face was handsome, strong and dominated by lavender, Asian, eyes. Hair almost the same shade of lavender as his eyes fell loose to his back where it gathered together and then dropped in a braid to his knees. Unlike the mismatched clothing of the people around him, he was dressed in well tailored pants and a perfectly cut dress shirt, both in black.

Toshi bowed, deeply. "Uncle." He greeted.

The powerful leader of the Sakamoto family smiled warmly. "Toshi." Instead of bowing, he gathered his taller nephew into a hug. "You look well."

Toshi stood frozen by that embrace for a moment, caught off guard, before he eased and gratefully returned the embrace. "I am well."

He stroked a hand down Toshi's hair before pulling from the embrace. "And this must be the new body guard of yours I've heard so much about."

Toshi bowed slightly again. "A.R. McKale, my uncle, Sakamoto Yasunari."

Yasun offered his hand and forced Mick to put the gun away or be rude. "I respect your dedication to my nephew's safety. None of my people will attempt to disarm you again."

"Thank you." Mick accepted the hand.

The I/S leader turned back to his nephew. "I'm glad you were able to come so soon, but I am surprised word reached you so quickly."

"Word of what?" Toshi forced out but the wind shifted and he caught the scent of blood. "What's happened?"

Surprise registered on Yasun's face before he schooled it to one of careful neutrality. "If you haven't heard, what brought you here?"

He wanted to explain about the murders and Mick's hunch and how they were looking for Tam because of an indefinable fear Mick had. "Where's Tam?"

"He was found this morning, we just got here a little while ago."

"What do you mean? What's happened?"

"Toshi, Tam's dead."

"What? No." He tried to push forward but found his uncle's hands on his shoulder's stopping him.

"Don't, you don't need to see him like that."

The smell of blood was heavy and Toshi shoved his uncle almost to the ground. He shook off another hand, Mick's he slowly registered, and was ready to knock down any of the guard that might try to stop him. As he approached the small building he passed one of his uncle's captains, a woman that had always been kind to Toshi but he brushed past her as well.

As soon as he rounded the corner of the shed his feet froze. Blood pooled on the hard packed earth, dark and thick and in the center lay Tam. There was no doubt that his death was violent. The slender man was crumpled forward, half curled up. His leg was a shattered, bloody mess, and the side of his head was gone. Blood matted his hair, stained the same jeans and t-shirt that Toshi had just seen him in the night before.

He took an involuntary step forward and then shuffled backwards. Air refused to move in his body and his chest ached, his heart pounded in his ears. Everything shattered into brittle edges and lines and the cry that escaped his throat was guttural, wordless and ripped from a well of pain he'd never wanted to acknowledge.

It was too much. There was only so much a soul could carry and this tipped him beyond reason. The sight of Tam dead would have been cutting, murdered in such a brutal way destroyed him. None of it was worth fighting against any longer, none of the memories he'd struggled to lock away, none of betrayals and abandonments he promised himself didn't matter. The endless years of emptiness, hiding from what and who he was, none of it was worth struggling with. Nothing held meaning and the tears that streaked across his face burned too much to allow room for shame.

Hands touched him and memory spiked. He screamed in rage and torment, screamed with the voice he'd never been allowed before and struck at the hands that pulled at him. There was no up or down in his world, just the sight of Tam's bloody corpse and hands pulling on him. His body bucked, strained against the unwelcome touch and the accompanying sense of violation. An elbow flew backwards and buried its point in a solid chest but still the hands pulled him away.

The hands pulled with enough force that his heels dug into the dirt and raised small grooves. As he was bodily dragged around the corner of the small building and from the vision of Tam's twisted body, Toshi's knees sagged and he fell as dead weight to the ground. His hands twisted into his hair and pulled, needing the physical pain to match the emotional but those demanding, invasive hands pried his fingers free.

Toshi found his arms pinned between his own chest and someone else's.

"I said stay away from him!" A voice, angry and dear, cried out, echoed in the chest under his hands. "Don't touch him!"

Those strong hands pulled him close, cradling him against an unwelcome body. Toshi tried to pull away, tried to escape but his movements were tangled in the other body's limbs. Then the scent hit him, not of blood or fear, not the scent of an I/S or of the drunken humans that still woke him up at night. This was different, solid, safe, like the sharp voice that warned the other hands away. This was a scent that smelled right.

Out of the pain and exhaustion, out of the deep agony of always struggling and the sudden need to surrender, came a spark of hope. The scent carried light, warmth. It didn't make sense yet, but it was there as something worth clinging to. That rich scent of belonging was a reason to keep fighting all that he was so soul weary of.

From that scent a name rose. "Mick?" Toshi whispered out.

Mick stroked a hand across the shuddering head tucked against his chest. "It's okay, baby, I'm here." In a normal situation the caress and endearing name would have embarrassed him but the only concern he had was for Toshi, not what the silent, solemnly watching group of I/S thought of him.

He stroked across the hair again and pressed a kiss to the top of Toshi's head. "It's okay, it's okay now, I've got you, baby, I've got you." The hands that had been clawing at Mick in an effort to escape suddenly clutched tightly and instead of the panicked sounds of sheer agony, those tormented near screams of grief, a healthy, soul deep sob escaped.

Mick crouched there until his legs had grown numb. Toshi sobbed brokenly for a long while and the surrounding group of I/S had simply turned their backs and watched away from the scene, offering what privacy they could. Yasun and what Mick guessed was one of his advisors, stood nearby, talking softly among themselves. Mick really wanted to blame the lavender haired man for some of this. If anyone should have known how Toshi would react to seeing Tam's body it should have been his uncle.

But, Mick was forced to admitted as he hushed and soothed the slowly calming Toshi, there was no faking the look of pain he'd seen on Yasun's face at Toshi's breakdown. The man had truly been as panicked and frightened as Mick had felt. He'd moved to try to comfort his nephew first and had been hurt and shocked at the violent reaction his touch had spawned.

The why's behind Toshi's strong reaction might not have been clear to Mick, but he understood the look in the guarding I/S's eyes. Their job was to protect Yasun and none of them wanted to be forced to hurt the painfully grieving nephew to protect the uncle. It was Mick that pulled Yasun away and took a firmer hold on Toshi. It was Mick who took the elbow hard in the ribs and still held on. Once he'd gotten a grip on that writhing, broken spirit, not even the Devil himself could have made Mick let go.

Slowly, Toshi settled. The quaking sobs eased into hitching gasps. The trembling which had threatened to shake Mick apart faded to occasional tremors. The hands that dug into Mick's flesh hard enough to raise bruises slowly began to relax. Bit by bit Toshi grew limp in his arms and Mick waited a few moments longer, waited for that torn breathing to settle a little more.

"Toshi-love, you okay?" He whispered, soothing the hair and still holding on tightly.

The dark head nodded and a deep sniff was the only reply at first. Gradually, one hand released it's grip on Mick's back and wiped the tears from the hidden face. "I'll be okay." But it took breathing in that scent to be able to say those words with any conviction.

"Can you stand? We need to get you home."

Toshi nodded but it took two tries to get them both to their feet and than it was only because Yasun had hurried over to steady Mick. It didn't matter to Toshi if he was collapsed on the ground or standing on uneasy legs, he clung to Mick and kept his face hidden against that chest and under the dark fall of his hair.

"Your companion is right, I'm taking you home. Can you ride?" Yasun asked gently.

"Thank you uncle." Toshi began, stepping a half step away from Mick but keeping his head lowered. "But the Committee won't allow me to go home with you."

"The Committee be damned." Yasun spat out. "There are rules in place for these situations. You're coming home with me, at least for the day." He raised his eyes and locked them on Mick. "Mr. McKale, no one will fault you for returning to his apartment but I'd consider it a personal favor if you would come with us."

"Where he goes, I go."

A grim smile tugged at Yasun's face and he bowed slightly. "Thank you."

"About the body, the crime scene, will there be someone to gather evidence?" It could have been random, Tam didn't lead the most secure of lifestyles, but if his death really was connected to the chain of murders, the situation had just gotten a great deal more personal.

"We'll see to the body according to our ways but who is there to investigate an I/S's murder? Your police? They don't care. We have no system in place." Yasun glanced to the small building but obviously seeing the body behind it. "Not yet anyway." He added softly.

"His murder may be connected to others." Mick added carefully.

"Mick," Toshi spoke with a fragility that he couldn't summon the energy to care about. "Stay, do what needs done."

"No."

"Please."

"Toshi,"

"I'll be safe."

Yasun nodded. "Jenit, come here."

The short pumpkin colored Succubus nodded and came to stand at loose attention in front of Yasun. "Sir?"

"Please tell Mr. McKale what your role is."

"Sir, I'm commander of this guard unit, sir."

"Now, please tell him what yours and your units role is."

"To place our lives between harm and the Sakamoto line, sir."

"And who here will you give your life to defend?"

"You, Sakamoto-dono, sir, and Toshi Hoshimoto Ranvier, gladly and with great honor, sir. Additionally, at your command, we will defend Roa Kouri, sir." Her eyes flicked to the woman that Mick had pegged as an advisor.

"Very good, Jenit. While he is our guest, please inform your fellows that Mr. McKale is to be under your protection as well."

She bowed. "Yes, sir." She backed three steps up before turning and informing the ring of guards of the new order. If she was at all upset at being asked to protect a human, it didn't show on her

face.

"You see, Mr. McKale, Toshi will be quite safe."

Mick felt torn in two. Toshi obviously needed him, he was still shaking and looked like he could barely stand but what evidence may have been left behind was getting more and more fragile. He reached out and brushed the hair back from Toshi's face so he could look into those grief reddened eyes. It was natural to brush those tears away with his thumbs. "Are you sure. I can tell them what to look for, they can get pictures. There might not be anything of use to learn here."

Toshi nodded and more tears leaked out to replace the ones Mick had wiped away. He simply couldn't stop. "Stay, do what you can here but come to me when you're done."

Mick nodded and hated that he'd put a corpse and a case over a living body and soul. He swooped forward and pressed a quick kiss to Toshi's cold lips. "I won't be long." The public display caused a blush to creep up his neck. He reminded himself that none of the people around them were likely to be shocked by the idea of two men kissing and after the last half hour there was little doubt as to the nature of their relationship in anyone of their minds. It still left him with a nervous, vulnerable feeling.

"Jenit, pick two of your people to stay behind and assist Mr. McKale with whatever he needs. When he's finished, leave your people to tend to Tam's body and escort Mr. McKale to my home."

"Yes sir." She moved to comply.

Yasun carefully touched Toshi's arm and this time instead of trying to escape the touch, Toshi just glanced up. "Can you ride?"

"Yes, but not drive."

"That's okay, Jenit's stubborn about that, she's convinced I'll wreck the bike."

There was a few moments of settling things out before Toshi pulled his helmet on, climbed on the back of one of the guards bikes and was whisked away. It didn't miss Mick's attention that Toshi had left his bike behind, left it in his care. It wasn't quite Cinderella's slipper but it felt almost the same to him.

Part Fifteen

Jenit had picked two men to stay behind with her. One was slender and tall, well over six feet and twice as wide in the shoulders as the petite Jenit. His hair was an amber, sunny blonde and his eyes a blood red. The other was obviously of African bloodlines. His skin was dark, mocha, smooth and rich, the amber gold eyes that dominated his face missed nothing. The only sign of the curl his hair should have had was the full waves in the long length, it fell in burgundy tumbles.

The trio stared at Mick and Mick stared at them.

"Sakamoto-dono ordered us to help you however you require." Jenit finally said.

Mick nodded and walked over to them. He offered his hand. "My friends call me Mick."

Jenit actually pulled back for a moment. She glanced to the two men that looked equally stunned by the offer before she cautiously took Mick's hand. "Jenit Arbreth." She motioned to the blonde.

"Bent Donck," than to the darker skinned man. "Orish Horns."

Mick offered his hands to both of the men and nodded. "Good. Thank you for offering to help." He ignored the fact that they'd been ordered and saw it caught them off guard again. "Can one of you find me a camera? And some plastic bags or other sealable containers? I'm not sure what I'll find but just in case."

The three exchanged glances and Jenit tossed out a few words of their slang before Orish nodded. "Thanks." Mick called out as the man moved to take the left behind bike, leaving the trio that remained with only Toshi's bike for transportation.

Mick fished out the small notepad he always carried in a coat pocket and the disposable pen tucked inside it. "Now, who found the body?"

Jenit shrugged. "Someone, word was sent up to Sakamoto-dono."

"When did you're people get here?"

She shrugged again. "Not long before you arrived."

Mick guessed at the time and made note of it. "Did you touch anything, move anything? See anyone around?"

She shook her head. "It was pretty obvious he was dead."

Mick tried not to sigh, he didn't want to do this. He wanted to follow Toshi, he'd never been so distracted before. "Thanks." He smiled and started walking the scene.

He moved a few dozen paces away and carefully worked his way back toward the shed. There were foot prints everywhere, some pressed dried mud from the last time it had rained, some scraped into loose gravel or dry dust. There was no way he'd be able to isolate any one track, not even the police had been able to when Amanda Evans had been attacked. So he just looked for anything odd, tried to scan over the empty bags of drugs and litter, to see beyond the remains of the day to day life in the yards.

Closer to the body he found something. "Hey, ah Ben, Bent?" The blonde nodded. "Come here a second."

Both I/S came over curiously. "Yes?" Jenit asked for the man.

"One of you needs to stand here and make sure nothing happens to that until I can photograph it."

They both stared at the ground and than glanced to each other. "What are we guarding?" She asked.

Mick crouched down and traced the partial footprint in the air above it. "See it?"

Bent scratched his head. "It's a foot print."

"No, it's a boot print. A good one, see the tread, and new too. Deep in the dirt, so it was from a heavy person. The pattern here, the tread mark? Some boots are very unique, like finger prints. It'll narrow down the manufacture and from there I might be able to figure out what type of boot."

They nodded and Bent looked around. "There are a lot of foot prints."

"I don't need all of them, just this one."

"Why?" Jenit asked, suddenly forgetting that the strange man was human and seeing someone she could learn from.

Mick looked up from jotting notes. "Well, how many people around the yards wear heavy boots?"

"Not many."

"So,?" He lead.

"It might be connected to who ever did this."

Mick smiled and nodded. "Right on. A full forensic team would document everything, than try to sort out what belonged and didn't. I can't do that, not without being here for days and with a lot more equipment than I have."

"So, you're just looking for what's different?"

"Yes." He was moving away, circling closer to the body. Jenit followed almost at his elbow now, looking where he looked, studying what he studied but never speaking or breaking his train of thought.

There was nothing else that caught his attention outside of the shelter and by the time he'd worked his way over to it Orish was back. Mick accepted the camera and box of plastic bags with a nod and moved to the shelter door. "Jenit?"

"Yes, sir?" She knelt down next to Mick.

"See anything?"

Her eyes scanned around the canvas tent flap and the low hanging, cheap wood the doorframe was made from. "Yes, sir."

"What?"

She pointed to a spot along the side of the door frame. "A hair."

Mick nodded and snapped a few pictures of where the hair was caught in the frame before plucking it out and bagging it. It maybe was silly, since no one had ever been arrested let alone tried, for the murder of an I/S but if he'd learned anything it was to protect the evidence just in case.

"It's grey. Like Tam's."

Mick just nodded and followed the wood up and snapped pictures of a few more pictures, this time of some dark threads caught in the door frame's wood. When he plucked them out and bagged them Jenit's forehead wrinkled up.

"Tam's not wearing dark clothes." She clamped her mouth shut. "Sorry, sir."

"It's okay, he's not, is he? And with Amanda Evans being attacked here you can bet the police pulled any fibers they found, so they should be new." He pushed the canvas aside.

Inside was more cause for documentation and Mick carefully bagged the crumbled, well worn photo of Amanda Evans that had been dropped to the ground. "What do you think this might mean?"

"I, well, Tam was inside when whoever did this arrived. He caught a hair in the door on the way out?"

"When he was pulled out. The picture is obviously something he carried on him, would you just drop it?"

"No, sir."

"Neither would I, but if he was surprised and pulled out, the skid is pushed a little to the side, he must have tried to fight it. Whoever had a hold of him could have caught their coat or shirt on the top of the door frame and Tam's hair snagged as he was dragged out."

Mick moved to where the body lay, the two I/S men watching him like he was a strange bug but Jenit following hungrily beside him. He snapped pictures of a bloodstain a short distance from the body before he knelt and poked at some loosened dirt.

"Sir?"

"I'm betting they pulled him over here, from the looks of the wound on his leg he was shot. I'm betting here, bullet passed clean through but they took the time to dig it out of the ground before they left." He moved to where Tam still lay but all he could really see was Toshi, over come with grief.

He photographed the body as it lay and the blood splatter on the back of the building. There was a blood trail from where his leg had been shot to where he'd been killed. "His hands are bound with b-cuffs." He photographed everything. "They dragged him over here. Made him kneel and shot him once from left to right, the larger wound here is the exit wound, the force blows the tissue outwards. See this here?" He pointed to a smaller wound at the back of Tam's head. "They shot him again after he was down but I'm betting he was already dead. Help me move his body."

"Wait." She pulled a knife, small and sharp and two small bands from somewhere. "Before you move him," She knelt quickly, not worried about the blood and sectioned off two small tails of Tam's hair before severing them from his head. There was blood on the hair and other things more gory in spots and flecks but she rolled the tails up and pocketed them with her knife. "It's our way of remembering the dead."

Without further protest she helped Mick move the body but there was no evidence the second bullet had left Tam's flesh and there was no easy way Mick could find to remove it from him. He quickly searched the man's clothes, finding neither fibers, loose odd hairs or anything more important than two hits of shine in small pink plastic pouches the size of his pinkie nail. There was nothing of use left behind and as Mick had feared, where the first, fatal bullet had lodged in the shelter's cheap wood, it had been carved out and taken along.

He stood up and sighed. "There's nothing left I can do." Too much time had already passed. "Thank you, all of you, for your help."

The thanks caught them as much by surprise as the offer to shake hands. The two men nodded and whispered to themselves and Jenit followed him to Toshi's bike. "You're that cop aren't you?"

"I'm not a cop anymore."

"But you were, you were the one that I've heard about."

"I doubt it."

"No, you were the cop that used to work down here, the one people said actually treated everyone the same."

"I tried."

She snorted and moved forward, obviously intending to drive. "No wonder they kicked you out."

Mick was too tired to argue. He pulled his helmet on and climbed behind the slender woman. His mind spun between Tam's death, the string of deaths he'd just found and always ended back with Toshi. As they whipped across crowded, too narrow streets of the camp, Mick gave up trying to make sense of it. Nothing was going to make sense until he knew Toshi was okay.

Jenit was a skilled rider, in spite of the difference in heights. She took them into the camp past the far looser security of the train yard entrance and didn't pause to allow them to inspect Mick. Apparently, the rules for the guards of the Sakamoto family were different, or the rules at this entrance were more for show. Mick didn't care, he knew he should be watching the turns taken and the path followed in case he had to leave the camp on his own but he didn't care.

They turned down narrow streets and more narrow alleys. Rode past crowds of people in markets and lines of uniformly dressed school children. They passed thousands of people, young people, old people. Hundreds of bicycles pulled along beside them, old and new and mixed in were rickshaws and bicycle taxis. Other than the few motorcycles they passed, the streets were filled with the sounds of bike bells and people calling out to one another. A din far less annoying than modern life and oddly one that felt comforting and safe.

When Jenit finally eased the bike toward the curb, a space clear of market stalls and groups of talking people unlike the rest of the Camp's streets, Mick guessed they were almost in the center of the city. A boy came running out as soon as she stopped the bike, not more than fourteen and slender. He hopped on and rode the bike off almost before Mick could clear the seat.

"That's Toshi's bike."

Jenit nodded. "Yes, it'll be taken care of. No need to worry."

He felt foolish then, the boy was their version of valet parking. He covered it by looking at the building they'd stopped in front of. Five stories high and not at all impressive, it was a plain, rectangle of a building with the older design of a structure that had been standing before the Camp had been created. There was a guard at the front of the heavy, wood, double doors and they opened them for Jenit and Mick as they approached. Inside the plain entrance way was another pair of guards and when they rounded the corner to find an elevator, a third pair stood on guard.

"Tight security." Mick nodded as the woman who stood at attention by the elevator pressed the call button.

Jenit nodded. "We don't the advanced security measures you do. Sakamoto-dono could have them, he chooses to spend the resources on the people instead. So, we do things this way."

"Does it work?" Mick asked as they stepped into the old elevator.

"Very well, sir."

"Than, that's all that matters." He ignored her sideways glance as she punched the top floor's button and they rode up the short flight in silence.

The elevator doors opened to what could have been a pleasant, modest, middle class families entrance way. Sliding paper screen doors blocked off two rooms, one to either side and the hallway ended against another paper screened door. Another pair of guards waited at the elevator here and sounds of movement and life filtered across the rooms.

The screened door in front of them opened and Yasun himself emerged. The guards at the elevator and Jenit both bowed and Yasun paused long enough to return a shallow bow of his own. "Thank you, Jenit, that will be all."

She bowed again and moved to the left hand room, sliding the door open and giving Mick a glimpse at what appeared to be a staging area or security station before the blocking screen again closed.

"Mr. McKale, I'm pleased you were able to return so quickly. Will you come with me?" He motioned to the door behind him.

Mick nodded and followed. The sliding screen door let into another small entrance room and a solid wood door that stood cracked open. Yasun lead Mick past that door into what was obviously the families private quarters. When the door shut behind them, the hushed din from outside was shut out as well. The lighting was soft, diffused and easy on the eyes. The floors were plain, smooth wood and the walls a soft tan. What furniture and decorations sat about were simple, plain and understated.

"Toshi is inconsolable." He began without having to be asked. "My wife is with him now but she's virtually a stranger to him. My presence was only making things more difficult for him, my wife refused to let me stay. She said he had enough grief without trying to feel nothing to please me." Yasun's face broke into a quickly flashed grin. "My wife is often wiser than I."

Mick just nodded and followed down corridors and around corners. There were as many solid wood doors as there were sliding screens and Mick began to wonder just what this building had used to be. It could have been an office building, or warehouse, maybe even a school at one time, the way the space had been redesigned made it's original function impossible to know.

Yasun stopped in front of one of the wood doors and knocked softly before opening it. He held the door but didn't enter the room, leaving Mick to step into the dimmer darkness alone. It was obviously a bedroom, a futon lay on the floor and a brightly colored crazy quilt spread over it's width. A plain, dark wood dressing table was pressed to one wall, it's mirrored surface flyspecked with age. A second door led off to what would be either a bath room or closet, it stood slightly ajar and Mick was betting it was a bathroom. The lamps, small and set high on the wall, had a dimmer and it was turned low but all of the rooms decorations were secondary.

Mick's attention was fixed on the quiet, strangled sobs and the man that sat beside the futon. Toshi looked to have just dropped and not really moved since then. His legs were folded in front of him and he bowed over them, face in hands. The dark hair that held such fascination for Mick fell in tangled disarray, covering the already well hidden face. To the side, was a small pile of crumbled, used tissues and a tray of untouched cooling tea and tumblers of iced water.

On the other side of Toshi sat a woman. She was dressed in simple, elegantly cut slacks and a plain pale lavender, light weight sweater. Her hair was a dusty pale cherry and was pulled back into a neat tail that fell down her back. Mick expected her to be a great beauty, to be the wife of someone so powerful but found her rather plain. Her face was round but obviously of Asian decent and her eyes were a pale grey.

When the door opened she glanced up and visibly eased. She stood gracefully, with smooth easy motions and walked with light steps to the door. "Mr. McKale." She bowed. "We'll take our leave and send word when dinner is ready." She bowed again and waited until Mick had stepped into the room to step out.

"Thank you." Mick mumbled out, nodding his head to both before they shut the door behind him.

"Did you find anything?" Toshi asked with a hoarse voice.

"Nothing that won't wait." He knelt down, almost on the spot that Toshi's aunt had occupied but he brushed at some of the tangled hair. "How're you?"

Toshi sniffed and lifted his head and stared out from between the knots of his hair. His face was blotchy and red, his eyes puffy and angry. "I can't stop crying, Mick. I can't." As he whispered out, tears leaking from his eyes with a twisted, pained look on his face.

Mick reached out and brushed that twisted hair back, swiped at the stream of tears before he moved and pulled his shoes off. "I have a grandmother." He started, slowly, uneasy even now talking about his family.

"What?" Toshi asked, confused as Mick pulled his own shoes off. Strong hands rubbed at the tension in his feet, a few quick strokes but it traveled upwards, forcing tension strained muscles to ease just a fraction.

"Yeah, when a commune member turns sixty five and a new child is adopted they take the role of grandparents instead of parents." He pulled at Toshi, dragging the exhausted and now confused man along with him. When his back hit the wall he leaned against it and pulled Toshi close to him. "Anyway, my Grandmother Rose, you'd like her, she's a very wise woman. I was pretty messed up as a kid but she got through to me. So," He reached over to the futon and snagged a corner of the quilt. With a few quick tugs he'd pulled it over and draped it across where Toshi lay pillowed against his chest. "She told me once that tears and laughter were the same, neither should be ignored, silenced or forced to stop, both have their own time table and we surrender to them, not the other way around. You'll stop crying when you get it out, not before." He smiled softly into the dim light of the room and carefully started stroking the hair back into some sense of order. Words that Grandmother Rose had once said to him came to mind and without thinking about it too deeply, he passed them on to Toshi. "I think this has been building a long time. You just go ahead and let it out."

It was too much, Mick should have been telling him to suck it up, to stop crying. The last thing he expected was to be held so gently and comforted in quiet acceptance. There wasn't a choice now, he couldn't have stopped the tears with the full force of his will. He clung to Mick and sobbed, great trembling, soul deep sobs that choked him and stopped the tears in their fury. He clung to Mick and wept, the stillness falling like a winter's snow to chill him and open the flood of tears to rain from his pain. Back and forth the depths of the two emotions dragged him and slowly, after what felt like an eternity, he felt spent and exhausted. The bouts of sobs were fewer and longer apart, the silent roaring tears were shorter and less often, bit by bit stillness returned.

Through it all, Mick neither moved nor spoke. He eased a hand across Toshi's hair and smoothed out the quilt across the shaking shoulders but did nothing to interfere. He just sat, at ease, letting Toshi grieve as he needed and when exhaustion and emotion were spent he held on longer. It wasn't until Toshi moved to gather more tissues that he finally spoke.

"Want some water?"

Toshi just nodded and finished blowing his nose but when Mick pressed one of the glasses into his tired hand he accepted it. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Feel better?"

"No, I feel worse but at least I don't feel like I might go mad."

"That's good, if you went mad, I'm not sure how'd we'd be able to tell the difference." He teased gently, pulling himself to his feet.

Toshi actually choked on the surprised laugh that welled up. "True, very true."

"Hey, this is a bathroom." Mick called from the small but full bathroom and ran ice cold water onto a wash cloth. When he returned, Toshi was still under the quilt and looked weary. "Here," He knelt down and washed the cold cloth, which must have felt twice as cold against the over heated skin, across Toshi's red and swollen face.

The cold was shocking but it snapped away some of the distance, his hands raised up to cover Mick's and press the cloth to his face. "That's nice."

"Thank Andy, I've learned a few tricks over the years of putting his broken heart back together." He folded the cloth over and placed it on the back of Toshi's neck, pulling out a startled gasp. "Too much?"

"No, just surprising." He fingered the quilt idly. "My mother made this quilt. It's only used when I visit." He sighed. "I'm so tired. I can't believe he's dead. I mean, I knew he was slowly killing himself but this, this is different."

"Why don't you lay down and try to get some sleep? There's at least an hour until dinner, a nap would make you feel better."

Toshi shook his head. "No, I'm okay."

"Here," Mick eased over to the futon and pulled off his jacket, shrugged out of his shoulder holster and unclipped the pouch from his waist band. "I'll lay down with you. If you don't sleep you don't sleep but at least lay down and rest."

Now that was an offer Toshi didn't want to refuse. "Okay, but only for a little while."

Mick nodded and helped the other man settle against him. It took a little squirming and trial and error to find a position that was comfortable to them both before Mick pulled the quilt over them. It was thick and warm, the heavy weight was a comforting pressure. Toshi sighed and snuggled down against the other body and almost before Mick could smooth out the quilt, he was asleep.

A soft knock startled both men awake, both surprised at having drifted off asleep. Toshi called out and whoever knocked didn't repeat the noise, but dinner or no, Toshi was too warm, too comfortable to want to get up.

"None of that, you need to eat." Mick tried to untangle himself, still blurry from waking up. He groaned and wondered if Toshi was part octopus because for every limb he untangled, he found two more wrapped around him.

"I'm not hungry."

"I don't care, you're eating. Do you think your aunt didn't put effort into this meal? They're worried about you."

Toshi moaned softly in protest. "No fair making me feel guilty."

"It's just the truth. That and I'm afraid Alec will hurt me if he hears I let you skip a meal."

"He might at that." Toshi pushed off the heavy quilt and slid out into the cooler air of the room. He was still tired, bone tired but he found his way into the bathroom. Washing his face and brushing his hair didn't do a thing to make him feel more stable but seeing Mick sitting on the floor, trying to sooth wrinkles from his pants and shrugging back into his shoulder holster did.

Tam was dead. The cold truth struck him but this time there were no tears, just a deep, sharp pain. "Was it connected?"

Mick glanced up. "If any of them are, this is likely to be. Honestly? I don't know. It wasn't a random act, they dug the bullet slugs out of the dirt and took them. There were no shell casings, no real evidence of any kind. What was left was minor and almost useless."

Toshi carefully pulled his shoes on. "What do you think? Is it connected?"

He wanted to deny it, but was it more of a comfort to know Tam had been killed randomly or been the victim of a killer that seemed bent on wiping any traces of something Mick didn't understand away? "I believe it is."

There were no words, Toshi just nodded. "Is this our fault? If we hadn't found him,"

"If this isn't connected it had nothing to do with our actions. If it is, Toshi, who ever is doing this has systematically executed everyone that's witnessed it. They would have found him sooner or later." A cold thought settled on him. "I want you to let this go."

"What?"

"I want you to forget about this. I don't think you should take any further part in any more looking I do."

Rage flashed in Toshi's eyes. "No."

"We agreed, if I felt it was too dangerous you and Alec would sit it out. It's too dangerous. I won't risk you."

"No!"

"Toshi, whatever's going on here, these people are killers. They won't stop to think twice about killing you or me if we get too close. I'll take that risk but I won't let you."

"Who do you think I am?" Toshi snapped out. "Some sheltered little pansy rich boy? I'm capable of taking care of myself, don't you ever dare think otherwise! You wouldn't have known about Tam if it weren't for me, this is affecting my people as well as yours. Besides, I'm already involved and nothing, not even you, will tell me not to seek vengeance for the death of a member of my house!"

Tam's connection to Toshi was blurry to Mick, unexplained, and he hadn't asked. To learn that he wasn't just a friend but a member of Toshi's house limited the connections available and made things a great deal more personal. Mick was more and more certain that Tam had once been Toshi's lover, maybe even a love.

"I don't have your skills, Mick, I don't know what to look for or even where to look but I'm not helpless. Our skills compliment each other. Now, we can work together or I can do this on my own but I'm not walking away." Toshi's angry pacing was stopped by Mick blocking his path. "I won't sit on my hands while you take risks."

Mick eased his hands across Toshi's shoulders, trying to sooth some of the anger. "I never said you were helpless." He tried very hard to keep his voice level, steady. "I don't think you are, but, my interest in your safety has gone beyond professional. Let me do this."

"You're an idiot." Toshi grabbed Mick and kissed him, hard. He forced his tongue past those stunned lips and ravaged his mouth. As quickly as he'd claimed the kiss he backed away, moving to the door. He paused with his hand on the door knob. "Do you think it would hurt me

any less to see you harmed? We do this together.”

Mick sighed and moved to wrap his arms around Toshi’s waist. He pulled the man’s back against his chest and rested the side of his face along the flat planes of one shoulder blade. “You’re too stubborn.”

Toshi just snorted.

“Agreed, but if things go bad, you will listen to me. If something happens and I tell you to run, you run, okay?”

Warm hands covered cooler and Toshi pressed tighter to the body behind him. “So long as you’re running beside me.”

Mick shook his head and pulled the bedroom door open. “Stubborn son of a bitch.”

“Just as stubborn as someone else I know.” Toshi tossed back but there was no maliciousness in either man’s voice.

Toshi led them down the corridors to a sliding door that stood open. Inside, the floor was raised wood and the entrance way was three or four inches lower than the main floor. Racked in cubby holes along the wall were pairs of shoes and Toshi slipped his off and put his in an empty slot.

“Only in these rooms, the rest of the house is Western. There are slippers if you want a pair.” He pointed to a small, neat line of slippers.

“Thanks.” Mick stowed his shoes but when Toshi skipped the slippers so did he.

The room was open, airy but still lit with filtered light. The woods used were light, the accent colors were earthy and simple. They turned around a small wall and into the full room. It was lined in paper screened walls, in the center was a low table. Flat, pillows in rich jewel toned colors sat around it. A lovely, skillfully made flower arrangement sat in the center of the table. The plates that sat waiting for use were black and square, glass tumblers sat with cool water and waiting and beside them slender wine glasses waited to be filled.

Standing by a screened wall were Toshi’s aunt and uncle and when Toshi offered a slight bow, Mick followed as well. Yasun’s eyes were bright and they scanned across Toshi but what he saw or didn’t see there eased him.

“Aunt, have you met Mick?” Toshi said into the uncertain silence.

“Not formally.” She moved with graceful steps to greet them.

“Mick, my aunt, Sakamoto Hope, Aunt, my friend, A.R. McKale.”

Mick bowed slightly and Hope offered her hand. She smiled and bowed and offered it again. Mick took it and forced a slim smile. “I’m pleased to meet you.”

“And I, you, Mr. McKale.”

“The flowers are lovely, are they your doing?”

She blushed prettily and glanced with a warm smile to her husband before she answered. “They are, thank you.”

“We’ve heard so many stories about you, Mr. McKale.” Yasun began carefully. They’d have been happier if Toshi had found an I/S to take as a lover but any lover was better than none.

"I'm sure the stories aren't to be trusted." Mick began, wondering if this was the dinner where he was meeting Toshi's family or if this was a family dinner that the hired help was invited to.

"Uncle." Toshi warned.

Giggles at one of the screens drifted to them and with it came hushing whispers. Hope's smile faded but Yasun sighed and threw back the screen that separated the dining room from the next. Hope moved quickly to shoo at the children that scampered out of sight, Mick heard hushed scolding and a door shutting somewhere in the other room.

"Forgive them," Yasun shook his head. "They're too much like their father."

Mick was confused until Toshi touched his arm. "My cousins, they've never seen a human up close."

"And some of the stories they've heard make you into monsters." Yasun finished. "It can't be helped."

"They won't be joining us for dinner?" Mick glanced to the table.

"Not tonight, but if they behave they'll be allowed to join us later." Hope said as she came back into the room, shutting the screen behind her. "I'm sorry, Mr. McKale."

There was a sense of some protocol being broken but Mick wasn't aware of what it might be. He shook his head. "There's nothing to be sorry for, curiosity should be encouraged and please, call me Mick." It must have been the right thing because Hope relaxed and motioned them to sit and Yasun clapped Toshi lightly on the shoulder before he could sit down.

As they were settling in, another door slid open. Mick wondered how many were in the room, the doors blended perfectly into the screen covered walls, and from this door came four white clad attendants. They were wrapped in Asian robes with red and gold obi's that hung in long lines down from the backs of their waists. Their hair was braided into a hundred slender strands and then gathered into a loose twist at the back of their heads. Each one's face was painted pale white and nearly glowed in the soft light of the room, their lips were painted in small bows in shades of red and pink. The make up was close enough to geisha to surprise Mick but different enough that it made him uncertain of their role.

It wasn't until the attendant closest to him knelt that he was able to see this one wasn't a woman, but a slender man. When he looked, he saw the one kneeling by Hope was also a man, the robes and wrapped obi disguised gender differences well. The man bowed slightly and smiled and through the door came plainly dressed servants, none made up, bearing food and wine.

Mick glanced across the table to Toshi and saw that the whole affair seemed perfectly normal to him. This wasn't just a family dinner with the hired help, the food brought out was elaborate and served on his plate by the attendant, the wine was poured by the attendant as well and the man smiled slightly and bowed again.

"My husband assured me that you eat the same foods we do but we've never entertained a human at our table. I ask forgiveness for any flaws in the menu." Hope bowed to Mick and then to what was obviously the person in charge of the food.

The formality was making his head ache. "I'm honored to be invited to share this meal with you and I'm certain there will be nothing to forgive." It sounded strange and formal to him but Toshi nodded slightly.

"The attendants are based on Geisha," Yasun said. "The tradition has been adapted but the art

has remained. Hento, the man beside you Mick, is a celebrity among our people. He's renowned for his skills in dance, poetry and music. We call their art, Genta, they're highly valued. As such, none would wish to harm one, so it became tradition that the first bite of a meal is taken by them. No one would risk poisoning the food and harming a Genta."

With a careful movement of Yasun's hand, all the Genta bowed and produced ornate chopsticks from wide sleeves. They sectioned with smooth, perfectly timed motions, a small bite away from the main portion of food. In sync with each other, the bite was raised to lips and carefully consumed. The chopsticks were carefully wiped clean and slid back into their sleeves before with careful motions they raised the wine glasses, turned them and took the smallest of sips from within.

The glasses were turned again and replaced soundlessly. Each Genta folded hands into their laps and bowed their heads, a moment passed before they raised their heads in perfect unison. Hento clapped his hands three times. "All is as it should be." He spoke in a smooth, even voice and all bowed in unison.

Toshi, Hope and Yasun all clapped three times and returned the bow. "Thank you." Yasun replied.

The ritual completed, the family gathered up their own chopsticks to eat. Only Hope froze and her wide eyes grew wider. "I'm so sorry, please forgive me, Hento, would you please ask the cook to bring Mick a fork?"

Mick glanced down to how he had picked up the chop sticks and realized that the three family members had slid them gracefully into their hands, not pawed at the slender wood the way he was. "No, it's okay." He switched his grip to hold the sticks properly. "I'm fine."

Hento sighed skillfully. "And here I was hoping I'd get the pleasure of feeding you."

Yasun laughed warmly and Hope visibly relaxed but Mick didn't care, his eyes went to Toshi's. The blue gaze held no jealousy and only slight amusement which meant that the Genta's job was to flirt but it wasn't serious. Smart, artful, and capable of soothing difficult social situations, that was all Mick knew about Geisha and he assumed that those traits had been preserved in the I/S version.

He ducked his head and smiled. "Perhaps another day." He managed to get out and hoped it was the right answer.

It must have been because his hosts relaxed and the other Genta giggled and laughed. Toshi nodded slightly and continued to eat in careful, measured bites that he didn't taste. It was only then that it occurred to Mick that Yasun's children might not have been the only ones to never see a human up close. A good portion of the I/S community never left the inside of their walls, they stayed in the safe shelter of their camp. Genta, if they followed to the Geisha tradition, had probably never interacted with a human and were as nervous at offering offense as Mick was. Once he stopped worrying and forced himself to relax the party around him visibly eased as well.

The food was similar to what Hamada-san had made for them. An odd mix of cultures and styles that Mick found wonderful. Conversation was kept light, gossip about people he didn't know dominated the guided topics the Genta kept moving. There was no mention of politics or of the difficulties between their people. Tam's death was avoided but there was no doubt to Mick that the Genta's careful ways were subdued and aware of the death. There was discussions of art and music and it was far more involved than Mick would have expected. Toshi was silent and for the most part so was Mick but the silence wasn't uncomfortable.

After the food had been finished, Yasun stood, ending the meal. He slid open the door the children had once been hiding behind and motioned for them to move to the other room. Mick

just followed, letting Toshi guide him but the Genta followed behind them. The room was simple, plain and had a scattering of cushions at one end and an ornate screen at another. The Genta moved toward the screen to take up instruments they'd stored behind and gracefully began to tune the odd assortment. A servant slid open another door and the now far better behaved children filed in.

They lined up, the oldest a girl that Mick guessed was close to twelve, had her father's pale lavender hair. The youngest was less than five and clung to the next oldest sibling. Mick was surprised to see the six, wide eyed heads because Hope didn't look like she'd had one child, let alone six. They outright stared at Mick until their mother shooed them to take their places on the floor but for as awkward as they were around Mick, they settled in like ducklings around Toshi. In hushed whispers the brood almost begged for attention, they leaned against him and petted his dark hair. Instead of pulling away, Toshi responded to them, talking back in quiet tones and encouraging their fascination with his hair.

Hope motioned for Mick to settle in behind the line of children that sprawled over Toshi. Yasun eased down on one side of him and Hope the other where she was able to pinch any of her children that grew too demanding of their cousin or too rude in their open study of their guest.

The Genta bowed and Hento began to pick out a slow, sad tune on a four stringed instrument. The woman kneeling next to him blew on a slender wood flute. As the dancers began a stylized, obviously ritualized, dance, Hento began to sing. His tenor voice was mellow and sad and while Mick didn't know the words, the song was mournful. Toshi wrapped his arms around the leaning children and let them cuddle tight against him and the sight made Mick smile softly.

Half way through the second song, Yasun touched Mick's sleeve before he stood. No one looked twice as Yasun rose to his feet and motioned for Mick to follow. It should have been unforgivably rude but no one seemed to care, Mick rose and followed. Yasun slid another screened door open and once Mick was in the new room, he softly slid it shut. The music from the other room filtered over.

Mick glanced around and was surprised by the sheer number of books on the book cases around the room. It was wall to ceiling and in the center were small clusters of comfortable chairs and sofas with small tables and reading lamps but Yasun didn't pause here, he led the uncertain human to the next room.

This one had springy woven tan mats on the floor and plain paper screened walls on three sides. Weapons lined the screened walls, swords and knives and stacked in neat racks were wooden practice versions. Mick knew a dojo when he saw one and it wasn't until the door slid shut and the music was cut off that Yasun spoke.

"You don't approve of me."

"I don't know you well enough to approve or disapprove of you." Mick answered carefully. He had no doubt the blades hung within easy reach were sharpened or that the shorter man knew how to use them.

Yasun smiled. "I don't mean personally, my families place, you don't approve."

"Is it so obvious?"

"To me it is, I've spent a lifetime honing my senses to become aware of those not inclined to be friendly. But from you," his head tilted to the side. "It's not envy or desire for power, or personal, it's almost, ideological?"

"I'm not fond of dictators."

Yasun nodded. "Ah, that makes more sense. Toshi seems fond of you."

Mick just shrugged, his relationship with Toshi wasn't any one else's concern.

"Let me show you something." Yasun moved to the single solid wall and to the far side. As they got closer, Mick could see the wall was covered in framed photographs. Yasun stopped in front of one, a man with human Asian eyes and strong, high cheekbones. Only, his hair was white and his eyes red, the mark of the first generation I/S mutation. Beside him stood a plain woman, with the same mutation, her face was sweet and simple in comparison to the stark striking appearance of the man. "Our families Alpha. My grandparents.

"Sakamoto Toshiharu, my nephew is named for him." Yasun turned to Mick. "What do you know of our people?"

"Only what everyone does."

"Indulge me."

The only reason Mick was willing to give in was because it was obvious this man was important to Toshi. "Little over eighty years ago the Darsel-Putman research facility was examining cross species mutations in the human genome. Without their knowledge it invaded a strain of virulent pneumatic virus, the research crew were infected without ever being aware. By the time they'd were showing early symptoms of mutation the virus had spread to sixty percent of the population and it was uncontainable. Virus act by hijacking the cell's DNA and replacing it with it's own, it was perfect. It replicated itself without destroying the host cell but the remains of the jumbled DNA altered the original code. Gradually, enough of the carrier's cells had been permanently altered and they became symptomatic."

Yasun shook his head and smiled. "Well, that's quite a bit more than what most people know."

"I just paid attention growing up."

"Yes, the Inky Commune." His eyes wandered to the picture on the wall. "Can you imagine what it must have been like? A billion people dead within that first year. They say that two out of ten died, two never got ill, one would become permanently sterile, four would fall ill and recover with survivable sub-mutations and one in ten would fall ill and arise changed. Some scientists have said they believe the final alpha I/S mutation numbers were close to a billion people, when they rounded them up to Camps, they could found just under three million. Instability in the mutation was blamed for the large die off but I can't blame those that killed the alphas.

"Think about it, your whole family falls ill, the only family in your town or block, you remain healthy. Around you, most of your family dies but one relation lingers. He's sick for weeks more, those that recovered are strong again and those that died are buried but on he lingers. Every day his eyes loose a little more color, his hair begins to grow in white and bit by bit he regains strength. Things start to go back to normal and while he's different, dramatically different, he's still your relation. Until your neighbors fall ill, and then people down the street. They'd no way of knowing that the mutation metabolized differently in everyone, it was natural to assume the alpha I/S were carriers. In their place, I can't say I too, wouldn't have killed my own relation in an effort to save my town."

"I wouldn't have."

"Perhaps you wouldn't have. Many didn't, my grandfather's father hid him for over a year until the option of containment was offered. A year, seeing his child changed, the alphas had no control over their new awareness. Like blind men suddenly able to see they overloaded on sensation and so many went mad, they became dangers. Reports are filled with alphas raping, murdering, tearing men apart to gain emotional stimulation or to stop it. In the face of all of that,

my great-grandfather guarded his child.

"The Camps are a mixed blessing, our kind would have died out if it weren't for them. Like zoos they offered a safe place for us to gather and breed but it was done so coldly. They wanted a good variation of backgrounds in each camp, my grandfather was loaded like an animal into a cargo plane with hundreds of others from Japan and then onto a train with thousands. That's how he met my grandmother, she'd been raised in a wealthy family and sheltered her entire life and suddenly was without protection. My grandfather defended her from attack and abuse and they were partnered before they reached the camp. He always said she was a good pair." He pointed to the woman in the picture. "Toyowara Natsuko."

"They dumped five hundred thousand people in this camp. Five hundred thousand from all over the world, with no means of communication, no order, no system to distribute shelter, water or food. It was chaos. They hadn't even told anyone which camp they'd been placed in, where in the entire of the world they were. In this camp, fifty thousand died in the first year from violence, starvation, exposure and there was no easy means of removing their bodies. My grandfather cared only to protect his people, which he saw in those first weeks as Natsuko and the child she was carrying. Then, as the months passed, he saw his people as those from Japan.

"He rose quickly, it was no different than what he'd done with his family back home. Within those first five years he saw all the Asians as his people. He encouraged the growth and use of both English since he was certain we were in an English speaking country, and the inter-camp slang that let the different people talk. Ten years after Containment, with four children now born to him, my grandfather controlled a third of this camp."

Yasun had moved to another picture, four children, three boys and one girl, all ranging in age from late teens to early and a photo beside it of the oldest of the group. An I/S with honey blonde hair and clear blue eyes. "My father, Sakamoto Utiaka. The other groups had murdered his siblings and his parents by the time he was thirty. By thirty five my father finished his father's work and brought the entire of the camp under one rule. He'd had two sons of his own and brought stability to our people for the first time. He'd lost his wife before he was forty and before he was fifty he'd had my sister and myself with his mistress."

There were other pictures, other faces that Yasun moved them past. The pictures of what Mick guessed were the older siblings, their wives and children, people that Yasun didn't bother to name. He paused at a picture of himself at about the age of ten and a young woman close to sixteen. She was lovely, her solemn eyes were amber, the hair that fell down her back was the color of smoke.

"Yokino, Toshi's mother, my sister. You may think of my family as parasites but I assure you Mr. McKale, Mick, that my grandfather's concept of his people expanded every year. He passed that love to his son and his son to me. My father instilled schools, he set up trading methods so our people could establish companies and earn a self supportive living. He's the reason our people thrived. The camp in Australia was on such short rations that the average caloric intake was less than eight hundred calories a day. The camp in Europe provided inadequate shelter and half the population froze to death that first winter. It took five years and over three hundred thousand dead, before they were taken care of. The African camp was stormed by angry, fearful, citizens and every man, woman and child was slaughtered."

Mick nodded. "Including the research scientists." Several dozen Inkies from a local Commune had been killed as well.

"As well as them, yes. Of all the camps, we thrived and my father smuggled relations to the other camps, three survived the journey and, shortly, all three will be under the care of the Sakamoto family. Each of those camps have grown more stable, stronger, each year our family has held them. Think what you will, Mick, but when you're starving, when people you can't control are taking your family members at random for experimentation, when your children are being raped,

there's no time to stop and take a vote."

"Why are you telling me this? You aren't seeking my approval."

"No, I'm not." Yasun moved to a picture that his body had been blocking. There was no doubting who it was. Toshi was as solemn as all the other faces, his black hair a stark contrast the rainbow hues across the family walls. "Toshi is my nephew and while he may carry his grandmother's family name, he is Sakamoto. What you detest about us, is in him. Until my own children come of age, he is my heir and not just in name. He's capable or he wouldn't be my heir. This is who we are, who he is, and our ways are not human ways. I'd be blind not to see he is fond of you. Maybe by seeing it with our eyes," Yasun smiled mildly at the term. "You'll be able to better understand."

"I understand, I just don't believe that violence is a solution."

"It was a pretty solid solution for Tin Tam." Yasun's voice was cold, showing some of the steel strength of the man under the pleasant face. "I love my nephew, my wife occasionally accuses me of loving Toshi more than my own children. I wonder what would have happened had Ranvier chosen me that day and not my sister. There would be no Toshi, I would be dead, my sister would have died at our brother's hands. The dream my father and his father had for our people would have been gone. It isn't that I love Toshi more than my children, but like our father, I see so much in that boy that could one day be."

Yasun drew a breath and weighed what he'd seen and felt from the quiet human. "I like you, Mick, I like that you aren't afraid of our people. I like that you aren't afraid of me even though with a word I could order your death."

"You wouldn't do that, I don't see you as a man that does anything needlessly."

"I like that you're observant and intelligent. Mostly, I like the changes you seem to have brought to my nephew. If you can make him happy, as unorthodox as it is, you're welcome in my family."

It had a weight to it that Mick wasn't sure he understood. Tam had a human lover, many of the train yard residents did but their families must never have approved. Without really understanding, Mick bowed his head respectfully. "Thank you." He'd have to ask Toshi what the offer really meant.

Yasun clapped him on the arm. "Now, let's return before Hento dances, it's quite a sight."

Part Sixteen

It was several hours later that the family broke up and the Genta, to bows and compliments, were escorted away. Mick followed Toshi back down the hallways to the same room they'd been in earlier.

"If we're leaving we should get going."

"I'd like to spend the night, if you don't mind Mick. I have too few chances to visit."

"That's fine." Inside the room on the dresser were stacked two pairs of cotton pants and two white cotton sleeveless t-shirts. Beside them were two pairs of folded jeans with plain black t-shirts folded beside them, two pairs of clean, new white socks lay across the bundles. On the futon, now remade, were two pillows and if Mick could have seen into the bathroom he'd seen two new toothbrushes and two full sets of towels.

Understanding dawned. "I'm to stay here?"

Toshi glance around. "I can arrange to room with someone else. Space is limited."

"No!" The word slipped out. "No," he added more calmly. "It's okay. I just didn't want to intrude. I'm sure they've made assumptions."

"Of course they have, they can smell me on you."

The words were so casually spoken but they settled like molten fire in Mick. It was going to be a long, sleepless, night.

"What did my uncle want that took you both away?"

"Oh, he showed me your families photos."

"He took you into the shrine?"

"It looked like a dojo."

"The shrine and dojo are the same. I'm surprised, only family are allowed in there. Not even the servants go in to clean it."

"About that, he said the oddest thing."

Toshi poked his head around from the bathroom, toothbrush stuck in his mouth. "Hmm?"

"He said, let's see, if I can make you happy, even if it was unorthodox, he would welcome me into the family."

Toshi choked. The toothpaste got inhaled and he was coughing it back up. He spit out the mouthful of foam and rinsed the brush and his mouth. "What did you say?"

"I didn't know what to say. I bowed a little and thanked him." The surprise on Mick's face was almost as great as the shock on Toshi's. "Was that the wrong way to handle it?"

"Mick, listen to me, very carefully. In a few days, he'll ask you if you've decided. Tell him politely thank you but you have to decline."

"Did I say the wrong thing? What am I declining?"

"No, you said the perfect thing, Mick, he's offering to make you a part of the family. In a sense to adopt you, this isn't an idle offer. It isn't just that he's saying you're welcome to sleep in his home and eat his food. He's literally offering to make you a permanent part of the Sakamoto line. It's unheard of for such an offer to be made to an I/S but to a human? If you accepted you'd be a cousin I guess or I don't know what, and even if you and I never see each other again, you will always be a member of the family." When it appeared the seriousness of the situation was settling in to Mick, Toshi shook his head. "I can't imagine why he offered so much, do you mind if I shower first?"

"No, go ahead."

It left Mick alone to call Alec and make sure he knew they were okay. The call was brief. He set into his nightly ritual of checking his side arm carefully, inspecting the harness and the contents of his belt pouch. For having as much hair as he did, Toshi didn't take long in the shower. Mick heard the water shut off and then water run in the sink. It reminded him he'd need to shave as well. A hand run across his face showed the light growth, the dark auburn always grew in more

strawberry blonde on his face.

Yasun's offer ran about his mind. Mick replayed the conversation over again in his head and looked for other meanings in the man's words. He'd been very clear that Toshi wasn't just a member of the family in name, what that really meant, Mick wasn't sure. It did make him wonder about the shy, withdrawn man he was getting closer to. Ranvier was known as being utterly ruthless in business matters, cold, hard. The Sakamoto family was known to be just as ruthless and hard. Those photos welled up into Mick's thoughts, the elder brothers and their families. One of the two had been murdered by the other, what had happened to the betraying brother's wife and children? If the rumors about the Sakamoto family were true, they hadn't lived long.

How could Toshi be as quiet, as gentle natured, as he was given both his parent's natures? It worried Mick about what was laying underneath, what was locked away. Could any child of two such renowned, powerful, deadly families be as careful and almost shy as Toshi seemed? Mick of all people knew that a child's nature wasn't written by their parent's but those same cold, dangerous people had raised Toshi. It made him think about sides to the other man he hadn't yet seen.

Toshi emerged with a towel across his shoulders, his wet hair laying against it. Mick looked like a small child surrounded by toys, only the toy in his hand was a deadly weapon. "Sorry it took so long."

"Not too long." He shrugged and holstered the gun, setting it near the futon where it would be in easy reach. "Be right back." He stood and slipped past Toshi who was toweling dry his hair. The scent of cinnamon rose up and tickled Mick's nose. It was going to be a very, very long night.

The towel was cool and damp and his hair was still wet. Tonight, it didn't bother him, his thoughts were elsewhere. He pulled the comb through the damp strands, he shouldn't be thinking the thoughts he was. His uncle approved of Mick, greatly so to offer so much to him. It let Toshi glimpse into the hidden aspects of Mick's personality that he couldn't reach with the implant in place. Maybe the offer was just his uncle's round about way of giving Toshi the information he knew his nephew was denied. Surely the offer wasn't serious, but it was tempting, full acceptance into the family of someone that he could trust to be close to him, it was almost more than Toshi could dream of.

And Mick was right there, within arms reach. They were going to sleep together, side by side. It wasn't an unusual occurrence in the Camp. Friends, family, often slept two or more to a bed and their family had been no different. Tonight would be different, Toshi wasn't sure how he was going to manage to sleep.

He wanted. A deep, far too often ignored part of him ached to be touched. He needed that cool contact along his skin, quenching the own fire of his flesh. It was an emotion he knew, he was lonely, only this time it wasn't vague. He was lonely for Mick's touch, hungry for it. Everything would feel better if they just touched, and there he was, on the other side of the bathroom door. Naked, wet, in the shower, Toshi could almost see how the translucent door to the shower would blur and distort the flesh hidden behind. Mick would have soaped up by now. The cinnamon scented suds would be clinging to his skin, a slippery hand would be lathering across his body.

Toshi had the bathroom door open before he knew he was moving. The latch had opened silently but he stopped himself from going in. It was wrong, he hadn't been invited. But, Mick would be wet and slippery and he hadn't once yet been upset at Toshi taking any leads to advance their relationship.

That moved him into the bathroom. He slipped into the steamy room as quickly as a ghost and silently latched the door behind him. He could see Mick, the pale skin moving behind the door, fragmented and distorted. It would be so easy to strip and slip into that water. The flesh tormented by the raining hot water would be scalding and the rest cool to the touch. The soap,

the scent of it heavy in the room, would have that expense of pale flesh smooth and begging to be touched. It would feel so good to press his half aroused cock to the hot, slippery ass.

Toshi's shirt hit the floor and he moved to untie his pants.

A soft, barely audible groan escaped the shower and Toshi froze. Mick moved in the water and the movement that the door blurred was unmistakable. This was wrong, Toshi knew it, he should turn around and leave. He bent and scooped up his shirt, embarrassment cooling some of his desire.

Mick gasped again, louder than Toshi had ever heard him. He was almost painfully silent when they'd explored. The sound was haunting and he didn't want to leave.

"Oh, God, Toshi."

The whispered words made his mouth go dry. It was one thing to call someone's name as climax swept away all thought but to be alone, masturbating in the shower, calling out a name while fantasy wrapped around, that was different. It re-stirred the lost embers of desire and wrong or not, Toshi couldn't leave.

There was a sense of urgency in the room. The heavy smell of desire was thick and humid in the steam and Mick's hand moved faster along that obscured length. He groaned again, loud enough to shock Toshi and shifted his feet under the running water. He could almost hear the gasping breath lost in the pelting shower. A whimper escaped, hungry and low and then a strangled cry. Mick's hand smacked out and hit the shower door with rough force and he moaned out his release. His hand gradually slowed.

Toshi knew he was blushing red. This was something private, it was wrong, horribly wrong, that he'd spied on it. The only thing worse would be to be caught and as Mick leaned against the shower wall and slowly returned to himself, so did Toshi. The latch was just as silent leaving as he was entering and Toshi retreated.

He sat down and hated the betraying arousal. The comb moved in his hair brutally, pulling out strands, as he tried to remember that he shouldn't have seen that. Tonight shouldn't be a night about his pleasure, it shouldn't be.

Tam was dead. The remembered sight of his broken, twisted body was enough to chase away any lingering desire. It was a mute testament to his shame, of just why he didn't deserve pleasure. He needed touch, that was one thing, but to seek out more wasn't fair. There was too much dirt, too many disgusting horrible things that clung to him to ever be able to claim anything proper with anyone. If Mick desired his body, that was fine, he desired Mick the same way, but there was nothing worth desiring beyond that.

When Mick emerged from the bathroom he was almost certain he'd be able to at least lay near the other man without embarrassing himself. He'd shaved and brushed his teeth and prayed he'd worked out the need enough that it wouldn't come back. Toshi was just so vulnerable tonight, it made Mick want to hold him. It made him want to kiss him and take the hurt away. Those were the thoughts he didn't need.

Seeing Toshi sitting, looking miserable and sad, only spun the need to make him feel better back. Fortunately, his body was too spent to respond. Then there was the sight of those exposed arms, long, lean, lightly golden. It would be nice to run his fingers up the inside of them and see if Toshi was ticklish.

Those were more bad thoughts. He scolded himself. "Ready? I'll get the light."

"No need." Toshi reached to where the wall met the floor, within arms reach of the futon and

pressed a small hidden button. A hand wide section of the base board glowed softly in dim blue light.

Mick nodded. "Nice." He flicked the light out and Toshi looked more vulnerable, more sad in the pale blue light.

The quilt was a heavy comfort, thick and warm. He had one on his bed at home but it wasn't this quilt. Toshi sighed and eased under it, he waited until Mick was settled before he reached above his head and turned the light out.

Than the night was as heavy as the quilt. Neither man moved, or spoke. They lay stiffly on their backs, uncertain, closed off in their own thoughts. Time moved with sluggish pain. There was none of the comfortable ease they'd had while napping. Mick was afraid to move, terrified he'd brush against an arm or leg and end up stroking the slender limbs. He'd end up sliding a hand up the limb, to shoulder or hip, and those were very bad thoughts.

Toshi sighed almost angrily in the dark and he shifted under the quilt. "Mick?" He whispered out, half praying the other man was asleep.

"Yes?" There was no sleep in the answering voice.

"I have a favor to ask."

"Okay."

"Would you make love to me?"

Mick almost swallowed his own tongue. "Excuse me?"

"Never mind." Toshi rolled onto his side.

"No, there's no way you can drop that and than just say never mind." He fumbled above his head and sure enough he found a small, square button. When he pressed it a blue light on his side lit up the room. It looked amazingly like moonlight. "Hey," It wasn't brilliant conversation but it worked. Mick poked the tense shoulder that faced him. "Hey?"

"What?"

"Why'd you ask me that?"

"Never mind."

"No, why?"

"Because I want you to hold me." He bit the words out and waited to be laughed at.

There was no laughter. "I'll do that anyway."

"Because I wanted to feel you in me." Those words were whispered, and the only way he was able to speak them was by having his back to Mick.

They froze Mick. Everything in their mutual seduction so far had been Toshi dominating him and as seldom as Mick was bottom, he craved a chance to let Toshi top him. To have the tables suddenly turned and be offered the thing he hadn't been expected to get for a long time, it started to stir things that shouldn't have been able to stir.

"Toshi," he began slowly, struggling to keep his voice steady. "It's been a difficult, emotionally

exhausting day. I don't think we should, you'll regret it later." That hurt to say.

Toshi rolled onto his back and looked up to where Mick was propped on an arm. "No, I won't. It's not easy for me to ask for this. Please, Mick, unless you don't want to." The idea hadn't even occurred to him before and he suddenly felt silly.

He traced one hand gently over the worried brow. "Of course I want to, I just don't want to hurt you. I don't want to take advantage of the day."

"You won't. I want you to take me, I want to," he stumbled on the words. "I want to feel."

"I think I understand." He lowered down and kissed the tense lips lightly. "I'm still not sure this is a good idea but I understand." He really did, grief did different things to different people. "If you want to stop at any time, any time, you tell me, okay?"

Toshi just nodded, distracted at the feather light kisses raining down on his mouth. He tried to force the kisses deeper but Mick pulled away. It was torment. "The light?" He gasped out.

"Stays on, I want to see you."

That made him shiver.

"Take this off." Mick pulled at the hem of Toshi's shirt and stripped off his own as Toshi obeyed. Now, when he stretched out against the other body, flesh slid along flesh. It allowed him to run his hands across that expanse of skin so long denied him as he laid a path of soft, careful kisses on lips and neck.

Exploring, teasing, fingertips slid over a pebble hard nipple and Toshi gasped. Mick sighed against his neck and increased the pressure and hunger of his mouth on that sensitive column of flesh. He made wet those errant fingertips and as his tongue swirled in lazy patterns on all those sensitive spots, he ran light, tormenting circles over that hard bundle of nerves. A hand buried itself in Mick's still damp hair, clutching.

Slowly, Mick's mouth worked downward, teasing the hypertensive hollow of the throat, dragging out hushed moans, down to nip at collarbones. His hand trailed over to the neglected nipple and teased it into tormented life before sliding down to tickle across the ridge of ribs, tracing the flat ridges of muscle to the delicate navel. As his fingers swirled around that tiny divot his mouth closed over a hard nipple.

The body below him arched off the bed. Toshi tossed his head to the side and covered his mouth. It wasn't supposed to be like this, it wasn't supposed to be a slow, delicious torture. He hadn't asked for it to be this good. His responses embarrassed him but it was too overwhelming to want to stop.

Mick's teeth nipped the nub in his mouth and he kissed sideways, pausing to lick the ridge of breastbone, before finding the other nipple and hungrily devouring it. His hand dipped lower, teasing at the edge of the cotton pants, scrapping nails along the tops of the exposed hip bones. The hand tangled in his hair slid down and touched the Mick's bare shoulder before sliding lower to his back.

The hard ridge of a scar slid under Toshi's fingers and stopped his exploration. He traced it unwillingly, tapered at one end, widening outward to over an inch across. "Mick?" The concern over rode the desire flooding across him.

The teasing mouth paused but Mick kept his head bowed and tucked against the warm chest. "I'm not that pretty with my clothes off." Lovers often asked and he'd joke it off but not this time. He stretched out and took a hold of the wandering hand. It was easy to guide Toshi's touch

across one fading scar after another.

"What happened?" Toshi asked gently, surprised as his fingers slid across two, than three different marks on Mick's back and then across another four along his chest.

"I got shot a few years ago, that's this one and the one in the back is where the doctors cut it out. I got stabbed here, Andy and I were jumped while in college. " He guided Toshi's hand along the line that followed his rib. "Most have stupid stories like that. Fair skin makes impressive scars."

"And this one?" Toshi traced the wider one on Mick's shoulder.

"One of my foster mother's idea of discipline."

The confession made Toshi's chest feel too tight, it made it ache. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

"Don't be, if I hadn't wanted to tell you I wouldn't have. I was hoping you wouldn't notice, I was enjoying myself."

The meaning sunk in slowly. "This," he ran fingertips across a scar. "Doesn't change anything. Do I need to ask you again?"

The closed off mask Mick had worn at the first questioning of the marks on his body melted. "No, you don't." He kissed Toshi's mouth and this time when the other man parted his lips he claimed the deep kiss they both wanted. "Now, where was I? Ahh, I think I was here." He leaned down and nipped the bottom edge of Toshi's ribs.

The pleasure from such an unexpected place shot across Toshi's body. "oh!" He called out and his body writhed. A caressing hand held him in place, only the gentle touch along his aching hardness didn't do much to settle him down.

Mick tugged gently at the top of the cotton pants. "I want these off." The tip of his tongue circled around Toshi's navel and his fingers made quick work of the ties. When he tugged again the cotton slipped down and Toshi raised his hips a fraction, using action to agree when words were failing. The fabric caught on Mick's hidden objective and unwittingly provided a scrapping, teasing touch that pulled a soft gasp from the prone body.

The level of Toshi's sensitivity was shocking, and it made Mick smile wickedly. It was almost unfair, he swiped a tongue across a hip bone and palmed that hard length. He kissed his way across that flat plane, distracting with touch, and catching Toshi unaware by a wide, hot tongue across the head of his cock.

Toshi almost sat up in his surprise, he rested his weight on his forearms. "Don't!" he cried out but the sight of Mick, slowly sucking his length into that hot mouth made him forget how to speak.

Mick lifted his head just enough to catch those almost glowing blue eyes. "Don't? You don't like this?" He ran a long, slow, lick from base to tip before sucking the head into his mouth. Toshi's head lolled back but he didn't pull away.

"I don't," he swallowed hard and tried to think. "You shouldn't have to,"

That was surprising enough to make Mick pause. "This," he drew the hard length into his mouth. "Isn't done because I have to." He nipped lightly, teasingly. "It's done because I want to, I love this." Slowly, Mick eased his head downward, feeling Toshi's eyes on him, until he'd managed to fit nearly every inch into his mouth, to the back of his throat. He heard Toshi whimper and felt him fall limply back to the futon as he slowly slid the length back out. "The feel, the taste of you, God, Toshi, is amazing."

It wasn't a lie, or even an exaggeration. Mick hadn't exactly been discriminating over the years in who he was willing to go down on, it was his favorite pastime. Some moments, like some men, were better than others but rarely did Mick feel such an aching need. The very idea that Toshi thought he might be doing this unwillingly made him chuckle and the feel of the sound struck the hard length in his mouth like lighting to a rod. Toshi fit, there was no pause, no hesitation, no worries, they were like glove to hand and as Mick gave into one of his fantasies he lost himself to the sensations.

Because of his history, Mick knew he could drag this out and he really wanted that but Toshi hadn't asked for this. It wouldn't end so simply tonight. That didn't mean Mick was going to settle for less than an ending. He redoubled his efforts, using mouth and teeth, lips and throat, hand and tongue to drag out shivers and hidden, raspy gasps.

"Mick, no, Mick, I can't, I, it's, I'm," Toshi faded off into mindless moans.

Mick pulled away just enough. "Good, because I'm not going to stop until you come."

"Oh sweet God." Strong hands held his hips down and there was nothing Toshi could do.

Mick pulled away enough to catch the salty, bitter heat on his tongue. His tongue laved and stroked, pulling everything from the trembling body below him. Nothing in the world was hotter than seeing someone so surrendered, so free, and it was twice as erotic from Toshi.

When Toshi's vision cleared and he looked down, Mick was adding a few final swipes from his tongue to the tormented tip of his rapidly softening cock. There was an evil look in the man's eyes, a hungry one, and he grinned viciously as that evil tongue slowly licked over his red lips. The ragged breath that had only fractionally slowed froze in Toshi's throat, he had to look away to remember how to speak.

"Why did you?" Toshi let himself sink bonelessly down. "I'm sorry." He closed his eyes but Mick was soon beside him. Stroking his damp, tangled hair back, the fabric of the cotton pants he still wore felt rough and too harsh against Toshi's bare legs.

"Sorry for what?" Mick started to kiss the ear he exposed from under all that hair. "I told you I was going to do that next time." He chuckled warmly. "I'm a little bit of a slut, I'm afraid I'm going to be addicted to tasting you."

"But, I thought we were, I," It was so difficult to think, his mind felt fuzzy and those slow, languid kisses to his ear weren't helping. "Oh, that's nice."

Mick chuckled again. "I'm glad you approve, but," carefully he pressed his own now hard and aching body into Toshi's hips. "Unless you say otherwise, we aren't finished."

Toshi managed to roll his head over, forcing Mick to abandon the ear he was nibbling and look at him. "You still want to?"

Mick nodded.

"Than why did you, I mean, why," he sighed and hated that the words were gone.

"Because I wanted to, because it's been a long time since anyone's had you and I wanted you to relax, because I want this to linger." There was no teasing in his tone and his words carried the weight of his full seriousness. He bowed his head and kissed that haunting neck. "Don't worry," he whispered into the hot skin. "The next time you come my cock will be hard in you."

The words were like a thousand hands suddenly stroking across every inch of his body and Toshi

moaned. His head tilted back to display his neck in as wonton a display outside as he felt inside.

"Unless," Mick moved his mouth to that hypersensitive hollow and kissed it. "You tell me to stop, right now."

"I," Toshi sighed and his back arched. "Stop that, I can't think when you're doing that." He knew he was whining but Mick chuckled again, rich and dark in the dim light and stopped. Those soft lips pressed gently to Toshi's and a gentle hand traced the features of his face.

"Better?" Mick asked, the face below his now slack from spent passion but still lost in a hazy world of desire. He waited until Toshi nodded lazily below his hand. "Now, do you want me to stop?" He dreaded the answer. Yes, he'd be content if Toshi said stop. He surely wouldn't die from disappointment but oh, that lithe body called to him. Like an addict, he craved it, needed to be buried deep inside it and he held his breath waiting for an answer.

Toshi managed to get his eyes half open. "On the dressing table," one slender arm snaked out to point. "The blue porcelain bottle. It's a good lotion." It was as close to saying continue as he could manage.

It was enough. Mick dropped his weight down a little too hard against the languid body and kissed the lips that instantly parted for him. The contours of that mouth were as comfortable as his own, the tips of those fangs as natural as the points of Mick's own canines. Toshi moaned into his mouth and his tongue snaked out to swipe at Mick's. It was such a forceful action, so surprisingly deliberate, that Mick broke the kiss.

He watched as Toshi, eyes squeezed closed, licked softly at his lips. "That's how you taste, love." He didn't wait for a reaction but slipped across the small room to find the bottle. When he returned to the futon he had to pause. In the dim, pale blue light Toshi was laying out, fully displayed. The quilt had been kicked and pushed aside and one of Toshi's arms was tucked up near his head, the hand curled loosely along the slender neck. His other hand rested on the too thin ribs, rising and falling as his breath slowly steadied. The sight stopped Mick.

Those massive eyes cracked open. "What's wrong?"

Mick just shook his head. "Nothing, it's just, you're so beautiful. I can't believe you're interested in me."

Toshi's eyes slid shut, hiding whatever thoughts floated behind them. "I'm I/S, we're almost all attractive."

There was something in the tone that told Mick he wasn't going to make the sincerity of the compliment sink in tonight. His body was aching, demanding too loudly, to even attempt to convince Toshi that the beauty he saw wasn't in the flesh but the soul under it.

He settled in next to where Toshi lay and pumped a little of the lotion out. It had a light, herbal smell and was slick on his fingers. It surprised him but didn't shock him that a well stocked I/S guest room would have a lotion that was ideal to double for lube, it made him smile in a secretive manner. He ran his non-slicked hand across one of those gracefully folded legs, admiring the strength in them before he lifted it and settled the limb on his shoulder. Those teasing fingertips continued to gently stroke across that leg, judging the growing tension and unease by the tautness of the muscles.

Mick kept his eyes on Toshi's half hidden face as he slid a slick finger back, lower, seeking. The leg and hip under his soothing hand tensed but not a flicker of unease crossed Toshi's face. Carefully, the slick fingers found the hidden ring of muscle and always watching for any sign to stop, began lightly circling over it. Mick waited, forcing his breathing to slow and all his focus on the closed off expression, seeking signs of discomfort or worry but the only hint he had that Toshi

was even paying attention was the uneasy tension in the leg over his shoulder. Gradually, that tension faded as the careful, slick touch lulled that most hidden of places and when he was certain it was okay, Mick eased one finger past that tight ring and into the passage beyond.

The leg over his shoulder instantly tensed up, his soothing hand fell to an uneasy hip and Mick had to gently hold Toshi still. The hidden face buried deeper into the tucked up arm but not before Mick could see the worried, tight expression that crossed it.

"You okay?"

"What are you, why don't you just?"

Toshi's confusion hurt Mick, the fact that such a basic concern offered to a lover would be foreign could only mean that no one had ever cared enough to offer it. "You're tight." That was an understatement but Mick didn't want to linger on that thought. "I don't want to hurt you, this will make it so you don't get hurt. Okay?" There was no way he was going to be taking the night any further without some careful and serious attention to prepping the body below him. "Hasn't anyone ever done this for you?" He wasn't sure he wanted an answer.

Toshi's breath froze and voices from his past tumbled free. Laughter echoed in his ears, mocking voices blurred by Shine, teasing about his virginity, as rough fingers plunged in carelessly, painfully. He'd always assumed that it had been an extra means of humiliation, the action had hurt so much more deeply than physically. It was something entirely different than the gentle, careful touch Mick was offering. The overlap of memories made a tremor shake his body and the slow movement of that not totally unpleasant finger in his body stilled.

"Toshi?"

"Never like this, never so carefully." He managed to whisper out.

"Are you okay?"

The touch on his hip was soothing. He nodded. "I'm fine." The words sounded more convincing than he felt and that slowly moving stroke returned.

"Relax, I'm not going to hurt you."

Another finger joined the first and it felt too tight, it didn't hurt, not really but it wasn't what he'd expected. Toshi focused on slow, even breaths and remembered this was Mick. He didn't care what the other man said, it was going to hurt eventually but this didn't, it just felt different.

The tension held in the leg Mick was holding slowly faded and that's when he added a third finger. Only this time the leg only slightly tensed up and as he stroked in those carefully measured shallow caresses, the tension melted far more quickly. The sight, the feel, was almost more than Mick could stand. He watched each captured breath move in and out of that lovely chest, watched the beautiful face try to hide from sight. It made him ache with need. The moment Toshi sighed softly and his hips arched in a small, lazy twitch, Mick took his cue and slid his fingers away.

Toshi whined softly when the touch disappeared. It had been rapidly going from uncomfortable, to comfortable to something close to pleasure and then it was gone. His head turned and his eyes cracked open. Mick knelt between his legs, the one draped up over a shoulder made him blush to see. He was looking down and Toshi's eyes followed the movement to see Mick carefully stroking himself, spreading the lotion across his own arousal. It was Toshi's first clear look at the other man, he wasn't even sure when or how Mick had slid out of his pants, and the length that his eyes gazed across seemed too large for what they were planning. He took a deep breath and studied Mick's anatomy judgmentally, he wasn't really that big and Toshi could easily

recall men larger than what was before him finding ways to fit in him.

The memory made him feel as if raw sewage had been suddenly dumped on him. He'd asked Mick to do this because he was feeling empty, lonely and this was a way to chase some of that away but he hadn't expected to feel so unattached to the whole act. Mick was doing so many wonderful things to his body but somehow it wasn't able to reach inside, really inside, past the cold layers of empty ice he felt trapped in. He hadn't really expected it to, wasn't sure he wanted it to. He knew what he was, dirty, used goods, damaged, why would Mick want to reach past the filth? This was as good as he was likely to ever find, better than he certainly deserved and his only hope was that Mick wouldn't become soiled by touching him.

Mick glanced up and was surprised to see those blue eyes open. He grinned a little and moved his hands away from himself, mockingly displaying himself for inspection, but no teasing smile, not even a small grin, was returned. Instead something dark and shadowy flitted across the face below him, something Mick couldn't name and the eyes that watched him grew distant and sad.

"You're certain?" He whispered, hoping the look had merely been uncertainty, worry.

Toshi only nodded and closed his eyes. Another day, Mick might have stopped. The combination of the day's events and that odd, unnamable expression might have overridden his lust and stopped him. He eased his mind by going over how many times he'd asked if they should stop. Toshi had been the one to ask, he'd been the one at every step to encourage their continuing and Mick really, really didn't want to stop. He hurt, he ached and all he wanted was to slid into that hot, tight passage and claim the waiting body as his. An indefinable look wasn't enough to override all the reasons to continue.

There was no resistance, no uncertain tensing, in the second leg as Mick raised it to his shoulder. He leaned his weight forward and carefully balanced himself. The desperate length of his cock slid against that fevered body, teasing, testing and when he saw no signs to stop, the tip found and pressed against the tense ring of muscle.

When Mick eased his second leg up over his shoulder Toshi closed his eyes. He hated being like this, it was a position that made him feel helpless and trapped. Even while shiny and needing a fix he'd try every trick he knew to get his john to flip him over. He hated the feel of the other persons weight pressing down on him, their body rubbing against his when it didn't have to. Their breath against his face or neck was maddening, it was too much and too close but this was Mick. A man that had gone out of his way to provide a mind blowing amount of pleasure when he didn't have to. For Mick, Toshi would keep his body relaxed and receptive and be as cooperative as he could.

Only, there was no smothering trapped feeling. Mick didn't crush him down with his weight but held himself up on those strong arms. There was no breath pressing against his skin in unwelcome invasion, no grunted moans sharp in his ear. This wasn't some rough, nameless person but Mick and, as he'd been with everything, he was careful, gentle and Toshi responded to the man as he'd never with anyone. There was no denying he'd be more comfortable in another position, but having Mick be the one above him didn't make him want to crawl out of his skin and hide either.

And then all worry and thought of vulnerable placement disappeared. Something hot, slick and hard slid along all those places that had gone so long untouched. It sent tight tingles of pleasure sparking along Toshi's nerves, stirring something primal and needy in him. The tip of that length, as hard as steel, blunt and far too large now in feel, pressed against his opening, rested there and the feel of it gently pressing, testing the way in, triggered diverse reactions.

This is what he'd asked Mick for. He wanted to be taken, filled. He wanted someone to find pleasure in his body and remind him, even subconsciously, that no matter what happened he'd always be able to be something to someone. Even if all he was to someone else was a tight

passage to use, a means for gaining pleasure, it was better than being a nothing, which he felt too often in the empty, dark, nights.

The feel of that hard, demanding pressure was a feeling of inevitability. It made a voice buried deep inside of him want to scream in pain, curl up in fear. He wanted to shout at Mick to just do it, to just shove it in and get it over with. There was no doubt how it was going to be, it was always the same. Now that he'd gotten what he wanted he wanted it done. He wanted, needed, Mick to finish this as quickly as possible. Needed him to limit the pain this act would cause by being as direct as possible.

But it was Mick, so he forced his body to relax and kept his eyes shut. It didn't matter that this would hurt, he expected that when he'd asked Mick to take him. He just wanted Mick to find pleasure here, in his body and be done.

Above him, Mick choked on a sob as the tip of his cock pressed forward and slipped inside Toshi, it didn't hurt. That surprised Toshi, it burned, it ached in dull discomfort, but there was none of the stabbing, shattering pain he remembered. Carefully, he opened his eyes and the sight of Mick was enough of a distraction from the manageable unease of being taken. The strong arms were braced on either side of his shoulders, they trembled and sweat beaded up on the pale skin. Mick's head hung loose on his neck, the thick unruly auburn hair fell forward and disguised all but the tip of Mick's nose. It was obvious from the tension in the man's whole body that he was easing into Toshi slowly with a great force of will.

That thought hit hard. Mick was easing into his body. The wonderful, hard length he'd stroked off the night before was now sliding into him, inch by inch with slow care. It wasn't breaking him, it wasn't forcing its way inside. It wasn't hurting him, it was stretching him, filling him, taking him and from the strangled gasp that slipped from Mick's throat, it was obviously a delicious torture. It would have been worth the pain he'd been expecting to know he was causing Mick to feel so good.

For Mick, it was almost too much. He bite the inside of his cheek and tasted blood in the effort it was taking to go slowly. There was no way he was going to hurt Toshi, there was no way. That phrase repeated in his head over and over, a mantra that did little to shut off the driving need to pound into that hot, tight pleasure. His breath burned in his chest and escaped in strangled, choked gasps but slowly, he was easing in, settling down and finally, after a torturous forever, he was fully in that welcoming passage.

He hung there, gasping for breath, trying to settle and adjust to the unbearable pleasure that poured across his body. He wanted to give Toshi time to adjust but the legs had never tensed against him, the hips had never moved to push toward or away from him. When Mick thought he could stand to see the beautiful man below him and not lose control, he opened his eyes and fell into a sea of blue.

He tried once and failed and then tried again to speak. "You okay?" His voice was ragged and broken even to his own ears.

Toshi below just nodded, staring up at Mick with wide, unreadable eyes.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No."

"Let me know when you're ready." He groaned out, his arms shaking now, his body needing to move, needing to thrust and seek out the pleasure that would make this look like a mild tingle.

"Ready?" Toshi asked confused.

If Mick hadn't been in the middle of the most pleasurable experience of his life he might have stopped and gone out and hunted down the people that had hurt Toshi and killed them very, very slowly. "When you've adjust to the feel of me, of me," he groaned. "Oh God, of me in you." Now was without a doubt a very bad time to be explaining these things. The words brought mental images and they carried along feelings and sensations he was trying not to focus on.

The sheer passion, the hungry need in Mick's voice settled like the quilt against Toshi's body, heavy, sheltering and warm. It was silly to wait to adjust to that hard intrusion, how much more could he adjust? It didn't really hurt, hardly even ached any more and was by far more pleasant than he could have asked for. Toshi turned his head and found the trembling arm so near by, he arched up on a whim and licked out his tongue to taste the beaded sweat.

"Oh my God," Mick groaned and his eyes grew wide.

"I'm ready." He braced himself for that hungry need to be unleashed, for the hard, fast pounding that should follow such desperate agony that he saw on Mick's face.

It didn't happen. Mick moved, slid out with a hushed moan and slowly eased back in, the movement was gentle, careful and it totally confused Toshi. There was no rough urgency, no violent need, just gentle, slowly demanding, joining. Mick lowered down and his lips kissed hot trails along Toshi's face and neck, quick, hungry tastes and it felt good. There was no sense of being smothered, no sense of being trapped, it felt good. It was starting, slowly to feel really good. That relentlessly paced hardness filled him and when it started to leave his body sent tingling shivers along his nerves and than filled him again. It was starting to feel far too good.

The pace was too slow, too gentle. It was too much, it made Toshi nervous. Something that felt this good, this right, this safe couldn't continue. It would hurt soon, it had to, there was no avoiding that. What was worse, the gentle, zinging tingles along his nerves from that slow consumption was starting to get him hard again. Not just the semi-hard, semi-soft half awake arousal Mick's kisses produced but a real, hard, erection was returning. He wanted to cover it, to hide it from Mick's sight. He didn't want the man that was taking him with such gentle ease to see what a whore he was.

"Mick?"

"Yeah?" The voice was strained, broken and Toshi shouldn't have worried about being seen, Mick's eyes were shut.

"Would you mind, I mean, can we,"

Mick chuckled warmly. "Say it, love, what ever it is you want, tell me. I'll do anything you want." His voice was dark and throaty and the depth of the emotion in it almost made Toshi believe he meant it.

"I want to turn over, is that okay?"

Mick moaned, low and tight in his throat. He lost the steady, slow rhythm he'd been holding and thrust roughly into Toshi, forcefully but it didn't bring pain, instead it carried a pleasure that consumed him. He thrust hard back, forcing his hips against that rough taking and it pulled another hungry moan from Mick. His left arm collapsed and he scrambled to catch his weight on his forearm. It broke the moment.

"Yeah, baby, that sounds nice." Mick sighed in breathless desire. With gentle ease he slid out, as careful removing himself as he was entering. When he'd finally extracted the now throbbing ache from the source of so much pleasure and torment, Toshi whimpered softly below him.

Mick eased the legs that had be cramping up by now as badly as his arms were off of his

shoulders. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Toshi shook his head and tried to ease away from those eyes that were dark in the dim light and missed nothing.

"Tell me, if I hurt you I want to know."

"No, it's not that, I, don't laugh, I," he folded his arms across his stomach and looked away. "When you pulled out, I've never felt so empty, I want you back in me." He knew he was blushing and he prayed that Mick wouldn't notice.

Mick smiled and soothed damp hair away. "Why would I laugh at that? That's how it's supposed to be. I want you just as much." He claimed another kiss, this one deep and with all the hunger he felt before he let Toshi slid away and turn over.

The idea that Toshi was beautiful laying on his back exposed to a wandering eye was chased away. That was nothing, that was simple prettiness, that was a mild attraction, compared to the sight of Toshi on his hands and knees. The long curtain of black hair, hanging in damp strands down his back, showered out to either side. He was all long lines, long limbs, long muscles lean under golden skin. His spine bowed downward and his head swung, swiping the shower of blackness across that rich expanse and down over a shoulder.

The sight stunned Mick. Knocked him breathless. The tattoo the showering curtain of hair pulled away to reveal only added to the beauty of the moment. It was swirling colors, dynamic and the mark of power and deadly strength. Mick reached out his hands and slid them over that firebird, across the exquisite curve of the lower back displayed for him. Then it occurred to him, floating up in his lust filled mind, this beautiful creature was a prince to his people. That was what his uncle had been trying to show him, they were less a dictatorship and more a monarchy. The swirling colorful fire under his hands was the royal seal and this being of power, sensuality, of beauty, wanted him.

It was a heady thought. He slid his hands down over that strong ass, cupping it, curving over it, tracing those lines. His hands went lower to the strong thighs and with gentle touches spread them wider. They fell open without resistance, and Mick accepted and moved to kneel between them. Mick took a hold of his throbbing erection and pressed it back into that still tight, still far too hot, passage. Only this time, he could watch himself entering the beautiful flesh below him. It was a sight he doubted he'd ever forget.

Toshi turned over and knew it would come now, the hard pounding, the violent grasping hands. At least, like this, Mick wouldn't see how turned on it would make him, he wouldn't mistake it as a natural reaction instead of a response to the man doing it. Because now, Toshi knew there was no doubt, he was going to be as hard as steel again soon. Mick could have beaten him, than taken him hard and fast with all the pain he remembered so well and he still would be hard. It wasn't the act, it was the man behind the actions.

Strong hands slid over the small of his back, across the tattoo Toshi had never shown Mick and never explained. He waited for the questions, but none came and he relaxed as the hands slid lower, glad that Mick had mistaken it for a simple decoration. Feather soft strokes slide down his ass, one finger dipping to tease the length of the suddenly hungry cleft, before lowering across hips. Down the hands went, studying, learning, to thighs and then there was the direction. Toshi didn't wait to be asked again, he slid his knees wide. He felt Mick slide forward, the now hot feel of his body pressing close to his own, thigh brushing against thigh in a touch that actually made Toshi feel good.

The blunt head of that hard need pressed against him and slid inside. There was no resistance this time, no discomfort. It didn't ache, it didn't burn, it didn't hurt, it slid into his body as if it belonged. It became part of him as if the two bodies had merged into one. It felt right and it

made him feel whole and good. A thought crossed Toshi's mind, if this was what sex was like between willing, caring partners, it was no wonder people craved it.

Mick sighed and settled into him and Toshi braced for the thing he'd been anticipating and half dreading the whole time. Only, when Mick moved it was barely an inch, sliding out just a fraction and sliding back in. Shallowly, smoothly, if Toshi's heart hadn't been beating so fast, and when had it sped up, he hadn't noticed, the shallow thrusts would have been timed with his heartbeat.

Lub dub, thrust out thrust in, lub dub, thrust out, thrust in. Over and over in slow, easy strokes. Mick only moved to shift angles and suddenly those shallow thrusts were sliding against something. It was a tingling, a scraping of pleasure, a hint at an explosion. Those shallow strokes were so like a gentle fingertip teasing the head of his aching cock, promising so much more but just giving a hint that Toshi knew there was more waiting to be discovered.

Toshi moaned, softly, surprised at the sudden low pleasure and Mick smiled behind him. Those steady strokes continued, shallow, taunting, holding that hint of pleasure at just a hint. It was something Toshi had felt before, brightly shining, occasionally the man using him would hit a spot and his world would explode in impossible pleasure. Toshi had always assumed it had been from the shine, the right combination of drug and emotion, not of biology. Even these teasing hints at more felt better than he'd ever dreamed was possible to feel while sober and he wanted to get away from it.

It was bad enough that the smell and feel of Mick all around him, clinging to skin, thrusting into his body, had made him hard again. But this was too much, it wasn't supposed to feel this way. It wasn't supposed to be better than it already had been. He didn't deserve for it to feel better. It was enough as it was. Toshi didn't understand why Mick didn't just finish it. He didn't understand why he was teasing like this, why he was tormenting him with something he couldn't and didn't deserve to have. Toshi tried to move his hips so those shallow, wonderful strokes didn't hit that betraying spot.

The move confused Mick. From how Toshi was starting to relax and respond he knew he was on the right spot but the lithe body below him was trying to get away from it, not trying to welcome more. Then Mick really saw what was before him. Toshi was down on his forearms, face and neck tucked away and protected, legs spread and ass in the air in open invitation, it was sexy as hell but spoke more than words could. His mind added in those small movements to avoid the pleasure of their joining and the picture the whole created was as clear as crystal and just as brittle. It was something that needed to be addressed and stopped, not later but right now.

Mick ran a hand over the tense back in front of him. "This is how those men used you isn't it?" He kept his pace slow, gentle, not changing rhythm and he didn't wait for an answer, he already knew it. "Like this, they could use you, hurt you, ride you as hard as they wanted and you didn't have to see it or let them see you."

Fraction by fraction, Mick slowly increased the depth of those slow, careful strokes, holding those hips in place so the added friction and pressure stayed right on that wonderful, perfect spot.

"I can understand why you'd think it's supposed to be that way." It wasn't easy to speak let alone put the swirling chaos of understanding into words but Mick had to. There were no options. There would be no finishing and discussion of this later, he knew in his bones that the moment they were done Toshi would withdraw as he'd done each time they'd touched. He couldn't just take his pleasure in this wonderful body now without speaking. That would make him no different than all those other men and he was different.

Toshi squirmed a little again, trying to escape the increasing pleasure that was spreading across his body. "Just do it," he hissed out, almost ready to beg Mick to finish before it felt any better. Part of him knew this was just the tip of the iceberg and it could and would feel so much better and he couldn't have that.

Mick swallowed hard and tried to focus. "Do what? Take you, use you, like they did? Toshi," he groaned and fought with himself, liking the idea of taking the man harder. He promised himself that once they'd passed this battle he'd be able to and told his lust to shut up. "Do you want to know why I want you to enjoy this?"

Toshi just gasped under him, his back was starting to shine with a light sheen of sweat.

"I'm taking you with such care because you're a virgin."

Toshi pulled so hard away from the words, physically as well as emotionally, that he nearly pulled away from Mick. Those strong hands held his hips steady and the depth of those careful, gentle strokes had increased, increasing the building pleasure with them.

"No," Toshi hissed out. "You're wrong, I'm definitely not a virgin."

Mick leaned forward and kissed that teasing spine. "Of course you are. Virginity can't be taken, Toshi. It can only be given. Those men, they took your body, they used it for their own lust. They took your body, not you."

Toshi collapsed and would have fallen if Mick hadn't slid an arm around his waist. He curled up, trying not to hear those words that had to be in mocking bad humor. His arms folded around his head and his hands crossed on the back of his neck to protect it. "No,"

"Yes." Mick groaned, thrusting deeply now but still slowly. Teasing with the pleasure a really good fucking would bring them both, but it had to be welcomed by them both or he wouldn't go further. "They fucked your body, not you. I'm fucking you. Do you feel me? I'm not just in your body, I'm in you, because you gave me the gift of your virginity."

Toshi sobbed, a wracking sound of terror, disbelief, shame and hope, mingled together with a warmth he couldn't name and a pleasure that was driving him mad.

"My touch," Mick went on, not thinking now just feeling and speaking what he felt. "My touch wipes away their touch. My kisses cleanses away their mouth. My cock is the only one that has ever taken you. You are pure and I need you to feel the beauty of this." He pushed in hard and hit that spot.

Toshi nearly strangled on his cry, more pleasure than he'd dreamed he could feel in this act and his hips thrust back. "No, I'm not, I'm not." But he no longer fought to escape that pleasure, even in his thoughts he wanted it, needed it.

Mick tightened his arm around that waist and thrust in hard again. He was rewarded by a needy, almost desperate moan. "You are pure, Toshi." He thrust again and the pleasure pulled a moan from both their throats. "You are innocent." Now those slow thrusts weren't so slow. He pushed in with all the force and need that Toshi had feared and dreaded before only it brought with it mind numbing pleasure not agony and shame. "I'm the only one that's taken," Mick paused to accent his last word with another hard, long stroke. "You."

"Yes." Toshi sobbed and moaned and felt he was mad but he felt it. This man taking him had broken in. The pleasure spilled over walls of ice and melted it with fire that burned. Mick was taking him, taking his soul, taking him apart. Mick was in him, not his body, Mick was driving into him. "Oh God, yes, please."

Mick leaned forward, bowing over that bent back and nipped hard enough to sting on that hunched up shoulder. "I'm going to take you, as hard as I want. I'm going to pound into you."

"Yes." Toshi whispered.

"I'm going to fill you."

"Yes."

"There will be no room for anything but me, I'm going to take you so hard." Mick was growling the words out now, shivering with need.

"Oh, please, yes."

"You're going to enjoy every second."

Toshi cried out, too far gone to even try to stifle the sound and his hips pushed back hard onto the driving cock. Inviting the invasion deeper, needing it harder.

"Toshi," Mick's dark, demanding voice was barely above a whisper but it filled the room and Toshi's world. "You're going to come with my cock hard in your ass and you're going to come before I do."

It was too much. "More!" Toshi heard the begging tone in his own voice. "Oh God, oh, please, more, harder, please, please."

Mick nipped the salty skin again. "Anything my beautiful love wishes."

He used the arm around Toshi's waist to pull the man up from where they'd slipped lower. Mick's knees spread out, forcing Toshi's out wider. He held on tightly to those slender hips, had a moment of clear thought left to make sure he was still on or close to being on that perfect angle and then he let himself go.

He took Toshi with primal need. Pounding now forcefully but the way was smooth and for every stroke in, Toshi pushed back wanting more. The room filled with the sounds of Toshi's keening moans, each one a symphony of overwhelmed pleasure, their paired gasping breaths and the sensual, hot sounds of sweat slick skin scraping hard against sweat slick skin.

Mick closed his eyes, he wanted to keep watching, but he couldn't. The scents of sweat, need and sex were heavy in the room. He was close, it felt too good, he'd teased too long but from the shuddering of Toshi's body, the begging tone of his wordless moans, the other man was close to his own breaking point. He slide the arm around Toshi's waist lower and his hand found the weeping, desperately neglected cock.

It took less than a dozen hard strokes, in time with Mick's thrusts, for Toshi to spasm and break the rhythm as he came. It was hard, consuming. Hot, jetting release spilled over Mick's hand and splashed up onto that heaving chest. The cry that his release wrenched from his throat was loud enough that Mick hoped the rooms were sound proofed. It was a passing thought because Toshi's climax had his entire body contracting, clenching, trembling and as Toshi fell from that great height Mick lost the fragments of his own control.

His hard pounding stuttered, faltered and turned into deep, staccato jabs. He tried to bury himself as deeply as he could into that easing body as he came so hard he saw black floating spots in front of his vision. It didn't end, he prayed it would because he thought he might die other wise, but, oh, he never wanted it to end. Over and over his hips snapped into Toshi's body, coming, filling, claiming in a wash of pleasure that almost hurt.

Than slowly he was coming back to himself. Toshi was crushed beneath him, his softening cock was still buried in that warm passage and seemed happy to stay there. His breath burned in his throat and his pulse pounded hard in the tender, bruise on his face and the aching spot on the back of his head. Both of their bodies were sweaty and sticky and Mick wasn't sure he could

move.

Only, Toshi hadn't moved. He'd collapsed down but he hadn't moved. It worried Mick enough to have him withdraw out of that lovely ass and that pulled a soft whimper from the body below him. He rolled to the side, sliding in next to Toshi, facing him and started to pry that buried head up to see into the face that was being denied him.

When he managed to lift that head and brush back the heavy curtain of hair, he saw tears streaking down the beautifully open face. Toshi closed his eyes and tried to turn his face away but Mick grabbed a hold of him and pulled him close.

"There now, it's okay. Shhh, it's okay."

Toshi gasped and hiccupped and wiped brutally at the tears on his face. He'd cried the whole time, sobbing silently, tears flowing freely. He'd cried not because it had hurt or felt bad or made him feel bad but because all those things were lacking. He'd cried because for a moment, he really did feel pure. His breath hitched in his throat and as his breathing slowed, so did the tears.

"Sorry." He muttered against that comforting chest.

"Don't be. You're okay?"

Toshi nodded and Mick kissed his head.

"Thank you."

"For what?" His voice sounded sullen even to Toshi. He knew part of him was waiting for the pain, waiting for the hurtful words that would prove that something as wonderful as what had just happened couldn't happen to him.

"For letting me be your first."

Toshi shook his head. "You didn't really mean all that did you?" But he kept his face tucked against Mick, not wanting to see the other's expression.

Mick hugged Toshi closer. "Of course I did. Totally, one hundred percent."

That ran a shudder across Toshi and for a moment he pulled Mick as close as Mick had pulled him.

"Now, we're sticky and sweaty and nasty again. How about a shower? I'll wash your hair."

Toshi shook his head. "I thought you were supposed to be sleepy?"

"Not all humans roll over and fall asleep after sex." He was tired but he'd do anything to cling to this moment, this feeling and there was no way he'd be able to sleep while this dirty. "How about it? Want to shower with me?"

Toshi sighed and found himself nodding. "I'd like that." A hot shower and then a warm, safe body to curl up against and sleep beside. It sounded better than anything he'd ever dreamed about. Mick hugged him tight for a moment before pulling, away, untangling their bodies and leaving Toshi feeling cold and alone.

Part Seventeen

Mick knew Toshi was watching him, he could feel those luminescent eyes following him. He wasn't quite ready to turn on the light and let Toshi see him in it's glaringly honest glow. Instead he reached to press the other blue light on and leaned over to steal another quick kiss.

"I'll start the water."

"I'll be right there." He watched Mick cross the small room not at all uneasy over his nakedness and the low blue light was plenty to make out every detail. The scars weren't ugly, they just were and the sight of the smooth, strong body only made him smile in a hidden way.

The light in the bathroom clicked on and Toshi's ears caught the unhappy grunt the brightness drew from Mick. The water turned on before he could make it halfway there and the small, now far too brightly lit room, was starting to steam up. Inside Mick was folding towels and putting them within easy reach, he glanced up as the door opened, the warm smile still on his face.

And Toshi saw the scars, pale, most old and fading, marring the paler expanse of Mick's skin. The bullet hole was unmistakable, round, small and puckered at the edges. The one identified as a knife wound was long and slender, the blade had dragged along a rib and torn the soft flesh over it. They pulled Toshi over and he found a hand reaching to that flat scar on the back of Mick's shoulder. "How did she?"

He ducked his head. "She burned me."

"I'm sorry."

Mick just shrugged. "I wasn't an easy child to handle."

"There's no excuse for that."

"Thanks." Mick ducked his head and couldn't stare into those eyes. "I didn't hurt you did I?"

That made Toshi smile and his hand rubbed across his bare hip, knowing it would draw Mick's eyes to the motion. "I'm sore but no where near what I expected. So, no, you didn't."

Seeing Toshi, who had let himself be so vulnerable, so open to Mick, look ready to fight what ever battles to avenge a burn Mick had gotten when he was eight, moved him. There was nothing weak in the other man, nothing soft, no matter how bravely vulnerable he allowed himself to be. It was something Mick envied and the beauty of such a person made his chest ache.

"Good, now I believe you said I could wash your hair."

"I'm starting to think you have a hair fetish."

"So am I." Mick laughed and slid open the shower door, letting Toshi step in and under the streaming water first. When he followed, the sight of Toshi wet, with his hair clinging to his skin and his eyes shut, put bad, naughty thoughts into Mick's head. If he wasn't certain even an I/S couldn't get it back up again so soon, he'd be seriously thinking about trying to get the other man to nail him to the wall.

He brushed against the tempting body in an effort to reach the shampoo bottle. Toshi just opened his eyes a tiny fraction to watch him.

"Here," he stepped aside. "Rinse off?"

"Sure." Mick moved and let the water wash over him, quickly rinsing off his body and wetting his hair. When he glanced up, Toshi was watching him. "Turn around and I'll soap up your hair, but

I'm going to hog the water."

"Feel free." Toshi turned, his arms folded across his chest. His emotions were too unbalanced, the sight of Mick, these very casual, comfortable moments, twisted something inside of him.

Strong fingers dug into his scalp, massaging shampoo into lather, and it made Toshi sigh. He closed his eyes. "I was taken from my mother when I was four."

"I didn't know that." Mick spoke as softly as Toshi was, sensing the unease the other man had over any conversation.

"My grandfather was worried I'd be a target, being what I was and all. He moved me in with him, he put my uncle Yasun in charge of me."

"He seems to care a great deal for you." The head under Mick's hands nodded.

"A couple of months after I came to live with them, my grandfather came home with a boy. He was about my age, of mixed Asian bloodlines, they thought Korean Chinese but weren't sure. Grandfather was worried about me growing up without friends because the other children it was safe for me to play with were afraid of me, so he bought this boy for me."

Mick made sure the gentle massaging strokes on the thick hair didn't falter. "Tam?"

"Yes. His parents had died, he had no family so he was sold with the rest of their belongings. It's common among our people, it must sound barbaric to you. Anyway, my grandfather gave him to me, called him the first member of my household." Toshi's words faded away and he fell silent.

"I'd wondered what your relationship with him was, I thought maybe you'd been lovers."

That made Toshi chuckle. "No, no. We grew up together. For all that he was my servant, he was more my brother. The only lessons of mine he didn't attend were the ones my uncle and grandfather gave me in the family shrine. Other than that, every minute of every day we spent together. He started seducing other servants about the time he was thirteen and we kissed once when we were about fourteen. It made us both laugh, it felt silly.

"He was with me the night my grandfather was killed. In our family, at ten, a child is expected to be a full member of the family but the duties are minor. Running errands, writing letters, things a child can handle, at fifteen they're expected to be a full adult. My grandfather had a tradition with his children that he carried on with me. After the fifteenth birthday, before the child was asked to do their first adult job, he indulged in one last childish thing. For me, he read to me.

"He used to come home, come into my room with a book and read to me as a child. He stopped when I turned ten. So, he was about half way through the Swiss Family Robinson. Ever read it?"

"No, can't say I have. I've seen movies based on it."

"I loved that book as a child. The idea of being forced to make your own society, build your own way, all themes that connected for obvious reasons. So, anyway, Tam and I were sitting on the floor at his feet while he read to us and the door slammed in. My traitorous uncle rushed in with a half dozen of his armed people, one of them grabbed my hair and my grandfather yelled at them to get out. When it became clear what was happening, he was so dignified. His last words were trying to protect me, but his son slit his throat. Blood sprayed everywhere, it, I, there was a lot of blood. It stained the book, Uncle Yasun found it in the library years later and gave it to me."

Mick lowered his hands down to massage at the tense neck and shoulders, keeping the movements steady and comforting. He wasn't going to interrupt.

"They took me, tied my wrists, my ankles, my elbows and knees and gagged me. One of the men asked what to do with Tam and my uncle said it didn't matter, he was just a servant. They might have beaten him, might have raped him, most likely he'd have been absorbed, unharmed, untouched, into someone's household within my uncle's people. Tam fell at my uncle's feet, clutched at him, begged him to let him go along with me. They laughed at him and still he begged until my uncle agreed, he said, okay, let the freak keep his pet and Tam was tied up like me. We were both blindfolded and taken away." The memories were so sharp, cuttingly so. Toshi never shared them, not even with his uncle, it was just something not talked about but Tam deserved to be remembered for what he was not what he had become.

"I didn't know what clubs smelled like but I guessed where they took us. They dragged us upstairs and dumped us in a private room, I could smell my Uncle Yasun even before they unblindfolded us. Anyway, to make a long story short, the men that brought us there made it clear to the club's human owner that I was given to him, that my uncle needed to be securely stored until he could be convinced to help and that Tam was a free bonus to do with as he liked. They left, my uncle was taken away and while I was forced to watch, they stripped Tam naked, held him down and raped him. He screamed and he fought and it didn't matter. After the first man was done, they put him on what they used to call a humping table. I'll let you use your imagination. Tam's ankles were buckled to it's legs, his arms to posts. They wedged his mouth open and pulled out four of his molars to make room for a bit, like a horse would wear, it had reins on it. They put it in where his teeth used to be while his mouth was still bleeding. He screamed so much."

It was almost more than Mick could stand to hear, he wrapped his arms around Toshi's shoulders and pulled the tense body close to his own. He waited to see if it would make things better or worse and was relieved when Toshi folded himself tighter against his chest, the soapy hair pinned between their bodies.

"They used him that way, I could feel his pain, his humiliation and shame, his rage and those horrible men's pleasure. It was a game to them, it didn't matter because Tam and I were nothing more than livestock. The human owner told me I was going to be used just like Tam only I would beg for men to use me and he showed me four hits of shine. Mick, I wasn't scared, not until that moment but Tam and I both knew what shine did. My owner told me I had a choice, I could take those hits or I could take two and Tam could take two. Said he didn't care either way, on shine Tam would be a willing whore like me and without it they'd sell him to their clients that liked a fighter. I knew Tam would rather die than use shine."

"Is that how he became an addict, with you?" He asked as gently as he could.

"No, I took all four of those hits."

Mick hugged Toshi closer, wishing he could go back in time with a gun just for a single moment. "Isn't that close to being an overdose?"

Toshi nodded. "Very, they had to force the third and fourth hits into me, I was insensible by the second. It didn't kill me, I wish it had. I did horrible things to Tam in those months. When you use that much shine, you'll do anything you're told and I did, I did it all Mick. In spite of all the awful things they did to him, the unspeakable things I did to him, he still believed in me and the Sakamoto line. It was Tam that found out where my uncle was being tortured. It took him weeks to arrange to free him, not expecting Uncle Yasun to free us but knowing that he'd kill his brother and reclaim the family.

"But, Uncle Yasun came back for us. There was a fight, I got shot three times. There was a fire and Tam was badly burned in it. I was sent to a human hospital, my real father was discovered and he dropped me in the best rehab money could buy. I spent months locked away trying to get clean with no word if Tam was alive or not. I didn't hear from my family for almost two years and by then Tam was shinning. Uncle Yasun said he offered Tam anything he wanted, any reward for

his service to our family. He even offered to be adopted into the Sakamoto line but the only thing Tam wanted was to be left alone." Toshi rubbed a hand across his face. "I did that to him. I broke him. I let him down. And later, I couldn't be around him, I just couldn't, he smelled like shine and that awful place and I couldn't stand to see him. I failed him, Mick. It's my fault."

"No, it's not." Mick whispered into an ear. "Neither of you asked to be hurt, you tried to keep him clean. You didn't make him take his first hit of shine and you didn't kill him. Someone is responsible for his death but it's not you and I swear, we'll do everything we can to find who did it." He rubbed Toshi's arm. "Okay?"

Toshi nodded. "I need to do this. I failed him so badly in life Mick, I can't fail him in death too. I can't."

"When you live on the streets, or close to it, you develop habits, comfortable areas to work in, live in. I don't care how unnerved people are by what happened to Amanda Evans, they'll be back, if they aren't already. When you're living like that it's not safe to change your patterns too much. How tired are you?" It was a crazy, stupid idea but Mick needed to take action. Hearing Toshi blame himself so fully made him want to pull his hair out or punch the wall, he needed to do something to help.

"Not overly." He turned in Mick's arms. "What are you thinking?"

"Let's finish showering, get dressed and drive down there. We'll look around, see if anyone saw or heard anything about Tam. See what the place is like at night, maybe it'll make things clearer. What do you say?" He met those blue eyes and saw the helplessness melting away.

"Okay, let's do it."

They washed quickly, elbows bumping into each other and bodies sliding against each other as they danced about the small space to move in or out of the water. Under other conditions, it would have had Mick laughing but things were too serious. They toweled off stealing side ways glimpses at each other and in other situations those glimpses might have turned to soft touches. Clothing was pulled on over still damp skin, the jeans left for them fitting well and both men choosing the more casual clothes over their day old dress pants. Toshi brutally brushed out his hair while Mick checked his gun again and shrugged into the shoulder holster.

He clipped the pouch onto the back of the borrowed jeans and pulled his shoes on. By the time he was shrugging into his coat Toshi had tamed his hair and pulled the top and sides back. "Hey, toss me that comb."

Toshi flipped it toward Mick and wasn't surprised when the other man easily snatched it out of the air. Five strokes of it later and Mick's hair was falling in waves instead of random damp tangles. "There are definitely advantages to shorter hair." Toshi smiled and caught the comb tossed his way.

"Where's your coat?"

"In one of the house closets. There're only two, I'll find it. The helmets will be there as well."

They moved and communicated like a pair far more used to each other than they should have been. Mick opened the bedroom door and followed Toshi out into the hallway. There was no denying it, they were good together. Not just in bed but in a lot of aspects. Mick had never had a partner on the police force he'd so naturally clicked with, worked so well with, as he did Toshi. It was the easy give and take he'd seen in other partners but never had found for himself.

The lights in the hallway were limited to an occasional night light. They walked as softly as they could down the hall toward the entrance and Toshi froze a moment before a light came on.

"It's a little late for a moonlight walk." Yasun let his hand slid from the light switch, the book he'd been reading in his other hand.

"Uncle." Toshi half bowed.

"You're sure you want to do this?"

"Uncle?"

"Don't insult my intelligence." His voice was firm and cold. "We're a great deal alike, Toshi, I know what I'd be doing if I were in your place. I can't go down there, but you can. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Mick is good at his job, Uncle, his instincts say Tam's death is connected to the others. The only common bond any of these people have is the train yards. Yes, I'm certain." There was no sign that Toshi was going to back down.

Instead of being angry, Yasun smiled. "Be careful, trouble follows a half breed like fleas to a dog."

Toshi shook his head. "You know how much I hate that saying."

"I know but there's wisdom in it. Things are a little loose down there these days, Toshi. Be careful."

"Loose? How so?" Mick didn't like to step into their conversation but his job was still the same.

"Our family is a little short on trusted representatives. My hold on the yards is solid but my monitoring of it is thin right now. There are human gangs, groups, operating there part time that I can't waste resources on, it makes things more dangerous. I need a strong, trustworthy leader for the yards and the one I want isn't able to do the job yet." Mick wasn't imaging the slight glance Yasun gave Toshi, he was sure he'd seen it. "Keep your back to a wall, the place is filled with desperate people."

Mick nodded. "We will."

"Toshi, your coat and helmets are in the back closet, could you get them please? I don't wish to disturb the staff."

Toshi nodded. "Yes, uncle." But he knew the reason was because Yasun wanted Mick alone, he wasn't sure why.

Yasun offered Mick a piece of paper. "My private number and the direct line to my guard. If you need back up, now or any other time, call."

"Thank you." Mick took the paper and slid it into his inside coat pocket.

"No," Yasun's head tilted slightly, listening to make sure Toshi was out of ear shot. "Thank you."

"For?"

"Fucking my nephew into the floor."

Mick knew he was blushing.

"I'm not angry, I'm delighted. It sounded like he had a wonderful time."

"I'm sorry, we didn't mean to disturb your household."

"Nothing like that, I happened to be awake and walking by. I'm serious, McKale-san, thank you. There's very little I value in life more than my nephew, hearing him happy, seeing him happy," Yasun shook his head.

"Makes me happy." Mick finished. "We'll be careful tonight."

"Good, I've been hearing some odd stories from the yard of late. Don't underestimate the situation."

"I hope your finished saying whatever it is you had to say, Uncle, I'm able to hear you again."

"Brat," Yasun muttered behind his smile.

"I heard that too." Toshi was smiling slightly as he came around the corner.

"Will you be returning tonight?"

"It'll be safer to just go straight back to my apartment."

"Very well, I knew I couldn't keep you here." Yasun studied Toshi's face, carefully, like a man afraid it may be his last glimpse. Which, given how long the gaps of time were between Toshi's allowed visits, could be. Yasun had learned the hard way that life wasn't predictable. "I've called down, your bike will be waiting."

"Thank you, Uncle."

Mick held his tongue the whole way out of the building. He followed silently and it wasn't until they were by the waiting bike that he asked what he wanted to know but wasn't sure should voice. "Why don't you visit more?"

"The Committee doesn't allow it." Toshi pulled his helmet on but not before he heard Mick's response.

"The Committee is a bunch of assholes."

The train yards at night were a different world. The deserted open expanse of concrete and dirt was lit by a maze of make shift tents and battery operated lights stuck on stand alone poles. If it weren't the train yards, the movement and light would almost appear magical, mysterious, not the simple means to conducting a dirty business. Around the handfuls of stronger, small shelters like Tam and Amanda's sprouted dozens of more over night shelters. Old blankets and fabric clipped together over flattened cardboard box floors, forming new alleys and side streets.

Hundreds, if not thousands of I/S moved about the small tent city. The more daring or desperate vendors cooked noodles or sticks of meat over metal barrels cut in half with a fire blazing inside. Dealers patrolled their small regions or sat outside of their own small tents, turning a quick and easy trade. Users huddled near by, looking for a fix of chemicals or emotions.

Among it all, moving with a light hearted ease like ants at a picnic, were the humans. Some were headed to the clubs that sat closer to the wall, some came straight to the yards. It was easy to spot the addicts here looking for a fix from the human dealers from the ones here looking for sexual contact with the myriad of prostitutes. The addicts bothered Mick less, they were the same as the I/S addicts, chained by drugs and need he could almost pity them but the other kind made him sick, made him ashamed.

It didn't matter that every year more and more human prostitutes moved into the yards, they were the ones falling off the food chain inside the cities streets. They were the ones too addicted to whatever drug to function any more, they were the ones that had to scrape by on the human throng's cowards. Cowards that came into the yards looking to bang an I/S and couldn't quite do it, they selected these lost human whores instead.

Even they were better than the occupants of the cars that followed the only safe road to the clubs near the wall. Rich men that came from across the country and globe to attend these sex clubs. Drawn by the stories of I/S, the fascination with venom and the idea of owning another person for a set time and the right price, they made Mick ill. It was said, in those clubs, you could do anything, have anything, for the right price. From what Mick had seen, they weren't just stories.

Toshi drove the bike past the check point and to a small building a few yards away. It looked newly constructed of grey cinder block with a metal roof that still was un-rusted. When he pulled up, the handful of I/S that lingered around came forward and made Mick uneasy.

"It's okay." Toshi said even before he'd pulled his helmet off. "They're part of my uncle's guard."

"Sakura-sama." The man that appeared to be in charge bowed deeply and automatically accepted Toshi's helmet. He passed it to the woman next to him without looking.

"Thank you," Toshi bowed in return and handed the keys to the bike to the man. "We're going to walk around a while."

"Yes, sir, would you like an escort?"

"No. Just an eye kept on the bike."

The man's wide, green eyes slid over Mick as he accepted the other helmet. "Yes, sir."

Toshi didn't wait, he knew Mick would follow. When they were half way between the guard house and the first of the tent cities streets he spoke. "There used to be guard houses like that all over the yard. They did a lot of good."

"That's news to me, which means the police don't know about them."

"Ownership of the yards, the entire buffer zone, is still being debated. My Grandfather figured so much I/S blood had been shed here during the years spent locked down that we deserved it and since ownership is nine tenth of the law," Toshi shrugged.

Mick's eyes caught on movement and behind one of the more solid shelters a human was roughly thrusting into a far too skinny Succubus. Her movements had the languid disconnected manner of someone really shinning. "Toshi, you're sure you're going to be okay doing this?" He watched the shoulders under that loose hair stiffen. "I don't think I could if I were you."

"I've been clean for a long time, Mick. I'll be okay."

"Better question than, how do we get people to talk to us. I couldn't even get them to admit they spoke English before."

"They'll talk." The spots of light from the make shift lamp posts were brighter now and they lit Toshi up, casting what Mick could see of him into shadow.

And much to Mick's surprise, people did speak to them, but they had little to say. After hours of walking the yards, talking to every I/S they could corner, they were no further along than they

had been. They'd walked across the length of the yard and now stood closer to the clubs than where the small, mobile city was thriving.

"Toshi, enough!" Mick finally called out. "We'll come back tomorrow night but it's time to go."

"No!"

"Toshi!" Mick caught the man's arm and pushed him against the crumbling wall of a building that was half destroyed. There was little light here, the tent city was a glow behind Mick and the dim, low wattage security lights set high on the wall did little to break into the shadows. Still, people were here. Not many, but a handful too lost in shine or other drugs to worry about the risks. Behind them in a space between the crumbling walls, a man was moaning out his appreciation for the services being rendered.

Toshi struggled against the grip on his arm but not as much as he could have. "We should keep asking!"

"Who? Huh? Who are we going to ask?" Mick hissed out. "Everyone knows we're here, they're answering our questions before we can ask them. What little anyone has known isn't anything we didn't already hear from Tam. Strange noises, a scraping sound, odd smells, those didn't kill Tam. Let's go home and try again tomorrow."

The fight left him and Toshi sagged against the wall behind him. "Mick, this was the club. This building was the club. Tam would come back here a lot."

Mick glanced up and understanding dawned. "Oh, God, you were owned by the Pony Club?"

Toshi nodded and slid down the wall, exhausted. "I thought the bit gag gave it away. They pulled teeth out of everyone's mouth so we could be good little ponies."

The Pony Club had a global reputation. The elite, the height of the clubs not just at this camp but anywhere. The things that went on inside were too horrible to believe and people came in droves. It was one of a half dozen clubs that had been the victim of arson all within the same year, only this one was never rebuilt.

Mick knelt down beside Toshi. "Okay, we'll see who works around here but then we go home. Deal?"

Toshi rubbed at his eyes and nodded. "Yes. I wish we'd thought to bring some water with us. I don't trust anything down here."

"All the more reason to finish up for the night. Besides, it'll be dawn in a couple of hours, and everyone will be disappearing until tomorrow anyway." It amazed him that the entire tent city would be folded up and gone in less than an hour. By the time the first rays of dawn hit the yards, there would be no sign anyone had been here over night. Human addicts and hookers could never have managed such a feat, but somehow the I/S did.

Toshi just nodded and accepted Mick's hand to help him rise. He'd been back to the Pony before, once shortly after he'd gotten clean just to make sure the damned building had burned down and then occasionally over the years. Mostly, he came back to remind himself of just why he was living with the humans, why he was doing all that his father wanted, why he got out of bed every morning.

The building had taken on a sort of legend, most I/S avoided it the way small children avoided the supposedly haunted house in the neighborhood. That very avoidance made it a good place to tuck in and hide for a bold few and slowly, they circled the burned out building and found those few. None had anything to say and Toshi lingered, waiting for the business transaction to finish to

question the last of the buildings two legged rats.

The human that came out of the dark space was young, close to their own age. He was still zipping up his pants when he caught the cold glare from Mick. He smiled and knowing eyes slid over Toshi. "Space is all yours friend. You've got a hot one there, better than the skanky bitch I found."

Mick's hand twitched toward his gun. "Get the fuck out of here." He snapped.

The john laughed and staggered away into the dark.

"It's a natural assumption."

"I don't care." Mick just stared at Toshi in the dim light, wondering how the man could be so casual about it.

"We should give her a few minutes to settle. She won't be coherent right now anyway." He glanced around and shook his head. "The dance floor was over there. Most of the staff died in the fire, I think it was like two hundred I/S dead and almost as many humans."

"Toshi,"

"I'm fine, really." He forced a slight smile but the wind shifted. The scent that hit him was faint.

"What is it?" Mick was instantly scanning the darkness, looking for something that Toshi's better night vision showed that he couldn't see.

"A smell,"

"Another fear scent?"

Toshi shook his head. "No, this is, earth and dust, decay and rot, just like people have been saying."

That made Mick spin to stare upwind but there was nothing there. Nothing but the small narrow space between two ruined walls where a woman was slowly leveling off on her shine. They heard her giggle and before the giggle turned to a scream Mick had his gun in hand.

They crossed the few yards at a dead run but the space was too dark to see into and Mick stopped Toshi from rushing in. "Wait, can you see?" He was fumbling around in his pocket and his hand fell on the slender, tiny flashlight he always carried. When Toshi didn't answer right away, Mick glanced over and the look on the other man's face was confused horror.

"I'll take that as a yes." The girl's screams were more frantic now. Mick twisted the flashlight on and held it in with a solid grip, gun and light out ahead of him. "Stay behind me, I don't want to shoot you by mistake."

"Mick, I don't think you should go in there." Toshi whispered, the screaming cutting the night air.

"Just stay behind me." The flash light highlighted section after section as Mick moved down the dark passage. Every corner, every pile of debris glowed for a moment before being mentally checked off as safe. It wouldn't matter who was being hurt down in the darkness, old habits kicked in. A corpse couldn't help anyone and rushing in blindly was a fast way to become one.

The flashlight beam cut across what should have been an empty space and instead it lit up a slender, spiked, brown leg. The covering over it looked hard and shiny not soft like flesh and as Mick followed the stick like appendage over to wear it joined an oblong, brown body he wished

he'd listened to Toshi.

"What the hell is that thing?" The flash light beam moved and caught another leg, another body. They were moving, scraping with a dry sound along the dirt and concrete to quickly to really see. "How many are there?"

Than one bumped another out of the way and pale, bloodied flesh was exposed. The girl's screams had faded to small hitching sobs and those were in turn fading away to silence. Blood began to pool out around the twitching, writing shapes that occasionally revealed hints of flesh below.

"Do I shoot them? What can I do? We have to do something!" Mick was almost frantic. Every instinct, every nerve, screamed at him to turn around and run but he couldn't, not while the woman was alive.

"They're bugs Mick, look at them, they're bugs." The revulsion in Toshi's voice was thick.

One of the writhing heap got pushed off the now still and almost silent body and Mick fired his gun. The report was loud in the small space but his aim was true. There was a high pitched squeal and the brown body scurried in a tight circle before hitting a pile of rubble and flipping over. Legs twitched violently in the air before curling up against the body.

"That things the size of a cat, Toshi, that can't be a bug. It can't be."

"That one was a small one, the biggest is twice that size."

"Oh God." He started forward. "We have to pull her out of here, we have to do something." He didn't get far.

Toshi caught his shoulders and held on. "She's already dead, she was dead before we got here, Mick. Don't, just stay here. There's too many of them." Mick fought his grip, the light flaring wildly around the corridor.

"No!" He tried to break free again and failed. "They're eating her, oh God!" The sounds were clear now that the woman had fallen silent. Wet, ripping, tearing sounds and clicking scraping noises, all the sounds of a happy, swarming feast.

"And I don't want them to eat you either!"

Less than ten minutes from the first scream, the brown scraping creatures started to retreat into the darkness from where they'd come from. Almost as a single entity they finished and turned, not rushing or hurrying, they moved in satisfied, gluttoned ease.

Mick shook off Toshi's hands and came forward. The body left behind wasn't the worst he'd seen but it was in the top ten. They'd eaten through her stomach, her throat, her face, large hunks were missing from her legs and arms and her sightless eyes seeped blood. The regret, the guilt stabbed Mick and he wanted to scream into the night but he swallowed it and moved to the thing he'd shot.

The bullet had cracked the thing's body casing and Toshi was right it looked like a bug. Only it had four legs, each with three joints, it had a hard exoskeleton and was a flat matte brown. Around the bullet wound a whiteish paste had oozed out clinging to the hole and running in a thick slime down the body. Mick kicked it with a foot, using his toe to turn it over.

"Aw, bloody hell." He glanced up at Toshi and than back down to the creature. "Stay here!" He ordered as he took off running, chasing in the direction the scraping, disgusting creatures had gone.

There was no thought to obey. Toshi took off after Mick's retreating form and the bouncing glare of his flashlight, held low with the gun, both at the ready. He wasn't sure what Mick had seen in the creature that set him off chasing it but he was going to find out.

"What are you doing?" Mick snapped when Toshi caught up with ease and kept pace. "I thought you said you'd listen to me!"

"No, I said I'd run with you." They hit a corner, now at the back of the burned out building and Mick pressed Toshi to the wall before glimpsing around it himself and setting out at a run. "Why are we chasing them?"

"Didn't you see." His eyes were scanning the ground for the fading blood trail but he could hear them again so they were closing.

"If I'd seen I wouldn't be asking!"

"They had hair, Toshi, they had hair."

"Don't some insects have hairs?"

"Not like a mammal they don't! Their mouths were more like a dog than a cockroach! Think about it." Mick pressed Toshi back again to glance around another corner before grabbing the other man's collar and dragging him along. "How would a bug have fur or a human have venom?"

The shock of the idea tripped Toshi and he fell hard, his hands scrapping on the rough concrete. There was no time to recover, Mick dragged him to his feet and forced him to keep running. "That's impossible."

"Legs or not, do you think those things could have shot Tam? Or set up all those accidents? I'm so stupid! I thought it was a new drug, I didn't think about what else someone would kill for. Shit, we're heading toward the city!"

It was in the realm of possibility that someone would be playing with cross genetic mutations again, barely but there. If they were, Toshi could understand killing to keep it secret but he didn't understand why the creatures created as such would be allowed loose. There was something else he didn't understand. "Why are we chasing them?"

"None of this is random! Someone owns those things, I'm betting money on it. I'm betting once they feed they return home. Fast little suckers!" He caught a glimpse of them scurrying across an empty street into a dark alley. Mick glanced around and tried to get his bearings, if he was right they were headed for storage and warehouses.

"You mean they're someone's pets?" The idea made him ill.

Mick nodded, more winded now that Toshi. "Yeah, and the people in the yards are their dog kibble. They were different sizes, they must have been increasing the pack. That would be why the attacks have been getting more violent. The attack hasn't increased the number of attackers has!"

Toshi followed, stunned, as Mick continued down the ally, muttering to himself about not understanding sooner. He glanced around and judged they hadn't even covered a half mile yet but the haste and sharp turns made it feel three times the distance. It was too much to wrap his mind around and he only followed Mick now because there were no other options.

Mick glanced around another corner and dragged Toshi off with him, only this alley dead ended.

As they watched, the last of the scratching bug creatures pushed and shoved it's way through an open slat in a plain, grey door. The slat was a good eight inches high and the full width of the door, bright light spilled out from inside but no voices, no sound. He chased them to the door itself, Toshi behind him.

The grey door turned out to be metal and Mick grabbed onto the slick metal handle. It didn't move. Not even a little, not a rattle to show it was locked, nothing. Something about the set up tickled the back of his mind but it wasn't until a tiny green light clicked on above the handle that he remembered.

Frantically, Mick glanced down and saw the metal grid work set into the alley. "Oh, God." He tried to push Toshi back but he barely had bumped into the other man when his body seized up. He swore he could hear the electricity sizzling. Pain lit up his nerves and it grew difficult to breathe. Everything shut down. even the thought about this system and how easily it was to kill an intruder was pushed from his mind. The only thought, Mick's only concern, that survived as blackness claimed him, was a small prayer that he'd hit Toshi hard enough to knock the other man from the electrified grid.

Part Eighteen

When the blackness started to thin a little bit, it wasn't instantly clear to Mick that he wasn't dead. It took the pain to convince him the shock hadn't killed him. His head throbbed horribly, pounding in the worst migraine of his life but the pain wasn't so kind. There was a sharp stinging burned feeling along the side of his leg and all his muscles ached. His chest too, it was tight and hurt, as he came more fully awake it focused. It wasn't his chest that hurt but his heart, every beat felt slow, forced, unhappy and spread pain outward down his arm and up his neck.

He tried to rub his chest but his arms wouldn't move. A coughing fit took him and he gagged, choked on a taste of stale, flat metal and blood. It finished waking him up and he moaned, suddenly feeling icy cold and shivering hard. It confused him, sure it was still spring but the nights weren't this cold, and his mind couldn't understand why he was hurting so badly.

Than it returned. Hard, the whole night and he about dislocated his shoulders trying to move. "Toshi!" His eyes flew open and quickly squinted shut. The light was bright, painfully bright, and unforgiving.

"It's okay, I'm here."

"Where are we?" He forced his eyes to focus and saw the floor under his nose, he was on his side. More calmly now he felt the bonds around his wrists, his arms behind his back and knew they were wrapped in a b-cuff. There was no way out, he'd tried enough times over the years but there wasn't one.

"I don't know."

A warm body pressed against Mick's and made him jerk away startled.

"Easy, you're freezing cold, it's just me."

His teeth chattered. "Shock." That made him laugh bitterly. "I can't see you."

"I'm behind you, my hands are tied too but I can help you sit up I think."

It took a few tries but Mick managed to push himself up. He would have fallen back over if Toshi hadn't caught a shoulder against him and steadied his swaying body. "What happened?"

"I don't know, you hit into me and than I guess we got fried." Toshi's hair was tangled and dirty but he appeared unharmed to Mick's eyes. "You knocked me half off the grate, the charge tossed me back. It still knocked me out cold."

"It can be set to kill or capture."

"Mick, you weren't breathing when they dropped us in here. I was half awake, they gave you something, in your arm. Your lips are still blue."

He tried to twist to see his arm but couldn't manage it and he couldn't isolate the prick of pain from a needle from the random hurts everywhere. "Epinephrine, it'll kick start a heart. It's kept on hand in case you fry an ally." The shivering was getting worse but the pain in his chest was slowly easing. "You okay?"

"Better than you."

"You saw them? Who has us?" He was trying to get to his feet but nothing wanted to work, he wasn't even seeing straight.

"I wasn't really awake, a couple of men. I think I smelled at least three, human, and gun oil, gun powder. They had on dark blue pants and heavy boots."

"How long have you been up?"

"Less than ten minutes, no one's been back. It looks like we're in a storage area, nothing useful I could see."

Mick finally managed to push his way to his feet. Their room was well lit but beyond it was darkness. The wall behind them was industrial concrete and one wall to the side as well but that one had a keypad locked door so Mick guessed it was an interior wall. The other two walls were chain link, so was the ceiling and the chain link door was sealed with another keypad. There were crates and boxes sitting around but Toshi was right, there didn't appear to be anything useful, one box had a length of rope, another had an empty carrying case for a gun.

That reminded him of his own gun, the harness was still on, so was his coat, but the gun was missing. So was the pouch clipped to his belt and his coat was missing so all the nice things he hid in the pockets were gone. He dropped back down next to Toshi, partly from frustration and partly from exhaustion. His head dropped back against the crated box behind them and as if fate were laughing at them, his hair caught in an exposed piece of tape.

"Ow, what the?" Mick lifted his head and let the hair pull out or free as it willed. He turned around and his eyes focused on the paper taped to the box. "This isn't good."

Toshi twisted to look but the paper didn't make any sense to him. "What are we looking at?"

"It's an evidence log." He craned his head around and sure enough all the boxes had papers taped to them. "We're in a police evidence lock up."

"That's my clever boy." Sal's rich, deep voice spilled out from the darkness and footsteps came closer. He touched a light switch on the interior wall, on his side of the chain link, and an industrial light over the area just outside of the lock up clicked on.

Mick coughed to cover the fear that took him. "Why, it's the three stooges, where's Shemp? Out buying the beer?" He shrugged his way from sitting to kneeling. "This is a poker night isn't it?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Toshi, you've met Sal, the blond is Hank, the one looking like he wants to gut us is just a big softy named Taylor. Add in the missing Vega and you have my ex-

boyfriend's best buddies."

Toshi grinned smugly, darkly. "How's the eye?"

Taylor hit the chain fence. "Shut up freak!" He punched in the code to the door and it unlocked, the three men slipped inside. Each was as tall and strong as Sal, it was a requirement to join the SWAT. The three men oppressively filled the small storage room.

"What ever happens, whatever they say," Mick began, speaking so softly he could barely tell he was giving the words any voice but counting on Toshi to hear. "Don't say anything, don't fight them."

Sal knelt down in front of Mick, his eye was badly swollen and his face was stern. "How much do you know Mick?"

Mick just met his eye and kept his mouth shut.

The slap was quick and no where near with enough force to hurt. It just stung and made Mick's already aching head ring. "This isn't a game! How much do you know?"

"The only thing I don't know is whether you and your pig friends are sanctioned or not." He hissed out and braced for another blow that didn't come.

Sal only sighed and glanced to his friends. One of his large hands reached out and checked Mick's pulse before running across his chin and forcing him to look into the light to check his pupils. The care was almost done affectionately.

"I still say we just kill them." Hank added in, hovering near the now shut and locked door. "That's our orders."

"No," Taylor corrected. "Our orders are to kill anyone not of consequence. Sal's idea is the best, we're sticking to it." He knelt down now as well, making himself on eye level with Mick. "I'm sorry we have to do this Mick, sorry it's come to this. You were an amazing cop."

"So, you're Moe. I'd wondered which of you four were in charge."

"You're right, that would be me, but only when we're on duty. I've seen your scores, Mick, amazing. You would have made Captain before you were forty. That's why you were pushed out, Sal tried to show you how things were done but you never listened."

"I'm not dirty like you."

Taylor laughed and glanced to Sal. "You're right, a fucking idealist." He sighed heartily before turning back to Mick. "Do you remember the hostage stand off at the Gleick Furniture store about two weeks before those charges came against you? Well, Sal had been given direct orders to put a bullet through your back that day, he disobeyed. He was convinced you could be reasoned with and I backed him up. None of us expected you to actually walk, that took balls."

The confirmation that Sal had almost killed him wasn't new, the fact that he hadn't pulled the trigger of his own accord was. Mick kept his face steady and let nothing of the emotions he was feeling show.

"The powers that be can't afford to have any bright boy rise up in the ranks who doesn't know the rules of the game. They tend to get wise or get cold real fast. It's because you were a cop, Mick, and because I know you're a smart boy I won't sugar coat this for you. This is my situation, we're responsible for protecting our patrons interests. The easiest thing would be to kill you and your freak boy friend. Luckily for you both, we know who he is. Ranvier would tear this city apart

looking for his son's killers and unlike most humans we know who his uncle is. It would be difficult for our patron to continue under that kind of scrutiny. So, we can't just kill him. You we could, but Sal has a thing for you and he's never asked a single favor ever. Because of him, if you give us no reason to kill you, we won't."

That surprised Mick and when he glanced to Sal he saw more than just obsessive desire to possess him in those dark eyes. There might have been real pain at the idea of losing him.

Taylor sat back on his heels. "I've had to look at this logically. If we let you walk, what will you do? I don't think for a moment you'll keep your mouth shut. Well, you can turn us in but who's going to listen? Internal Affairs? I'm sure you noticed it's their seal on the crates, this is an IA lock up. Do you think they'll do anything about us? You're an idealist, you aren't stupid. So that leaves the Feds, I'm sure they'll piss themselves laughing before they can hang up on you. So where can you go? The only people that might listen to you is the press.

"The story is sensational enough, I'm sure you've a nice little trail of bread crumbs you've followed to show them. It'll make a fun, interesting conspiracy theory and because of who he is," he tossed his chin to Toshi. "They might actually listen to you. In which case, people will read it and pay attention and start asking questions and BAM! We're right back to where we started with our patron's need for privacy not being respected."

"It's a real, tough situation. I feel such sympathy for you." Mick muttered out and this time it was Taylor that smacked him.

"Mick, Mick, Mick, you're a smart man, what would you do?" Taylor smiled at the cold look in those hazel eyes. "You already know. Good, this will make it easier."

"Don't, keep him out of this. Do what you want to me, he won't give you any troubles. He doesn't know anything, he was just following me. All the evidence I have is locked in my system, he hasn't even seen it." One thing Sal had taught him was the proper way to stay strong and keep a solid front while begging, Mick used it well now.

"It's too late for that Mick. We're the cops, we have access to the Committee's files, we know about your boyfriend's past. Such a shame you were a bad influence on him, he was doing so well. The press will love this story. Rich boy, half breed freak falls off the wagon, found shinning out of his mind in some side street down town with his ex-cop boyfriend who'd been kicked off the force for molesting a fourteen year old boy. A man so strung out on venom that he cut the poor freak's implant out to get him re-addicted. That sound about right Sal?"

Sal nodded. "That sounds like how it happened to me."

Mick was glad Toshi hadn't spoken up, glad the other man had stayed still but even without looking over he could feel the fear and anger rolling off of him. "Don't. Don't do this, not to him. I'll take whatever you want, I'll do what ever you want. Leave him out of this. I'll confess to what the boy accused me of, I won't fight it, send me to jail. Just, let him go."

"You don't get a say in this, Mick. Just be lucky you're getting out of this alive and remember, if I see either of you poking your nose into anything of mine again, we will kill you both." Taylor stood up and Sal followed, they moved to stand near Hank by the door. "How long until Vega gets back?"

Hank shrugged. "Ten minutes to the yard, ten back, soon."

"Sal?" Taylor nodded to where Toshi sat with a cold, distant look on his face and Mick looked ready to chew his own arms off to escape. "Which one's top?"

That snapped Mick's head up. He heard a snarl in the back of his throat before he could collect

himself. Getting angry, getting emotional, wasn't going to solve anything. Toshi was counting on him to get them out of this mess.

Sal smiled, showing off white teeth. "Mick's top."

"You don't believe that adage about long hair do you? Come on,"

"It isn't that, Ty, I just know Mick, he doesn't play bottom for anyone but me. All the guys he's picked up over the months, have all been lily bottoms."

Mick forced himself to laugh. "You're kidding right?" He glanced to Toshi and was glad to see the cool, steady face. "You think I can top him? Please! Sal I've bottomed for every cock I could get. Even Andy's topped me, and he topped me harder and deeper than you ever did."

He was hoping to provoke a reaction from Sal, hoping to lure the other man closer but it was Taylor that crossed over. Instead of hitting Mick, he grabbed a handful of Toshi's hair and dragged the man behind him. Toshi stumbled and nearly had a handful of hair ripped out, Taylor steadied him and dropped him face down across a crate. The edge of it cut into Toshi's throat, leaving his hair to fall forward and exposing the back of his neck. Toshi fought, he kicked and bucked and it took Taylor and Hank to hold him down.

"No!" Mick shouted and surged forward as quickly as he could. He wasn't sure if he was shouting to the cops or to Toshi but he did know he had to stop this. Sal easily caught him and Mick fought and bucked against those tightly gripping hands.

Taylor pulled a gun and held it to Toshi's head. "Stop fighting!"

"Or what?" Toshi hissed back. "You'll shoot me? Didn't you just bore me to death ten minutes ago about why you couldn't? How is that supposed to be a threat!" He'd fought his way half way up, one knee braced on the crate and trying to push Hank back.

"You're right." Taylor smiled. "We'll just shoot Mick."

Mick froze, the gun was still pointed dangerously close to Toshi's head. There was little left he could do, but there was always one card left he could play when Sal was in the mix. He bucked once more, only this time he slid his ass firmly across Sal's groin. The stroke delivered, Mick let his legs go weak and slid to his knees. He knelt there, in front of Sal as Taylor glanced over.

Sal snapped out of his shock, certain what he'd felt had to have been an accident. He pulled the gun, Mick's gun, from his waistband, cocked the hammer and put it to his lover's head. It wasn't the first time they'd played this scene out. He'd gotten a little too drunk one night, Mick had been his normal stubborn self and he'd nearly blown the pale man's head off. Instead of begging for his life, or trying to reason, Mick had started to fellate the gun barrel. It had gotten him so hot to watch that he ended up fucking the other man instead of killing him.

There were no tricks this time and Sal really hoped he didn't have to pull the trigger. A few tense heartbeats passed before Toshi surrendered. He stopped fighting. "Okay, okay, don't kill him." He let Hank slam him down hard enough that the edge of the crate smashed into his throat with enough force to bring stinging tears to his eyes.

Sal didn't put his gun away, he kept his eyes on Mick and watched Taylor move out of the corner of his eye. The other man slid that long expanse of hair out of the way and started probing the back of the half breed's neck, tracing the outline of the implant. Mick was watching him, staring up at Sal and eventually the pull of those eyes drew him. When their eyes met, Mick very carefully licked his lips. It shot across Sal like a bullet, his breathing grew short and his cock hard. It was too much, seeing Mick, hands bound and on his knees, looking that sexy. His free hand buried itself in Mick's hair before he had even thought about it.

"Jesus, Sal, you want him that bad?" Taylor called over. He'd drawn his knife and had left Hank to kneel on the half breed's bound wrists to hold him in place.

Sal drew a long breath but didn't break eye contact. "He owes me."

"You're just horny. Can you do it and be done before Vega gets back?"

"It's not enough time to fuck him but he can suck me off easily."

"Than do it. If you hear me shout, kill him. Freak here is going to be a good boy though because he doesn't want my hand to slip. I wouldn't want to make him into a cripple." He patted Toshi's head. "Right freak."

"Go to hell." Toshi hissed back and twisted his head enough to see Mick but Mick just shook his head very slightly no. Once, Mick had trusted him to handle himself and it had worked out with neither of them seriously hurt. Toshi was going to return the favor and let Mick play his hand without trying to stop it.

"Let's pick up where we left off." Sal pulled Mick up by the hair and forced the smaller man ahead of him to the office door. He kept the gun buried against Mick's spine but reached around him to punch in the keypad code.

4 - 2 - 9 - 5 - 2 - 7

Mick ran those numbers over and over again in his head. Repeated them like a mantra as Sal pushed him into the records office and clicked on a lamp by an old, dingy desk. "What makes you think I'm going to do anything you say?" He snapped out as the door shut behind them.

"Because unless you're a very good boy and behave until I've come down your tight throat, I'm going to take your own gun out there and break every one of your freak boyfriend's fingers. Last person I did that to, still can't hold a pen in their right hand. That's why."

Mick was glad his back was still to the other man, he wasn't sure he could hide the look of frustrated pain that crossed his face. "Don't do this, Sal."

"Shut up and get on your knees." When Mick turned around Sal smiled and actually caressed the side of Mick's face. "There, that's the look I've been missing." He slid the hand to Mick's shoulder and pushed down.

Mick let himself drop. There was no doubt that Sal would carry out his threat but he knew Toshi would never understand that this was the only way Mick could get a chance to see the keypad pass codes. It might not make a difference, it might make all the difference and it had been a chance he'd been willing to take.

"I can do this better if I have my hands free."

Sal actually laughed. "I don't think so. I'd forgotten how hot you look like that. Remember that fight we had where I handcuffed you to the bed and fucked you off and on the whole day? You were such a prissy queen about it, didn't talk to me for days but every time I took you while you were pouting you came so hard. When we're back together, we're going to go to one of those BDSM clubs, you look too sexy in bondage." He unzipped his pants and his hard length spilled out. "Be a good boy now and do me right."

The sight of that bobbing cock in front of his face made Mick's stomach churn but it was the level of Sal's delusions that chilled him. Now wasn't the time to point out that there was no hope of them every being a couple again and there was no way out of the situation. It was a well known

feeling of bondage tighter than any rope or hand cuff could deliver and one that made Mick feel sick. Sal had always controlled him, even after the appeal of such behavior had worn off, Mick had found it impossible to break away. He swore he'd never be here again, never feel this way again, never be on his knees for this man again.

He closed his eyes and shut his mind off. The first swipe of his tongue brought with it a contented sigh. When his lips finally closed around Sal's throbbing cock the man cried out. There was a time that Mick actually liked the feel of Sal's hardness in his mouth. It was thick, overwhelming, it choked off his air when Sal would use him. For whatever reason, Mick liked that sense of being controlled, belonging to someone else but once the lust had faded things were always different. He had belonged to Sal, not like something precious but like a child that pulled the stuffings out of his teddy bears. What Sal had given him was close to something he needed but always left him feeling more alone, more empty. The cock in his mouth felt like emptiness now, the sight of him aroused instantly made Mick feel worthless and hollow. He hated himself for being back on his knees.

It didn't take much to push Sal's control. The man was easy to over excite and once to that point, Mick just had to relax, shut his mind off and try not to let panic set in. Sal was grunting, holding Mick's head in place and just thrusting deeply into him. Mick had been reduced to a hot mouth, a hole to fuck, he didn't need to do anything but wait for the end. His mind wandered, desperate for something else to cling to and his thoughts fell across Toshi.

Toshi felt so right in his mouth. That was how it was supposed to be. Mick wondered if the shy, withdrawn man would ever be comfortable enough to just use Mick the way Sal was. If he ever was, Mick wondered what it would be like. The few times other lovers had gotten so rough had left Mick achingly hard but had lacked that something he was looking for. A something Mick didn't want to name but thought he might have found in Toshi. Would Toshi using him make him feel closer to the other man or further away? Mick didn't know but he wanted to survive this to find out.

His thoughts were on Toshi, held down in the room outside while Taylor was cutting the implant out of his neck as Sal was grunting. The door opened and Taylor stepped inside, Sal came, moaning loudly and Mick closed his eyes. His face went red with embarrassment, praying Toshi couldn't see into the room. He swallowed as hard as he could and was too shammed to really notice.

"Christ, Sal, could you be any rougher with the fellow?" Taylor actually looked a little shocked.

Sal groaned, coming down from his climax. "He likes it rough. Oh, yeah, that's the hot slut I love." He was sighing, the death grip he'd held in Mick's hair eased up and became gentle strokes. "What do you want Ty? Other than to watch?"

"Vega's back, he just came in through the front and we got the freak's implant out."

Mick bit down. Not as hard as he'd wanted to, not hard enough to do lasting damage but hard enough that he was pretty sure he'd drawn blood.

Sal screamed, he shoved Mick away with such force that Mick hit the desk behind them. "Aw fuck!"

"What?"

"He bit me!"

Mick wiped his mouth on his shoulder. "Our deal was I'd behave until you came, you came. You should have taken your limp dick out of my mouth."

The look that came over Sal was one Mick knew. "Fucking, cock sucking whore!"

Mick had long since suspected that Sal had a history of beating up his boyfriends. He could pull back and punch a man right in the face without breaking loose a tooth, a skill Mick had long since appreciated. He felt the first blow land and his nose lit up in sharp pain, blood flowed freely and Mick was pretty sure it was broken. The rest of the blows to his face blurred together.

Taylor chuckled. "Don't kill him and don't beat him too badly, we need him awake remember."

"I remember!" Sal shouted back.

Toshi actually prayed he would die.

He'd been mildly sedated when they'd put the implant into his neck as a fifteen year old boy. The fact that he'd been sick and going through withdrawals hadn't made him really care about the process. All he remembered was how silent everything suddenly had become, like losing a sense of smell during a cold, things felt blander and at the time he hadn't cared.

Gradually, the lack of input from those deeply ingrained instincts and near empathic skills became normal. He knew he was lacking something, the way a person blinded for years knows they're not really seeing colors in their mind's eye any longer, but it wasn't something he'd ever really missed. The implant had caused headaches but he'd learned to live with those. The headaches were a small price to pay to know he was deemed safe to live around humans, it was a small price to know he could never again be addicted to shine. At most, if the drug were introduced to his system with the implant in place he'd glow like a human and have to face those stronger cravings again but he knew he could handle that. Even if he lost control and sought out the emotional feedback he was addicted to it wouldn't matter, the implant would block his sense and keep the addiction from reforming. The implant made him safe, it made it so he could sleep at night.

Taylor had been skilled with his knife, cutting the skin around the diameter of the disk in his neck. It had hurt, badly, but Toshi held still. He was used to pain, it didn't frighten him, not like the thought of Mick being killed because of his actions, that terrified him. The blood had run down his neck, to meet over his adam's apple and gathered into fat drops that plunked to the floor below. Taylor had to swab the blood aside to get a grip on the thin metal disk. He twisted the top section a half turn and the probes of the implant withdrew.

That made Toshi's entire body feel covered in crawling insects. It was a nervous system thing, he'd felt the same reaction when the implant had gone in. He cried out, chocking back the discomfort and pain, not wanting to give the men doing this the satisfaction. It didn't matter, when Taylor took a hold of the disk again and yanked, the pain that blinded Toshi sucked the groaning cry from his throat. Taylor dropped the disk on the ground, letting it roll into the gathering blood under Toshi's head.

It wasn't even the sudden return of that sense that made him want to die. That felt right, proper, as if his body was mocking his stupidity for blocking such a natural thing for so long. The only difficulty was in the volume. It felt too loud, even though there was no sound. Toshi had worn an implant for so long that he no longer really remembered what even the smallest I/S child knew. He couldn't focus out the feelings from other people, he couldn't turn down that awareness, he couldn't shut it out. It was all there, raw and accessible and he needed time to remember how to sift and control it.

Hank got off of his back. Hank who Toshi now saw as gentle, earnest, strong and a little slow. He wasn't a villain, he felt he was doing his duty. Toshi rolled away from the man, sliding off of the crate to land beside it. He knelt there, head bowed almost to the floor, eyes squinted shut, trying to garner some control.

Something on Taylor beeped but Toshi didn't look up. That man was sharply intelligent, cold, clever, strong, distant, not someone to be trusted. Things were black and white to Taylor and nothing was grey. Toshi knew the man wasn't pleased with the handling of the situation but knew it was logically the best course of action. Whatever the beep had told him, he was growing impatient to have the matter at hand finished.

Toshi was just starting to be able to focus on something other than what that hidden, newly recovered sense was telling him when Taylor opened the door Mick had been dragged into. He made the mistake of glancing that way and his internal sense followed. Eyes and sense landed on Mick. The sight of him being held in those rough hands, his face being fucked, would have been enough to slip him over the edge but the sense did more.

He couldn't shut it off, couldn't make it look away. Mick's empty pain, the sudden shame and embarrassment at being seen like that, overwhelmed Toshi. There was anger and loneliness, terrible, bitter loneliness. Wrapped around it all was a numb disconnection and a self loathing sense of deserving.

It wasn't exactly like what Tam had projected that night, so long ago, but it was close enough. Here was another person Toshi cared about being used by humans and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He knew how this story was going to end. Faced with Mick's life or using shine again, Toshi would use the shine. Than this group would use him, he'd probably beg them to once the shine was in his system and Toshi would be fully addicted. Breaking a shine addiction once was difficult, using again, becoming fully addicted again and trying to break that hold a second time was impossible.

The realization was unbearable. He dropped his head back to the cold floor, and simply wished they'd kill him. Prayed that some how, some way, he'd just die. He was so lost in the wish he only heard Sal's cry of pain distantly and didn't notice the door shutting and closing away the sight of Mick getting beaten.

"God damn, he bled like a stuck pig." Vega paused out side of the gated lock up room, hands buried in his pockets.

"Who sticks a pig? I mean gross." Hank mumbled back but he smiled at Vega.

The door opened to the office and Sal dragged Mick out by his bound arms and tossed him toward the folded over half breed. Vega punched in the code and came into the room, Mick slid across the floor in front of him. The former cop's nose was bleeding and staining his shirt red, from how it was swelling, Vega was betting it was broken. The rest of the man's face didn't look much better, one eye was already going black and he was bleeding from two shallow cuts on the other temple. Oddly, Vega heard the man giggling. "What's he laughing about? You didn't drug him while I was gone did you?"

"He's laughing cause he's a smart ass."

Mick chuckled again. "Big man hits like the pansy he is." The insult was cut short as one of Sal's boots connected with Mick's side.

Sal kicked Mick once, twice, started to walk away and kicked him a third, harder time. That stopped the stupid laughing and knocked Mick sideways almost into the half breed. "He drives me insane!" He spat out as he turned away but movement caused him to glance back. It wasn't Mick, the slender man had stayed down after that last kick, but the freak. "What're you looking at, Frankie?"

Toshi just shook his head. "You really love him. I'm sorry."

Sal's face screwed up. "Did you drug him already?" Toshi's eyes were dilated, wide and staring

blankly but oddly seeming to see everything.

"No, that's how they act when you pull an implant out. They get all voodoo psychic shit like until they can balance it out." Taylor waved it off. "Did you get it?" He held his hand out to Vega.

Vega dropped the three little plastic pouches into Taylor's hand. "That should do it."

Taylor curled his hand around the small bags and crossed to Toshi. He grabbed a handful of hair and lifted the man's head back up. "You've got a choice here, freak. You're taking this hit one way or another, no choice over that, but I got extras. I can make Mick here take a hit with you or you can bite him. Choice is yours. I don't care which."

Toshi's eyes focused. "Than what?"

"Than we walk out of here, Hank will stay out front for a couple of hours until you've settled down and he plays good cop and drops your sorry asses off at a local hospital. Whatever's left of Mick anyway, I don't care what you shine to. This isn't personal freak, it's just business. So which is it?"

Without breaking eye contact with Taylor, Toshi leaned over to where Mick was laying. He was awake but still stunned, his breath moving sharply and the pain from the beating he'd taken unmistakable on his face. "I'm sorry, Mick." Toshi whispered before he closed those last inches and bit into his lover's bare arm.

"Again." Taylor ordered when Toshi pulled away.

"What?"

"Bite him again, I want enough venom in his blood to make it obvious."

Toshi obeyed, biting in next to the first two, tiny puncture wounds and pulling away as quickly as he could. A new thing was added to his list of worse than dying situations but if there was one thing he'd learned was patience. If they weren't going to kill them as they'd said, Toshi would survive this and find them, addict or not.

Mick jerked, his movements startled and directionless. Taylor lifted Mick's head and glanced in his eyes before nodding. "Good, I'm glad you're cooperating. Now," Taylor shook out the contents of one of the small packages into the dent on the back of his hand, below his thumb. "You know, they used to call this spot the anatomical snuff box, now it's called the shiny spot." The pale pink powder made a small pile on his hand, he held it out to Toshi's face. "Take it."

He could smell it, sweet and light like ground up cotton candy. For the first time in years, Toshi really wanted a hit, needed it and he hated himself almost as much as he hated Taylor or Sal. His pride wanted to knock the drugs away but he wasn't going to get Mick killed, not for his pride's sake. It was far too easy, too comfortable, to inhale that powder.

It was as if he'd never stopped using. He could have inhaled a second hit and not thought twice about it. As it always did, sunshine spread across his body, pure bliss better than any orgasm could ever be because it didn't peak but went on. Toshi fell back against the crates, the damage to his body still hurt but now it felt painful in a good way. He closed his eyes, riding the wonderful first few moments, knowing that it would be gone too soon and leave behind the need.

"I can understand what Mick sees in him." Sal said softly as the men stood around and watched. "He's beautiful. You're sure we can't stay?"

Taylor clapped his friend on the shoulder. "We aren't sure what the freak shines to, do you want to be here when he's ripping your throat out?"

"What if he doesn't shine to sadism?"

"We have too many things to do to fuck around here, Sal. Hank, cut him loose than stay in the front room. Give them three hours before you haul them out to a hospital, call the press right after. Vega, you're with me, we need to check on the children. Sal, go clean up their meal. Time's wasting." He pulled Sal along with them. "Don't worry, Hank will break it off sooner if he hears too much screaming. We won't let him be killed."

Toshi only vaguely heard the words, he could sense Sal's lust and it was making him hungry. It was one of the hardest things he'd ever done to not latch onto the other man's need. Sal would give him what he was starting to crave, oh, yes, Sal would, he was half way there now. It would be so easy to convince him to stay and play, a few words, a touch or two, it would feel so good.

Hank pushed him forward and something sharp slit the cuffs off of Toshi's wrists. The first bright sparking shine was fading and Toshi hungered, he needed to really shine. He needed that delicious combination of his pleasure and his trick's, he need a sharp accent of pain and the bitter sting of being used. It would make everything stop hurting, make everything shine so brightly. He could get Hank to play, he knew he could, but than his eyes fell on Mick.

Mick who he'd had to bite, twice, and would now be pumped so full of venom a heated look would have him hard and as aching as Toshi already was. He wanted Mick so badly already, it was a natural solution. All he had to do was explain to Mick how badly he hurt and how roughly he needed to be fucked to feel better, Mick was kind, he'd help out. If he didn't help, if he wasn't willing, well, he was still bound, his hands behind his back. It would be so easy to take the prone man, it would be as good as if he were taken. By the time the metal door locked shut and the men left them alone, Toshi was licking his lips.

Over his life Mick had learned a few things about being kicked in the ribs. His months with Sal had only added to his education and while he was fairly sure nothing had actually broken, it hurt to breath. Everything hurt actually, and he couldn't fight anymore. It wouldn't get him anywhere and he needed to gather his strength. Survival was based on knowing when to act and when to wait for the moment to act. He let Sal's kick drop him and knew enough to not act, they would relax more if they thought he'd been broken. By all rights he should be, what with getting a concussion the day before, being electrocuted near to death, face fucked by his ex-boyfriend and than having the snot beaten out of him, literally, he should have been broken in spirit and body.

It was a sad shame that they didn't know him better, a head wound, no worries, and electricity, please, he used to stick butter knives into wall outlets as a kid. As to the other, well, Sal never had been still or gentle when being blown, it was just another day with his lover in that regard. The beating, well, he wasn't a fool enough to say it was nothing, but pain wasn't a stranger and he was used to being beaten up. It was all comforting words, reminders he gave himself and it held him together.

He held still while Taylor toyed with Toshi and kept himself steady by imagining a dozen clever ways of killing the man. The only thing that got to him was Toshi's softly whispered apology before those fangs bit into his arm.

All in all, it wasn't what he had expected. Some how a mental picture of a vampire had come to mind, thick, wide fangs that dug in and drew blood and hurt. They felt more like slender hypodermic needles, or a small splinters. When they broke the skin it hurt, but not more than slightly, not even enough to be annoying. Than the venom hit him.

When Toshi bit him a second time, the feel of that hot, wet, mouth on his arm was erotic enough to make him half hard. The pain in his body started to retreat, fading to a dull, easily ignorable

aching. Mick started to feel hot, his clothes felt too heavy and he wanted to take them off. The friction of the fabric on his skin was unbearable, it made all his nerves tingle. Being nude would be so much better, nude, with all their eyes on him, on his slowly swelling cock. They'd see it and touch him. The idea cranked up his desire. Even if he knew it was the venom, it didn't matter, he couldn't turn it off. He was suddenly, unbelievably, horny. There would definitely be advantages to that venom down the road in their relationship, Mick promised himself that, and that was the only thing that kept him from trying to rub his growing hard on against the floor.

The sound of his heart beat in his ears was louder than the voices around him. Mick struggled, he really did, with the needs of his body. He'd never liked the idea of being an out of control person with anything, least of all with his sex drive. If he let himself go, that was different than not having control. He was a thinking man, he knew he was, there was logic in this somewhere.

The dose of venom in the average bite took an hour or two to wear off. Mick didn't know if that meant two bites took three to four hours or if it just meant he'd be twice as horny for those two hours. He was starting to think it meant twice as horny. He could focus, he could keep some control.

Distantly he was aware of someone saying something about cutting Toshi loose, that was good. B-cuffs were strong but they tore easily on a sharp edge, something in the room would work. He kept his eyes closed and tried to keep his body still and his breathing steady. He tried not to think about how hard he was getting but as soon as he tried to not think about it, the ache between his legs was quickly becoming all he could think about.

The wire door opened, he heard footsteps, and the door shut. If they were really gone, and he could get his hands free, he could jerk off. It wouldn't take long, not long at all when he was this hard. The room fell silent for a moment and then a soft, aching moan broke into Mick's feeble efforts to control himself. A warm hand slid along Mick's arm and up to his neck before an equally warm body slid against his. The contact made him break out in a sweat and shiver at the same time.

A hand ruffled across his hair. "Mick?" Toshi's voice was low, dark and slutty. It burned like fire into Mick's brain. "I'm afraid I've been a bad boy and I'm afraid I'm going to be an even worse one here soon."

It was his darkest, dirtiest fantasy come to life. "Toshi, how many hits did you take?" Mick tried to roll over but warm hands were exploring him, pulling at his clothes.

"One, I didn't want to, Mick, I can't stop, I'm sorry." That was more like the Toshi Mick knew. "It's just, God, Mick, I'm thinking about taking a second hit. He left the other two. Oh, the things I want to do to you, Mick, I can't stop, it hurts."

This was very, very bad. Every, aching, needing fiber of Mick's body wanted to give in and let Toshi do anything he wanted, wanted to do all the same in return to him. "Help me sit up, baby, we'll go from there." No, that wasn't helpful talk.

Toshi laughed, low and dark but he helped Mick sit up, his hands sliding across painfully sensitive nipples in the process. Mick moaned, and Toshi smiled. "That's it, I know you like that."

"Toshi, you need to find something with a thin edge, the cuffs will break that way."

Toshi nodded his head yes but when he moved to go find something he only made it as far as Mick's lap. He straddled it and sighed. "But this is so nice. God, you're so hard, Mick, don't you want to put it in me?"

Mick whimpered, he actually whimpered. Toshi was thrusting slowly against him now in long strokes that finished with Mick's aching cock pressing into that perfect ass. It made thinking so

difficult but Mick stumbled on an idea. "Baby, do you want me to fuck you with my hands tied, or do you want my hands free so I can pull that hair of yours, push you over one of these crates and ride you so hard you'll beg me to stop?"

Toshi's pupils dilated and Mick knew he'd won. Unfortunately, the idea of carrying out his threat was now in his mind and he was fighting with himself to not follow through with it.

"I'll find something."

Toshi slid off of Mick's lap with such a sexy slink that there was no way he could stop himself from watching every movement, every twitch with all the fascination of a pervert. "If there's a hell, I'm so going to it." He muttered.

It took forever for Toshi to return and Mick had resorted to rubbing his thighs slightly together, desperate for even the slight friction the fabric of his pants would provide. Toshi sawed at the b-cuff with a slender piece of metal he'd found with one hand and traced his fingertips across the top of Mick's waistband with the other. Rather than focusing anymore on what he couldn't take care of, Mick put his strength into his arms and pulled.

The cuffs split and fell apart. Mick's arms swung forward and he was grateful the venom dulled the pain because it made his ribs hurt, without the venom it might have hurt enough to pass out. He started rethinking about them being broken when he suddenly had armfuls of Toshi to deal with.

"Now, I've saved you, whatever are you going to do to me in reward?"

"Save you back, baby." It was the only warning he gave before he hauled back and hit Toshi.

The dark head snapped back, caught unprepared and unaware and sagged in a stunned daze in Mick's arms. Even that was sexy, and Mick couldn't tell if it was just the beauty of the man or the venom that made him think so. It didn't matter, he could not fuck Toshi, he could not let Toshi fuck him. Bottom line, if he actually cared about the man he couldn't do it. If they could keep his addiction from being reinforced, Toshi would be miserable for a day or so but he'd live and when the drug wore out of his system he wouldn't be addicted again.

It was great in theory. Mick trusted theories not at all, he liked fact and the fact was he was going to be humping the other man soon if he didn't convince Toshi to keep his hands to himself. There was no way Toshi could do that so Mick snatched up the length of rope left behind on one of the boxes and quickly tied Toshi's hands together, this time in front of him. The rope was long enough that he had a good lead so just to be safe, he tied a length around Toshi's slender waist, thinking all the while how he'd like to be kissing that wonderful spot not covering it further up. From the corner, Mick found a broken, slender, table leg from some piece of cheap furniture.

He flipped the stick in his hands. "A Toshi stick."

"You hit me." Toshi accused as he started rubbing at his face.

"Sorry about that but you'll thank me later."

"Do it again?"

"Oh, God, this is so not good."

"I can see how hard you are, it'll make us both stop hurting. Don't you want me?" He ran his bound hands across his chest, trailing lower.

Mick pulled on the rope to stop those hands. "Yes," He was breathless now. "I do want you. But

not right now. See this stick. You stay that far away from me or I will knock you out cold and carry you out of here." Not a good idea, really not a good idea. The thought of an unconscious Toshi, helpless, sexy, he could do anything to that hot body, well, it wasn't a good thought. "You need to fight this, Toshi, you can I know you can. I'm trying here, baby, but you need to try to."

Toshi nodded. "I'm trying. I really am. I want to be good to you."

"Stop it, or I'll gag you."

"I can think of something I'd like to gag on." His eyes were locked on Mick's crotch.

Mick moaned. "Come on, get up, we need to get out of here."

Bonelessly, gracefully, Toshi rose to his feet. "Uh oh, we're locked in, how should we pass the time?"

The stick swung out and caught Toshi in the ribs. "Back! Stay back!" If Andy could have seen him, warding off a shining Toshi with a broken table leg, he'd have died laughing. "It's a good thing I'm not Andy." He muttered, using the stick to keep track of where Toshi was as he punched in the code to the keypad. "He'd have tossed Toshi's pretty ass down and come two or three times by now."

"I don't mind sharing with Andy." Toshi added, a full stick distance away. "He's almost as sexy as you. Haven't you thought about it? What it would be like with both of us? I have."

"Shut up!" Mick snapped but he found his hand rubbing himself. He snatched it away, not sure just how much it would take Toshi to get the feedback he needed to fully shine. "Toshi, I'm going to make you a deal. Fight this, right now, fight it, and I promise that the first chance we get when we're safe I'll lock myself in a room with you and you can do anything you want. Fair?"

"First chance we're safe?" He was already hurting, it was a low, growing pain, like needles being put into his skin. In a few hours, it would be worse, he'd have to get someone to give him the emotional feedback he needed to make it feel good again, or it would be unbearable.

"First chance, baby, I promise. Just not here, it's not safe." He left the definitions of safe vague. His head meant when they both were sober but his cock meant as soon as they were behind a locked door somewhere.

Toshi drew a breath and nodded. "That helps, it really does. I'll try."

"It's helping me too." He muttered and crept forward. There was light around what turned out to be a corner. It dimly lit up a hallway.

"Stay quiet, stay back and let me do this." The only weapon he had was a horny half breed and a table leg. The venom was making him feel reckless, immortal, it wasn't a safe feeling. They slipped past dark doors down to the one that was lit up.

Mick glanced inside and couldn't believe his eyes. He glanced again and found it empty. It looked like a small lunch room, or conference room. A soda machine hummed to itself under the flickering florescent light, a few folding chairs were pushed around and a battered sofa was against one wall. There was a white board, erased but dirty and across the table were their coats and Mick's pouch.

He moved straight for that and stopped. On the sofa was a gun. Not his tidy hand gun but an automatic, a nasty weapon that the SWAT used, it could pop off a half dozen shots in the time it would take Mick to fire two from his own gun. He picked it up, comforted by it's weight and ran a quick check over the weapon to make sure it would fire if it needed to.

"Grab the coats." He ordered Toshi, trying not to look at the other man as he clipped his pouch to his belt.

"Mick?"

"What?"

Toshi nodded to a door across from them. "Hank's in there. I can feel him."

"What's he doing in there?"

A toilet near by flushed and the small room's door opened. Hank was adjusting himself and he froze in the door way. They stared at each other, startled, before Hank pulled a gun from his shoulder holster and fired. He wasn't a part of the SWAT because he was a big, ox of a man, he was an expert with firearms and his reaction time was good.

Mick's first thought was for Toshi, but the impact of the bullet knocked him back. He stumbled, raised the automatic and fired. All without thinking, which caused Hank's second and third bullets to go wild. It was over in a second, Mick finally hit the sofa. He was bouncing back up to his feet to check on Toshi almost before he'd stopped moving.

That's when the stinging pain clicked in and Mick's left arm was useless. He would have dropped if the venom hadn't been killing so much pain, a bullet knocked even the strongest man down. The shock of having a piece of metal pass through flesh was staggering and Mick knew his limits. He was suddenly grateful for the venom, aching hard on and all.

"Toshi? You okay? Are you hit?" He was trying to check the man without touching him.

Toshi's reaction time was fast, even in his haze of need he knew he was unarmed and out gunned. He'd dropped, got out of the way and hoped that when things settled Mick would still be breathing. For a moment, when Mick called his name, the relief was so great he didn't feel the pressing hunger of the shine.

"I'm fine. You're bleeding."

Mick nodded. "It went clean through, it just hurts. Don't worry, I'm okay. Shit that was a lucky shot." He was poking at the wound, it was high on his shoulder, above his collar bone. "Feels more like a graze. Let's get moving."

Toshi nodded and got to his feet. "Hank?"

"Leave him, let's go." He wasn't sure Hank was dead, he was pretty sure he'd be dead soon.

"I hate this, I hate not being able to think straight. Where are we going?"

"Back to where those things attacked that woman. I want the one I shot, then we'll get your bike and head back to the apartment." He emptied the trash from the waste basket by the door and pulled the plastic liner out, shoving the small bag into his pocket.

"And then we'll be safe?"

"Yeah, we'll be safe there." Blood was flowing down his shoulder now, there had been too much blood spilled tonight.

It took a little effort but Mick managed to get Toshi's coat over his shoulders without molesting the other man. "I hate getting blood on my coat." He whined but slid his arms into the sleeves.

He knew he was asking too much of his body and he didn't need the pre-dawn chill making things worse.

"Don't worry, I'll have it cleaned and you can find a way to repay me."

"Toshi," he groaned. "Come on."

"Come on you?"

"Stop!" He tugged on the rope and got them moving.

When they hit the outside, Mick's feet stumbled. They weren't where they should have been. The warehouse they'd chased the bugs to was further east, and further away from the yards. They were mercifully closer to the burned out husk of the Pony.

Mick had to snap the stick out and push Toshi away. The man had almost been on top of him. "Back!" He fished out his phone and with it the paper Yasun had given him. He dialed the number while keeping an eye on Toshi and as it started to ring he carefully held it to Toshi's ear.

Some of the glazed hunger left Toshi. "Uncle?" Shame sparked in his blue eyes. "I'm sorry, Uncle, I'm so sorry, I can't stop."

Mick pulled the phone away and backed away from Toshi. "Sir?"

"Mick? What's going on?" The voice snapped, no sign of sleep clinging to it.

"Things have happened."

"What kind of things?"

"The kind, sir, that shouldn't be discussed on the phone. The worst things, I need a hand." Toshi's bound hands slid over his hips. "No, stop that, back up."

Yasun was silent for a moment. "I understand. What can I do."

"Toshi dropped the bike off at a guardhouse near the train yard entrance, we're heading there."

Yasun cut Mick off. "I'll meet you there in ten minutes."

The line went dead and Mick glanced over to Toshi, the black haired man's tongue slipped out and the tip moistened just a tiny spot on his lips. "I can't run, but we need to move fast. Stay back and keep up." Five minutes alone away from Toshi, that's all he needed. He wasn't willing to entertain the idea that with the venom in his system he'd be hard again as soon as he'd climaxed. It was the promise of those five minutes alone that kept him moving and not groping Toshi.

Part Nineteen

They were barely half way there and Mick wasn't sure he was going to make it. Even the pain of unfulfilled need wasn't really sinking in. He knew the feeling, he was shutting down. He'd pushed too hard on too little for too long and was close to dropping. When they reached the outer edge of the Pony, all Mick wanted to was sit down and give up. Another step might have been a mile, it made no sense to continue.

"Toshi, I," he turned to glance behind him and the words died.

For as miserable as he felt, Toshi looked worse. He'd pulled his arms up to cover his head, trying to block out the mental noise that only he could hear. He was blood smeared, hurt himself, and stumbling along blindly. Every few steps pulled a soft, keening moan from the man and there was no doubt he was hurting worse than Mick was.

"We're almost there, baby, you can make it." He mumbled out and kept moving.

"I can't do this Mick, I can't. It hurts so much and I want it to feel good again, please, please, help me, don't let it hurt anymore. There's so much around, just untie me and let me go. Please, please, Mick let me find someone that'll make it stop hurting!"

Mick was grateful for the leash around the other's waist and grateful the yards were closing down for the night. If it had been fully occupied he wasn't sure Toshi would have survived it.

"Remember my promise?"

It took a moment but Toshi nodded. "Safe place, we're there soon right?"

"Soon, very soon." He tugged on the rope and kept them from stopping.

They'd only covered a few dozen more feet before Toshi stopped, his arms dropped. The painful lust was gone from his face and in its place was dark anger. "Sal." He whispered and as soon as the emotional reaction was released the lusting need returned. "Mick, help me, I want to gut that bastard for what he did to you but all I can think of is how good it would be seduce him."

"Where is he?"

Toshi waved around the wall closest to them. "He's coming our way."

Mick's hand clenched around the automatic weapon. "I can't. I don't want to just shoot him."

"Me either." Toshi groaned but even he couldn't tell what his own meaning was.

"Hank fired first. Oh, God, I've already killed a cop." The sight of Hank, falling backwards with red blooming across his chest consumed him. It wasn't the first time he'd had to kill someone, but it was the first time he'd shot a cop, a good guy.

"He wasn't a good cop, neither is Sal." Toshi forced out and then he held out his tightly closed fisted hand. "Here."

"Not now, Toshi, not now!" He hissed back, snapping, close to really snapping.

"No, here, take them."

The fact that it wasn't some come on ploy made Mick feel like slime. He held out his hand and Toshi's fist trembled, fighting with his own desires, before he opened his grip and two small, plastic pouches fell into Mick's hand.

"Hurry, he's closer now."

It took a moment for Toshi's meaning to dawn but when it did he shook his head. "It won't work."

"It will. If not you can shoot him."

"Damn it, stay put."

"Safe place," he moaned. "I'll wait."

The packets easily dumped into his palm and Mick dropped the now empty bags. He crept to the edge of the wall and crouched down, on the other side he could hear heavy boot steps. Sal was moving slowly, carefully, a flashlight beam was scrolling along the ground as he methodically searched the rubble of the building. Mick waited, his ears ringing with their desperation to judge the man's distance.

Then he was there, just a few steps away and Mick cursed the slightest touch of dawn that stole some of the blackness from the shadows. Stealing his nerve, praying his battered body wouldn't betray him, Mick popped up around the corner almost stepping on Sal. He opened his hand, closed his eyes and blew the powder toward the other man's face.

"What the hell? Mick?" Sal batted at the dust but he felt it in his nose, felt it melting sweetly against his tongue, felt it stinging his eyes. His first thought was it was some sort of non-lethal trick that Mick always carried with him but then the warmth started to spread. "Fuck no."

"Fuck, yes!" Mick kicked out and hit Sal's knee. He pushed with his good arm and the man fell, the flashlight skittered off in spinning circles. There was no time to think, Mick was on the dazed man, searching and when his hands wrapped around the butt of a familiar gun he pulled it out.

He knelt on Sal's chest and pressed the barrel of his gun against his forehead. He had to press it tight against the skin because his hands were shaking, badly, and he didn't trust that he'd have an aimed shot of even a few inches distance. Sal's dark eyes were wide, glowing on the dust he'd absorbed into his body and he didn't struggle. Mick wanted him to struggle, wanted him to fight, wanted a reason to pull the trigger.

"You're so beautiful." Sal smiled. "I never told you that often enough, you're so beautiful you make my heart ache. I love you."

"Shut up!" Mick shouted and cocked the hammer of the gun. He didn't feel the tears running down his face, streaking passages in the dried blood.

"I never told you that before but I do. We were so good together."

Mick bit his teeth on a frustrated scream. "We were never good together! Never! You took and I let you, you don't have any idea of how much you've hurt me!" It didn't matter if Sal struggled, he was going to kill him. It was a cold understanding. "You have no idea how much you've made me hate myself! I'm going to kill you!"

Sal only smiled wider. "Go ahead, kill me, it's the only way you're getting me out of your life. Nothing but death can separate us, you and I belong together. I don't mind dieing if you're the one that does it."

Mick trembled, he shook but he didn't pull the trigger. He eased the hammer back in place and clicked the safety back on. The gun pulled away from Sal's head and pointed to the ground beside him, Mick's hand shaking as badly as he'd feared. He wanted to hit Sal, wanted to smash his face in but he was just too tired to manage it.

Mick glanced up and saw Toshi, sitting on his heels, wide eyes solemn and more clear than they had been since he'd taken shine. He shook his head and looked away. "I almost,"

"But you didn't."

He sniffed back the tears in his eyes and winced, his nose glaring in pain. The gun slid back into his holster and Mick roughly searched Sal, finding nothing noteworthy except a few slender plastic tubes with a cotton tipped swab sealed inside each one. He pocketed those. In a deep pocket Mick found a sealed plastic bag with the dead creature inside and floating in the bottom of

that pocket was the shell casing from the shot Mick had fired. He slipped both of those into the plastic bag he'd stolen from the trash can. Into his pockets he tucked the automatic and Sal's hand gun. "At least this saves us a trip."

The rough searching left Sal hard and moaning. Toshi smiled. "He likes that."

Mick ignored him and fished a b-cuff from his pouch. He tore it open and quickly bound Sal's wrists tightly.

"He likes that even more. You could top him, he'd let you. I promise to just watch."

"No!"

"Mick, you gotta try this shit, it's amazing, I feel so good. I could fuck you for hours like this."

"Both of you, shut up!" He closed his eyes and focused on how awful he felt not how horny he was and stood up. "Both of you, on your feet. Sal, you move to the side of me, Toshi you stay behind me. If I see either of you trying to touch me or each other I swear I'll start shooting."

Neither man believed him and Toshi actually chuckled. "He's playing a game with us, if we listen, he's promised to fuck us silly." He confessed to Sal and the words made Sal thrust blindly forward against his own bound hands.

"Just walk." Mick forced out, scooping up the flashlight as he went by.

They garnered more than a few odd looks as they passed by the last of the train yard residents and the few straggler humans. Sal obeyed, smiling like a fool to anyone that looked at him and Toshi went back to trying to physically block out the sense of the people around them, keening softly after a few yards. Mick only had to use the stick to keep them apart once and to keep them from him twice. His nerves were shot, his body was barely willing to move and he was still aching hard when he spotted the guard house in the now, virtually deserted train yards.

A dozen feet away, Mick's foot caught on something and he fell to the ground. The pain was stunning and he couldn't move, worse, two sets of hands were instantly on him. "Get back!" He hissed, trying to move but when he glanced up long haired men and women were running over from the guard house. It was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. "Oh, thank God." He sighed as Yasun pulled both Sal and his nephew off of the fallen human.

Yasun's nose twitched and he looked to both bound men. "You're on shine."

"I'm sorry, Uncle, I'm so sorry, I couldn't stop."

"It's not his fault, he's on shine, but he's not shinning." Mick let Yasun pull at his arm and gentle fingers slid over the bite marks.

"He bit you twice and you still haven't given in? He's not shinning?"

"I promised I wouldn't hurt him." Mick gasped out. "Please, help me."

"Doria, take my nephew to the side, see he stays bound and that he touches no one and on one touches him, not even to tend his wounds. Do not fail me in this."

One of the woman bowed. "Yes, sir!"

"What about the other?" Yasun asked, motioning to where Sal was trying to gain attention from the I/S around him.

Mick let Yasun help him to sit up. "He's one of the people responsible. He's glowing right now but he's a cop. His id is on him."

The rage in Yasun's eyes was blinding. He rose and stalked over to Sal. "You, human, you gave my nephew shine?"

"Naw, Taylor did, it was just my idea. I couldn't let them kill Mick. I love him, he's the best fuck I've ever had, I love him." He mumbled. "This is really good shit."

Yasun back handed the much taller man. "I will deal with you later. Take him away and place him someplace secure." He placed a steadying hand on the shoulder of one of his people and smiled grimly. "Help McKale-san up, get him inside the guard house. I need to know what happened."

Mick let them haul him to his feet but they had to half carry him to the small building. Inside there was a single, bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling, a table and some chairs, a single utility sink and a small cook top. On the heating element of the cook top water boiled and one of the I/S poured a mug of tea while another pressed Mick into a chair and began checking his wounds. His concern was for Toshi who sat in a chair in the corner, with nothing around him. His legs were twitching and his eyes were glazed and wandering.

"Now," Yasun sat in the chair opposite Mick and ignoring his nephews obvious distress. "Tell me what happened."

"It should be spoken of in private."

"These people are loyal, what they see and hear here will never leave them without my permission. Speak freely." Yasun accepted the mug of tea from the guard with a smile and set it in front of Mick.

"Well, if you say so." With his good arm Mick dug out the plastic bag he'd found on Sal that had the body of the creature he killed. The story of night came out in quick, simple words. He kept his emotions out of it and the only things he left out or downplayed were Sal's use of him and Toshi's relentless come ons. When he finished he set the automatic weapon and Sal's handgun on the table.

"Her body is in the Pony's rubble. I'm sorry, I didn't save her."

Yasun was silent, his eyes went to his nephew and then to the human that he was obviously so attached to. "Glen, get a group together, see to our own. Also, follow Mick's blood trail back to this warehouse, take care of the situation. Do not engage these other two police men. Do you understand?"

Glen, an I/S man with orange hair and purple eyes, bowed. "Yes sir."

It was obvious even to Mick that Yasun was thinking quickly. "All of you here, you are witnesses to this night. You have heard and seen the honor of my nephew, willing to suffer so much to protect his human friend. Each of you have witnessed with your own eyes the honor in McKale-san, a human. Such strength to guard another is rarely seen and tonight, we've witnessed it twice."

The nods and murmured words of agreement made Mick embarrassed and made Toshi hide his head.

"Medic?" Yasun asked the I/S that had been poking at Mick. "How is he?"

The man shook his head. "The collarbone's broken but the damage beyond that from the gunshot

is minor. The venom is working well as a pain killer but he's close to his limits."

"And my nephew?"

"One hit of shine? The worst of the pain will fade if it's not reinforced within twelve hours, it'll be fully out of his system within twenty four. It'll be at least a week before he'll be able to pass a blood test, maybe longer."

"Mick?" Yasun put his forearms on his knees and leaned forward. "These men are looking to discredit you and Toshi. They will call the press and they will call the Committee. You both require medical attention that my people can't give you and you won't be safe in any hospital here. I'm sure with your background and connections you know of several, private, secure medical facilities that you could take Toshi to. Someplace where no one will know where you are, do you know of such a place?"

Mick nodded. "I don't think I can get us there."

"I believe you can. I believe in you enough to place my nephew's life into your hands." He glanced to the medic. "Sedate him."

The room actually seemed to pull back but the purple haired man nodded and dug a needle and small vial from his bag. Mick watched in confusion as the medic injected the sedative into Toshi's unresisting arm. "I thought it was dangerous to sedate anyone of I/S blood."

"It is." Yasun hadn't straightened up in his chair and he didn't watch the sedative being administered. "It's a low dose, it'll start out making him a little easier, it'll take the edge off the need. Within a half hour, he'll start to relax, then he'll become sleepy. Within a couple of hours he'll be unconscious and if he isn't in the care of a medical facility, he could die before the sedative wears off. I'm sorry, Mick, it's the only safe way to transport him."

"You don't get it? I don't think I can even stand let alone take him anywhere. I'm, I'm," he sighed and closed his eyes.

"McKale-san."

Mick opened his eyes enough to see one of the guards bowing to him.

"Anyone of us would be honored to help ease some of the effect of Sakura-sama's venom."

It took a moment for the meaning to sink in. "You can't be serious?"

He bowed lower. "We're very serious."

"No!" He replied curtly. "I'm sorry, it's a gracious offer but there's no way I'm going to take this situation out on anyone." He tried to rub his eyes but his nose hurt too much.

"Very well, if you won't let one of us help with the venom, let us help with some of the other troubles." Yasun was smiling slightly, knowing his people would be shocked that a human with venom in his veins had refused an I/S. "We have a local anesthetic that the Medic can give you for your shoulder and a stimulant that will keep you going for a few more hours." He didn't miss the worried look on the Medic's face. "There will be risks to it."

"I'll be okay. Just do it so I can get going."

"Thank you, Mick. The Committee must not be able to get their hands on both of you, there's no place in my city I can hide you and no place in yours."

Mick picked up the tea and drank it. "I know." He held still while the Medic drew out another needle but he didn't watch the drugs the man pulled from his supply. He didn't even mind that the man cut the collar of the t-shirt to expose the still sluggishly bleeding wound.

"Uncle," Toshi asked softly from his corner. "Please, help me to wait outside?"

Yasun just nodded and took Toshi from Doria and helped him to stand and make his way outside. Once there, he led them a few feet away from where Toshi's bike sat waiting to be used. "I should have sent people with you."

"It would have just gotten them and maybe us killed. I'm sorry, Uncle, I'm so sorry."

"Stop that!" He wanted to take his nephew's face between his hands and comfort him but any physical contact would only make things worse. "Is the sedative helping?"

Toshi nodded. "Some. I don't feel like I'll die if I don't find someone soon, it just hurts." He glanced to the lit up door way. "Mick was vague, Sal is his ex-boyfriend. Sal hurts him, beats him."

"What do you want done with him?"

"I," Toshi fought the idea that came to mind knowing it was the shine, he reminded himself that he didn't not want to be fucked by Sal. "I don't know, I can't think straight. Just, hold him but he's dangerous, you needed to know."

"Thank you." He nodded to the blood drying on Toshi's neck. "They took out the implant?"

"It's in my pocket. Everything's so loud, so bright, I'm having trouble." He hated admitting weakness.

"You'll remember and the sedative will help for now. Toshi, this human, Mick, he smells right to you doesn't he?"

The thought of Mick's scent made him hurt. He wanted so strongly that he struggled to answer. "How do you know that?"

Yasun smiled very gently. "Because, the two of you act together the way my parents acted together. I'm pleased for you, but you must remember that scent and what it means and fight this. For his sake if not yours."

"I'm trying." He knew he was whining.

"I know you are, I know." He hated being helpless and hoped the sedative was just strong enough to work without killing. The door to the guard house opened and the people inside spilled out. To Yasun's eyes Mick was more alert but it was a brittle alert. The man was close to breaking.

"A car would be better." Mick muttered to himself when he saw how slow and sluggish Toshi was moving. Then he thought about a car with a soft, wide, back seat and a sleepy, willing Toshi spread across it. "Never mind. This will work."

"Don't stop, for anything." Yasun warned. "Even with the sedative in him he still could be demanding. The stimulant might weaken some of the venom but I wouldn't risk it."

"I won't." Mick nodded. "Sir?" He asked in a lower voice, embarrassed.

"Call me Yasun."

"If I can't take it any longer, and have to stop and he's unconscious, he won't notice if I, well, if I," the thought was ever present, no matter how exhausted he felt, or how much pain, he needed to find those five minutes. "Well, wander alone into the bushes for a few moments. Will it affect him?"

Yasun shook his head. "It shouldn't if he's truly unconscious but Mick, keep in mind that when the stimulants we've pumped you full of wear off, you're not going to be able to see straight. Don't stop."

Mick held in the groan and kept his hands firmly on his helmet. "I understand."

It took a little maneuvering to get Toshi settled in front of Mick on the bike but there was no other choice. Once Toshi grew groggy it was the only way to promise he wouldn't fall off, but for now, both men were tormented by the positioning.

"I'm trying."

Mick heard the soft whisper. "So am I, baby, so am I." He reached around Toshi, trying not to touch the other man which was impossible. His left arm was too numbed to hurt but it was unwilling to move and his grip was weak. As he pulled them out of the train yards, driving unsteadily, the sun was barely touching the sky in the east and it was set to shine on the longest bike ride of Mick's life.

It took twenty minutes to clear the city, another thirty to clear the out laying suburbs and Mick drove as fast as he could. Toshi had stopped trying to rub his ass into Mick's groin by the time they hit the suburbs and when they'd reached the country side he was slumped forward more unconscious than not. An hour and a half out from the train yards, Mick's vision started to blur, he was starting to get dizzy. He was pretty sure he shouldn't be driving but he pushed on desperately trying to cover those final miles.

Finally, he turned into the short driveway and pulled up to the gate. The keypad stared at him, waiting for a code and he couldn't think clearly to punch one in. The only code number he could remember was the one to the locked room they'd escaped from and that wasn't going to open this door. After staring at the keypad for close to five minutes he finally punched the call button and waited.

"Yes?"

"It's Mick, I mean, Amun McKale, can you please open the gate?"

"Hang on."

Mick wanted to kick the keypad but he couldn't move easily anymore. It sounded like one of the kids and they didn't have all their names memorized. He'd have to fetch an adult and while it was standard procedure, Mick cursed it now.

"Amun? Is that you?"

Mick released Toshi to pull his helmet off. "It's me, Papa Henry, please, please, let me in."

"Surely, surely, but why didn't you just use your code? And is that blood I see on you? Are you hurt? Who's your friend?"

"Papa Henry, please, just open the gate, I can't remember my code, we're hurt."

Mick heard Papa Henry cursing in German and the gate began to roll open. "Thank you." He sighed out, uncertain he could navigate up the drive.

"Can you make it to Benter Hall? I'll have the troops waiting."

"I'll make it, if not, come pick us up off the pavement."

"That's not funny, Amun."

But Mick didn't hear the scolding he was easing the slender bike up the paved two lane drive way. When he wasn't feeling ready to die, the drive up to the buildings was one of his favorite sights. Lined in old trees that stretched out and met each other over head, the oaks dropped brown leaves and acorns that crunched under tires in the fall and covered the road in shade the summer. Most of the grounds were forested, a lot of the trees were labeled and identified, planted in a garden aspect but there were still acres of wild forest beyond the gardens.

The beauty was lost on Mick this time, he was just glad he'd made it home. The buildings sat atop a small hill, giving them a wonderful view of the land around them and a defensive advantage. As the years had passed the buildings and grounds had moved more from a defensive look and feel to one more like a private school or small college. Housing was to one area, set up in small dorm like buildings with several parents and a handful of children in each one. Research buildings were off slightly, down the hill from the housing. Clumped between the two were the common buildings, places where the kids studied together and lived together. Benter Hall was the family's medical clinic, a small hospital and set very near the end of the drive way.

By the time Mick reached the pull up to the building, he was lightheaded and dizzy. He stopped, put the kick stand down and tried to take off his helmet only to find he wasn't wearing it. It took far to long to remember he'd pulled it off for the cameras and he must have dropped it there. It took two tries to get his legs to move enough to get off the bike and than he staggered.

The door behind him flew open and people poured out. Faces he should have known and yet couldn't seem to remember were everywhere. Hands fell on him as questions tumbled out that he couldn't figure out answers too. It didn't even sound like English, maybe they were seeing if he'd been paying attention in class and testing him. What was it this term? German? Spanish? Latin? None of it was making any sense.

Than he glanced over and the people he should have known were touching Toshi. That made sense, no one must touch Toshi, no one. "Don't touch him! Get away, leave him alone!" He shouted and broke free of the hands holding him. Wildly, he pulled at the people around Toshi, pushing them away and back.

"Amun! Amun, listen to me, you're hurt, so is your friend, let us help." A woman said in slow, careful words, her hands out in front of her and open.

"Get back!" He shouted again and drew his gun. "I won't let you hurt him!"

The crowd pushed back and began talking among themselves. Mick aimed his gun but his vision was blurry and unfocused. All he knew was one thing, no one could touch Toshi. He felt sick, but he couldn't be sick, not until Toshi was safe.

A woman pushed the crowd of people away and stepped forward. Her grey hair was pulled up in a loose bun on her head and strands of it hung rebelliously free. She wore a robe over a pair of flannel pajamas that had bright pictures of candy all over it. Her feet were shoved into purple fuzzy slippers.

The face felt comfortable to Mick, something in the lines around the eyes was comforting. She moved forward and he swung the gun at her. "Stay away!"

"Shhh, it's okay Amun, it's okay now. I'm not coming any closer."

"I can't let you touch him!"

"I won't touch him, no one will until you say it's okay. Do you know where you are?"

He glanced around and tried to place it, but nothing came. He shook his head.

"Do you know where you were headed? Where you were trying to go?"

That took a moment but he nodded. "I have to get Toshi to Papa Mike. I have to."

She smiled warmly. "How about I bring Papa Mike to you, hmm? Then you'll be where you need to be." She turned slightly but knew that Mike was already on his way. "Amun, do you know who I am?"

"I, I should but I, I can't think."

"You've been hurt, there's blood all over you. Did you wreck your bike? It looks intact."

Did he wreck his bike? "No, no, it wasn't that. I, we were looking for something, someone."

"Papa Mike?"

"No, Tam's killer, they shot him." His face twisted up and the gun wavered.

"Who am I, Amun, look at me, who am I?" She heard the door open behind her and Mike pushed his way forward.

Mick's eyes fell on the tall, slender man. The shaggy brown beard grown long from neglect not style, the long thinning brown hair pulled back into a tail at the base of his neck. There was a warmth to those brown eyes, a comfort and things started to click. "Papa Mike."

"That's right, Amun, it's me."

He knew the woman. "Grandma Rose."

She nodded but held Mike back. "Where are you Amun?"

He glanced around. "I made it home?"

She nodded again. "Yes, you did, now would you give me the gun? Papa Mike's here, you can tell him what you need to now."

Mick glanced down to the gun in his hand and dropped it. The safety was still on he hadn't even had the presence of mind to remove it, which was a good thing since he'd just nearly shot his own parents, but would have been a bad thing had they been really surrounded by hostiles.

The last day flooded back and he fell to the ground. His legs simply couldn't hold him anymore. Grandma Rose and Papa Mike were the only two of the waiting group to carefully approach him. Rose reached out and gently touched him.

"Papa Mike, I need your help!"

Mike laughed. "I figured that part out, what's wrong?"

"Toshi, Papa Mike, this is Toshi Ranvier, the half breed, he needs help. They made him take

shine, he's an addict, no, he was an addict, he's been clean for years but they made him take shine and I've been trying so hard to not reinforce it but God he's so sexy and he bit me and we got electrocuted,"

"Slow down," Mike had kneeled down beside Mick. "I understand about the shine, now, tell me, what else do I need to know about Toshi so I can help him. Than you can tell your Grandma Rose or Mama Ruth anything that happened to you so they can help you, okay?"

Mick nodded and tried to focus. The big thing clicked into place. "He's sedated, for a couple of hours now. Please, help him."

"I will, son, I will, now, you let them help you." Mike stood and didn't waste time, he nodded to the small group closest to the door and they rushed forward.

Mick saw them gathering Toshi's limp body up, setting him on a gurney and taking him quickly away. He clutched at Rose's arm. "No can know we're here, promise me."

"I promise, Amun. Now, do you know Mama Ruth?" She nodded to a blonde woman in her late fifties, her hair cut short.

It was the woman he'd almost shot. "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Mama Ruth, I'm not thinking straight."

"It's okay, Amun, I'm just glad you made it home. Tell me, what's happened."

He clutched at the two women. "Toshi's safe?"

"Toshi's in very good hands, he's safe." Rose comforted.

It was all he needed to hear. His eyes rolled up and he passed out.

Part Twenty

There was no gentle easing passage to wakefulness for Toshi. One moment he was floating in blissful unawareness and the next he was awake. It was the smells, the place smelled wrong, different. Before he was even half awake he knew he wasn't in a place he'd ever been and that meant trouble. The room was dimly lit and smelled softly of lavender but when he opened his eyes it wasn't a bedroom he was laying in but a hospital room. A nice one, with soothing wallpaper in shades of blues and greens and soft sheets of pale, robin's egg blue but it was still a hospital bed.

An IV was in his arm and a fluid slowly was dripping down the tubing and there was an ache in his body that he hadn't felt so strongly for years. A craving, a distant need, and he knew what it was. He closed his eyes and told himself he wasn't going to feel it, he wasn't going to go out and find a small plastic pouch filled with sweet smelling powder.

The door opened and an older woman came in. She smiled warmly and pulled the shawl she was wearing tighter around her shoulders. "Good, you're awake." From her arm dangled a floppy bag and spilling out of the top was yarn.

Toshi's newly returned senses latched on to the woman and reassured him. He liked the way she felt, soft and safe, like fluffy clouds you could actually hug. That made him smile slightly, he'd missed those small mental images that internal sense provided.

He let his head drop back onto the pillow. "Where's Mick? Is he okay?"

The woman nodded and moved smoothly into the room. "He's fine but I can't say for sure just where he is. Most likely off by the creek, that's where he'd go when he needed to think when he was a boy." She sat on the edge of Toshi's bed instead of in the chair. "I'm Rose by the way, and you're Toshi Ranvier."

"Rose? Mick's Grandmother Rose?"

That made her face light up. "He's spoken of me?"

Toshi nodded.

"Wonderful! He must be really sweet on you if he's mentioned me." She folded her hands on her leg and studied the still, solemn man laying like a broken doll on the bed.

"How is he? He was really hurt."

"He was, is, but he'll be fine. The concussion was minor, they found some irregularities in his heart's rhythm but that's gone now, he's young and strong. The bullet cracked his collarbone but didn't splinter it, he'll be in a sling for a while but it'll heal. His ribs weren't broken, but his nose is. Ruth thinks it'll heal with almost no noticeable damage. The same for the burns on his leg."

"Burns?"

She nodded. "A grid pattern? He must have fallen on to the grid that electrocuted you both while it was still hot. Nothing serious, but it's sore and it'll leave a scar for a while but it'll fade pretty quickly. He slept for the better part of a day, the mix of venom, shock and stimulants will do that. You should know, he didn't stop until you were safe."

"The better part of a day? How long have I been out?"

"Oh, two days, well, let's see, two days and about four hours or so. More I guess since I don't know how long you were out before Mike got you."

"Papa Mike? Mick brought us to the commune."

She just nodded.

"But how did I stay out so long? I should have been awake or dead days ago."

"Mike's a smart man, it's a new sedative his I/S team's come up with. The trials have been working well so we used it on you. You slept like a baby past most of the worst of the shine, now, it's up to you to deal with the residual cravings." She smiled and her face lit up. "I don't think that'll be difficult for you."

"A sedative that's safe for I/S? That would be amazing."

"Yes it would but our access to your people is so limited any more. The important thing is you're okay, a few scrapes and cuts all minor. Except for this, it might be a problem." She dug in her bag and pulled out the smooth metal implant disk. "We found it in your pocket."

He stared at the smooth flat disk and felt something almost like regret. "When will you be putting it back in?"

"That's the problem, Toshi, Mike doesn't think it can be placed safely back in. The implants aren't meant to be yanked out so violently. The myelin sheaths around your nerves are swollen, the tissue around it is showing signs of scarring. If they put the implant in, it's doubtful it'll work safely

and it's probable it'll cause searing pain all the time. The good news is that if the site is left to heal you shouldn't have any problems, so long as you don't have the implant put back in." She broke the news with the same tone of voice she'd use to tell someone they'd lost a limb and wasn't expecting the small, hidden smile that crossed the other man's face.

"This is going to cause problems but I'll deal with it. I dodged a bullet with the shine, I'm not going to freak out over something this minor."

Rose laughed as she dropped the disk back into her bag. "Good boy! I can see why Amun's in love with you."

"No, it's not like that, we're just friends."

"Of course. Slid over, sweetie, let an old woman sit next to you and show you something."

Startled by both the woman's comfort level with him and her easy casual manners, Toshi slid over. She pulled herself into the bed, kicking off small, clunky looking low heeled shoes and soothing out the long, plain skirt. Once settled she leaned against the him and laughed again. "My! You're like a furnace!"

"It's the higher body temperature."

She waved it off. "It feels good on these old bones. Here now, look at this." She pulled a book from her bag and held one cover and made Toshi hold the other. "See this here, this is Amun, the day he graduated from the police academy." She pointed to the photo. "Look at how short his hair is! Six parents, two grandparents, and eleven siblings went to that, we took up two rows. And this one, this is from his college graduation. Nine parents, five grandparents, all of his younger siblings so it would have been, let's see, at that time it was close to twenty still here that were raised with him. We took up four rows that time."

Toshi studied the pictures, the ones of Mick surrounded by the horde of family and the ones of just him alone in cap and gown, or with Andy hanging on him, smiling broadly under his red lipstick. "He looks so young."

"Well, he was young, he was two months shy of his sixteenth birthday when he started college, he graduated in the spring so he was only nineteen here. He almost didn't make it you know. Those first weeks of school were so difficult for him, he's not the most social of boys." She patted the pictures. "He was being bullied by a room mate, oh he never complained about it but he'd call home and sound so lonely. He stuck to it though and shortly after his birthday that dear boy Andy arranged to have them be room mates. You've met Andy?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "Good boy, so talented! Amun always thinks he's less talented than the people around him but he is, he's brilliant but he doesn't see it. He went from barely being able to read or write when we got him at eleven to going to college at fifteen, that alone is amazing."

"Mick's one of the smartest men I've ever met."

She watched Toshi from the corner of her eye and nodded. "Here now, here's a good one. This is his sister Ivory, a name she came with, not one we gave her!" Her one finger tapped a picture of Mick holding a long legged, dark skinned girl on his back. They both looked to be about fourteen or so and Mick was laughing, the girl had her tongue sticking out. "They used to hate each other, fought all the time until Frank, an older sibling to them both, he would have been oh about four years older than them. Anyway, Frank started teasing Ivory and Amun leapt to her defense. They still fought but they found a common ground after that. She's a lawyer now, they're the only two of their siblings that were gay, I think they found a common connection with that. Well, no that's

not true, Alana is bi but she was never quite about that.” Rose chuckled and kept turning pages.

“Last ones, I promise, I know how it is to be bored by old women.” She turned the pages and the Mick in the pictures grew younger. “Here now, this is the day Mick came to stay with us. He was eleven. He had a broken leg, a broken arm and ironically his jaw was wired shut, he’d had that broken too. He’d actually put on weight here in this picture. He weighed all of seventy two pounds when we brought him home, that’s with the casts on.”

She turned the page. “This is the first picture I took of Amun. I’m a psychiatrist, Toshi, my job here is to help our children. So many of them are so damaged when we get them. There’s actually four of us, but as senior on staff I do a lot of the field work. A lot of the time, child services will call us as they’re bringing a child by because no one else will take them but a lot of the time I have to go out to them. I meet with the child, see if we can help them. It’s heartbreaking.

“I’d been having a really bad day. The girl I’d gone to the hospital to see was beyond our resources but she needed help so badly. It’s never easy making that call but anyway. I was leaving the hospital and passed this room. The door was open and no one was in it but this tiny child. He was all bandages and casts and this shock of red hair. See how red it was.” She ran her fingers over the picture of the bone skinny child laying in the too large bed.

“He’s mentioned that he was hurt in foster care.”

“Has he? Amazing, he never talks about it, see,” she nudged Toshi in the ribs. “I told you he was in love with you.”

“We’re just friends.”

“Uh huh. So I saw this scrawny boy and thought he’d been in a car accident. When I checked his chart I found out that a police officer had found him in a dumpster, badly dehydrated, half dead. It’s bad enough when someone murders a child and tosses away the body, to do it while the child was still alive? They think he’d been in there for a day or two. The foster parents he’d been placed with claimed he’d run away and since none of their other children showed signs of abuse they believed them. His chart said he was being released to an institution next. That he was slow and unresponsive, that he acted out and was a danger to others.”

“Someone did that to him and then threw him away?”

“Breaks your heart doesn’t it?” She sighed. “I did some checking and the only reason he was listed as slow was because he hadn’t ever spoken to anyone. He was unresponsive because no one had attempted to reach him on his level. He acted out because he was scared, hurt, angry and the only times I’d seen in his records of him being a danger to others was when he was threatened. My family here in the Commune backed me up but I had to fight child services tooth and nail for that boy. They had already written him off but I got him. I won.” She shut the book and locked away the pictures. “He was here almost a year before he spoke.”

“Why? Why wouldn’t he talk to people?”

“I can give you the clinical theories, tell you it’s a control issue and blah blah blah but even I don’t know why, just like I’m not sure why he finally let us in. Ask him, I bet he tells you.” She sighed and rested her head against Toshi’s shoulder.

“Why are you telling me all this? Why show me those pictures?”

“Because, I love Amun and he loves you. Now,” She slid away and off the bed with an agility that denied her years. “I’ve prattled too long. Let me get someone in here that can get that needle out of your arm. I’m sure you’ll want a shower, there’s clothing in the drawer that should fit you

nicely. Here." She set a piece of paper on the side of the bed. "A map to where Amun used to hide himself away at. I'm sure you'll want to find him right away."

She patted Toshi's arm and gathered her bag up, leaving him feeling like he'd been dropped into some strange and distant planet.

The computer printed map had obviously been hand drawn at one point. In one section was a carefully drawn map and below it, written in a neat, tight hand, were directions to follow. The map, and following it to Mick, were about all he could think about and left him with a mixed sense of urgency and dread.

Toshi stopped outside the medical center and had to glance around. The bright sunshine was warm, the day felt more like early summer than spring but the sunshine had him squinting to see the grounds around him. He scanned the building he'd just exited, surprised by how un-medical it looked. Children of different ages were chasing each other in a game of what looked like football with no clear rules on the lawn to the side and around other buildings different adults and children moved in various levels of urgency.

He glanced down to study the map and jumped, startled, by a small child of nine or so standing almost on top of him. The boy's hair was short black, his eyes a matching black and obviously Asian. He was wearing blue jeans and a plain green long sleeved t-shirt, one of his sneakers was untied and the backpack on his back was too large for him.

"Hello." Toshi said and smiled at the boy, half expecting him to turn and run away.

The boy broke out into a huge grin. "Hi! I was waiting for you, she said I'd know you. Wow, are you really an I/S? I've been reading all about you. Do you really have fangs? And venom? I have a snake, his name's Bertie but he's not poisonous, he's a constrictor, one of my older sisters gave him to me." The boy stopped and clapped a hand over his mouth. "I'm sorry, she said I shouldn't pester you that you'd had a really rough couple of days, like Amun, he's my brother, sort of, he was a grown up before I got here but we're all siblings I guess. He looks like someone hit him in the face with a hockey stick. I got hit in the face with a hockey stick, it knocked a baby tooth out, see?" The boy pulled back his lip to show the missing space. "I've read about how you're always growing teeth. Mama Fran and Papa Mike are trying to figure out how to do that for us humans too. Oh, sorry, I'm doing it again!"

Toshi knelt down and was still smiling at the boy. He was far more used to all children, human and I/S, watching him in fear. "It's okay, maybe later I'll have time to answer your questions. You said she asked you to watch for me? Who is she?"

"Oh, Grandma Rose. I'm Hieko and you're Toshi Ranvier, I've read all about you."

"It's nice to meet you Hieko. Was there a reason why your Grandmother Rose wanted you to wait for me?"

He nodded and handed over a pair of sunglasses and let the backpack from his shoulders. "Here, she said these were in your coat pocket and I'm supposed to give you this. She said to tell you that it's a picnic lunch and you need to eat and there's a nice, light olive oil in there that you and Amun might like to share."

It wasn't meant the way it sounded, surely it wasn't, but Toshi found himself chuckling. "Well, thank you for delivering it to me and if you run along and thank her for thinking about us, I'll try to answer your questions later okay?"

The boy nodded and took off at a run for a few feet before stopping and turning. "It was really cool to meet you!" He shouted before running headlong around the corner of the building.

Toshi stood up and slid the sunglasses in place, making life a little more bearable and shouldered the back pack. Now, he just had to decipher the map. It took a little walking around the buildings to find the right one but the trail on the map was right where it was in real life. He started off into the woods, and at the large dark boulder with a white streak of quartz running in the middle of it he turned from the trail and made a left. The rest of the directions were the same, look for the this or that and turn, go such a distance before looking for the next landmark. It took forty minutes to reach the creek but if he'd been able to move faster some of the time could have been saved. The trip was so lovely, so like disappearing into another land and world that he didn't mind.

The creek was ten or fifteen feet wide and looked at least waist deep in the center and ankle deep in the shallows. He followed its winding path upstream as the map said until he found the fallen tree. The bank he was on was narrow, it had been steeply cut away by the water's erosion but the far side, where the tree's tops lay, was open and flat, meadow like in the dappled sunlight that broke through the baby spring leaves. Soft grasses were growing up, nearly knee high in places, and under one large willow tree was spread a blanket and on the blanket sat Mick. He was leaning on the tree, balancing a notebook on his legs while jotting in it. The sight made Toshi smile, even if he found Mick angry with him, he was still too happy with the sight to help smiling.

The fallen tree was wide and easy to cross. Toshi made it half way before his shoes scraped on the bark and Mick glanced. The notebook fell from his fingers and the pen rolled away but getting to his feet was slow. Mick was bare foot, his shoes sat to the side of the blanket with socks stuffed in them and the button down shirt, at least a size or too large for him, hung loosely over the arm bound to his body under the fabric. It was his face that chased away Toshi's smile. The nose was swollen and tape crossed the bridge, both eyes were black but one was swollen as well. That side of his face was puffy and red and the opposite had darkening black spots surrounded by ugly yellowish areas. Over the swollen eye were a few cuts, butterfly bandages holding them in place and his lower lip was split near the corner.

As Mick hurried over to his side of the fallen tree, for the first time Toshi was able to see Mick as any other I/S would. Mamita-san had been right, Mick was as cold and lovely as winter. There was a crisp sharpness, a sparkling beauty that dazzled to the other man. The feel was isolated, distant and lonely but not unreachable. It was a feel that like a cold night made Toshi's chest feel tight and his breath sting.

"Toshi," Mick whispered out as the other man dropped easily from the tree onto the ground, the sunlight slid across the glossy blackness of his hair before the breeze stirred it. "They told me you wouldn't be awake until tonight."

Toshi didn't answer, he just stood there, his eyes scanning Mick but not really seeing the flesh but the crisp, calling snow that his internal senses showed him. It made him want to dive in, fall into that sensation.

"How'd you find me? Are you okay?"

It was too much, the entirety of the man in front of him was too much. He was too lovely to look at, even with the bruises and swelling. His voice was too comforting, too perfect to be heard. The scent that the breeze stirred across to Toshi was simply too right and the feel that his now liberated senses gave him was bracing, like a snowball down a warm back it set his nerves to tingling.

Toshi reached out a hand and gently touched the swollen side of Mick's face.

"Yeah, it looks better than it feels." He tried to joke but the words fell flat in the face of Toshi's continued silence. "You okay?"

Those stray fingers slid backwards, rustling across that soft hair, glowing like a copper penny in the sunshine. His fingers trailed down the back of Mick's neck, tickling the ridges of his spine. There was no fear now, no worry that churned his stomach about Mick rejecting him, the man before him was too right for that. In the sunshine splitting around the leaves above them, Toshi knew this is where he belonged.

He tugged and stepped forward. His free arm slid around Mick's waist and pulled their hips together as his mouth, already open and demanding, crushed into Mick's. The body in his arms was tense for a moment, a single heartbeat, before Mick moaned into that desperate kiss. He fell into the claiming warmth and finally let Toshi hold him. The mouth below him parted and Toshi plundered forward, claiming what was his.

When the kiss broke, Mick was breathless. He knew he was letting Toshi support too much of his weight and he just didn't care. The only hand he had that was free was pressed against Toshi's chest, fingers spread wide and the beat of the heart below was a caress. His eyes cracked open and he struggled to see into those blue depths hidden behind the sunglasses.

"Toshi?" He whispered out but still the other man was silent. The arm around his waist pulled Mick as close as the arm strapped to his body would allow, the one on his neck slid across his shoulders and Toshi buried his face in his hair as he swallowed Mick into a tight hug. "Toshi?" He would have wrapped his free arm around the other man but it was still pinned between their bodies.

"I was so afraid I'd lose you." Toshi whispered, his voice nearly choked with emotions he didn't want to think about.

The sound of all that wasn't being said was in the whisper in his ear and Mick only knew one way to handle such emotion. "Don't worry, I'm a bad penny, I always turn up." He half laughed, using humor to hide behind.

Toshi wasn't buying it. He pulled away to claim another kiss, one that melted into another, and then into another. His lips slid across, hot, angry skin, kissing the damage, kissing the pain, covering those unforgivable bruises with kisses. Kisses that reached into Mick and pulled out soft, unvoiced gasps.

Kissing wasn't enough. Toshi stepped back from Mick and took off his sunglasses, letting them drop to the soft grass below. He let the back pack slide from his shoulders to slump at their feet. One hand reached out and he let his thumb trace Mick's lips, his gaze watching the touch before raising up to lock onto those bloodshot hazel eyes.

"I'm afraid of losing you." He spoke again, hushing the self mocking reply from Mick with fingers to lips and eyes locked to eyes.

Toshi kept his eyes focused on those confused, hazel ones as he let his hands stray downward. That sensitive touch found a smooth button and easily released it, found the next in the even line and freed that one as well. With each button, the confusion in Mick's eyes faded to be replaced with one of quiet, unvoiced hope colored with long accustomed loneliness.

The shirt finally hung open and Toshi broke eye contact long enough to glance down. That beautiful, pale skin was marred by purpling bruises that hid under the sling that bound his left arm to his body. The edge of the white bandage that covered the bullet wound on his shoulder stuck out in bitter reminder. He ran a single hand across the unbroken collarbone and down the center of Mick's chest, across smooth skin and fine, light strawberry blonde hair before he let the touch trail across the old bullet wound low on his stomach.

Mick was breathing harder but he kept his mouth shut, it leant an air of sacredness to the forest clearing that touched Toshi as well. Gently, with great care, Toshi caught the soft pads of his

fingers under the collar of Mick's shirt on the side that hung loosely over his damaged shoulder. He lifted the fabric and let his hand slid inside the shirt and than carefully, Toshi stepped to the side. Step by slow step, he circled behind Mick, taking the shirt with him, trailing his free hand across the slowly exposed shoulders. When he reached the far side, he let the fabric slide down Mick's arm, the too large shirt falling free from the body it had cruelly hidden.

With a graceful, measured step, Toshi returned to where he'd been standing. He gathered the warm fabric up in his hands and raised it to his face, pressing it to his nose. The scent was one he could get lost in and he closed his eyes as he inhaled it deeply. His sharp hearing caught the stifled hitch in Mick's breathing, practically a moan for the quiet man. Toshi smiled gently into the fabric before lowering it, folding it as it were a holy relic simply because he had worn it and setting it on the grassy earth.

In contrast, Toshi caught the hem of his own shirt, crossed his arms and just stripped it upwards. Letting the fabric slid up his arms to drag over his face and as he lowered his arms to cast the shirt aside, his hair tumbled out. He felt Mick's eyes slid over his chest, finding and noting the multiple scratches and scrapes and light bruises there, falling on the reddened, abused skin around his wrists from the rope Mick had used to restrain him.

Before Mick could speak, to apologize for doing what Toshi knew had to be done and didn't mind, he stepped forward and let his hands slide along the ridges of Mick's stomach. Let each finger tip slowly trace each muscle and delighted in how the flesh broke out in goose bumps under the contact. He found those hazel eyes now grown dark green with desire as his fingers found the button to the jeans. Toshi tugged on it, with just a little more force than he needed, letting the fabric grow tight against that slender body.

The button popped free. Toshi kept his eyes on Mick's while he let one hand slowly trace the hard length under the cotton, watched as Mick's eyes drifted shut at the contact and his lips parted but no sound emerged. He watched those eyes while his hands wandered across jean covered hips, back to trace the rough waistband where it met soft skin. Than slowly down, sliding over that wonderful, beautiful ass that tensed under the teasing contact.

His hands traced forward, slipping over the round edge of hip bones to glide across that length still so hidden below to settle on the zipper. The sound of it being lowered filled the glade, Toshi tugged it slowly, letting the sound of each tooth of the zipper click independently of it's fellows. Mick's hips twitched slightly, not quite thrusting forward but obviously wanting to as Toshi's hands traced back up to the waistband.

Toshi let himself watch as his hands traced the rounded curve of the top of Mick's hip bones. Back and forth they slid, memorizing the feel of the man, before finally settling between skin and fabric. As he tugged the jeans down, catching the hidden boxers as well, Toshi knelt. His hands slipped down the outside of Mick's hips, tracing the flesh to the tops of his thighs as Toshi lowered down to his knees. His hands fluttered across that wonderful fine hair that covered the strength in those legs, down to slender knees.

He remembered the burn on one of the lower legs and not knowing which, Toshi sat back on his ankles and gently bunched the fabric lower. He kept his eyes on his hands, not allowing himself to look at the man he'd just bared. He saw the top of the bandage on the outer edge of the right calf before he touched it and caused pain. Both of his hands caressed one of Mick's legs, tracing muscles and strength up to wrap fingertips around to the back of his knee. He tugged gently and Mick raised that leg, letting Toshi pull the fabric from his ankle. Toshi set that leg down, tracing his fingers over the lower leg to the ankle and than across the top of Mick's foot. When he repeated the same, slow process to the other leg he sensed more than saw Mick's hands clench up into fists and heard his breath grow shorter.

Toshi loosely folded the jeans and set them beside the shirt and than just sat there on his ankles, head bowed, hair hiding his face. He wasn't thinking, just acting and he bowed forward and

pressed his lips to the top of first one than the second of Mick's feet. He kissed upward, both ankles, flicking his tongue out to trace the corded tendons. Kissed both calves, gently placing feather soft kisses over the bandaged burn. He moved higher, kissing the now trembling knees, letting his hands wrap around them again to brush across that sensitive hidden hollow behind them. Another gentle tug spread Mick's legs a foot apart and Toshi slipped forward to sit between the feet of his lover.

Upward he kissed, slowly, feather soft, tasting the thin skin of that too often ignored inner thigh. So sensitive, so erotic, in some ways so much more so than higher, the place of expected eroticism, the inner thigh was hidden desire that had to be sought out. Toshi hunted it, found the responses in soft kisses. His hands were teasing touches that slowly worked upwards to trace the bottom curve of that perfect ass.

He was kneeling now, his lips tracing upward, higher on those inner thighs and Mick's legs parted wider of their own accord. Toshi smiled as his nose slid against the soft, hidden balls and he kissed them as well, letting his tongue trace across them, learning their lines. Mick's whole body trembled and his hand stroked into Toshi's hair. It didn't pull or hurt or demand, it just touched in smooth comforting strokes, it just connected them further.

Toshi opened his eyes to study the hard, bobbing cock before him. He admired it's lines, the feel of it's heat so close to his face. The sun and shade of the trees bounced shadows across the pale skin reddened now with need. He glanced up and found those hazel eyes watching him with open awe and wonder. He fell into that gaze. A smile tugged at his lips again before he parted them and slid the tip of that weeping cock into his mouth.

The taste was bitter, salty and this time the only memory he let it recall was of Mick. He kept his eyes locked on Mick's as best he could as he slowly slid the length into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the shaft, feeling the hurried, needing heartbeat in that tense flesh. Toshi closed his eyes and slowly, painfully slowly from the gasping breaths that came from Mick, bobbed his head along that length. He wanted to give Mick the same pleasure he had been given, wanted to suck on that aching need as freely, but he couldn't, not yet. He bobbed his head back, slower, letting each inch slid away before only the head was held by his lips. Even slower now, Toshi slid that sensitive flesh out, letting just the very tip remain in his mouth to flick his tongue over before releasing it.

Mick groaned, softly, deeply but he groaned.

Toshi smiled as he kissed down the length of the now slick shaft, he kissed the base where it rooted into soft, strawberry curls before kissing up. He let his hands cling to those tense hips as his mouth kissed across those hip bones and up, across the flat ridges of stomach. He trapped Mick's hardness against his upper chest and when he shifted his weight below him, the tip slid against Toshi's neck. Pleasure lit up in him unexpectedly. It was an intense feeling, surprising in it's origin and he moaned, pressing the side of his face against Mick's lower stomach. He raised himself up, letting that hardness glide along his neck, letting it light up nerve endings in them both, delighting in how perfect they fit together.

The smile on his face was now more wicked and Toshi pulled away from the teasing contact with a soft, fluttering sigh. He kissed the belly below his face, circled the naval with his tongue and kissed the scars. Kissed the spot where a bullet had ripped into his lover's body, kissed the line where a knife and torn across his ribs, kissed the faded, old scars that Mick hadn't identified and Toshi feared to ask after. He kissed as high as he could go with the arm strapped to Mick's body and when he reached that barrier he pulled away to sit on his heels.

He took a moment to just admire the body before him. So in need, so in control, so right in more ways than Toshi had ever dreamed. The smile softened, gentled with the aching knowledge that if he'd lost Mick, his life would be grey, nothing would have meaning again. But he hadn't lost him, he was right there, battered and beautiful and wanting him but waiting, surrendering himself

to Toshi's pace and control. This man who had no reason to trust people, who had been used and cast aside, beaten and abandoned, easily trusted when he should never have trusted again. This man who had seen the worst of human ugliness yet still clung to an ideal of honor and justice. It humbled Toshi and swelled his heart with pride.

He wasn't going to abuse that trust. The back pack came open easily and he wasn't surprised to find the flip top plastic bottle of olive oil, the size of a roll of dimes, right on top. It fit nicely in his palm as he gracefully stood up, Mick's eyes watching every movement. He stepped toward Mick and kissed his parted, inviting lips, holding his body out of reach. He teased those lips in gentle kisses, pulling away, kissing softly again, pulling away and again until after a few passes he truly pulled away. He was beyond Mick before the man opened his eyes with a sigh.

Only to shut them again as Toshi kissed the back of his neck. Kissed up to the hair line and then forward to tease the back of an ear. A hand slid along the less damaged side, feather soft over ribs and then forward to circle a hard nipple that froze Mick's breath in mid inhale. Toshi increased the pressure of that teasing touch to the hungry pebble of nerves as he kissed the bottom edge of the burn scar that curled out from under the bandages over the bullet wound. Rubbed it in tight circles as he kissed the marks on Mick's back and then back up to his shoulder to nip the base of his neck with sharp teeth.

The hand teasing that singularly exposed nipple trailed downward, teasing in its direction before slipping over the curve of a hip to the small of Mick's back and up his spine.

"Ohhhh." Escaped Mick's throat in breathy longing at the change of direction.

Toshi removed his hands from Mick's body, kissing those top vertebrae up to the base of his skull. His nimble fingers flipped open the top of the bottle and some of the light fragrant oil glossed onto his hands. It warmed on his skin and the rich aroma floated up, he wondered how long it would take Mick to smell it too.

He trailed his now slick fingers back down that long spine. Those wandering fingers had made their way down to the small of Mick's back so Toshi dribbled some of the oil down the glossy trail his fingers had made, letting the oil pearl up and slip down Mick's spine to pool in the small of his back and slip lower to disappear into the cleft of his ass.

Mick's eyes widened. "Oh God."

"Shhhh, relax." Toshi whispered and let his fingers follow the oil.

His light touches left ghosting glossy finger print dots everywhere he touched Mick's ass and then connected them in long streaks. Toshi spread the width of his palm out, gliding the wider contact across the entire globe before cupping lower to the top of the thigh and back up. Only after Mick's hips tried to press tighter against his hand did Toshi let his fingers glide into that slick cleft.

The light aroma of olives was wrapping around them as Mick's fevered body heated the oil. Toshi traced a finger slowly along that cleft, feeling the hidden ring contract and relax as he slipped over it and lower, following the oil down to where it slid forward to gather and drip from his tight balls. Toshi's hand smoothed the slick oil over them, massaged the sensitive flesh and then back up, teasing, to the entrance he was now aching to invade.

He tried to tease, tried to be as gentle with Mick as Mick had been with him. It didn't work that way, one moment he was gently circling that twitching spot and the next he'd buried the digit all the way in. Mick moaned and thrust back onto Toshi's finger, his head snapped back, his eyes clenched shut.

Toshi stroked a few times, lost in the look of sheer need on Mick's battered face. He added a

second finger while the passage still felt tight and Mick swayed, gasping, pushing back, hungry for more. The gentle movement of his fingers wasn't too gentle, as Toshi added a third he was surprised to find he was taking Mick far harder than he'd been taken. From the look on Mick's face, he was fully enjoying the experience.

He wanted now, as badly as Mick did so Toshi slid his free hand into Mick's and slid his oily slick fingers from that tight body.

"No." Mick whispered when the sensation stopped.

"Shhh," Toshi whispered and pulled on the hand he held.

Together, Toshi led them to the spread blanket and guided Mick to the tree he'd been sitting under. He gently pushed Mick to lean his back against it's smooth bark, his bare feet's toes curling now on the blanket's soft surface. Toshi stepped away and toed off his shoes. With quick, hungry motions he stripped himself bare. His cock sung to be free, the sunlight and breeze becoming erotic witnesses to what he was about to do.

With Mick watching, he opened the oil bottle again and directly dribbled it out in splashing spots along his length. He snapped the bottle shut, dropped it and his free hands stroked the oil across himself. The skin sliding over the steel of his need, the oil making everything slick and bright. Toshi stroked himself more than he needed to, wanting Mick to see him. One oil slick finger found and teased his own aching nipples, the pleasure making his eyes close and he heard Mick moan again.

Toshi stopped touching himself, simply froze and smiled slightly at the sight of Mick clutching the tree with his free hand, half rubbing his ass against the cool bark. "Turn around." He ordered and saw Mick swallow hard but he obeyed instantly.

He made more noise than he had to as he crossed those few steps, letting Mick know where he was. Oil slick hands trailed up the back of Mick's thighs and then spread them wider, opening him, exposing him, making him vulnerable. That alone caused Mick's hips to buck forward, his cock brushing against the tree.

Toshi used one hand steadied his now aching, oil slick cock at the exposed entrance while the other held those wandering hips still. He leaned forward, felt the tip of his world pushing, and then he was sliding inside. He watched Mick's body take him, the breeze rustled the leaves over head and blended with the long deep, begging moan that escaped Mick. It was better than he'd imagined, tight and hot and perfect and Toshi wasn't sure how long he could last in the face of such pleasure.

Mick was gasping, clutching to the tree trunk, leaning his least sore side of his chest against it's solid stability. He pushed back into Toshi, trying to pull him deeper and the sight made Toshi need so badly he felt he might die. He leaned forward and nipped Mick's shoulder to get his attention.

"I need you." He whispered. "I need you."

"Take me." Mick gasped back.

"Not just like this, I need you, Mick, you're vital to me. I want to be yours and I want you to be mine. Do you want to be mine?" His hips were thrusting and he wasn't sure when he'd started that, the pleasure spread from his cock to his hips and up his spine through his entire body.

Mick nodded against the tree, gasping for breath. "Yes, oh, yes."

"Yes what?" Toshi growled, pumping harder, losing control.

"Yours, I'm yours!" Mick cried out. "I want to be yours." He whispered.

Toshi suckled at the back of that pale neck, on a spot unmarked from violence, so hard that he marked it with passion. Mick was pushing hard back into his thrusts, his mouth open to silent moans that he didn't voice, his breath a raspy shudder. Toshi felt himself teetering it was too much, too perfect.

"Stop holding it back, I want to hear you. Let me hear you, let me in, let me hear you, let me in, Mick." He whispered over and over into that ear, his oil slick hand loosely stroking the heavy length in front of him.

Mick gasped and shuddered but stayed silent, struggling with himself and failing. "I can't." He finally confessed in a low whisper. "I can't," Toshi closed his hand over Mick's cock, stroking harder. "I can't." Mick called more loudly. His mouth worked but no sound came out. "I can't." He repeated, the words partly moaned.

"That's it, let it out, let it out." Toshi was pounding now, he licked out and tasted sweat and olive oil. His hand squeezed.

"Oh, I can't!" Mick groaned, the loudest he'd been yet and came, gasping, shuddering against Toshi, pressing back into those pounding thrusts.

The sound of Mick's release, hidden in denial but still there, and the feel of his body clenching so hard around his driving cock, was too much. Toshi cried out, wordlessly, desperately and buried himself as deep as he could into that heat. He tumbled over the edge and fell, driving deeper, with bruising force on an already battered body.

"You're mine." He whispered, his breathing still ragged, against the easing body in front of him. Mick's legs were shaking, not in passion but in exhaustion and Toshi clung for a longer moment, letting his breath settle a little more and savoring the perfect feel of being in Mick's body.

"Toshi?" Mick asked, sighing at the soft, distracted kisses still falling on the back of his neck. "Don't be mad, I need to ask,"

Toshi chuckled. "I'm sober."

"I'm sorry to ask but I'm glad you are because I'd feel like a real bastard for not regretting this if you weren't."

That made Toshi outright laugh. "Good," he stepped back a little and drew Mick with him. "What are the odds of someone finding us out here?"

"Not impossible but not likely." Mick let himself drop to the blanket, letting the ground pillow him and the breeze cool his still fevered skin.

Toshi just smiled and walked to gather up their discarded clothes and back pack, pulling them all within reach of the blanket before dropping down beside Mick. He started digging in the back pack, pulling out a small packet of pre-moistened hand wipes, set so near the top that they would have been directly under the little bottle of oil.

"You came out here to seduce me?"

"Not at all, the back pack was sent to me from your Grandmother Rose."

"Oh my God." Mick laughed now and winced, he wrapped his good arm around his ribs. "Oh, that's funny. The oil too huh?"

"It's all very innocent looking. Olive oil, wipes to clean hands off before you eat, but, well, I wonder how innocently she meant it."

"Not in the least, she's an awful influence, remind me to send her flowers to thank her." He let his head loll back and lazed in the warm, fulfilled happiness. Something cool and moist slid across his lips, Mick opened his eyes and mouth. Toshi sat near by, feeding him a half eaten ripe strawberry. Mick chewed the fruit and sucked a little on the fingers that had offered it. "She really meant business."

Toshi had emptied the back pack, cool bottles of water, fruit, a crusty hunk of bread and a wedge of cheese. Finger food, erotic food, and the theme was clear. "I'm not complaining."

"Me either, but how did you find me?"

"There was a map," he had to look around for it. "Here."

Mick's smile faded when he saw the map. "She gave you this?"

Toshi just nodded and sucked on a grape.

"I wrote this up, for her, years and years ago. I can't believe she saved it. Rather than make me come to her office, she'd just join me here. I almost lived in this glade as a boy." He pushed aside the melancholy. "Are you okay?"

"Better than you."

"But are you okay."

Toshi shook his head. "No, I'm not, but I will be. I want to find the nearest dealer and make this itchy need go away but I won't. I'll never be able to say how sorry I am to you or how indebted, Mick. I don't know how you managed it."

Mick shrugged. "I had a stick."

"I'm being serious here."

"So am I, it was an anti-Toshi stick." Mick pushed up to kiss the tip of Toshi's long, straight nose. "Seriously? There's nothing to apologize for. Things happened and the only thing that matters is we're both still breathing."

There was no place left in Toshi to hide. "Mick, my people simply don't believe in love."

Mick glanced away and nodded. "It's okay. I don't expect anything more from you than what we have."

"We have a different concept." In careful words Toshi tried to explain about his grandparents and smelling right. That was the easy part, he braced himself to say the harder part. "Mick, to me, you smell right. Just being near you, it makes me feel safe, warm, it makes me feel like I'm home. I wasn't lying when I said you've become vital to me. I hate that I wasn't able to protect you back there. If you'd been killed," his voice shook and his wide eyes crinkled up in unhidden fear. "I'm asking nothing of you, I just want to be allowed to be near you. Even if we're never more than friends again, I need to be near you. That's all I ask."

Mick was glad he was looking away because he knew he couldn't look into those open eyes and stay composed. "That's not good enough. What we just did, what you just did to me, no one's ever made me feel so," the word was too vulnerable to say. "So desired before. I," he suddenly

felt like a cheater, a liar. "No, that's not true. We're men, for God's sake, it's not all that hard to tell when we desire someone, a lot of men in my life have desired me as strongly. No one has ever made me feel so, so cherished." He forced the word out. "No one, ever."

"Rose told me about how she found you, how a police officer found you in a dumpster." Toshi spoke carefully but Mick wasn't willing to look at him.

"Trash can kid." Mick joked but it fell flat. "I don't remember it. That's not just me being stubborn, I really have no idea what happened. I don't think I ran away like they said but I don't remember. It doesn't bother me, it worked out for the best. She told you that I didn't speak?"

Toshi nodded but Mick couldn't see him. "Yes, she did."

"This is why I don't bring anyone home, all my dark secrets come out." He glanced up and smiled but the gentle concern he found in Toshi's eyes didn't let him joke it off. "I don't remember my real mother, not really. I can see our apartment clearly, it was one room, her bed pulled down from the wall and I had a crib mattress on the floor of the coat closet. The walls were pale green and she'd send me to bed and go out drinking. She was always bringing men home, I don't really remember them either but I remember one of them actually came home with her more than once. They'd fight and he'd hit her, not slap her around like other guys did but really hit her. I hated that, the sound of it. Anyway, he was coming by twice a week and he'd end up hitting her about half the time and I started being a brat to him. I can't remember her face but I remember her telling me to behave, that he was a good man and he was going to take care of both of us. I told her I didn't like him because he hit her and she hauled back and slapped me. She said I was a rotten brat that had ruined her life and she wasn't going to let me ruin the rest of it, she told me to shut up and I did. It took her a couple of days to notice I hadn't said anything and then she told me it was an improvement. I wanted to yell at her but I couldn't, I just couldn't get the words out. Six visits later, that man beat her to death with his bare hands."

"You saw it?"

Mick nodded. "Well, I was in the closet, five years old and already in the closet." He laughed bitterly but it didn't hide his unease. "A neighbor had heard their fight and when she didn't see my mother the next morning she called the cops, they showed up that afternoon but I couldn't speak, I just couldn't."

Toshi soothed the auburn hair back and pulled Mick to rest against him. "I'm sorry."

"It's just a story. There are a lot worse ones out there. I mean the things I saw in those foster homes, stuff you wouldn't believe. Sure I got smacked around a time or two but I'll take that any day over the abuse I saw. I've never told anyone about my mother, no one. Not Grandma Rose, not Andy, no one, I've never been able to speak of it. It's just, Toshi, I, I think, I," he couldn't say it. He wanted to shout it.

Mick pushed himself up on his good arm and leaned over Toshi. Very deliberately he raised his nose along the side of Toshi's neck, inhaling deeply, scenting Toshi the way Toshi had scented him that night so long ago after the art show. He finished looking into those clear eyes. "You smell right to me too."

It was all either of them had to say.

Part Twenty One

Toshi reached up and gently touched Mick's face before kissing him. Not the desperate passion of earlier but the contented fulfillment of the love neither of them could give voice to. He pulled

Mick back down and snuggled the cooler flesh closer to his body. They lay there, nude in the afternoon sunlight, wrapped around each other, warmed by what they couldn't and didn't need to say, and just let the world revolve without them for a short time.

"Toshi?" Mick asked, he was growing cold in the spring breeze, even with the warmer body beside him. Somehow in their quiet snuggling, Mick had ended up on his back with Toshi curled up along his side. Mick's free hand had been lazily playing with the long hair under his fingers until they brushed against the bandage hidden by the dark length.

"Hmmm?"

"Did Papa Mick tell you about your implant?"

Toshi nodded. "He's very nice, he actually spoke to me before examining me."

"You don't mind?"

"That he spoke to me?"

"No, about the implant?"

"No but my father's going to throw a fit." He sighed and pulled his leg higher up across Mick's thighs.

"Papa Mike told you about the Committee?"

Toshi nodded.

"I'm sorry, Alec was frantic."

"There's no harm done. A part of the Commune grounds are within my travel radius so they can't bust me on that and Dr. Mike told me about how they'd sent a fake venom sample and a filtered blood sample from both of us to them."

"But, they know about us now. You don't mind?" They'd had to tell the Committee that Mick had brought his new lover home to meet his family to offer a plausible excuse.

He rubbed his leg up higher, just teasing more sensitive areas. "Should I?"

"Everyone will know about us before we get back."

"So? I'm almost thirty, I'm old enough to sleep with whomever I wish, if they don't like it, they can go to hell." It wasn't entirely true. There was only one mixed couple open with their relationship. Even in the more liberal atmosphere around the Canadian camp, the couple and their two half breed children received dozens of death threats a week. Their home had been burned down once and they'd had dozens of windows knocked out from thrown rocks.

"Stop that," Mick batted at Toshi's leg, slowly rubbing across his groin. "I'm too tired and you wore me out too much. Besides, I need to get dressed, I'm freezing and we have to get back soon. Mama Ruth wants to check my injuries again." He slithered out from under Toshi and moved to redress.

Toshi just groaned and rolled onto his back, he let his hair fan out around him and tossed an arm over his eyes. It was a lovely sight and one that Mick fully enjoyed. It tempted him to stay, to start something new but it would be better in a warmer location. The sun was getting lower in the sky and their little valley was rapidly losing its sunny warmth. He tossed Toshi's pants onto the other man. "Get dressed you."

Toshi laughed again, he couldn't help it. "I think you liked it when I was shiny, I think you like it when I'm being sexy." He kept the arm over his eyes but slid the pants off his body, exposing his nakedness again.

"I'd be a liar if I said otherwise but I'm freezing and we have some lying, murdering bastards back in the city to arrest." He glanced again at the beautiful body, sprawled out for his pleasure and sighed. "I'd be ready though, if I were you, the moment we get into a bedroom with a lock," he let the threat fade off but a thought took its place. "Toshi, before, how much of that was, well, the shine?"

The arm raised and Toshi glanced under it. Mick had shrugged into his shirt but was struggling to button it. The thought of Mick almost fully dressed while he was still naked was thrilling. "You want to know how much of that was my own dirty thoughts getting out and how much of it was just the need to have someone fuck me?"

Mick nodded. "Yeah."

"Just because I keep a tight rein on myself most days, doesn't mean I don't have fantasies." He smiled an evil, happy smile and stretched his spine, his body arching upwards from head to toe. "Some of them I would have shared with you in time, like how hot you looked with your hands tied and some I wouldn't have ever admitted to."

"Like the one about Andy?"

That made Toshi sit up, his head tilted to the side. "Yes, but you don't need to worry. I know I/S don't do monogamy well but I promise you, if you want me, I'm yours. I won't promise not to think about another person again but I won't act on it, man or woman, without your permission, ever." He stood up and pulled on his pants quickly and yanked the shirt on over his head.

"That wasn't what I was worried about, it's just, yes, I've thought about it too." It was Mick's turn to smile wickedly.

Toshi forgot how to get his head through the hole in his shirt and he struggled with it. "What?" he asked as soon as his head pulled free.

Mick just smiled, widely. "Just get your shoes on."

Toshi hiked behind Mick, the back pack over his shoulders, ready incase Mick slipped on the often unstable terrain. The way Mick led them back wasn't the way Toshi had followed in and it took twenty minutes to reach the outskirts of the buildings.

"You're staring at my ass." Mick laughed without turning around to see.

"And your problem with that would be what?"

"All those stories are true, I/S are insatiable sex monsters. What ever am I going to do now?"

"We'll think of something together." Toshi was chuckling too, comfortable for the first time in a very long time. "This is a really nice place, Mick. What I've met of your parents are nice, the children running around are nice."

"You won't meet everyone. This Commune has ninety three full members, fifty of which are on pure research so they don't really interact with the kids. At any given time there will be twenty or thirty adopted minor children here and about half to almost as many foster kids. All the

Communes are interconnected, I can walk up to any in the world and be welcomed in as their child. It's worth all the jokes and bigotry I've gotten to have that to fall back on." Mick paused at the start of the campus walkways and reached for and took Toshi's hand.

Toshi tried to pull it away but Mick held fast. "Someone will see."

"So?" He pulled on the hand and didn't let Toshi hide. "I gave the body of that thing to Papa Mike and his crew. They're top notch genetic researchers with their specialty being I/S and I did a lot of digging yesterday. I think I narrowed down the ownership of the building we saw those things disappear into. Once Mama Ruth has a look see over my cracked bones, we're waiting around until Papa Mike has some answers. I'm surprised he let you out of his sight, he's obsessed with I/S. He wanted to try to adopt some orphaned I/S children into the Commune, wanted to prove that they could be as smart as any human. He feels that the only hope for any respect for the I/S community is if they get their own trained doctors, researchers, things like that."

"The Committee shot him down?"

"Bingo. Papa Mike helped invent the implant you used to wear, did you know that?"

"No, I didn't."

"He's one of my primary parents. See, all of the adopted kids are given six primary parents, people who've stepped forward and volunteered to be directly responsible for that child's well being. It keeps things from being like an institution. Than the research Commune members are called Aunt or Uncle and the same for adult members of other Communes. I care for all of my parents and family but Papa Mike was good to me." Mick froze in place and pulled Toshi close, kissing him quickly. "You're never fucking me again."

"Why?" He couldn't keep the hurt and confusion from his face.

"It makes me feel so good I babble." He kissed Toshi again, teasingly, happily before pulling them down the walkway.

"I like hearing you babble, I liked making you babble."

Mick hung his head and tried to sound upset but the smile came across in his tone. "Insatiable!"

The clinic's nurse on duty had smiled and greeted them warmly, a man that Mick didn't know personally but like all the Commune members was family. He directed them to one of the dozen or so rooms on the first floor, not exam areas, real rooms with doors. Mick found it with ease, he'd spent so much time growing up in and out of the clinic that he had it memorized. He'd been a touch accident prone for a while, too willing to take risks and do stupid things and as often as not he was having to be checked for concussions and the like.

Mama Ruth almost beat them to the room. "Hello, boys." She picked a stray leaf from Mick's hair. "I'll assume you had a nice picnic since your coloring has improved."

Mick blushed but ducked his head to hide it. "Toshi, my Mama Ruth, Mama, my friend Toshi."

She smiled. "We've met, only you were unconscious Toshi. I bandaged up that ragged wound on your neck. May I see it?"

Toshi gathered his hair to the side and exposed the back of his neck. "I'm going to get spoiled by this care."

"Hmm, I'd imagine you're used to far better, we're a small outfit here." She pulled gently at the bandage before removing it totally. The raw, bloody wound surprised Mick.

"I'm being spoiled." Toshi winced as she cleaned the wound carefully.

"He's right, Mama, those doctors treat him like some bizarre lab animal. Even the best of them never ask permission, they're awful to him."

She glanced to Mick to see if they were teasing her but when she saw the earnest seriousness in Mick's eyes she shook her head. "Well, from now on, you come back and see us. I've never treated an I/S before, you're healing amazingly well." She quickly re-bandaged the wound and moved to Mick. "Sorry, Amun, this is going to hurt."

"What a coincidence, it already does."

Mick had his pants back on and Ruth had finished checking, prodding and torturing his bad arm and now he only had to endure the strapping it back into place, when a knock came on the door. He called out to keep from whining about how much it hurt and his brother James poked his head in.

"Geesh, Amun, they weren't kidding when they said you looked run over."

Mick smiled. "Hey, James, how's things?"

"Better than with you it looks. Papa Mike sent me over. We've got a lot of things to tell you, can you come by? He promises he'll have dinner in the meeting room."

"We'll be there as soon as I'm cut loose. Ow!" He pulled away and swore he could feel the broken line of his collarbone rub together.

"Well, don't get shot again if you don't want it to hurt." Ruth tsked back, as if there had been a choice in the issue.

"I'll make note of that advice. Ow, man!"

James just left the room shaking his head.

Mick's coloring had paled out considerably but he'd swallowed the painkillers Ruth had given him without question and without water. She'd pressed the filled pill bottle into his hand, proclaimed that everything looked like it was healing fine and left them both with quick, basic instructions. He'd left the back pack with Ruth, asking her to hold it until it could be returned to Rose and then led Toshi out of the clinic and up two flights of stairs.

"Each research team has it's own conference room here, above the clinic, so they can give presentations and such without unauthorized people getting access to the actual labs."

"Now I know where you got an interest in security."

"It used to keep me busy finding ways around all of it here." He smiled but his arm was throbbing and he wanted to sit down. At the top of the stairs he punched in his family access code, specific to him, that he now remembered and it unlocked the hallway door. He had to do the same outside of the conference room, which surprised him and made him wonder just what Mike had found.

Inside the table was set with bowls of steamed seasoned vegetables and tofu with heaping round bowls of rice, folded cloth napkins, chopsticks and glasses of water. It was standard fare, fragrant and filling. The only thing that Mick was surprised at was the six place settings and Mike's entire senior staff, himself and three others. Their food was pushed to the side and in it's place was a scattering of papers that they were hunched over, talking in low half sentences.

"Amun, Toshi, come in, sit! And you two need to eat, no getting out of that." Mike waved them in without hardly glancing up.

They settled in and Mick watched Toshi push his food around with the chopsticks. "Not hungry?" He asked in a soft voice.

Toshi just shook his head. "Not really." He glanced up and smiled. "Don't worry, I know the deal."

"The good news, Toshi, that side effect should level out in a couple of weeks. It won't be like it was before, at least we think so. What with you being only half I/S and all, and the fact that we've only animal tests to go on, but it looks promising." Mike smiled. "Now, eat, both of you."

"Yes, Papa." But Mick's concern was for how little interest Toshi had in food.

There was some more shuffling of papers before Mike, James and the other researchers settled down. "Okay, we've been going over all that you've brought home and what you sent out before hand. Let's start with Amanda Evans." Mike nodded but didn't wait for agreement.

"Your medical examiner's original report was correct, her wounds were consistent with bites, even if the mouth structure didn't match any in the database. We've gone over the autopsy reports and found the originals to be highly accurate. Their findings of heron, cocaine, shine and venom in her blood stream were accurate. The cocaine was the lowest dosage, but there were signs of long term shine use, so it's safe to say that was her drug of choice. However, when we ran the blood sample you sent us, it spiked something new. It looks like venom but isn't I/S or anything in our database. It really stumped us but James here figured it out."

James smiled and ducked his head. "We wouldn't have if you hadn't brought that creature with you. It's a digestive enzyme toxin. Similar to what a stinging insect would produce but dramatically different, it's an entirely new substance. It's closest to a spider venom, but has characteristics of the digestive stew a fly will vomit out to consume nutrients."

Mick set his chopsticks down, but the rest of his family kept eating, undisturbed.

"It appears to be an auxiliary to their digestive system."

Mike nodded and pulled paper out from his stack. "The thorn like point you sent to us had us baffled. It's a stinger, tucked into the creature's mouth." He slid photos across to Mick and Toshi of the bug creatures open mouth. "It secretes this new venom while it's eating and you can see, the teeth structure is designed to cut and rend not chew. We believe it rips meat off and lets this strong venom do most of the work of early digestion for it."

The distorted mouth of the creature lay out in full color in front of them, not really a mammal and not an insect, it made Mick ill to see it. "Papa Mike, I'm sure it's all very fascinating but it doesn't help me any. What is it?"

The group glanced among themselves. "We aren't sure. We've been breaking down it's gene code all day and well, it's a new combination. The base is insectoid. That's obvious, we think it's a cockroach, only there's no wings, no real obvious beetle characteristics. There is definitely spider mixed with it."

"And the hair? The mouth, it looks like a mammal."

James nodded. "Canine actually, a spaniel we think but we can't be sure yet."

Mick's stomach rolled over. "I don't need to know what kind of dog, I need to know the whys."

"Well," James looked surprised. "A dog is a pack creature, it's easily trainable and can achieve simple to complex tasks."

"Wait a minute, you're saying these things are trained?"

"Quite well too, they're scent based." Mike pulled out another stack of papers. "Those sealed swabs you found, they're scent markings. Rub that swab over anything or one, let these critters out and they'll find it."

"If our preliminary research is correct, they'll be able to find it miles away. When they're done feeding, they can be trained to return to their nest, the behavior you saw."

Toshi had given up eating, he turned to Mick. "They're using the train yards to teach them."

"It would be easy. Taylor just sends one of his men out with a few bucks, picks up a whore,"

Mike tsked.

"Prostitute, during the transaction it would be easy to swipe the scent onto them. They walk away and hours later the person is randomly attacked." The thought made Mick angry. "These things, how do they breed?"

"Well, right now, we're fairly sure they're egg layers, but, Amun, a creature this specific, this distorted, is sterile." Mike glanced to James. "Should be sterile anyway, we're working on that."

"So they'd need to make each new one, grow it from scratch?"

"Well," James started carefully. "The broken stinger you gave us is genetically identical to the DNA code of the dead creature you brought us, but see, this creature's stinger is smaller and in tact."

"So, what? It's one creature?"

Mike nodded. "One creature that someone is cloning."

"So some one is making these things."

"Very deliberately so, we're estimating that only one cloning in four will survive to adulthood." James nodded.

"Is this another Darsel-Putman mutation?" Mick looked to Toshi and back to his family. "Is this a hold over that someone stored away and brought out now?"

"No way, it's impossible."

Mike waved to James. "We've a database of all possible Darsel-Putman mutations, the ones that occurred and the ones that never did. None of the models show this variation. However, it's similar, but it's not random. Someone used a Darsel-Putman model and adapted it for their own needs."

"I only need to know one more thing, how do we kill them?"

"You can't kill them. They're a new species, the only of their kind, if you kill this brood you'll kill their entire race." James protested.

"These things are eating people. Innocent, helpless people are bleeding and dieing and the people around them that have witnessed this new species have been killed to protect them."

Someone is breaking the law by mixing up these creatures in the first place, I'm stopping them. Now, how do I kill these creatures?"

Mike nodded. "We understand your point of view, Amun but you must try to see ours."

"How do I kill them?"

"You'll try to save copies of their research if you come across it?"

"You know I will, how do I kill them?"

Mike and James exchanged a look and James tossed his hands up in the air, leaving Mike to answer or not. "Their exoskeleton is strong, like an eggshell, but it's designed to absorb a tremendous amount of pressure over a wider area. Like an egg, you can squeeze it with all your strength and not break it but just like an egg, if you focus the pressure on one spot, the shell will crack. Shooting them would work but it might just wound them. Fire would eventually boil their insides, poison would work as well but the dose would be dangerous for you. Best advice, aim for the head and shoot them or crack the head open. Do not let them bite you, the toxin would be difficult to treat."

"Which is why those earlier victims had to have their attacked limb amputated." It made sense now and Mick hated that he hadn't figured this out sooner.

Mike nodded. "Remember, Amun, this is all theory. We don't have answers, not yet. We need more time to examine all that you've brought us."

"How many people are capable of making something like this?" Toshi asked.

James shrugged. "There's maybe, oh, three dozen research scientists on this level in the world, maybe more. The problem isn't who can do it but how they did it. This kind of practical application isn't just illegal, it's expensive."

"I've made some headway there. If I remember the location of that building right, it's owned by Genricht Ltd. Which is a holding company for a Ferinholt Research Group. Have any of you heard of them?" Mick's family shook their head but Toshi glanced to the table and kept his eyes there. It was a sure sign that the other man had something to say and didn't want to say it in the room. "Well, than, thank you. I can't thank you enough for helping me with this. If you'll excuse us, Toshi has to call in to his secretary soon."

Mick hurried them out of the room, leaving the food mostly untouched and their departure almost unnoticed as the group in the room began debating different findings. He pulled Toshi along with him, and as their feet treaded on the steps he didn't look over at the other man.

"You know this Ferinholt Research Group, don't you?"

"Some of the tests I've taken part in were submitted by them, they get priority access to me because they're owned by a company that is owned by a company that is owned by Ranvier Industries. They have a facility on tenth street, not at that warehouse. You're certain they're connected?"

"No, I'm not, without going back there personally I had to narrow it down to three warehouses but it can't be chance that one of those three is owned by a scientific research group."

"You want to go to them, not the warehouse." Toshi knew where this was headed.

"It makes more sense. God knows I know how to break into research labs."

"We don't need to break in. I need a phone."

"You can get access?"

Toshi nodded. "It's a requirement, my father and I have full access to any thing any branch of RI owns. It will take Alec a few hours but he can find us the access codes."

"Have him find out if they have any other buildings in the city and see if he can get his hands on layouts and blueprints of their holdings. Toshi, if we're going to do this, we need to do it now, while they think we're still hurt. It wouldn't be difficult for them to uproot and move if they feel threatened."

Toshi nodded. "Agreed, are you up to it?"

"Well, it only takes one hand to shoot a gun but I doubt they're going to be so aggressive. After hours it'll be a few security guards that are technically on your payroll. If things get hairy from there, we'll deal with it from there." A thought occurred to him and Mick smiled. "You'll have to drive the bike, I can't with the bum arm."

"I think I can manage that." He followed Mick back into the clinic and was surprised to find Rose sitting in the waiting room chairs, her hands folded loosely in her lap.

She glanced up and smiled. "Ah, boys! I've your coats ready." She waved to the chair beside her, their coats were draped over a small box filled with their personal items and the helmets sat on the floor in front of her.

"You knew?" Mick asked, scooping his gun from the box and checking it quickly before putting it back into the shoulder holster, wrapping the straps around it and dropping it into his coat pocket.

"As soon as I heard that you were back from your picnic and Mike had answers for you." She was smiling warmly. "About that picnic, did you have a good time?"

Mick leaned forward and kissed the side of her face. "The best, thank you."

She reached up and patted the side of his face. "You're most welcome. Now, one of the older kids should have brought that motorcycle of yours around front." She watched how Mick checked his belt pouch before re-clipping it his waistband, pleased by his direct, confident motions. He'd been so distracted, so worried that morning and she'd guessed rightly that it was over the handsome, dark haired half breed.

"Thanks, next time you're in town, come see us, okay?" Mick turned his cell phone on and it instantly started flashing messages. "Oh, geesh, sixty four messages, two from Alec, the rest from Andy."

Toshi laughed and accepted the phone but it he hadn't missed the smug look on Rose's face at Mick's use of the word us. "Excuse me, I've got to make some calls but I agree with Mick, next time you're in the city, come see us."

Her smile widened. "I will, I promise that I will."

Toshi bowed out and stepped outside as he dialed the phone. It took a moment to convince Alec he was fine but the man was too efficient to make a large fuss over the phone. In quick, certain terms Toshi laid out the information he needed. "It's important you do it quietly, Alec, they can't know we're coming."

"I won't tip them off. Are you up to this tonight? Want me to come along?"

The idea that Alec might be shot at chilled his blood. "No, there's no need, it's just a casual inspection and I'm fine. This new drug they have Alec, it's amazing, we need to look into it. I actually slept, no side effects."

"I'll get on that as well."

"Alec, I've a favor to ask." This wasn't as easy.

"Ask."

"I'm changing some things. The implant can't go back in. I'm not going to pass a live blood test."

"I figured as much but the Committee is waiting for you to get back to do a live test."

"Call them, tell them I'll meet them in the apartment in three hours. Also, call my uncle, please tell him I'd like to meet with him, explain the time issue without explaining too much. Ask if he could meet me at Martin's South, send a car and an escort." His uncle rarely left the Camp, partly because of the Committee and partly because he had his hands full inside the wall. He was known to be enticed to visit Martin's South, a restaurant that had private rooms. It was halfway between the camp and Toshi's apartment.

"Okay, when?"

"Two hours and a half?"

"That's short notice."

"He'll do it."

"What about your father, George has called for him three times?"

That was a very good question. "Stall him, at least until tomorrow."

"Of course. Anything else?"

"Isn't that enough?" Toshi chuckled.

"How's Mick?" He wasn't asking about Mick's health, Alec already knew how injured the other man was.

"We're good." Toshi answered instead.

"Good, drive safe on the way back."

"We will." He clicked the phone shut as a teenaged girl rode the bike around to the door.

She hopped off, her mousy brown hair cut raggedly around her face but she was all smiles. "That is one sweet bike! Is it yours or Amun's?"

"Mine, but he borrows it a lot."

She whistled between her teeth. "Lucky brother! You've good taste in rides."

The door opened behind Toshi and he glanced back to see Mick and Rose joining them, coats and helmets in hand. "You've no idea, when you ride it full out, it really is sweet." He answered but his eyes were on Mick.

"When you come back to visit, bring the bike, I want to ride it again."

"Jenny, thank you for bringing it around now, don't you have chores?"

She sighed. "Yes, Grandma Rose." She was still smiling as she hurried away.

"I swear, that girl is seventeen and more in love with machines than people." Rose shook her head but she was hiding her grin.

Toshi accepted the coat from Rose so she could help Mick close his own over his injured arm. "You've cleaned it." He was surprised.

"Of course, they were all bloodied."

"Thank you, and, please, if you see a boy, Heiko, tell him I'm sorry I wasn't able to stay and answer his question but I'll try to next time."

"I will, he'll be pleased, now, you two, be careful and don't get your fool heads shot off."

"We'll try not to." Mick smiled and pulled his helmet on. "Thank everyone for me when they come up for air."

"I will, be careful!"

"We will, bye Grandma Rose." He nodded and slid in behind Toshi, he wrapped his arm around the warm, lean waist as Toshi pointed the bike back to the city.

It was a good thing Mick wasn't timid about riding a motorcycle. Toshi's skill's were frightening and the obvious joy speeding along full out brought the half breed was enough to risk becoming road jelly. The sweet little bike was made to zip up to unsafe speeds and still it hugged curves like it was bolted to the road. If his arm was working, he'd have clung to Toshi's warm back and let the whirling landscape relax him but this trip wasn't about relaxing. The aches in his body were a steady reminder of all they'd faced and had yet to face.

Part Twenty Two

The city was a bitter sweet sight and it was pretty obvious from the first turns Toshi took that they weren't headed to the apartment. When they rolled to a stop in front of a chic restaurant, Mick wasn't surprised at the name on the sign above the door.

"Martin's South? Toshi, what are we doing here?" Mick pulled off the helmet but Toshi was already speaking to the valet.

"Keep it out, we won't be long." Toshi waited until the valet had nodded and moved away. "I have to speak to my uncle, he's meeting me here."

Mick caught Toshi's arm and stepped them out of ear shot of the valets and other patrons. "Toshi, this place, it's not just a restaurant."

"I know, it's run by the Santos crime family."

"If you know that than you know that anything said in here will be all over the street moments later. It's not safe or private."

"It's safe and Mick, why do you think people meet here, they want it spread over the streets."

Mick shook his head. "How do you know any of this?"

"Because, nothing gets done in this city, or anywhere for that matter, without compromise. My uncle and father both keep in contact with Joa Santos, as he does with them. My father assumes I don't know about his less than legal dealings but I do, my uncle keeps me fully in the loop of who he trusts and who he doesn't. Don't worry, I know what I'm doing." He smiled at the worried concern.

"Do you?"

"I sure hope so." Toshi moved to the door, knowing Mick would follow.

It was its reputation for serving high society patrons that made Martin's South popular with those lower on the social ladder. It was its reputation of high power and crime that had the upper crust scrambling over themselves to get in the door. Martin's South was clever, it only took a small number of reservations, it allowed anyone in the door and it allowed only the best customers to dine in its private rooms. What baffled most was the way the restaurant defined its best customers, they ranged from a local plumber and his family that fixed a broken pipe late on a Friday night to Sakamoto Yasun and occasionally, Luke Henri Ranvier when he was in town.

The pretty young hostess smiled when they came in the door. "Ah, Mr. Ranvier." She said just loud enough for the tables nearest the door to hear. "We've been expecting you. Right this way." She smiled but her eyes didn't even flinch at Mick's battered state.

They followed her through the crowded restaurant, people turning to stare and whisper, sensing the importance of the pair being lead to a private room. Toshi ignored them and waited for the woman to open the door. "Thank you." He nodded and stepped inside, she shut the door behind Mick.

Inside the table was set low and cushions were tossed around. The room was full, a half dozen of his uncles guards sat near the walls, three of his advisors sat around him and they'd brought two Genta as well. It must have been a sight to see the large party entering the human establishment, a full dozen I/S outside the camps was always noteworthy.

"Nephew." Yasun greeted from where he knelt formally in the center of the room. The table sat to the side, closer to the Genta who were gracefully fixing cups of tea.

"Uncle." Toshi responded and knelt, bowing formally low so his forehead nearly touched the floor.

"You look well." Yasun saw and accepted the formality.

"I am well, thank you for your concern."

"I am here, nephew, what is it you wished?"

Toshi kept his eyes locked on a point a few feet in front of his uncle. "I have a request that I'd like to humbly petition the head of my clan and people with, if I may?"

Something icy and cold settled for a moment in Yasun's eyes. "If it is the same request I have denied in the past, I do not wish to hear it."

"No, Sakamoto-dono, it is not." Toshi used the most formal of address he could, and the advisors sat a little straighter, the Genta paused in their fussing over tea.

"Than please, nephew, I would hear your request."

Toshi bowed deeply again and when he rose he placed his gaze on that spot in front of his Uncle. "I am aware that since the death of my Grandfather, your esteemed father, the honored Sakamoto Utiaka, that there has been no rule, no order, in the buffer lands between our people and the humans. I know this is not for lack of manpower but for lack of a leader you can place your trust in. Uncle, I humbly ask your permission to assume authority over those half way lands between our peoples." He spoke clearly and bowed again deeply, keeping his forehead to the floor.

Mick didn't miss the quick look of surprise and pride that chased across Yasun's face before the cold mask of a leader took it's place.

"My nephew, I have no doubt you are more than qualified for the position you've requested, nor do I hold a single doubt about your honor or loyalty. Answer me this, have you fully considered all the ramifications of this request?"

Toshi raised up from the bow, he glanced to his uncle and caught the subtle way his uncle glanced to where Mick stood by the door and back to him. "I have, Uncle, and I am prepared to face them. I do not make this request lightly."

"Nor would I expect you to have." Yasun sat in quiet thought for a moment before speaking again. "Very well, I grant your request. You will hold total and final authority over the buffer lands. I can not think of a more fitting caretaker than you, nephew, someone who is himself placed between our two peoples."

Toshi bowed deeply again. "Thank you Sakamoto-dono."

"When would you like to receive possession? And how many people would you like to aid you?"

"Tomorrow, if that suits you, Uncle and as many as you deem willing to loan me. My household is, as you know, limited." Limited to two, Alec and Mick and Mick was in no shape to tackle this task.

"Where shall I send them?"

"For the short term, I'll be taking residence in the south wall quarters, with your permission."

Yasun nodded and a smile played at the corner of his mouth. "I have no objections, but the Committee that is using it as a barracks may."

"That space belongs to our people, it's time we took it back. I will deal with that Uncle."

"Very well. And Nephew, I know your Grandfather would be quite pleased."

Toshi bowed again. "If I may take my leave?"

"Of course."

Mick followed Toshi back out of the restaurant and to the bike silently. He was awed, shocked and little frightened. His lover had just gone from the side shoot of a family that was essentially a monarchy to a ruling prince with absolute authority, and they'd only been back in the city twenty minutes.

Toshi was silent once they parked the bike in its place but to Mick's eye the man looked more alive, more connected than he'd ever appeared. There was a stubborn confidence to him that wasn't there a week ago and it made the beautiful man even more magnetic.

"Mick?" For all the stress and uproar, Toshi's voice held amusement. He glanced to where Mick stood to the side of him in the elevator as it took them back up to his apartment.

"Yes?"

"How would you like to go into business with me?"

"What are you planning?"

Toshi just grinned like a Cheshire cat as the doors opened and he stepped out of the lift. Inside the private living space of the apartment Alec sat at the counter, hands folded together and looking ready to climb the walls. Lounging around the living room, looking smug were the Committee agents, four of them this time and among them was the esteemed Mr. Henerson.

"Welcome home Toshi." Henerson smiled an oily, smug smile. "It was good of you to inform us of your return, it saves so much trouble. Now, please, on the scale."

Toshi glanced to the flat scale and the agent near by it that was setting a venom collection cup on the counter near Alec. "You're correct, Mr. Henerson, it does save so much trouble. I'm glad I didn't have to go down to your office to do this." Toshi fished the silver disc from his coat pocket. He'd found it there when Rose had returned his coat and helmet and known just what to do with it.

"The scale, please, Toshi."

He just held the disc up for the agent to see.

"That can't be, we'd heard reports but,"

Toshi smiled sweetly, walked to the kitchen, stepping over the flat scale. He set the disc very carefully down on the wooden butcher block cutting board and pulled open a near by draw. Inside the large meat tenderizer mallet gleamed in burnished silver, the blunt points on its hitting surface were perfect. With a flourish he pulled it out and held it up.

"How'd you remove that implant without a doctor's help?"

The hammer fell, crashing with heavy violence onto the disc. Toshi smashed it over and over, cracking the implant's cover, denting it out of shape and over the smashing he heard Alec's suppressed laughter.

"Mr. Henerson, you and your people no longer get to ask me any questions. You no longer get to ask any of my staff questions. I've had about as much as I can stomach of your self righteous Containment Committee. You're obsolete, useless, unnecessary and will no longer be tolerated." He picked up the broken implant and threw it at the stunned human.

"You can't do this."

"Oh, yes, I can, I've always been able to. I've jumped through everyone of your hoops, submitted myself and my private life to your every scrutiny simply to be given a chance to be treated as any person should. No longer."

Henerson was shaking his head. "Toshi you were doing so well."

"Don't you dare speak to me like some prized lap dog, I've had enough of your sadistic humiliations."

A spot on Henerson's jaw began to twitch. "Toshi Ranvier, you are here by given twenty four hours to vacate human lands and return to your place inside the Ninth Containment Camp. Failure to comply with statute eighty four nine of the Containment Act will result in your immediate arrest and punishment. If you are found in the company of humans, associating with humans or in any place on human lands, you will be arrested and jailed with no right to due process."

"Shut up. Alec, how long will it take our lawyers to take apart the original Containment Act?"

Alec shrugged. "Full dedication to that cause should result in a loosening of restrictions within six months and a full repeal of the Act itself within two years."

"Mr. Henerson, I reject your authority. I reject the abuses you have rained down on I/S who've never stepped a foot from the Camp. I reject you. As of this afternoon, my uncle, Sakamoto Yasunari, de facto leader of the I/S in the Ninth Containment Camp, has approved and granted me full authority over the buffer zone around our lands, which includes but is not limited to all residents, buildings and property."

Toshi walked around from behind the counter. "You are hereby given notice that your people will no longer maintain offices or barracks in the quarters of the wall. For the time being, your people will be allowed to maintain control over the gates on the sole condition that their reports are shared with myself and my uncle. Failure to vacate the said properties will result in a large number of very pissed off people doing horrible things to those that remain. With no due process. Do I make myself clear?"

Henerson's spine stiffened. "You can't do that, that land is in dispute, for now the Committee is the only source of control and order, remove us and there will be chaos."

"That land belongs to me and the only control your people garrisoned there have ever demonstrated was of cruel abuses that I will no longer tolerate. Now, do you understand? If you fail to understand, any blood shed will fall upon your hands, not mine." Toshi looked down his long, straight nose with his impossibly large eyes and Henerson actually glanced away.

"I understand and you'll regret this, I swear you will." Henerson was waving to his shocked people to gather their things.

"I seriously doubt it, the only regrets I have are that I've tolerated your kind for so long. Now, get out of my house."

Alec was laughing before the door could shut. "Oh, Toshi, oh if you'd any idea how long I've prayed you'd do that. I'm so proud of you."

"Alec," Mick spoke softly. "Don't look, I'm going to kiss your boss."

Alec only laughed some more but he didn't hide his eyes as Mick claimed a passionate kiss from Toshi. One turned into two and then three. "Alright, alright, get a room, geesh you two are going to make me sick."

Mick brushed some of Toshi's hair back. "Well done." He whispered before pulling away. The truth was, seeing Toshi being so authoritarian had turned him on.

"Thanks." He whispered back before turning to Alec. "As you can imagine, we've a lot to do. Did you find the information I asked for?"

"Yes, I've override codes for that division, they only maintain two buildings anywhere, in the city or elsewhere, a warehouse near the train yards under a holding companies name and a facility out on tenth street. The main staff there go home at six so they should be cleared out. I found blueprints for the facility but not the warehouse, but according to manifests a lot of medical and scientific equipment was shipped there for storage, only the numbers shipped back out are always less than what arrived."

"Some of it's sticking around." Mick nodded.

"Exactly, the group's official research statement is something like improving the human condition through better understanding of the I/S mutation or some such but they've never published any papers, never shown any results. I couldn't even find a list of employees, nothing above clerical anyway. It's small, less than fifty total, support staff included."

"And you did all this in the last couple of hours?" Mick shook his head.

Alec only shrugged. "I'm good at my job. Toshi I'll get things moving on packing up this place and the offices. I'll stay here until we can get the household moved over to, I assume, one of the Committee's soon to emptied wall quarters?"

Toshi nodded. "Yes, for now. Alec, I need you to contact the right people to demolish the remains of the old Pony Club. We're going to build a night club there, a real one, not a sex club." He caught Mick's eye. "No, we're going to build three connected clubs, one for humans only, one for I/S only and one in the center between them where the two can mix."

"That's crazy." Mick shook his head.

"It's brilliant." Alec nodded. "I'll start looking into it tonight."

"Good, Mick, take what time you need to look over those blueprints. Alec, I need the uplink, I'm going to clone their computers. Also, Mick, do you have an extra gun?"

"You're expecting trouble." Alec's voice was cold.

"No, but I'm not going in unprepared for it."

"Do you know how to use one without shooting off your own foot?"

Alec shook his head. "Mick, he's I/S, the eyes make him almost a sharp shooter."

"I'll take that as a yes. I'll get it ready. Casual or suits?"

"Suits, this is supposed to be an official inspection after all. How much time do you need."

Mick glanced to his watch, it was half past six already. "Give me a half hour and I'll have those blueprints memorized."

"Good. A half hour and we go." A half hour and they'd be on their way to find some answers.

Part Twenty Three

Twenty five minutes later Toshi was helping Mick button up his dress shirt over his immobile arm. Two guns sat in different holsters on the counter top of the kitchen beside the small portable computer uplink and a nervous Alec.

"You'll be taking the bike?" Alec asked.

"It'll be safer, we'll park it around the corner." Toshi answered.

"Here, have you worn a shoulder holster?" Mick asked handing his secondary holster to Toshi.

"No."

"It'll feel a little odd at first but you'll get used to it." He slipped the gun out and handed it to Toshi. "Safety is here and on, it's semi-automatic. Fifteen shots in the clip and I don't keep one in the chamber. It fires clean and smooth with minimal kick, it's a good gun."

Toshi turned it over in his hand and sighted the far wall. "It'll do."

"Are you taking extra clips?" Alec asked and watched the two men exchange a look.

"My gun holds another fifteen. If we need more than thirty shots, an extra clip isn't going to help any." Mick grinned bitterly as Toshi shrugged into the holster.

He slipped the gun in place and Mick was right, it did feel odd. He watched Mick attach his ever present emergency pouch to the back of his waistband and clip the smaller gun holster to the side of his hip.

"Don't worry, we won't even need them." Toshi comforted and dropped the computer uplink into his suit jacket pocket and slid it on over his dress shirt and tie.

"When will you be back?"

"Don't start worrying until dawn but we should be back in a few hours. We'll call if anything holds us up." Mick did a final check and found nothing lacking but the use of his arm.

"Don't sit up all night worrying about us. We'll be fine." Toshi added.

"You'd better be." Alec sighed as the pair again left. There was a sure cure for nervous energy and that was directing it into work, and Toshi had left plenty of that to deal with.

The facility looked more like a lawyers office, set in a small line of other non-intrusive looking offices and buildings. It certainly didn't look like the headquarters of something nefarious. Toshi pulled the bike into the series of buildings small lot and into a discrete spot to the side.

"I'm willing to risk the helmets being stolen." He said, helping Mick out of his own when he struggled one handed with the strap.

"Works for me." Toshi had brushed his hair back into the severe, business like style he had always worn it in, it made Mick want to mess it up, pull the length over his shoulders.

There was no questioning of readiness, no careful asking if either one wished to back out. Too much had happened for either man to think the other wasn't willing to go forward. More than that, too much had happened between them to allow either to let the other go where he was unwilling to follow.

The smoky glass doors were locked with a swipe card and pass code. Toshi's over ride code made the swipe card unnecessary and the door unlocked and let them in. In the small lobby and a rental security guard sat behind a desk, the man stood up. Mick glanced over the slight paunch, the receding hair line and knew even with one arm and aching sore ribs he could take the man down.

The guard held up a hand. "I'm sorry but we're closed right now, I didn't mean to leave the door unlocked. Sorry about that." The man smiled but the smile was forced. "Come back tomorrow."

Toshi slid his eyes to Mick and Mick didn't smile when he spoke. "This is Mr. Toshi Ranvier, he has full access to all facilities owned by RI and the right to inspect at any time. Now, I don't think you want to ask him to come back tomorrow."

The man licked his lips nervously. "Let me call my supervisor."

"What's your name?" Mick asked, moving over to the desk and ready to pull the phone from the wall if he had too.

"Jim."

"Well Jim, you're married?"

The man nodded.

"This is a good gig, I bet. Pays well?"

"Well enough."

"Not bad for this job market. Thing is Jim, Mr. Ranvier is your supervisors, supervisor. He's a patient man but he isn't that patient to sit around waiting for you to find permission he doesn't need. So, you think about this real long and hard. Get out of his way, don't waste his time, let him do his job, and you keep your wife happy with that steady paycheck. Or, piss me off which makes him cranky which will result in you going home early tonight. Which is it?" He kept smiling and would have been happier to just knock the man out cold but that would look bad and it really wasn't fair to Jim.

"Well, I'll need to see some ID's."

"Good man." Toshi nodded and pulled out his ID.

When Jim was finally satisfied, Toshi punched in the code again and the interior door opened. Toshi waited until the door shut behind them. "So far so good. What about his cameras?"

"Just hallways and such, nothing invasive. I doubt good old Jim even has access back here."

"Think he'll call this in?"

Mick shrugged. "He might, if all goes well we'll be in and out before anyone can arrive. He'll call a supervisor, the supervisor will call who ever is his boss, worst case that's the person that will drive back down here and he may or may not be aware of our run in with Taylor's group. If he is, he'll call Taylor right off, if not, it'll be longer. Half hour, Toshi, we've a good half hour." Mick was leading them down corridors. He had a good idea where the computer's main access system was and that's where they were headed.

Toshi unlocked the door Mick had stopped them in front of and wasn't surprised to find a small office with several sets of computer terminals and a server humming along the wall. "IT room, good job."

Mick grinned. "Easier than going around personal passwords, override code will work directly to the server too. How long do you need?"

Toshi was already moving to the server and pulling the access panel off. "The hook up is easy, depending on how long it takes to clone out the system. Hopefully less than a half hour."

"Hopefully." Mick answered and left Toshi to play with the small portable computer he'd brought. His interest was in the regular access terminals, he sat down in front of one of them and began to snoop into it.

He had to dig into four or five files to find where the information about the creatures was buried. "They call the project Leviticus."

"What? Why?" Toshi called from where he was working.

"Heathen, Leviticus is a chapter in the bible."

"Which one?"

Mick laughed. "Anyway, be glad I had to read it, there's a passage in there, ah chapter ten or twelve or something early like that about what you can eat and it mentions that you can eat anything of four legs and then lists bugs as having four legs. It was something we had to study about."

"And you never forget anything."

"That's not true." He scanned across files and notes, seeking for what the reasons were behind the project but he found an odd note. "Hey, I found an internal memo, sent to a small number of addresses, it says that 'due to project Leviticus' secondary status under project half child, discretion must be used at all times'."

"What's half child?"

Mick shook his head. "I'm looking but the name is cloaked in the search feature, hang on." When he found the proper folder, Mick wished he hadn't. "Oh, God."

"What?" Toshi glanced over his shoulder but Mick was just staring at the screen in front of him. "What did you find?"

"Project half child's aim is to remove the I/S mutation and clone a viable child from the DNA sequence of Toshi Ranvier."

"What?" Then he shook his head. "That's not funny, Mick."

"I'm not laughing."

Toshi hurried over to stand behind Mick and felt cold dread clamp down his spine. Splashed across the screen were pictures of some of their more advanced successes, one baby had actually survived to term and died a few days after being born. Toshi stared at what his baby picture would have been if he'd been human, the small eyes looked odd on the tiny dead face. His stomach turned over.

"How are they doing this?"

"They're using clone tubes, they aren't as stable as a real womb but they've produced success with even horses and such. They're banned from human use. It looks like most of the fetuses die early, only a handful have survived to even partial term but as you can see, they're normally horribly disfigured. Only this one managed to come out almost okay but he died too." Mick cleared the screen of pictures of twisted and distorted babies and dived into the text files. "You okay?"

"No, I wouldn't say I'm okay, should I be okay?" Toshi snapped.

"No."

"Find out why they're doing this, I want to know if it's just an experiment to them, or," but the or was to awful.

"Or? What do you suspect?"

Toshi put a hand on Mick's good shoulder. "Find out if my father ordered it."

"You don't really think that, do you?"

Toshi went back to check the uplink. "He wants an heir, cloning himself wouldn't do any good, that child would be sterile too."

"He has an heir."

"No, he has a half breed bastard freak. Just, see if you can tell, Mick. Find out too, if you can, if this is ongoing and if it's at that warehouse."

"We weren't planning on going there tonight, we aren't prepared for that."

"Just check for me Mick."

Time ticked away and neither man spoke, Toshi hovered near the uplink and wavered between anger and a soul cutting hurt. Mick tapped at the computer and read files that churned his stomach as quickly as he could.

"I can't tell, Toshi, they're receiving funding directly from the RI research fund but they report through too many channels for me to trace upwards right now."

Toshi shook his head. "He's behind it, I know he is."

"We don't know that."

"Is this at the warehouse?" The uplink beeped and Toshi began to disassemble it.

"I think so."

Toshi glanced at his watch, they were at twenty eight minutes. "I have to go there."

Mick nodded. "I know, I would too." There was no point in saying he was sorry, the dark, angry hurt in Toshi's eyes didn't need to hear a word about being sorry. He needed to go to the warehouse and put an end to things.

Jim tried to talk them into staying, going on about how someone was on their way in to give them a tour but Toshi turned his cold, too large eyes on the man and he fell silent.

"Mr. Ranvier is a busy man." Mick soothed but didn't break stride.

As they were pulling out of the lot on the purring motorcycle, a car was pulling in but Toshi didn't wait and neither man looked back. They whipped across streets and alleys as Toshi took them single mindedly back to the warehouse.

The train yards were starting to show signs of life, the first of the tents were going up and pole lights were being dragged out but Toshi barely slowed down as he drove past them. Mick saw the burned out rubble of the Pony club hulking like a blackened shade of the past as they slipped on

by. Toshi took them on the path they'd followed in the wake of the creatures, pulling the bike up to the mouth of the alley that had led to the fake, booby trapped door. The tires of the bike spun as Toshi turned it in a tight circle and began to follow the outer walls, looking for an alternate door in.

There were no windows and they found only two doors, one a wide service door for delivery of equipment that was set high on a loading dock and beside it was a plain metal door. A simple light hung over it, protruding from the wall, and a keypad was set in the wall next to it. Toshi rolled past it and parked the bike in a nearby alley.

"They'll come after us if we go in there, won't they?" Toshi asked, but his pace never slowed as they walked back to the door.

"Yup." He slipped his gun out and into his hand, hoping Toshi hadn't noticed. "If I were them, I'd have the override code set to send an alert."

"Mick, I," Toshi hung his head as the keypad glowed waiting for the numbers to be input. "I need to do this."

"I know."

The door buzzed and unlocked just long enough to let someone pull the door open. Inside was dim, there were only a minimal number of security lights on but for what Mick could make out it was simply a warehouse. Crates and skids of boxes were stacked in neat and tidy rows. A pair of forklifts sat waiting for use and a small office was built long the wall, the door shut and locked.

Toshi walked over to the office door, tried the knob before he hauled back and kicked the flimsy wood door. The lock released under the force and slammed inward. Without pausing, Toshi went inside and pulled out the computer uplink. He found the interface under the old, cheap desk and quickly wired it in. As he slid out from the desk he was dialing home.

"Alec? I'm dumping another system into yours. Can you back trace it and get access to the building's security? Good, change the keypad locks, I only want the override to work, nothing else. How long? Good." He hung up and stowed his phone. "It'll take him ten minutes or less he says, depending on how many firewalls there are."

"Good idea."

"Where do you think it all is?"

Mick pointed with his chin to behind the rows of stored supplies. "Back there."

Toshi followed a step or two behind Mick, letting the other man go first and sure enough they found another door in an otherwise solid wall. Light spilled out from under it and Toshi paused by the keypad, the gun slid easily into his hand. "Think someone's in there?" He whispered.

Mick just nodded. "Lights on, someone's home. Let me go in first."

He didn't have to like the idea to agree and nod. Toshi punched the code in and the lock buzzed. Mick hit the handle hard and let the door slam open. He went in, gun at the ready and took in the room with a quick, practiced eye. It was a long, narrow room, the wall to Mick's right had another locked door set a third of the way down. To his left was a stainless steel table scattered across it were boxes of tubes with cotton swabs in them, obviously fresh from the manufacturer. Sitting near them was a sealed glass flask with an amber liquid filling the bottom third. The bottom half of the room was blocked off with a metal mesh wall and gate, locked with a simple push button latch.

Behind the metal screen were wide water bowls and shredded blankets. The far wall had a slot, a small panel slid across it now and swirling, playing almost like puppies, in the kennel space, were the mutated creatures. Two of them were even pulling on the same blanket, skittering and clicking to each other.

Mick ignored them, there was a more dangerous predator in the room. Vega sat on a stool by the table, forcing the swabs through the top of the flask to soak the cotton tip. He was wearing latex gloves and obviously had gotten the trick of soaking the swab, pulling it out and sealing it down to a fine art so none of the fluid got on him or spilled into the room. Vega froze, eyes going wide, gloved hands stopped in mid motion. At the same time, Mick took in the other man in the room. Taylor was kneeling by the kennel, clipboard and pen in hand. He stood at the door's motion but Mick was already in the room.

"Don't!" He shouted.

Vega reached under the table, Mick only saw the motion and a glint of metal and he reacted. Three shots fired, in rapid, quick order and the SWAT member fell back, blood erupting from the tight cluster of shots that appeared on his chest.

Taylor moved and Mick swung his gun around to the other man. "Don't! It doesn't have to be this way."

Toshi pushed past Mick, raised his gun and fired. Taylor crashed backward, the small bloody circle appearing like a jewel on his forehead. Blood trickled down onto his face, the clipboard fell from his nerveless hand and his body quickly dropped to pin it down.

"Why'd you do that?" Mick turned on Toshi.

"He was reaching for a gun, behind his back."

Mick rolled the body over and sure enough strapped along the man's belt was a tiny, discrete pistol. "How'd you know?"

"He wouldn't have been reaching behind him for anything else." Toshi failed to mention that what the man had his hand on first was the thumb latch to the gate, the gun was too small to do much damage to a body but it would easily shatter a glass flask. The impact would have sprayed them both in the scent and the creatures would have done the rest, even if Mick had shot Taylor, they'd be dead.

"Thanks."

Toshi nodded. "What about them?"

"Half child and the equipment should be on the other side of that wall. Go on, be careful and I'll join you when I'm done here." He counted nine remaining creatures and that would leave him three shots if he aimed well.

"Okay."

Mick opened the latch and coldly aimed at the nearest snapping mouth. He knew it wasn't fair, the creatures hadn't asked to be made but now that they were alive they should have had as much right to continue living as any other being but he couldn't spare them. It may not have been their fault there were used to such a horrible means but it would be Mick's fault if they were allowed to continue. He fired carefully and tried not to think about it.

Toshi moved to the last locked door and keyed it open. He wedged the door open before slipping inside and finding a light switch on the wall. The space lit up. To his left was a well stocked lab,

machines and equipment lined tables and walls. Computers hummed on standby and paper folders sat near abandoned microscopes. He guessed from the space and size that maybe five or six people worked in the lab at any given time, more than that and they'd be tripping over each other.

The vast majority of the space was the sealed, artificial wombs. Sealed like a honey comb together, two dozen bunched around a central monitoring station. Nine of them had green lights and with a sick sense of dread he crossed the space to the observation ports.

The first two were obviously growing more of the insect creatures. One was near complication and the other was just starting to look like the bugs should. Seeing them floating in the gel inside was nauseating but acceptable. He drew a breath and stepped to the next tank.

Mick was grateful the creatures seemed to have no sense of fear or no sense or awareness of their own mortality. Even after killing most of the pack, the others showed no signs of distress. Even the last one, happily munching on the still warm body of one of its dead brethren, didn't respond to Mick moving closer. It was a small comfort, monster or not, it would have been much more difficult to shoot the creatures if they'd been cowering and frightened.

He made sure the shots were clean and the creatures were really dead before he moved to join Toshi. It was the sight of the other man, standing by a tank, hand on the view port that stopped his steps. "Toshi?"

"My brother." He stepped away and the look of twisted, sick despair was unhidden. "I'm going to go make sure Alec was able to get into these computers and if not I'm going to move the uplink. Excuse me." He pushed past Mick and Mick let him go.

Pulled forward, drawn by the revulsion the situation had sparked, Mick moved to the tank Toshi had been standing in front of. Inside the tank, suspended in the gel around it, was a severely deformed, near full term fetus. The child twitched its malformed arm that ended without a hand. Its face was barely recognizable as human but its twisted skull was topped with a generous amount of black hair. Below, its rib cage had failed to close and Mick could see the steady beat of its heart, exposed and open, and the twisted, grayish organs spilled outside of what they should have been in.

It made him want to vomit. It made him want to aim for the pitiful creature's distorted skull and fire the last three shots into it. He did neither but he forced himself to check the other tanks, one by one. Gratefully, of the rest that held Toshi clones, only one was visibly developed enough to see it was a child, but it was curled so tightly into a ball that the four inch fetus' face was hidden from sight. No lower body had formed on this one, and it was clear it was close to terminating on its own.

Mick went in search of Toshi, and found him leaning against the wall just outside the lab's door. His hands pressed to his face, shoulders rounded. Mick reached out and soothed the length of hair back from his shoulders. "Hey,"

Toshi drew a deep breath and dropped his hands, his eyes were haunted but his face was steady. "Alec got through from out there."

"What do you want to do?" He asked gently.

"I don't know. Mick, this goes so far beyond wrong." He glanced into the other room and at the tanks. "How do we turn it off?"

"You're sure."

Toshi nodded. "Those things, they won't survive. They shouldn't have to suffer. If we turn off the

tanks they just shut down too. Right?"

Mick had no real idea but he nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

"I don't know how to do it, I, God, Mick why would he allow this?" His face screwed up for a moment, his control shaken. "Am I so awful?"

"No," Mick placed his hand on the side of that torture face. "You are beautiful and perfect as you are, if he can't see that, it's his fault. This has nothing to do with you. Nothing and he may not even know about it."

"How could he not?"

Mick shook his head and slid his grip down to the hand that for the first time wasn't warm. "Trust me, scientists, they don't see beyond their own noses. They could have told him anything and he might not have known they've taken it so far. Don't kill yourself over this now until you hear otherwise. Okay?"

Toshi nodded but he didn't believe it.

"Stay here, I'll go try to figure out how to shut those tanks down." Mick waited until Toshi nodded before stepping back into the room. It took him a few moments to access and understand the system but when he did finding the batch abort option was easy. He waited during he countdown and watched as the lights on the tank went from green to red one by one. He watched as the tanks used for cloning a human Toshi went red before he re-joined the original.

"We've got the information, what do you want to do now?"

Toshi pushed himself from the wall. "Alec changed the codes, no one will get in here now expect myself or my father. Mick, I need to speak to him, now. Than we'll call someone, someone you trust, in to take this over."

"It's got to be federal, I don't know who's safe here anymore."

"Than we'll do that, but I need to talk to my father first. Another hour isn't going to change anything."

Mick nodded. "Alright, baby, let's do it but he'd better behave. I'm feeling overprotective of you."

That made Toshi smile, small, secretive but a smile none the less. "Thanks, Mick."

Ranvier lived in a neo-Victorian styled house set in the center of two acres on the sloping hill side out on the North side of the city. It was a pricy neighborhood, private, clean and well landscaped and Luke Henri Ranvier was the star of the district. His large, ornate home was set around well maintained gardens and lawns, all tucked behind a far too tall wall and a secure gate.

Toshi had only been there twice in twelve years, both times were for events. He'd never once been invited to his father's home for a family event or even just to talk business. He hadn't even been introduced to his latest step mother until after they'd wed. She was thirty three, slender, pretty enough to be a model and Toshi gave her two, three years tops until his father grew bored and moved on.

Toshi pulled the bike up to the gate and let the lock scan his thumbprint before he typed in the access code. The gate clicked and slowly rolled open and without waiting for the security forces

permission, he roared them up the long, sloping driveway to the front of the house. He shut off the engine and left his helmet resting on the seat.

"You don't need to come with me." Toshi glanced to the house. "My father can be a bit intimidating."

"Don't insult me."

Toshi nodded in acceptance and led them up the four, wide steps and opened the front door without knocking. He wasn't surprised to find George Farinholt waiting inside for him. "Hello, George."

"Toshi, sir, you look well, we've heard some things." His eyes scanned over Mick.

"I'm fine, where's my father?"

"He's busy at the moment."

"He's going to get un-busy."

"Toshi, he's already upset with you, now might not be the best of times. He's spent the last hour on the phone with the Committee."

"George, where is my father?"

"He's in his study, let me tell him you're here."

"That won't be necessary, thank you George." He pushed past the aging man and led Mick deeper into the house.

The furnishings were ornate, well made antiques. Expensive, famous art hung on the walls in their hand carved frames. The entire house was finished in the same neo-Victorian style and Mick didn't see any of it. He followed on Toshi's heels to the stairs and up a flight, then down a hall to a wide, heavy wood door.

Toshi pushed it open and strode inside, Mick followed, shutting the door behind them. The room was done in dark woods, deep blues and greens with brass and gold accents. A fireplace was waiting to be lit, plush, high backed chairs clustered around it. To one side a table held liquor decanters in cut crystal, glasses sitting waiting to be filled and in the center of the room, over an expensive rug, was a wide dark wood desk.

The man behind the desk stood up. "What do you think you're doing?"

Luke Henri Ranvier was pushing into his seventies. His face was lined from a lifetime of smiles and frowns and his thick graying hair, once brown, was just barely starting to thin. The man had made no obvious efforts to hold back the process of aging, he was elegant and graceful in his years and his body was strong and fit. Mick saw instantly the father in the son. Toshi had his father's straight, long nose and he had his father's full, rich voice. Luke Henri was slightly taller but both men were long legged, slender and lean, the father being slightly wider in his shoulders than his son but otherwise much the same.

"We need to have a conversation, Father."

"Yes, we do. I had a rather difficult conversation with the Committee this evening. Do you have any idea what it's going to cost me to get them to forgive your tantrum?" The man raged.

For all his anger, Toshi wasn't surprised that his father focused on a spot over his shoulder and

didn't look directly at him. "I won't go back under their authority, Father, you can save your money and I'm not here to discuss them."

"What could be more important than that? Hmm, or are you here to tell me that the rumors I'm getting are true, that you really are using again?" The elder's voice had dropped down, smooth, controlled, cold.

"How dare you." Toshi snapped back and all the years of silently accepting his place broke away. "Do you even care? Is there any shred of humanity left in your cold body?"

"Get out of here, I will not stand here and allow you to insult me in my own home."

"No. Why did you do it, Father? Why? I know you can't stand the sight of me but why would you do something so unforgivable, so cruel? Do you even know what they were doing as a side project, how many innocent people have been killed because of your sick desire?" His hands were balled up into fists.

The anger melted from Luke Henri and for the first time the man saw Mick and the damage the other man had obviously sustained. "What are you talking about?"

"Mick was following up on an old case of his. It was your scientists Father, they used your equipment to make mutated monsters that they were letting kill people for food. The equipment that you provided so you could get your perfect human child! I'm ashamed to have your blood in my veins!" Toshi was shouting now, he felt himself slipping away, losing control.

Only, his father didn't react with anger or self righteousness, he only stood looking confused. "You're not making any sense."

Toshi growled under his breath and rubbed at his eyes. Mick stepped forward. "Let me?"

Toshi just nodded and paced away, struggling to get control of himself.

Mick carefully explained the course of the investigation that had led them to their awful discoveries. He watched the powerful man across from him, a man that actually owned enough of the land of several small countries to take them over if he wished, for any sign of falseness and all he saw was disbelief and shock. "That's how we ended up at their facility tonight and it was by going into their computers that we came across project half child."

Luke Henri nodded. "Yes, they're working on half child, they're one of four labs approaching the problem from different angles."

"You have three other groups working on the same thing?" Toshi whispered out, frightened now that he was really going to become ill.

"Wait," Mick held up a hand. "Sir, I think you need to explain to your son what half child is."

"Half child is the project I've been funding trying to eliminate the sub-mutation in my DNA code that makes producing a child so difficult. The hope is that soon they'll have a treatment that will give me a fifty percent chance of fathering another child with an I/S woman. It's a pipe dream but I'm not the only one with this sub-mutation. If it can be fixed for me it may be applied to others." He glanced to the two men in his study, the human nodding his head as if a theory of his had been confirmed and his son looking shocked and ill. "What did you think it was?"

"Not what we thought it was, what it is, Father. Ferinholt Research Group was attempting to clone a child for you."

"That's absurd. The idea was rejected before you were born." Not to mention that it was illegal

but if the process would have produced a clone of himself that wasn't sterile, Luke Henri would have made the process legal somewhere.

"Not a clone of you Father, of me. They're cloning me only they're trying to do so without the I/S mutation." He spat the words out.

Luke Henri's mouth opened but no sound came out. He moved to the bottles of liquor and poured out a finger width of Scotch, downed it in a quick swallow and refilled it. "You thought I ordered such a thing?" He glanced over and didn't need Toshi to answer. "Why would I order that?"

"I think we're both old enough to face the truth between us, Father. I know you can't stand the sight of me. I know you'd be happier if I wasn't a freak."

Luke Henri stalked over and with a drink in his one hand, he slapped Toshi across the face with the other. He used just enough force to sting without really hurting. "Don't you ever let me hear you call yourself that again. Ever! Do you understand?" He growled out.

"Yes, Father." Toshi answered, almost meekly.

He downed his drink and went back to refill it. "Would I be happier if you had been born human? Of course I would have been."

The look of hurt was swift and deep on Toshi's face, it was one thing to suspect something, it was another to hear it.

"But not because I'm ashamed of you or my vanity is so great that I want a little human version of myself, but because I knew, I know, how difficult things will always be for you."

Toshi shook his head and bowed it for a moment, hiding behind the spill of his hair. "I have a difficult time believing your reasons, Father, when even today you can't look at me. I'm not blind, I see how uncomfortable you are with me."

Luke Henri sat his drink on the edge of his desk and glanced to where Mick stood silently watching. "Must we have a family spectacle in front of him?"

"Mick isn't just my bodyguard, Father."

"Well, that part of the rumor is true it seems. Fine, you're right I am uncomfortable around you. I'm not sure I can ever be comfortable around you and I guess I don't look at you. I never thought you'd notice."

"How could I not? No one looks at me, no one wants to even shake hands with me because of what I am. I notice it in strangers I'm not stupid enough to fail to notice it when my own father does the same thing."

"Toshi!" He tried to look at his son and had to look away. He sighed and leaned against the desk. "I'm an old man, there's no harm in the truth now. Every time I look at you I see her." He shook his head and the steam left him but his spine was as straight as steel. "Your mother was the only woman I have ever loved. I adored her, I moved my company headquarters here to this nothing of a city to be closer to her." He moved to behind his desk and pulled open the center drawer. From inside he removed a framed photo and his fingers stroked across the glass before he brought the picture to give to Toshi. "She's all I ever wanted."

Toshi took the picture, a rare, casual one of his mother. She was sitting, a quite shy smile on her face, within the circle of Luke Henri's arms. He was smiling broader, more fully, than Toshi had ever seen.

"You're so much like her. You have her eyes, not just I/S eyes but hers and the way you tilt your head a little when you're listening is from her. So much about you reminds me of her that I can't stand to look at you." The words were bitter, dark and clouded with grief. "I disgust myself because what love I have for you, isn't for you but because she's in you. I know that isn't fair so I avoid you." He smiled bitterly and accepted the frame back from Toshi's numb hands. "You never seemed to mind."

"I thought you hated me, that I was a disappointment to you."

"I don't hate you, I may not be a good father but that isn't because of you. And you have never disappointed me, never." He tucked the picture away in his desk and glanced up to his shocked son. "The very fact you would believe me capable of ordering such an experiment disgusts me but I can't blame you. I've never given you a reason to think other of me. Frankly, in a way, if things are as you say, it's my responsibility. I knew Ferinholt was branching into more extreme research but I didn't follow up on it."

Luke Henri pushed a button on his desk and wasn't surprised that George almost instantly opened his office door. "George, we've a situation. Call Annie Hawkins and get her to come here with a team of her agents. One of our research facilities has been conducting illegal experimentation and are responsible for several murders."

George glanced to the two younger men before nodding. "Right away, sir." He shut the door behind him on his way out.

"I assume you have all the proof?"

"Yes, sir, and we've secured the warehouse where the actual experiments were carried out." Mick nodded.

Luke Henri came around to stand in front of Mick, he glanced up and down the young man and studied him like a bug. "McKale, what is that? Scottish? Irish?"

Mick refused to flinch or look away. "Something like that sir."

"And you're an Inky?"

"No, I was raised in an Inky Commune."

"You aren't the least bit intimidated by me are you boy?"

"Should I be sir?" Mick answered coolly, raising an eyebrow.

Luke Henri let out a barking laugh. "Good, very good, a man that easily gets all shaken up isn't going to make it being involved with a half breed." He clapped Mick on his good shoulder, hard, and moved to where Toshi stood to the side.

"Look at me, son." He demanded and this time it was Toshi that had a hard time meeting his father's eye. "Are the rumors true? About the shine?"

Toshi had to lower his eyes. "They made me take a hit, yes."

Luke Henri's voice softened. "Are you okay?"

"I will be, I'm clean and that won't change."

"Good, I don't want you having to go through that again. You're serious about telling the

Committee to shove it?"

Toshi met his father's eye. "Completely, I plan on dismantling them."

The elder laughed again. "That's the Ranvier in you, give us a lever big enough and we'll move the world. Your uncle called me, he told me your moving and what you requested, you'll have my support."

"Thank you Father."

"Do you two want to stay here until Annie gets here, she'll be flying in so it'll be a few hours?"

"No, father, it's been a rough few days and I have to see to things."

"Very well. I'll send her over with some of her people as soon as she arrives."

"Of course."

"And Toshi, if you can forgive me for being the bastard that I am, I'll try to be a better father from here on out. Can't promise I'll succeed, but if you'll let me, I'll try."

Toshi found himself nodding in stunned silence and let Mick guide them both out. His mind was whirling as he drove them home, not really thinking just exhausted and overwhelmed. Mick guided him up to the apartment and it was Mick that spoke to Alec and made sure he was okay with what had happened. Toshi watched in silence as he handed over both of their guns, knowing that the federal agent being called in would want them and asked Alec to transfer the computer clones to her while she was in route.

He let Mick guide him into his bedroom, let him slide the leather holster from his shoulders and unbutton his shirt. He let Mick push him to sit down and then wordlessly let the other man brush his hair in long, soothing strokes. When he'd finished, he let his pants be removed and watched with shocked, weary eyes as Mick stripped down to his boxers as well.

"I've been wanting to do this for a long time." Mick smiled.

"What's that?" Toshi finally asked, speaking in a whisper, not at all in the mood to fool around.

"Sleep beside you." Mick slid onto the futon and held the quilt up until Toshi slid in next to him. He held still as Toshi settled in next to him but as soon as the warm body was pressed to his, he let his hand stroke through the thick black hair.

"He's never spoken to me about my mother. I always assumed she was just another mistress, little more than a whore to him. Tonight's the first time he actually treated me like his son and not his burden." Toshi whispered against Mick's shoulder.

"Maybe tonight's also the first time you were yourself around him too and not what you thought he wanted you to be."

"Maybe." That made Toshi smile a little bit in the darkness. He loudly sniffed along Mick's bare shoulder. "You smell good to me."

"And you do to me too, baby, I'm glad I smell good to you." He turned and kissed the top of the dark head and snuggled in to sleep a sleep more soundly and deeply than he'd had in a long time.

Part Twenty Four

"As of four o'clock this afternoon, we've arrested four of the five scientists involved in this situation, we expect the fifth to be apprehended shortly. Additional arrest warrants have been issued for two members of the SWAT police force, Salvador Larter and Hank Miller. To date we've confirmed a total of nine homicides are connected to this case and we expect that number to rise, as we continue to research the data presented to us. This number does not yet include the I/S homicides which we will be adding. We wish to express our deepest sympathies for the actions of these rogue scientists and police officers and our deepest gratitude to Mr. Toshi Ranvier and Mr. A.R. McKale who worked so tirelessly and took great personal risks to secure the evidence we required in this case. If not for their quick thinking and fast action, the computers and servers at Ferinholt Research Group's holdings would have been wiped clean before our arrival. Ranvier Industries has been working with us to ensure full access to all their research facilities to guarantee that nothing similar is occurring elsewhere. We have no suspicions of such but it is Mr. Luke Henri Ranvier's desire to make certain that the Ferinholt Research Group was truly acting alone."

Behind the small stage Toshi and Mick stood listening, in the four days since Annie Hawkins had arrived, they'd been swamped with questions, interviews and meetings with her team as well as the difficult task of moving into the smaller, far less luxurious former Committee barracks in the train yards. It galled Mick to turn his case over to someone else but he wasn't so stuck in his pride to see that things had to be handed off. The extra man power and trustworthy police efforts had made things go a lot more smoothly.

They'd decided to hide nothing from the federal agent that Luke Henri trusted so deeply and had told her everything. She'd been talked out of filing sexual assault charges against Sal because Mick refused to testify but the list of charges being brought against his ex lover were longer than his arm. They had it set up that Sal would be turned over to Annie later that evening, from Yasun's care, and Hank's body as well. She was only being told that they'd wandered into the train yards and been picked up by his people, Hank having been shot while trying to escape them. Mick was certain the autopsy report would confirm whatever findings Annie wished. The only snag in the plan was Toshi's desire to kill Sal, and they'd only gotten around that by Mick convincing him that letting the man rot in prison would be a more cruel fate.

"Well, it's almost my cue." Luke Henri said from behind the two younger men. "This is garnering incredible publicity for RI. What other global executive risks so much to clean up one of their own companies!"

"I'm glad you approve, Father." Toshi answered dryly. His father was spinning it all nicely, making it clear that Toshi and Mick had acted with the full support of the Ranvier family and Ranvier Industries because it was a caring, concerned corporation. It only slightly pissed him off and made Mick laugh.

"Missy wanted me to invite you two over for dinner later this week. She's having some friends in and thought you might like to come as well."

"You mean Michelle."

"Michelle?"

"Missy was your sixth wife, Michelle is your current wife."

"Huh, I can't keep track of them, that's why I call them all darling. What should I tell her?"

"We'll see, Father, I'll call."

"Good, well, I've got to go dazzle the common morons." He pushed past them and out onto the

stage.

"You know, he really is an asshole." Mick shook his head.

"Yes, he is, but he's trying. Did you hear from Andy?"

They turned from the conference room and made their way to the door, leaving before the reporters were finished with the bigger story. "I did, once I convinced him that it was your idea he accepted. He'll design the new club and he liked the name Common Grounds. Samson's moving in with Oliver so it'll work out well. When the lease is up Andy will move in with us and he'll happily take an apartment in the new building."

"Good, Alec said he got the projections in. A month for demolition, five for construction and one more after that before we can open." The hand in his pocket touched the length of hair he had there, he pulled it out and glanced at it.

"Tam would be proud."

Toshi stroked lightly over the elaborately braided length. He'd carry the lock of Tam's hair for the next year as was their tradition, then he'd set it in the box with the braid from his mother and grandfather. "I want to make them all proud."

"They would be. I'm proud of you. Toshi? When you asked your uncle for the train yards, he said he wouldn't listen to your normal request, I forgot to ask, what is it?"

"It doesn't matter now."

"Tell me, it'll bug me until I know. You know what a noisy snoop I am."

Toshi sighed. "Don't fuss, I used to ask him for formal permission to kill myself. He always refused." He saw the uneasy look on Mick's face and shook his head. "Well, you asked, don't worry, I don't think I'll be asking him again anytime soon."

"Good, because if you did I'd kick your sorry ass from here to next Thursday."

He smiled, warm, content, happy and slipped the lock of hair back into his pocket. "Hey, have I told you yet today that you smell right to me?"

Mick nodded. "Yeah but tell me again."

Toshi turned and right there on the street, not caring who might see, he pulled Mick into a fierce embrace. Lips parted, tongues met and danced for dominance playfully, both men careful of the other's still healing wounds, both emotional and physical.

Mick sighed when the kiss broke. "Good way to say it." He groaned. "Months in that tiny little apartment with Andy being hyper about his design and art. You know, he's never going to shut up."

"I can think of a way to shut him up." Toshi smiled wickedly.

Mick broke out in laughter as he followed Toshi into the back of the car. "Your uncle's right, you are a brat."

"I have a birthday in a couple of months." He teased.

"Insatiable too!" Mick chuckled and leaned his good shoulder against Toshi. A warm feeling of safe contentment filled him. This was home, this is where he was meant to be. Things weren't

perfect, seeing the rubble of the Pony club instantly stirred Toshi to a dark mood and more than one of the sex clubs were balking at submitting to Toshi's new authority. The press was all over this string of murders and the two of them for being in the center of it all and there was a new hatred for the evils of scientific research stirring. The Committee was being difficult and that wasn't going to be solved anytime soon either.

None of it seemed to matter. Mick knew as he pressed into that delightful warmth that it was all things they could and would face, together. No matter how rough the coming months would be, or what the world around them was going to say or do about their relationship, they had found a place of stillness, a quiet eye in life's swirling storm and nothing could remove it.

He slipped his hand into Toshi's and gave it a good squeeze. Toshi's eyes glided over to meet Mick's and in their half hidden depths Mick saw a wickedly delicious desire and a warm fire he'd never seen before, a look that made him feel safe and loved. A look that smelled right to him.

Fin

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