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Himiko: Bonding

TOP SHELF

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By CB Conwy

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It was a day right out of a horror movie. Although it was still early in the fall, it was dark and gloomy long after sunrise. The rain that had been falling all morning didn't make it any better.

The somber scenery seemed a perfect background for the black cars parked next to the administration building. Cars large enough to carry several people in the back. Matt shuddered and took another path to get to the Architecture Building. He'd heard the rumors that the Himika had been at the university before, but he had never seen them here himself. Well, of course he had *seen* them; they did walk among everybody else, as if they were mere humans. While the truth was that they were... well, they weren't. Not at all.

So, he'd seen them, but he hadn't seen them hunting before. Or harvesting, as some people called it. Matt had always considered that phrasing to be even more sinister; when you harvested grain, you killed it and ground it into something unrecognizable. Which wasn't that far away from what the Himika did to the people they kidnapped.

He shuddered at the thought. He supposed that there were a politically correct name for that, too -- "recruiting," he thought they called it -- but the fact was that people disappeared.

And that wasn't even the worst part. What really scared the hell out of Matt were the stories about the few people who managed to escape and came back, ripped of any trace of humanity and more often than not so deep into psychosis that they were beyond any hope. Most of

them never even made it into the psychiatric wards -- the suicide rate was sky high.

Matt sighed. It had only been a little more than a year now, and mankind's dream of finding intelligent life in the universe had already turned out to be a nightmare. The beginning had been so promising, though, and he had had a front row seat to it all.

Jones had come home from the university consumed with excitement about the blob. Matt had found himself a little perplexed by his lover's language. Spandrels and architraves he understood intimately -- astrophysicist's jargon, not so much. Jones had patiently explained that the Lyman-alpha blob was a huge mass of gasses and that it could be the predecessor of a galaxy. In other words, Jones had said, you could see how a galaxy was made, just by looking at it.

Jones had been intrigued when his colleague had found the blob. Himiko, they called it, a beautiful name for a not-so-beautiful thing, it turned out.

Also one that didn't make the slightest sense; it was the name of an ancient Japanese sorceress queen. Their friend Benjamin incessantly grouched about how little sense the name made. He studied linguistics, and names were important to him.

The three of them were close friends, sharing a house through most of college, and despite their different backgrounds, they had been equally excited about what was happening.

In the beginning, Jones and his colleagues had just watched the thing in their telescope. Then it started moving far too quickly for a blob. A few weeks later, they received the first message. As someone once said, the rest was history. Well, strictly speaking, Matt thought, someone once said that the rest was silence, but Matt refused to go there.

That was how humankind could put an exact date to the biggest change ever: the day when they found out that they weren't alone in the universe. And, more importantly, that their neighbors were closing in rapidly.

It was just like a sci-fi film coming true. Unfortunately, it seemed that it was one of the scary ones.

Matt ducked his head against the rain and hurried the last few feet toward the Department of Architecture. He hadn't been here a lot in the years since he graduated, his firm taking up all of his time. He did feel bad about that; he hadn't seen Jones for ages.

Despite the fact that they weren't together anymore, Jones was still the closest friend Matt had ever had. Granted, Jones had managed to move on a lot quicker than Matt's pride would have liked after they split up, but they had still hung out all the time while Matt was a student here. Jones had even helped him out when he had struggled through that first horrible self-employed year.

It hadn't really been a choice for Matt to create his own firm, not after that evaluation of his last internship had the words "anger management issues" in it. He did have a temper, and he didn't like it when senior architects tried to steal his ideas. However, the architectural world was way too small for word not to get around -- at least, if he wanted to get into any of the ambitious firms. And he was ambitious. So, self-employment it had been. After the first year, his firm had taken off, and Matt took great pride in having a successful business even though he had just turned thirty this year.

However, it was nice to be back at the university. He loved being out in the real world, but it was a treat to take a day off from the constant struggle of sending out proposals and entering competitions in favor of diving into academics once more. When Benjamin had asked him to give a lecture on Matt's pet subject, the rhetoric of buildings, he had jumped at the opportunity.

Much to his disappointment, it turned out that his enthusiasm wasn't reciprocated. The small gathering of graduate students, looking worn and not quite awake as they sat hunched over their laptops, seemed wholly oblivious to his passionate attempt to show how the Jewish Museum in Berlin testified to the Holocaust not only in its exhibitions, but in its very shape.

He didn't give up that easily, and he was in the middle of a long monologue about empty spaces in the building when he suddenly felt the atmosphere in the classroom become charged. The students were suddenly very still, and it wasn't in amazement over Matt's discoveries. They were all staring at something behind him, and they certainly didn't seem asleep anymore. He turned around to see what had caught their attention.

There were three of them. The Himika weren't wearing their hoods, so he could clearly see their pointed ears. Matt froze to the spot, and the only thing his frightened brain could concentrate on was how stupid it was for the Himika to use hoods trying to hide their one single deviation from a human appearance. As if humans didn't know what they were.

As if humans didn't know what they did.

Two of the Himika were wearing a strange-looking headband, a silver strip around the back of the head that ended in half circles in front of their ears -- sort of like sunglasses worn backwards. It just seemed to enhance the impression of being in the middle of a bad sci-fi

movie. Unfortunately, these people had the very real power to sentence the students to an unknown destiny.

At that moment, Matt realized that the Himika were completely ignoring the students in the classroom. In fact, the Himika were staring at him. His brain went even further into panic mode, not a single coherent thought left.

Then the one in the middle took a step forward, reached out one hand toward him, and said, "Come with us."

Matt was paralyzed, unable to grasp what he'd just heard. They weren't here for one of the students. They were here for him.

This wasn't happening; his life couldn't be ending in the middle of a fucking architecture lecture. Except it was.

The two Himika in the background came closer, and it was only out of sheer stubbornness that Matt managed to unlock his frozen legs. He'd be damned if he was going to be carried away screaming and crying. Dizzy with the realization that this was it, he took a step forward and then one more.

He cast a look at Benjamin, who looked about as stricken as he could imagine he looked himself.

"Please tell Jones that I'm gone." His voice sounded like nothing he'd ever heard before. He felt the two guards taking firm grips on his arms, and for one sickening moment, Matt thought he was going to pass out.

He didn't. Instead, he put one leg in front of the other, walking out of the building between the Himika with numb legs and a numb brain. All he could hear was the sound of his own steps, loud and regular, the sound reverberating between the buildings. He wondered how

his body could work when everything else was coming to an end.

He saw the armed van parked next to the lawn, and he realized that his steps toward it were going to be his last. People didn't come back from this.

His throat constricted and his vision went gray as he choked. The hands around his arms held him up, and he felt someone lift his head, enabling him to breathe. Gasping, he found his legs again as his vision cleared. Before him, the leader of the Himika nodded, and they brought him to the car. He climbed in behind the darkened windows.

So, this was what the end of life felt like.

Afterward, Matt didn't remember much of the drive. There were two other passengers in the car, an unconscious man and a girl crying hysterically and throwing up. One of the guards was there, too, but after checking to see if the unconscious man was still breathing, the guard didn't move from his seat.

Matt didn't really start to come around until the car stopped and he was led into a giant building.

It was mayhem in there.

The room was big, probably a former gymnasium, even though they had covered the wooden floors with a carpet. That didn't do much to keep the noise down; it was almost deafening with people moaning, screaming, and crying.

At a right angle from one wall were metal beams, waist high and with iron rings welded on every few yards. At most rings, a human was handcuffed to the beam. The air was dense with sweat and fear.

The chained humans were in all stages of breakdown, from the young man in a suit rocking slightly and staring blankly into empty air to the soccer mom screaming at the top of her lungs. Most people had dazed looks on their face, and some were sitting on the floor with their hands still fastened to the rings over their heads as if they had been there for a long time.

Of course, the place was teeming with Himika. Almost all of them wore the same metal headbands as those worn by his own guards. Matt saw one of them approaching the screaming woman. The Himiko removed the headband, and the woman fell in a heap on the floor, her bound hands keeping her in an awkward position.

The Himiko put his headband back on and bent over her. Then the guards pulled on Matt's arms, and Matt couldn't see what happened to her.

Matt felt anger rising in him as he passed the bound men and women. These were human beings, and they were tied up like animals in a stable. Led down the middle of the enormous hall by his guards, Matt got more and more furious.

As they got closer to the other end of the hall, his attention was drawn to what could only be described as a big metal box against the far wall. It took up about half the space across the hall, and it was the size of a small house.

Matt could feel his heart beginning to beat faster as his guards steered him toward the box. "So, this is where the showers are?" he asked the guard on his right. The guard only stared at him. Nazi references obviously didn't resonate with someone who had only been on the planet for a year. The problem was that they resonated very well with Matt, now that he had started thinking about them.

He hesitated and tried to slow down in spite of the firm grips of his guards. Then he saw a man being led out of the cube, unscathed. Reluctantly, Matt allowed the guards to drag him forward again, into the metal construction.

Inside, the metal walls were as bare as the outside of the box. They went through two sets of heavy metal doors and ended up in an empty room the size of a classroom. There were only a few guards and, in the middle, an elderly Himiko. He had a distinguished appearance with his dark blue clothes and gray hair, looking controlled and very aware. He didn't wear a headband, and he stared intently at Matt.

Matt stared right back when he was led in front of the Himiko. He could feel his pulse quicken as rage surged through him.

"Are you the one responsible for this? For all those people chained like animals back there?" The Himiko's eyes widened and he took a step back. Matt followed, boiling with rage.

"Why the fuck don't you fucking SAY SOMETHING?" He was losing it, and it felt good. Also, the small part of him that was still sane knew the choice was either losing himself in the rage or losing himself to the fear. And he refused to surrender.

The Himiko was as silent as they usually were, so Matt broke away from his guards and charged through the double doors back into the hall.

His return caused a lot of commotion -- Himika came running from all directions, closing in around him. Nobody seemed to want to take him on, though.

"Who's the fucker in charge here?" he shouted at the top of his lungs, glaring at the Himika surrounding him. He lunged at one of them now and then, trying to attack, but they carefully kept their distance. He could feel his

fury ebbing as exhaustion set in, and he desperately tried to hold on to it.

There was a rustle in the line of Himika, and a single Himiko stepped into the circle in front of the guards. He was dressed in dark blue clothes like the one in the metal box, but his hair was dark and he had the clearest gray eyes Matt had ever seen. He wore a name tag that read Pietr something. Fucking Himiko name.

"Is it you?" Matt demanded, his voice cracking on the last word.

The Himiko cocked his head as if listening, but didn't speak.

Matt sensed someone behind him, but before he could turn around, his world turned gray and then black. The last thing he felt was hands catching him, and then he was out.

He was so comfortable. He was lying on something soft and warm and he never wanted to wake up.

Matt felt a cool liquid on his lips. He licked it tentatively, and it tasted wonderful. He opened his mouth to get more and was rewarded with a sip of some kind of juice. It tasted so good that he tried to raise his head to get more.

"Easy now, just lie still."

He opened his eyes and blinked, confused. At first, he only saw a lot of bright whiteness, but as his eyes got used to the light, he could see that he was lying on a bed placed along the wall in a small room with white walls and no windows.

"Am I... Is this a hospital?" Matt looked around, trying to find the man who had been speaking before. He started when he saw the Himiko standing next to his bed. Fuck. He suddenly remembered the harvesting, the big hall, and the strange Himiko who had done something to him to make him pass out.

He started scrambling to get away, but he couldn't move his hands or his legs. What the fuck? He tried harder, but he was stuck.

"We had to restrain you in case you panicked when you woke up." The Himiko watched him with a concerned expression while he struggled.

"I wouldn't panic if I wasn't tied up." He tried to keep his voice light, but he wasn't calm at all -- he hated being restrained like this. How the hell had he ended up in this mess in the first place?

"You're sensitive," the Himiko said.

What? He wasn't crazy about being captured by aliens, and that made him a wimp? *Fucking asshole!* Matt started getting pissed again.

"No, you ended up in this mess because you're sensitive. Your ESP skills are highly developed, you'd probably say."

Matt forgot to fight, staring at the Himiko. "My ESP ski... What are you talking about?" This was going nowhere he had anticipated.

Wait. He hadn't actually asked the question out loud in the first place, had he? He felt more and more lost.

"No, you didn't ask the question out loud, but that doesn't matter. I can hear you anyway. We don't have to talk out loud to communicate."

He just stared at the man. The Himiko. Whatever.

"And that's why you're here, that's why we took you with us. You have the potential to do the same."

Okay, he hadn't just fallen down the rabbit hole. He'd fallen down the rabbit hole *in* the rabbit hole.

"You mean, you can read minds?" This had to be some sick joke.

The Himiko had a patient look on his face, like someone trying to explain something very basic to a slow child.

"Yes, we can read minds. You just experienced that. You never wondered why we don't bother speaking out loud?"

"No, I was kind of occupied running away every time I saw one of you." Mostly to avoid a situation like this. He was so fucked.

Matt struggled with the bindings again, refusing to acknowledge what he had just been told. The Himiko looked worried now. "You are panicking, aren't you?"

"Of course I'm fucking panicking! You just told me that you're not just scary aliens, you're fucking mind reading aliens! My entire world just changed, what did you think I was gonna do?" In spite of his bravado, he

could feel his throat constricting and his heart beating way too fast. This just wasn't happening.

"I can help you, but you have to stop fighting so hard."

"Then let me loose, for fuck's sake!" Matt couldn't take much more of this.

"Okay."

He forgot to fight, staring at the Himiko. "Okay?"

"Of course I'll let you loose if it'll make it easier on you. I won't allow you to harm anyone or yourself, but I can untie you if you'd like."

Matt hesitated and then nodded abruptly. "I'd like that."

"Fine." The Himiko nodded back and took a step toward his bed. "I'll untie your legs first and then your arms. Don't try to hurt me; I'll just have to tranquilize you if you do."

Somehow Matt didn't think the Himiko required a needle and an anesthetic to do that.

"I'll be good." Matt was trying for sarcastic, but truth be told, he really, really wanted to get rid of those straps.

The Himiko lifted Matt's blanket and loosened the strap around his left foot, looking disapprovingly at Matt's ankle. "Your skin is almost raw from your fight against the bindings."

"Well, then you shouldn't have tied me up." *Please, take them off.*

The Himiko loosened Matt's right foot. "I'll get you some ointment after I've untied you." He took a closer look at the foot. "And some antiseptic; you're bleeding a bit here."

Matt didn't say anything, just waited for his hands to be untied. Finally, he was free. He scrambled to the wall and curled up in a corner of the bed, hugging himself.

The Himiko took a close look at him but didn't say anything, just tucked the blanket around him. The warmth felt good. His watcher -- doctor? nurse? whatever -- went to the door and quickly returned with a tray full of medical supplies. The Himiko sat on the bed and started sorting out the things on the tray.

"Are you warm enough?"

Matt nodded once, mutely.

"Okay. I'll take care of your abrasions now. They are probably a little sore, but it shouldn't hurt too badly, and I won't do anything without telling you first."

The Himiko folded back the blanket from Matt's left ankle and started rubbing in an ointment. As he worked, he kept explaining what he was doing in a low, soothing voice. When he had finished working on Matt's left foot, he gently covered it back up, uncovered the other foot, and started disinfecting and bandaging the wounds there.

After finishing, the Himiko looked back up at him. "Can I see your hand now?" Matt nodded and offered his hand to the Himiko. It was carefully examined, cleaned, and bandaged.

"Now the other one." Matt tried to reach out his right hand, but it was an awkward position.

"You can lean on the other wall," the Himiko suggested. Matt managed to unfold his stiff legs and lean on the wall next to the headboard of the bed. Again, the nurse made sure he was warm enough before taking care of his right hand.

"The muscles in your hand and arm are really tense." The Himiko rubbed Matt's hand after bandaging it. Matt didn't answer, and the nurse kept on massaging his hand and arm, working around the wounds. It was quiet in the room, almost peaceful, and Matt leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes.

The Himiko put Matt's hand back under the blanket and tucked it around him. Matt kept his eyes closed, unwilling to move. He felt the Himiko's hand brushing through his hair. "You'll be okay," the Himiko said, and left the room.

When Matt woke up, he was stiff from leaning against the wall. Still drowsy, he experimentally stretched his arms and moaned when the movement reminded him of his abrasions.

"Still sore?"

Alarmed at the voice, he looked up and saw the same Himiko standing next to his bed again.

"You don't make much noise, do you?" Matt grumbled.

"You slept. I didn't want to wake you up."

"Very thoughtful of you. How about extending your consideration to not kidnapping people?" Matt had meant it to be sarcastic, but honestly, he just sounded tired.

The Himiko gave him a sympathetic smile but didn't answer. Instead, his watcher reached for a bottle on the bedside table and poured a glass of juice.

"I'd like you to drink this; you're running low on fluids." The Himiko sat on the bed and held out the glass for him to drink.

"I can hold it myself," Matt complained.

"No, you can't." Matt started protesting, but the Himiko interrupted him. "Look at your hands."

Matt held out his hands. They were shaking.

"Your blood sugar is low. You've had a shock, and you expended a lot of energy at the scan. It didn't help that we had to stun you."

Reluctantly, Matt let the Himiko hold the glass for him while he drank. The juice tasted so good, and he protested when the Himiko took it away.

"I want more." He knew he sounded like a petulant child, but he was too tired and freaked out to care.

"You can have the rest in a little while, and then we'll get you something to eat. I want to make sure that you can keep it down."

Matt had to admit that made sense.

"If you move down a bit, I'll raise the bed head so you can stretch your legs a little." Matt shuffled around, hissing when the bandages on his leg got caught in the sheet. He felt a lot better when he was stretching out properly, though.

"Let me check that bandage again," the Himiko said. Matt leaned back on the pillows and let the Himiko take care of his ankle.

"You've still got sore muscles, haven't you?" The Himiko didn't look up.

"Yeah." Matt felt as if he'd run a marathon. Up a mountain and with a sixty-pound backpack.

"The food will help, but the fatigue is a side effect of using up all of your energy. I'll give you a massage; it'll help a little." Matt didn't protest; it felt good. And he desperately needed a sense of being safe, enough that he didn't say all those things he should have said. He should have yelled at Robbie about the people in the gymnasium and about the people who never came back and about those few who did. Instead, he leaned back and watched the Himiko work.

"What's your name?" Matt suddenly blurted out.

The Himiko looked up as if confused. Then he blushed. "Oh, sorry. I mean, a formal presentation isn't exactly necessary for us. Our names are, well, very distinct. I'm Robbie."

"I'd say that it was nice to meet you, Robbie, but you know, I could imagine better circumstances." He contemplated Robbie's words from before and sighed. He guessed that there was no way around this.

"So, you really read minds?"

Robbie gave him a steady look. "We really do."

"But it doesn't make sense! Why don't you speak, then?" The Himika were fucking terrifying in their silence.

Robbie looked up, frowning. "We don't need to talk to each other, and we're not allowed to speak to humans. The policy is to limit the human exposure to Himika to frighten you as little as possible..." The Himiko's voice died out, and he stared at Matt.

Matt was speechless for a moment. "Frighten us as little as possible? Have you lost your mind? Nothing's more scary than that silence!"

There was shock in Robbie's eyes. Matt shuddered inwardly at the thought that the Himiko could hear everything he thought as well as what he said, and he noticed Robbie's flinch when Matt thought that. Shit, this was a fucking horrible mess.

Finally, Robbie spoke. "I don't interact much with humans outside of the clinic, so I thought..."

"You thought everything was peace, love, and harmony between us?" Matt tried to keep the sarcasm out of his voice and failed miserably.

"I... No. No. But they said that it was the best thing to do."

"Yeah? Who the fuck are 'they'? Because 'they' sound as if they want a terror regime, not a mutual understanding. This doesn't make sense." He stared at the Himiko, challenging him to answer.

There was a flash of fear in Robbie's eyes, and Matt didn't understand it. Except if... Matt groaned inwardly.

Except if Robbie didn't agree with what the Himiko had been told by his superiors and was afraid to reveal it. Among mind readers, even thoughts had to get you in trouble. And looking at the way the Himika treated humans, there was a good chance they wouldn't take criticism lightly among their own. There was sheer panic in Robbie's eyes when, Matt assumed, the Himiko caught Matt's reasoning.

"Fuck you." Matt stared at Robbie. "How dare you kidnap me like this and then angle for my compassion?" But Robbie hadn't really angled for anything. He was just a scared minion. Matt sighed. This really was a fucking mess.

Robbie looked so miserable that Matt felt a pang of compassion against his will. He decided to change the subject.

"Let's just assume that you really do read minds. What on earth makes you believe that I can do the same? I think I would have a much easier time at work if I could read my clients' thoughts."

Robbie looked relieved. "You can't hear us yet, but believe me, we can hear you. And the scan this morning showed that you have a lot of potential." He began massaging Matt's leg again, making a visible effort at relaxing.

"You keep talking about a scan -- I haven't been scanned."

"Yes, you have. Remember the elderly man in the cube? He assessed you." Robbie seemed more at ease now that the subject of the conversation had been changed.

"This is bullshit. He didn't assess me; he only looked at me. Besides, I ran out of that cube before he could do anything at all."

Robbie lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, he assessed you, and the result was quite impressive. Didn't you wonder how you managed to open the doors to get out?"

Matt shook his head. "I didn't open them, they were automatic."

"They most certainly weren't -- you think we'd allow people to run in and out of a sensitive process like that? No, those doors can only be opened with the Assessor's permission -- or a lot of mental force." The Himiko looked uneasy. "And believe me, you did not have his permission."

Matt could only stare at the Himiko.

"Well," Robbie said and slapped his thigh, "let's get you the rest of this bottle of ReGen and then go to the dining hall. You really need something to eat."

Getting out of bed proved to be a lot more difficult than Matt had imagined. Even with Robbie helping him, he had trouble supporting his own weight. He swayed, and Robbie reached out a hand to steady him. Just that simple touch felt good, and he scolded himself for being this weak.

"It's okay, Matt." Robbie's voice was quiet.

Matt decided not to think about the fact that his only source of comfort was someone he had considered an enemy up until now, and let Robbie support him. He did manage to stay upright, and Robbie helped him dress in a robe.

"Could you put this on, too?" Robbie asked him. Matt stared at the metal headband in Robbie's hand. His caretaker looked apologetic. "I won't force you. It's just that, well, you're pretty loud."

Matt stared suspiciously at the metal thing. "What does it do?"

"Nothing to you, but it blocks your thoughts from us."

"So when I put this on, you can't hear me?" Matt looked expectantly at the Himiko.

"That's right."

He put the thing on without any further protests. It fit perfectly around the back of his neck and his ears. He couldn't feel any difference at all wearing it, but it did seem as if Robbie's shoulders relaxed a bit after he put it on. Loud. Huh.

They went down to the dining hall, Robbie supporting him with a hand around his waist. Matt hated to admit it, but he really needed the assistance -- he was sweating profusely from the effort of walking by the time they reached the dining room.

He had imagined that his room was part of a big hospital, but the building was almost homey with lots of light and a nice atmosphere. The dining room was no exception, and even the Himiko who brought him his food nodded to him with a kind expression. He could almost forget those damn pointy ears.

It didn't do much for his appetite, though. There was pasta and salad and a soda on the table before him, and it looked fine, but he was so exhausted he felt queasy.

"I don't think I can eat anything," he said to Robbie, who was sitting next to him at the table.

"Here, let me help you." Before Matt could do anything, Robbie reached over and removed his headband. Suddenly, Matt didn't feel nauseated anymore; instead, he was ravenous and started wolfing his food down.

"Easy now, I don't want you to puke in the middle of the dining hall."

Reluctantly, he managed to slow down, but he still ate far more than he usually did. Finally, he felt his strength returning -- and with that, his curiosity.

Robbie made a grimace. "Do you mind putting your shield back on? Your mind is as active as a squirrel on speed, and the chef is having a minor heart attack listening to you." Matt looked over at the Himiko in the kitchen; the chef was leaning on the wall, looking rather green in the face. Matt put the metal headband back on, and the chef looked deeply relieved.

"What is it with this thing? I'm a nice, quiet guy. I'm an architect, for Christ's sake!" Matt was just about to get offended. Even though the volume of his voice probably didn't help his case much.

Robbie looked at him patiently. "I explained the outlines to you earlier, remember? You can't hear us yet, but we can hear you. Very clearly, that is."

"I just don't underst... Wait. Yet. You said yet. What do you mean that I can't hear you yet?"

"We'll give you a chip to enable you to hear us."

Matt stared. He seemed to be doing that a lot today.

"And where exactly would I get that chip?"

Robbie looked him straight in the eyes. "In the neck, basically under where your shield is right now. That's the part of your brain where the potential to communicate like we do is located."

Matt blinked. "That's not my neck; that's my brain stem. Also known as the part of my brain which enables me to do nice things like, let's say, breathe. And you're going to put a fucking computer chip in there?" Okay, maybe he was loud now.

Robbie wasn't fazed.

"It's nothing as primitive as a computer chip, but apart from that, yes."

If he learned much more about mind reading and brain surgery -- oh, no, no thinking the s-word -- Matt was going to freak out. Well, again. And more, this time.

"Do I even get a choice in this?"

For the first time, Robbie looked uncomfortable, staring down at the table. "That's the only way we can get to know each other properly, you know -- if your race gets to experience how my kind perceives the world." The Himiko got eager, looking at Matt again. "The whole point about the way we talk and sense each other is that it's not just a means of communication like a telephone or a computer. It's that we experience other beings in a far more intimate way than you do. And it's really difficult to harm someone when you know them that well."

"You seem to manage quite well," Matt interrupted Robbie.

The Himiko looked ashamed. "I... I know. But it's what we have to do. The humans and the Himika haven't exactly got the best relations. This entire attempt at co-existing could go really wrong." Robbie looked pleadingly at him. "To enable humans to experience our perceptions is the only way to change that."

"No, it's not. You could start by not kidnapping us. You could try not treating us like animals, and you could try not making us terrified. Do you really think this is the best way?"

Robbie looked down. "I'm not saying that I agree with the methods."

"Have you even seen what's happening? Have you seen how humans are kidnapped and tied up like animals? Because it's really, really horrible."

"What do you mean, tied up?" Robbie looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"The people you kidnap are tethered like cattle until you do whatever the fuck you do to them. Some of them looked as if they had been there for hours and hours. I'd say that it wasn't humane, but that goes without saying, doesn't it?" He looked angrily at the Himiko.

"I didn't know that! People come here from different places, and of course they're scared in the beginning..."

Matt interrupted him. "But it's not a matter of course. Why should they have to be scared? Why should I have to be so fucking scared?" His voice cracked on the last word.

Robbie reached out to him and put a hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry. I really am. Because I see the fear, too. It's not..." The Himiko's words ebbed out, and he was staring down at the table as if he were far away. Then he shook his head slightly, his eyes once again present.

"But I can't change the way it's done, or the fact that we're not even allowed to talk to humans. I can't do anything, other than make you as comfortable as possible while you're here. It's all I can do."

"You just follow orders?" Matt couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"Himiko orders," Robbie's voice was very quiet, "you have to follow. If not..." He looked at Matt, but didn't finish the sentence. His eyes were deadly serious.

Matt was tired, and it irked him that he bothered listening to Robbie's explanations. It irked him even more that, in spite of the whole situation, he was starting to like the Himiko. Robbie seemed sincerely upset about Matt's words.

He briefly wondered if he was getting some kind of Stockholm syndrome, giving in this easily. There just didn't seem to be any other options. He could even see how it was necessary to lessen the tension between humankind and... Okay, "Himikokind" just sounded

plain wrong. Matt decided to let it go; he had had more than enough of this for one day.

"Can I go back to my room now? I'm still really tired." He wasn't lying. The food had given him a lot of his strength back, but he was getting sleepy. And overwhelmed.

Robbie looked worried, but helped him stand and supported him on the walk back toward his room. Walking was a lot easier now, even though his legs were still a bit wobbly.

"Pietr will be here to talk to you tomorrow, and he'll go through everything that'll happen from here on," Robbie said as they were walking down the hallway and into his room. "You already know him from this morning, and he can give you some more details."

When they entered his room, Robbie took off Matt's shield, looking relieved when it was off. About what the Himiko heard? The thought was too spooky, and so Matt ignored it. He was then gently helped out of his robe and into bed.

"Right now, your body needs to recover, and sleep will be the best way to do that. Don't hesitate to push this button if you need me, though -- I'll be here until tomorrow."

He had already closed his eyes. "I thought I was loud?" he mumbled.

He could hear the grin in Robbie's voice even without looking. "Nobody's loud enough to shout through these walls. Night-night."

Matt tried to answer but fell asleep before he could finish.

Matt felt a lot better when he woke up the next morning. He was ravenously hungry, but his head was clearer. Unfortunately, that enabled him to contemplate the things he had been told the day before.

The problem was that at least some of it made sense. The relationship between humans and aliens was precarious to say the least, and one of the things that really made humans freak out about the Himika was their silence. They hardly ever spoke, and then only to make short commands. It only underlined their inhumanity, and it made communicating with them almost impossible. It clearly did not help the relationship between the races that the humans failed to understand this aspect of the alien race.

Their mind-reading abilities also explained their intellectual superiority. The only thing keeping down a rebellion among the scared humans had been the very clear knowledge that they would lose. Big time. In the first confused days, after the Himika had arrived and before the political leaders of the world had given their Berlin pronouncement ("as this city was once divided and now is united, so will humans and Himika be united, standing proud and facing a new future together"), some panicked fundamentalists from the Bible Belt had tried to fight the "ungodly aliens." The result had been very, very ugly. The pictures had gone around the world, and nobody had wanted to repeat that experience.

Now, the discontent was growing. There had been an almost complete lack of communication between the two races, and even the most enthusiastic alien lovers had grown silent.

There had been a lot of excitement back when they had got the first messages from space. Every UFO

enthusiast out there had the "I told you so!" moment of their life. Jones had definitely been one of them. He'd even got one of the t-shirts with an alien and an "I told you they're real!" on it.

"It's the childhood dream of every space scientist," Jones had explained. He talked like that, Matt remembered with a smile. Jones insisted on calling himself and all of his very different colleagues space scientists. "Nobody can spell astrophysicist, you know."

"It's a fact that we're not alone after all. Most of us haven't even dared hope to find the fossil of a single bacterium, much less intelligent life, but now it seems that even our wildest dreams haven't been ambitious enough," Jones had continued, a dreamy expression on his face.

Matt had been caught up in Jones' enthusiasm, and he had been in the crowd gathering in the park to see the landing on the big screens there. It had been more like a formal meeting of foreign heads of state than a Spielberg movie. That is, boring and with a disappointing lack of action.

Disappointment had been the predominant mood on Earth after those first excited weeks. There hadn't been much contact and hardly any communication between the Himika and the average human being. In most people's opinion, the discovery of other life in the universe had been the biggest anticlimax ever.

Until the harvesting began and the fear took over.

Matt's stomach rumbled loudly. He shook himself out of reminiscing and got out of bed. After a moment of swaying, his legs held up fine. Robbie had been right; all he'd needed to recover was a good night's sleep.

The Himiko had put out a pair of sweats and a t-shirt for him. After a moment of hesitation, Matt also put on the shield. He liked the thought of having some privacy.

Matt opened the door and walked toward the dining room. He had rounded the corner when he saw three Himika standing a little farther down the hallway. One of them was the dark-haired Himiko from yesterday. Matt clearly remembered the strange name, Pietr, and he wondered why.

The group of Himika were gathered closely together, studying some papers, and hadn't seen him yet. Matt halted, looking at Pietr. He remembered the gray eyes from yesterday, and he felt something inside him shifting as he watched. For a moment, he felt dizzy. The Himiko looked up, and their eyes met. Without thinking, Matt reached up and took off his shield.

All hell broke loose. One Himiko stumbled and fell to his knees, another cried out and started running toward him, and suddenly Robbie was next to him, shouting something unintelligible in his ear. Matt didn't hear any of it; he was caught in the eyes of the Himiko. There was something there, and he lost himself completely in it, letting go entirely. It felt so good, like coming home after being away forever.

Suddenly, Robbie had his shield back in place and Matt was torn out of his trance. He swayed and almost fell, but Robbie caught him and he stayed upright. His eyes desperately sought Pietr's, but the Himiko was being led away on unsteady legs between two others.

For a moment, Matt struggled to go after Pietr, but Robbie wouldn't let him. His nurse was still talking to him, but Matt didn't understand any of the words. He had a sickening pain deep in his chest, and it got worse and worse. He clung to Robbie's shoulder and tried to breathe.

After an unbearable moment of suffocating, his vision cleared. He looked up to see the two Himika carrying a now unconscious Pietr down the hallway and

into a room. This time, Robbie couldn't hold him back. Matt tore off his shield and charged toward the room.

Pietr was in a bed, still lifeless, and the other Himika were standing around him with stricken looks on their faces. Matt ran to Pietr's side.

One of the guards tried to stop him from getting near the bed, but he flung the Himiko against the wall. Finally, Matt could climb into the bed and hold his mate. Another of the Himika tried to close in on him, but he lifted his head and snarled, keeping them all away. Nobody was going near Pietr.

The Himika around him looked shocked, and one of them sank back against the wall as if hit. He turned his back to them and cradled Pietr in his arms. This was where they belonged, together.

After that, there was a lot of commotion around him. He didn't pay attention to any of it; he just held his unconscious mate, rocking Pietr and crooning gently. After a while, it got quieter in the room.

Matt held on tightly to the warm body in his arms. He had a feeling of completeness, of being whole for the first time in his life. Looking at the Himiko filled him with a happiness that he had never experienced before, and it was a heady feeling. It was the feeling of being totally content. He'd always thought that pure happiness was a fairytale made up by drunks and junkies, but this was very real.

His mate began to stir. Pietr's eyes opened and the Himiko looked at Matt, blinking. The gray eyes stared at him as he held his lover's head gently between his hands, caressing Pietr's cheek. Suddenly, the Himiko began to panic.

"No, no, no, you're okay, I've got you." Matt's words didn't help; quite the contrary. There was a deep anguish in Pietr's gray eyes. It tore Matt apart to see his mate in this kind of pain, and he leaned in and kissed Pietr gently, easing his mate with his lips and willing the Himiko's pain to go away.

Pietr stilled and looked at him with big, wondering eyes. Matt poured compassion and calm into the kiss, and suddenly Pietr kissed him back. Matt could have cried from the joy of it, from the feeling of his mate's body against his and the eager response to his kisses.

How long they spent kissing and just breathing together, he didn't know. He was brought back into the real world when he heard Robbie's polite cough in the background. He reluctantly turned his head to look at the Himiko while putting his arm protectively around Pietr.

Robbie had his arms crossed and didn't look pleased at all.

"Am I too loud again?" Matt asked, exasperated.

Robbie looked at him incredulously. "You might say so," the Himiko said with a raised eyebrow. "Especially considering the people we've had to carry out of here unconscious because you were lashing out mentally at everyone who got too close to you. And then there's the slight detail that you've bonded with a Himiko."

"He's mine." There was no doubt about that. By his side, Pietr gave an affirmative noise.

"I'm afraid you're right." Next to him, Pietr started to get up. Matt quickly turned to calm his mate down.

"Shh, you've been unconscious. You should rest."

"I'm fine." It was the first time Matt had heard the voice of his beautiful Himiko, and it filled him with joy. "You should rest, yourself -- you spent all of your energy only yesterday."

Matt gave Pietr a hard kiss and had almost forgotten about Robbie when he cleared his throat loudly.

Reluctantly, Matt tore himself away from the kiss. "What?" he asked impatiently.

"If the two of you could keep off the caring competition for more than three seconds at a time, we could discuss this."

Matt and Pietr both raised their heads and growled almost in unison, then looked at each other, surprised. Matt blushed a bit and sat up, leaning against the wall and keeping Pietr close by his side.

"Okay, what's wrong?"

Robbie took a seat on the chair next to the bed. Suddenly, he seemed very tired.

"What's wrong is the fact that this shouldn't have happened." This time, it was Pietr who leaned aggressively forward. Matt gently stroked his lover's face to calm him down.

"It will be enough for now," Pietr said. "He's my mate."

"What?" Matt looked from one to the other uncomprehendingly.

"It'll be like this, you know." Robbie ignored him, talking to Pietr. "This is all you'll get until he has his operation."

"Hey!" Matt started to get angry. "Could you please tell me what you're talking about?"

Robbie looked at him with a cold expression. "We're talking about the fact that Pietr won't get any real feedback from you until you've had your operation -- and maybe not even then, if you don't succeed in learning to use your abilities. You can't respond to anything he thinks to you, to how he feels. And what your mate won't tell you because he's stupidly in love with you is the fact that it might be critical to him."

Matt turned his attention back to Pietr, who avoided his eyes. He suddenly felt cold.

"I don't understand."

Robbie gestured angrily. "I tried to explain it to you earlier on. The 'mind reading,' as you call it, it's not only a means of communication. It's the key aspect of our interaction. If you prevent us from doing it... Well, we can't live like that." Robbie got up and started to pace.

"Some of us manage better than others; you already saw the guards at the Scanning Hall wearing shields. They can do it for long periods of time -- but most of them haven't bonded yet. And even the strongest of us need to connect with others regularly to stay sane." He looked apologetically at Matt. "When you've bonded, your connection to your mate is your primary source of contact -- and if it fails, it can be... damaging to the Himiko."

Matt stared at Robbie. He didn't want to know what that meant. "So if I fail to learn how to communicate, Pietr will be hurt?"

Robbie nodded. "Or worse," he added. Matt did not want to ask what could be worse.

Matt desperately tried to avoid the thought that he could be the reason that his mate suffered. He looked Robbie straight in the eyes.

"Then give me the operation now." He felt the fear rush through him at the thought of someone placing a chip in his brain, but he refused to let it show. Pietr took his hand.

Robbie looked at him, a bit kinder now. "Believe me, we will. The transplant surgeon will be here as soon as possible and you'll have the surgery today or first thing tomorrow morning. In the meantime, there are a lot of things you need to know."

Matt stuck out his chin stubbornly. "Then explain them to me."

When Robbie left their room an hour later, Matt's head was spinning. It wasn't just from the sheer amount of information; what really worried him was the scarcely hidden fact that this could go wrong. Very wrong.

"Right now, Pietr can hear you as clearly as we all can, but you can't hear him. The chip will enable you to do that, but it's a bit trickier than that," Robbie had explained. And then he had kept on and on, explaining all the details, some of them obvious and some of them beyond what Matt would ever have considered of any importance at all.

After the operation, they would be in an insulated room to keep anyone but Pietr from communicating with him in the first moments after he woke up. Robbie was very vague as to why that was so important. That did absolutely nothing to reassure Matt.

What worried Matt mostly, however, were the intricacies of the process. Apparently, one of the most difficult things was the anesthesia.

"We have to sedate Pietr first -- otherwise, he's going to panic when you disappear," Robbie explained.

Matt winced.

"Okay, not the best choice of words," Robbie said apologetically. "But anyway, the tricky thing is to bring you back up at the right pace. You can't be brought out without having Pietr there, and he can't be awake for long without you; we're already stretching the time he can be on his own by postponing the operation until tomorrow." The surgeon hadn't been able to come until the next day. "And no one can be in the room

unprotected when you wake up, which makes monitoring and medicating you difficult. The shields won't be adequate in this particular situation; you're just too sensitive."

Matt felt his desperation grow. "So you're basically telling me that this is probably going to go wrong -- and you're doing that without giving me any advice on how to make it work. Why are you even bothering telling me all this?"

Robbie sat down, sighing. "I guess I'm trying to prepare you for something that you can't be prepared for," he said. He looked sympathetically at Matt. "The most important thing is that you don't panic. Relax and let it happen. It will feel really strange, but if you relax and let Pietr guide you, you can make it.

"I'm a bit worried about your claustrophobia, though," Robbie continued. "How bad is it?"

"I don't like to be confined," Matt confessed reluctantly.

"Or tied up, if your reaction to the restraints is anything to go by," Robbie said. "We'll do our best to mix the anesthetic to match that. If we put in a nice bit of tranquilizer, it will be easier for you to accept his presence in your mind.

"The best you can do right now is to strengthen your bond with Pietr. The better you know him, the easier it will be tomorrow. So I won't, well, disturb you any more until tomorrow." Robbie blushed a bit as he left.

Matt blinked and looked at Pietr. "Did he just order us to have sex?" he asked disbelievingly.

Pietr smirked. "I think he did."

"But are you even gay?" Matt couldn't hide his indignation.

Pietr looked at him. "You really don't know anything about this, do you? And by the way, you just kissed me. Very thoroughly."

"Just because I kissed you, it didn't mean you wanted me to! And how am I supposed to know anything? I don't know anything about you." Matt stopped himself from saying the word "aliens" at the last moment.

Pietr looked slightly apologetic. "Okay, point taken. If you lean a bit closer, I'll tell you everything about it."

He looked suspiciously at Pietr. "Why do I have to sit closer?"

The look on Pietr's face was just a little sheepish. "Well, you don't, I just like it when you do."

Matt grumbled but still moved so he was leaning into Pietr, who started talking.

"Have you ever heard the term 'my other half'? You often find it in popular culture, like films and literature."

"Of course I know it. I have an extensive knowledge of 'popular culture.'" A fancy way of saying that Matt had watched his share of movies and television. "It comes from Plato, who believed that each of us is one half of an original whole, and the other person who completes that whole is out there somewhere -- thus the belief that you can find your other half again."

Pietr stared at him.

"What? I have an education, you know."

Pietr shook himself. "Yes, of course, I just didn't think..." Pietr made a visible effort to get back on track.

"Well, the point is that Plato was right. Not about you humans, but about us -- Plato was very sensitive."

This time it was Matt's turn to stare. "Sensitive as in - he heard you?"

"Well, not so much heard as distantly registered our ideas and characteristics. The influence was enough to inspire him to write what he did. That has been the case

with major parts of Earth culture and inventions. Plato, Michelangelo -- da Vinci, of course."

"So, you're basically saying that every step forward we've ever made was made because of your influence?" Matt sounded a little lost, even to himself.

Pietr put his arms around him. "I'm sorry, I know it's all a bit overwhelming. But the truth is this: we have been here for a long time, watching and waiting for the time when you were ready to meet us. Most of the things you got from us merely rubbed off from our culture and were absorbed into your daily life, but a few things we deliberately planted here to prepare you for our arrival."

Matt swallowed. "Let me guess: Spielberg?"

"Of course -- and Bowie before him. Sometimes, it wasn't that controlled; I've no idea why the pointy ears got so popular. But really, it's a rather long list."

"You don't say," Matt said in a weak voice. Pietr hugged him tighter.

"I'm sorry to spring it all on you like this, but it's the only way to explain what's happening with us."

Matt tried to tear his thoughts away from the fact that what he had believed to be the miracle of a unique human civilization was nothing but a bad copy of the Himiko culture.

"Not a bad copy. You did a nice job on your own, too. We could never have Mahler. Or ice cream."

"I. You... What?"

"Well, it doesn't make much sense, does it? Cream doesn't taste all that great in itself, so why try to freeze it?"

Matt sputtered. "I wasn't talking about..." He gestured wildly in the air. "What about Rilke, then?" Okay, there were probably more urgent topics to clear up, but this one was important to him. And now he was defending himself against himself. Way to go.

For the first time, Pietr looked a bit worried. "Rilke was extremely sensitive. I think that's very clear from his *New Poems*. Are you okay?"

Matt nodded. Then he frowned.

"Why do you even ask? Can't you tell how I'm feeling?"

"Yes, I can tell that you're a mess, and I don't understand why. You accepted the fact that the Himika communicate with thoughts, but this seems to upset you. And it concerns me to see you upset."

"I'm not a mess." He was.

"You are. And you can't hide it from me, so why try to play hero instead of letting me comfort you?"

Matt frowned some more. "And now you're just trying to confuse the case by bringing logic into it," he grumbled. But he had to admit that Pietr had a point, so he reluctantly gave up his attempt at an unconcerned façade and leaned into Pietr. It felt really good to be lying in the Himiko's arms. He sighed.

"It's a stupid thing, really, but back when my father was still alive, he used to read Rilke for me. He taught German. It was long before I was anywhere near able to understand it, but I still connected the sound and the rhythm of those words with my father. I even wanted to study literature, or at least German, because of it. It was only my father's suggestion to envision a day of work in each of my chosen fields of study that finally made me choose architecture. I haven't regretted it, and I'm eternally grateful to my father for that. Somehow, Rilke means all that to me."

Matt made a dismissive gesture, a little embarrassed by his monologue. "Learning that all I've held sacred -- you know, literature and art -- that it's all just a bad copy of the real thing, that's like finding out that our entire civilization is a fake. It's really disturbing."

"Once again: It's not a bad copy. I didn't say that." Pietr held him more tightly and gently stroked his arms. "Will it be of any help knowing that you've only incorporated so much of our culture these last couple of hundred years because you're about to catch up? All Plato got was a very vague outline; it hasn't been until now that you've been able to accept the idea of us."

Oddly enough, it was a comfort. Of course, Pietr's warm body and gentle caresses weren't bad, either. Matt decided to leave the panicking to some other day. He had a sense that he would need it plenty of times in the future.

Pietr snorted. "You're very odd, you know?"

"I'm not!" He lifted his head to glare at Pietr.

"Yes, you are. You fight like crazy when you feel you have a cause, but if not, you just let it go."

"Well, anything else would be stupid."

"It would. And you're not stupid. Far from it."

"Apart from that, I had something to fight for last time, you know." He let his head sink a little toward Pietr.

"You did. And you got me, heaven help us."

Matt was about to give an enraged answer again but got kind of distracted when Pietr kissed him.

This was nothing like the chaste kisses they had shared earlier on. Matt felt something surge through him as Pietr's lips met his again and again, soft and then hard and more exciting than anything he had ever experienced before. He felt melted and tense all at once, fully absorbed in the pleasure, and he reached out to Pietr to make sure that his mate wouldn't let go. The hard grip on Matt's shirt assured him that letting go was the last thing on Pietr's mind.

They rolled, and he felt Pietr's weight on top of him. His lover looked down. "You give so much," Pietr said, wonderingly.

For once, Matt was serious. "You can have it all," he answered. "Please." Pietr made a strangled sound and dove in to kiss him again.

He felt the strange connection again, but his need took over and he couldn't think of anything but his beautiful lover. "Please... Touch me." He couldn't get close enough, couldn't feel enough. Greedily, he tore at Pietr's clothes. They ripped with a very satisfying sound, leaving Pietr blinking. Then the Himiko dived in again, kissing and trying to work off Matt's shirt.

He didn't have much luck since he refused to let go of Matt's lips the entire time. In the end, Matt had to pull back to get some much-needed oxygen, laughing and panting at the same time.

"My shirt is in the way, stupid." He managed to get it over his head before Pietr kissed him again, this time using pinching and caressing hands to stroke Matt's chest at the same time. It was good until the Himiko came to Matt's nipples -- then it was unbearably hot. His body went tight as a spring, and his moan came from somewhere in him nobody had touched before. Pietr kept pinching and tugging until Matt's mind was about to collapse with the pleasure. Then his lover finally granted him a rest, gently kissing him until he recovered a bit.

He clung to Pietr's body, suddenly worried.

"What's up?" Pietr looked at him questioningly.

Matt laughed, a bit embarrassed. "It's just... I'm almost losing my mind and you haven't even touched my cock yet. Don't melt my mind, okay?" He was only partly joking.

Pietr hugged him tenderly. "Don't worry. I'll blow your cock, not your mind."

Matt stared, then he started to giggle. "That one was so bad!" He smacked Pietr's ass.

"Hey, that particular part of me is for fucking, not for spanking. And I can't believe you don't appreciate my efforts to be romantic."

"You're not being romantic, you're being incredibly cheesy. But hey, thanks for watching out for me."

He let his hands wander over Pietr's back and shoulders, and he couldn't help touching those pointy ears, either. They felt just like normal ears, though, so his hands went back to get another feel of that tight ass. "Does that mean that you're a bottom, by the way?"

Pietr nuzzled under his ear and Matt had to use all of his self control not to melt right then and there. "It means that I'm into anything that turns you on."

Fuck, this was just like Christmas. Well, without the kids and the family, because doing what they were doing with that kind of audience would just be... stranger than he was willing to be.

Poor Pietr looked slightly bewildered, and Matt had to remind himself that the Himiko could hear his thoughts. He really had to keep that wandering mind of his in check.

Matt quickly got back on track when Pietr leaned down and kissed him. "Tonight, I'm turned on by you fucking me," Matt managed to say in between kisses. He ground his cock into Pietr again.

"I know." The realization that Pietr really would know exactly how Matt felt hit him, and it made the excitement surge through him. So intimate.

"Yes, I'll be inside you. Inside your body tonight, and tomorrow, I'll be in your mind and you will be in mine."

"I can't wait." Matt struggled to get loose. Pietr cocked his head, looking at him.

"Words, remember? Can't hear you without them."

Pietr looked sheepishly at him. "I just wanted to know if something's wrong -- why are you trying to get away?"

Okay, now he was getting aggravated. "Pants, you fool! Way too many clothes here. What happened to your mind reading?"

"Oh!" Pietr hastily moved so Matt could get the damned trousers off. The Himiko looked flustered and more than a little embarrassed. "I was kind of occupied with... other subjects on your mind."

"That's just a fancy way of saying that you're really horny."

"Exactly. So hurry up with the pants, will you?"

"They're off. Will you stop talking and ki..." Okay. Mind reading: good thing.

Touching was even better. Matt couldn't keep his hands off Pietr's back, letting them wander and pet and do his very best to drive Pietr crazy. It seemed to work, too; Pietr ground slowly against him, and their cocks rubbed. He moaned out loud and clung to Pietr's shoulders, grinding right back. He managed to speak. "Can't wait much longer... Do you have stuff?"

Pietr kissed his throat and ground again, forcing a groan out of Matt. He managed to push the Himiko away. "I want you to fuck me. Get the slick, will you?" He took another kiss. "And hurry up, God damn it!"

With a groan, Pietr tore himself loose and fumbled in the bedside drawer until he came up, triumphantly, with a tube of lube. "Now you won't call me unfocused again, will you?" He slicked up his fingers and hooked Matt's leg over his shoulder.

"I didn't call you... Oh!" The first finger broke into him, soon followed by another. It burned, and Matt arched with the feeling. So good. So safe.

"God, you're so hot." Pietr started to fuck him with two fingers.

At first, the Himiko's movements were slow and careful, driving him nuts. "I need more. Please, please, Pietr." He desperately ground against the fingers, trying to get more, get it faster.

Pietr added another finger, and for a moment it was too much. Matt arched desperately, too full, the three fingers too much to take. Then Pietr's fingers found that spot inside him, and Matt screamed while his body tensed up in arousal.

"Now, Pietr. Don't let me fucking wait anymore!" Okay, so he was pushy; it didn't seem like Pietr was complaining.

Pietr pulled out his fingers and started lubing his hard cock. Then Matt finally felt the cockhead pushing in.

He looked at Pietr, confused. "Honey, we can't... You don't know if I'm clean." Not that he didn't want to, but that was a risk he just didn't take.

Pietr wiped his fingers in the sheet, then bent over and kissed Matt. "Himika can't get those diseases. Anyway, we're both clean."

Matt looked up at him. "I... We can do this?"

Pietr nodded, looking too caught up to speak.

"I've never... You'll be my first. The first to enter me bare."

Pietr moaned, and then the Himiko kissed Matt until he lost any coherent thought in his head. Pietr supported himself with one hand and pushed. The cockhead breached Matt, and he yelled from the oh-so-good burn.

Pietr didn't stop to let him get used to the feeling, just kept on pushing. The cock inside him felt big, and Matt

was spread wide as he was filled with his mate. It was just on the edge of what he could bear, and he bent his head and bit down hard on Pietr's shoulder.

His mate shouted and reared back. It only served to drive that cock deeper into Matt, and he groaned again and pulled Pietr's cock all the way into him.

Pietr looked stunned, but the Himiko grabbed Matt's head and kissed him again, his cock withdrawing. Matt moaned into the kiss, protesting the loss. When Pietr was almost all the way out, his lover pushed back in, deep and hard. All the air left Matt's lungs in a rush, and he panted into the kiss as Pietr began to fuck him.

Sliding in and out of his body with long, graceful movements, Pietr pulled out until Matt could feel the cockhead just inside his entrance and then pushed in again. The Himiko's lips left Matt's, no longer blocking his moans as he was taken deeply and still harder.

Pietr nuzzled and licked the sensitive skin underneath Matt's ear, pushing Matt to new levels of pleasure. He could only hold on as Pietr's thrusts got more aggressive and filled him completely, leaving him babbling and keening with the pleasure.

Matt was far beyond coherent. His breath came in loud moans and he cried out as Pietr found his prostate. He was full, he was loved, and he poured his own love back at Pietr as he came with a long shout.

Pietr's hips stuttered and he emitted a hoarse groan as he came, pumping his seed deep into Matt. He thrust wildly a couple of times more and then collapsed on top of Matt's sweaty body.

Matt held on tightly, trying to catch his breath and enjoying Pietr's weight. To his own astonishment, his cheeks were suddenly wet from tears and he clung to his mate, sobbing. Pietr didn't say anything, only held him

tightly and kissed his tears away. Matt grasped his mate's hair and looked into the gray eyes.

"I love you," he said through the tears. Pietr looked at him with passion in those eyes, kissing him like his mate would never let go. Which he sincerely hoped the Himiko wouldn't.

They turned onto their sides, kissing and nuzzling. Suddenly, Matt was exhausted. It felt like his limbs were broken and he was unable to move. For a moment, fear shot through him. Pietr gently stroked his cheek.

"You're just tired -- you've basically used all of your energy twice in as many days. You'll be fine tomorrow."

Matt settled in, trusting Pietr to tell him the truth and being too tired to do much else.

"You know, I *will* be fine tomorrow -- I'll be able to hear you for the first time." The thought didn't scare him as much anymore. If being with Pietr could be this good now, he would take any chance he could get to get even closer.

Pietr hugged him. "You will. I love you, and everything will be fine. Go to sleep now. I'll be here with you."

That was all Matt needed to hear, and he let go and fell asleep, feeling safe and loved.

It was a feeling he desperately tried to retrieve the next morning. He had woken up feeling half dead, muscles screaming and his head filled with lead, unable to think any coherent thoughts. Robbie had mumbled something about teaching him the proper use of energy when the Himiko had brought them their breakfast. Matt had stubbornly ignored the mutter, letting himself be cuddled and fed by Pietr.

Pietr was quiet, holding him close and kissing and caressing him while they ate. There wasn't anything awkward about the silence, and Matt let the peace fall over him, feeling his strength returning as he got some food and drink in him.

When they had finished eating, he turned onto his side and nuzzled into Pietr. They stayed like that, the only sound in the room their breathing. Finally, Matt broke the silence.

"I'm ready now." He looked up at Pietr. "It doesn't mean I'm not still nervous, but I'm ready to do it." *For you.*

Pietr smiled, so much tenderness there. "Then let's do it." He got a twinkle in his eyes, grabbing Matt's butt hard. Matt gasped, the ache from the fuck the night before exquisite.

"And if you wake up and forget who I am, just feel this and remember who did that to you." Pietr grinned.

Matt feigned shocked disbelief. "Here I thought you were my romantic lover, and instead you had ulterior motives all the time?"

Pietr was utterly unrepentant. "My ulterior motive was fucking you so you would feel it for days -- that can't possibly be bad."

"Okay, when you put it like that..." Matt chuckled, then got serious. "I trust you to catch me if I fall, okay? After the surgery?"

Pietr looked at him steadily. "I will."

"Okay." Matt took a deep breath. "Then let's do this."

In spite of his resolution to get the operation over and done with, Matt's nerves were still threatening to choke him when he was on the operating table, waiting for the surgeon. The table was broad, leaving space for Pietr, too. The doctors would anaesthetize them both, move Pietr away while they put the chip in Matt's head, and then bring them back together to wake up. It sounded relatively simple and wouldn't even take that long. Still, the risks were so big...

"Keep him calm, will you?" Robbie didn't look at Matt, he only talked to Pietr.

"Hey -- 'he's' right here, you know. And I'm calm," Matt protested, trying to hide his nerves.

Robbie raised an eyebrow. He was annoyingly good at it. On the other hand, he had to be, with the training he put in.

Matt grumbled and snuggled in, letting Pietr hold him. It helped, and he could almost ignore the green-clad people around him preparing the operation. Well, almost.

One of the nurses came to them. "We'll start sedating you now. In the beginning, it will mostly be a tranquilizer, and then we'll add the anesthetic." She started adjusting some of the equipment surrounding them.

So, this was it.

Pietr gently held onto Matt's head and kissed him. "Sweet dreams, okay? See you in a bit. I love you."

Matt swallowed and let the kiss comfort him. "Get me back, will you?" Pietr nodded. "I love you, too." He began to feel the effect of the drugs and relaxed. Pietr struggled briefly, clinging to him and shaking him a bit. Through the haze, Matt managed to calm his mate down, though, petting Pietr and mumbling soothing words. Well, thinking them, really. Speaking took way too much energy right now. Then he was out.

He couldn't wake up. Matt's body was so heavy and he couldn't move his arms or legs at all. It didn't really feel that bad except for the fact that he couldn't move. Couldn't even if he tried really hard. Which he did. He groaned, fighting whatever it was that kept him down, kept his eyelids glued shut.

"Reduce the drugs now, he doesn't like it."

Nope, he didn't, and Pietr knew it. Pietr. Matt pried open an eye and saw his lover next to him. Satisfied, he managed to roll over. Sighing, he rested against the Himiko, scenting the now familiar body.

Matt felt Pietr's arms around him and then felt the most peculiar sensation he'd ever experienced. It was as if something was poking his brain, but from the inside. He shuffled a bit, trying to make the annoying brain-mosquito go away. Wait. Brain-mosquito. That was funny.

Yeah, you're a funny one. This didn't feel right. It was Pietr, but his lover's voice was all wrong, taking up space in the middle of Matt's brain. Matt shook his head to make it go away, waking up a bit.

I won't hurt you. I promised to get you back, remember? And I'm right here for you.

Matt struggled to sit up, desperately trying to get away from the intrusion in his mind. The feeling of something strange in his head was intolerable.

Inside his brain. There was something inside his brain. The thought was enough to make the panic shoot through him.

It's me. I won't hurt you. Please stay with me.

But Matt couldn't, there was no way he could cope with this, with the terrifying feeling of something intruding in his mind. He struggled to get out of the bed, only to collapse against the wall. He curled up and grasped his head, hard.

Please, make this stop. He couldn't take it anymore.

"He's freaking out. If you don't calm him down, we'll have to stun him." The voice was vaguely familiar.

"NO! You can't, I can't lose him again." It was Pietr talking now, and Matt cringed with the desperation in the Himiko's voice. He automatically tried to calm his mate, giving Pietr love and warmth with his mind.

Yes! Like that. Talk to me.

Matt was still choking from the invasion. *I can't, it's too much.*

But you're already doing it. Far away, Matt registered Pietr holding him, looking into his eyes.

I can't have you in me. It's too much, there's not enough space for us both.

Then come into me. He looked into Pietr's eyes and fell into them. Suddenly it wasn't only his lover inside Matt's mind; Pietr opened up, letting him into his mate's mind, letting him catch his breath again.

Pietr withdrew a little, letting him sense everything there, unhindered. Matt couldn't believe it.

You're so open. There was so much space in here, so many corners and memories and thoughts. And everything was laid bare to Matt with a trust so complete that it baffled him.

I love you. It seemed to be as simple as that for Pietr. And his mate really did; Matt could feel Pietr's love surrounding him. This time it wasn't suffocating. Instead, it was supporting him, letting him know that everything would be all right, that they were going to be together forever. He felt the exhilaration go through Pietr at that thought, and the kiss he got was so full of love and relief that he could do nothing but lose himself in it.

Matt vaguely felt Pietr lifting him back into bed and an annoyingly familiar cough. He pushed Robbie out of the room; really, he had more important things on his mind right now.

He felt Pietr's laughter ripple through his mind. Their minds. He couldn't believe this was true.

Concentrate now, baby. Pietr sent him a very clear image of his lover's very hard dick. *I need your cooperation here.*

Matt spluttered. Mentally, which was a whole new experience. *So now "cooperation" is another word for getting off?*

If I need words, I'm definitely doing something wrong. Pietr kissed him again, fighting Matt's clothes to get to his body. The Himiko was clumsy to the point where Matt decided to just tear the damn things off. It gave a very satisfying ripping sound.

Easier like that. He felt the laughter go through Pietr's mind. Then it changed into clear, pure heat as Matt let his tongue wander down his mate's neck. Someone definitely had a sensitive spot here.

It wasn't just a single hot spot, though; Pietr's pleasure never diminished. *It seems you're my hot spot.* Pietr's laughter mingled with Matt's joy. For a moment he marveled at the fact that he had made his lover feel like that.

That's what we do. And don't stop, please.

Matt didn't have to be told twice. He kept up his exploration, going further down to the collarbone, nipping and sucking the soft skin under his lips.

Pietr surrendered; head back and eyes closed, he arched, trying to make Matt go lower. His mind welled over with pleasure, need, and exultation about having finally met his mate. Matt's eyes were suddenly full of tears at having made someone this happy, this fulfilled.

The sexual need in Pietr's mind won over any thoughts, and Matt found Pietr's right nipple and sucked. Pietr yelled; body arched and hands caught in Matt's hair as Pietr tried to hold on, to get more. His mind was a dazzling inferno of pure pleasure, spiking when Matt bit his nipple, none too gently.

Matt left the nipple and continued to kiss a slow path down Pietr's chest and stomach. The IV wouldn't let him move his hand any further down, so he kept pinching Pietr's nipple with one hand while he kissed his way down Pietr's belly, the tense muscles rippling under his lips as he nuzzled the soft skin.

When he got to the hard, dripping cock, he gently nuzzled his way around it, caressing Pietr's inner thighs with his lips. By now, Pietr was begging him mentally, beyond words or even coherent thoughts and body trembling with need. Finally, Matt took pity on his mate and let himself taste, taking the beautiful cockhead into his mouth.

Oh, dear God. Matt wasn't sure he had managed to say the words even in his head. He felt Pietr's pleasure

so clearly, and it increased his own until they were both reduced to the essence of boiling, burning need. He felt the rush of come in his dick, in his mouth. He could no longer distinguish between himself and his lover, and it was glorious. He came, and Pietr came, and they were so closely interwoven that he couldn't tell them apart anymore.

He greedily swallowed the last of Pietr's come and cleaned his lover up with slow, nuzzling strokes of his tongue. When he could feel Pietr reaching the verge of overload, he pulled himself back up and kissed his lover.

"Wow." Matt spoke out loud. He was hoarse -- had he been shouting that much?

It's from the tubes from your surgery. And yes, "wow" is a pretty good description.

Is it always this good? This big? Matt was suddenly worried.

I don't know. Why does the pleasure worry you?

Matt kind of blushed. In his mind. A very peculiar feeling. It didn't help much that Pietr started laughing at his mental image of the top of his head coming off while he was... coming. Okay, embarrassment wasn't good for either vocabulary or imagery.

Pietr got a bit more serious. *I promise that if it gets to be too much for you, we'll take it down a bit. But I really enjoyed it before. Didn't you?*

Stupid question!

Well, thank you, baby.

Matt might be new to this whole mind reading thing, but he could clearly recognize being laughed at. *You almost blew my mind; "enjoy" doesn't really cover it.*

Matt did his very best to grumble, but it just wasn't convincing when your partner could feel the satisfaction in your mind like a purring cat in front of the fire. Matt

would definitely have to work on that; he had a reputation to keep up. Then he thought of something.

Hey, why did you say that you don't know if it's always this good? You weren't a virgin. Matt didn't know how he knew that; he just did.

You're right, I wasn't. On the other hand, I haven't had sex with my mate before. It's a lot stronger than casual sex, you know.

Matt suddenly got some pretty murderous feelings at the mentioning of casual sex. No more of that for Pietr. And who had his mate been with, and what had they...? With an effort, Matt got back on track.

Peter caressed his cheek and looked into his eyes. "No one else but you from now on. That's what being bonded means."

He kissed Pietr fervently. "No. Nobody but you." Matt snuggled up close, finding that spot under Pietr's chin that was made for him. Suddenly he felt exhausted, and his head started to hurt.

A bit of painkiller would be good for you.

Matt didn't quite understand the tentative note in Pietr's inner voice.

Well, you were quite determined to push Robbie out of here earlier on. Pietr still sounded cautious.

Hey, I was busy getting into your pants, alien. Matt's head was pounding by now. *Can he sedate me at all? Wouldn't it make you freak out again?*

I did NOT freak out! I was just... somewhat concerned.

Matt tried to laugh, but the pain was beginning to make him queasy.

He'll only give you a little, so we'll still be able to feel each other. But you have to let him near us. Matt could feel that that would be difficult for Pietr, too. He wondered briefly about it, but the pain was too much.

Okay, let him in.

YOU have to let him in, baby. Pietr's voice was gentle. *You're the one who's blocking the door.*

Oh. Feeling a little guilty, Matt let the door open. It made the pain in his head worse, and he closed his eyes and groaned out loud.

He could feel Robbie's presence just outside of his mind. It was a strange feeling, like a polite neighbor who didn't want to intrude. Pietr somehow made it easier, creating a soft barrier around Matt to protect him.

"How's he feeling?" Matt didn't even protest being talked about as if he wasn't there.

"The headache is pretty bad by now, but otherwise he's healthy. Our bond is strong." Matt could sense the mixture of pride and reluctance to share him in Pietr's voice, the unwillingness to let anyone get this close to Matt.

"I'll give him a bit of this in his IV. It's going to take almost immediate effect -- can you handle that?"

"I'll be fine. Could you hurry up? He's in pain." Pietr was making a huge effort to stay calm. Matt could feel Robbie working, knowing the danger, but still not intimidated. The danger? Matt definitely had some questions. As soon as he got a little better.

"It's coming. Here, this should make you feel better." Matt felt the drug kick in, and finally the pain withdrew, enabling him to breathe again. It also made him tired, though, so he snuggled closer to Pietr. He rested his hand on Pietr's stomach and let the Himiko feel how nice it was to be free of pain and near his mate.

Pietr relaxed a bit and let Robbie lecture him about food and drink before he very pointedly finished the conversation. Finally, they were alone again.

I think I'm going to sleep a bit. Will you be okay? He kissed Pietr's neck.

I'll be fine. I'll watch over you. Somehow, that was the sweetest thing anyone had said to Matt in a long time. Thought to him. Whatever.

Matt felt really, really hung over when he woke up next time. His head was pounding, his mouth was dry, and he generally felt as if he had downed a bottle of tequila and then run a marathon. Granted, running would probably be difficult after that much alcohol, but that was the way he felt, he chided his inner metaphor police.

You have inner metaphor police?

Well, in this case it would probably be inner simile police, according to Matt's father. *Who else would keep all the bad tropes at bay? The world could use a lot more of those people.*

You're really, really odd, you know that?

It wasn't until then that Matt started to pay attention to the fact that the voice was in his head. Oh, yeah, the mind reading thing. He groaned out loud.

You're not freaking out, are you? Pietr was worried.

I only freak out when I have good reason to. So, no, I'm not freaking out. He could feel the relief go through Pietr's mind. *But I really don't feel well.*

Pietr wrapped himself protectively around Matt's mind, soothing.

I need more painkillers. Otherwise his head was going to burst open. And a lot more than bad metaphors would come out then.

He could feel the reluctance in Pietr's mind.

It's just a bit of painkiller; it won't hurt either of us. And I need it.

Yeah, but HE has to give it to you. Pietr was as close to a pouting nine-year old as the inner voice of a grown man could be.

Himiko, not man.

Matt forced himself back on the subject of Pietr not wanting him to have the drugs he needed.

You mean Robbie? Yes, he'll have to do it. That's his job. What's wrong with that?

Don't want to share! Pietr had started to growl.

I won't share either, stupid. Be shared... whatever. But I need my medicine, so I'm going to get him in here.

Pietr was still sulking. Tough luck.

Matt let open the doors and sort of... reached out for Robbie.

"Christ, I'm coming! You really need to acquire a bit more finesse when you do that. I nearly went through the wall."

Matt felt a little embarrassed. "Sorry about that. I guess I haven't really gotten the hang of this yet. Could I get more painkillers? And why are we speaking out loud?"

"Yes, you can, and we're speaking out loud so we won't provoke big boy there." This brought out a rumble from Pietr, who kept his arm protectively across Matt's chest.

Robbie had kept as far away as possible while he prepared the medication. Now he closely watched the pair in the bed.

"I have to get near him, you know that. He's in pain."

"I know!" Pietr sounded furious now, his mind a swirl of aggressive possessiveness. Matt raised an eyebrow. *Quite impressive with the macho-bodyguard growl, honey.* Pietr was too occupied to pay any heed to the bait, though.

Robbie carefully edged nearer, needle in one hand. Pietr got up on all fours, growling and snarling like a predator. *Mine! He's mine!*

Matt slapped him across the nose. *He knows that, stupid.* Pietr drew back in surprise, and Robbie took the chance to get the drug into Matt's IV. Pietr was about to attack again, but Matt pulled him back, showing him how quickly the pain was disappearing.

Stay with me.

Pietr was indignant. *I'm not going anywhere!*

Except for hunting nice people who give me nice drugs. Behave, now.

Pietr grumbled, but lay down and pulled Matt tightly into an embrace. *Much better.* His inner voice was so smug that Matt had a hard time keeping from giggling. That only made Pietr grumble some more. Matt snuggled in and enjoyed the warm body and the absence of pain.

"Matt?"

Robbie was still there. Brave man.

"Hmm?"

"You need to start drinking. Otherwise you won't heal very well. I'm going to put a couple of bottles here for you.

"And you, grumpy." Robbie stared at Pietr, undaunted. "He's going to hurt if he doesn't drink those. Make sure that doesn't happen. If it does, we'll have to sedate both of you again."

Pietr snarled, and Matt couldn't help being just a little impressed by Robbie's courage. His mate wasn't exactly forthcoming at the moment.

"I'll be fine, don't worry. And I am thirsty, so thank you. You better leave us now; it'll be easier to calm grouchy here down when you're gone." Matt laughed

inside as he felt Pietr's outrage. But Robbie left, and that made everything a bit easier.

I am really thirsty, you know -- help me with the bottle?

He felt the guilt rushing through Pietr as his mate felt Matt's thirst. The Himiko grabbed a bottle of juice and gently helped him sit up a bit. The world tilted strangely as Matt did so, but the taste of the cold liquid was so good that he moaned out loud. He drank deeply and sank down on the bed again.

How long am I going to be this weak? He wasn't really worried, more curious.

You had brain surgery only yesterday. And great sex this morning. His mate was very satisfied with that. *It's going to take a couple of days. But we can try having you up and walking this afternoon.*

Satisfied, Matt closed his eyes again. That was as good a plan as any.

It might have been a fine plan, but it didn't go all that smoothly. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Matt felt strangely disconnected, unable to make much sense of his surroundings. He wrote it off as a bit of fatigue after the operation and decisively stood up to go to the bathroom.

Or rather, wanted to stand to go to the bathroom. Instead, he fell flat on his face in a very undignified heap on the floor.

What in the world are you doing?

Matt spluttered. Yes, getting way better at doing that mentally.

I'm... not walking, can't you see? Now, help me up.

Pietr scooped him up from the floor and put him back on the edge of the bed. *Why didn't you walk? Your legs work just fine*, Pietr demanded accusingly.

I... Matt wriggled his toes and looked up at Pietr, blinking. *They don't when I try to walk*.

Pietr's mind was one big question.

How the fuck can you forget how to walk?

I don't know, but I have! Now, will you help me or not? Matt wasn't scared, just astounded about not being able to get up and around.

Pietr placed himself in front of Matt and lifted him under his elbows. His legs worked, but it was almost purely theoretically. As soon as he tried to push himself off the bed and take a step, something seemed to short-circuit and he just made little helpless movements.

You're supposed to walk now.

I know, you idiot! This doesn't help me. At all!

Pietr dumped him back down on the bed, his mate's mind working to find a solution to the problem. Matt started to get annoyed and a little worried.

Did the operation do this to me? But I don't understand -- it's not as if there's anything wrong with my legs. I just can't get my moving right.

Wriggle your toes.

He did.

Now bend your foot as if taking a step.

He did that, too, without any problems.

Okay, everything works just fine. Now try walking again.

Matt did. The result was only better insofar that he managed to tangle himself up so he landed on the bed this time instead of on the floor.

This is incredibly annoying! I'm going to ask Robbie what's wrong. The door crashed open.

"I told you not to do that!" Robbie barged in. "I brought down two guards and a trash can on my way here. You really need to work on your manners. And heavens, you're loud."

"Well, sorry about that, but I seem to have a problem." Matt looked sheepishly at Robbie, who was brushing bits of paper and a candy wrapper off his trousers.

"Oh." Robbie's curiosity did nothing to reassure Matt. "You can't walk."

"Well, I kind of can and I kind of can't."

Robbie edged nearer the bed, ignoring Pietr's looming figure. "What do you mean, you can and you can't?"

Matt showed the Himiko in his mind. Pietr growled.

"Oh, now I see." Robbie studied him thoughtfully. "Can I go into your mind for a while without your keeper taking my head off?"

Matt pointedly turned toward Pietr, ignoring his mate's outrage. "I don't know, can he?"

Pietr reluctantly agreed.

"It will be easier if you hold him." Robbie said quietly. Pietr sat down on the bed, putting his arms around Matt and holding on tightly. "You have to learn it at some point, you know." Robbie sounded almost gentle now. "I know it's hard."

Pietr held Matt closer. He was really reluctant about this, Matt sensed.

What's wrong?

Pietr was almost sad. *I don't want to share you.*

He turned in his mate's arms and held Pietr's head in his hands. *I'm yours. Nothing can change that, okay?*

Matt could feel Pietr cheer up a little, even though the sadness was still there. He settled back in the Himiko's arms.

"Okay, here I come." Matt felt a gentle poking in the outskirts of his mind. *Is this okay?* Robbie's mental voice was clearly recognizable, and Matt knew his caretaker pretty well by then. Still it was almost too much having a stranger in his mind.

Not a stranger, remember? I'm Robbie. And Pietr is still here, he's holding your body and your mind.

Matt relaxed a bit at Robbie's words and felt Pietr do the same. That made it easier, and he let his control slip a bit, allowing Robbie to look for what the Himiko needed to see.

The search was quick and gentle, but thorough, and Robbie soon withdrew. Pietr immediately filled Matt's mind afterward, comforting him and making sure he was okay. He almost melted; really, his lover was so sweet.

Robbie cleared his voice. Oh yeah, they had a guest.

"Well, mainly good news. Your brain isn't fried; it's just a little... confused." Matt stared at Robbie, who took on a businesslike tone. "Those are layman's terms, of course. In both cases."

"Of course."

If Robbie caught the irony in Matt's tone, he didn't show it. "You have a coordination issue. The chip has probably caused a slight swelling and that has affected the surrounding parts of your brain. It isn't dangerous, and the rehabilitation shouldn't take nearly as long as if you were still human."

"I am still human!" Matt was almost outraged enough to ignore Pietr laughing at him.

Robbie blushed. "Oh, I didn't mean... I mean... It's just that you can do things now that most humans can't. It's really very convenient."

Matt crossed his arms, not about to let himself be mollified that easily.

Robbie turned to Pietr pleadingly. "You can show him. Just guide him through the movements with your mind. You only have to do it once or twice, and then the coordination will improve. The brain is amazing, and yours is a lot more effective now than it was before." Robbie was eager now. "I can show you, if you'll let me? It'll really help him."

To Matt's astonishment, Pietr agreed without further protests.

"Okay, I'm going to guide you to move your arm and leg at the same time. You need to relax to let me do it, but I promise to restrict myself to that, okay?"

Matt felt the disturbing feeling of Pietr letting Robbie into the mind that belonged to Matt. Matt growled a bit, not ready to share his lover.

Now, don't you start, too. Robbie's mental voice was just as chiding as his physical one. *I have absolutely no plans of seducing your Mr. Right.*

Matt grumblingly had to withdraw and witness Pietr - - surprisingly patiently -- let Robbie sort of wrap around a small part of Pietr's mind and use it to move his limbs. Then Robbie withdrew again. Matt shuddered in relief when they were finally alone in their minds again.

"See? Not that difficult. You only have to do it a couple of times, then he'll remember."

"Well, that seems to be rather easy." Matt was suddenly weak with relief from the tension he hadn't known he had felt. "The only thing I don't understand is why I can do a lot of other movements." He moved his leg bit up and down on the bed. "Look, this isn't a problem at all. And I can drink without any problems."

Robbie snorted. "That, my dear, is because Pietr has already unconsciously started teaching you." Matt looked uncomprehendingly at Robbie, who shook his head disbelievingly.

"Sex, Matt! You use that movement when you have sex. Apparently, a horny Himiko is a very good teacher, whether he knows what he's doing or not."

Matt blushed until there wasn't a drop of blood left anywhere else in his body.

Pietr laughed his ass off in his mind, and Matt reminded himself to find out how to kick some ass mentally.

"So, you'll need to... practice. All movements. Not just your, well, favorites..." By now, Robbie was blushing a bit, too. He quickly changed the subject, talking to Pietr.

"He's getting tired again, so let him rest before you start." Matt would have protested, but he suddenly realized that he was exhausted. "I'd like to give him a bit of painkiller, if that's okay with you?" Pietr nodded. "If he's free of pain, he'll recover faster. And remember to get him to drink." With that, Robbie left the room.

Pietr gave him some juice. While Matt drank it, he could feel the pain he hadn't even noticed before disappearing. Pietr rubbed his shoulders, and he slowly relaxed.

I guess I was a bit worried after all. Matt leaned into the massage.

It's okay. Pietr's hands were gentle. *We'll figure it out.*

Promise? Matt closed his eyes, enjoying Pietr's touch.

Promise. I'll kick your ass until you get back in shape. The words were completely at odds with the gentle care exuding from Pietr's mind, and Matt smiled. He could live with that.

Matt's recovery went a lot faster than he had imagined. They used most of the next day rehearsing his forgotten patterns of movement, Pietr carefully wrapping around Matt's mind and then showing him the combination of movements. Before the day was over, he could manage most everyday movements pretty fluently. It had the added benefit of letting Matt explore what he could do with his newfound powers and linking him more closely to Pietr. Their connection didn't seem as outlandish to him any longer, and he started to see a structure in Pietr's mind.

Matt was lying on the bed that evening, exhausted after a long day's work. His head didn't hurt, only felt heavy.

I think you're ready to meet Aki. God, you're going to hate him. There was a certain glee in Pietr's inner voice.

Why am I going to hate him? What's he going to do?

Annoyingly, Pietr wouldn't answer him; he only got the mental equivalent of a smirk.

That's not very becoming, you know. Matt was too tired to get pissed, though. *I think I did all right today.*

You did.

Matt could feel Pietr's pride in him, and it made him feel ten feet tall. He had just started thinking suggestive thoughts to his mate -- something about the right sort of rewards for being a good boy -- when Robbie came into the room.

"Stop it, please. I don't want to be in the middle of a porn movie, okay?"

"Well, then, you should stop disturbing us when we're about to have sex." Matt did his very best to pout.

"You weren't; you're too tired." Robbie sounded as if he was establishing a fact. He probably was. "But I take it that your day went well?"

Matt nodded, too tired to really lift his head from the pillow. "It did. I'm still a little uncoordinated, but it's not too bad. And the headache is almost gone."

Robbie nodded. "Yeah, I can feel that. I think it's time for you to meet Aki." He shuddered. "Boy, you're not going to like him. But he's going to get you into shape, whether you like it or not."

"What is it with this guy? Why is he so terrible? And why do I have to meet him if he's such a drill sergeant?"

"He's going to teach you how to contain yourself and communicate with others besides Pietr. You can't be let loose in public as you are now. You're..."

"Loud. I know it."

"I was going to say the human equivalent of a military siren, but I guess your version covers it, too." *Barely.*

"I heard that! So, what is the drill sergeant from Hell going to do to me?"

"He'll help you create shields and use them properly. He'll probably have to chain your bodyguard there to the wall while he does it."

"Hey!" Matt got the peculiar experience of hearing Pietr's heartfelt protest and sensing his accordance with Robbie. That created a mental picture in Matt's mind of Pietr strung up on the wall like a rabid vampire.

Very flattering imagery, dear. Wow, Pietr was good at being ironic, even mentally.

Thank you, honey. I did try hard. Matt could hold his own when it came to irony.

"I'll come back tomorrow morning and prepare you for Aki's arrival. It would be a good idea for you to eat and drink a bit more; you'll need all the energy you can get."

"If you're trying to spook me, then you're doing a pretty good job." He curled up a bit on the bed. Pietr was there immediately, wrapping himself around Matt.

You'll be fine. Aki's a pain in the ass, but we've all been through it.

Yeah? The thought did comfort Matt; if everybody else could survive, then so could he.

"We have." Robbie checked Matt's stitches, letting him rest against Pietr as Robbie did so. It didn't hurt much. "Do you need any painkiller?"

"No, I think I'm good. I'm just tired."

"Fine. Call me during the night if you need any; you heal faster if you're not in pain."

"I will." He snuggled in without paying much attention to Robbie anymore. He could feel Pietr fussing with his blankets and his pillow, and enjoyed the attention. Robbie left the room at some point, and Matt spent the evening being cuddled by his mate, feeling completely safe.

"You were actually serious?"

Matt was watching Robbie fasten some very solid-looking chains to the wall while Pietr donned an equally heavy harness. Robbie had arrived early, given Matt a substantial breakfast, and then returned with what looked like half the contents of a BDSM dungeon.

That something you're fantasizing about, honey? Pietr was wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

Matt tried to convey "are you out of your fucking mind" and "this is the least appropriate time imaginable to think about that" all at once. Given the wince on Pietr's face, Matt felt he'd succeeded quite well.

"I think it's about time Aki gets here," Robbie mumbled, but Matt's hearing had always been good. However, he was busy being speechless at seeing his lover actually tied to the wall -- and, weirder yet, Pietr wasn't protesting it. Matt shook his head and sat down on their bed, hard. Something had to have been seriously lost in translation here.

"Is he secured?" Matt turned his head toward the voice, surprised. He hadn't felt anything, no presence like the one Robbie gave out even when the Himiko was being polite and staying out of Matt's head.

A short, muscular guy with black hair stood in the doorway. He was Himiko, but Matt's first thought was that he looked like something out of a Japanese epic, all narrow eyes and... warrior-like.

The look on the Himiko's face turned grim. "I take it you mean that as a positive thing. I'm sure your impression is going to change to something... less polite during the day."

"Yes. Pietr is secure, and I'm going to flee." Robbie made his way to the door.

"How strong is he? Medically. I haven't worked with any humans before."

Matt blinked. Yes, less polite was a definite possibility.

"He had surgery recently, but he's doing fairly well. I wouldn't worry too much about that part of it if I were you." Robbie closed the door behind him before Matt could ask what that was supposed to mean.

"Hello, Aki." Pietr had a peculiar feeling in his mind -- like a man who had been beat up repeatedly by somebody and was grateful for it. Matt had no idea how to interpret that.

"Pietr. Good to see you again. A bit of a mess you've gotten yourself into, isn't it?"

"Hey! The mess sits right here!" Matt was offended. "And it's kind of waiting to find out what all this is about."

Aki nodded, curtly. "Well, then, let's get started."

Suddenly, Matt's mind was invaded, completely filled by a stranger.

What the FUCK! Matt reeled back, nowhere near being able to cope with this. Somewhere far away, he could hear Pietr roaring.

You don't like this? Then make me go away. Aki's voice was strangely neutral. Matt got angry, pushing like he had done with Robbie and the others. Nothing happened. Matt started to fight, pushing and punching as hard as he could with his mind. It didn't work; he couldn't drive the presence away, and it was starting to overwhelm him. Aki was all the way around him, surrounding him, smothering him, drowning him...

He came to, lying on his back on the bed, gasping. Pietr was jerking the chains to get to him, and he reached out for his mate.

Oh, no, you don't. Aki was back, invading him. *If you don't like this, then shut me out.*

Matt lashed out, this time determined to hurt. Aki only dodged and laughed at him. Matt got angry, attacking and pushing with all his might. It was like hitting mud; Aki was slipping and sliding and still all around him, seeing all his most intimate memories and thoughts.

All you need to do is raise a wall. Aki showed him. *Push your thoughts up like that and you will be able to evade contact.*

Matt tried. It was like building a two-foot fence to stop a tsunami.

Try again. You're not trying hard enough.

Matt ground his teeth, trying again and again. He tried to imagine building the wall from bricks, one on top of the other. It never worked; even if he held back Aki for a moment, the Himiko always managed to get through somehow.

Matt had no idea how long they fought -- it could have been hours or it could have been days. He began to feel weaker and weaker, finding it hard to concentrate and sinking again.

This time he came to when Aki slapped his cheek, Pietr growling furiously at the sight. Matt opened his eyes, exhausted and relieved to be alone in his head. Well, apart from Pietr, of course.

It's necessary, baby. You have to learn. Somehow, the resignation in Pietr's voice made it all worse. Matt could have used somebody on his side.

I am on your side. Trust me. Pietr's mental voice was gentle, giving him at least some sort of comfort.

"He's still weak. You need to give him something to drink if you go on for this long." Pietr sounded almost calm; the difference between that and his mate's rage

only moments ago confused Matt. And Pietr wouldn't tell him what was going on, only repeating that it was necessary.

"All right, thank you," Aki said, getting a bottle of juice and supporting Matt so he could drink. Matt resented having his tormentor touch him, but he needed the nourishment desperately. When he had finished, he sank back on the pillows.

"You're ready to go on now." Before Matt could protest, say that he was too tired, Aki was back in his mind.

Matt almost managed to get a wall up this time, almost managed a moment of peace. Then he heard Aki's pounding, and the listening itself was enough to make his barrier shatter again. He howled with frustration, going back and starting all over again, only to have the next wall torn down, too. It went on forever, and Matt got more and more frantic. He needed so desperately to push out this invader, and he lashed out at Aki with all his might. Aki didn't disappear, and Matt summoned every bit of his anger, reaching out and breaking Pietr's harness, using all of his power. He needed this to stop. Finally, it did, and he let himself sink into the wonderful quiet.

Matt woke up with Pietr curled around him, mind and body both. He sank into his mate's mind, letting his gratitude pour out of him. Pietr didn't use any words, just nuzzled him, making sure that he was okay.

He opened his eyes and saw that Robbie was in the room, too, trying to stop Aki's nose from bleeding. Aki was sitting down, leaning heavily against the chair and

looking a bit battered. His mentor saw that Matt was awake and looked disapprovingly at him.

"Well, that was counterproductive. Letting your mate loose on me didn't improve your ability to shield yourself."

Matt questioningly turned to Pietr and got an image of Pietr charging, hitting Aki, and pushing the other Himiko away from Matt. Then Pietr had curled up around Matt, growling.

Impressive.

Thank you, dear. I quite agree, if I may say so. Pietr sounded just a little bit smug.

Matt turned his attention back to Aki. "Well, it solved my problem, didn't it? I got you off my back." Matt stared coldly at Aki, noticing with a deep satisfaction that the Himiko didn't seem quite steady when he got up.

"For today, yes. I'll be back tomorrow, same time. This time with a more solid harness for your mate." He nodded to Robbie and left the room.

Robbie looked despairingly at Matt. The exasperation was clear in his mind, even if he only used vocal communication. "You just can't do anything without drama, can you?"

Matt felt the anger flaring in him. "It would fucking help if you fucking cared to explain what was going on! How the fuck am I supposed to know what to do when you won't tell me ANYTHING?"

Aki came rushing back into the room, a wary look on the Himiko's face. "And you!" Matt pointed at his tormentor. "If you can't teach a supposedly simple thing after trying for an entire day, then you're either lousy at your job or you're doing it wrong. Wait, was that the same thing? I think it fucking was!" Matt was fuming with rage now. Aki quickly closed the door, looking

worriedly at Robbie. Robbie took a step closer to Matt, undaunted.

"Are you trying to set a new record in the number of f-words in one sentence, Matt? Because I'm sure you can do better than that."

Matt stared. Then he felt the fight go out of him, just like that. "I'm sorry." He turned around, burying his head against Pietr's chest. He was so tired, so useless at being what he was. What he had been forced to become. *You could at least help me after what you've made me into.* There was no anger left in his mind, though, only despair.

Oh, baby. He felt the compassion in Pietr's mind, his mate's arms wrapping around him and holding him close. In the background, he felt the acute worry in Robbie and Aki's minds. However, Matt was too desolate to do anything about it. This was so fucked up.

He curled up, both mentally and physically, withdrawing as far into himself as he could get. Leaving his stupid body behind and retreating to the farthest corner of his mind. He just needed to sleep, to get away from this for awhile. He could feel the agitation behind him and shut that out, too. He just couldn't cope with it right now.

Pietr wouldn't let him be. *No, baby, you can't let go. You have to stay with me.* There was a strange mix of compassion and a deep, burning fear underneath that in his mate's mind. Matt felt a hint of worry at sensing that, but then he let it go. He could ask later. Right now, he needed to rest, to be left alone. He pulled back further.

Please, Matt, stay awake with me a little longer. You need to stay awake. I need you. Pietr's desperation was stronger now, disturbing Matt, not letting him rest.

I'm just so tired. He didn't want to show Pietr how he really felt, how miserable he was at being a freak. A fucking monster.

You're not a monster! Pietr was shouting now. *You're like me, and I'm no monster. I'm your mate, and you can't leave me!*

The anguish pulled at him, and suddenly Matt was back in his body, struggling to breathe, suffocating. Pietr held him, rocked him, trying hard to comfort him. Matt clung to his mate's body and started crying, long sobs wracking his body. He clawed at Pietr, trying to get closer, to get more of his mate. Pietr opened completely to him and gently wrapped around him, giving him somewhere outside himself to be safe, to be protected. Finally, Matt could relax. He cried until he had cried himself out, and then he just lay there, worn out.

Just rest, Matt. I won't let go of you.

Matt didn't know what to say, so he just held on. Pietr wrapped a leg around him and pulled him even closer into the embrace, and Matt took the solace he so desperately yearned for in the warm body surrounding his.

He must have dozed off at some point, because when he woke up, Pietr was there immediately, nuzzling him. Matt could feel the relief radiating from his mate's mind and didn't understand why.

You almost left me. There was so much sadness in those words that it startled Matt.

What do you mean? He reached out, soothing. *I'm here, I'm not leaving.*

No, but before... You almost let go. With a shock, Matt realized that Pietr was deadly serious; somehow, Matt had been in real danger.

I don't get it -- what did I do wrong now? This was turning out to be an exhausting experience.

You didn't do anything wrong! But you got overwhelmed and you nearly disappeared into yourself. Around Pietr's words, Matt could sense the memories of a deep sorrow, of others disappearing. Others like him.

Matt sat up, at a loss for words. He just stared. "You... you did this to me, knowing the risk?" He dug deeper into Pietr's mind and was startled. "Even if you knew that you could die, too?" He couldn't believe this. Couldn't wrap his mind around it. *I could have been lost?*

Yes. The word was abrupt; the world of anguish behind it wasn't.

Matt didn't know what to think, what to feel. *Those people who went missing, who didn't come back... That was what happened to them?*

To some of them, yes. Most of them are just being trained as ambassadors for the Himika. But we all felt it deeply when someone was lost. You're the first one who's ever bonded with one of us, though. We didn't know how you would cope; we hoped it would be easier for you.

Matt hugged his legs, curling up. Pietr reached out for him, the worry clear in the Himiko's mind. Matt rested his head on Pietr's shoulder and let his mate caress him. So many things to take in.

"You're doing fine." Sometimes, it was easier when Pietr spoke out loud. Like something from Matt's earlier life, something he could understand. He reached out, hugging Pietr tightly. Pietr hugged him back, gently kissing his hair. Matt sighed.

Pietr let his lips wander down, light, comforting kisses that barely touched Matt's neck, his shoulder. At first it was just... nice. Then Pietr found the spot under Matt's jaw, and he sighed. Pietr kissed it again, this time lingering, gently licking and nibbling. Matt bared his neck to get more, his hands beginning to cling to Pietr's shoulders.

Pietr let his throat go. Before Matt could complain, his mate had taken his lips instead. Pietr's lips were soft, and the little kisses made Matt want more. He got it, Pietr pushing an eager tongue into his mouth, exploring and tasting. Matt bared himself completely, letting Pietr see his lust, his sadness, his need for his mate. Pietr moaned, grabbing him tighter and pushing him down on the bed.

Matt lay back, taking off his shirt and pants and opening himself up to his lover. Pietr bent down, licking from his neck down to his chest. At the same time, Pietr's hand wrapped around Matt's dick, slowly stroking it. Matt arched, trying to get more of it all. He could hear Pietr's gentle laugh in his mind, but also feel his mate's excitement about seeing Matt like this, naked, open.

I want you to take me.

Pietr let his head fall to Matt's chest, groaning. The Himiko struggled to get out of his clothes, laughing when he saw the flustered image of himself in Matt's mind. Then he grabbed the lube in the bedside drawer.

You can't tease me any longer, Matt pleaded. *I have to have you, and I want to come with you inside me.* He could both hear and sense Pietr's groan, and it was almost enough to make him come. *Stop it!* he chided. *Open me up.*

Bossy, bossy. Pietr wet his fingers with the lube, and Matt spread for him.

That would be the pot calling the OH FUCK! He let his head drop back, consumed with the feeling of Pietr's finger breaching him.

In me, oh, shit, baby, you're in me. He could feel Pietr laughing again, adding a finger.

"Oh! Oh, tight." Matt arched his back, riding the burn, letting Pietr know how good it felt, how much he needed his mate. He got a wave of lust back, Pietr quickly adding a third finger.

For a moment, it hurt too much, making him grunt and wince. Then Pietr started moving those intruding fingers, fucking him with them and making him crazy. He took a deep breath and felt himself relax around the intrusion, knew that he was ready.

Now. Take me now.

And Pietr did.

Everything went still. The whole world had narrowed down to the sharp pain turning into a burn turning into a movement that made Matt cry out. And behind it, consuming them both, was the bright, hot fire of Pietr's lust, his joy, his need to be here, to move, to make Matt cry out and grunt and moan.

His mate started moving, and for a moment Matt didn't know if he could take it, the power of his own and Pietr's lust combined nearly overwhelming him. Then Pietr kissed him, showing him that he could, and he surrendered, taking everything Pietr could give him. Each time Pietr thrust into him, he sighed, groaned, needing to let the sound out to make space for his feelings.

Pietr's movements started to get faster, cruder, and Matt could see the flames flaring bright, their climax almost there. Then Pietr pushed deep, so deep, and there was nothing between their minds or their bodies, nothing to hold them back from surrendering to the fire

and coming. The pleasure was all-consuming, and in the middle of it he met Pietr, rejoicing in the happiness they were giving each other.

Then Matt was suddenly back, lying on the bed with his arms and legs wrapped tightly around Pietr. He was gasping and crying, shattered, exhilarated. Pietr kissed him and caressed his hair and crooned for him, his mate's mind pure bliss. *Mine*, Pietr thought. *Mine*.

My mate, Matt thought back. There was no doubt anymore. He couldn't not belong to Pietr. That made the satisfaction spread all through his mate, and Matt laughed, so happy.

Pietr moved, making Matt moan, both from his soreness and from the pleasure it gave him. Pietr smirked and experimentally pushed into him, making him grunt.

"Oh, fuck, there's no way I can do this again." Matt's dick didn't quite agree, though; jerking, it did its best to come back to life. Pietr bent down and kissed him, moving deep inside of him.

Mmm, you feel so good. So tight, and filled with my come. Matt whimpered, the thought so hot. Pietr grabbed his cock, started stroking him again. *You like that thought? Being full of me?*

Fuck yes, he did.

I can feel it when I move inside you. I'm pushing my seed deeper into you.

Matt groaned, starting to grind his hips to get more of Pietr's hand, more of his mate's cock. This time it was different, less consuming, but not any less hot. Pietr urged him on, playing with his body to give him as much pleasure as possible. Matt let his mate do whatever Pietr desired to do to him, lying back and watching his lover fuck him.

Pietr had been playful and controlling; now he started losing that control, thrusting deeper and harder into Matt. Almost making it hurt, and Matt rejoiced in the feeling of taking what his mate needed to give him. He could feel Pietr's need grow, swelling and teetering on the edge, and Matt was so consumed with his lover that he was almost surprised when he came himself, drawing Pietr with him into a crashing orgasm.

There was no holding on to his lover this time. Matt felt completely broken -- all he had energy for was gasping for breath. Pietr was lying heavily on him, the warm body feeling good. Matt clumsily patted his mate's back.

Fuck, you blew my mind.

Pietr chuckled inwardly, satisfied with himself.

You're going to make my lungs collapse, too, if you don't move.

Pietr hastily got up, getting his weight off Matt. The movement made his dick slide out, and Matt groaned out loud. *Shit, don't go. Oh, so sore.*

You do know you're kind of contradicting yourself, right? Man, his mate could sound smug. Then Matt felt the trickle of come running out of his sensitive ass, the feeling so foreign and so hot that he could do nothing but let his head fall back and moan with it.

God, baby, you're so hot. Even Pietr's inner voice was hoarse from excitement.

Matt ground his hips, his cock twitching one last time. Then he relaxed back on the bed, feeling wet and depraved and so sated. Pietr moaned again.

Fuck, baby, if I had any energy left, I would fuck you again. You look obscene.

Obscenely happy, at least. Matt laughed, drawing Pietr back down for a kiss. They snuggled for a while. Then the wet started to feel more gross than hot, and he

sat up. The movement made his ass twinge and he hissed. He stood up and took a couple of steps toward the bathroom, but had to stop, moaning and clutching to the bedside table not to fall, his ass aching. Behind him, Pietr moaned, too.

If you get your ass over here to help me, then we can have hand jobs in the shower. His mate was at Matt's side with impressive quickness. *How can I still be so horny? My poor balls haven't got a chance to keep up.*

I think it's your fantastic new lover, baby. Pietr's voice was so happy, full of pleasure. Matt couldn't help laughing, but slapped Pietr's ass, too, just for good measure.

Well, get me clean, then we can talk.

Their shower was incredibly long. First they got clean, then they got dirty, and then they had to get clean again. It was the best shower Matt had ever had. It was also the most exhausting; on his way back to bed, his legs gave out, and Pietr had to carry him the last steps to the bed. Matt was a bit annoyed, but too happy and sated to be worried.

You don't have to be worried. You're still healing, and I fucked you very well.

Matt slapped Pietr's ass. Hard.

Hey! Pietr ruefully rubbed his cheek. I really do think you have a thing for BDSM. Otherwise, you're just plain mean.

Matt leaned back, sighing happily. Pietr covered him with the blankets, keeping him warm and safe. Then the Himiko hesitated.

Come on, I know you want to say something to me. Think something. Whatever.

Pietr smiled, but the smile didn't really reach his eyes. *You do know that Aki will be back tomorrow, don't you? You have to learn; we've all been through it.*

Why?

What do you mean, why?

Matt pushed down the comforter with an annoyed movement.

Why do I have to learn? What will happen if I don't? And what do you mean that you've all been through it? Can't you just explain it all to me from the beginning and in small words, please? That's how I cope with things, you know -- learning about them.

Pietr's mind was a mixture of surprise and embarrassment.

I guess we've probably taken some things for granted; others, we've tried to spare you from.

Yeah, well, bad choice. Now, tell me.

All right. Pietr pulled back up the comforter around them and settled in. *I guess I'll start with the beginning.*

Himika aren't born with the ability to communicate; it doesn't develop until late puberty. When it does, we have to learn to shield ourselves, just like you do. The adults around a teen can sense when the powers are about to break through. Then you're sent to a retreat where you get a mentor to help you wake your powers fully. You learn how to use them and how to shield yourself. Aki is one of the best. He was my mentor, too.

Matt could feel the contradictory feelings in Pietr's mind: affection, dislike, admiration.

Why are you so conflicted about it?

Pietr hesitated. *It isn't easy. Your mentor brings out these strange powers and then he pounds your mind again and again until you can protect yourself. Then comes all the details; how to communicate directly, how to listen, how to hide. It can take weeks, and it's the hardest work most of us will ever do. People pass out, cry, break down. And still you have to go on, you have to learn.*

At the same time, you know that the best and the hardest mentors will make you stronger, more fit for the life to come. If they go soft on you, then you won't be able to cope when you go back to your life.

Matt really didn't want to ask his next question, but he had to.

What happens if I don't learn?

If a Himiko has weak shielding skills, then he has to be protected. Some move far away from civilization, but most live in retreats. There, they have insulated cells like this where they are protected. They can work, and most can interact a bit with others if they keep away from crowds, but it isn't an ideal situation.

Matt got an image of a convent-like building with people studying in their cells. *They don't seem unhappy?*

They aren't, and some of our greatest thinkers are weak. But it's not a very full life, is it?

And me? What if I don't learn?

For a moment, Pietr's mind was fully neutral, feelings hidden away, then he spoke.

You have to learn. He sounded apologetic. I'm so sorry to put this burden on you, baby, but you have to learn. I can't be separated from you, and I can't go into a retreat. I'm needed here. You have to let Aki show you. If it's any comfort, you're doing really well.

Yeah, sure. Nice try.

No, I'm not trying to be kind. You're extremely strong and nearly had your walls up against Aki in one of your first sessions. Nobody does that. But your strength is also your weakness; you're too stubborn to give in. Pietr felt strange, not entirely open to him.

You're hiding something for me.

Pietr sighed. *Yes, I am. It's just a lot to spring on you all at once.*

Well, I don't feel any better now.

I'm really sorry, baby. But because you're this strong, you can't be around other Himika until you learn. You're blowing their minds.

So, we're back to the fact that I have to learn, huh?
Matt felt rebellious. *Then show me. Who says it has to be the drill sergeant from hell who teaches me? You did just fine in teaching me how to walk again.*

But I can't! We're still so newly bonded that neither of us can take being shut out. It will be easier later on, but right now we have to be together.

Then show me how to build the wall without finishing it. It can't be that hard.

He could sense the hesitation in Pietr.

You said it yourself: I have to learn. Show me.

Pietr gave in. Reluctantly, the Himiko showed Matt how to put up a wall. It didn't completely shut Matt out, but it still made a sickening feeling surge through him until Pietr let it go. It hadn't seemed difficult, though; without Aki pounding on his senses, it was much easier to understand how to do it.

Now you, Pietr said.

Matt concentrated hard and let his mind shape a barrier. Suddenly, he was all alone, and a wave of sickness hit him.

Pietr's eyes rolled back in his head and he started convulsing.

"Fuck!" Matt tore down the barrier and grabbed Pietr, shaking him. "Pietr! Wake up, come on." *Please stay with me.* He went into Pietr's mind, the relief from sensing his mate again immense. *I'm so sorry, baby; I didn't mean to do that.*

Pietr laughed weakly in his head. *See? You're strong. Please don't do that again.*

I won't!

At least you learned how to do it. Now I think it would be very wise to work on how to include me in your shield. That'll keep my guts from trying to turn themselves inside out.

I'll try to keep them in place.

For the next couple of hours, Matt practiced. Pietr poked him again and again, and Matt learned how to block the "attacks." Pietr also taught him how to hide parts of his mind from his mate. The latter was almost impossible; he didn't want to hide from Pietr, he wanted to invite the Himiko in to stay.

This is the part which is easier with somebody you don't like. Pietr laughed ruefully, and Matt had to agree.

Creating a barrier that protected the two of them was both easier and a lot harder. Matt's natural possessiveness made it very easy to want to draw Pietr in, but containing them both proved really tricky. Pietr didn't make it any easier, challenging him by struggling and being altogether obnoxious. It felt like pushing a giant octopus into a very small plastic bag.

So not a flattering image, babe.

Then behave, you sorry... There! Matt suddenly had a nice, thick wall up around them. He gave Pietr a triumphant look and had leaned in to take a kiss when Robbie rushed through the door, followed by more Himika.

"What now?" Matt looked up, exasperated. He kept up his wall, too; he was sick and tired of people snooping around in his mind.

Robbie halted in the middle of the floor, almost run over by the Himika behind him. He looked thoroughly confused.

"Are you okay? I couldn't feel you anymore. Or Pietr." Matt saw another Himika come running into the

room, too, pushing a cart full of complicated medical equipment.

"So you automatically assumed that I'd killed us both?" Matt raised his eyebrow. Pietr just leaned back, the amusement clear in his mate's mind.

"I... No! Of course I didn't. It's just... You're not supposed to be doing this. I mean, yet." Robbie was flustered now. Matt enjoyed every second of it.

"Well, I decided that I didn't like being taught by our drill sergeant, so I practiced on my own. And guess what, it worked." And worked well if judged by Robbie's rescue.

"Huh." Robbie was staring. The other Himika just looked confused.

"So if there wasn't anything else...?"

"What? No. No, I guess that was all." Robbie turned to go, then turned back. "Oh! You have to have food. I'll bring you something. Late dinner. Yes." He went out the door, mumbling. Matt could have sworn he heard the words "obnoxious brat."

He turned back to Pietr, accepting his mate's kiss. "Well, that went pretty well, I think."

It did. You did great.

Satisfied, Matt snuggled in. There might be a lot of things to learn still, but he would get there. One wall at a time.

When Aki returned the next morning, the Himiko looked stronger. Also more annoyed. He personally fastened Pietr to the wall, tightening the straps until Pietr gasped. Then he turned to Matt. "Ready to start?"

"I am." He felt Aki attacking and slammed his walls up. Aki reeled back, almost falling over. Matt felt very satisfied by that sight. Pietr laughed at him inside Matt's mind.

Aki managed to stay upright, taking a deep breath. "So, you've been practicing."

"I have."

"Good. Now, do the same again, but without using enough force to destroy a small town."

And so his mentor went on. If Matt had had reason to feel smug at the beginning of their lesson (and he really felt that he had), then it quickly disappeared. Aki made him push, evade, and strike over and over again, yelling at him every time he used too much force or wasn't accurate enough. Which was basically the whole time. After three hours of that, Matt was dripping with sweat and breathing hard.

"You have to feed him. He might seem strong, but he's still recovering from surgery, remember?" Pietr sounded casual, as if this was something people did every day.

They do.

Matt decided to ignore his mate. To his deep satisfaction, Aki looked a little disheveled, too, after their morning of hard work.

Aki nodded curtly. "I'll have Robbie bring you something." He left. The door hadn't closed behind him before Robbie was there, carrying a tray of food.

"Listen, do you sleep outside my door?"

Robbie blushed. "Hey, I'm only doing my job! I knew that you would need something to eat soon."

"Yeah, our friend the torturer is exhausting. Is he always this grumpy?" Matt dug in, the food tasting good.

Haven't you forgotten something, honey?

"Oh, fuck. I didn't mean to forget you, Pietr." Matt blushed and hurried to the wall. Pietr grumbled, mumbling both mentally and out loud about ungrateful bastards while Matt unfastened the harness.

"Hey, you weren't the one working his ass off today. And no rescue missions necessary." Matt could feel the not-anger in Pietr's mind. It didn't keep his lover from taking great pleasure in grouching, though. Matt just smiled and patted Pietr's cheek, causing an outraged look on his mate's face and a slight twinge of excitement in Pietr's mind. The combination was so weird that it took Matt a moment to wrap his mind around it.

Hey, you're hot even when you forget me.

I never forget you. Matt leaned in, gently letting his lips slide over Pietr's cheek.

"Stop it! Do you want to know about the drill serg... Aki or not? And please don't tell him I called him that; he's going to skin me alive." Robbie looked nervous.

"You know him?"

"Everybody knows Aki -- or at least they know of him. He was my mentor, too. Total disaster." Robbie looked embarrassed.

What does he mean?

Robbie is exaggerating, but well, he wasn't the fastest kid on the block when it came to shielding.

Oh.

"By the way, this silence is almost scary. We've gotten used to being bombarded with your moods. Especially when the two of you got busy."

"What? I thought this was an insulated room! And what do you mean by 'we'?"

"It is insulated -- for everybody but you; nothing seems to keep you in. You've had your guards alternately flattened and up. If you get what I mean."

"I... You..." Matt was speechless. He had been the local freak show; everybody knew when they had sex. "I need to learn how to be... not loud." He so did. Preferably right away.

"I told you so."

Pietr had been leaning back comfortably in his mind (Matt didn't even know you could do that), watching them talk. Now he interfered.

Why don't you practice now, with Robbie?

I can do that?

Go on and try. If worse comes to worst, it'll feel too weird and you can stop.

Okay. Matt turned to Robbie. "Can I try, you know, talking to you?"

Robbie looked a little wary. "You know, normally it's a very good idea to keep the hell away from a newly bonded couple. You saw how Pietr reacted when Aki tortured you; having you talk to me can actually be worse because you do so willingly."

"But I've already had you in my mind when you checked me out."

"Believe me, that wasn't the same. You were having troubles and I'm a trained professional. It was my job."

"Well, as my personal warden keeps telling me, I have to learn." Matt sat down on the bed with his hand touching Pietr. Then he gently lowered his shield, enough to feel Robbie.

Wow, this is odd. It was. The first time around, he hadn't really communicated with Robbie -- only let the Himiko in to see what was wrong with him. It had been

clinical. Now, he felt Robbie like he felt Pietr. He didn't have the same yearning to cuddle up in Robbie's mind, though.

You better not.

Mmm, you're sexy when you're all big bad wolf.

Pietr was almost purring when he heard that. The Himiko was trying hard not to mind Robbie's presence in Matt's mind. Matt was proud of him.

Hey, I said I didn't want to witness any live shows, you two! It was so strange having Robbie this close. The Himiko's inner voice sounded almost exactly like his spoken voice, but the mind behind it was a lot gentler than his acerbic façade gave away.

I knew I shouldn't have done this; I hate having my cover blown.

Robbie was trying to be all brusque, trying to conceal that...

Robbie! You were supposed to have been my mate? Matt was astounded. Next to him, Pietr snarled.

No! I wasn't! I really wasn't. Robbie was frantic in his effort to calm Matt's mate. In a flash, Matt got a very disturbing image of blood and a growling Himiko protecting a prone body. Not them; something Robbie had witnessed and now feared would happen again.

I was just supposed to help you through the surgery, try to catch you on the other side of it. Like Pietr did when he taught you to accept the mental communication. Pietr, I'm really not a threat to you.

Pietr was beyond any reason with rage, and Matt actually felt his mate getting ready to leap. He nailed Pietr to the bed, preventing the Himiko from hurting Robbie.

"Robbie, you'd better leave."

"I'm sorry. Really." Robbie ran out the door, his misery clear.

What the fuck do you think you're doing?

You're mine!

Of course I am! That doesn't entitle you to act like a Neanderthal.

He can't have you!

Matt slapped Pietr. Mentally and hard.

You fucking behave, now! He did manage to shake his mate up enough to bring Pietr out of this possessive rush.

He was being nice, helping me when I was miserable. If it weren't for him, there might not have been anything left of me to scrape off the floor before you got here, understand?

Pietr shook his head as if trying to get out of his blood rush. *I... It's just... Well, you're mine.* He sounded very small now.

Matt leaned in, holding his mate. *I know, and you're mine. Doesn't mean you can't act civil around other people, does it?*

I guess not. Pietr sounded like a contrite boy.

Good. Let's get him back in.

No! Pietr clung to Matt, reluctant to let him go, to share. *Matt, you have to understand this. We're different when it comes to this. You know it yourself; you felt how it was to let him into my mind.* Matt tried not to think about how aggressive he had become when Robbie went into Pietr's mind.

It's pure instinct. And it can be dangerous to go near a new couple. Why do you think Aki insists that I'm tied up while he's teaching you? I could have killed him when you let me loose yesterday. Luckily, I was too occupied tending to you. Otherwise, I would have had blood on my hands. It doesn't matter that Aki is very, very strong; in that condition, a Himiko can be unstoppable.

But why did you tell me to talk to Robbie, then?

Matt could feel the shame in Pietr's inner voice. *I thought I was over it. I thought I could control it by now. I know Robbie; he's always joking. I didn't think I would consider him a threat. And I didn't, not until I heard that you should have been his. Then I wanted to rip his throat out.*

Is it going to be like this? I mean, can't we go anywhere in the future, can't I talk to anybody?

Of course we can! It's just very strong when we're new. It'll calm in a few weeks.

Matt sighed. "It's a complicated fucking mess, that's what it is."

Yeah. Sorry about that.

So, what do we do to make it easier? String you back up in your BDSM outfit?

Pietr looked rueful. *We practice, I guess. Over and over. It'll be easier when you're a bit more controlled; then you won't be all over the place.*

No pressure. Matt didn't know whether he should laugh or cry; everything kept coming back to him having to learn this. Urgently.

I'm sorry, baby. I really am. Pietr sounded genuinely apologetic.

Matt didn't have time to get any comfort from his mate, though. The door opened and Aki came in, looking grimmer than ever. Matt automatically stepped in front of Pietr. However, this time it wasn't in order to protect Pietr, but to keep his mate from attacking Aki like Pietr had attacked Robbie.

Aki wasn't anywhere near Matt's mind; still, he cocked his head as if listening, sensing the change in atmosphere in the room. Pietr was calm, and Matt stepped to the side, allowing Aki to secure the harness. It still hurt Matt to see how tightly Pietr got strapped in,

but interference was out of the question this time. The restraints were necessary.

Aki stepped back, looking at Matt. Before his mentor could say anything, Matt stepped forward. He reached out his hand.

"I'm sorry." Aki's face didn't change; only his eyes narrowed slightly. "I'm sorry," Matt repeated. "I didn't understand what was going on and why this was so important. I still don't understand the details of it, but I want to learn. Please teach me."

Aki hesitated; then he took Matt's hand and shook it. "Fine. Let's start."

Aki didn't go any lighter on him this time, but there was a difference. When something didn't work, Matt didn't fight or get angry -- he asked about it until he got an explanation that made it clear for him. The challenges got harder, Aki weaving intricate patterns that Matt had to trace or break or evade, but it still seemed easier to master them. At the end, he managed to seek contact with Aki using just enough of his power to do so instead of throwing it all out there.

When Aki called a halt, Matt protested. He still had so much to learn.

"You do, but it's enough for today."

Matt kept on protesting until Aki stepped close and pushed him, gently. He sat down on the bed with a thump.

"If you can't resist that, you're done for today. Tomorrow we'll go outside and practice. You need to rest until then." Aki nodded to him and left.

He sat for a moment, suddenly leaning forward with the exhaustion. Then he got up to undo Pietr's harness.

It wasn't much progress, but I did learn a little, didn't I?

Pietr had kept himself back in a way Matt hadn't felt before. Now he exploded, making Matt take a step back.

It's amazing, baby! You've finished the first part of your training!

Matt was confused. *I have?*

You have! And do you know how fast you've done it? It can take weeks; hell, it even took me longer. And I'm both strong AND very stubborn. Pietr reached out for Matt, and only then did he realize that he was still fastened to the wall. *Help me out of this, baby.*

Matt went to untie his very own Himiko, and then hesitated just before he touched Pietr. His mate looked really, really good strung up like this.

Oh, no, you don't. You fucking don't.

Matt stepped back with an evil grin on his face.

I think I like you like this. All tied up and eager. Matt could feel the surprise in Pietr's mind; Pietr hadn't even known himself how much he wanted Matt.

But Matt did. He could sense the radiance that always came with his mate's need. He wasn't about to let the guy hang, either. Well, not in any sense but the literal, that was.

He let his eyes wander over Pietr's body, taking in the dark hair, pointy ears, and clear eyes, right now filled with disbelief.

Don't do this to me, baby. Don't you want me? Pietr sounded a little hurt.

Oh, yes, I want you. Matt conveyed every ounce of his lust, of his delight in seeing his lover so beautifully displayed.

Pietr was tied with a harness around his chest, his hands fastened to it at shoulder height. He looked so helpless in his need. So sexy. Pietr moaned when he felt Matt seeing him, hardly able to resist him.

Yes. So beautiful. So needy. And all mine. That fact was still a wonder to Matt.

Pietr reached out for him mentally, desperately trying to make Matt touch him. And Matt did. With his eyes, he saw everything, and he let his excitement caress his mate. It was like giving his lover a long and sensual massage, only without any actual physical touch.

By now, Pietr was writhing in his harness, so urgent was his need for Matt's touch. Matt gave in, but only touched Pietr's trousers, opening them slowly. Then Matt kneeled in front of Pietr, looking up at him. Pietr groaned hoarsely at the sight, his cock jerking.

When Matt finally touched him, it was to take Pietr's cock all the way down. Pietr yelled, unable to contain the feeling. Matt swallowed around him, and Pietr cried out, his mind exploding in pure, clear pleasure, dragging Matt with him and making them come, the feeling of the other's passion enhancing their own until they were near implosion.

Matt withdrew, leaning his head on Pietr's hip and gasping. They didn't speak, not even in their minds. Matt finally felt Pietr chuckling.

What? Matt didn't think he had enough energy to talk out loud.

It might be me strung up on the wall, baby, but you're the one with the nasty pants.

Matt laughed, breathlessly trying to get up. It took him several tries to pull himself up by Pietr's harness, and he managed to undo the clasps. Pietr caught him just before he hit the floor, Matt's body drained of energy.

It's okay, Matt, you're okay. Just tired from your exercises. Pietr put him on the bed, giving him something to drink. His mate put a couple of pillows behind Matt's head, and Matt could only watch while Pietr gently undressed him, washing him and dressing

him again in a clean pair of boxers. It should have felt embarrassing to be treated that way, but it didn't. Matt could feel Pietr's loving care glowing from his mate's mind, and he basked in it.

Pietr got into bed next to him. *I love you.*

Matt was surprised. Not about how Pietr felt -- he could feel that with every fiber of his mind -- but because the Himiko bothered with actual words.

Sometimes you have to say it. It makes it real.

Matt realized that Pietr was right. *I love you, too.* He leaned in and kissed his mate.

"I know. And now, you need to eat and I need to apologize. Let's get Robbie in here."

Matt looked at his lover, trying to estimate whether the Himiko really was able to do this. Well, they had to learn, as somebody annoying had once said to Matt. He reached out, gently.

"Well, at least you don't pull me through the wall anymore. Big progress, if I may say so. Huge." In spite of his cocky comments, Robbie looked wary, staying right inside the door. Pietr cringed at seeing his caution.

"I'm sorry, Robbie," Pietr said.

Robbie looked surprised. "There's nothing to be sorry about. That's what happens when you're newly bonded."

"Well, it shouldn't have. I should have controlled myself, or I should have known. So, I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted. Do you want me to feed your prodigy?"

"Yes, please. Did you hear how well he did?" Pietr sounded like a proud father.

"I did. It was the closest to un-grumpy I've ever seen Aki."

"And he's going outside tomorrow. So he needs to be fed."

"That's early!" Robbie looked stunned. Then he visibly pulled himself together and went to get the food.

Matt felt increasingly suspicious about this.

Why are you and Aki both insisting that I need a lot of strength to go outside? What's going to happen? All of a sudden, Matt had all kinds of images in his head: secret tests, challenges -- unpleasant stuff.

It's nothing like that. Matt could still feel a vague sensation of unease in Pietr's mind, so deeply burrowed that he wasn't even sure Pietr knew of it himself. *When you go outside, you'll feel the presence of other Himika. They'll be well shielded and you don't have to communicate with them, but it can still be a bit weird for you. Don't worry about it; you're going to do just fine.*

Matt still wasn't fully at ease, but Robbie brought them food and he was too hungry to worry more about it.

Robbie kept them company while they ate, and it was as close to cozy as it could get when his lover had just tried to kill his nurse.

Pietr sputtered and blushed, and Robbie snorted. "Doctor, actually. He tried to kill your doctor. We don't have nurses."

Come on, honey, why don't you be a bit more outspoken? Feel free to think extremely loudly about any of my fuck-ups.

Matt desperately tried to think of a way out of this and realized that there wasn't any. "Yeah? I thought you were a nurse because you're here all the time. Doctors aren't in our hospitals." He ignored Pietr's outburst. Pietr had tried to kill Robbie, after all.

Hey!

"Well, we think that you're important." Robbie looked a bit more serious. "Look, don't worry about tomorrow. It might feel really strange, but Pietr is going

to be there, I'll be there, and Aki will be ready to guide your every step."

"And you've all been through it."

"We have. And we survived." Robbie got up and took their plates with him. "I'll be here tomorrow morning for you. The weather is really good, by the way. It's going to be a nice little field trip." He smiled and left.

Matt lay back in bed and sighed. He suddenly felt the exhaustion after his exercises today.

Come on, baby. Let's get a shower and then we can make it an early night.

Matt nodded and tried to get up. *I think you have to help me.* He struggled to get upright.

Pietr put an arm around him to support him. *I'm here for you. Now, tomorrow, always. Don't worry.*

And suddenly, Matt didn't. It was going to be fine. And if it wasn't, Pietr would still be there for him.

Matt wished he could regain that confidence while he waited for Aki to show up the next morning. Their evening had been really nice: a long, slow shower and then to bed. Under the stream of hot water, he had leaned on Pietr's body, letting his mate wash his hair and soaking in the comfort. Afterward, he had been too exhausted to do anything but fall asleep right away. Still, it had been nice. Cozy.

Now, there was an oddly tense atmosphere in the room. Robbie was there and the guards were waiting right outside the door. None of them spoke. Finally, Aki entered the room.

"Good morning. Are you ready?"

Matt almost smiled. The taciturn Himiko definitely wasn't one for small talk. Matt nodded, feeling the butterflies in his stomach. Pietr gently caressed his hand.

There for you.

Matt took a deep breath. He could do this.

"Good. Let's go. It will probably be strange for you to feel other Himika. Don't worry about it; they are well shielded, and you can always seek comfort with Pietr or even with me." Matt almost felt sorry for Aki at hearing the "even"; Aki clearly knew that he didn't come across as the most approachable guy.

There was no time to ponder that. Aki opened the door and stepped out of the room. Matt stubbornly lifted his head and followed. He could do this.

He knew the hallway from his trip to the dining hall, but everything still seemed strange. Matt blinked, trying to adapt. The guards followed them, and he could feel their shielded minds. It was a very strange feeling, like walking by a window and seeing an animated conversation you couldn't hear through the glass: You

knew there was something there, but you couldn't get to it. It didn't really worry him, though; both Aki and Pietr had told him that the guards were well shielded, and Matt trusted them.

Good. You're doing fine. Pietr was calm, encouraging.

Matt smiled a bit uncertainly and kept walking toward the open door at the end of the hallway. He could do this.

He was almost blinded by the sunlight and had to stop until his eyes got used to it. Then he hesitantly started walking, his feet moving over the flagstones and onto the grass. His eyes were trained to the ground, only seeing what was right in front of him. He felt disconnected, like only his legs and feet moved and touched the ground, not him. It wasn't a pleasant feeling and he looked up, trying to take in his surroundings.

They were in the middle of a park, grass surrounded by trees. The grass was very green, almost glaringly so, and Matt squinted his eyes and tried to find something else to focus on. The sky was too bright, blue and without any clouds. He knew he should have found it beautiful, but he just felt blinded and unable to take it all in. He nervously looked at Pietr.

You're doing fine. You'll get used to it.

There were noises, too. He could hear the wind in the trees and the sound of a car on the other side of the building. Matt shook his head a bit, trying to clear it. He couldn't sort out the sounds, couldn't tell which ones were close and which ones were far away. There was the wind on his skin, too, and the sun, and Pietr touching his hand and saying something to him. More sound. Matt veered, trying to escape. It was all around him, pounding him from every side. He felt sick.

Pietr was talking to him now, thinking to him, but Matt couldn't focus. It was all around him, the sounds, the visual impressions, the sensations, attacking his mind and it was too much. He couldn't do this after all.

Then he was on his knees, staring at the ground in surprise. The color of the grass was so bright, making his head spin. He could feel Pietr shaking him, yelling at him with both voice and mind. Matt couldn't do anything to respond, could only look at the ground. Then he closed his eyes, shutting everything out.

Matt slowly opened his eyes, and for a moment he had no idea where he was or what he was doing there. He started closing them again, but somebody kept shaking him, kept talking insistently to him.

"You have to wake up, Matt. You have to do this, you have to help Pietr."

Pietr. Matt reached out, seeking comfort with his mate. There was hardly anything there.

He gasped at feeling the weirdly muted mind of his mate, and he struggled to get up. There was someone there supporting him, keeping him in a firm grip. Matt reached out again. Aki. But he couldn't get to Pietr, couldn't get the comfort he needed so much.

He opened his eyes and saw his mate lying prone on the ground next to him, Robbie carefully holding Pietr's head and talking. Matt clawed at the hands holding him; he had to get to his mate.

"Calm down!"

Matt couldn't, the panic was strangling him. He was so alone.

"Matt!" Aki was shaking him now. Distantly, Matt noticed that, for a change, his mentor looked far from composed.

"Good. Look at me. You must stay calm, otherwise Pietr won't make it, you understand? You must stay calm."

I can't reach him!

"Yes, you can, but he's sedated, almost unconscious. We had to do it when you passed out; he couldn't wake you up, and that was too much for him."

Matt whimpered, wanting to touch so badly.

Aki helped him move closer and lifted his arm so he could caress his mate. Pietr's head turned slightly after the touch, but that was all the reaction Matt got. His mate's mind was a fog with almost no feelings at all. Matt couldn't take this.

"Matt!" He managed to focus on Aki, looking into the worried eyes. "I can't sedate you, too; we'll never get the two of you brought back together this soon after you've bonded. You need to stay calm for Pietr's sake, Matt."

Dread went through Matt at his mentor's words, clearing his head enough to enable him to nod. Aki squeezed his shoulders.

"Good. You're going to be just fine. You just got overwhelmed."

Matt still was; so confused and so lonely.

"We have to get you back into your room now. I'm going to carry Pietr."

Matt desperately tried to keep it together, tried not to freak out. "He won't let you. He doesn't like anyone but me touching him."

Aki had already done it, though, gently lifting Matt's mate. Pietr only sighed a bit.

Robbie had his arms around Matt now. "Aki is the only one who can do it. He was Pietr's mentor, too, remember?"

Matt nodded, feeling lost.

"Can you walk?"

"Yeah." But he couldn't, he found out, his legs collapsing when Robbie tried to help him up.

"Can you cope with me carrying you?"

Matt nodded again. Speaking seemed too hard at that moment. He could cope; it was Robbie.

He was lifted, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Would you like something over your eyes?"

Robbie's voice was kind.

"Please." Matt felt miserable. Then there was a piece of fabric over his eyes, one of the other Himika putting it there. The darkness helped a little, taking the pressure off at least one of his senses. He could still hear, though, and feel the movement as Robbie walked. He whimpered and tried to hide his head in Robbie's shoulder. But Robbie didn't give him the comfort Pietr gave him, and the attempt only made Matt feel worse to find it missing.

Finally, they were back in their room, the quiet a blessing to Matt's overwrought senses. Aki and Robbie undressed them and helped Matt lie close to his mate. The close contact was a solace even if the mind connected to his was still nothing but a blur. He curled up, trying to get as close as possible. He could sense Pietr's body relaxing, leaning into him. Just that weak response was enough to calm Matt down a little.

"Matt?" It was Aki. Matt opened his eyes, seeing his mentor looking disheveled and worried. Aki's appearance was far from the controlled person Matt had come to know, and the change shocked him.

"Do you understand what happened?"

Matt shook his head; he didn't understand anything.

"You got overwhelmed and shorted out. Feeling you disappear was too much for Pietr, and we had to sedate him to enable him to cope. It's extremely important that you're there for him when he wakes up. So you have to keep it together, okay? We can't sedate you, too."

Matt nodded mutely. He was still so scared.

Aki's face softened, and the Himiko reached out and took Matt's hand. Matt relished the touch, but then remembered how Pietr had reacted to his talking to Robbie and tried to withdraw his hand.

"It's okay, Matt. I was Pietr's mentor; he knows me intimately, and he knows that I'm not a threat. Let me hold you."

Matt gave in, finding at least some comfort in the simple touch. He relaxed a little.

"Good, you're doing fine. And Pietr is still there. You can feel him, right?"

Matt cleared his voice. "Yes, but it feels so wrong." He clung to Aki, trying hard not to panic.

"I know. And I can't do anything about it, but it will be better soon. It's only a couple of hours, then he'll be back."

Hours? This wasn't happening.

"Would you like me to stay? He knows me, he won't mind." Aki's voice was kind.

"Yes, please." Matt pulled Pietr in closer, still clinging to Aki's hand across Pietr's body. It was quiet in the room. Matt hadn't realized until now how... not-alone he felt with Pietr.

Matt cleared his voice again. "Talk to me?"

Aki stroked his hand. "Of course. What would you like to know?"

"What happened? I know that you were concerned about today, but why did I react the way I did?" Why did he fuck up again?

"You felt our worry?" Aki sounded surprised. Matt only nodded. "Well, it is a strange feeling to sense someone else's mind, even if they're shielded. I'm always careful when I take someone out for the first time."

Matt smiled bitterly. "I didn't mind that at all. I could feel them, but since I couldn't get to them, I just decided not to waste any time on them. It wasn't until I got outside that things got out of hand."

"Tell me about it." Aki's voice was steady, neutral. Exactly what Matt needed.

He thought, trying to explain how it had felt. "I couldn't take it in. There were too many impressions at once, light, sound, sensation. I just couldn't cope." It had been scary.

Aki nodded. "It's not something we have seen before, but I think it makes sense. You have a lot of power, and that makes you more sensitive, too. You weren't exactly happy with having me in your head for the first time, either."

That was an understatement if there ever was one.

Matt felt a pang of fear going through him. "Does that mean that I'll be confined to this room? Or to a retreat? Pietr can't do that." Pietr would have to let Matt go and Matt couldn't, just couldn't give up his mate.

Pietr stirred a bit, a ripple going through his mate's mind.

"No! Matt, stay calm. Keep Pietr calm."

Matt hugged Pietr tightly, sending soothing thoughts into his mind. Pietr settled down again, his mind going back to the nondescript fog. Matt hated it.

"You won't have to go to a retreat. You just have to practice. Your symptoms aren't that uncommon with humans after, for example, a concussion -- and you have had brain surgery, after all. That's a lot less stressful for your brain than a concussion, though, so if surgery is the reason, you'll be fine in a couple of weeks. Personally, I think that you're just sensitive; your mental powers are so strong that the addition of other impressions was more than you could take at that moment."

"At that moment? So I'll learn?"

"You'll learn. If not, I'll teach you."

Aki sounded so certain that Matt did relax, trusting his mentor's words. He was exhausted.

"I'm so tired all the time -- I never seem to recover from one thing before something else happens. Is that normal, too?"

"Nothing's really normal with you." For the first time, Aki's voice was gently teasing. "You're progressing a lot faster than most. But yes, since you recently had brain surgery and you're going through strenuous exercises, it's quite normal. You can sleep if you need to."

"I... Pietr won't panic if I'm not awake when he comes to?"

Aki smiled reassuringly.

"No, he'll find you even if you're asleep. He'll probably wake you, but as long as you're just sleeping, he can reach you."

"Okay. I think I'll sleep a little, then." Matt closed his eyes. If he slept, maybe Pietr would be there when he woke up. He felt Aki gently stroking his hair; then he fell asleep.

Matt was woken by a sorrow so big that it took his breath away.

You left me! Pietr was clinging to him, arms and legs wrapped tightly around Matt's body and his mate's mind an open wound of grief.

"Pietr! Pietr, I'm right here. I'm not leaving you." Matt poured reassurance and love and calm into his mate's mind, but it didn't help.

You left!

The intensity of Pietr's feelings of loss and hopelessness shocked Matt. They had told him that Pietr needed him the same way he needed Pietr, but somehow, he had considered Pietr to be stronger, to be able to go on without him. He was astonished to learn that it wasn't so. He had almost lost Pietr. He cradled his lover, hugging Pietr tightly.

I'm so sorry, baby. I didn't mean to. And I won't do it again; I'll stay with you now.

You left me. Pietr was calming down, and now Matt could feel the traces of the sedative clouding his thoughts, explaining some of his panic. Matt held him more tightly, trying to comfort him with both body and mind.

I'm here, baby. I'm not going anywhere.

Pietr reached out. *Promise?* He sounded like a lost child, and it almost made Matt break down.

I promise, baby. I'll stay with you.

Just like that, Pietr accepted Matt's reassurance and went back to sleep.

Matt cradled his mate and pulled the comforter around them. Then he settled in to watch over his lover, giving Pietr comfort and peace while the Himiko slept.

When Pietr woke up again, the Himiko was crying and clinging to him. Matt desperately tried to comfort his mate.

Shh, baby, it's okay. I'm here. Don't cry.

I was all alone! The anguish was so deep that it shocked Matt. The sobs wracked Pietr's body.

I'm so sorry, baby. So, so sorry. I didn't mean to leave you. Matt frantically tried to calm Pietr down with his hands and his mind. He felt miserable about fucking up again. It was one thing to have difficulties learning things, but this time he'd almost gotten his mate killed.

Oddly enough, it was Matt's distress that calmed down Pietr. *It wasn't your fault. It was just too much for you.*

Of course it was my fault. I was the one who freaked out.

Pietr gently cradled Matt's head, his kisses tasting salty from his tears. *You couldn't help it. I just got so scared when you left me.*

Matt could sense the echo of Pietr's terror, of the emptiness he had felt when Matt passed out and left him all alone.

I'm so sorry. Matt didn't know what else to say, what to do, the guilt almost choking him.

You're doing fine. Just stay with me. Pietr took a shaky breath and pulled him closer. Matt knew that he had no right to allow this, that he should be the one helping Pietr, but he couldn't help it and started crying. He was ashamed of being inadequate, so useless that he had let down the most important person in his life.

Pietr held him and let him cry. *You'll be fine, baby. Don't worry; you'll learn what you need to learn.*

But I don't! I keep fucking everything up. I almost got you killed!

No. You got overwhelmed and I panicked because I couldn't feel you. That wasn't your fault. And none of us knew that you would react like that. If we had known, we wouldn't have made you do it.

I don't want to be like this. Matt struggled to breathe through his sobs. *I don't want to make a scene every fucking time I do something new. I'm sick and tired of being useless.*

You're not useless! Pietr tightened his arms around Matt until it almost hurt. *You're mine and you're strong and we're going to be great together.*

Matt had his doubts, but he was too exhausted to protest Pietr's words. His fatigue only fueled his self-hatred.

Shh, baby, don't do this to yourself. You're tired. We'll sleep and then we'll figure out whatever we need to do when we wake up, okay?

Matt couldn't do anything but nod. He didn't know what to do, but his body needed the rest, and he fell asleep again.

Matt woke up before Pietr the next morning and lay next to his mate, watching Pietr sleep. He felt empty and miserable. He couldn't learn what they wanted him to learn, but at the same time, he had to. If he fucked up again like he did yesterday, there was a real risk that Pietr wouldn't make it. And he couldn't force Pietr to a lifetime with Matt in a small room like this just because Matt couldn't cope with anything else. There was no choice but to keep trying to learn. Trying and failing, most likely, if he judged by his endeavors so far. It seemed so hopeless.

Pietr opened his eyes and put his arms around Matt. *Don't be sad. It's going to be fine.*

Matt made an effort to pull himself together. *Sure. I just have to practice.* He tried to smile.

Oh, baby. Pietr kissed him tenderly, letting warmth and compassion flow into the kiss and pulling him in close. It should have felt great, but Matt didn't even get hard.

You don't have to. Pietr wrapped him in a hug and kept him there. Matt couldn't do anything but listen to his mate's breathing. It did calm him down enough to make him notice that Pietr felt... odd. Fragile.

You weren't the only one who freaked out, you know.

Matt couldn't believe he hadn't noticed until now how vulnerable Pietr still felt. And it was all his fault.

Stop it! Pietr shook him. *We're in this together, understand? It's not all on your shoulders; I'm here, too.*

You'd be better off if you weren't. There, he had said what he most of all wanted to keep hidden.

No, I wouldn't. It has been less than a week, Matt. You can't judge anything by how you feel now, and you can't expect to do everything perfectly on your first try. And even if we wanted to split, we can't. This is for life. But I don't want to be without you; you're strong and clever and sexy and you're fucking mine, okay? Matt would have bruises where Pietr clutched his shoulders.

Matt nodded hesitantly. He still had no idea how he was going to do this, but there was no way to deny that Pietr meant every word. There was no hesitation, no regret in his mate's mind.

Okay. I... Okay. Matt didn't know what to say or do, so he just let Pietr hold him, trying to take comfort in his mate's embrace.

He must have fallen asleep, because he was woken by Aki and Robbie entering the room. They brought

food, and Aki held a bag in one hand. They both looked concerned. Matt felt his heart sink at the sight of that expression once again.

Remember, you're still learning. Let them help you.

"How are you feeling?" Robbie looked at both of them as he raised the head of the bed and got the food ready.

Matt didn't quite meet his eyes. "A bit shaky."

Pietr nodded. "Same here."

"Yes, that's to be expected. If you can tolerate it, it would be good to let Aki have a look at you. There's no reason to believe that you were hurt yesterday, but you both used all of your power."

Matt nodded.

Robbie looked relieved, and it made Matt wonder. Had he been that difficult before if such a small permission had that effect?

"You both need to eat first. You need the nourishment." Now that Robbie said it, Matt felt really weak. He started wolfing down his food.

"Hey, don't make yourself throw up -- that's not going to help."

Matt didn't look up, but managed to slow down. He felt Pietr's worry in the back of his mind. *I'm fine.*

When they had finished, Matt looked questioningly at Aki. He could feel Pietr's worry growing and he didn't like it.

Aki seemed to sense it, speaking quietly. "I'd like to have a look at Pietr first, if that's okay." He looked at Pietr. "If you've spent all of your power, I can give you some of mine. It'll make it easier for Matt." Pietr nodded reluctantly.

Robbie stood up. "I'll give you some privacy. Just call me if you need anything." He left the room.

"It's going to be easier for him if you hold him, Matt," Aki said.

Matt frowned, but put his arms protectively around Pietr. Pietr closed his eyes and clung to Matt, his fingers clutching tightly at Matt's shirt.

It's okay, baby. It's just Aki -- he's not going to hurt you. Matt felt Aki gently probing at the outside of Pietr's mind. Pietr gasped and dug his fingers into Matt's back, trying to cope and failing.

Pietr! Don't be scared. It's okay. I have you, I'm right here. Matt held Pietr tightly, letting him feel Matt holding him, body as well as mind.

Pietr only gradually calmed down enough for Aki to enter his mind, even with Matt there. Pietr whimpered, thrashing and fighting against the intrusion. Aki examined him quickly and gently and then pulled out, leaving Pietr sweating and gasping. Matt curled up around him, rocking him and cradling his head. It took forever before his mate could as much as breathe normally.

Matt looked up. "Is he okay?"

Aki nodded. "He's used a lot of power and he's fragile emotionally, but he's going to be just fine in a day or two."

Matt had to close his eyes as the relief rushed through him. Then he tended to his mate until Pietr fell asleep, exhausted by the exertion of the day before and the examination. Matt looked up.

"Do you need to take a look at me, too?"

Aki nodded. "I would like to, if you can do it with your mate asleep."

Matt nodded. "I think I can." Not that he knew anything at the moment, but he wasn't afraid of Aki anymore. He lay down next to Pietr, and the Himiko

instinctively spooned up and reached out for him. Matt let Aki enter his mind.

The Himiko was quick and thorough, and Matt didn't try to hide anything from his mentor. It was no use anyway. He kept his eyes closed when Aki was done.

"Matt, you can't do this to yourself."

Matt reluctantly opened his eyes. Aki was looking at him, the normally hard eyes filled with compassion.

"All this isn't your fault."

Matt kept his voice low so he wouldn't disturb his sleeping mate. It didn't keep the bitterness down, though.

"No? So he was already being confined to a closed room before I came by, was he?"

"No." Aki's voice was even. "And neither were you. Meeting Pietr has brought you exactly as much trouble as it has brought him."

Matt stared.

"And it's not all bad, is it? It's a good feeling to be bonded, isn't it?"

"Oh, it's great; now I can fuck up two people's lives instead of just my own." But Aki was right. In the brief moments between fainting and exercises and exhausted sleep, meeting Pietr was the best thing that had ever happened to Matt.

"You haven't fucked up anything. You're learning, and because we haven't taught anyone like you before, it's by trial and error. That means errors now and then. That's nobody's fault; we're just in unknown territory here."

Aki sat down next to him. "The ironic thing is that yesterday was actually a huge success when it came to testing your ability to handle meeting other Himika. You didn't have any trouble at all with that."

Matt was about to protest, but Aki wouldn't let him.

"Yes, you ran into some unexpected trouble, but I have an idea on how to fix that." Aki looked determined, and Matt sighed. A determined Aki meant hard work.

"I'll be back after lunch to try something with you. If I'm right, you'll be outside again in no time at all."

Aki nodded to him and left. Matt couldn't help feeling a glimmer of hope; he really wanted to learn this. He was sick and tired of being as limited as he was now.

Aki was right; the short rest Pietr got before lunch did him a lot of good. He felt less frail, and that made Matt feel just a little better. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all.

I told you it wasn't. But please warn me next time you intend to freak out.

Matt smiled, but he couldn't help the pang of guilt that went through him. Sometimes he really missed being able to lie to the one he loved.

"Oh, fuck. I'm sorry, Matt. I didn't mean it that way." Pietr was genuinely contrite.

It's okay. I just still feel bad about it.

I know. But shit happens, you know? It was nobody's fault. I'll be fine, and so will you.

I guess so. Aki pointed out that I didn't have all these problems before you abducted me. I guess I'll just start blaming everything on you.

That's the spirit!

Matt giggled. No matter how much he fucked up, he still had the most wonderful mate.

Please, go on.

And the sexiest. And the most sarcastic. And the one with the most inane sense of humor. And...

Thank you, that's quite enough. Pietr silenced Matt by kissing him.

You do know that I can kiss and think at the same time, don't you?

If you can, then I'm doing something seriously wrong.

But Pietr wasn't for long; when Robbie came into their room half an hour later, Matt was only just returning from a very necessary trip to the bathroom to clean up. Robbie stopped inside the door and narrowed his eyes.

"You're sure you're not half bunny, Matt? It's not something we've encountered before, but, you know, we're aliens and don't know everything about you humans."

Matt threw a pillow at Robbie and caught the doctor smack in the face. He wanted to do it again, but his legs were still wobbly after their lovemaking, so he had to be content with that. He flung himself on the bed next to Pietr.

Robbie picked up the pillow. "You obviously look better. That's good, because Aki seems very optimistic about something."

All three of them heaved sighs. Then they stared at each other and started laughing.

"Okay, I guess we all have a clear picture of what Aki in a good mood indicates."

"Hard work." Pietr sounded very pleased that he wasn't the target of Aki's project.

You don't know that, baby.

Matt couldn't help laughing at Pietr's expression, which wavered between annoyance and horror. He had a more pressing need, though.

"I think I need something to eat."

"You both do," Robbie said. "I'm a bit concerned about that, in fact; you really don't get enough nutrients. It'll be better when you start getting more physical exercise, but until then, you'll have to eat everything I give you, okay?"

Matt nodded obediently. That he could do, at least.

They had almost finished their lunch when Aki arrived, carrying the same bag he had brought earlier that morning. He did look very energetic.

Matt pushed away his dessert. "So, what have you planned?"

"No, you don't! This is what always happens. You have to eat."

Matt blinked, and Aki sat down with a thump on the chair by the door. Matt obediently put the fork back into the fruit salad and started eating again. Pietr was laughing his ass off in his mind.

Just you wait. Remember, his plans might well be for you.

That silenced Pietr quite effectively.

Robbie loomed over them until they had finished their lunch. Then he nodded approvingly and took away their plates.

"I think we can start now." Matt looked pointedly at Aki, who was staring after Robbie with a puzzled look on his face.

"Oh. Yes." Aki got up, quickly getting back to his usual efficient attitude. "Just stand there, in front of the bed." He started rustling in the bag, looking for something.

Matt hesitantly did as he was told. "Do I need Pietr for this?"

Aki pulled two pieces of cloth out of his bag, one red and one green. They looked like flags. "No, no, it's not strenuous at all."

Matt refrained from saying that Aki had said the same thing about going outside.

"Now, stand still and look straight at me."

Matt did so, and Aki started waving the flags in the periphery of his vision. The Himiko looked like a clown at a birthday party. For very small children. Matt raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "What on earth do you think... Oh." He suddenly felt dizzy and swayed back against the bed. Pietr caught him and helped him sit down.

"I knew it!" Aki sounded triumphant. Matt forced himself to open his eyes, focusing on Aki to keep the

world from moving. Aki waved the flags in different directions again, and Matt groaned and had to close his eyes once more.

"Would you stop that? Unless you want him to throw up." Matt gratefully sank back against Pietr, who held him, centering him.

"He's going to have to get used to it. This is what's wrong. He can't coordinate different sensory inputs. It's not uncommon with humans after a trauma to the brain - - and it seems his brain considers either the operation or the new mental impressions a trauma. It's probably similar to the physical coordination issues he had right after his surgery." Aki sounded very pleased with his discovery.

"How can that be a good thing?" Matt kept his eyes closed; that way, he didn't have to look at the world moving around him.

"Because it's so simple! And even simpler to cure. You just have to practice looking and listening and moving."

"Why does everything come back to me having to practice?" Matt knew that he sounded grouchy.

"Because it is about you having to practice. It's a new skill; you have to put it into use to master it."

That actually sounded logical. Matt opened his eyes. "And that's all there is to it? It isn't something complicated or -- permanent?" He held his breath after asking the latter.

"I don't have any reason at all to believe that. I'll give you something to stimulate your senses, and then you can start expanding the exercises. Take a break when you feel nauseated, and then go on. It's really simple."

It sounded that way, and for the first time in ages, Matt felt optimistic. Hard work was something he knew;

this didn't have anything to do with mysterious abilities he had never known before. He could do this.

An hour later, Matt was about to explode. He had less skill than a five-year old. Aki had thrown a ball at him. He hadn't caught it. Aki had waved those flags around, and the world had started moving in directions it wasn't supposed to move in. Then Aki had made sounds and gestures at the same time, and Matt had had to lie down, his head spinning.

"This is so incredibly annoying!"

Aki didn't look as if he was going to disagree with that. The Himiko crossed his arms and looked speculatively at Matt. "I have another idea. Yes, why not? Wait a moment." He left the room, looking very determined.

You're so weird, you know that?

Matt sat back up, looking incredulously at Pietr. "I'm the weird one? I'm surrounded by fucking mind reading aliens! I'm so not the weird one here."

Fucking, yes, mind reading, yes, but we're not weird. We're very consistent. You're not. You learn the hardest things in no time, and then you freeze over something like this. It's like your trip outside. You aced the challenge that we were worried about -- and then you found something totally unlikely to freak out about. You're weird.

Matt was incredibly close to yelling something not very polite when the door opened and Aki entered again. He carried a radio and put it down on a table. Then he looked expectantly at them as if he were presenting the cure for cancer.

"What's that?"

"It's a radio."

Matt just stared.

For the first time since Matt had met him, Aki looked uncertain. "It plays music? Sounds, you know?"

Matt rolled his eyes. "I know that!"

Aki looked relieved.

"What I mean is, why have you brought it, and why do you look like it can bring peace to the Middle East?"

Aki looked offended. "Because it's a very good idea!"

If you may say so yourself.

Matt managed to keep a straight face even with Pietr's impertinent remark in his head.

"Dancing gives you three different sensory inputs at the same time, sound, sight, and sensation -- and it enhances your coordination. It's perfect." Aki turned on the radio and looked expectantly at Matt.

"You expect me to get up and dance? Now?"

Aki's eyes narrowed. "Only if you want to get better."

It was kind of difficult to protest when his mentor put it that way. "But... In front of you?"

Aki looked slightly hurt. "Well, I can leave if you'd like."

"I would. Very much." Matt could do a lot of things in front of strangers; dancing wasn't one of them. Aki huffed and left.

Matt just sat on the bed. He would normally have to be very, very drunk before anyone could get him out on a dance floor.

Baby?

He looked up. Pietr was in the middle of the floor, reaching a hand out for Matt. Uncertain, Matt stayed where he was. Pietr smiled gently at him.

Come dance with me?

There wasn't much Matt wanted less right now. Dancing was embarrassing even on a good day. And he

wasn't having a good day. But there was no way he was going to let his mate down again; Matt still felt raw when he sensed how fragile Pietr was.

With a great effort, Matt got up, crossed the floor, and took his mate's outstretched hand. He closed his eyes and snuggled into his mate, sighing when he felt the solid body against his. It was close to ridiculous, but being apart, if only for minutes, felt hard. Pietr put strong arms around him, and they moved gently across the floor to the music. It wasn't bad at all.

I think you're supposed to keep your eyes open.

Matt knew; he also knew what would happen if he did. He sighed and opened them. It was okay for a moment, and then he started to lose focus.

It's okay; close your eyes again.

Matt did, leaning into Pietr. It felt good. Pietr was still marked by Matt's collapse the day before, mind a little frail. But his mate never pulled back, never tried to protect himself from Matt, and Matt was grateful for that.

Now, try again. And it seemed that Pietr was back to his old bossy self as well.

Matt almost refused, wanting to stay in his nice little comfort zone. But he did it. This time he could keep his eyes open long enough to lift his head and look at Pietr. A smile spread on Pietr's face, and Matt got rewarded with a kiss. He surrendered, gave up on being strong, and leaned on Pietr, physically and especially mentally. Strangely enough, it made Pietr stronger every time Matt did so, and Matt could feel some of his confidence returning. Maybe he couldn't do this alone, but together with Pietr, he could.

Every time he tried, he could keep his eyes open for a little bit longer without getting dizzy. Then he started to get tired, and they had to stop and rest. Pietr pulled him

back out on the floor after a while, though, and they danced and rested like that for the rest of the afternoon. When Robbie brought them dinner, Matt felt... optimistic. It took him a while to recognize the feeling.

Maybe it was the optimism that led him to think about the future. Or rather, to the realization that he hadn't thought about it at all. He turned to Pietr.

What do you actually want me to do?

Do? Pietr looked questioningly at him.

Yes. When I learn this, what am I supposed to do with it? Do you have any plans for me?

Pietr put down his dessert -- and yes, he had eaten all of it, thanks to Robbie's newfound Aki-ness. *As a matter of fact, I don't know. The original plan was to educate you, to teach you that we aren't malicious, and then let you go back to your old life as a goodwill ambassador for us. You can still do that, of course, even though we have to be quite close in the beginning. But perhaps you'd like to do something else?*

Like what?

I don't know. You're one of a kind; I've never thought about it before. You don't have to decide anything right away, though -- and you should relax and learn about your new skills first. You still have a lot to explore. Matt got a vague image of a little cottage in an idyllic-looking forest from Pietr's mind.

Where's that?

Pietr blushed. *I thought we could go there when you get out of here? You'd still need to take it easy for a couple of months; we could stay there together.*

Matt sat astride Pietr's lap and kissed him.

I'd love to. Matt could feel the happiness in his mate's mind, and it made him proud. Maybe he really could learn this.

It did seem that way. During the next couple of days, Matt worked harder than he remembered ever doing before. He had the hang of it now; the trick was to match the right amount of exercise with the right amount of rest. He learned to trust Pietr more, too; his mate knew more about how much he could take than he did himself. It had the added benefit of making their bond tighter. They were woven so closely together now that Matt didn't think he even could withdraw again.

And he made progress -- a lot of it, in fact. Enough that he looked speculatively at the closed door on the fifth day after his collapse.

"I want to go outside again."

Pietr looked questioningly at him. "You think you can do it?"

The Himiko did this sometimes; held his mind carefully neutral and talked out loud instead. It was something new; they were more independent now, and Matt didn't feel like his guts were getting dislocated when they were more than a few feet apart. With Robbie, it was different; the doctor just seemed to prefer speaking out loud over thinking.

"Yes." Matt nodded. "And if I can't, I'll lean on you. I'm not afraid of freaking out again." He really wasn't. He had learned a lot about his own abilities and limits.

"Okay. But I don't think you should go farther than to the window in the hallway. That way, you'll get plenty of sensory input and still be close to the security in here."

Matt frowned and stubbornly poked behind Pietr's careful shields. It had both its upsides and downsides that they weren't as fully engrossed in each others' minds anymore.

You don't think I can do it?

I think you'll still react. I also think your reaction will be a lot more controllable than last time, but I want to be sure that I can get you into safety before anything serious happens.

Matt had to concede that Pietr's worry was warranted. And Pietr wasn't really worried; just very, very adamant that this time, he was going to keep his mate safe.

Matt leaned in and hugged him. *You didn't do anything wrong. You can't help that I'm less predictable than a four-year old at times.*

Pietr laughed. *I can't. And I like it.* He kissed Matt, very thoroughly. Matt slapped his ass.

"Hey!" Pietr looked offended.

"We'll never get anywhere if you keep that up." Matt got a mix of arousal, pride, and frustration so peculiar that he couldn't help laughing. *You're way too good at distracting me.*

I am, aren't I? Damn, his lover did smug well.

Matt just smiled, took a few steps toward the door, and opened it.

He blinked against the bright light and felt Pietr's consternation. Outside the door, his guards scrambled to get their shields when they saw him.

It's okay, guys, I won't fry your brains this time. It was actually quite funny to feel their surprise. But he was on a mission, so he kept on walking until he reached the window. He looked outside.

It was a cloudy day, looking chillier than the day he had been outside. With a pang of joy, he realized that he was looking out of the window without getting sick. He felt Pietr embracing him from behind and smiled.

He kept looking until he felt the familiar dizziness, then he turned around and hid his head in Pietr's shoulder.

I'm okay, I just need a break. He could feel Pietr's worry and, more unexpectedly, the compassion in one of the guards' minds. He looked up, surprised.

I'd have thought that you would be sick and tired of me by now?

The guard smiled kindly. *It's not easy for any of us. You had a rough time of it.*

Matt nodded and closed his eyes again. He loved being held like this, feeling safe no matter what happened around him. Pietr tightened the embrace when his mate felt that thought.

"Hey, no mashing the lover, okay?" He opened his eyes and kissed Pietr's nose. Then he turned around and looked some more until he got lightheaded again and Pietr insisted that they go back to their room. Matt didn't protest; he was tired, but at the same time, he felt triumphant. He could do this. He could have his life back.

Or make a new one. Pietr was proud and relieved and...

Are you always horny?!

No, only when I'm around you. Matt thought about pointing out that that was all the time, but then he got distracted when he felt Pietr rubbing against one hip.

Mmm, feels good. He rubbed right back, his breath hitching when he found that place between hip and stomach where he fit perfectly. He grinded slowly, luxuriating in just feeling good.

I can make you feel much better.

Matt had no idea how Pietr managed making an inner voice sound that lecherous. It aroused him and made him laugh and almost prevented him from getting his trousers undone.

Focus, baby. Pietr's voice was teasing and distracted with need. Not so distracted, though, that his mate

couldn't manage to get Matt's pants down. Pietr stepped back and turned Matt, pushing him down on the bed none too gently.

Matt gasped, taken aback by Pietr's sudden intensity. And by the effect it had on his dick. He whimpered and rubbed himself against the bed.

Matt was pulled up on all fours. *No coming before I'm in you, baby.* Pietr sounded strict and his mental voice was breathless.

Matt hid his head against his arms, breathing deeply in his effort to regain a little control over himself. Then Pietr slathered the cold lube on his ass, and he lost it.

"Oh, god, yes, please." Matt nodded and sighed and angled his hips to get more. Pietr laughed at him and added a finger.

It was good, and he rode the sensation, grunting when Pietr's fingers spread and opened him wider. He tried to convey that he was so ready for more, but Pietr got there before him.

The Himiko pulled out his fingers and let his cock push into Matt's body. Matt groaned, the feeling of being too full quickly changing into an unstoppable desire to get more, to feel Pietr fill him until there was no more room for anything else inside his mind and body.

And Pietr gave it to him. His mate grabbed Matt's shoulders and started fucking him, pushing deep with every thrust. Matt gasped, the feelings so big. Then Pietr hit his prostate, making him lose his breath. Pietr kept grinding that sensitive spot, and Matt went crazy, trying to get away and get more and make enough space for his feelings.

Pietr reached around and stroked his cock. It was all Matt needed; he cried out and came all over the sheets, his mind a blinding chaos of pleasure. Pietr went over,

too, and his mate's bliss made Matt's climax go on and on, until he lay gasping across the bed, unable to move.

Pietr stayed inside him, stroking his sides and kissing his neck. Matt let his satisfaction and gratefulness flow into Pietr's mind. Pietr chuckled.

We're pretty good at that, aren't we?

Matt smiled, his eyes still closed.

The best. We're the best.

Matt kept on working hard, and it paid off. He used every single opportunity to force his battered brain back into shape. And the progress was there; he could leave their room now, and it was exhilarating no longer to be confined to the isolation area. The triumph was immense the first time he could have dinner in the dining room along with the Himika. He knew it was a bit foolish, but the normality of walking down the hallway, hearing the noise of other people talking and eating, and then just sitting down to have dinner was a sign that he was on his way back to a regular life.

Granted, the chef had a wary expression on his face when he saw Matt, and Matt couldn't help winking at him, at the same time keeping himself carefully shielded. The chef laughed, looking both a bit embarrassed and immensely relieved at the same time. Matt didn't listen to his mind; that wouldn't have been polite.

Aki still came by every day, and now they were working on the intricacies of Matt's newfound abilities. It was still hard work, since the exercises were getting more difficult, and his progress wasn't as pronounced anymore. It all seemed to be part of the process, though. Matt even got a reluctant "not bad" out of Aki one

afternoon. That was enough to make him raise his hands in the air and yell triumphantly. Pietr startled in the corner, where his mate had been reading while Matt practiced, and Aki frowned in a display of disapproval that would have been very convincing if it hadn't been for the twitch at the corner of his mentor's mouth.

I take it that you're happy with your progress today, baby?

Matt walked to Pietr's chair and gave him a kiss. *I am.* Then Matt's stomach growled loudly enough for all three of them to hear.

I'm also starving, it appears. Let's go have dinner. He pulled Pietr up.

Care to join us? Matt turned toward Aki, who had been about to leave.

He mentor turned back, the Himiko's surprise so big that Matt could feel it through all of Aki's careful shields. It was echoed in Pietr's mind. Matt made a note to himself to find out why later, but his stomach growled again, this time much louder.

Coming? He didn't wait for an answer, just went out the door and started walking toward the dining room. Pietr was so slow to react that Matt felt the familiar, sickening feeling of being too far apart. He impatiently reached out and tugged at his mate.

"Would you stop that?" Pietr came up next to Matt at a very undignified half run. Matt could hear Aki snort behind them and tugged a bit at his mentor, too. The snort turned into a yelp as Aki crashed forward and only managed to right himself at the last moment.

I told you I was hungry. Matt ignored the outrage in both of their minds and entered the dining hall. *You know Robbie is very particular about having me eat regularly.*

I think I'm going to have a word with Robbie. Pietr made sure that both Matt and Aki heard his thought. Matt just gave him a kiss on the cheek and sat down to eat.

The food was as good as usual, but there was a rather awkward silence at the table. Matt was so busy eating that he didn't become aware of it until he had almost finished his meal. When he did notice, he also saw the looks he was getting from the rest of the room. He frowned.

What, have I broken some Himiko custom by having dinner with more than one person at a time?

Pietr actually blushed, the Himiko carefully hiding his thoughts to Matt. Matt could have found out, of course, but preferred letting him have his privacy (Matt did have some sense of Himiko manners by now, after all) and looked questioningly at Aki.

Aki looked a little uncomfortable, but as always, he answered Matt's question.

You haven't broken any customs, but as a rule, I'm not considered good company. Aki kept the answer so neutral that Matt could barely sense the pain behind it. Barely, but he could.

Matt looked incredulously at his mentor.

You're the most important person in their lives, and they still don't like you?

Aki shrugged. *What I do might be important, but it's also extremely unpleasant. Not many people want to be reminded of being that helpless and vulnerable. And seeing me reminds them of that.* There was resignation in his mind.

Matt had absolutely no idea what to say to that. He looked at Pietr.

There's also the fact that he's one of the strongest of us. Pietr's words were matter of fact. *That freaks out a lot of people, too.*

Matt just looked from one to the other. *Well, I don't want to be dictated to about who I have dinner with, so you're always welcome at my table.* He got up and left the dining hall, looking accusingly at the other Himika.

Thank you. Aki was deeply grateful for that tiny kindness, and there was something really sad about that. Matt could sense him saying goodbye to Pietr and leaving.

Matt was almost back at their room before Pietr caught up. His mate was very quiet.

That was really nice of you, Matt.

Matt turned around, astounded.

No, it wasn't. It was just how I felt. Feel. He went into their room and closed the door behind Pietr. *Remind me that we need to switch rooms; there's no need to stay in a windowless room any longer.* He felt Pietr's arms go around him from behind.

I mean it. It was a kind gesture. You're a nice person.

Matt tried to shrug it off, but Pietr wasn't fooled. Matt turned around.

It's just that I feel really sorry for him.

Pietr's mind was one big question mark.

He doesn't have anybody. He sees a lot of people and helps them... Pietr snorted. *Okay, then, bullies them through it, but still, he enables them to live a good life. And he hasn't got one himself, and the loneliness is eating at him.*

How do you know that, baby?

Matt shrugged. *Well, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? You can feel it when you're around him.*

Pietr looked at Matt with a funny look on his face. *No, you can't. Or rather, I can't. Nobody else can, either.*

But it's so clear! I mean, he isn't shouting it out, but his feelings are just... emanating from him.

Pietr sat down on their bed and patted the spot next to him. *Come and sit down.*

Matt did, a bad feeling filling him. He didn't like the feel of Pietr's mind.

I'm not eavesdropping; I swear I'm not. Along with everything else, Aki had given him a crash course in polite Himiko behavior. Eavesdropping was extremely impolite, up on level with humans crashing someone's formal fiftieth birthday dinner party uninvited -- and naked. You either only listened when spoken to, or you made it clear that you were there.

I know you're not. Pride and a little worry were mixed in Pietr's mind. *It's just that I think you might turn out to be really strong. Even stronger than we thought at first.*

Yes? Matt had a very hard time seeing where this was going.

Well, if you were Himiko, strength like yours would result in equally large responsibilities.

Matt still hadn't a clue what Pietr meant.

For one, it would mean that you don't get to choose your job. Matt got a clear image of regret about leaving his friends and his life behind him in order to travel to an unknown planet far away. Pietr's memories.

Well, I'm not, so I don't worry about that.

Pietr tried to object, but Matt refused to budge.

No, really, I'm serious. Matt had a real problem with people bossing him around; that was one of the main reasons why he had started his own firm instead of

taking a job. He was his own boss, and he had no intention of changing that now.

Pietr didn't seem all that convinced, but the Himiko let it go; Matt saw to that when he pulled his mate's pants down and started sucking.

Matt was pacing up and down the floor, getting more impatient with every second. The moment when he could leave the hospital was so close that he could hardly comprehend it.

The cottage where they would be staying was a part of the Himika compound, but the area was so big that they would have several miles to the nearest neighbor. Matt had found out that the compound was huge. It used to be a military area, but it had been closed down long time ago. Now the Himika had taken over the area and built the facilities they needed. Some of the buildings used to be outside the military area; their cottage was a former civilian house. It would be very close to having a normal life, and Matt couldn't wait to get there. It wasn't that he didn't like it at the clinic, but it was a hospital, and he didn't need to be in one anymore.

And we can have sex without anyone listening. Pietr's voice was expectant and just a little horny.

Matt laughed, feeling almost giddy at the thought of being on their own. All they needed now was for the Assessor -- somehow it sounded as if the Himiko's title was spelled with a capital A -- to come by and approve of Matt's discharge. Matt had no idea why the Himiko insisted on coming here to do that, but he hadn't paid much attention to it, either. The main point was that he was going to live with Pietr for the next two months. Aki was still going to come by a couple of times a week to teach him, but other than that, they were going to be all alone. God, it was going to be good.

There was a knock on the door, and Matt raised his eyebrows. *Polite one, your Assessor?*

Pietr's mind was kept carefully neutral, and that made Matt just a little suspicious as he went to answer the

door, getting his defenses up. He had bad experiences with Pietr in neutral mode.

Matt recognized the nondescript elderly man he had met on his first day with the Himika. The thought of that day made Matt shudder inwardly, and he automatically strengthened his defenses. He still kept a polite smile on his face.

"Please come in, Mr..." Matt realized that nobody had ever told him the Assessor's name.

"Anderson. Nice to meet you, Matt."

The Himiko's name most definitely wasn't Anderson; a name was one of the most difficult things to hide. Lying about it meant that the Assessor expected Matt's skills to be weak. And what was it with the schoolmasterly use of his first name while the Himiko only had a last name? Matt decided that he didn't like the Himiko much and made sure that the Assessor couldn't get anywhere near either his or Pietr's mind.

"So, I wanted to hear how your recovery is coming along. Are you ready to get out of here?"

The so-called Mr. Anderson's tone of voice was just a little too hearty. Still, Matt might not have noticed the Himiko's attempt to sneak into his brain if he hadn't been as cautious as he was; it was that skilled. With his defenses as high as they were, though, the feeling of the Assessor trying to creep into his mind was like the icy, wet fingers of someone you hate touching your neck. Matt slammed his walls up and lashed out, singeing the Assessor's fingers.

The Himiko stumbled back, shaking his hands as if trying to cool them off. Then he looked up at Matt, his rage only barely concealed.

Matt wasn't intimidated. "That was incredibly rude! I thought the first Himiko rule was to respect the integrity of other Himika's minds?"

The Assessor had the decency to look slightly ashamed. It still didn't stop him from trying to get one of his mental tentacles into Pietr's mind.

Matt could feel his mate shuddering as Pietr's defenses were almost breached. Matt had no intention of letting that happen, though, and he raised the walls so high around them both that the only thing that could reach them was the Assessor's physical voice.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Matt was shouting now, so angry that he almost didn't notice the people pouring into the room.

"I'm here on official business to evaluate your development." The Assessor's voice was stiff, trying to hide his rage and embarrassment of being yelled at in front of the other Himika in the room.

"No, you're not!" Matt pointed a finger at Aki. "You've already talked to Aki, and he knows how I'm doing. And by the way, I'm doing fine, and I'm more than ready to get out of here."

"You're not going anywhere until I say so." The Assessor looked like someone used to getting his way. Matt didn't care much about that.

"Yes, I am. Both my doctor and my mentor say I'm ready, so I'm going. And you wouldn't do anything banned to keep me here, would you?" Matt knew as well as the Assessor that the attempt to breach his mind was a serious crime, and he let the word hang in the air to remind the Himiko of that.

The Assessor looked furious, but there was nothing he could do if he was to avoid being exposed.

"Of course not. I was just trying to have a polite conversation, but it seems that you're still too traumatized from your experience to respond appropriately. I just hope that Pietr will be happy with you as his mate."

Matt didn't bother getting offended, although he could feel Pietr seething. He just crossed his arms and looked pointedly at the door. The Assessor took the hint and stormed out, almost colliding with first a confused-looking Robbie and then with one of the guards. It did ruin the dramatic exit somewhat.

Matt sat back on the bed, feeling the tension draining from his body.

"It's okay, you can leave now."

The guards reluctantly obeyed. However, there was no getting rid of a still more annoyed-looking Aki. Robbie nervously hovered by the door when he saw the look on Aki's face.

"What do you think you're doing? That was the Assessor you just pissed off with your childish behavior!" It said something about Aki's rage that he was cursing.

"He tried to creep into my mind!" Matt didn't have to fake his outrage; it had been a disgusting experience to have someone trying to enter his mind without his consent.

"Of course he didn't." Aki rolled his eyes. "That's highly inappropriate, not to mention harmful to the one it's done to -- it can get you banned. You shouldn't accuse people of something like that."

"He did. He also tried doing it to me." Behind the calm tone of voice, Pietr was shaking.

Matt immediately put an arm around his mate and almost didn't see the shocked expression on Aki's face. Robbie hesitantly got closer, looking worried.

Are you okay?

Pietr felt fragile, like someone crashing after an adrenaline rush, and Matt gently stroked his back.

I'll be fine. It's just... You just don't do that! Pietr reached out for Matt, holding on tightly and hiding his

head in the crook of Matt's shoulder. Matt held on, reminding Pietr that it hadn't happened, that he hadn't been... raped? That was the word Pietr refused to think.

With a shock, Matt realized that what had been an unpleasant experience for him had been far worse for his mate. He looked helplessly at Robbie.

"Just hold him. When someone does that to you, it feels..." Robbie shuddered.

Matt got the point -- if for no other reason than because he could feel the raw betrayal in Pietr's mind. He held his mate tightly, telling the Himiko again and again that it hadn't happened, that Matt was the only one allowed access like that to Pietr's mind.

"This is unheard of. I can't believe he did that!" Aki looked alarmed.

Pietr cringed from the outburst.

"Well, he did, and it was disgusting. If I hadn't been practicing, he would have gutted my mind like you clean a fish." Matt saw the shudder go through all three Himika and immediately regretted his choice of words. *Sorry, honey, I didn't mean it like that.*

Pietr made an effort and pulled back. "Yes, you did, and it's an accurate description. God, that was disgusting." He kept one arm closely around Matt.

"Why would he do something like that? He had already talked to you, hadn't he, Aki?"

Aki nodded. "Yes, and I had informed him of your progress and that I considered you to be ready to move on. It's not unusual to have someone else assess a young Himiko before he's let back into society -- you get caught up in your pupil, and sometimes you can't tell if his progress is sufficient. That's why I wasn't surprised about his request. But this..." Aki shook his head.

"This was fucked. I'm glad I singed his fingers."

Robbie looked alarmed. "You did what?"

"I zapped his fingers." Matt blushed a little. "I didn't really think -- it was just that his mind felt like icy cold fingers, and so I gave him a rap over the knuckles."

Aki blinked. "You gave the Assessor a rap over the knuckles?" He spoke slowly.

"Yes. And it wasn't as if he didn't deserve it, either!" Matt was not going to apologize for that; not with the way Pietr was still clinging to him.

"What did he do to you?" Aki looked alarmed.

"What do you mean? I just told you that he tried to creep into my mind, and Pietr's, as well."

"No, I mean, how did he punish you?" Aki stepped closer, looking ready to help.

Matt frowned. "He didn't punish me. How could he? He made the mistake, not me."

Aki exchanged looks with Robbie, who looked blank.

"The Assessor couldn't let anybody know he had tried to enter someone's mind without permission." Pietr's voice was quiet. "Not even he could get away with that. That's the only reason why Matt got away with it."

Aki shook his head in disbelief. "It probably is. But the Assessor is still not someone you'd want for an enemy."

"He doesn't matter enough to me to be my enemy, and I never intend to see him again," Matt said.

It was one thing being rude, quite another to hurt his mate. Speaking of which... Matt turned to Pietr.

"I want to take you to our house. I want to make love to you and live with you, and I want to do it now. Are you coming?"

Pietr looked at him, a smile spreading on his mate's face.

There isn't anything I'd rather do. Pietr's mind welled over with his need to be close enough to erase the

memory of the Assessor and with the joy of knowing that that was possible. Matt took it all in.

His beautiful, beautiful mate. Matt was never going to let Pietr go.

"Oh, God, they're getting sappy again." There was alarm in Aki's voice, and it made Matt snort. So much for having a romantic moment.

"Don't worry; I'll take him away so you don't have to witness it anymore." Matt looked around and grabbed their bags.

Robbie had a startled expression on his face.

"Just like that? I mean, aren't you gonna...?" He sounded confused and a little lost. Matt put down the bags.

"I was going to put these in the car first, but you can have your hug now." He embraced Robbie before the doctor could protest. Robbie held on with surprising strength.

Take care of yourself, okay? And of Pietr.

Matt smiled. *I will. And thank you.* He didn't know how to explain how much Robbie had meant to him, taking care of him during the first hard days and ever since. The Himiko seemed to understand well enough, though.

"Come and visit us, okay? Often."

Robbie looked relieved to have been asked.

"I will. And remember to eat. And exercise. And get some air..." Matt let Pietr have his turn for a hug before Robbie could lecture them any more, and turned to Aki. Matt got serious.

Thank you. It means a lot to me that you've helped me through this. You're always welcome at my table. He ignored Aki's startled expression and gave the Himiko a hug, too, holding his mentor tightly. After a moment, the rigid body in his arms relaxed. He patted Aki's back and

pulled back, smiling quietly. Aki seemed a little dazed, but followed them to the car outside nonetheless.

"So, this is it." Matt let his head fall back, closing his eyes and feeling the sunlight on his face, the wind cool and refreshing as it lifted his hair. He smiled and opened his eyes again, looking at Pietr.

"Ready to start a new life with me?" There was nothing in the world but his mate.

Pietr smiled, stepping close and kissing him.

"I am. Let's go."

This was the good life. Matt let his strides get longer, pushing himself a bit as he ran toward the big oak at the end of the meadow. His breathing was fast and deep, his lungs working to get enough oxygen to his muscles. He hadn't been able to do more than a slow jog for the first week or so, but now his body seemed to remember the many hours he had spent running through the streets in the city, and it rejoiced in the workout.

He got all the way down to the oak tree before he felt the pull of his bond with Pietr. As always, it annoyed Matt that he couldn't get any farther, but at least they could be separate now. During the first week, he had literally been running in circles around the house, physically unable to move away from his mate. It didn't help any that he didn't really want to be separated from Pietr; there were so many interesting things they could do together.

Matt groaned inwardly as his dick showed a definite interest in some of those things. It wasn't easy running around with a hard on, and, to make matters worse, it looked silly.

He grinned as he touched the tree and turned around, heading for the cabin. It was a quarter of a mile away, almost hidden by the bushes and low trees surrounding it. He could see the doors to the garden opening and Pietr coming out of the house, heading for the lawn.

Without noticing it, Matt had increased his pace. It felt good, though, and he ignored the little voice in his head that told him that Robbie would know and Robbie would scold him. He had somewhere to be.

Pietr looked up from his book when Matt rushed through the gate.

"That wasn't exactly a warm down, was it?"

Matt grinned unrepentantly, out of breath.

"Nope. That was a sprint."

He walked closer, slowing down when he felt Pietr's eyes on him. God, what a turn on it was to feel his lover's desire so clearly.

"Mmm, you're all sweaty."

And you like that. Matt bent down and kissed Pietr hello.

He had meant it to be a short kiss before he went to get a shower, but the way Pietr's brain shorted out and left nothing in Pietr's mind but need, need for Matt, made it impossible to go anywhere. He sank down on his knees, tugging Pietr closer.

Oh, yeah. All sweaty.

Pietr tugged his t-shirt off, and Matt felt the sun warming his back while he pushed Pietr down onto the blanket, book long forgotten. Matt smiled at the sight: Pietr's long body stretched out in the sun, chest naked. His mate's eyes were open, but Matt wasn't even sure the Himiko could see. Pietr's mind was filled up with Matt, the scent of him, the desire for him. Matt gave in and lowered himself until their bodies touched, finding Pietr's lips again and kissing his lover.

This time, he didn't take the time to bask in his mate's yearning for him. The lust was burning with a bright force in Pietr's mind, and it took Matt in and surrounded him, making him gasp into their kiss. He ground his hips against Pietr's, and suddenly, he was so close.

Matt wanted to make it last, to stretch out what he was feeling, but there was nothing to do. Pietr's pleasure rolled over him, and somewhere in the middle of it, he came with his mate, shouting his joy out in the quiet garden.

He ground his hips one last time against Pietr, eliciting a gasp from his mate before he let himself roll to his side, keeping one hand around Pietr's shoulder.

Lying there, Matt felt the grass under the blanket and the sun on his closed eyes, and he couldn't stop smiling. God, he felt good.

He heard Pietr rustling something, and he opened his eyes to see the Himiko reaching for a bottle of water.

You need to get rehydrated. Robbie will skin me alive if I don't look after you.

Like that was the reason why Pietr was taking care of him. Matt kept quiet, though; no need to tear Pietr out of the illusion that the big bad alien wasn't stupidly in love with him.

Pietr gently lifted up Matt's head, tipping the bottle so he could drink. The gesture was so tender that Matt almost forgot to breathe. Matt drank some of the water, realizing that he was parched. Pietr gave him half the bottle and then put the rest away, turning back to him.

"You know, I've heard about what just happened," Pietr said conversationally. The Himiko kept his mind carefully shielded.

Matt frowned. "You've heard about sex? Well, good for you."

"No, premature ejaculation. I know you can't help it, and... Oof!"

Matt accidentally planted a knee in his mate's stomach when he pounced. Well, maybe not so accidentally; the man needed to be put in his place.

My place, you say? Pietr was struggling and laughing, his eyes shining.

Yes! You're entirely too impertinent for your own good. Matt did his best to find any ticklish spots, without much luck. Pietr just grabbed his arms and pulled him down.

My place is right beside you. And, well, there wasn't much you could do with words like those than to kiss the one who said them. Thoroughly. Maybe it would be a little while longer before Matt could get that shower.

"I just can't make it work." They had gotten as far as the by now very familiar oak tree, and the pull in his mind was strong enough to remind Matt that he would be sick if he went much farther.

He had made a lot of progress except for this. He was eating like a horse, running every day, and doing his shielding exercises with Pietr as often as he could talk his mate into doing it. Which wasn't half as often as Matt would have liked, but Pietr kept insisting that Matt risked overdoing it and that he would regret it if he did so.

Matt still kept pushing to get more to do.

However, there was nothing that tried his patience as much as the fact that he still couldn't move any farther than a quarter of a mile away from Pietr.

It wasn't that he really wanted to get away, but the ability to be separate was a sign of maturity -- of growing up as a couple. It was necessary to be able to do it in order to return to normal life, and however good this was, they couldn't stay here forever. Matt was hell bent on not holding Pietr back.

Aki had been out two or three times a week for the last three weeks now, and he was very satisfied with Matt's progress. Or rather, he didn't look entirely unhappy at the end of their lessons, and Matt was pretty sure that in Aki's book, that was the equivalent of getting a gold star. But he couldn't teach Matt to separate, in spite of his many attempts.

"No matter what I do, I can't weaken our bond enough to get any further than this." Matt resignedly pointed at the tree. "I've tried everything, and Aki hasn't got a clue why I'm suddenly dumber than a five-year old."

Robbie put his hands on his hips.

"You're not supposed to weaken your bond, Matt," the doctor said disbelievingly.

"Of course I have to weaken it -- how on earth am I going to get away otherwise?" Why did people keep telling him contradictory things?

Robbie shook his head. "You're thinking at it the wrong way."

He sat down at the foot of the oak, patting on the ground next to him. Matt sat down, looking skeptically at him.

"You have to stretch your bond enough to move wherever you want to go physically, but you do that by strengthening it, making it elastic. That way, it'll still be strong enough to communicate over a very wide distance. You won't be able to talk like you do when you're up close, but when you get the hang of it, you'll be able to let each other know if you need help or stuff like that. That takes a stronger bond, not a weaker one."

Matt stared at him. "So all this time I've spent trying to hack away at our bond has been totally wasted?"

"It has, and thank God for that." Robbie shuddered. "I don't know what would happen if anyone could actually do that. Luckily, they can't. I can't believe Aki didn't tell you this."

Matt felt his cheeks redden just a little. "Well, I never told him what I did -- I just assumed that was what I had to do. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, either." It had felt so very wrong.

"And with very good reason. Now, let's try again."
Robbie got up, holding out a hand for Matt.

He let himself be dragged up, the thoughts whirling in his mind. A lot of things suddenly made sense.

"Let's try walking again and see if your new perspective will help."

They had already done this four times, each time ending up with Matt feeling so sick that he had actually puked once. It had brought Pietr down to the tree, even though the Himiko always let Matt do his exercises on his own.

Pietr had been adamant about that. "You have to develop your skills at your own tempo. If you work with me, you'll become very good at the things I'm good at without ever figuring out what your own strengths might be. This is something you should do on your own."

Pietr had almost managed to make it sound as if he didn't want to be as close as possible as often as possible. He was back in the house now, and Matt could only feel his worry as a vague disturbance somewhere at the periphery of Matt's mind.

"Now, imagine your bond like it's real, a physical bond," Robbie said.

Matt did, visualizing their bond as a rope.

"Now, see the bond as a very flexible rubber band."

"I already tried that, Aki told me to."

Matt had felt a vague panicky feeling every time he envisioned the only thing keeping him tied to Pietr as something fragile like an elastic band.

"Yes, but this time, imagine that it has got a core of something very hard, like steel. Only the steel can stretch and stretch until it's so thin it's almost invisible -- but it'll never break. Can you do that?"

Matt tried out the picture in his head, and suddenly he got it. The core of their bond was the same, only

stretched out, even when they couldn't hear each other. He started walking, concentrating on the images in his head.

"Please don't..."

Matt felt Robbie grabbing his shoulders to steer him clear of something and registered the very hard tree he had been about to walk into. He didn't pay much attention to it, because he was at that point where their bond was beginning to tug at him, stretched so tight that he almost couldn't breathe. This time, he concentrated on the core of it, feeling how, even if he couldn't hear Pietr clearly anymore, his mate was still there and would never go away.

With a feeling like a coiled spring releasing, Matt was suddenly able to keep on walking. It was a triumphant feeling, and somewhere distant, he could feel Pietr laughing with him. It only increased Matt's joy, and he started running.

"Hey! Where're you... Oh, for heaven's sake!"

He could hear Robbie scrambling through the bushes after him, but he was too busy rejoicing in the feeling of running full speed, without anything holding him back anymore.

It was a beautiful day, the sun shining through the trees and a light wind cooling his face. He laughed out loud as he went full out in a sprint, jumping over a fallen tree and ducking to avoid the low branches.

He might have kept running like that forever if he hadn't suddenly been at the brink of a lake. The forest continued all the way around it, but the path led into a small stretch of grass at the edge of the water. He stopped, the silence sudden after his wild run. The water was so calm that it reflected the sky, and he just stood there, taking it all in.

The quiet beauty of the moment only lasted until Robbie came charging into the open.

There you are! Robbie bent over, supporting his hands on his knees and gasping for air. He sounded as if he had been running an Olympic eight hundred meter race. *Why the fuck did you do that?*

"What happened to speaking out loud?"

I can't, you idiot. Robbie was so winded that he stayed bent over.

"Hey, you didn't have to follow." Matt couldn't stop smiling. He walked over to Robbie, pulling the Himiko up. *But thank you for doing so.*

He gave Robbie a hug and felt the surprise go through the body in his arms. Then Robbie awkwardly patted him on the back and broke their hug. Someone really wasn't used to kindness.

The realization made Matt stubborn, and he put his arm loosely over Robbie's shoulder as he turned them around. "We've better get you back before you fall over. You're not exactly in great shape."

Robbie had tensed up when Matt touched him, but now he relaxed a bit under Matt's arm. "Well, I've been busy cleaning up your messes."

There wasn't any rancor in his voice, though, and they walked back toward the house in companionable silence.

He pushed once more, and the fucking cones all fell from the branch. Again. Matt felt like kicking them into the woods where he had found them; his fucking feet would be more accurate than his mind was at the moment.

He had started practicing accuracy and force in moving things, and it had turned out to be a lot harder than he had thought. It had been easy enough at the clinic. He had pushed and pulled at people, held the door closed, and snapped Pietr's harness. It turned out to be a lot harder to do something when you weren't in desperate need for it to happen, though.

Even after practicing for more than a week, Matt had only succeeded in hitting the exact cone he wanted in one out of three tries. He sighed. Damn being human.

At least he could make them move now. At first he hadn't been able to make them budge an inch. And it was easier to use force now. Just to cheer himself up a bit, he broke a branch on a tree down by the lake. It was probably Himiko Basic Technique 101, but it was still nice to be able to do it.

The branch fell into the lake, floating slowly toward the shore, and the sight of the water gave Matt an idea. Maybe it would be good practice to make waves? Water therapy was used a lot in rehab; it might do his weak mental powers good, too.

He looked at the water and concentrated on creating a wave. It was more difficult than it seemed; the water wouldn't stay in one place. Matt had a fleeting thought that he maybe should have expected that, but then he got caught up in the challenge he had given himself, pushing as hard as he could. It was impossible to do it the same way that you pushed at something solid; this was more a

question of guiding than of punching. When he understood that, it slowly started to come along.

It was difficult, but the point was to concentrate his force on a limited area and then just push without trying to hold everything together. He managed to make a ripple, and then, after concentrating his power on a little creek, a couple of quite decent waves.

Blinking the sweat out of his eyes, Matt looked up and realized that he had spent almost an hour by the water. Guiltily, he turned to get back to the house; he had promised Pietr that he wouldn't overdo his work. He almost fell when he turned. His legs were strangely rubbery, and when his thirst kicked in, he belatedly realized that he had forgotten his water bottle.

Well, it wasn't that far back to the house. On wobbly legs, Matt started walking. It was okay in the beginning, but then he started getting dizzy, and he had to take breaks more and more often. When he got to the oak tree, his legs refused to carry his weight anymore, and he sank to the ground, leaning on the tree.

Tired. Come get me?

Just the short message seemed to take a lot of energy to project, and Matt dozed off, leaning his head back against the tree trunk.

He felt the bottle at his lips before he sensed Pietr near him.

Thanks. Oh, fuck, yes.

The liquid in the bottle was something he remembered from the clinic, and it tasted so good that he greedily leaned forward to get more, the movement making his head nod like a baby's. Pietr let a hand slide around his neck and supported him while he drank.

What is this stuff? Matt's thoughts were strangely muffled.

What you need. What in the world have you been doing? Pietr's inner voice was concerned and overbearing at the same time.

Trying to move water. More, please.

He could feel Pietr's incredulity. Matt had a hunch that this had been one of the things that wasn't on his schedule yet. Well, too late for that now.

Pietr fed him some more of the incredibly good stuff and then took the bottle away.

Can you walk now?

Of course. Matt was quite offended by the question.

Baby, you haven't managed to open your eyes yet.

Matt had to concede that that might be a good idea before walking. Until he opened his eyes, that was; the world was strangely blurry around the edges.

He could hear Pietr sighing.

"Come on, water boy, let's get you back to the house."

Matt wanted to protest the babying. Then he actually tried getting up.

First, his legs simply refused to work. Then Pietr hoisted him up with one arm around his mate's shoulder and got him standing. That was okay, even if he was swaying. But then he had to walk.

It took every ounce of energy he had left in his body to get his legs to move again, and he was concentrating so hard that he couldn't as much as think to Pietr. It went well enough for a while; then his legs gave out again and he sat down with a thump.

Pietr didn't try to get him up again, just fed him another bottle of the good stuff.

"What is this?" It seemed much easier to talk out loud, although his speech was a bit slurred.

"Nutrients. They'll help you recover faster."

Matt was all for that, and he drank greedily. Then he had to get up again. His legs felt more rubbery than ever.

"Come on, baby, it's just a little farther. Stay with me."

Matt wanted to point out that he wasn't going anywhere without Pietr right now, but he couldn't even talk anymore. He managed to stay on his legs until they reached the house. The sight of the gate to the garden was the last thing he remembered before he passed out.

Matt woke up slowly. It was light in the room, and he had a feeling that he'd slept for an eternity. He wanted to open his eyes and sit up, but when he moved his head, the nausea rushed through him. He groaned.

His head felt terrible. It wasn't so much painful as it was the feeling of healthy brain tissue that had dried and shrunk into something completely useless. Everything was muffled, and he couldn't even open his eyes, he felt so bad.

"Here, baby, drink this." Pietr's hand slid around his head, lifted him up, and put a bottle to his lips.

At first, Matt wanted to protest the movement, but then he tasted the liquid from yesterday and drank eagerly. He felt minimally better afterwards. He tried to think to Pietr, got nothing, and started to panic. His mind just didn't work.

"Shh, take it easy." Pietr spoke out loud again. "You overdid it yesterday, and your brain needs some time to recover. I'll speak out loud today; that will be easier for you." Pietr let his hand glide soothingly over Matt's arm, and Matt grabbed it and held on, squeezing.

He felt a light kiss on his forehead. "Don't worry. You'll feel like shit today, but it'll pass. I got enough

fluids in you that you'll recover just fine." Matt had a vague memory of being woken during the night and being made to drink more of the special juice. "I won't leave you."

The last sentence did more to reassure Matt than all the rest. He concentrated on the contact with Pietr where their hands touched; he couldn't do much else, his mind being so foggy. He wanted to curl into Pietr and stay there. His brain might not work, but he still needed their intimacy.

"Please..." He couldn't manage more than a whisper through his haze of exhaustion, but Pietr still seemed to understand.

"We'll go sit in the garden. The warmth and the air will be good for you." Pietr's arms slid around Matt, lifting him up. The first movement was dizzying, and Matt hid his head in the crook between Pietr's neck and shoulder. Pietr was only wearing shorts, like himself, and his mate's skin was soft against Matt's.

Matt felt the warmth from the sun on his body as Pietr carried him out into the garden. He kept his eyes closed. Pietr walked a couple of paces to the left and sat down on the ground with Matt on his lap, leaning against the fence. Matt curled in and tried to touch Pietr as much as possible.

"Shh. You're okay. We're just going to sit here. You can sleep if you want."

It was a peculiar sensation when Pietr's mind wrapped around his own without pushing into it, protecting and cocooning him without provoking his sore brain. Matt relaxed, the light sun on his back and Pietr's body under him calming him down, and he let himself sink into Pietr's gentle care. His head felt all wrong, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"Yes. Like that." Pietr hugged Matt, making him feel loved and cherished. His mate was quiet, the calm exuding from the Himiko's mind. It was good.

Matt was almost asleep when a sound made him jump. Pietr's arms tightened soothingly around him.

"It's just Aki, baby."

Matt realized that it was the sound of a car door closing he had heard, and relaxed into Pietr's body again. He was still too exhausted to open his eyes, and Aki was safe.

"How is he? I brought more ReGen." Aki's voice was low behind him.

"Sore and worn out, but he'll live."

Matt could hear Pietr opening a bottle and leaned into it when it was offered to him, eager to get more of the cold fluid.

"He's drinking well. Did you get anything in him yesterday?" Aki kept his voice low, not disturbing Matt.

"Yeah, four bottles." Pietr took away the empty bottle, and Matt cuddled up to him again.

"He must have been running low. Do you want me to check out his scar?"

Matt thought about tensing up, but this was Aki. Safe.

"Yes, please." Pietr let his hand glide around Matt's head, holding him, and Matt heard Aki sitting down behind him.

It was like an electric shock going through his entire body when Aki touched his scar, and only Pietr's arms stopped Matt from jumping off his mate's lap. Matt gasped, and Pietr kissed his temple.

"Sorry, Matt, I had to check it. You're okay." Aki sounded sympathetic. Then he spoke again.

"He'll be fine. The tissue isn't swollen, and he hasn't gone numb, either."

Aki let gentle hands run over Matt's neck, not touching the sensitive spot over his scar anymore. Matt slowly relaxed, feeling Pietr's body under him and Aki's soothing touches to his back.

"I can help him a bit?" Aki's voice was soft, questioning.

"Please."

There was something more than just the affirmation in Pietr's voice, but Matt was too tired to figure out what it was. Gratitude, perhaps, and an acceptance of something that stretched further than just the simple offer of help.

Aki's touches got slower, gently sliding over Matt's back. Matt then felt Aki's mind sort of wrapping around him the same way Pietr's was already doing. He had a fleeting thought that it might be wrong; Pietr didn't like others being so close to him. But Pietr's mind was at peace with this, gently giving way to Aki without ever pulling back too much.

Matt sighed as the gentle warmth from the two Himika surrounded his mind. He reached back and took Aki's hand, holding it close between his and Pietr's bodies so that all three of them were touching. There was a brief surprise in Aki's mind; then his mentor settled into the intimate position.

Matt was completely relaxed now, the sun on his back and the feeling of being cocooned by his closest friends exactly the comfort he had needed. He let his sore mind unfold, accepting the quiet energy that flowed around him, strengthened him. Sinking into the sensation, he was so closely surrounded that he didn't quite know where his mind ended and Pietr's and Aki's began -- and it was okay. It was as if a deep glow surrounded the three of them, and it was beautiful. Matt sighed again and gave in to the feeling completely.

When he woke again, he was still nestled against Pietr. Aki was sitting next to Pietr, Matt's legs across his mentor's lap. Aki was fast asleep, leaning against Pietr.

He looks tired.

There were dark circles under Aki's eyes, and the Himiko's cheeks looked hollow. Matt was going to ask Pietr if his mentor was okay when it dawned on him.

Hey, my brain works again. It was sluggish and a little sore, but he could communicate with Pietr. Relief welled up in him.

It does. Aki gave you some of his power. But take it easy, you're still not back to normal yet.

Matt stretched a bit. *I know. I feel ninety years old.*

He didn't feel sick anymore, just really tired. It wasn't enough to quell his gratitude, though. He let his hand caress Pietr's neck.

Thank you for coming to my rescue. I'm really grateful for that. He gently kissed Pietr.

Pietr reached out for Matt without holding back, and Matt could feel his relief at sensing Matt fully again.

You're welcome. We've all tried to overexert ourselves. Even though you do seem to make an art of it. The gentle teasing didn't quite hide Pietr's gratefulness for having Matt back.

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. I guess I don't really know my limits yet.

I know. Pietr hugged him tightly. *It's all a part of the process. Now you'll know when to stop.*

I will!

Pietr laughed at the vehemence in Matt's words.

Aki does look tired, though. Should we be worried?
Aki hadn't moved at all while they had been talking, and Matt hadn't tried to be quiet.

He is tired. But you can give him some ReGen, that'll help him recover faster. Pietr reached out for a cooler sitting next to them and got out another bottle, handing it to Matt.

Matt reached over and stroked Aki's cheek, trying to wake him up. He didn't react at first.

He'll need something to drink. It's okay to wake him.

Matt gently shook Aki's shoulder, finally managing to rouse him. The Himiko slowly opened his eyes, looking bewildered. Aki's mind was strangely... fuzzy around the edges, as if he couldn't quite contain himself anymore. It was very far from his usual composure and self-discipline.

"Don't worry, you'll be fine." Matt kept his hands on Aki's shoulder, rubbing gently. "You helped me, and now you need something to drink."

Matt opened the bottle and offered it to Aki. Aki tried to take it, but the Himiko's movements were sluggish and uncertain.

"Here, let me help you." Matt held up the bottle, letting Aki drink.

At first, the Himiko was reluctant to be aided that way; Matt could feel the resistance through his blurry shields. Then he got his first taste of the cold liquid and greedily tried to get more.

"Take it easy, you can have as much as you need."

Matt caressed Aki's cheek while he drank. Aki looked up in surprise, then focused on getting as much ReGen as he could. He leaned forward to get the last drops, almost losing his balance. Pietr put an arm around him, keeping him from falling.

Aki blinked and looked up at Pietr, and Matt realized that his mentor hadn't even noticed the other Himiko before now. Poor man must be exhausted.

"I have you." Pietr kept one arm around Aki and reached out for another bottle.

Matt gave it to Aki while Pietr still held him. Aki cast a glance at Pietr, then he let himself be held and fed the ReGen, relaxing. It wasn't as intimate as when Aki and Pietr had helped Matt, but their connection was still strong. Matt tried to support Aki's faltering shields, but Pietr immediately prevented that.

Oh, no, you don't. You've just spent all of your power; don't waste the work Aki did.

Matt pulled back, a bit ashamed.

Don't be. It's nice of you to try to help.

Aki smiled at him, and Matt impulsively gave his mentor a kiss on the cheek.

Thanks for helping me out. Again. He grinned, a bit embarrassed at having messed up again.

Well, for once it isn't just you who's overexerted yourself. It seems Aki here has a bit of trouble reeling himself in when he tries to help people.

Aki's outrage didn't quite cover his mirth, and Matt had a peculiar feeling of being in the middle of an old joke. The story was there just under the surface of Aki's leaky shields, but Matt refused to look; being so close to Aki in the condition he was in right now, Matt had already seen far more than was polite without invitation.

"Well, let's get you up, old man."

Matt grinned when Pietr called his fearsome mentor that. Then Matt had to get up himself, and groaned when he tried to make his still-wobbly legs work. He ended up leaning over Pietr, supporting himself on the fence behind his mate.

"That's a very good position for a lot of things, honey, but not very appropriate right now."

Matt looked down and realized that Pietr was indeed in the exact right place to give him a blowjob. He blushed and tried to move, managing to take a few steps to the side.

I guess Robbie was right; you two really are thinking about sex all the time. "Oh, fuck!" Aki's legs wobbled under him, and he only just managed to catch himself on the fence.

That was two invalids leaning weakly on the fence, and Matt couldn't help laughing ruefully.

Pietr just shook his head and got up, supporting first Matt and then Aki to the kitchen table.

"You need something to eat." Pietr started heating up dinner in the microwave, meat and vegetables that his mate had apparently made for yesterday.

Matt raised an eyebrow, looking at Aki, and he could feel the amusement right under the surface of Aki's mind. Pietr's tone of voice allowed no contradictions, though, so he sat back like an obedient boy. Aki giggled a little, sensing that image, and Matt did his best to keep a straight face.

You keep forgetting that I can read your mind, boy.

Under the overbearing tone, Matt could feel Pietr's contentment that they were both back to normal.

Back to annoying the hell out of you again. Matt laughed.

That, too.

How Pietr managed to waggle his eyebrows in such a lecherous manner, all in his mind, was a source of constant envy for Matt. There was definitely something to aspire to, there.

Aki shook his head. *You two are incredible.* There was exasperation and a little bit of longing in his inner voice.

"I know. And you're hungry."

Aki's stomach growled loudly at the same moment, pretty much ruining his comeback to Pietr's comment. He just had to sit back and accept the plate put in front of him.

Like a good boy. Matt was really getting better at teasing somebody and keeping a totally straight face at the same time.

Aki grumbled but started eating. So did Matt, and it was only then that he realized he had been famished.

"You both used more power than you should have." Pietr's tone of voice was chiding.

Matt threw a bread roll at him without hesitating.

"You're incredibly annoying!" Pietr jumped up, quickly moving around the table to Matt's chair.

Matt guessed that Pietr had been planning to do something painful to him, but suddenly, he found his lips taken, Pietr kissing him deeply, a hand in his hair holding on so tightly that it hurt. Matt's dick never hardened even a little, his body being too exhausted for anything sexual. It didn't matter; this was where he belonged.

Pietr looked almost surprised when he let Matt go. Matt kissed him one last time.

"That'll teach me." He smiled.

Pietr laughed. "It will, I'm afraid. Eat your dinner."

Pietr sat down again, and on the other side of the table, Matt could see Aki shaking his head again.

Matt was about to say something about that, but having sated his appetite, he felt how tired he was. Aki didn't look much better when Matt looked over at his mentor. He cast a glance at Pietr, suddenly worried.

He got a kiss on his forehead, Pietr collecting their plates. "You're just tired. Your body needs more rest before you're fully recovered." His mate put the plates in the sink. "I'll get you to bed."

"Aki, too."

Matt immediately felt the tension going through the air at his words. He sent a picture of a litter of puppies to them both, all tangled up in their sleep.

It's nothing sexual. I just want us to sleep together. They needed it. *And Aki can't go anyway; his shields are as leaky as a sieve.*

Aki wanted to protest, but Matt was so clearly correct that he didn't bother trying. It was really weird, this whole having direct access to Aki's mind thing. Very intimate. But good.

Pietr knew that Matt was right, but his mate was still a bit reluctant -- more out of habit than conviction, Matt sensed. He sent the Himiko a picture of his very noodle-like dick; he wasn't exactly up for anything even if he had wanted to be.

Aki sputtered. Okay, Matt had meant that picture to be private, but maybe his shields weren't quite recovered yet, either.

"Maybe not, baby." Pietr shook his head. "Come on, my little puppies, let's get you to bed."

Aki snorted, but he let himself be hauled up, Pietr supporting first him and then Matt on the short walk to the bedroom.

Are you coming, too? Matt needed him.

Sure. Let me just clean up a bit first.

Matt went to the bathroom, and when he was finished, he found a toothbrush and a towel for Aki. When he got back to the bedroom, Aki was slumped on the edge of the bed, looking like moving was completely impossible.

Matt went over and gave his mentor a hug, feeling the surprise going through the mind so close to his own. He winced when he felt it; nobody should be that surprised at tenderness. He didn't let his feelings show, just let go and pulled Aki up.

"Get your ass into the bathroom, then we can collapse afterward."

Aki reluctantly went, his feet dragging from fatigue. Matt kept a mental eye out for him while finding another pillow. Aki did okay, and came back into the room at the same time as Pietr. Matt's mate pulled the curtains and went straight to bed.

Matt crept in next to him. Aki stood in the middle of the room, hesitant and swaying with fatigue.

Come on. Matt patted the bed next to him.

Aki looked uncertainly at Pietr. Matt could feel his mate nodding behind him, and Aki finally came into bed.

Matt pulled Pietr's arm around him until he felt his mate close behind him. Then he snuggled into Pietr and pulled Aki closer until Matt was cocooned by them both. Finally, Matt had arranged everybody to his satisfaction, and he sighed contentedly, closing his eyes.

God, he's bossy. Even through the exhaustion, Aki was baffled and slightly amused. Matt could feel Pietr's hilarity and thought about getting offended. Then he fell asleep.

He woke up slowly, surrounded by warm bodies. Well, two warm bodies, but it was still perfect. Especially if he could just... He shuffled around until he was close-close to Pietr's body.

Hey, I know when I'm not wanted. Aki wasn't really wounded, rather a bit... wary?

We're not going to have sex! Did people think that was all they ever did?

It is all you ever do. I'll go take a shower.

Aki quickly got out of bed. Matt checked, and the Himiko wasn't really hurt, just not into live porn.

Hey!

Aki just sauntered out of the room. Which probably wasn't really Aki's style, the sauntering. Matt guessed he should feel guilty about corrupting his mentor. He snickered.

Pietr pulled him in tighter. *We aren't going to have sex?* Pietr's mind was sleepy and just a little aroused.

Noodle dick, remember? Matt showed Pietr a mental image of the state of his still very exhausted cock.

Huh. We really do have to teach you to rein yourself in if this is the result.

Matt let a hand run down Pietr's body. *I could always give you a blowjob?*

Pietr took a firm grip around his hand. *No, you can't.*

Really, I don't mind. Just because Matt was all noodle-y, it didn't mean he wouldn't enjoy giving Pietr pleasure.

Yes, it would. There wasn't any doubt in Pietr's mind. *Or rather, I wouldn't get any pleasure out of it when you don't. We're connected, remember?*

Matt got a clear image from his mate of one-sided sex as being as exciting as watching fruit rot.

Huh.

You better hope I'll never go impotent, then. With that comeback, Matt jumped out of bed and went to get a shower.

Matt had forgot all about Aki, opening the door to the bathroom and finding him in there. The Himiko quickly

pulled up a towel to cover himself. His body looked every bit as warrior-like as his face, and Matt eyed him curiously, not so much to ogle him as to see if it woke any feelings. It didn't, not even a little. It seemed that Himika really were monogamous.

Only when we're bonded. Aki did his best to leer at Matt.

Matt leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. *Nice try, but you can't hide that we're friends.* Leaving Aki with a baffled look on his face, Matt went into the kitchen to make coffee.

Matt felt much better when they sat down to have breakfast. His brain was back to its normal bouncy self; it seemed that the only aftereffect he was going to suffer was a strong aversion to overexerting himself ever again.

Well, at least you learned something from your little adventure. Aki's walls were back to their normal strength. His acerbity, too, it seemed. *Trying to move water is about the stupidest thing you can do.*

I know that. Now. Matt kept on wolfing down the omelet that Pietr had made for him. His mate was still at the stove, making another omelet for himself.

But I was sick and tired of being so fucking sloppy when I tried to push the cones from the branch where I put them. Matt showed them a picture of the three cones and how hard it had been to push down the one he wanted. *One time, I actually managed to break the branch instead.*

You broke the branch? Pietr's inner voice was... peculiar. Matt looked up, forgetting to chew.

Yes, before I started making waves instead. I told you that. Matt swallowed.

Pietr withdrew from him mentally in a guarded move that hurt. Badly.

No. You told me that you TRIED to move water. Not that you had actually succeeded in doing so. And you didn't say anything about breaking things.

Matt looked over at Aki and saw the shock in his mentor's eyes change into caution before the Himiko carefully pulled back from Matt's mind. It stung, and Matt didn't have a clue why this was happening.

"I don't get this. I said that I'd tried to move water. What's the difference between that and moving cones? I wasn't very good at it, anyway; I didn't exactly make a tsunami, you know. Just a couple of lousy little ripples."

Aki pulled his chair back and stood up, walking over to lean on the counter. As far away as he could get from Matt, in other words.

Matt looked from Pietr to Aki, desperately trying to figure out what was happening. "Talk to me. I don't know what I did wrong."

Aki's mind might be closed, but as always, Matt could feel the echo of Aki's feelings through his shields. With a shock, he realized that there was a caution bordering on fear in his mentor's mind; Aki was struggling not to run from the room, disgust that strong. Matt turned to Pietr.

Don't you fucking shut me out!

Matt threw himself at what was not quite a shield, showing Pietr how much it hurt him to be shut out. Pietr made a strangled sound, and then his mate's arms were around Matt, mind opening up once again to him.

Matt clung to him, assuring himself that everything was okay and frantically looking for the reason for the Himika's sudden caution.

Ouch. You're not very gentle, Pietr chided, and Matt apologetically pulled back from his frenzied search.

Then tell me! Matt still clung to Pietr, but the order was meant for both of the Himika. Aki cleared his throat.

"It's just that... it's not very normal to be able to move things. At least not like that."

"What do you mean? I destroyed Pietr's restraints at the clinic and you never batted an eyelid."

"Things are different when you're newly bonded, more intense. Most of us can do crazy things then. This is... unusual."

Aki's voice was as guarded as his mind. but Matt still got the meaning under it. Really unusual -- and dangerous. For reasons that Aki didn't want to reveal.

"Dangerous? I can get hurt from doing that?" Matt had overexerted himself, but up until that point, what he had been doing hadn't seemed risky.

No. You can hurt other people. Aki's inner voice was carefully neutral.

Matt immediately brushed aside that thought. *Of course I can't. Or won't, at least. And I can hurt people far more by running them down with my car, anyway.* That was just a stupid thought. Throwing cones at people didn't exactly break their bones.

Whatever you might think, this is something you need to learn to control. Aki looked at Pietr. *I think we need to bring in Sam and Jerry.*

There was an astounded silence in Pietr's mind that Matt couldn't decipher. Then he nodded and turned his attention back to Matt, his arms tightening. *He's right. You need to practice until you have full control over this.*

Matt groaned out loud. "Shit! Why does everything end up with me having to practice?" He tried his best

puppy eyes on both his mate and Aki. They were both deadly serious, though. Matt sighed.

"Okay, then. Bring in Ben and Jerry. I promise I'll do my best."

There was a shocked incredulity in Aki's mind. *Not Ben and Jerry, you fool. Sam and Jerry!*

Matt could feel the laughter right under the Himiko's indignation, though, and it made him feel a little better.

Whatever. He couldn't resist the temptation to create an image of two ice cream men breaking branches.

Aki shook his head, pushing away from the counter and starting to clear the table. *You just can't help yourself, can you? I swear, it's going to get you into serious trouble one day.*

Matt took the juice and the butter and put it away. *Well, at least I'll have a lot of fun until that happens.* He slapped Aki's butt and laughed at the outraged look on his mentor's face.

Even though Matt had made fun of the arrival of Aki's acquaintances, he diligently practiced during the following couple of days. He could feel Pietr itching to make sure that Matt didn't overdo it, but the Himiko still let him go away to train, not interfering at all.

Matt didn't try making any more waves -- he had learned his lesson there -- but he trained his accuracy until he could hit the right cone almost every time. He had started to move fallen branches, too, trying to make them go where he wanted. It wasn't as easy as it seemed, and he was pretty tired when he got home on the third day.

He heard voices inside the house when he got close to the door: Robbie and Pietr speaking. Matt hurried his steps and burst through the door. Robbie looked up, grinning at him.

"Hey, Robbie!" Matt gave Robbie a hug, though he was a little sweaty from his run back. "I didn't think you'd be here today. I would have come home earlier if I had known."

Robbie gave him a warm hug, sweaty or not. Then his former doctor blushed a bit. "I had a flat tire, and I have no idea how to fix it. Your cars aren't exactly like the crafts I'm used to."

Matt blinked. "Are you saying that you actually have flying saucers back home?" Beneath the teasing, he felt some of his old excitement about the aliens come back. And why on earth was it that he hadn't thought to ask this before?

"Not exactly, but they are sort of hovercraft-like. Go take your shower, then you can come with us and show us how a real human changes a tire." Pietr's tone of voice was teasing, and Matt could feel that his mate

wanted to do something very different from watching him changing a tire. Pietr really liked him sweaty.

"Guys!" Robbie managed to sound outraged, which, in Matt's opinion, was pretty well done at this point. The poor doctor had seen a thing or two by now. Matt grinned and sauntered to the bathroom.

After showering off the sweat and getting some clean clothes, he returned to the living room. Pietr and Robbie were having sodas, and he thirstily grabbed one and sat down next to Pietr.

"Did you have a nice workout? Any aftereffects of your overexertion?" It was Robbie's day off, but apparently he couldn't quite get out of doctor mode. Matt didn't mind, though.

"Yes and no. Well, apart from the fact that I've learned not to overdo it." He laughed ruefully.

"Aki told me about that. He said you were pretty wiped out afterwards."

"I was." Matt nodded. "But I got a lot to drink and he helped me the next day, gave me some of his energy."

"Really?" Robbie looked curious. "That isn't easy."

"No, he was worn out at the end. We gave him a lot of ReGen and dragged him into our bed. We were both out like a light."

Robbie blinked. "You slept with Aki?" There was disbelief and something else in his voice.

"Well, slept as in slept. He can't do anything else, even if we had wanted to." Matt took a sip from the bottle.

"What do you mean?" Pietr looked at Matt, his mind as inquisitive as Robbie's face.

"He's blocked that part of himself completely. Maybe it's to be able to train young Himika, I don't know. But he can't connect with anybody, you know, intimately."

Robbie blinked. It took several moments of stunned silence before he spoke. "How do you know that?" He was speaking very slowly, his words tense.

"I... I don't know. You can see it if you look for it, I guess." Matt frowned; sometimes people didn't really pay attention to Aki.

"And you say that he has shut that part of himself down? The part that enables him to connect with other people?" Matt could see Robbie's knuckles going white where he held the bottle.

"Yes? Well, he can still talk to people; he's just not allowing himself the other part. Not for real."

"The fucking FOOL!"

Matt startled when Robbie jumped up, smashing his bottle against the wall. There were shards all over the place and yellow fluid running down the wall. Robbie didn't seem to notice, just stormed through the room.

"What are you--?"

"Where are your car keys?" Robbie turned around in the doorway and looked at Pietr. He was breathing heavily and his hands were shaking.

Pietr's mind was as blank as Matt's. "Here?" He took the keys from his pocket, showing them to Robbie.

"Fine." Robbie went back to grab them before Pietr could move, and then he ran through the house.

That wasn't what I... We can't let him go like that!

Pietr ran after Robbie outside, and Matt only had enough time to grab his sneakers by the door. He looked up to see Pietr wrench the car keys out of Robbie's hands. Robbie looked ready to hit Pietr.

You can't drive like that! Pietr was pointing out to Robbie how his hands were shaking. You'll hit a tree and kill yourself. Let me drive you.

Robbie was staring at Pietr, breathing heavily. Then he nodded and got into the car. "Let's go."

Matt just made it into the back of the car before Pietr started the engine. "What are you going to do to Aki?"

Robbie stared at him.

Nice try. Pietr drove off, ignoring Robbie's order to drive faster.

Well, it was worth a try. Matt bent down and got his shoelaces tied up.

I still don't know what made him explode like that.

Robbie was trembling with rage, but he still kept his shields higher than Matt had ever experienced before. Matt got a feeling that whatever was going on was extremely important to Robbie.

I guess we can only follow and try to keep him from killing Aki. Somehow, the image of sweet, gentle Robbie attacking his old mentor physically didn't seem as unlikely as it had half an hour ago. Matt heard Pietr groan inwardly. *I hate it when things happen without any warning.*

Matt snorted. *So, you don't like being around me much?*

Pietr grumbled out loud, but even that wasn't enough to drag Robbie out of his fury; Matt could feel it growing by the minute.

Are we there yet? I don't mean to sound like a nine year old, but we're pretty close to an explosion here.

Just around the corner. Pietr's voice sounded as concerned as Matt felt when they turned onto the little lane leading up to a cottage much like their own.

Robbie was out of the car before they had come to a halt, running to the front door and banging furiously on it. Then he simply tore open the door and stormed in.

Matt was close behind Robbie and Pietr only a step further back. They arrived in time to see Aki jumping up from the desk where he had been sitting, startled at Robbie's noisy arrival.

"You stopped it from happening!" Robbie was spitting with rage by now.

"What are you...?" Aki blinked and looked inquisitively from Robbie to Pietr to Matt, trying to get an answer.

Sorry, no idea. Pietr shrugged.

"You stopped us from bonding! It was happening, and you stopped it, and I've been feeling fucking miserable ever since. You fucking MORON!" Robbie was shaking so hard that Matt couldn't tell if he was crying or not.

Matt could feel the shock freezing Pietr's mind. *But you can't do that. Nobody can do that.*

Neither Aki nor Robbie reacted to his words; they were staring at each other.

Aki looked stunned. "I didn't... I only did what was necessary." It sounded as if he was repeating something he had told himself a lot.

"You're so stupid. So fucking noble and so stupid." Robbie was crying now. The Himiko stepped closer, and Matt thought that Robbie was going to knock Aki to the ground. He took a halfhearted step forward to prevent it. Then Robbie grabbed Aki's shirt with one hand and the back of his neck with the other, pulling him in and kissing him so hard that their teeth clanged together.

Aki first tried to pull away, his eyes going wide and his hands going up as if to defend himself. Then he made a sound like a sob and gave in. Robbie pulled him even closer, using the other hand to hold Aki's head, kissing and biting him in a hectic display of need.

Matt gasped and swayed. There was suddenly something in the room, a force so primal that it threatened to rip him apart. It took him several moments to realize that it came from Aki and Robbie.

On the outside, they were just kissing. In their minds, though, they were uniting in a blazing, beautiful inferno of desire and exhilaration. It was incredible and terrifying at the same time, and Matt was bathed in it, so close to the union that he was almost one with them. It was heady. Then Matt sensed a change in the atmosphere and blinked when he heard a low growl.

Stay away from my mate! Aki was clutching Robbie tightly and leaning threateningly toward Matt. His rage was so sudden and so overwhelming that Matt could only stand there, a rabbit before the snake.

You're too close. Get away. He's MINE!

The normally controlled Aki was lost in a frenzy of possessiveness, and Matt had no way to get through to the Himiko, to explain that he was just Robbie's friend, that nothing had changed. Matt got a disturbingly clear image of how much Aki wanted to rip his throat out.

It was Pietr who stepped between them, looking undaunted and speaking soothingly to Aki. "Your mate is scared. You have to take care of him. Take care of your mate." It sounded like a litany.

Aki snarled at Pietr, but he tore his attention away from Matt and back to Robbie, who looked anxiously at them, clinging to Aki. Aki curled in on Robbie, crooning to the Himiko and petting his mate. *He's mine!* He said it as a warning while he comforted Robbie.

"He is. He's yours, and you have to protect him. Take him to bed and claim him." Pietr's voice was sure and strong, beyond questioning.

Aki growled something incomprehensible, and with a last threatening glance at Matt, lifted Robbie and carried his mate through a doorway. Matt could see him laying Robbie carefully down on the bed in the middle of the room, and then the door slammed shut.

It wasn't nearly enough to stop the frenetic, animalistic desire that radiated from the bedroom and surrounded Matt, nearly suffocating him.

We have to go. Pietr's inner voice was urgent.

Matt couldn't answer, just nodded. Pietr had to physically grab his arm and drag him out of the house before Matt could get his body to move. He couldn't breathe normally until they were in the car, driving away from the cottage.

I take it that was a bonding? Matt was shaking a little bit. Somehow he had a hunch that it had been a close call in the house.

It was. Matt had a bad feeling that Pietr was answering both his question and the thought following it. *It was unlike any bonding I've ever witnessed before, though. To have kept back for that long...*

Matt could tell that Pietr was shaken, too. And scared. He didn't quite understand why.

You're close to Robbie. Being near him during a bonding could have proved... fatal.

Matt took a deep breath. Pietr reached over and took his hand.

If it's any consolation, I never saw it coming, either. I knew that Robbie had an unusually hard time learning how to shield. No wonder if he was trying to shield from his mate. Just the thought made Pietr angry. Aki is such an idiot.

Matt couldn't imagine the pain it would cause to have your mate in front of you and refuse to bond with him. Or the strength such denial would require.

It's not strength, it's pure idiocy. Behind his calm exterior, Pietr was very, very angry. *It's a miracle that they're both still sane.* Pietr had started to tremble.

"Pull over."

Pietr looked up, surprised by hearing Matt's voice, but he did as he was told. When the car was still, Matt climbed over, straddling Pietr and hugging him tightly. Pietr held back at first, trying to compose himself; then he sobbed and clung to Matt so tightly that it hurt.

He could have killed you. Newly bonded couples are fucking dangerous.

Matt felt a chill going through him at the memory of the look in Aki's eyes when his mentor had snarled at Matt. It was the first time he had seen a Himiko looking that inhuman.

And the pain he has caused Robbie. Pietr's fury was returning, and he angrily wiped his eyes.

And himself, Matt reminded his mate. A lot of things made more sense now; all the things Matt had felt from Aki while he had been guided through the first hard days after the surgery, the things that nobody else seemed to feel.

Pietr took a deep breath. *You're right. It can't have been easy.* Under the simple words, there was incredulity at the amount of pain Aki had been willing to go through to do what he thought was right.

It was fucking wrong. Pietr took a deep breath and loosened his iron grip on Matt. *I have to go talk to some people at the clinic. They have to be warned, and I can't be as detailed as I want to at this distance.*

What Pietr really wanted to do was to take Matt home and never ever let his mate near anybody again. Matt was so shaken up that it actually was a comfort to feel that thought.

It's okay. Matt cradled his mate's head. *I'm okay, and Aki and Robbie are, too. In fact, they sounded very... happy, when we left.* Pietr snorted at the understatement; their lust had been saturating the entire cottage.

Matt kissed Pietr and climbed back into his seat. Pietr started the engine and pulled out. Matt didn't let go of his mate's hand until they reached the clinic.

When they entered the building, Pietr leaned in. "Stay close." His mate put an arm around Matt, guiding him down the familiar hallway and into the administrator's office at the end. Matt didn't remember the name of the man before he saw the nameplate on the door. John Smith. Well, Robbie wasn't the only Himiko without a fancy name, he guessed.

Just before they went inside, Pietr did a strange thing with their shield, sort of contracting it so that Matt was both pulled back and protected far more than he needed to be. It felt like being a four-year old in a padded playpen. It was constricting and a little suffocating, but Pietr didn't listen to Matt's protests. For a moment, Matt thought about throwing a tantrum, but that might not be the best way of proving that he was no four-year old.

Two Himika joined them in the office, Pietr having summoned them while Matt had been busy fighting his new restraints.

What's happening?

Matt had a vague memory of this Himiko from when he had collapsed outside. Something to do with the medical side of the clinic, he thought.

Are you all right, Matt? The Himiko continued, looking concerned and frowning as he saw how close Matt was standing to Pietr.

I'm fine, thank you. Despite his misgivings about being limited like this, Matt kept himself politely in rein, Pietr's shield subduing his inner voice considerably.

The Himiko didn't seem to notice. He just looked relieved when he heard that Matt wasn't the problem.

Then why did you need us to meet here? Mr. Smith sounded a little impatient.

Pietr got straight to the point. *Aki and Robbie have bonded.*

"They what?" The surprise was clear, both in Mr. Smith's voice and in the mind of the other Himiko.

How... but they have been around each other here for months now. They've known each other for years! How can it happen now? The other Himiko was stunned.

Pietr smiled bitterly. *Oh, it's much worse than you think. They bonded back while Aki was Robbie's mentor. Or they would have if Aki hadn't stopped it from happening.*

You can't do that! There was shock in the medical guy's voice. Gus, Matt learned; his name flowed through his shields together with his consternation.

Not unless you're as devoted to your duty as Aki is. And as ruthless in carrying it out.

Pietr was almost over his anger, but Matt could still feel it flickering under the surface. Matt let a soothing hand slide over his back.

"I don't believe it. He can't have... That's more than ten years! Are you sure?"

The administrator sounded skeptical, but Matt got a clear impression that it wasn't because the Himiko didn't trust Pietr. It was more that the alternative was so... He couldn't exactly get the hang of what Mr. Smith really meant because of Pietr's tight shields. He writhed a bit mentally, but Pietr didn't budge an inch.

I'm very sure. We went there today, and both Matt and I witnessed their bonding. It was stronger than anything I've ever seen before. Matt was close to being sucked in, and Aki was fucking lethal.

Are you sure you're okay, Matt?

Gus was honestly concerned about him. On one hand, it felt good that the Himiko cared about him; on the other, it only underlined that he had been in real danger. Matt just nodded and inched closer to Pietr. Suddenly, Pietr's tight shield was comforting instead of constricting.

He is. I managed to make Aki take Robbie to bed. I don't expect them to emerge any time soon.

Pietr sat down heavily on the couch along the wall, and Matt could suddenly feel how much energy it had cost Pietr to keep Aki in control and Matt out of trouble. He sat down next to Pietr, letting an arm slide protectively around his mate's shoulders. He pretended not to see the barely concealed smile on Mr. Smith's face. He snapped the word "cute" from the Himiko's mind before Pietr's shield reined him in tighter than ever before. Matt only refrained from rebelling because he didn't want to make a scene.

I still can't believe it. Gus shook his head.

Neither can I, but it seems that it happened anyway. The administrator had switched back into communicating mentally, too. *Now we need to figure out what happens next.*

Pietr shrugged. *There isn't much we can do about it.* He leaned back into Matt's arm. *Aki is very dangerous at the moment, and I still feel that we're the ones best suited to train them.*

Gus's eyes narrowed, and Matt looked questioningly at Pietr. *Training? They need to learn to communicate like I did?* That didn't make sense.

Pietr shook his head. *No, but they need to learn to allow other people near. That might be a problem for Aki, but you and I are probably his closest friends.*

Matt remembered the look in Aki's eyes and snorted. *I'm not sure he's exactly friendly at the moment. Is it really necessary to go near them right now?*

Well, not today, but otherwise, yes. If we don't, they might be lost in each other. That's not... healthy.

Matt got a flash of an alarming image, surprisingly similar, from both Pietr and Gus. It was of Himika getting so wrapped up in each other that they weren't able to back off at all. It was a condition closer to psychosis than Matt was comfortable with. Despite Aki's behavior earlier that day, he still considered Aki as well as Robbie to be close friends.

Okay. Matt nodded.

Gus stared. *Do you have any idea what you're accepting?*

Matt had an ugly feeling that he didn't. *Not really, but it has to be done, doesn't it?* He shrugged.

Next to him, Pietr nodded. *It does, and I wouldn't suggest it if I didn't think we could do it. Aki knows me very well, and he won't see you as a threat.*

Matt knew that that was probably an insult, and he sincerely doubted if it was the truth. But it worked very well to convince the two other Himika. Gus relaxed a bit, and the administrator nodded.

Good. Give them some peace today and bring them food tomorrow. But don't forget a physical shield for Matt; if the situation blows up, you can put it on him and he should be relatively safe. Will he be able to tolerate the separation for long enough to get him out of there?

This time, Matt was definitely being insulted. Pietr warningly pulled their shields closely around Matt's mind, not letting Matt show how he really felt.

He will; our training is progressing.

Pietr didn't say any more, and Matt felt a little like a retarded kid. There wasn't anything to do about it, though, unless he wanted to make a very public scene -- and he didn't. They made their arrangements for the next day and left the clinic.

Matt held it back until they were safely out of earshot, physical as well as mental.

"What the fuck was that about?" He was fuming. "You treated me like a little kid."

Pietr nodded, unperturbed. "Or like someone weak." Matt had already opened his mouth to complain, but Pietr held up a hand. "Which was what I wanted them to believe."

Matt made a hard push at Pietr's mind to see what his mate meant. Pietr winced, but Matt wasn't able to find what he was looking for.

"And why can't I do this anymore? We used to be like one person."

Matt had been enjoying his ability to be away from Pietr, but if this was the price he was going to pay for it, he didn't know if he was ready for it.

Oh, you definitely can if you keep on using that much force. Pietr's inner voice was sardonic and not in the least worried. He looked over at Matt, and his face got softer as he felt Matt's concern, reaching for Matt's hand.

Don't worry, baby. He squeezed Matt's hand. *We're just learning and developing. It's natural and healthy -- and we can still be as one person. We are one person. It's just a little easier now to buy a birthday present and actually surprise the other.*

Matt rolled his eyes. Pietr ignored him.

As for your first question, I don't want them to know how far you've come.

Why not? Matt's curiosity won over his desire to sulk.

Pietr shook his head. *I just don't. Especially not now. They might have all sorts of good ideas of what you can use your powers for, and I want you to be fully developed and trained before you make any decisions.*

Matt had no desire at all to be the Himiko equivalent of paper pusher. Or worse, someone who had to take orders. His experience as an intern at the big architectural firm came back, and he winced; being told what to do definitely wasn't his forte. He was still pissed about the way Pietr had done it, though.

Well, thank you for that, honey, but you could have warned me beforehand. I felt like a fucking four-year old.

They assumed you were one, too.

Pietr effortlessly ducked when Matt tried to slap him on the back of his head. Bonding with a mind reader had its drawbacks, it seemed.

No, really, that's good. It will give you peace and quiet to find out what you can do -- and more importantly, what you want to do with it.

Matt reluctantly sat back; as usual, what Pietr said made sense.

And slapping your mate while he's driving can be very unhealthy. For both of us. Pietr grinned.

Matt only snorted. He was still curious, though; it was the first time he had interacted with foreign Himika outside of his first training. *There's another thing: Why are some Himika speaking out loud? I know you're not allowed to speak to humans -- which is fucked, by the way -- but why do you sometimes communicate with words instead of thoughts when you speak with each*

other? Robbie does it all the time, the administrator did it when he got surprised, but you hardly ever do it.

Pietr shrugged. *It's just different from Himiko to Himiko, I think. I used to be quiet all the time; since we've bonded, I speak a lot more out loud because you do. I used to think that Robbie did it because he was having problems communicating mentally -- it takes some strength, you know -- but now I'm not so sure.*

Robbie's not weak. Matt didn't know why he was so sure, but he was. He's just a little... different. His shields aren't that strong; it might have something to do with not being able to bond.

The thought brought him right back to the memory of Aki that morning.

Do you really think he's dangerous? Matt sort of hoped that had been just another part of the charade.

Oh, yes. He'll be very dangerous if we don't treat both of them right. But we will, and they'll be all right because of it. Pietr sounded so sure that Matt immediately felt a little better. *And we're still the ones best suited for the job.*

Matt sighed. It seemed there wasn't any way out of facing Aki again.

He'll be a little less feral tomorrow. And I'll teach you what to do to get out of there alive.

Pietr seemed remarkably undaunted by the task.

I've done it before, baby. A lot. And I'm still in one piece. Pietr pulled the car up in front of their cottage and killed the engine.

Okay, then. Matt got out of the car, walked around it, and opened Pietr's door.

What are you...? Oh.

Matt leaned in and kissed Pietr until there was nothing left in his mate's mind but the feeling of their lips together, of Matt's desire for him.

Matt pulled at Pietr until he was out of the car, then marched him to the bedroom, never stopping their kisses. Pietr was briefly distracted when they scrambled into a chair, then Matt got him right back to what he was supposed to be doing. Kissing Matt, that was.

Matt only stopped when they were in front of the bed, pulling back and taking Pietr's head between his hands.

I love you, and I need you.

Independence was all very well; right now, Matt was desperate to be as close as possible to his mate.

Oh, baby. Pietr leaned in and kissed him again, more slowly this time. *I'm still right here, and I'll never leave you.* His mate opened himself up, showing Matt that just because they could be two separate persons didn't mean they weren't still one and the same.

Matt felt his throat constrict; then he was there, bathed in Pietr's mind, protected by his mate all around. He sobbed once when he could let go, could let himself be a part of his mate. It was the ultimate freedom and the ultimate safety.

He could feel the sheets against his skin, and somewhere in a corner of his mind, he knew that they were on the bed, kissing and fondling and rubbing. The only thing that mattered, though, was the burning white joy in Pietr's mind, his mate's desire that transformed itself into lust so overwhelming that Matt was floating in it, letting it drench him to the limits of his soul. Somewhere far away, he heard someone cry out, and he didn't know if it was Pietr or himself, just felt the climax rushing through them until he lost himself completely in it.

It felt like hours later when Pietr pulled a blanket over him, wiping Matt's cheeks. Matt hadn't even known that he was crying.

You needed it. Pietr pulled him close, let him feel the warmth from his mate's body. Matt was boneless, could only comply.

We needed it. Pietr was thoughtful.

Matt tried to get a grip on himself, reel himself in.

No, don't. Pietr wouldn't let him withdraw. Instead, his mate kept them wrapped up in each others' minds, as close as they had been in the first days after their bonding. *I think I let us get too independent too fast.*

Matt sniffled. *Well, maybe. Or perhaps it was just Aki and Robbie. It was scary to be that close to them.* To a bond that was so strong and wasn't his.

I know. Pietr comfortingly stroked his back, and Matt snuggled in, enjoying the silence.

Were we that bad? Matt couldn't help being curious.

Pietr snorted. Loudly. *We knocked several people unconscious, baby. And you took care of another all on your own when he wanted to pull us apart. It wasn't just for your sake that we were isolated in that room, you know.*

Huh. People had complained about him being loud, but Matt hadn't really thought that carefully about it before now. He'd mostly been concerned about being a live show.

Well, I guess that means that I'll be able to stand up for myself in there. In a weird way, it helped to be as dangerous as the one you had to encounter.

Pietr snorted again. He seemed to have a habit of that.

Oh, you'll hold your own just fine, I guarantee you that. And no, I didn't have a habit of that until I met you. You induce snorting.

Matt hit him, of course. But not too hard; you had to be careful about making lumps in what you used as a pillow.

Pietr shook his head. *I think you're the most ungrateful mate ever.* He also pulled Matt closer, though, sighing contentedly when he had arranged Matt's body to his satisfaction. Matt snuggled in, giving Pietr a picture of how thoroughly comfortable the Himiko was making Matt.

You're welcome. Matt thought about smiling; then he fell asleep.

"Are you ready?"

Pietr had been speaking out loud to him all morning to get Matt used to it. It was all part of the "survive Aki" rules that Pietr had drilled into him earlier that morning.

"The first rule: you never think to someone newly bonded. It's too intimate, and some might take it as a threat."

"No waaay! Aki would *never* do that!" Matt interrupted.

"Stop with the sarcasm and pay attention. I'd like you to survive this."

Matt huffed, but he did as he was told. He'd like to survive his upcoming encounter with Aki, too.

"You don't communicate mentally, you don't touch, and you shouldn't even get too close to them. They'll be... sensitive."

Matt nodded. "Yeah, I get it." He did; the first days after their bonding were still very clear in his mind.

"And most importantly, remember that it's just Aki and Robbie. They might be a little crazy, but they're still there under all the fuzz."

Matt cocked his head. "You know, I think you're right. It's just Aki; I've survived everything he's done to me this far, and I don't think Robbie would let him kill me. Not even now."

Matt decided to ignore the fleeting look of doubt on Pietr's face. Matt was getting more confident about the meeting, and there was no need to ruin that feeling.

"Let's go before I pee my pants."

Pietr's concern was so loud that Matt worried about his mental ears. Well, there was bound to be an equivalent to those.

"It's a saying! Meaning somebody's nervous. Jeez, aliens." Matt shook his head and went out the door. He thought he heard another snort behind his back, but refused to acknowledge it.

"Boys! Food!" Matt could feel Pietr blinking next to him. The "no thinking" rule had only been meant for Aki and Robbie, and obviously his mate wasn't used to Matt being this loud.

Matt slammed the door wide open, stopping right inside the doorway the next moment. He looked at Pietr, who quickly went to open a window. It didn't take any mind reading to agree that the cabin needed fresh air. Matt left the door open behind him and went to the bedroom.

"My mate is sleeping! You're waking up my mate!" Aki was crouching over Robbie in the bed, looking more like a predator than anything human. Well, Himiko, Matt reminded himself. It still didn't change the fact that Aki seemed ready to attack.

"Your mate is not sleeping, he's already awake, and you need to feed him," Matt said. It was another of Pietr's rules: appeal to the protective gene if the situation is getting dangerous.

Aki turned to Robbie, quicker than anything Matt remembered seeing before.

"Is there food?"

Robbie looked sleepy, hair tousled as he sat up and rubbed his face. Aki instantly cradled him, caressing his hair and kissing him. "Oh, hi, Matt." Robbie wrapped his arms around Aki, leaning into his mate and looking completely at ease. It touched something deep inside Matt to see the insecure Himiko this settled.

Well, and hungry, apparently.

"There is, if you can get Big and Bad there to let you into the kitchen."

"Sure I can. We need to eat, don't we?" Robbie patted Aki's arm and pulled back the sheets. Aki was still staring at him when he pulled on a robe and handed one to Aki, too.

"Come on, baby. You're hungry."

Aki blinked, looking as if he was fighting hard to keep up with what was happening around him. Matt hid his smile; it seemed that Robbie wasn't necessarily the weaker one in that relationship.

Robbie started toward the kitchen, and Aki made a strangled sound.

"You better move. Your bond doesn't stretch that far yet," Matt advised him. Matt almost felt sorry for Aki as the Himiko stumbled after Robbie. All that strength didn't do him much good in the adjustment department.

Pietr got busy making sandwiches. He had insisted on bringing something they could put together quickly. Seeing Robbie making a beeline for the food, take it out of the hands of a protesting Pietr, and bite into it right then and there, Matt kind of understood why. Matt managed to rescue the other half of the sandwich and hand it to Aki.

"Here, you need it as much as Robbie does."

Aki looked at Matt with an impossible mixture of a scowl and helpless hunger on his face. The hunger won out, apparently, and he dug into the food.

"Hey, easy, now." Matt almost reached out to touch Aki, only Pietr's mental warning keeping him back. Matt turned to Robbie instead. "Don't let him choke on it."

Robbie immediately put down his own food and reached for his mate. "Slowly, baby. I don't want you to get sick." Without any ceremony, he took the sandwich

out of Aki's hands and started feeding him, one arm around his mate's back.

Pietr exchanged a surprised look with Matt.

Well, you know I hate saying "I told you so," but I did. Robbie isn't weak.

Pietr lifted an eyebrow. *Apparently not. And you love saying that.*

Matt grinned and leaned in, giving Pietr a quick kiss. Then he turned his attention back to the newly mated couple. Robbie was feeding Aki kisses in between the bites, and there were more and more kisses and less and less food.

"Come on, Robbie, you've hardly had anything to eat. Aki, he's only had three bites."

Matt picked up the sandwich that Robbie had abandoned in order to feed his mate, giving it to Aki. Without looking at Matt, the Himiko grabbed it with an impatient move, turning to feed Robbie.

You're good. Matt felt warm inside at Pietr's praise.

Well, they need to eat. Even without the bonding, going for days without eating would make someone a little crazy.

The feeding was turning into something else -- again -- and Matt dug out two bottles of orange juice from the fridge.

"You're not done yet, guys. Sorry."

Aki sent Matt an evil look, but obediently drank when Robbie handed him the bottle. As soon as he had the first sip, he forgot to scowl and downed all of it. Robbie did the same, apparently as parched as Aki.

"Okay, now that you're fed, I need to know if you need some ReGen. Robbie, is Aki okay? It was intense yesterday." Matt kept his voice matter of fact.

Robbie let his hands cradle Aki's head while he got a faraway look in his eyes. "Yeah, he's fine. A little tired, but we've been... Well." Robbie looked a little sheepish.

Aki looked like someone who was completely out of his depth. "I... Aren't you going to ask me if Robbie is okay?" He sounded unusually vulnerable.

Matt smiled, going to close the window. "Nope. You would tell me if he wasn't."

On his way past Aki, Matt reached out and patted the Himiko's arm without thinking. He felt the alarm in Pietr's mind and saw the complete consternation on Aki's face at the same time.

"Now, don't do anything stupid, Aki," Matt said before crossing the floor to the window, feeling extremely exposed with his back to Aki. When he turned around, Aki looked from him to Robbie, bewilderment clear on the Himiko's face.

"You're supposed to rip him apart for touching me!" Aki had to be thoroughly baffled to speak out loud to his mate.

Robbie just looked overbearingly at Aki. "He's good for you."

Matt went with his gut feeling, like he had before. He took the few steps back to Aki, gently took the Himiko's face in his hands, and kissed his mentor's forehead.

Out of the corner of his eye, Matt saw Pietr rush in to help him, and Robbie made a protective gesture. Aki was just staring at Matt. Matt kept his voice low, easy.

"You're still my friend, Aki. Nothing's changed that."

The Himiko didn't attack. The look on his face was deeply puzzled.

Matt let go of him and stepped back. "Now, go fuck your mate. We'll be back tomorrow at noon to pester you some more."

Robbie grinned. "Now, that's a good suggestion. Do you have something more to drink? Just in case we don't make it out here again." He looked a bit flushed.

"Aww, they're so cute," Matt teased. He watched Aki get more befuddled with every passing minute and took mercy on the poor Himiko. Opening the fridge, he got some water and soda.

"But you should make it out here." It was the first time Pietr had opened his mouth since they had arrived. He was looking at Aki. "It will be better for both of you if you don't get dehydrated. You might be skilled, but the next part is still hard."

Aki nodded. "I'll take care of him."

"I know you will."

Matt put a salad in the fridge and left the bread and some soup on the counter. That way, the new couple didn't have to take more time than necessary away from their lovemaking to cook.

You're showing great insight into a newly bonded couple's mindset.

Matt grinned. *Or perhaps I'm just horny.* He turned to say goodbye to Aki and Robbie, but they were a lost cause already; Aki was kissing Robbie breathless as they walked toward the bedroom.

I don't think we're needed here anymore. Matt got the car keys. Both Aki and Robbie were close friends, but that didn't mean he was eager to witness their sex life.

I think you're very, very right. They managed to leave the house before the sounds started in the bedroom. Well, almost.

It turned out that the next part of training the new couple wasn't nearly as hard as either Pietr or Matt had thought it would be. When they arrived the next day, Aki and Robbie were at the table, in their robes and with their hair still wet. They were having soup, and Matt had a suspicion that they had only ventured out of the bedroom because they knew they would be disturbed. Matt went straight to the point.

Is Robbie okay? Matt kept his contact simple, the question the only thing slipping through his shields. Aki still winced, and Robbie comfortingly rubbed the Himiko's back.

He's fine. The words were hesitant, as if Aki had to learn how to speak all over again. *Thank you for asking.* He almost felt shy, and he refused to look up at Matt.

Good. You look okay, both of you. Well, when one of you isn't trying to tear my head off, that is.

Aki ducked, and Robbie laughed quietly and kissed his mate's cheek.

Yeah, my mate has a well-developed protective gene. Robbie sounded exactly like he had before, no hesitation in his inner voice, and he showed far more feeling than Aki.

Oh, Robbie. Matt felt his eyes tearing up at the pure happiness and comfort in Robbie's mind. It was so different from how the Himiko had felt before, and without thinking, Matt pulled Robbie up and into a hug.

He heard the surprised protest from Aki as Robbie's mate scrambled to get up, and Matt pulled his mentor in close, too. When Matt felt Pietr's arms around him from behind, he got the same feeling he had had in the garden when Aki had helped him by feeding him power. It was the feeling of being a perfect triangle of energy. But this

time, Robbie was there to support and steady Aki, making their union stronger and more stable.

Matt kept it short; Aki was still too sensitive to endure too much contact with anyone but his mate. He was swaying when Matt stepped back, and Robbie quickly caught him, steadying him.

"I think that's enough for today." Robbie's voice was firm. "He needs to rest."

Matt just nodded; Robbie knew what his mate needed. "We'll see you tomorrow. Don't worry about food, we'll get you something." Matt didn't really think food was that high on the list of things Aki and Robbie were going to want during the next week or so, but they did need it.

Robbie nodded and grabbed a couple of bottles of soda before he helped Aki back into the bedroom. Aki looked a little shaken.

It's time to go, baby.

Matt nodded and followed Pietr out of the house.

In the car, Pietr was quiet for a long time.

I don't understand why Aki is having the harder time adjusting. His communication wasn't fluent at all. I'd have thought he would be stronger than this. Pietr was shaking his head.

Well, he's been denying himself for a long time, building his shields so high that it's a wonder he's able to break them down. There's something... unyielding about him, like he's been suppressing who he is for an entire lifetime. Robbie never did that -- he might have been messed up by Aki refusing to bond with him, but it's left him wide open and ready. And I told you, he's not weak.

No, he really isn't. Pietr seemed to marvel at that. You're good at reading people.

Matt shrugged. *I've been very close to both of them; it wasn't hard.*

Well, I think there's more to it than that -- you're sensitive, in a good way. There was a sense of pride and admiration in Pietr's mind that hadn't been there before. This wasn't just his mate's love for him -- it was genuine recognition of what Matt could do.

Matt leaned over and kissed Pietr's cheek, the warm glow in his mate's mind more important to him than any words.

I'm a little worried about Aki, though. Pietr seemed pensive as his thoughts strayed back to the new couple. *His communication was very hesitant. And he tired easily.*

I think his strength is working against him. He's used to fighting, not to yielding. He'll learn; Robbie will see to it.

Matt was about to continue when they drove up in front of the house and saw another car waiting for them.

Oh, fuck. There was so much venom in Pietr's inner voice that Matt looked at him in surprise. *I'd totally forgotten that I'd asked them to be here today.*

What? Who?

Pietr killed the engine and just sat there for a minute, his mind swirling with mixed emotions. Then Matt felt him pulling himself together enough to answer.

Sam and Jerry.

Matt didn't have a clue; all he could sense was the dread in Pietr's inner voice.

Aki and I asked them to come here to teach you how to control your power. But with the bonding and everything, I forgot all about it.

The ice cream guys?

Don't call them that! There was apprehension bordering on fear in Pietr's mind as he got out of the car and walked toward the house.

Pietr? Aren't you going to meet them? Introduce me? Matt got out of the car.

No way. Pietr hesitated and turned around. *Take care of yourself, baby. You'll be fine; just watch your back.* He walked into the house, closing the door behind him.

Matt stood back on the grass in front of the house, blinking. It really wasn't like Pietr to leave him like that. The doors to the other car opened, though, and he had no more time to think about it.

As the two Himika got out of the car and walked toward him, Matt swallowed. If this had been a western, then these would definitely be the bad guys. Hell, they would be the bad guys in any genre he could think of.

They weren't especially built or tattooed or anything like that; they just exuded a sinister, powerful vibe that was enough to make Matt tighten his shields as much as he possibly could. Then they were right in front of him, and he had to act civilized.

"Matt?" the Himiko with the leather jacket asked him, with more than a little doubt in his voice.

At least Matt was used to Himika believing he was useless.

"Yes." He didn't reach out his hand. Matt was going to learn, but nobody said he had to be gracious about it. The Himiko just nodded.

"I'm Sam and this is Jerry. Aki told us you've been trying to move things and overexerted yourself?" Sam sounded a little tired.

"I did." No way to hide it, really. "I could use some help learning how to control it."

"We'll teach you. I promised Aki."

The Himiko sounded less than enthusiastic about the task, but he did seem quite determined. Matt guessed that it could have been worse.

"Do you have anywhere we can work? Well out of reach of your mate if that's possible. It's better that way."

Matt fleetingly wondered why exactly they wanted to get him away from Pietr. But he had had to do the rest of his training on his own, too, and these guys were Aki's friends. Well, Aki's acquaintances, at least.

"There's a small meadow a quarter of a mile from here -- will that do?" The little clearing by the oak was closer than the lake, and Matt wanted to keep his spot by the lake private.

"It'll be fine."

It was the first time Jerry had spoken, the other Himiko's voice deep and gravelly. If the situation hadn't been this uncomfortable, it would have been almost comical how bad guy-ish this Himiko was. Even with those ears, there definitely wasn't anything cuddly-elfish about the guy.

Matt straightened his back and started walking. He was going to learn, and these guys were apparently the best ones out there to teach him.

They walked in silence, and they were almost there when Matt bent down to clear a fallen branch from the path. He suddenly felt a crawly feeling along his spine as one of the Himika tried sneaking into Matt's brain. The attempt was very discreet, but Matt caught it.

"Oh, no, you fucking don't!"

Matt zapped the Himiko's fingers, and Jerry swore out loud and shook his hands as if they were burned. Which they hopefully were. Matt turned all the way around and stepped close to the two Himika. Sam was looking from Matt to Jerry, a baffled expression on the Himiko's face.

"You keep your fucking minds away from my brain! You get that?" Matt kept up his hard stare.

Sam hesitated. Then he seemed to make up his mind and nodded, his face inscrutable. "We'll do that. Let's get started."

Jerry was grumbling something unintelligible, but he rubbed his fingers one last time and stepped into the clearing. He put down a bag and turned toward Sam and Matt.

"What can you do?" Sam seemed to be the leader; Jerry kept in the back, scowling at Matt.

Matt had his arms crossed, reluctant to cooperate at all. He couldn't figure out how much he was supposed to reveal to these strangers. He decided to trust Aki's judgment. Aki thought that this was the best way for Matt to learn. And he needed to learn; he was still as delicate as a bulldozer when it came to moving things, and the hangover from his last overexertion wasn't something he ever intended to experience again.

"I can move things a little, but not with great accuracy -- it's far easier just to break something. And I tried to make waves, but it didn't end that well."

"With you being unconscious?" Jerry's tone of voice was condescending.

"Basically, yes." Pietr had had to carry him the last of the way home, after all.

"Show me." Sam didn't sound as if he had high expectations about what he was going to see.

Matt sighed inwardly; having Himika consider him less than capable was getting to be tedious. He pulled himself together; he was going to learn as much as he could and then go home and yell at Pietr for setting him up with these gangsters.

He arranged some cones on a branch like he normally did and stepped back.

"What do you want to do to them?"

Matt turned when Sam spoke, frowning at the interruption.

"I can only assess your accuracy if I know what you intend to do in the first place," the Himiko explained.

"I want to push them down one at a time, starting with the left one, and break the branch afterward."

Jerry scoffed. Matt very pointedly turned his back to the Himika and concentrated.

It might have been because he hadn't been using any force during the last couple of days, due to the whole Aki-and-Robbie mess, but he succeeded in pushing the cones down in a nice row. The branch didn't give as easily, and he had to try twice to succeed in breaking it.

"The oak's a lot harder than the trees I used to practice...What?"

Jerry's mouth was open, and Sam looked a little perplexed.

"Aki didn't... You said you had been practicing?"

"Yes?" Matt hadn't been doing much else since he bonded with Petr.

"How often do you succeed in doing that?" Sam gestured to the cones.

Matt thought. "Probably four out of five times by now? I'm having difficulties with the accuracy, so the rest of the time I push down too many cones."

"And the branches?" Sam's voice was carefully neutral.

"Well, that's a lot easier; I haven't had to practice that a lot."

"When you say that you tried to make waves," it was Jerry speaking now, "did you actually succeed in doing so?"

Matt shrugged. "Only small ones, even though I tried for more than an hour. And then I got tired and was only

halfway home before I had to ask Pietr to come help me. He brought some ReGen, and with that I could make it almost to the house before I crashed."

Sam exchanged perplexed looks with Jerry. "So, what you're telling me is that you moved water for an hour, and afterwards you were able to both walk and call for your mate? How far from home were you when you communicated with him?" The Himiko sounded almost agitated by now.

"I was here when I got tired." Matt didn't understand why that was important.

Jerry burst out laughing. It was such an unexpected reaction that Matt automatically took a step back. Sam grinned, too, and took a step toward Matt.

"Well, it seems that we're really here to train a warrior, not to nurse some green, newly-bonded wimp."

Jerry quickly looked at Sam, a strange mixture of surprise and apprehension on the Himiko's face, but Sam reached out his hand toward Matt.

Matt took it, more than a little confused. "I think this is the point where I should be offended." Nevertheless, he shook hands with Sam, then with Jerry, too.

"Probably." Sam was still grinning at him. "Or we could just get on with the work."

It turned out that Sam and Jerry's training was just as tough as they were. They had him pushing branches and cones and acorns around, and after a while, Matt was convinced that he had rearranged every inch of the clearing. They were good at explaining the tricks he had to learn, though, and especially Sam's descriptions made the work a lot simpler. After a couple of hours, he was

tired and sweaty, and Jerry smiled that shark-like grin and pointed to a stump of a tree.

"Now, split that."

They seemed to take great pleasure in torturing him with increasingly difficult tasks. Matt stared at the stump. It was old and the wood wasn't nearly as hard as the branches, but it was solid and it would take something different to tear it apart. He made a mental image of it, and suddenly he could see that if he just used his power like *that*...

"Yes!" With a crack, a large piece of the stump broke off. Matt turned to Jerry with a triumphant grin, but suddenly he felt queasy.

"Easy, there, son."

Jerry had his arm, steadying him when he swayed. All of a sudden, the world was spinning around him, the trees getting a bit blurry. The Himiko helped Matt sit down, leaning against a tree, and Sam rummaged in a bag before finding a bottle of ReGen.

"Is your mate going to come running because I touched you?"

Matt had a hard time paying attention to Jerry's question. God, he was this close to puking. Sam handed him the bottle. Matt's hands were shaking, and Sam held the bottle, still without touching Matt. He drank thirstily until Sam pulled the bottle away.

"Is he?"

Matt looked uncomprehendingly at Jerry before he remembered the question. "No, he's fine with it by now. Can I have some more, please?"

Sam handed him the bottle back, again careful not to touch.

"Good. It's nice to be prepared if there's an over-zealous mate coming for you. It can get ugly." Jerry sounded as if he was talking from experience.

"Tell me about it." Matt only stopped drinking long enough to say that before he emptied the bottle.

"Yeah? Your mate was feral when you bonded?" Sam sat down next to Matt, grabbing a couple of sodas from the bag. It seemed it was finally time for a break.

"Well, yes, but nothing compared to Aki."

Matt was so busy opening the can and getting a sip of the cold liquid that he didn't immediately notice the shocked silence around him. He looked up, seeing Sam staring disbelievingly at him.

"Aki has bonded?" Jerry's gravelly voice sounded even hoarser than it normally did. Matt nodded.

"Who the fuck did he bond with?" Sam sounded astonished.

"With Robbie. I don't know his last name, but he's a doctor at the clinic."

"Robbie? Little Robbie?" Jerry sat down, hard.

"Yes. Well, he's not so little; as a matter of fact, he's taking it far better than Aki. It might have something to do with the fact that Aki blocked their bonding years ago -- it wasn't exactly healthy for either of them, but Aki's having more difficulties now because of it."

"He what?" Jerry sounded dumbfounded.

Matt took another sip. "They bonded when Aki was Robbie's mentor -- except Aki refused to acknowledge it and prevented Robbie from bonding with him. It messed with Robbie's shields and Aki's ability to connect with others."

"The fucker! That would be just like him."

Matt looked at Sam, eyebrows raised.

"He's not a fan -- it goes way back." Jerry shrugged. "But how the fuck did that happen?"

"It's kind of my fault." Matt felt his cheeks go a little warm. "Aki is a friend of mine, since he was my mentor, and I mentioned to Robbie that Aki couldn't connect

with others. Robbie went straight to Aki's house and shouted at him, and then they bonded. It was... intense."

"Aki's your friend?" Sam sounded as if that was the most incomprehensible fact of them all.

"Yes?"

Jerry just shook his head behind Sam's back.

"Wait -- you don't like Aki?"

Sam spat. "No, and it's entirely mutual."

Jerry rolled his eyes.

"But why the fuck would he send me to you, then?"

"Because we're the best at what we do and he knows that -- whether or not his sensitive ethics are disturbed by what we do."

Matt wanted to ask more questions -- there was definitely a story there -- but Sam emptied his drink and got up.

"Back to work, kid. We can still wring some sweat out of you."

Matt was exhausted when Sam and Jerry drove away. They had pushed him just about to his limit, but not over it, and he felt okay. They had made him drink and given him something to eat along the way. And it was really fun work.

He turned and opened the door to the house. *Honey, I'm home!*

I know, you dork. Pietr snorted, and Matt briefly thought once again that he had to learn how to do that mentally.

Oh, you're doing just fine. Pietr met him in the living room, leaning in for a kiss.

Not yet, alien. Matt crossed his arms. *You have some explaining to do. It was really bad style just leaving me*

with them. He leaned back, acting all affronted and making sure that Pietr knew both that he really was offended and that it wasn't all that bad. He blinked at the thought of how much information you could cram into a single thought.

Yeah, sorry about that. It's just that I've had a... disagreement with Sam in the past. Pietr was still reluctant to share more than that.

Yes? What about? Matt was the king of stubborn.

Pietr sighed. *I'd really rather not tell you yet. I want you to learn what you can from them; then you can form your own opinion afterward.*

Matt scowled; sometimes his mate was way too politically correct for his taste. But he didn't push into the part of Pietr's mind where that particular memory was hidden. Instead, he stepped up close.

Well, I guess you have to pay, then.

Pietr looked slightly alarmed at that. *Pay?*

Yes. Matt grinned and opened his mind, showing Pietr exactly what he was thinking. *I need somebody to wash my back.*

Oh. Okay. I think I can manage that. Pietr grabbed him, smiling, and leaned in to kiss him.

Matt closed his eyes when he felt the soft lips against his own, gently probing until he opened up and allowed Pietr's tongue access.

It's been far too long. Matt wasn't entirely sure which one of them was thinking that, but he fully supported the thought. Pietr was licking and biting and sucking on his tongue, and he couldn't do anything but moan.

You're not wet yet.

Matt had no idea what Pietr meant. His mate just laughed at him, showing him an image of a shower and them under the spray. Naked. And Pietr was doing a lot

more than just washing his back. He groaned and started tugging at Pietr.

It would probably go faster if you were at least walking in the right direction.

Matt opened his eyes and realized that he had been pulling Pietr toward the garden. He resolutely grabbed his mate by the collar and dragged him into the bathroom.

Hey! You can't... Mmm.

Yes, naked skin felt so much better than clothes. Matt reached in to turn on the water while he got rid of their underwear.

I want you to fill me. It's been so long.

Pietr groaned and stumbled after him into the shower, the warm water on Matt's body not feeling half as good as his mate's body against his.

Matt leaned back, letting Pietr hold him. Pietr made a halfhearted attempt to wash his front, and Matt sighed as Pietr's hands caressed his belly, straying up to pinch a nipple now and then. He arched, yearning to have Pietr touch him lower.

Like here?

Matt had no idea how the Himiko could be that coherent. He just moaned and pushed into Pietr's hand, needing more.

Oh, I'll give you more.

Pietr's other hand slid down Matt's crack, the water and the soap making everything slippery and good. Matt groaned out loud when Pietr's finger found his hole. His mate teased him, circling his hole and stroking his cock way too lightly with his other hand. Matt gasped, unable to stand it.

Easy. I've got you. Pietr's hand left his dick and slid up to turn his head while Pietr gently kissed him.

Matt breathed into the kiss, winding down a bit and just enjoying Pietr's hard body against his back.

Well done.

Matt pushed back with a sigh when Pietr slid a finger inside his ass. It was good and warm, the feeling of being filled both physically and mentally amazing. He relaxed into the sensations of Pietr pushing the finger deeper into him, letting Pietr feel how hot it was, how good his mate was making him feel. Pietr moaned and added another finger.

"Yes." Matt leaned back in Pietr's arms, letting his mate hold him and open him up. The water and the last traces of soap didn't give quite enough friction to prevent the sting, but the slight burn just heightened the feeling. It still felt good, and he pushed into it, wanting more. He was almost sobbing by the time Pietr pulled those probing fingers out.

"Please." Matt turned halfway around, only to see Pietr reaching for the bottle of lube on the counter and slicking his cock.

Please. He leaned forward, supporting himself on the wall and waited for his mate, completely secure in the knowledge that Pietr would give him what he needed. He had a kaleidoscopic impression from his mate of Pietr sensing his thoughts and seeing him at the same time, the double image combining with the glowing lust in his mate's mind and Pietr's reactions to Matt's reactions in a dizzying spiral that somehow pulled them still closer together.

Then he finally felt the cock against his entrance, and he sighed as Pietr pushed into him.

He was opened up as Pietr's cock thrust deep inside him, and he let the physical sensation translate into a mental one, letting all guards down. Letting Pietr see everything.

Matt. Oh, yes, Matt.

His mate was so grateful, letting joy and contentment flow into Matt's mind. Pietr didn't pull out much, his mate's need to be close so strong that Pietr fucked him slowly, with small movements, pushing as deep as his mate could get. It was different from their usual burning lust, but Matt relished it, letting Pietr see how much he enjoyed being taken like this.

It went on and on, the water falling over them washing away most of the lube. It left a stinging, raw feeling where Pietr pushed into Matt, and it was almost painful. But even that only seemed to bring them closer, and Matt never wanted this to end. It did, though, the joy overwhelming Pietr in long, crashing waves of pleasure, his mate crying out as the Himiko came deep inside Matt. Matt let himself lean back against Pietr's body. The blinding joy from his mate was enough to bring him over, too, and he opened his mouth as if to scream, but not a sound came out. It went on and on, and he was almost unconscious when it was over.

Pietr cradled his body, keeping him from falling. His mate's mind exuded happiness and pure bliss. Matt smiled with his eyes still closed.

I love you. You know that, don't you?

Yes. There was so much delight and gratitude in Pietr's inner voice that Matt got a lump in his throat. Then he let Pietr support him while his mate sluiced water over him, rinsing away the last traces of soap and lube before turning off the water.

His ass ached a bit when he stumbled out of the shower. Pietr felt it, of course, but instead of being concerned, his mate radiated contentment.

You like marking me. It was a little surprising. Pietr just grumbled something and kept drying Matt.

Matt stopped him. *I love you.* He let his mind stay as open as it had been while they made love. *I might be learning from others and enjoy having Aki and Robbie as friends, but you're the one I love.*

Pietr hugged him without a word, accepting his surrender and giving it back to him. They were fully entwined in each other's minds, and it was perfect.

To Matt's relief, Aki did improve. When they visited the newly bonded couple two days later, Aki was cleaning up the living room while Robbie was doing laundry.

Wow, separate rooms! You're practicing, I take it? Matt couldn't keep the teasing note out of his inner voice.

Aki huffed. *He ordered me to do it.*

The thought of big, bad Aki being ordered around by gentle Robbie was so foreign that Matt couldn't keep from laughing out loud.

It's good for you. Robbie's inner voice was firm as he came into the living room. "And I'll spare you for more mental communication with foreigners today; you've been a good boy talking to Matt all by yourself."

Matt was speechless. Aki just blinked. It was Pietr who roared with laughter at hearing his former mentor being called a boy.

Robbie's eyes gleamed, and he gave Aki a hug from behind, keeping his arms around his mate. Aki leaned back into the embrace, body relaxing. Robbie made a little sound of approval.

"So, things are okay?" Matt couldn't take his eyes off the couple. He really hadn't thought that the balance in the relationship would end up like this. He knew that

Robbie wasn't weak, but Aki was so strict as a teacher that Matt had automatically concluded that his mentor would be the stronger of his friends. He had definitely been wrong.

"Things are fine," Robbie said, not elaborating. Aki didn't answer, but Matt could see him tense up a little.

"Yeah?" Matt looked from Aki to Robbie.

"Yes. We don't learn everything in a single day, and that's okay." Robbie's voice was firm.

"It is hard work." Matt decided to let it lie; Robbie seemed perfectly capable of guiding his mate. "Have you eaten?"

They hadn't, and all four of them started making an elaborate dinner.

It was interesting watching Aki. He hovered. He tried very hard not to let it be obvious, but he never took his eyes off his mate for longer than necessary, and when Robbie dropped the potatoes on the floor, he was there immediately to pick them up. Robbie, on the other hand, seemed perfectly at ease, accepting Aki's help and fondly rubbing his back, completely ignoring Aki's intensity. It did seem to calm Aki down a little.

Matt wondered briefly if his bonding with Pietr had been as tense. Then he remembered the long string of dramatic episodes he had caused and thought better of it. Maybe this was just how it was.

No, you're right, he is intense, Pietr told him when he asked his mate about it on their way home. But then again, nothing's really normal about their bonding. I'm just really relieved to see that they're both okay.

You think Robbie's going to be able to handle everything? Matt was the one defending Robbie from the beginning, but Aki did seem like a handful at the moment.

Pietr just laughed. *Oh, yes. He's going to be just fine, and so is Aki -- whether he'd like to or not. Robbie will see to that. I think Aki has finally met his match.*

Matt met up with Sam and Jerry several times a week during the next three weeks, and he made a lot of progress. He could move things quite accurately now, and he got stronger and stronger. At the end of his last lesson, Sam declared that he had served his apprenticeship.

"You have learned as much of this as we can teach you. You can still improve, but you don't need us for that."

Surprisingly enough, Matt had a lump in his throat. He had thoroughly enjoyed working with the two Himika. Jerry didn't talk much, but was hardcore when it came to showing Matt how to use his mental powers, and Sam had a wicked sense of humor. It had been like summer camp, only with big burly guys smashing things.

Matt slapped Jerry on the back when he gave the Himiko a hug.

"Call us if you need to take it further." The Himiko's voice sounded as grumpy as usual, but Matt knew that it was all talk. Well, the grumpiness was; his skills were more than real.

"Further?" Matt pulled back. He looked from Jerry to Sam.

"Never mind. Just practice what we taught you." Sam pulled Matt into a hug before he could say any more.

"I will. Thank you for teaching me."

There was a slightly awkward moment when Pietr came out of the house. His shields were higher than

Matt had ever experienced before. He acted civilly, though, shaking first Sam's and then Jerry's hand. Sam looked a bit surprised. Jerry just nodded.

Matt stood with Pietr's arm around his shoulder and watched them drive away. In some strange way, it felt like something was ending.

It is. Pietr squeezed his shoulder. Are you ready to go back?

Go back to what? Matt turned toward him, surprised.

To your life, everything. We don't expect you to spend the rest of your life in a remote forest, and you've responded faster to the training than anybody we've ever trained. You're ready.

The thoughts were churning in Matt's head. Go back to his firm, his apartment? If he still had those things; he hadn't paid his bills or his rent while he had been here. God, why hadn't he thought about that?

We did that; don't worry. Pietr's hand around his neck felt as tender as his mate's presence inside Matt's mind.

It's time to move on, Matt.

Matt gave up on hiding what really worried him. *You'll come with me?* He knew that they couldn't be separate; that wasn't the same as Matt being able to go back to his old life and Pietr tagging along.

I will. I'll probably have to travel now and then, but we'll figure it out. We'll make it work.

There was more in that "we" than just the two of them; Matt had a clear feeling that all of the Himika wanted this to work out.

We do. You're important to us.

There it was with the extension again. This was like what Robbie had told him about before Matt had his operation, acting as a bond between humans and Himika. It felt like an impossible burden; Matt didn't have a clue how he was going to do that.

Just go back to your life. That was what we originally wanted. Before the... "complications." Pietr was laughing at his own quotation marks, and Matt got a very clear image of how this whole being bonded thing often ended up. How Pietr managed to get a sexual innuendo into his thoughts so expertly, Matt had no idea.

I'm creative that way. And you're very inspiring. Pietr turned serious, putting his arms around Matt. *You shouldn't worry. Things will go back to normal and we'll still be together. Everything will be fine.*

Matt nodded. He was looking forward to having a life again; on the other hand, he was reluctant to leave this. He couldn't remember ever having been this happy before.

I love you, too. Pietr squeezed him tightly. *But we can't stay here. It's not real.*

Matt knew that. *It's just that this has been the best time of my life.* It might sound sappy, but it was true. Pietr stroked his back comfortingly.

I know. But I would drive you crazy in the long run. Imagine, only me and the trees to keep you company.

Matt snorted. *You mean I would drive YOU crazy.* Pietr was right, though. It was time to move on. *When do you intend us to move?*

How about tomorrow?

What? Matt pulled back in shock.

Pietr looked at him, mind filled with compassion. *We might just as well jump into it.*

I'm not ready! To go back to the city, to his employees and friends that he hadn't thought about once in the last four months -- it seemed completely overwhelming.

I know you are. I'll come with you, we'll live in your apartment and you can see other people and grouch about your boyfriend to them.

You don't even know if you'll like my apartment! Matt knew he was being ridiculous now, but he couldn't help it. He was wiggled out.

I will. It's going to be fine. Trust me?

Matt took a big breath, willing himself not to come up with more excuses. He was nervous as hell, and he knew that Pietr knew, his mate wrapping him up in soothing thoughts. There was only one thing to do.

Okay. It felt scary just to say it.

Oh, baby.

It was a comfort that Pietr didn't think he was being silly.

Think of all the things you have survived during the last couple of months. If you can survive Aki, you can survive anything.

Matt laughed, almost against his will. *I guess I can. So, tomorrow?*

Yes. Tomorrow.

End