



DRAGONFLY

ANDRA SASHNER

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Dragonfly
By Andra Sashner

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CHAPTER ONE: RETRIEVAL

"I'm not short," Ghost reiterated firmly, his volume so low it would not be audible to the human ear even if the person were merely a metre away. Neither his voice nor his face expressed any discernible emotion, never really had. His movements had not paused when he'd spoken; he continued crawling through the ventilation shaft as silently as before.

"You stand five feet and five inches tall," said the deep, gruff voice in Ghost's earpiece. The tiny yet clear voice came from the tiny plastic chip embedded into his inner tragus, the half-moon of cartilage protruding just over the opening of the ear canal.

"Assumptions can be horribly deceiving," Ghost retorted just as softly as he'd initially spoken and corrected, "I'm not short, I'm *compact*." Gale laughed, and Ghost ignored him in favour of paying attention to his status on his vision-screen.

The device, spectacles with a single wrap-around lens, protected his eyes, wirelessly connected with his embedded communication devices and acted as a transmitter for his communication devices. Most useful of all, it also acted as an information screen overlying his vision with indications and calculations.

In the bottom right hand corner, a digital clock displayed the time right down to double digit fractions of seconds. Above the clock, an icon indicator which alerted him to nearby audio-spy equipment began to flash. Simultaneously, a soft whine sounded from his ear piece, a specific pitch that warned him he was approaching within range of a listening device. Certain that the tone was also received at the other end of his communication link, he made no other sound and focused on schooling his breath to a quieter level.

He did not need to take much more care to be quiet as he had already been doing so, aside from the spoken exchange. The tiny whine faded the closer he came to the listening device, the little machine in his ear adjusting its pitch of warning in accordance so as not to raise alert.

The instant it went entirely silent, Ghost reduced his breathing even further.

In the stillness of the shaft, he could not hear even the noise of his own movement. There was none, not even from his clothing, shoes or gloves which all had been made from a unique fabric specifically engineered for silent traction against the aluminium-alloy material of the ventilation shaft interior. It was almost as though he did not exist; was not there.

A phantom.

Sliding along, he waited for the whine to resume, the sound that would tell him he was moving further away from the device, but it did not come within the customary distance. Not the least bit worried his communication to Command had been temporarily silenced, he continued. His mission operation had been fully provided for, including how to locate his Mark.

The Target had nano-mites in his system, tiny organic machines which served all sorts of clever purposes. Nano-mites which had been discreetly introduced by another operative, programmed to 'resonate' to the mites in Ghost's own body which had been freshly injected only two hours and forty seven minutes ago at operation launch.

The mites flowed through his blood stream, through the adaptor installed at the base of his skull, and the signal was picked up by the digital portion of his brain. The mites had made him physically aware of his Mark, 'resonating' a signal from the target he could sense was precisely twenty-six yards away from his current position, also on the thirty-second floor of this building.

The air was thick with nano-mites as well—the little machines had been pumped into the building air filtration system. All occupants of the building had breathed them in and were also locked into Ghost's system, resonating on his inner grid and providing him with certain knowledge of all the building occupants' locations. The only danger of detection was posed by the security system, but so far... so good.

As always, of course; with his flawless record attained and maintained by hard work and constant training, this was quite a standard task. Best of all, he worked on the good side of the law, snatched up after military school graduation by RIG—acronym for the inconspicuously named Rescue & Investigations Global. His employers could claim to serve even her Majesty the Queen, running little 'errands' for them similar to this one.

Not that he could brag about any of this, had he even the inclination. A job well done by a RIG operative meant no one outside those who were supposed to know ever even knew they had done it... even if the results were globally broadcasted. Happily, he never really found any issue with that, and that mentality, aside from his formidable skills, made him very valuable to RIG.

The whine sounded softly in his ear, cutting off further musing.

"Check?" he whispered, when the whine clicked off.

"Clear," Gale told him, assuring that the device in Ghost's ear and the receiver chips embedded at each corner of his lips were all functioning perfectly; all communication systems still go. All tracking mites still go, and he double checked his target's location; eighteen yards.

"Far radius," he commented of the most recent obstacle.

"No info," Gale replied, sounding a little annoyed. Had it not been for Ghost's enhanced hearing, he would never have detected the slight change of tone which indicated the emotion.

The nano-resonance seemed louder when he arrived at a four-way intersection of the shaft. Tapping through a series of buttons on the temple of his vision-screen, he pulled up and reviewed the building's three-dimensional plans. Making a decision, he took the left branch of the intersection, moving toward the shaft opening directly in the room his target occupied, closing in.

"Twenty one-fifty," he reported the countdown time as customary. Now ten yards from his goal, he prodded, "Operation commission?" Just to double check the order status.

"Confirmed," Gale replied. "Proceed with vocal silence at twenty-two hundred."

"Confirm communication black out?" he asked.

"Negative. Maintain contact."

"Copy that." He arrived at the ventilation shaft window, the opening blocked by a slatted screen. Pressing a finger gently at the middle of the screw-on screen, he tested its give and calculated the amount of force necessary to dislodge it. It was an old habit, the data not useful, but a piece of information he filed away anyway. His mission tonight was not a barge-in and take-down op; he would be making a silent entry and making as silent an exit.

Moving quickly, he injected a soft glue to the corners where the screen met the rim of the shaft opening. Next, he cement-glued the exposed ends of the screws as close to the screen as possible, then melted off the rest of it with another of his 'toys'. The screws, installed from outside the shaft, now would not fall and leave suspicious clues when he left, and the screen was now free to be moved, held in place only by the soft hi-tech adhesive. The preparation process had taken but four minutes.

Show time.

Peering through the screen slats, his eyes snapped to where the resonance was loudest, where a figure was seated behind an expansive desk to his right. The Target's face was not visible from his perspective, and he could see only a smooth and obviously expensively-tailored three piece suit from the shoulders down. Ghost observed, registering the young, slender man as likely six feet tall, probably weighing in the area of two hundred pounds and left handed.

Internally he took stock of where everyone was in the building, then quickly triple-checked the special multi-purpose dart launcher at his wrist. Not taking his eyes off his target, aware of the vision-screen digital clock only in his peripheral vision, he muttered,

"Twenty-two hundred mark."

Gale responded, "Confirmed, proceed."

Coiling, Ghost braced his feet and tensed up to pounce. At twenty-two hundred, he sprung soundlessly, exploding out of the shaft four metres from the floor. In midair, he grabbed the slatted screen with his left hand before it could drop, the right shooting a dart from his wrist launcher. Struck in the neck, the Mark slumped back immediately in his seat as Ghost landed quietly then pounced for the light switch.

In the darkness, assured that the sedative-laden dart had already taken effect, Ghost belted the ventilation shaft screen to a strap at his lower back. He would need it to cover his exit. He walked toward his target without haste and as he moved, he re-armed the launcher at his wrist to a specific poison engineered to induce violent cardiac arrest.

Tonight, he was to play the Grim Reaper.

Coming to the Target's side, he registered the slow breathing associated with the paralysis formulae effects. He gently tilted the swivel chair around to face him. Allowing himself but a moment, he spared the frozen man a contemptuous glare before leaning over the still figure. He produced and positioned a small tube-like device over one wide-eyed hazel eye to perform a retina scan, results coming up on his vision screen. Strangely, ID was not confirmed. He tried again.

Negative.

Ghost quickly pressed out a sequence on the little buttons at his vision-screen temple, firing off the message that retinal ID was not confirmed. Not that HQ couldn't see it for themselves courtesy of the vision-screen nano-cam which captured and transmitted everything in front of him. Calling up a window in the bottom left of Ghost's vision-screen, Gale posted a company ID picture. Visual confirmation was also not a match, the face in the photo most definitely not the target Ghost had sitting in front of him.

Shit.

"Ghost, speech is now permitted," Gale sounded pissed off, as though he'd been arguing off-com. "Operation is recalled. Mission re-state: Rescue and retrieve; Status: Approved. Repeat, mission re-states this is a rescue operation."

"You've got to be shitting me!" Ghost muttered. His size was one of the reasons they'd assigned him this mission in the first place: small, condensed, and fast. Not built to be hauling six-foot, two hundred pound targets. But despite his words, he was already preparing to carry out his orders; he took a running start and leapt as high a jump as he could to press the slatted screen back into place to cover his entrance.

"Not kidding, kiddo," Gale growled. "A float pad is thirty seconds away for extraction. They'll catch you directly out the window of your position."

Ghost reprogrammed his launcher for a supply of adrenaline. Directing the shot into his own neck, he almost immediately felt the surge of energy. He re-set the launcher as he walked toward the floor to ceiling windows and, stopping five metres away, fired an expanding web of explosive gel. As the indicator on his vision-screen counted down, Ghost dashed back to his former Mark , grabbed the man's left arm with his own left and bent to haul the man over and across his shoulders.

"Hang on tight," he dryly quipped as he bent them down into a crouch behind the desk.

The moment the glass exploded, the building security alarms sounded. It wasn't too loud, the noise itself, but all of Ghost's equipment went haywire. His ear piece shrieked the danger into his ear, and his vision-screen flashed red before his eyes. Ignoring it all, ears ringing from the blast, he jumped to his feet and shuffled along under the weight on his shoulders.

He focused only on the distant low echo of the hovercraft's nano-resonance; he couldn't see it, and he couldn't hear it. Without pause at the window's edge, thirty-two floors up, he leaped out into the cold air and darkness of the night.

CHAPTER TWO: ACQUAINTANCE

"Nice to meet you, Mr Frost," Ghost replied shortly, without much sincerity. He obligingly gripped Ian Frost's hand in a firm clasp and gave it a single, decisive shake before quickly releasing his grip. Touching people, especially civilians, always felt a little strange to him.

Mr Frost seemed to relax. "I wasn't able to thank you—"

"Don't." Ghost shook his head for emphasis. "Excuse me." He turned and sat back in his seat at the conference table, dismissing the grateful civilian. He folded his hands together and refocused his attention on the opposite side of the room.

Civilians, he internally huffed. What was this man doing in here, anyway? Non-military shouldn't have been granted access to the main offices, much less to an internal case meeting. For that matter, why was Ghost here himself? This was all completely *not* standard operation. As part of a two-man cell, only his handler Gale should need to be in this meeting; he would make decisions for the cell and give Ghost orders later. To have both the handler and the operative in a meeting would only make allowances for conflict of opinion. This was such a waste of his time when he could—

"Ah... I only meant that since you got me out, even if you were the one who was meant to..." Ian trailed off uncomfortably when Ghost turned to look at him.

Well that's nice, Ghost thought, feeling a little better knowing his trademark blank look still had that effect on civilians; it had immediately silenced the hapless man. "I said, don't," he repeated expressionlessly. From beside him to his left, Gale smacked him upside his head.

"You'll give the poor man a heart attack, ya brat!" Gale scolded, shaking his hand a little because the strike had hit a bit on the metal portion of the base of Ghost's skull. "He summoned up all that nerve to speak with his would-be killer, and you give him *that* look? You've no heart."

"Shut up," Ghost replied in the same tone of voice as always. He again looked forward, unseeing yet focused—and caught the strange expression Ian cast him before looking away again. Around him, Gale on his left, Ian Frost two seats over and across the table to his right, the handler and charge spoke around him as though he were no longer there,

"Ahh, Mr Frost, don't let this midget scare you, he's just like a trained dog!" Gale rumbled Ghost's short black hair as though petting him. "He looks dangerous, well he sure is, but doesn't bite unless ordered to. Never disobeys his handler, no sir!"

Ghost ignored him, but he'd get the old man back for the 'midget' jab, yes he would.

"Er, that's..." Mr Frost's voice trailed off, and Ghost could feel the man's eyes on him. "That's..."

"Now, now, Gale," another voice interjected from the opening door. "What's Mr Frost supposed to reply to that without insulting little Ghost here?"

Ghost ignored him, too. But beneath his breath, he muttered, "I'm not little."

"Hey, Serge!" Gale greeted, grinning at having overheard Ghost's statement. "Well, yeah, I guess you're right." He turned back to Mr Frost. "Sorry about tha'. I was just trying to reassure you, your life is most definitely no longer in danger."

"Er, if you say so Mr Gale," Mr Frost inclined his head politely, uncomfortably. Politely, he turned, and his eyes followed Serge to the head of the conference table.

As Serge logged in to the laptop setup to Gale's left at the head of the table, the conference room doors opened once again. Two more figures stepped in, and Ghost immediately recognised them both. May, female operative and twenty-two years old; Snake, male handler and thirty seven years old. The two took their seats to Ghost's right, nodding briefly to everyone in the room.

Another cell? This was making less and less sense, he thought. In the next breath, he wondered when his best friend Arch would return from his own mission so they could go back to working together.

"Now that everyone is here," Serge began with his usual opening introduction to a mission start-up, "Today is your first briefing of the new mission SA-GO-2007-243, and I welcome you all."

Ghost automatically deconstructed the mission code: SA would refer to Sergei 'Serge' Armstrong as the Captain for the mission, GO would mean Gale O'Malley as second in command, 2007 would be the year and 243 the mission number of the year. Gale as second in command yet also acting as a handler didn't fit into standard procedure, but there was no reaction from the man, so Ghost remained silent.

"For the benefit of our guest, Mr Frost," Serge gestured politely to the wide-eyed Mr Frost, "Explanations shall be a little extensive, so bear with me. Before we proceed further, welcome to Research and Investigations Global, Mr Frost." Serge named everyone in the room for him, gesturing politely as he went.

Mr Frost nodded to each of them in turn.

Serge continued, "As you can see here before you, there are two pairs of operative-handler cells. These cells have been assigned to your case exclusively, and you would do well to remember as much about them as you can." He spared Mr Frost a smile when he said, "It is best to be very familiar with your allies."

Wide-eyed and nervous, Mr Frost indeed studied them all again. He seemed particularly interested in Ghost—who ignored him completely, conscious only of his actions through habit of awareness. While Mr Frost busied himself, Serge addressed the rest of the room,

"Mr Ian Frost is the son the multi-national firm Arctic Holdings Group's founder, now deceased. He is a Senior Partner there now and is on the Board of Directors. At this time, however, we find no relation to Mr Frost's situation as a target and the company's current or past movements." Following protocol, he

enumerated other facts and gave a brief observation of the relevance of these facts though mostly it was to discount a relationship between the failed mission and the holding company.

Serge frowned when he said, "As Ghost and Gale are aware, this mission was originally instructed to them as an elimination order. Due to a—" Ghost tensed at the slight pause in his Section Commander's speech, "—fault of some kind, the initial information supplied," Serge clicked his remote control, and the hi-def screen mounted on the wall behind the head of the table grew bright, "And the actual facts do not match."

On the screen, side by side, were a passport-type image of the target named as Stephen Arling and a formal company half-body shot of Ian Frost. It was obvious the two were nowhere near similar to each other. Where Mr Frost was tall, slim and pale, Mr Arling was of average height, had brown hair and a muscular build. It would be impossible to physically mistake one for the other, barring incredibly poor eye sight.

"The image of Stephen Arling was retrieved only a few minutes ago from a visa application to the Home Office. We are still working on getting authorisation to view the rest of his details." He waved a dismissive hand, "In any case, we have eliminated the possibilities of miscommunication, information tampering and mis-planting of nano-mites." Serge clicked again, and the screen changed. This time, there was an official-looking movement order. "This Mission Order is what Ghost and Gale were supplied with, the last part of this mission to eliminate a Mr Stephen Arling who would be pre-marked with nano-mites. According to the mission operator, the mission orders previous to this one which listed the authorisations for stalking, visual identification, and planting of nano mites were all handed to Snake and his operative May. The mission operator also confirms the data stated a source had visually confirmed Mr Ian Frost as the target before he was marked."

Gale shifted in his seat, and Ghost glowered a little up at Serge. A mission operator stated information from memory? Where was the data itself?

"So that's why you look familiar!" Mr Frost murmured, turning to May with startled recognition. "You were at the Nero café beside Liverpool Street station four days ago. In a red dress, if I recall correctly."

May looked at him, but said nothing. She wouldn't, when confirming her actions would be the only result, and it was not her place to acknowledge the observation. Ghost was a little impressed, actually, that Mr Frost had even remembered her. Perhaps she was his type...

"That is so, Mr Frost," Serge replied instead. He continued, "At the time, we did not have official sources of information on Stephen Arling, whom we assumed you to be. But then we were under instruction that a standard check was not needed, and we proceeded with the marking." Shaking his head, "It is usually our practice to look up targets on common information sources, such as Google, to determine the public image of our marks. We also call the Home Office or HMRC for confirmation of identities if the name of anyone in the UK is marked for our attention."

"Then," Mr Frost spoke up quietly, "how did you get the... the call in time, so to speak, if you had fore-gone looking me up?"

Serge went quiet for a moment. "Luck," he pronounced, the room going thick with tense awareness. "Someone had been efficient enough in the administration department to look you up anyway. It happened right as Ghost shot you with that paralysing dart." He turned to their civilian guest, "Mr Frost, you are very lucky. You should be aware that 'Mr Arling' had been confirmed as a critical element in London's drug supply with... well, let's say, a known Drug Lord. There was no incentive for the administrator to look you up."

Mr Frost sighed, eyes closing briefly in what Ghost supposed was thanks. Then he shifted in his seat, worried and indignant, before saying, "Well, I'm sure you know now I have no association of such a kind."

"Of course." Serge smiled kindly, a touch of admiration in his eyes at how well Mr Frost had handled the truths he'd just shared.

Ghost slid his eyes over Ian Frost. He'd been expecting a tantrum or shouting of slander at how inept their organization must be to have nearly eliminated an innocent man. This was... unexpected.

The Commander turned back to the screen, gesturing, "If we will return to the discussion of paper trails, I was saying this page is just a movement order. It is merely a document which authorises handler-operative movement on behalf of a mission. I would show you the mission order itself, the document which reports decisions and tracks all movement orders, but that, along with the rest of the data besides this one document, is gone." He turned to the rest of the team and tersely announced, "And it is worth noting that Mr Stephen Arling himself is not even an employee of Arctic Holdings Group to begin with."

Ghost's folded hands tightened. This was not looking good.

~~*

Shit.

'Not looking good' had been a damn understatement.

There was suspicion that the order itself had been falsified, that there was a possible mole in the company, that perhaps the system had been hacked, there could be a defector in the government... Gods, what was there *not* wrong; it was all up in the air and nothing was for sure at the moment. All Serge had told him, noticing but ignoring the displeased expression on his face, was that they were *working on it*.

He found it all intensely dissatisfying.

Feeling sulky, Ghost sat back in his seat and contented himself with looking out the car window. He sat shotgun, which was about the only thing he could be pleased about for the day, but that there had not been anyone else competing for the seat in the first place, well...

Mr Frost was driving; it was one-thirty in the afternoon, and they were heading to his home. The car was courtesy of the former target's company car supplier. It was late in the day now because they'd been in the police precinct all morning.

And Ghost was sulky also because he was hungry. He'd been supposed to have dinner last night after his mission then head to bed, but the mucked up assignment had kept everyone up and away from decent food and rest.

Toward the end of this morning's four o'clock meeting, Serge had outlined Mr Frost's explanation for his disappearance would be that he had been snatched, but later dumped, unconscious from shock. A passing Good Samaritan had helped him—Ghost... who'd been obliged to hide his displeasure with his newest role as a homeless street urchin. Serge had explained that the entire incident would need to be reported to local authorities so that whoever had engineered the kill would know they had failed, and that Ian Frost was alive. RIG would handle the rest when these individuals moved again. There was no doubt that they would, either, to have gone to so much trouble to infiltrate their system and manipulate (humiliate?) them.

Ghost had his identity set up as a British-born Japanese-heritage citizen, Kazuhi Mori, in accordance with his looks and true lineage, before he'd accompanied Mr Frost to the police station. There, Ghost had relayed the information surrounding his identity and history as he'd been supplied that morning. He didn't know if it was a belated manifestation of shock from the entire incident, but Mr Frost hadn't wanted to be separated from him.

Despite flashing them curious looks, the constables had complied and interviewed them jointly.

As per Serge's instruction, Mr Frost expressed the wish to take responsibility for Kazuhi upon discovering the 'street urchin' had no home to return to. Expressly, he made the invitation clear that he intended to take the boy into his home, pushing aside the policemen's concerns that 'Kazuhi Mori' might be an accomplice. The plan was to have the operative remain by his side while he remained home on vacation leave and look legally proper doing so.

Trying to inject some humour, Serge had reasoned that if Mr Frost would often find homes for stray kittens, then 'a kid' should be no issue. Ghost had resisted reminding them he was not a child, much as he might look like one.

Mr Frost had looked uncomfortable at that and had come very close to blushing, sparing a moment to flash Ghost an embarrassed smile. Ghost had also needed to resist the urge to look at the man with new respect, careful to remain impassive. Fortunately, no one had seemed to notice. Because Ghost liked cats, which May happened to know, and she had darted him a quick knowing look that he returned with a barely-there scowl.

Regardless, in Ghost's opinion, it would have made better sense for May to be in his place when it would seem more probable Mr Frost would want to return the kindness to an attractive young woman and not a... boy. And besides, he wanted to be part of the external action, not be stuck babysitting. In the next breath, he squashed an urge to sigh.

"We're here," said Mr Frost, pulling into the driveway. Ghost gave Mr Frost a measured, belligerent look. "Come on, kid, don't look at me like that," he spoke nervously, keeping loosely to the script they had been supplied with that morning as he stepped stiffly from the car. He gave Ghost a look he could not interpret before saying, "It's not so bad inside really."

Ghost silently, almost sullenly followed suit. Pausing in the driveway, he shoved his hands into his pockets and glared up at the monstrous residence.

It was huge and looked ornate, one of those places people probably bought to show off and appear of status. Jeez, what was the use of so much space when no one was ever there to enjoy it? It would be filled with lots of tasteful furniture that no one used, he wagered. They would all have that museum-quality expensive look, but serve absolutely no purpose. He allowed his shoulders to sag, as though intimidated, when really he was falling all the more dejected over this silly assignment.

"Hey come on, let's go in," Mr Frost called, coming to stand before the door and pressing the door bell. "It's just a house, it won't bite." As though remembering Gale's use of that same metaphor earlier that morning, Mr Frost stiffened then turned away.

Ghost understood what he was thinking. That had been a reminder that this was all no joke, someone was out to kill, and Ghost himself was a killer. The damn man had better remember that at all times, Ghost thought... and not look at him with such an unfamiliar expression as he'd been doing so often since they'd formally met. But before he could dwell much longer on this, the front door slammed open.

"Ian!" A tall and beautiful blonde woman threw herself from the doorway and into Mr Frost's arms, her slender hands clutching the back of his jacket. A diamond solitaire ring twinkled from the ring finger of her left hand. Ghost glared at it. She cried, "I was so worried about you! When AHG security called and said my brother had been kidnapped right out of his own office, I didn't know what to think and then the police...!" She buried her face in his neck and began to weep dramatically.

"Shh, Eileen, hey..." Mr Frost made shushing noises and guided her back into the foyer of the house.

Siblings, Ghost realised, as he followed. He cringed internally when he heard a number of vehicles begin pulling up behind him. He didn't need to turn around, as the monitor device in his ear had begun to whine, signalling that the vehicles had high quantities of equipment in them, identifying the unwanted visitors as media crew.

Following into the house, he quickly shut the door. He raised a brow when Mr Frost, still smothered by the woman, looked over at him with a beseeching and trapped expression on his face as if to ask for help.

Your accident of birth, Mr Frost, not mine.

Ignoring the two, he glanced around and took in the high-ceilinged foyer, tensing when he sensed slight movement from his left, but he relaxed when he felt a familiar sensation at his ankles. Looking down, he watched a plump tabby cat draw figure eights around his ankles. Smiling slightly, he crouched and offered a hand to the creature. It gave him a cursory sniff before bumping its head against the proffered appendage, asking for attention. He obligingly scrubbed his fingertips behind the cat's ears and head,

moving along its spine toward the tail before sweeping back and stroking again. It purred happily, yellow eyes closing with rapture as he lavished it with attention.

"Hello there," Ghost murmured. The cat mewed a greeting back, delighted.

"Hello there to you, too," The woman said from above him, apparently done with her theatrics. Midway looking up, Ghost realised he was faintly smiling and dropped his mask of impassivity back into place. But he noted how the woman's eyes widened a little at having caught the change of expression. Hands on her hips and glaring, she bluntly demanded, "Who are you?"

The cat lashed its tail at Ghost with an annoyed growl when he abandoned her to stand up. He returned Eileen's gaze, feeling quite at par with her despite his lack of height. He realised she had the same hazel eyes as Mr Frost.

"Er, Eileen, this is—"

"Kazu," Ghost finished smoothly for Mr Frost.

"Bless you," she quipped, studying him up and down, and Ghost half expected her to walk around him in inspection.

Mr Frost admonished, looking worried, "You shouldn't be rude to—"

"No more rude than you for not introducing me to your little guest, in turn," Eileen interrupted breezily, otherwise ignoring him as she met Ghost's gaze.

"Er..." Mr Frost seemed flustered now.

Irritated with the 'little' comment and feeling sorry for the poor man, not to mention not wanting to see what this Eileen would do next, Ghost took an initiative, "Kazu," he pointed to himself then directed the finger at the haughty woman before saying, "Eileen." He put both hands in his pocket, relaxing his stance. He calmly continued to meet her imperious gaze. "I think that covers it."

"Crass," Eileen commented, straightening up to her full height, one eyebrow rising and almost looking down at him. Almost.

"Overbearing," Ghost said softly, eyes narrowing, taking a half-step closer, completely not intimidated by her greater height.

"Presumptuous," she declared, amusement filtering into her tone.

"Officious," he insisted in return.

"Interesting." A small smile played about her rouged lips.

"Likewise," he murmured, with a polite inclination of his head.

They shook hands.

She gave him a sharp, approving nod before turning away, and they both looked expectantly over at her brother. Poor Mr Frost's eyes bounced back and forth between the two, astonished by the sudden camaraderie.

She rolled her eyes and stepped away, addressing Ghost over her shoulder as she turned and led the way, "Have you had any lunch?"

"We have not," Ghost replied. He politely waited for a dazed Mr Frost to indicate that he should continue before nodding and following in her wake down the front hall.

Ghost had a feeling that Eileen tended to railroad most of Mr Frost's friends. He could quite possibly be one of the few ever to meet the demanding woman's approval. With an internal shrug, he put the thought aside for more important matters; food was on the way.

He followed Eileen and along the way took the opportunity to inspect what he could of the premises. Later, he thought, he would be having a better look around the finer points of the property.

The house was old, that much was obvious. However, the floors were relatively new in a dark hardwood, and the walls were painted in pale tones instead of being gaudily wallpapered. The ceiling and floor mouldings seemed original, quite elegant, of classic design and obviously restored with high quality plaster. All windows and doors were modern though the joints were antique-effect in keeping with theme. The double-paneled glass windows, tall and wide, allowed abundant natural light, which cast a pleasant glow on the large tasteful leather and wood English furniture and classic paintings. Even the upholstery stylishly complemented the window dressings.

Oak, Ghost noted, seemed to be most abundant. And however well-styled the place was, Ghost noticed, despite the expensive furnishings, the scattering of books and framed photographs made it rather cosy. Everything was nicely worn and the residence seemed to be more of a home than a house. It was nice, he admitted, and certainly proved his earlier assessment wrong. Perhaps this would not be such a boring assignment after all.

As though sensing his approval, Mr. Frost leaned close to mutter, "I hope you enjoy your stay here."

Unsure how to manage the kindly statement or the gentle sincerity in Frost's eyes, Ghost dipped his head in a single nod of acknowledgement, puzzled.

"The food will take a few minutes," Eileen warned, stepping into the large and spacious kitchen. "So you boys sit and get comfortable."

Modern granite countertops and oak stool chairs, island preparation table and appliances cleverly installed into matching paneling. The copper-effect metal finishing and ancient stone floor gave the place a hint of age, but it was all too... clean.

Ghost took a seat at the long table before the island. The stool was bar-height and a little too tall for him, but he nimbly hopped up, accustomed to such disproportions. In his peripheral vision he noticed Mr. Frost was watching him, but he did not understand the man's expression.

Turning, he asked politely, "Is something wrong, Mr. Frost?"

"*Mister Frost?*" Eileen chuckled, flashing Ghost a grin over her shoulder as she handled a roast beef and set it by the pre-heating oven. "Good God, child! He's not *that* old, do call him Ian," she instructed, setting glassware before them and fetching drinks. Mr. Frost remained quiet as she moved, looking uncomfortable. Noticing he'd not backed up her invitation, she sharply called, "Ian!"

"I'm not deaf," he grumbled, turning from Ghost and meeting her eyes.

"Invite him to call you so because he never will of his own accord," she ordered, smirking. He flashed her brother a look before saying with barely-discernible weight on the words, "I'm sure it will sound... better."

"Yes, Kazuhi," Ian's brows met, glaring back, obviously annoyed at her for some reason Ghost did not understand. "Please do call me Ian."

"Thank you," Ghost tried it out, rolled the name off his tongue, tasting it, "Ian."

Again, the man gave him a look he could not interpret.

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Ghost regained full awareness instantly, without moving or giving any outward change, retaining his relaxed sleep-pose despite being immediately alert.

The house had fallen silent some minutes ago and now was his time. Extending his awareness, maximizing the use of his new Resonance nano-mites, he determined there was no one in the room. In case nano-cams had been planted, he moved sluggishly as though truly only just waking up. He even blinked sleepily, rubbing at his face a bit before looking around in mimicry of being confused. In moments, he got up, tucked a pillow under his arm and padded out and down the hall to Ian's room.

Ian.

Stopping outside his host's door, Ghost frowned. He focused his nano-mites once more and when it turned up nothing but echoes of Ian's own nano-mites, he silently slipped inside.

The room was very spacious, but sparsely furnished with a few impressively sized pieces of good oak furniture, such as the pair of sitting chairs and round table set to his left against the wall beside the door. The whole wall across from the door was entirely of paneled floor-to-ceiling windows, and to his far left against the wall was the largest four poster bed he had ever seen, complete with billowing chiffon curtains.

From the breathing patterns, Ghost deduced Ian was still half awake. And from the foot of the bed, he whispered, "Hey."

"Good God!" Ian exclaimed with a start and struggled to sit up.

"It's just me." Really, he had warned the man back at command base that he would spend his nights in Ian's room; Ian had known he was coming. He padded round it to his left and arrived at the bed's right hand side.

"You startled me, is all." Ian placed a hand over his heart, his quickened breath slowing down. He smiled a little sheepishly. Long chunks of blonde bangs fell messily over Ian's forehead and eyes, and he looked very nicely bed-rumpled and warm. For some reason, this look, coupled with the fact the man was half naked, the sheet across his lower half over his boxers giving an appearance of complete nakedness, gave Ghost a heavy feeling in his abdomen. He noticed Ian had quite a nicely well-toned body—

"Are you alright?" Ian asked, concerned.

"May I stay here?" Ghost asked, ignoring the query. He did not want to own up to such a question for it might imply acknowledgement of his distraction. He didn't know why, nor did he need to understand, but he had lost focus there for a minute, and it annoyed him.

"Of course," Ian smiled. He moved awkwardly, obviously nervous, but pulled the sheet back in silent invitation to join him in the double-king sized bed. There was so much room three people could sleep in it and never bump another, really.

Ghost paused, uncertain—he hadn't been expecting this. Indicating the floor, "I can stay on the floor..."

"Nonsense," Ian scoffed, a shade of embarrassment appearing on his face—Ghost supposed it was from the rather forward invitation. "Look at the size of this thing; get in."

"Thanks," he hesitantly replied. He paused but one further moment before crawling in. He curled comfortably on his left side, facing his charge, and Ian smiled faintly at him, making him feel a little self-conscious. Uncomfortably aware this was in no way standard protocol, he conceded softly, "I don't sleep well in unfamiliar places."

"I can relate," Ian said, lying back down. He tucked his right arm under his head and turned onto it to face Ghost. "I travel a lot, and I can never get proper rest in unfamiliar places."

Ghost didn't suppose it would be polite to point out that, no, Ian couldn't really relate. Not with sleeping in basements or ventilation shafts, in a forest or the back of a freight truck. In any case, he let himself be drawn away down this sub-topic.

"New places are always a pain to get used to," he said vaguely.

Ghost mused to himself that although he had always wanted to sight-see, he had never had a real chance. He'd travelled to a lot of the world's capital cities and some of the most remote regions of the world on his assignments, but always left immediately after completing his missions, and those usually

only took a day or two. What sleeping arrangements there were mattered little to him for the most part; he didn't usually catch any real restful sleep without someone to watch his back, or if he couldn't find a secure location.

There was always the danger he would never wake up.

Personally and honestly, and despite all that, he did want to see the world, but had put the idea aside thinking he would eventually take some proper time off and do it then. However, whenever there was political tension in the world then there was work to be done, and since there was always political tension in the world...

"Do you like to travel?" Ghost asked, genuinely interested. "Personally, I mean."

"I love it." There was a smile in Ian's voice when he said, "My mother took me to see the great wonders of the world over school break before I started sixth-form education. That got me hooked. I try to go somewhere for pleasure at least twice a year."

Ian shifted a bit as he spoke, the sheet sliding lower down his chest and now only covering his stomach. Ghost looked over the twinkling of a necklace about his neck which Ian fingered as he spoke of his mother. He tried to focus on discerning the embossed design on the small medallion-like pendant, but was distracted by the black silk of Ian's boxers. For some absurd reason, Ghost wanted to touch that silk.

"I'm sorry about your mother," he whispered. Ian seemed a little startled so he explained, "The expression on your face, and the way you touch that necklace... I didn't mean to intrude."

Ian shook his head, "No, it's alright. It's been a long time anyway." He smiled at Ghost then held up the pendant saying, "She gave this necklace to me after that tour I mentioned, the very first gift my father ever gave her after they were married. I think he gave it to her on their honeymoon." His expression turned wistful as he said, "She and my father were killed a decade ago in France." Turning the conversation, his tone took on a more relaxed timbre, and he said easily, "But despite that, I've been to France many times and quite enjoyed myself."

"I'd like to go too, someday, for pleasure." The words had slipped out, and Ghost hid his surprise behind an expression of blankness. The casual exchange seemed easy for him, and he wondered at it, thinking he should keep his guard up around his charge. But that didn't seem right, somehow—

"And I'd like to see you complete proper schooling," Ian countered before demanding, "God, Kazu, how old are you anyway?"

He didn't pause at the nickname, answering, "Twenty-one." Ian blinked at him. "Yeah, I know," he murmured. "I look like I'm sixteen or something. I get that all the time." Feeling a little naughty, he added, "But it helps in my line of work." At that, Ian froze, and he prodded, smirking, "What?"

"P-pick pocketing is *not* a... line of work," Ian whispered, grabbing at a detail in Ghost's fabricated background, also careful in case they were being spied upon.

Impressed, Ghost grinned. Maybe the man had some spine in him after all? He argued, "Skill, then."

"A useless one," Ian insisted.

He countered, "Not in survival, it isn't."

Ian sighed.

"Sod it," Ghost grumbled, "I don't need your pity."

"I am not pitying you," Ian shot back, "I simply... look, Kazuhi, I mean no offence, but I disagree with your way of life. You're so young. I would think you'd have other more... lucrative... options."

"How I live is very, to use your word, *lucrative*," Ghost said loftily and with some pride. He was very good at what he did, after all. He ignored the way Ian spoke his name with that caressing quality of his. He watched in amusement as Ian's mouth worked, but no words came forth. Ghost found himself a little disappointed there might be no witty come-back.

Finally, Ian said, "I don't believe that."

He shrugged, "Then that's your issue." A corner of his lips rose in a half-smile at the annoyed expression on Ian's face. "Worried for me, are you?"

"What does it matter what I say?" Ian grumbled, "You'll just shoot me down anyway." A strange expression crossed his face at that, and he smiled sheepishly at Ghost, who was rather startled Ian could make that line in such good humour.

"You're awfully brave to joke with me like this, you know," Kazuhi murmured. "We just met, and already you've invited me into your bed. To think you have such opinions about me; are you sure you're even making wise decisions for yourself?"

"Touché," Ian conceded. "But yes, I believe I am making very good decisions today. And I think I can have an opinion about you." At Ghost's doubtfully risen brow, he continued, "You're a good person. Despite what you do, you're not violent by nature. I've seen that you're precise and thorough. And I don't need anyone to tell me you're quite intelligent."

"And you think paying me compliments will get me to see things from your perspective?"

"Well," Ian's eyes twinkled, "It's a good start to get you to consider there may be other, just as fulfilling, things you can do."

Ghost said nothing. Backbone, indeed.

Ian smiled and rolled over onto his back.

A while later, when neither of their breathing patterns changed, Ghost asked, "Aren't you going to go to sleep yet?" The thought that it might be nice to see what Ian looked like as he slept drifted idly into his mind. He internally frowned at that, having never had such an inappropriate desire before.

"I probably should, it's getting late." Ian threw his left arm above his head, his right hand coming down from a head-prop to rest on the sheet at his hip. His pale, bare chest gleamed in the soft moonlight streaming in from the window beyond him. "But it's nice to talk to you though. We didn't get to talk much today, with Eileen around. If she goes back to her fiancé's tomorrow, I suppose things will calm down a bit."

It wasn't that Eileen talked too much, Ghost thought, she simply had a very large presence. She was not one to be ignored, and if anyone tried, her eyes stared much too hard. It wasn't that Ghost couldn't ignore her, anyway; rather it was that Ian could not.

"She doesn't live with you then," Ghost observed softly.

"She likes to visit a lot, though." Ian smiled, turning his head to look over at Ghost. "I think she's quite interested in you so she might stay over longer than she ever has before." He chuckled, admitting, "I thought that if I took in enough cats she might be discouraged from coming over, but while that worked for a while, it's worn off."

Earlier in the day, Ghost had quickly noticed that Eileen abhorred the four cute creatures Ian had adopted. Amused, he conspiratorially joked, "I'll train them to yowl at her; maybe that'll help."

Ian stared at him.

Well, Ghost supposed, the joke might have gone over better if he had changed the inflection in his voice or, perhaps, smiled. But he supposed it took a certain kind of person to appreciate his poker-faced sense of humour.

"I am fairly certain," Ian said slowly, turning over on to his side to face Ghost again, "that I just heard you make a joke."

He sounded awe-struck, disbelieving. And if Ghost had been a bit more relaxed, he might have snorted at that. Gale and he joked all the time since the fatherly Irishman loved poking fun at him, and it wasn't as though he didn't have a sense of humour. Certainly, he didn't laugh very often, but he did enjoyed humour of various kinds.

"It happens," he shrugged, masking his self-consciousness, "but not too often so don't concern yourself."

"Actually, it brings to mind the wonder at what you might look like were you to smile." Ian smiled himself, turning to look back up at the ceiling. "Neither time I've heard you joke have I seen you smile, you see, so I wondered."

"Neither time?"

"There was that instance when we first met..." Ian's voice trailed off just when Ghost realised what Ian was talking about.

He'd stopped speaking, obviously embarrassed by his near slip. But the sentence wasn't incriminating in any way and so Ghost remained silent. 'Hang on tight' he had told Ian when he had been paralysed by one of Ghost's darts, only last night.

"I hadn't thought you would remember that," Kazuhi admitted. "What with the panic and all. Or, at least, what I thought would be panicking."

"No panicking. Rather hard not to recall when you held all my attention at the time."

"I apologise," Ghost said suddenly.

Ian smiled, relaxed, and softly asked, "What for?"

"I realise now I hadn't apologised for... threatening you." Logically, it made sense despite his social imparity. He, like most of the other covert-operatives, lost a good portion of their social interaction skills the longer they remained in their roles. But logic-patterns dictated that, despite having been following orders to kill this man, they had become allies of sorts and an apology now should be coming.

"It's not necessary," Ian replied. He seemed to choose his words when he said, "I didn't understand what you were about until much later. And when I found out, I understood. But by then, we were friends." With a slight furrow between his eyes, he suppressed a yawn then a strange expression overtook his face before he asked, "Do you have... friends?"

"Few," came the blunt reply.

"I hope you will count me as one of them," Ian murmured sleepily.

Ghost said nothing, and Ian remained quiet. He listened until his senses detected the fall in Ian's breathing pattern that indicated approaching slumber.

Ghost thought that while there would be no real sleep for him tonight, he would make do. He could rest lightly, carefully, for as long as Ian slept and stay by the man's side. Once outside noise intruded and real morning came, when the housekeepers roused from their own beds, Ghost's senses would no longer allow him even that, and he would slip quietly away.

Until then, he would remain here. Close by but not touching, curiously examining himself and these strange urges he'd never had before. The new feelings did not confuse him; he simply observed them, calculating. He knew his careful mind would supply the right answers, what would be acceptable and what he could get away with.

He set his thoughts aside for now, sparing half an hour of precious 'sleep' time to watch Ian, eyes studying the expression of unguarded boyishness on the man's face.

Unable to look away from his charge's hair reflected the moonlight, seeming like spun gold, Ghost wondered why this man, of all people and now of all times, made him feel so horribly... human.

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He was gone.

Ian noticed the moment he woke, turning his head to simply look at the lack of wrinkles on the space beside him. The covers, bed sheet and pillow had been smoothed out, made to appear as though they had never been disturbed, that there had never been anyone there.

But there was one thing: one strand of black hair.

Slowly, he propped himself up on an elbow and picked it up, lifting the strand and twirling it between his fingertips. He stared at it wondering if Kazuhi lived all his life like this, carefully erasing marks he left behind in the world, making a habit of leaving no traces that he had ever been there. It was such an opposite of what the human race naturally strived for: Recognition; Immortality captured in news and records, in achievements and awards.

Ghost.

That was what the people at the RIG command centre had called Kazuhi originally; though everyone had immediately adapted the new name as soon as Serge had assigned it, in order that the 'civilian' not become accustomed to the operative name.

Pursing his lips, Ian blew the strand away from between his fingers, the final and fleeting evidence so easily disposed of. He stared again at the space beside him, reaching out, hand hovering to carefully follow the surface of the pillow, trying not to disturb it. But then he slowly picked it up and pulled it toward himself. Bringing it to his face, he breathed in deeply.

Sea salt and lavender.

It was not what he had been expecting, but it was an interesting fragrance. He liked it... and he knew he wanted more. He sighed, recognising the strong attraction he felt for the young man. He was old enough to know what it felt like and experienced enough to know better than to deny its very existence.

He'd felt the beginnings of it as soon as he had seen that magnetic, entrancing creature pounce out from his office ventilation shaft. When he had slumped, his eyes had remained open and still in his control, and his face had been in the right position to watch Ghost's every movement. Ghost had been captivating with those movements, despite his initial fear at loss of control of himself. Even his short exchange over his communication link had been interesting. He had attitude, but he followed orders. He was clever and composed.

And damn hot.

Precise, efficient and intelligent... and very dangerous.

Ian wasn't normally interested in men. The few gay men he had dated had been much too self-conscious of themselves and sometimes even defensive of their sexual orientation. They had also been either too interested in pursuing a relationship and taking things too quickly, or too doubtful that his own intentions had been sincere. He preferred females most of the time, but the fact was, it was the person that attracted Ian, male or female. It was only a problem when the object of Ian's interest

misinterpreted him or became uncomfortable with his ambiguity. But so far on this occasion, his interest was still developing.

He had not known that Ghost had come to kill him that night, not until much later after the people at RIG explained that he would be under their organisation's protection. There had been no real opportunity to truly *fear* Ghost, only be impressed by. Helplessly, his interest had since done nothing but grow.

And Ghost, astute individual that he was, would most likely recognise it if Ian didn't take precautions to conceal it. He did not want to frighten his 'guard' away. He wanted...

With another sigh, Ian scrubbed a hand through his hair and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. It would be best not to think of such things, he decided, as he headed for his en-suite bathroom.

~~*

By the time he had showered and dressed, his self-confidence was, for the most part, restored. He smoothed down his blue button-up shirt and tan khaki trousers, automatically selecting a belt to match the shoes he planned to wear today, and, ready to face the world, he opened his door.

"Hey," Kazuhi greeted. "Good morning."

Kazuhi leaned against the wall near the window opposite Ian's bedroom door, hands in his pockets. He looked very like the delinquent he was supposed to be, his humourless expression lending him a dangerous air.

Ian swallowed.

Dressed in a black muscle shirt, low slung jeans and blue sneakers, Kazuhi's tight, taut body encased in such casual attire made Ian pause. Despite his head of thick, black hair, there appeared not to be a whisper of body hair on him, not even under his arms, as Ian peeked when Kazuhi reached to push a dark lock from his face. Such smooth skin...

Gods, not again. Ian forcefully stamped down on his reactions.

"Good morning," Ian pleasantly replied, politely gesturing that they should walk together. "You're up early; it's only seven."

"We went to bed at half past nine, I was with you an hour later," as they walked, Kazuhi spoke softly, ticking the hours off. Conversationally and unintentionally, he drove Ian nuts with ideas as to how long they had shared a bed. "By that account it makes close to eight full hours of sleep, so it's hardly early."

"Perhaps not," Ian conceded as they trotted down the steps together. "Then I suppose this household's schedule suits you well."

"I have no complaints," Kazuhi averred as they came upon the main reception hall below.

"Oh, but you will," Eileen interjected calmly from the top of the stairs. She had obviously just risen, appeared freshly made up and dressed to face the world. "Just you wait."

"And why are you up early?" Ian asked, disbelief in his tone. "O Lady of the manor whom no one can rouse before ten?"

"I," she acidly spoke as she made her way down the steps, "am awake because we have a guest." Her eyes narrowed, "Unlike some people who simply and unsociably get up at indecent hours."

Ian narrowed his eyes at her and wordlessly pointed over at Kazuhi beside him, obviously indicating his guest followed the same 'indecent hours' as he did.

She rolled her eyes in return, coming down the last few steps. "You didn't force him, did you?"

A dozen very indecent images flooded Ian's mind, and he could not restrain the light touch of heat to his cheeks. He managed a calm retort of, "I did nothing of the sort. In fact, he was up before I."

"Whatever," she breezily returned, completely and carelessly dismissing the conversation, walking right past him and fixing a pointed look on Kazuhi who, interpreting the look correctly, smartly clicked his heels together and stoically offered her his arm. With a nod of approval and a small smile, Eileen allowed herself to be escorted forward.

Ian rolled his eyes again, smiling to himself when Kazuhi tossed him a wink over his shoulder.

"The cook is on vacation and isn't in until next week," Eileen said, missing the exchange, "And I am sure you boys are hungry, as I am. I think breakfast should be our first concern, don't you agree?"

"Most assuredly," Kazuhi murmured gallantly, escorting her.

In the kitchen, Eileen had to concede her reign over the place pretty quickly. She could reheat dishes and follow recipes, but that was, as Ian and Kazuhi learned, about it. Faced with a myriad of assorted ingredients and no particular goal to aim for except edible food, her lack of knowledge became apparent. Not that it bothered her when she was much too accustomed to being waited upon anyway... and not embarrassed to admit it.

Kazuhi, surprisingly, gently and calmly took over. Startled, Ian watched him move efficiently, dishing up slices of the strange wrinkled sausages he found at the bottom of one of the deli drawers. Olives, salad with feta cheese, and fresh fruit, bread, and a plate of olive oil and balsamic vinegar, completed the meal.

"Mediterranean-type cuisine, hmm," Eileen murmured to herself.

"I like different styles of cuisine," Kazuhi ventured. Ian sensed a forced casual air when he offered, "And I like to cook when I have the time."

Taking a bite, Eileen made appreciative noises, then asked, "Have you ever considered becoming a chef?"

Something flitted across Kazuhi's eyes before he gave a small smile and said, "I took some classes, actually."

The two launched into their own conversation about food and dishes, and as they ate it took a lot of Ian's concentration to keep his eyes away from Kazuhi. He tried to focus on his sister, her voice and sisterly-irksome presence keeping him sufficiently annoyed and adequately distracted.

At eight am, the door bell rang, interrupting their comfortable conversation on what to do now that Ian was on leave and Kazuhi without a place to go. Ian went to get it, but Kazuhi automatically followed, prompting an amused Eileen to tag along and take over the situation. At the door there stood a fashionably dressed young woman with long blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes accompanied by a gruff, scarred older man in a pristine suit.

"Good morning," the woman greeted politely, holding out her card. "I am May Winters, liaison with The London Metropolitan Police. And this is Simon Kerr." She spared Ian a small nod, "Very good to see you well, sir." Addressing the trio at large, she continued, "We have come to install our personnel on the premises. For Mr Frost's safety, of course."

"Ah yes, how do you do?" Ian greeted graciously from behind Eileen, who had opened the door. "We met at the Constables' Station yesterday. Please come in."

When the two guests, Ian and Kazuhi were seated and Eileen had excused herself to fetch some tea, Ms Winters and Kazuhi eyed each other. Ian's gaze worriedly bounced back and forth between the two.

Good breeding forced him to speak, much as he wished to leave them to their glaring match, "Er, Ms Winters, surely you remember Kazuhi Mori?" Ms Winters nodded.

Ian shifted uncomfortably in his seat as the two continued to silently stare each other down. He did not miss the tension between the two operatives. Really, he couldn't blame Kazuhi, when the plan had been for May and Snake to make their appearances much later in the game. Something would have to be afoot for the handler and his operative to approach them this way.

He watched the three carefully, trying to look for signals or slights of hand where they might communicate to Kazuhi what was going on. Everything seemed normal; he noticed nothing out of the ordinary.

He sighed. This was undoubtedly going to be one very long morning.

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"We have a problem."

Ian glanced over at Kazuhi, startled.

Kazuhi remained still, eyes still looking out over London from where they stood at the top of Primrose Hill. Around them, people were occupied by their own activities in the open-ground grass park. And

before them, the whole city appeared to be spread out. In the twilight, lights were coming on and the beauty of London was coming more and more into perspective. But now...

"What do you mean?"

"Winters and Kerr," Kazuhi stated simply. After a moment, he continued, "They say we're being monitored. They believe there have been a few units hanging around the place, and we were right to take precautions because the place is teeming with bugs."

Ian watched Kazuhi's hair as it moved in the light breeze, watched how it caressed the smooth skin of his forehead and the way it brushed over the small delicate ear visible to him on this side of Kazuhi's profile. He knew he was distracted and he tried to focus.

Grasping at what Kazu had last said, he repeated, "Bugs?"

"Listening devices," Kazuhi, a small smile curving his lips. Ian found himself suddenly mesmerized. "Not the insect infestation you may or may not have had in mind."

"I see," Ian replied automatically, not seeing at all, eyes fixed on the transformation Kazuhi's smile had made.

After a few moments' pause, Kazuhi turned to look at him and asked "What do you see?"

"I see..." Ian swallowed, suddenly embarrassed. Despite knowing he had been hiding his interest, that he was studiously keeping his expression neutral, he did not like how those sharp eyes looked at him almost knowingly. "Er, that we have a problem."

"Yes," Kazuhi murmured, his eyes narrowing almost infinitesimally. "We do have problems."

"I am certain," Ian braved, "that these problems are nothing we cannot handle."

"We?"

"You, then," Ian sheepishly amended, "In terms of the... bugs."

"Our friendly neighbourhood 'Metropolitan Police' will handle that." Kazuhi tilted his head a little, suddenly looking mischievous, "And the other?"

"Pardon?"

"The other problem," Kazuhi reminded him, the smile widening another fraction. "You said 'these problems are nothing we cannot handle' so I assume the bugs count as one problem, and therefore there would naturally be a second problem. Am I wrong?"

"Well..." Ian was at a loss. He could not recall how the talk about 'we have a problem' had become plural. Shit. He should have been paying better attention. He was beginning to feel truly uncomfortable now, and why the hell was Kazuhi smiling...? But oh, Lord, what a smile.

"Ian," Kazuhi whispered, his expression suddenly fading. He stared hard, "Is there a second problem?"

"It isn't a problem, exactly," Ian fenced, just as softly. Inspired, he moved closer and looked meaningfully into Kazuhi's eyes. He reached to brush the back of Kazuhi's hand with his fingertips, tone going low and hopeful to add, "Unless you consider it one."

Kazuhi didn't seem at all surprised. "Me?"

"Just you," Ian muttered, searching and tense, worried and sick.

He felt like holding his breath, his chest tightening. It was too soon, he disappointedly thought. He knew it, and he thought just then it might've been a better idea to have avoided this minor confrontation and just give the beautiful young man more time. He exhaled, deciding those instincts were correct and, despite feeling suddenly downcast, he opened his mouth to deflect the situation—

"It isn't," Kazuhi murmured. "A problem, that is."

Oh.

CHAPTER THREE: RECONNAISSANCE

"You know, in all the time you've slept in my bed," Ian murmured, turning over to give Kazuhi a small smile, "I have never had the pleasure of watching you sleep."

"Well of course you wouldn't," Kazuhi breathed into the darkness, slipping in between the sheets. "I do all the watching."

Chuckling, Ian condemned, "That's not fair."

"What is this," Kazuhi chided, giving a rare soft smile, "a competition?"

"Don't care," Ian decided, looking Kazuhi over appreciatively, "As far as I'm concerned, I've already won." His gaze moved slowly over the operative's bare upper body, hot and intense.

Rolling his eyes to dispel the tension curling in his belly, Kazuhi playfully complained, "Is that what this is about? Take down the hot guy who's keeping you safe?"

"You sleep in my bed each night," Ian reminded him and then cut out, not saying anything more and instead watching him thoughtfully.

Resisting the urge to squirm under the steady look in the civilian's eyes, Kazuhi prodded, "So what happened to the 'competition' and 'not fair' stuff?"

"Hmmm," Ian smiled, gaze heated as he looked into Kazu's eyes, "At that last thought I voiced... I suddenly forgot."

Kazuhi battled the ridiculous urge to lower his head and remained bravely staring back. He didn't move even when Ian shifted closer, leaning in to nuzzle his shoulder and breathe against his skin. He didn't move when Ian shifted yet again and moved so close, he could feel the heat of Ian's skin across the scant millimetres separating them. And he did not move when Ian opened his mouth and tasted his skin for the first time.

He moaned instead.

Ian glanced up at him from where he still pressed his nose to Kazuhi's shoulder. Holding that gaze, Ian moved, nuzzling his cheek along one pectoral to Kazuhi's breastbone and nosing down the indentation to Kazuhi's navel. Ian smiled and dipped his tongue into it, making Kazuhi shift, interested and turned on, breathless and a little wary.

For a long moment they stared at each other. Ian poised low above Kazuhi's stomach, Kazuhi propped up on his elbows. Then Ian smiled and shifted slowly, reluctantly away to his side of the bed.

Kazuhi would have pulled him closer had he been more certain about their relationship but as things stood now... startled, he realised Ian must sense his hesitation.

"Good night, Kazuhi," Ian murmured, settling his head into his pillow.

Shimmying down, he settled in, too, and murmured, "Good night, Ian. Pleasant dreams."

He watched Ian sleep that night, too.

~*~*~

Kazuhi looked up from his book when Ian thoughtfully rubbed his own face, still frowning at the papers scattered over his desk.

It was something they had in common, Kazuhi realised, the intense focus on the single task at hand despite all distractions. Ian didn't always stare at him, didn't always think about getting into his pants. Ian was thoughtful and kind, smile full of warmth and attitude inviting when he'd asked Kazuhi to stay near—even if he was working.

Earlier, Ian would look up every once in a while, smiling at him while he'd occupied himself with reading and researching their case and simple regular fiction books.

Casual, Kazuhi thought, smiling at Ian when Ian, feeling his gaze, looked up and met his eyes.

They smiled softly at one another and a moment later, returned to what they'd been doing.

~*~*~

Kazuhi made breakfast.

Eggs, bread, milk, confectioners' sugar, honey and jam spelled all the trappings of lavish French toast. Someone had stocked the fridge yesterday; there was even fresh fruit and yoghurt.

"Hmm," Eileen murmured, sauntering in still in her dressing robe, "That smells divine." She winked at him, "And particular reason we get such a treat this morning?"

Kazuhi would have answered except Ian trailed in right at that moment. "Good morning," he murmured, sitting down beside his sister and looking Kazuhi over.

Without saying a word, he went right back to the stove, trying to ignore the weight of Ian's stare on his ass. He was wearing his usual white muscle shirt a pair of sleeping shorts, loose and comfortable, having not bothered to dress up this morning.

While the siblings chatted, he enjoyed the domesticity, the intimacy. Sleep wear and eye-knuckling, voices still low from slumber.

He could get used to this.

~*~*~

Kazuhi sucked in a breath as he leaned back onto his hands atop the desk, wondering what in the world possessed him to bother Ian at work—

Oh, right, lunch. He'd cooked and wanted to... *ah*... tell Ian to come and have lunch with him... *oh*...

He watched those long clever fingers skim up both his inner thighs, fingertips teasing in a tantalisingly slow caress at the leg openings of his shorts. Helplessly, he parted his legs, inviting more. Embarrassed by his own movements, he darted a look up at Ian, finding those bright blue eyes so intently focused on his own touches and that expression made Kazuhi moan again, aware of the way his blood rushed to fill a certain neglected part of his anatomy—currently very interested in Ian's touches.

Ian leaned over and breathed on his shorts-front, and Kazuhi choked out, "Tease."

"That would be you," Ian murmured, bending ever so slowly to taste and nip at Kazuhi's thigh, "Walking around in these skimpy little shorts." Moaning low, he nipped again and muttered, "God, I want to just rip it right off of you."

Kazuhi reached now, unable to help it, hands smoothing up Ian's arms to shoulders. Finally, he slid forward, slipped off the desk and pushed Ian back, perching himself right in Ian's lap and seizing those lips in a harsh kiss.

Oh, yesss... hot and wet, tangled and consuming, Kazuhi loved Ian's kisses.

Especially when, groaning, Ian opened to the attack, leaning backward in his chair and dragging Kazuhi flush against himself, pressing upward to get them as close together as possible. When Kazuhi undulated, pressing his hips downward into Ian's rising hardness, Ian moaned, hands smoothing down Kazuhi's back and squeezing over his ass—

"Ian?" called Eileen's voice from down the hallway.

Cursing, Kazuhi jumped up and moved away, swiftly throwing himself into the couch by the window, crossing his legs to hide his state of arousal.

The door opened a moment later and Eileen poked her head in, "There you are." She frowned, "Quit staring into space like that and come help me with my shopping." Spotting Kazuhi, "Lunch looks great. Ian and I will join you as soon as he's done helping me."

Ian shot Kazuhi a wry look as he followed.

~*~*~

"I think sometimes, when I watch you get into my bed," Ian said softly, "that I would really like to hold you." He looked over at Kazuhi and asked, "Will you let me?"

A small genuine smile played at Kazuhi's lips when he replied, "I'd like that. We've been patient these last few days, haven't we?"

"Too patient," Ian grumbled playfully. Taking advantage of how close they stood to each other, he gently stroked the back of Kazuhi's loosely hanging hand with his own thumb. He absently murmured, "You're so warm."

A shiver dashed up Kazuhi's spine at those words.

It was their second visit, three days later, to Primrose Hill since the day they'd brought their mutual attraction to the surface of their relationship. Three days spent casually since, living together and making more than the best of their situation, sneaking kisses and touches here and there wherever they could.

By some tacit agreement they spoke only of their attraction when here, atop the grassy hill where it had all begun to come out into the open.

Neither spoke as they walked, but as that first day, Ian stood just a little bit closer and his looks lingered a little bit longer. Kazuhi, just as naturally, put his hand on Ian's arm as they crossed the road to where they'd left the car. Ian paused but a moment before bending his arm and letting Kazuhi's hold slip from his elbow to his hand. Strangely thrilled but also self-conscious, Kazuhi held Ian's hand, the warm grip oddly comforting.

It seemed that every time they touched, they were both so aware of it, sending a tension-filled hum skimming over Kazuhi's skin. And in bed each night, they were careful not to touch, as though too-aware of the other.

Settling into Ian's car, they made toward the city, and Kazuhi lost himself to his thoughts...

There was always a specific, optimum sequence for everything—Ghost had learned that a long time ago and it was one of the first things he had ever learned. It was simply inefficient to not consider the most effective order of action, the one-two-three of what would come first then next, and so forth until a task was complete. It was what made him, as one of Gale's most efficient operatives, who he was and put him where he was.

Honesty was not necessarily part of it.

But through all this very personal development, Kazuhi had behaved without subterfuge. Without much logic and common sense or focus on his mission, he had spent his time with Ian. This had become very personal.

Sneaking a quick glance at his companion as they disembarked, Kazuhi wondered why this man inspired him to think about such things as his operative status. Acting upon selfish thoughts would not help their current situation.

And yet...

For all that Kazuhi enjoyed their time together and appreciated the way they took their time with each other, he always felt painfully aware that the days passed like a countdown. Because when this mission was over, so too would be their affair.

Yet somehow, he didn't see the end of the relationship. Only, by association, neither could he see the end of this mission. It used to be he knew what stage he had worked himself to, what step, how many more in the list of moves to make until the inevitable conclusion. And with some surprise he could not see that end now; did not want to see it.

He already knew he didn't want to think about not seeing Ian after this.

Pondering these thoughts he made his way down Oxford Street beside the source of these unsettling thoughts. He swaggered along with his most punk-like air and randomly glared at any belligerent teen would in this day and age. Somehow, and it always astonished him, he managed melt in with the crowds; people didn't give him a second glance... except perhaps to admire him, though he couldn't see why. The assimilation was much too natural, in his opinion, despite feeling as different as he did. He could not relate much to these people on the street leading the life he did but the flow didn't seem to mind...

"I'd like to have a look in here," Kazuhi muttered, brushing his thoughts aside for the time being, 'attitude' in place. He jerked his head at the Virgin Mega-store, hands resolutely in their pockets. Ian nodded and followed him in.

"I'll be in the classical selection," Ian said, and went off on his own at Kazuhi's nod.

Turning down toward the hip-hop section, he carelessly examined the latest releases. He listened to a few samples, head bobbing to the beat, generally trying to give the appearance of passing his time. Yet he also kept a sharp eye out on Ian, whose blonde head and tall stature kept the man in sight.

A little while later, he sensed a dangerous presence behind him before two slender arms wrapped themselves familiarly around his waist from behind. The hold was gentle, unthreatening and easy to break so Kazuhi maintained his relaxed posture.

"Hello, handsome," greeted a low voice from behind. Kazuhi looked back over at the pretty blonde young woman who smiled up at him from where her chin perched on the edge of his shoulder. Her clear blue eyes sparkled up at him.

"Hello to you, too," he said throatily, a small smile playing over his lips. He familiarly laid his own hand over the girl's hands clasped over his chest. But the girl released him, letting the fingertips of one hand drag as she moved to stand before him.

"You're looking good," She smiled, her chin tilting charmingly as her eyes flashed at him. "You want to come down to the club with me and my mates?"

"Sorry, love, I—"

"He's taken."

Oh dear. She looked Ian over, her smile never wavering. Ian stared back... more than a little aggressively.

"Like I said, sorry," Kazuhi murmured with a small smile on his face. Giving him one last, slightly wistful drag of her fingertips, she broke physical contact. With a nonchalant shrug she turned away—

"Shame," —and disappeared into the crowd.

Kazuhi slipped his hands back into his pockets, watching Ian watch the girl leave. He had been planning for an uneventful 'interception' but despite Ian's jealousy, and how gratifying was that, he did not see the necessity to explain to Ian the girl had come to give him a dose of new mites.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Ian asked politely, not masking his irritation very well.

"Nothing of interest," Kazuhi replied, giving the store a few final bored glances. When he turned back to Ian, he allowed an amused smile to surface, his eyes to spark with interest, and even cocked a brow for good measure... all to give the impression of, 'but you, on the other hand...'

Judging by Ian's mollified expression, the man had understood. They left together, walking calmly side by side.

Kazuhi was amused to note that Ian walked even closer to him now, solicitously laying a guiding and protective hand at his lower back when they encountered thicker pedestrian traffic. Weaving through the crowds, he enjoyed the feeling of being watched over. It was so rare to be the one not in control, in a life where his very survival meant having utter and absolute command.

There was no denying he had thought Ian interesting, watching the untrained civilian adapt so well to their situation. It had impressed him, interested him. But he had not quite considered or decided what kind of interest it might be. And Ian himself had decided on a very specific form of interest.

With which he found himself quite pleased with.

In all honesty, Kazuhi never really thought about romantic or sexual relationships much. When an offer became convenient, he took it if he fancied so but he had never initiated anything himself. Nor had he stayed around in anything more than two or three... encounters. It had even become part of his reputation; the untouchable, untameable fleeting Ghost.

This current situation was entirely new to him. It wasn't that he was making the move, if anything he would never have even dared consider Ian at all if he hadn't caught the interest in the man's eyes. In a way, it was familiar, being approached.

Of good reputation and efficiency, operatively high ranking, he was often the recipient of attention from other operatives. Plenty of his working colleagues had let him know they would be willing to relinquish the lead to him... But while he had, very rarely, conceded to take an occasional taste, none had ever made him feel like he belonged.

And he had never been so interested to see where things would go. Not ever.

That startled him, to say the least. So small a difference made a world of change for him and he decided that for the moment, he wanted to take reconnaissance. Processing the data could come later. There would be at least *some* points of comparison to previous experience for him to find familiar ground upon.

Right?

It didn't matter who was 'in control' to Kazuhi, it was always about who made him feel like he belonged. The way Gale belonged as his handler and May as his first preferred team mate, so did Ian seem to put him at ease.

"Thank you," Kazuhi murmured, as they got into the car, meaning many things.

With a warm smile, expression understanding and warm, Ian replied, "You're welcome."

~*~*~

Eileen quirked a brow when they arrived home for dinner, looking about a whisper away from licking her lips. Dishing up the meal at the kitchen side dining bar, she commented, "Quite friendly now, aren't you two?"

"We've always been friendly, ever since we first met," Ian parried. Kazuhi remained silent, content to admire the prettily laid out meal before him and also to see how Ian would handle the situation.

"Of course you have, dear," Eileen winked at Kazuhi, ignoring her brother and how he flushed a little before attacking his meal.

Knowing he and Ian would be in bed together again tonight was making his head spin a little. He gave his table mates back his full attention and noticed when Eileen smiled knowingly at him. Kazuhi ignored her.

And he ignored May, too, when she smiled in almost the same way as Eileen had.

He'd come to 'nose' about their business, but in actuality took a verbal report muttered from beneath breath, his enhanced hearing catching each word. Then he busied himself with the file May had brought for him, absorbing the background information on the two siblings. When he looked up, unseeingly, to digest what he had just read, he mentally added in a few things he had discovered on his own. Displeased with the blank holes in the information he had in total, he frowned.

"Don't do that, you'll ruin your good looks," John Falcon, one of the undercover support operatives, teased in passing. Eyes sparkling in amusement, May opened her mouth.

"Spare me," Kazuhi sighed. "Or I'll tackle you down and tape your mouth shut."

She grinned instead.

~*~*~

Ian did not like it when Eileen touched Kazu.

Ian did not like it when *anyone* touched Kazu.

The realisation had startled him when he'd first noticed it, earlier that evening as they were strolling Central London streets. They'd happened into a music store and some girl had put her claws around the handsome young man.

Handsome young man... He glanced over the table at Kazu and stifled a sigh as he noticed, yet again, how absolutely beautiful the operative was. His almond-shaped eyes, pert little nose and smooth, rounded bow of a mouth... Mentally shaking himself, Ian leaned on his right elbow on the table and gave into the urge this time, and sighed.

"Something the matter, Ian?" Kazu asked, turning to look at him. "You seem weary all of a sudden."

"Just tired," He forced a small polite smile to his face and rubbed a hand over the side of his face. "After all the excitement of the last few days, the stress is catching up with me."

"Well," Eileen interjected. "You shouldn't worry too much. We have those Police officers in the house and you're safe at home with... us."

Ian could feel the heat rise a little in his face at his sister's stress on that last word. Silly woman, embarrassing him like this and taking hideous advantage over the fact she knew perfectly well he was attracted to Kazuhi. He glowered at her, dropping all pretence of politeness when she chuckled lightly.

"Is something amiss?" Kazu asked, looking back and forth between the siblings.

Eyes locked in silent combat, he and his sister simultaneously replied, "Nothing at all."

Kazu rolled his eyes at them then stood and began to gather their dishes. Finally breaking eye contact, Ian and Eileen also stood and did the same. Together, they cleared the table and brought everything to the kitchen efficiently, silently.

Kazu didn't seem bothered by the lack of conversation, he moved with the same easy grace and efficiency he always did... and Ian fought an internal groan as he caught himself watching a little too closely.

With Eileen aware of his attraction for the young man, things could only get more complicated. Hell, knowing Kazuhi didn't consider their... what could one call it? Well, hell, as long as it wasn't a problem, who was he to complain? This was a chance he thought never to have anyway, thinking he would have had to go slowly insane having his guard in his bed each night.

Look but don't touch.

After three days of that, he almost couldn't bear it. Thankfully, after their little talk today, there was a very real chance he would be allowed to touch now...

Dear Lord, his own thoughts were making him crazed. He tried to focus lest he drop something and suffer Eileen's wrath, never mind this was his own house and these were not her dishes. He suddenly wished she would go home and leave him in peace; leave *them* in peace. Well, as much peace as he could have in his current predicament.

His sister was terrorising him, someone was after his life, and he was hot for his guard; great... just great. He stifled a frustrated groan.

"Pardon me!" Ian exclaimed, his voice suddenly loud in the quiet kitchen.

They had bumped into each other, gently, unintentionally. He had been so distracted, despite his nervous awareness of Kazu within the not so enclosed space, that he hadn't stepped out of the way when Kazu turned away from the sink... Ugh, he must look like a fool.

Eileen had stepped away to the ladies room, so at least he would not be in so much trouble... Kazuhi suddenly reached and closed a hand around his wrist, the one with which he had gestured for pardon.

Kazu leaned in very close, his other hand rising to curl around Ian's waist. Stepping closer the young man pressed their hips together, sending a crash of sensations shooting into his body at the firm contact. Then Kazu ducked his head to take a quick, teasing nip of Ian's neck...

Fire.

It was like being branded and Ian couldn't breathe. Touching a nose to the soft skin beneath his ear, Kazu inhaled a lungful of air against his rapidly heating skin then released the hold and stepped away, moving quickly around him, as he stood stationary and startled.

With a silent groan, heart pounding, he mentally called Kazu a damned tease... and growled aloud.

Quickly, he spun and caught the escaping little flirt, snatched at a slim shoulder and spun Kazu around to face him, pushing the young man backwards and pressing closer, flush against him. Ian gripped each of the operative's upper arms, fingers clenching reflexively when Kazu raised his head and met Ian's gaze with distinct softness and yielding in his eyes. Ian gave a soft moan at Kazu's unspoken submission, noticing how the young man swallowed with his own nervousness.

Startled, hungry and humbled, Ian bent and gave back what he had received. He tasted Kazu's neck before angling to nuzzle beneath one small ear... More, he wanted to do more but he forced himself to stop at merely returning what he had been given earlier.

Don't push, he told himself.

Yet their momentum had pushed them up against the kitchen island table. His weight bent Kazu back over it naturally and the younger man let him. Let him! The knowledge that this strong and capable young man allowed his touch... he had to get closer, relishing the spin of dizziness from the mad rushing of his blood when he felt, in their closeness, Kazu's hardness against his thigh.

Kazu's hair spread in a luxurious shimmering mass over the table, eyes nakedly admiring him in return and filled with hunger. There was a touch of warmth in them that made him pause and a smile worm its way across his face. He reached for Kazu's face with one hand, fingertips reverently tracing a smooth jaw line before rising to just whisper across Kazu's bottom lip, admiring the softness of it.

Parting his lips ever so slightly, Kazu touched the tip of his tongue to the corner of his lips. Ian couldn't help it, gaze riveting on that tongue as it slid across the bottom lip and to the other corner before disappearing. Kazu shifted his hips pressing forward into Ian, eliciting moans from them both in tandem. Delight lit Kazu's eyes and he undulated again.

A moment later, Kazu closed his eyes regretfully and he shook his head, murmuring, "Eileen."

Ian snapped out of his lust-filled daze, suddenly uncertain of his place, released Kazu and stepped back. "I apologise... I don't know what came over me, this is—"

"No trouble," Kazu softly assured him, pulling up to his feet. He reached out, a hand drifting over Ian's chest and the warmth of his touch seeping through Ian's shirt. He murmured lowly, "I certainly enjoyed myself."

Ian started, puzzlement clearing quickly and lips curving warmly at the sight of Kazu's longing gaze unabashedly looking him over. There was admiration in those eyes, and intense want. Kazu smiled back but quickly turned away at the sound of approaching clicking high heels. Ian turned to busy himself just as his sister walked in.

"Idiot," Eileen muttered as she walked in, eyes hawk-like watching them. "What are you two fools standing around uselessly in here when there are things to be done?"

"Waiting for you, madam," Kazu replied with an exaggerated flourish of his hand. He turned to continue clearing up and loading the dishwasher.

"Whatever," she grumbled.

~*~*~

There was nothing to stop them now and Ian knew it.

He lounged in the bathroom doorway, shoulder propped up on the jam. The light from the bathroom cast his shadow across the floor space between the bathroom and the foot of the bed. He looked out across at it, the bed, imagining what Kazu would look like sleeping peacefully upon it.

Or looking post-coital.

As if on cue, there was a soft short rap on the door before it opened. Kazu strolled nonchalantly in, eyes meeting his. The operative paused there, in the middle of the room to calmly wait. It was as though he were anticipating some indication of what was to follow.

Ian pushed off from the doorway, hand rising to flick the bathroom light switch off so that only the moonlight was left to illuminate the room, giving it a soft glow. Studying his 'guest'...

He liked the way Kazu's eyes seemed to sparkle in the darkness, appreciated the shadows each dip and curve cast on the boy's body. Ian looked Kazu over, eyes sliding over the slim-fitting tank top and boxer shorts, appreciating the view. He swallowed nervously.

Stepping forward, he reached out a hand. Kazu took it, almost childlike in the simple response. Leading the way, Ian drew Kazu into bed, sweeping back the covers and lying down, taking Kazu into his arms. The weight of the boy beside him felt... right. He pulled the Kazu closer, so that the operative's head rested on his upper arm. He folded his hands over the smaller body, an arm looping around Kazu's waist to rest his hand on the operative's back. He tucked Kazu's head under his chin and sighed before breathing in a lungful of the dizzying lavender and sea salt scent.

Finally.

Kazu's own arms held him close, though loosely, and Ian suddenly realised the boy had relinquished control over to him. Kazu was waiting to see what he would do. And the possibilities dizzied him. How far would he be allowed to go?

When?

But then again, he inwardly shook himself and firmly decided this was not the night they would be sating mad carnal desires. This was to be their first night they would sleep skin to skin, lungs breathing the other's scent. It was to savour their closeness, an experiment of sorts, to see how they felt about each other; something tentative.

And that was just fine. Because they last few days had taught him Kazuhi was just as powerfully attracted to him as he was to the younger man... Then Kazu snuggled a little closer, his thigh 'accidentally' whispering across Ian's boxer-front. He frowned.

"Kazuhi," he started sternly, "You aren't trying to drive me insane, are you?"

"Of course not," the operative calmly replied into Ian's chest.

Ian could feel the heat of the boy's breath on his skin, the flesh prickling with the sensation further along than the actual breath could ever have travelled. He cursed himself, annoyed with the severity with which his body responded. This was going to test his self-control all too soon. He suppressed the urge to sigh. Perhaps this was not such a good idea?

"I like this," Kazuhi murmured, burrowing a little. He rubbed his face against Ian's chest and his arms tightened. "I don't really remember when I last held anyone close like this, or when I was held close myself."

Putting images of other lovers out of his mind, Ian simply held Kazu a little closer. And then the words struck him a little differently, and his heart clenched. There had been a very-well hidden undertone of wistful longing in the young man's voice. It occurred to Ian then that perhaps, because of his very

profession, physical contact would not be easily given to Kazu, and that it might even be dangerous to let people close.

Ian pushed the thought away, enjoying the fact his operative had chosen him, lay here in his arms. Naturally relaxing, enjoying the feel of Kazu in his arms, he tempered his breathing, concentrating on trying to relax. Eventually, his body obeyed and he felt Kazuhi calm, breathing also slowing. Kazu in his arms might have stirred his libido but, Ian was glad to see, his mind still preferred something more than casual between them and enforced it.

It was a good thing, Ian had to admit, to have this opportunity. So rare it was to find one's attraction returned as strongly as it was given, and it was so easy to blow things off course early on. And on top of that, the chances of having this kind of opportunity to closely explore the mutual attraction were hard to come by.

He would take his time, he decided, despite the fact that their time together, whatever it might be, would never be long enough—and he did not entertain other illusions it could last beyond this... situation.

Not yet.

For now, he intended to milk this for all it was worth.

CHAPTER FOUR: LOST

When Ian's breathing slowed in slumber, Kazu opened his eyes.

He had never fallen asleep, had only been in a light restful doze that allowed him to stay partly alert. And now, without apparent dangers surrounding his situation, he gave in to the want to watch Ian sleep.

His breath caught.

The moonlight played on the civilian's smooth skin, making it look almost like alabaster, the fine hairs shimmering faintly. Pale eyelashes made half-moon shadows on his cheeks, lips parted but slightly. Hands relaxed, one on the pillow and the other about Kazu's own waist, clinging lingeringly. The fine contours of every line, dip and arch over Ian's body made Kazu... aware.

The operative smiled to himself. Ian had yet to notice he'd only originally wanted to sleep in Ian's bed because he couldn't help it, had been interested in the civilian even then. He could have turned the invitation down, slept on the floor or sat in one of the comfortable chairs by the window and dozed there.

And now there was no denying anything anymore.

With a soft sigh, Kazu pressed a little closer to Ian, whose hold automatically tightened. It gave him a sense of belonging, of a kind of security. He'd never felt this way before, had never been in this position before, as he had never stepped out of his bounds...

It was playing with fire to be where he was, he knew it. With May and Snake having free access to the property, should Kazu...no—he shook his head—should *Ghost* be caught fraternizing in an unseemly way with a ward, he would be in trouble. He knew this but it deterred him not in the slightest.

Not in the slightest. He didn't want to think about any of that but his emotions were a little too much right now, and his mind much too awake.

Slipping from the bed, needing a distraction, Kazu stepped quietly out of the room. He had no fear of being watched as he had already finally destroyed all the video feed cams. There might still be a few sound monitoring nano-machines left over from May's sweep, though he doubted that.

He opened his awareness, resonating his nano-senses and found the two guards, Falcon and Crane, at alert, one to the front and another to the rear of the house. He sent them a low-pulse nano-wave to project his location to them in order that they could be aware he was out and about.

At the bottom of the steps, Kazu broadcast a nano-echo then immediately moved quickly toward the side of the house. Sending such a wave would certainly alert him to other enhanced presences outside

of those carrying RIG nano-mites but it would also mean anyone else monitoring frequencies would know where he was. He hoped the echo would not bounce back any other presences—

One figure to the east wall.

—or not.

With a sigh, Kazu immediately changed directions and quickly made for the east side of the house. He knew the spy, for it could be no other when such a strong resonance meant the intruder was heavily laden with electronics, would have immediately changed his or her position.

Or perhaps fled entirely?

He needed to make sure. Kazu swiftly scanned the yard through a window, keeping hidden in the shadows. There seemed to be no activity, until he received a short-burst nano-wave from May letting him know her position on the roof.

As Mission Point he understood that May, trained as he, would understand to herd the operative toward him. He dashed silently back to the opposite end of the hall dove out the partially open window. He coiled to brace for the landing seven metres below and landed quietly, the grass moist and slick beneath his bare feet.

As he made his way around to the rear of the house he signalled to Patrick Crane, who appeared beside him, to round the west side of the house then sent May a reply, also by sequence of nano-bursts. It might give him away to the intruder but he had no choice, without a vision screen to coordinate through and no security guarantee on any frequency. Kazu moved quickly, closing in after the escaping pulse...

Breaking from the bushes in a pounce, Kazu lashed out and landed a harsh blow with his foot. The running operative grunted and staggered to one side then used the momentum to spring away, dashing for the nearby property wall. Kazu made after him, suddenly infuriated that someone would try to harm Ian.

The spy fainted but Kazu ignored it, knowing the property layout very well now and refusing to lose his logic to his predator's instincts in this situation. The faint cost the fiend a precious fraction of a second so that as he approached the wall, Kazu was just on his tail. Vaulting for the wall, the spy stretched out gracefully, ready to make it past the perimeter and to freedom. But Kazu had scrambled up a tree trunk and gained a bit of height, aiming to get at the spy's back in mid air enough to get a good enough grip to take him down.

But the man only took one hold on the wall, weight braced by his feet on the wall and turned his other hand toward his pursuer, a kind of launcher at his wrist—

With a gasp of pain, Kazu surrendered his purpose and altered his trajectory for a landing. The intruder turned once more, scrambled over the wall and away. Landing in a crouch on the ground, Kazu yanked out the protruding projectile in his side, lifted his hand from his abdomen into a strip of moonlight to see blood glistened over his fingertips.

"Shit," Kazu murmured, realising the lack of pain meant something very bad indeed.

"You go that right!" May hissed as she jumped past him and continued the chase, Crane right behind her in support of pursuit.

"Ghost," Falcon called softly, approaching from another area, removing his face mask. Kazu showed the other operative his bloody hand, who muttered, "Crap."

Feeling dizzy, Kazu reached for his comrade. He whispered, suddenly unable to force much air from his lungs, "It's in effect."

"I'm going to get you back to the Monitor," Falcon murmured, hoisting the much smaller Kazu onto his back and quickly making for the house. "We can run a diagnostic and go from there."

"Thanks," Kazu whispered, breath hissing as he struggled to inhale. Between the wheezing, he reported, "Respiratory... inflammation."

"Are you allergic to anything?" Falcon nudged open the kitchen door and made for the salon where their equipment was set-up.

"Just to...poisons..."

"I see your humour is, at least, intact." Falcon gently set Kazu down on the padded table.

Pushing Kazu over onto one side, he reached with his other hand for the Monitor cable and, sweeping Kazu's hair out of the way, plugged it into the port at the base of the operative's skull. Letting Kazu lie back, he tapped into the Monitor computer and logged in as an Operator. When he prompted the Monitor for blood-flow access, it asked for the patient's password.

"Shit! Ghost, I need your password, I'm not cleared to treat you," Falcon bent over Kazu whose breathing restriction was beginning to grey the complexion of his lips. "Ghost!"

Painfully, Kazu managed to give hand signals, costing the treatment process precious seconds. His vision began to blur and he knew he would soon lose consciousness. A faint buzzing echoed through his body and Kazu wondered at it, thought interrupted when there came a faint voice from some distance, sleepily calling,

"Kazu?"

Ian.

Shit.

Neither acknowledged the call and Falcon continued with his work running the diagnostic. Within moments, he said,

"The Monitor says it looks like a powerful allergen of some sort, induces severe asthma-like symptoms and swelling of the minor respiratory tracts." Kazu extended his senses, hearing Falcon breaking out another sterile apparatus and getting busy. "It's a short-term effect, powerful long enough only to asphyxiate a victim but it'll take time to sort this. The Monitor has given you an anaesthetic and issued instructions for me. Ghost?"

Kazu thumped a fist on the table in acknowledgement.

"I'm going to create an incision at your neck to introduce a breathing tube just below the most swollen areas. This will hurt but try to relax."

The cut didn't really hurt, but the liquid spilling down his skin did concern him. And then Falcon moved again and there was *pain*...

Kazu forced himself to not make a sound, not tighten his throat or close off his lungs as the tubing made its way into the slice in his neck and down toward his lungs. When it stopped and he struggled to continue breathing, he became aware of a hand gripped tightly to one of his own, on his side away from where Falcon stood. But when he turned his eyes to look, he realised he still could not see. Fisting his other hand, he thumped it on the table.

"Yes?" Falcon responded. Kazu made quick hand signals. "Copy no vision."

The gasp to his other side identified his new companion as Ian. Shit. He had not wanted the man to see him in this state, not ever.

But he was grateful anyway.

Ian clenched his hand tighter, saying nothing, but worry poured off him in waves. Kazu attempted to smile for him as Falcon cleaned up his neck and taped the tube in place. Gradually, his breathing eased, his vision began to return and Falcon made him close his eyes. Falcon summarised the poison and its effects, claiming the crisis now averted. Rest was all he would need now. All the while, the hand in his maintained its hold.

Falcon whispered, "I'm going to call for a surgeon to—"

Just then, the communicator in Kazu's ear fired up on a frequency he recognised as a public channel and Gale's voice came through *loud* and clear, "You little punk! Wha' the hell you get caught out for?!"

"Sir," Falcon replied, "I have sent through the Monitor's reports for—"

"I don't give a bloody shit what the hell you sent through, not right now!" Gale raged impatiently, "Where is he?"

"Ghost is unable to respond at this time, sir." Falcon reported dutifully, if a little pointedly. "The reasons behind this are in the report."

There was some grumbling as the handler accessed the report rising into colourful cursing before long minutes of silence. When Gale spoke again he growled, "I'll see to his medical attention."

"Thank you, sir."

"Ghost, you bloody fool," Gage hissed, tone not masking the concern beneath. "What if that had been a cardiac poison? Or a blazing gun?" He sighed then said, "I'm pulling you out."

Ghost's grip tightened in Ian's.

"Sir," Falcon glanced over the clasped hands on the table. "Who is the replacement unit?"

"No one. I'm pulling you all back to base." Gale explained, "We'll have approval to bring Mr Frost in now, this attack as evidence. Everyone's coming home."

"Thank you, sir," Falcon repeated. "The intruder?"

"Escaped."

Kazu cringed and, unable to hold out any longer, passed out.

~~*

When Kazuhi woke, it was dark.

He was in his room at base. He rolled his eyes around the room, his neck and head fixed in a brace, taking in his familiar surroundings. There was nothing there to mark it as his, really. He did not own much. Indeed, the only things to identify the room as his, at first glance, were the world map on the wall and the silver dish on his dresser. The world map was his reminder to see the world, and the silver antique dish an old find, merely to hold his watch and other small accessories.

There was no one in sight in the small hall of a room, but a small beep on his bed side monitor must have sent a signal that he had regained consciousness because a familiar uniformed medic came to check up on him.

"You shouldn't speak for a while, with these stitches in place, so just stay calm and get some rest," Elisa told him, peeking under the bandages. Smiling down at him, she murmured, "I'm just glad you're okay and will be back on your feet in just two days."

He gestured, giving hand signals.

"You're welcome." She smiled, "Yes, my holiday was lovely. You should book yourself one out soon, I swear all you black ops never take time off."

More hand signals.

She shook her head, "No, I don't know the status or current progress on your latest case." With a murmured apology, she left.

Unable to sleep, Kazu stared at the ceiling. He ticked off the seconds and minutes absently, thoughts preoccupied with the chance he had let slip through his fingers.

Ian.

Their relationship had been brutally cut off before it could really begin. And now there would be another operative, regardless the original plan had been tossed out. There would be a new guardian who would not get himself shot up and sliced, who would not be worthless and unable to do his job. He mentally berated himself; he was an idiot! He should have kept his mind clear and focused on his mission instead of giving in to the emotions behind his desire to protect his ward.

In the end, they were separated. And Ian would most likely be shipped off somewhere to cool his heels while the Investigations team cleared up the mess and tracked down the targets.

Had *Ghost* not let that intruder get away, there would have been a chance to remain together just a little longer. Had the intruder been captured, the case could have been solved, Ian would have possibly been sent home and they could finally meet as... normal.

But now that the enemy was aware RIG knew Ian was their target, they would not run the risk of sending in more assassins in the chance one might be caught and traced back to the source. Things were trickier now.

Politics and subtler subterfuge would be employed now to get to Ian, and Ghost was of no use in that respect. He was a field agent, not an investigator or researcher. He would be sent back into the field when able and he would likely never lay eyes on the civilian again.

The thought brought a crushing weight of sadness down on him.

He missed Ian already.

~~*

The week went by painfully slowly at first. But under the many tasks and routines of his day and as pressure and fatigue mounted, the time suddenly seemed to slip away. Before he knew it, the bandages on his neck were off, scabs had formed and he had therapy in progress.

Ghost stood in front of his mirror, turning his head this way and that to see the healing scar on his neck at different angles. When he stared at it directly, just seeing it as it was, fingertips brushing over it, he consoled himself with his battle scar—the mark of one who had tried to protect. He lifted his shirt and poked at the brown dot of a scar where he'd been shot with the poison dart. That one was not the same.

Pushing his shirt back down, he straightened his appearance then turned to leave. He nodded to those he passed in the hall, making his way out of the building to the parking lot. He made his way over to his bike, inspecting her thoroughly before starting her up and revving out.

On the road, he drove quickly and efficiently, obeying all the traffic laws and ignoring the people on the streets; the smiles, the waves, the expressions and ways of life.

He parked in front of a pub, removed his gear and stowed it away in his bike's top box. Then he crossed the street and hiked slowly up through the park, stopping to pet at dogs that sniffed interestedly at him and waving casually to their owners. The inviting smiles of some of the women went mostly ignored though politely acknowledged. And at last when he stood at his destination, he shoved his hands into his pockets and looked out over London, from his stand at the top of Primrose Hill.

He stood where he had the last time he was here, imagining Ian by his side looking nervous and flustered, a faint flush across his cheeks. There had been hope shining in the civilian's eyes that day, along with hesitance and a touch of sheepishness. The overall effect had been utterly charming, and he wished he had told Ian that. He almost wished he had told Ian sooner of his own feelings himself.

Closing his eyes, Ghost replayed their conversation in his mind and smiled to himself.

The park traffic began to dwindle as the sun set, and when it was finally gone, the light along with it, and there was no one there, Ghost finally turned away and back to his bike. On his way home, he passed by Ian's house, killing his bike engine a street corner before and coasting to a stop across the street from the place. All was dark and it was obvious there was no one in.

A parked van, decrepit and rusty stood parked nearby, directly over a pot hole, and he recognised one of his department's own surveillance vans. He wondered if they had seen Eileen; wondered who would be feeding the cats.

Instead of asking, he revved up and sped away.

~~*

A full ten days after the incident at the Frost house, Ghost was sent on a reconnaissance mission to Thailand. As he dressed to leave, no packing necessary, there came a knock on his door. Opening it he found May, her face expressionless as she held her hand out to him. He lifted his hand to receive what she gave him, a trinket of gold; a necklace.

Ian's necklace.

She moved away but paused in the hall, turning back to watch him admire the jewellery before coming back and whispering to him, "Falcon is with him. He asked about you. He was worried."

Meeting her eyes, Ghost said sincerely, "Thank you."

Her eyes widened briefly but then she smiled faintly at him. A kind of comprehension dawned in her eyes before she nodded and moved along.

Reverently, *Kazuhi* unclasped the necklace, fastened it about his own neck and tucked it under his neckline. With a new spring in his step, mindfully aware of the cool metal against his skin, he shut his room door behind him and went to meet Gale.

He absorbed everything about the mission attentively, focusing with his usual dedication and went on his way. At the airport, Ghost mulled over Ian some more, turning his memories over and over in his mind. With his memories on playback, he watched Ian smile dozens of different ways, watched the different ways the man gestured and how he looked at Kazu with such gentleness in his eyes. He remembered the jokes Ian made, the things he'd been told, and the touches his skin had memorized. Most of all, he enjoyed the incident in the music store, when Ian had been jealous and possessive of him.

He missed that.

Through waiting, check in and boarding, Ghost recalled the different shades of Ian's hair, the texture of his skin and the feel of Ian's body against his own. He wondered how it could be that he would feel this strongly for someone he had never even kissed.

He wondered if perhaps he had fallen in love—but he wasn't ready to even begin to answer that question just yet.

Throughout the flight, a direct one to Hong Kong, Ghost remained in his semi-sleeping state. Down enough not to be bothered by coherent thoughts and enough to rest, but not so deep that his mind would not be solely occupied by flashing blonde hair and smiling hazel eyes.

In Hong Kong's Kai Tak airport, Ghost paused before the window of a simple tourist shop. There was a display case of lucky cats, each with a single paw raised as they sat on their hind legs. With that idea, he found some time to stop by a fancy jewellers' shop and bought a charm pendant in a dark jade. He clasped it about his own neck finger poking over the trio on the charm, and vowed to himself he would replace it around Ian's neck.

Should their paths ever cross again.

~~*

When Ghost returned from his mission, London did not seem as welcoming as it had before.

He passed through customs and baggage unhurriedly but with purpose. He wore his vision-goggles, an inconspicuous sunglass-looking model, perched on his head. His findings, everything he had seen and heard, were stored in the memory stick in its case in a pocket of his skin-suit which he wore underneath his civilian clothing. Little else of what he carried mattered to him.

A nondescript black Toyota Prius swerved in before him when he stepped out to the designated meeting point, the nano-echoes resonating off the vehicle identifying it as a RIG-sent car. He got in, nodding to the driver who smiled back and regaled him with the action and results of the latest football match and the fortunately good weather.

Ghost let the man chatter, as most bored people were apt to do, and merely hemmed or nodded at all the appropriate places.

As the traffic became a little heavy and the driver took a detour, Ghost spoke up, "Can we pass by somewhere? I need to make a quick stop before the sun sets." He smiled a small charming smile, "Unless we need to get back right away?"

"Er, no, there's no hurry," the man looked confused. "I've only just gone to work for the Research Office, a lady there just gave me this box, your picture and told me where to fetch you. And she didn't give a deadline of any sort."

"Box?"

"Yea, box, this one," he gestured to the front passenger seat. "She told me to give it to you if you wanted it..." Ghost leaned over to look and there was a plain card box about the size of a cigarette ream. The driver handed it over to him. The nano-resonance was loud from it. "Where do you want to go?"

"Regent's Park," Ghost answered absently, studying the box. He carefully unwrapped it wondering if perhaps there was some sort of trap but he sensed nothing and eventually, he pulled the wrapping away to reveal a nano-transponder and... letters.

Involuntarily catching his breath, Ghost lifted them out and shuffled through them, noting the different stationary used and that there were numbers on them. On the front of each, in elegant script writing was the single word, 'Kazuhi'.

In Ian's handwriting.

Heart beating heavily, Ghost selected the letter numbered one, and slipped a finger through the sealed flap. Slowly, he pulled the single sheet of wrinkled note paper free and began to read.

Dear Kazu,

God, I've been so worried! I don't know how you are or where they have taken you.

Falcon has taken over my...caretaking. There was a while when I wasn't being monitored, when he and everyone else involved in this case went into a meeting. I wandered around that day asking for the infirmary but when I got there, there was no trace of you. Needless to say, Falcon wasn't pleased I had left from where he had 'put' me. When I told him where I had gone and why, he explained that all operative rooms are like hospital rooms, monitored and safe. I asked him to bring me to your room then, but he only looked at me strangely before saying we would need to go to our own rooms to rest. He told me this is for my own protection, that it is now his job to keep me safe.

I asked him when you would be back to protect me again and it was then he explained that you would not be coming; that you are too important an operative to send off on a babysitting mission. He seemed annoyed with me then, and I supposed he doesn't like being saddled with 'babysitting' much

himself. I wondered then if perhaps you never smiled and were so displeased so often, because you yourself did not like to baby sit me either...

I wonder when I shall see you again. I would ask that question first.

Ian

Dear Kazu,

It's been two days since I saw you last. I've been brought to one of the higher floors of this building. There are bedrooms here like hotel rooms, complete with paper and envelopes though there are no hotel insignias upon these, of course. I have decided to take the lot they have left, though it is not much, because I would like to keep paper close at hand so that I may write to you. I find I am torn between wanting to use the paper, and keeping it because it is the closest thing to you I have come across that I can take.

They made me leave everything behind that night, you see. I think of your clothes that were left in your room. I think I might have nicked that black tank shirt you had worn that first day you were there, would I had the chance to go find it. But I have nothing. Just this paper and this pencil, and the memories I have made of you.

Ian

Dear Kazu,

Today is the evening of the third day since I have seen you. We are leaving in a little while. May had come to tell me, bringing me a passport that has my picture but a different name and other information I do not recognise. She shot me up with nano mites again. As she sat with me for a while, I asked her about you. She says you are awake, that you are well and recovering. I was so glad to hear this but find it maddening to realise you are in this same building as I but I cannot go to you...

She must have sensed my unrest because she explained to me it is normal to feel gratitude to one who has protected you. She told me it was normal to long for you and feel safest with you... she said things about psychology which I see no importance in enough to remember and recount. I jumped up from my seat, I was so angry for a moment, and I wanted to tell her how I feel about you but I stopped myself and sat back down.

I realise now how severely we might have been dealt with had we been found out. But I do believe that those closest to us would understand were they to know. And yet, I am not sure I can ever find a way to send these letters to you, for fear that your mail is monitored and you will indeed be caught.

I asked May to do me a favour: I gave her my mother's necklace and asked if she would be able to give it to you. She seemed quite surprised at the request. I suppose she thinks this is more of my 'gratitude' but I pressed her and she gave her word she would put it in your hands. She gave her word, and I believe her.

I was glad then, that at least one of us would have something material of the other. I am hoping now that I wasn't too presumptuous. I just thought that you might, somehow, appreciate it. Do you even miss me at all, I wonder?

I miss you.

Ian

"We're here, sir."

"Thank you."

"Are you alright sir?" the chauffeur asked with neighbourly concern. "Your voice doesn't sound quite right. Coming down with a cough or cold perhaps?"

"Just... tired." Kazu swallowed past the rocks in his throat as he slowly and carefully, like all the others before, folded the letter in his hand and slipped it back into its envelope. He got out of the car and crossed the road, the words from the letters spinning in his mind. He followed one of the paths and made his way up to the top of Primrose Hill.

There, he looked out over London, watching the twinkling lights, thinking of the other letters in the box he hadn't yet read and the two weeks it had been since the night he was last a part of Ian's life.

CHAPTER FIVE: HOPE

Ian spoke French fluently.

His mother had spoken it; she'd been French, and she had sounded beautifully exotic. He had wanted, as a child, to emulate her, the brightest and most amazing constant in his young life. He had yearned to know more and yet more about the lovely woman who could control his gruff and temperamental father with soft words and cajoling eyes.

He spoke the words the way he remembered she did, with less throaty stress on the sibilants and a lilting caress over sharper syllables. And for some reason, this made him feel closer to her despite having only known her for a short time in his life; her identity as a Frenchwoman had always been something she'd loved to share with her children. It had been close to ten years since she and his father had passed away, and in time, they would be gone longer than he had known them. It wasn't fair in the sense that Time could keep racking up the numbers on being without than with.

The same way it racked up time away from Kazu, he thought, unseeingly looking out his window as he sat on the sill of his bedroom window.

Ian wondered where Kazu was now.

Probably on a new mission, protecting someone else perhaps...or taking someone's life? He shuddered. Imagining quiet Kazu as a killer did not sit well with him. He wondered how Kazu coped emotionally and psychologically. It was not normal to live one's days taking other people's lives, and yet Kazu had seemed perfectly...normal.

Perhaps, however, it wasn't as bad as he thought. After all, how many people could the Royal Service really want dead and 'out of the way'? More than likely, he was being employed as a spy. Ian tried to seriously imagine Kazu in a suit, in a James Bond-ish type of situation, but it just made him smile.

The punk certainly wasn't tall enough.

Kazu had seemed so at home in casual clothes and rugged wear, and Ian could scarcely imagine him in anything else. To him, Kazu would always be the punk kid he had posed to be.

Ian paused then, a thought dawning on him. What if that was how he had been led to see him because Kazu was just that good at his job? Could his musings not be so far off the mark? Even then, he wondered why he could not bring himself to push Kazu from his thoughts. They obviously did not belong together whichever situation, effective spy or dangerous killer, truly applied...

With a sigh, Ian pulled away from the window and went to get his jacket. He could tell by the darkening sky that he would be leaving for dinner soon. Indeed, his 'babysitter' knocked on his door minutes later and together they left for dinner.

Everyday, they ate someplace new, never walked the same streets at the same time and never followed a pattern. They were going to move to a different section of Paris the next day for a change of supposed scenery, just to throw things off. Ian was learning that something, anything, as long as it was change, was necessary every few days. It was what kept them going and where his minders felt most comfortable, being on their toes and where nothing was familiar.

Kazu had mentioned something like this to him once, that familiarity bred complacency, that familiarity made a human being automatically assume things an operative had no business assuming when lives were on the line. And so because Kazu had told him this, Ian did not put up a fuss.

He and John Falcon maintained a casual air as they went to the restaurant at the end of their street, a bright place that supposedly served excellent Steak Tartare. Things went calmly well, from seating to ordering. But conversation, as it had always been, seemed to take a little more effort.

"How are you coping?" John asked quietly as they waited for their drinks. He leaned across the table, hands folded before him, green eyes glittering with concern.

"Fine, fine," Ian insisted with a small smile. He brushed his fingers through his short-cropped brown hair, the new cut and colour courtesy of his need to change his appearance. He idly wondered if Kazuhi would like how he looked now.

"You're hardly fine," John commented with a soft shake of his head, strands of auburn brown hair falling on his forehead. "From comparison to your behaviour at the house, to now, you're worryingly listless."

"I'm simply...shaken, John," Ian smiled as reassuringly as he could, annoyed he could not even have his emotions to himself. "It is nothing to be concerned about."

"You're not a good liar," John said softly, sitting back to smile appreciatively at the attending waitress when she set down their drinks.

"Well keep your peace." Close to losing his temper, Ian hissed when the woman left them, "I don't want to discuss this."

"And I still have a few things to say." John fiddled with his fork a bit before continuing, "I think you are...attached to Kazuhi." He met Ian's eyes before rushing to explain, "You know, it's normal to—"

"Shut up!" Ian snapped sharply, barely able to keep his volume low. "I said I did not want to discuss this." He glanced around to make certain no one was listening then leaned forward to continue his heated statement, "And I refuse to listen to another lecture about how normal it is to feel however it is you think I do, how there is a clinical name and that it is a normal reaction, and all the psychological bullshit surrounding it. I don't want to hear it!"

Brows raised and surprise apparent, John murmured, "I'm sorry."

Ian closed his eyes a moment, willing the anger away, and sat back. He quietly said, "It's not your fault." He pinned John with a warning look and said, "But whatever you have to say, I don't want to hear it. You don't know what I am thinking or what I am feeling."

"May mentioned to me that you..." John hesitated a moment before finishing, "Might honestly care for him."

Ian turned his most icy glare on his table mate and flatly announced, "None of my emotions are anyone else's business. Not yours and not hers."

"She also mentioned that he cares for you in return," he added quietly. Ian stared. "She spoke with me off-the-record, mentioned Kazuhi's been sent on a recon in some part of Asia." John waved his hand dismissively but studied Ian's impassive stare, gave a sigh and then continued, "She gave him your necklace before he left. She said he put it on right there and left with it around his neck, tucked out of sight."

Ian contemplated this, uncertain but elated nonetheless.

There were implications behind Kazuhi's actions...yet while Ian told himself not to hope too much, he found a kind of excitement rising in his chest. He tried to control his breathing, to relax. But the questions and possibilities burned in his mind. It took all he had not to acknowledge what John the operative, might be trying to get him to accidentally admit.

The waitress returned then, and Ian felt terribly frustrated. He placed his order and waited respectfully for John to give his own. And when she left Ian could bear it no longer so he leaned forward across the table a little and, choosing his words, hesitantly asked,

"Is there a way that I can...communicate with him?"

John gave him an unreadable look.

Forcing back a sigh, Ian sat back, misery descending as his hope began to wane. Even he knew the communication between operatives and their command central followed no pattern except to be few and far between. John and his men were trusted to keep to orders and keep their charge alive.

But John sighed, pulling Ian from his thoughts, and asked, "What form of communication are we talking about here?" His eyes seemed to convey a promise and suddenly, whether wise or not, Ian gave a little more of his trust.

"Letters," he glibly replied. A lazily amused smile curled John's lips, and Ian flushed as he defended, "It's nothing like that. I write. I always have. And I happened to write a few notes which sit around and gather dust. Besides, they are done and—" Ian cut himself out and had to look away and swallow before finishing defensively, "ready to go."

"Uh-huh," John chuckled.

Ian glowered.

~~*

As quietly as he had always, Ghost moved out of the elevator and down the hall.

It was late at night; he had not meant to remain out for so long, but he had, and he only wished not to disturb anyone. Not for the first time, he wondered why he could not be like some of the other Operatives who did not *live* their work as he did and who went out and partied. Despite his preoccupying musings and inattention, he half turned toward the door across from his own a full second before it opened.

"I thought that was you," Jason Arch said, the music from his headset pulled down around his neck quite audible in the silence of the hallway. He answered the unasked question on Ghost's face, "I was waiting for you to get back."

"Hello, Jason," Ghost murmured, eyes appreciatively skimming over his half-clad colleague. He noticed Jason's longer hair, the ash blonde waves falling haphazardly, attractively messy, across his forehead and over his ears. It made the guy look younger, he noticed. He met Jason's hazel eyes, absently noticing they were not quite the shade he most appreciated. "It's good to see you back safe." Despite the closeness of their friendship, he politely asked, "How can I help you?"

A naughty grin swept across Jason's face at that, one which Ghost recognised rather well and made a corner of his lips rise with amusement. Jason predictably teased, "Oh, the many answers I could give to that one question..." He chuckled lightly, but he soon sobered, reaching out to brush his fingertips over Ghost's arm then gently said, "As it happens, I wanted to check up on you. I haven't seen you in a while. I missed you."

Ghost nodded, understanding. He had missed his best friend as well, and he smiled softly when he said, "I have to shower and change. I'll be back. We'll talk."

Jason nodded in return and stepped back into his room, shutting his door silently behind him. Ghost went to attend to himself, thoughts preoccupied by the history he shared with Jason. Things could get unpleasant if he did not outline his feelings.

Washed and rinsed, he tossed his head back, face into the spray of hot water and enjoying the moment alone. Relaxed, he almost did not notice the soft footfall from his room. Without moving, opening his eyes, or turning, he gave a soft sigh and ordered quietly,

"Don't." He could sense the pause behind him. "Things are not the same. I was going to explain to you."

"There's someone else." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," Ghost replied. He shut the water flow and turned to reach for his towel, not meeting his companion's eyes. "It was...quite sudden."

"I'm torn between being glad for you for finding something real, and sad that we really are not more than friends." Then hesitantly, "How do you feel?"

Ghost didn't want to lie, but he didn't know how to express himself on the matter. He met Jason's gaze and let the other see the emotions in his own eyes.

"You care for this person," Jason whispered, surprised. Ghost nodded. "Who is it?"

Looking away, Ghost dried himself off, thinking. He flashed Jason a look, a plea to give him time, and began to dress. When he was done, he looked up at his patiently waiting friend and formerly casual-lover. Jason approached and draped an arm around his shoulders and Ghost followed, being led to the bed, following Jason into it and lying by Jason's side. He relaxed, enjoying the comfortable silence with his best friend then began to whisper,

"I was sent to eliminate him. But something went wrong confirming ID so the mission was recalled..."

~~*

When Ghost awoke, it was with a snap of his eyes opening, body twisting automatically and his hand reaching to close firmly around the wrist descending to threaten his personal space.

"Well, good to see your guard is as solid as ever," Gale rumbled, half-pleased and half-annoyed.

Gale nodded his head toward the other side of Ghost's bed. Ghost sensed Jason's presence behind him, understanding Gale's interest, and narrowed his eyes at Gale's amused expression.

He roughly asked, "Why are you here?"

"New mission," Gale replied casually. He tried to tug his wrist back, but the hold did not relent.

"You don't normally sneak into my room to fetch me," Ghost commented, eyes narrowing.

"You don't normally avoid me." Gale gazed imperiously down his nose at Ghost, but there was a note of hurt in his voice that made Ghost pause then release his grip.

"You don't normally make this much noise," Jason said groggily, rolling over to curl into Ghost's side.

"You don't normally sleep here," Ghost and Gale muttered simultaneously. They glared at each other as Jason chuckled and sleepily rubbed his eyes.

Lounging back, Jason crossed his arms under his head and calmly regarded Gale. Despite Gale's seniority in rank, the operatives' living quarters was considered a Safe Zone, and rank held no jurisdiction in the place. That aside, the three were true friends while both Gale and Jason were aware they were the closest to Ghost there had ever been.

Giving Jason a nod, Gale turned solemn eyes to Ghost and said, "It's your time off, I know. But we have a lead on Stephen Arling, the target we were originally after in Ian Frost's case." Gale ignored the way both Jason and Ghost tensed and continued, "I figured you would want first dibs on this."

"You figured correctly," Ghost said flatly, getting liquidly to his feet. He snatched a work-suit from one of his drawers and headed for his bathroom to change, leaving the door partially open behind him.

Gale turned to Jason. "I understand you only just got back a few days ago, while Ghost was away?" Jason nodded, and Gale cocked a brow before asking, "How much do you know about the Frost case?"

"A great deal, I believe," Jason softly replied, sitting up and tossing his legs over the edge of the bed. Gale sat beside him, tacit and waiting. "He...suspects he has honest affections for...Frost." There came a soft snort from the bathroom which they both ignored.

"I wasn't too happy when he told me, and I'm not certain command would look well on such a relationship as things stand," Gale muttered. "This case has a lot of people baffled."

"And I'm certain we are all aware of that," Jason returned, eyes lifting to watch when Ghost emerged from the bathroom, dressed in a standard RIG work-suit.

Ghost calmly stated, "And it's about time I get a shot at changing that don't you think?"

"Going to chase him as a civilian, then?" Gale teased, chuckling when Ghost shot him a dirty look. "But oh, you won't be so calm when you hear what we've discovered." He turned to Jason, "You in, Arch? We could use you."

Jason jumped up and headed out the door; Gale and Ghost waited quietly in the hallway. As they marched down the hall toward the elevators together, Ghost observed, "This is the first time you've been so...casual about an Op."

"This is the first time things have gotten this complicated." Gale nodded to Jason, "You heard about the data wipe?" When Jason nodded, he said, "It's in relation to this particular case."

"Missing info and wrong movements are a scary combination," Jason observed, leading the way into the lift.

"Precisely." When the doors had closed behind them, Gale said, "This has all been messy since the very beginning." He turned to flash Ghost a small smile, "But now I think we have a chance to end this. And do it in a very *satisfying* manner."

Ghost paused, not liking the expression on Gale's face, then asked, "What are you talking about?"

"This isn't a Black Op, it's an Open one —class Red. Hence my...casual take on it." The doors opened, and Gale led the way to one of the smaller briefing rooms. "Arling, hell of a target that he is, resurfaced in the open and seems rather unafraid. There must be a reason behind his carefree behaviour, but I still want you in his face. The risks are high."

"Do we have any leads on how to get close to him?" Jason asked as they all took seats.

Gale laughed, but there was a dangerous and somewhat wry undertone to it. He fixed Ghost with a meaningful look and said, "Luckily, Mr Stephen Arling seems to have a penchant for young Asian men."

Ghost stiffened.

CHAPTER SIX: CAPTURE

"Mocha Frappuccino with an extra shot," called the barista, eyes half-heartedly searching for a claimant's signal.

"Thanks," a nearby customer greeted, smiling back when the barista gave him a somewhat-sincere smile. Collecting his cup he moved toward a couch in the corner, smoothing down his suit jacket as he went. He nodded politely in return when he met someone's eyes, not pausing in his step to greet the familiar face.

In the corner was the couple he had noticed earlier; an attractive young man sat speaking earnestly to a pretty blonde young woman who looked upset by his words. As he approached and they continued their heated discussion, he pretended to ignore them but listened in on their conversation as he took his seat. He was within ear shot after all.

"I don't know," the young man was saying. "This isn't a simple matter, and it's difficult to know how I really feel about this all. I need some time to think things through."

"You didn't have to call me out in public to tell me this," the girl said, her voice strained. "Things like this... I deserved to be told something so private, in private!"

"I realise that now, and I am so sorry," the young man said softly, miserably. He rubbed a hand across his face, obviously stressed. "I just didn't know what to do."

"I don't know what you expected of me, but I can't take this." She collected her bag, shaking her head, "I have to go."

"Marianne..."

"No!" She paused to hiss into his face, and swept away. With a weary sigh, the young man slumped back, propping his elbows up on the seat armrests so he could bury his face in his hands.

The observing customer took this opportunity to study the young man, who was indeed more attractive than he'd originally observed. Slight, slender but muscular build, only around five feet and five inches tall perhaps. Chunks of silky black hair framed his heart-shaped face, and when those elegant hands parted, slanted black eyes hinted at Asian heritage.

"What are you looking at?" the youth demanded crossly.

Tentatively, he tried, "I couldn't help but overhear..."

"You shouldn't listen in on things that don't concern you!" The young man seemed to dismiss the customer then, snatching up his own cup of coffee and downing a gulp. He choked, however, and the

amused observer moved closer to helpfully thump the young man on his back. Eyes red and ego bruised, the youth begrudgingly muttered, "Thanks."

"You're welcome." He dared a grin, "No sense in adding up your misfortunes by letting you choke to death after that spectacular shoot-down."

With a grimace, the young man admitted, "I didn't handle that very well at all." He sighed, "I need a drink." With a distasteful glare at the menacing cup of coffee, he clarified, "and I don't mean more of this crap."

With a laugh, the older man asked, "What's your name, kid?"

"Don't call me a kid!" He glowered, then sniffed and replied, "It's Aki. You?"

Finishing off the rest of his Frappuccino, the customer said, "If you let me buy you a drink, you can call me Stephen."

Aki smiled almost warmly, youthful features seeming ever more breathtaking, and said, "Deal."

~~*

Stephen was feeling reckless enough, daring enough to slip a liquid dosage of his favourite 'relaxant' into Aki's drink.

It wasn't that he didn't have confidence in attracting the kid all on his own. Hell, he knew he looked close to a decade less than his thirty-two years. Body as trim, muscled and tight as four visits a week to the gym and intense working-out could get him, not to mention his extra training...

But never mind that.

Aki was driving him mad. Why, the kid had been nothing short of dazzling all evening, dancing seductively with partner after partner in this club they'd chosen, and downing drink after drink. Well, he certainly knew how to have fun, Stephen admired. Aki's smiles came more easily now, and he had become delightfully affectionate with his guard lowered. His initial display of temper had magically never resurfaced, and his charm had begun to attract more than a little attention...

Stephen found he didn't like that very much at all, hence the slip of his hand over Aki's glass.

Oops.

He shook his head to a familiar face he passed in the crowd on his way to Aki's side; that could wait until later. He had... some things to do first. His breath hitched at the wide smile he received when he found Aki on the dance floor and handed over the drink. In turn, he smiled warmly to the trusting young man and watched as Aki knocked back nearly half of it in one gulp.

"Careful, Aki," Stephen leaned closer to say, "You don't want to choke again, now do you?"

Instead of blowing up Aki laughed, a hand landing on Stephen's arm, and said, "You'll save me again, won't you?"

"Always," Stephen murmured under his breath, taking a swig of his own drink.

He moved to stand to one side and watch Aki make an attractive spectacle of himself. Stephen waited, slowly consuming his current drink, pacing the time for the drug to take effect before setting his empty glass down and moving into the crush of people toward his object of interest.

Aki was dancing with another young man now, much to Stephen's surprise, tall and attractive with ash blonde hair and alcohol-glazed pale brown eyes. Their seeming pre-occupancy with each other irked him, a slow burn of possessiveness winding forked-tongued in his gut. With a growl, he stepped up behind Aki, slipping an arm around the young man's waist, and pulled him away from the stranger.

"Get lost," the stranger said with some hostility, but Stephen ignored him, pulling Aki against himself. In his arms, Aki gave a soft laugh, slender arm reaching over to clasp at Stephen's shoulder.

"Sorry, but I'm here with him tonight," Aki said to the stranger, soothing Stephen's temper instantly.

He flashed the 'intruder' a triumphant grin, and the young man huffed before turning reluctantly away. He pulled Aki away as well, moving to the beat, pressing the young man against himself and enjoying the way Aki turned slowly around to face him. Unashamedly, the young man pressed close, arms lifting to hold Stephen just as tightly.

Surprised at both the young man's earlier choice of partner and his current behaviour, Stephen bluntly said, "I thought you were straight."

"At Starbucks when we met earlier, I was actually telling Marianne," Aki laughed, "That I might be interested in playing both fields."

Stephen laughed too, dazzled and delighted. He pulled Aki closer still, bending to whisper into one small ear, "I'm so glad for that."

Aki seemed startled, looking up at him with wide eyes. He seemed embarrassed when he hesitantly said, "I... I've never..."

"Don't worry, Aki," And he wanted to shudder too, blood roaring in his veins, when Aki shook in his arms at the desire Stephen could not help but drape over the simple phrase. He murmured, "I can be incredibly patient."

And he was.

He danced with Aki, held his partner close, kept himself in control and merely relished the feel of Aki's rising... *interest*. Oh yes, he relished that, sliding a hand down very low on Aki's back to help press the youth's hardness against his thigh. Despite his possessiveness, he even allowed Aki to dance with a few other people when he himself needed to seek the men's room, and wisely Aki would leave those other people when Stephen came to get him back.

That ash blonde from earlier was beginning to annoy him, however. But late in the night, he gave a signal to his chauffeur and took the time to admire the angry and envious flashing of the intruding young man's hazel eyes when he escorted a well-drugged and unstable Aki from the club.

As he guided Aki toward the exit, he smiled when his armed guards swept into the driveway and flanked them, escorting them into the dark recesses of his Hummer. Aki groggily resisted, but Stephen would have none of it.

There was the noise of struggle behind him, but Stephen ignored it, leaving matters to his men, and ordered his chauffeur to go.

Within the speeding Hummer, he reached into a side compartment and pulled out several items. First, a pre-filled plunger syringe which, pulling a languid Aki astride his lap, he set on the young man's neck and delivered a full dose of one of his little 'treats' then tossed the syringe aside. Aki started, pulling out from the daze the earlier drug had induced in him, hands scrabbling in shock when, as Stephen well knew, his world started to spin.

"What did you do to me?" Aki hoarsely demanded, panting, eyes unfocused, fighting to get away.

Stephen smiled and waited, keeping his hold and the young man in his arms. Scant moments later, he slid his hand under Aki's shirt to skirt up his intoxicatingly smooth belly and play over a nipple. His captive gasped and arched into the touch, and Stephen grinned. Quickly, he bound Aki's hands together with specially-made nylon cord wrist-cuffs. He turned to lay the young man back on the car seat, leaving Aki's legs splayed around his hips, and pushed Aki's hands up overhead to the seat beyond and pinned the little delight down.

"I was wondering if they would send you," he said thoughtfully, one-handed shedding his jacket as he bent over his captive. "I did so love the way you looked in the photographs they sent me, you make such a handsome punk." He bent and captured Aki's mouth in a demanding and rough kiss, holding the young man down when he struggled.

When Stephen lifted his head, the drugs had taken full effect, and Aki lay mostly submissive beneath him, breath coming in panting gasps, slave to the drugs forcing sensitivity, weakness and arousal upon him.

"Ohh," Stephen exaggeratedly sighed, admiring the view in his lap. He stroked possessive fingers over Aki's lovely features, "How I anticipate making you completely mine... *Kazuhi*."

~~*

Ian never suspected, of that Falcon was absolutely certain.

He could be such a trusting soul, Falcon noticed, who for all he had a sharp business mind, did not seem to truly see or notice the hidden agendas around him. When Falcon asked all his questions, revealed what Command had allowed him to let Ian know they'd unearthed about his past, Ian had only been embarrassed. There had been no maliciousness in him at all.

Falcon envied him, this strange sort of innocence Ian had.

And because of it, he waited. He let Ian have his day and waited as long as possible to tell his charge what had happened. As it was, it hurt to know he would break the peace Ian had now here in Paris where they were, for the most part, safe. He wondered if he'd be forgiven when Ian heard about the withheld truth, but then that hardly really mattered, in the greater scheme of things.

Command had hit upon some information which Falcon was to share with his charge, but felt personally reluctant to. He did his job anyway, of course, but only after a satisfying dinner and when they were finally alone in Ian's hotel room. So Ian sat before him, sifting through the photographs and documents on the table, expression tense and hands shaking.

"He... killed my parents...?"

"He was after your mother," Falcon said softly, "I think he made a mistake. From what we understand, your father wasn't supposed to be there." He sighed, "I'm sorry."

"He was a computer genius?" Ian's fingertips danced over one of the documents, voice shaking, "Rigged the traffic lighting system... He was responsible for their crash...?"

"I'm sorry," Falcon repeated.

"I don't know him..." Ian whispered roughly, denial in his tone, "I've never..."

His words trailed off when Falcon handed over a new photo. Softly Falcon explained, "This is him, just under a decade ago."

"Stefan..." Ian gasped.

"Stefan Artoise," Falcon confirmed. "He was the son of your mother's—"

"Bodyguard," Ian finished. He swallowed then shakily asked, his tone more knowing than Falcon would have guessed, "But the bodyguard was also her lover, wasn't he?" Tossing the photo down, Ian buried his face in his hands. "I remember him... them, Jean and Stefan. But Stefan, he was a strange one. Mother said it was because he had seen his father kill to protect her. That it had changed him. She worried about him."

Quietly, Falcon asked, "How much do you know?"

"I know Jean was involved with my mother. He divorced his wife soon after..." Ian took a deep breath, "they got involved. Jean took his son to move in with us, he and Stefan had a portion of our apartment here in Paris to themselves."

"That is a bit more than I expected you to know."

"Oh, I knew of her involvement with Jean," Ian muttered, lifting his head but turning to look out the window. "I knew of the others, too. My mother was very... passionate. She was too free, interested in

too many things and travelled too much. My father knew he could never really keep her; I think he just didn't look too hard at the things she did. He didn't want to know." Ian smiled softly to himself, "But even then, he was happy. We all were."

Falcon pulled out his palm pilot and quietly took notes, letting Ian talk it out.

"Stefan left soon after he graduated; he went back to his mother I think." Ian's brow furrowed as he recalled, "He and Jean fought a lot of the time before he left, his mother and my mother a sour point between them in the few years they lived with us." He sat back, eyes still staring unseeing out the window, "Mother and I travelled back and forth from London. I suppose we didn't see how bad it really was. I hadn't a clue, really, not until Jean and Mother fought..."

There was a long silence and Falcon worriedly watched emotions play over Ian's face. Hesitantly, he asked, "We think he is responsible for the loss of the information leading up to the night you and Ghost met. It wasn't until the precise time the mission was to be carried through that the information was deleted."

"But because... Ghost... was thorough," Ian filled in logically, stumbling over the name, "The time was overstepped and the blank-out noticed."

"Yes."

"Thank God for small favours," Ian said wryly.

"He went to a lot of trouble, Ian," Falcon said briskly, steering the conversation again. "You mentioned that his father Jean and your mother, they fought?"

"Yes. Jean wanted to leave," Ian whispered. His words gained speed and strength again with each word as he said, "He wanted to be with her, away from everything, but she would not leave Father, or us. He left his job in the end and... not much later... I heard that he..."

"Shot himself," Falcon supplied. "Yes. We managed to confirm that."

"Stefan is seeking revenge." Ian's eyes widened, and his gaze snapped to Falcon's. "Oh, God..." Further understanding dawned in his eyes, and he jumped to his feet, "Eileen. We have to get to my sister!"

With a sigh, Falcon winced. "I'm sorry, Ian." Bracing himself for the inevitable he said, "He already has her."

~~*

Falcon received the call at five o'clock in the morning, rising from his half-sleep when his nano-mites alerted him to the incoming call.

Without other unnecessary movement or even opening his eyes, heart-weary from seeing Ian's strain from recent news, he merely reached up to the vision-screen eye glasses sitting atop his head. Pressing a

button there to signal his awareness, the communication chip in his ear gave an unusual whine before Gale's voice came through,

"We're monitoring communication until further notice," the handler said without greeting. "So there may be some whines or feedback."

"Yea, I heard."

Ignoring him, "I have some bad news."

Falcon's eyes popped open, heart beginning to pound. He recognised the tone of Gale's voice. And sure enough, he sat stunned as the handler relayed events which had occurred only under an hour before. Hand shaking, he pulled his vision screen down and switched it on to review the photographs which Gale sent to him of the evening. He squinted at them, trying somehow to find something, anything at all, to help. But there was nothing he could see in the tiny images, and he willed himself to simply absorb the news.

"What's next?" He asked hoarsely.

"We're trying to track him via his nano-mites," the handler replied curtly.

"But since those only work at a particular distance and are only so strong..."

Gale said grimly, by way of dismissal, "I'll let you know as soon as I have anything."

"Wait," Falcon jumped in to say. He hated those words from a handler like any operative did, but he pushed that aside. Puzzling through what facts he had in his head, he asked, "What kind of mites does he have?"

"The new Resonance series." Gale seemed curious about this line of questioning, adding, "Ghost was part of the test team and got shot up with them every month, but on the same schedule as everyone else."

"Same schedule but new model..." Falcon murmured, mulling this over.

"Ideas?"

Falcon said slowly, "None at the moment." Then he smirked humourlessly and said, "I'll let you know as soon as I have anything."

"Bastard."

Falcon gave an internal groan that had nothing to do with Gale's reply. There was a step now he felt uncertain he could make, but he sympathised and had to try. Firming his tone he asked, "Do I relay this information to Frost? He could provide more information on possible—"

"I already know about Frost and Ghost." Falcon stilled at this and remained silent. Gale went on, "Yes, the whole damn story, I know it all. Impudent brat, you think Ghost wouldn't come to me?" He huffed, "You and me both know Ghost isn't the type to do things half-assed. But Frost, on the other hand... well."

Smiling to himself, Falcon realised Gale was taking a rather fatherly view on Ghost's side of the... romance. But the amusement made a quick death a heartbeat later. "He will want to return and be part of this."

"All the better," Gale gruffed, "I don't have to take as big a responsibility for civilian lives."

"You don't mean that," he protested.

"Course, I do," Gale drawled. "This is *my* operative we've lost because of that damn civilian."

In more ways than one, Falcon thought. He nodded, mentally switching back to official matters, "We haven't lost him yet. What are your orders, Sir?"

"Get your arse back here," Gale snapped. "And bring that sod responsible for my operative's love-sickness here with you."

CHAPTER SEVEN: FALL

Ghost gained consciousness as he always did, with a mental start. However this time, his body also jerked as he awoke in a way it never naturally did, awareness bringing a heavy and spinning reality with it.

Despite the horrible blur he knew to be his vision, he could not help but register the world seemed to be much too off-kilter and spinning so fast he felt he'd left his innards in the stratosphere on the other side of the planet. Gasping for breath, he turned over, pressing his bound hands to the ground between his knees, drawing his legs up beneath him. Stable enough, he bent over his knees, heaving. In seconds, unable to restrain it, he emptied what pathetic contents his stomach had over the floor. Panting, he concentrated on steadying his breathing, ignoring the stench of his own vomit, and trying to regain his shattered equilibrium.

"Who's there?"

The voice had been soft and hesitant, adjectives he had never thought he would ever apply to the voice he had almost instantly recognised... and dreaded hearing at this moment. His heart and stomach clenched with fear and dread, threatening to implode on his already abused insides. Coughing, he managed to clear his throat. When he felt able to do more than croak, he whispered,

"Eileen," coughs tore at his throat momentarily before he could continue. "Gods, Eileen, are you alright?"

She sobbed quietly, recognising his voice, half in relief and half... of something else, "Oh no... Kazuhi...?"

"Yea, it's me."

His throat hurt, his mouth was dry and he couldn't really see beyond the splotches of blurred colour of his vision. He turned his head in her direction anyway, squinting to try and see something, anything, of her condition. While she cried, he tested his bonds, moving to determine whether or not he was anchored anywhere. Able to move somewhat freely without an anchor, he studied his wrist-bonds for possible weaknesses.

Rubber-coated nylon cords, he surmised, and very well made. His ankles, he discovered, were each wrapped with a cuff of the same material, just there and not anchored. Not that it would really prove any sort of advantage. Already, not having even moved from where he'd awoken, he knew he was still helpless even if his wrists hadn't been bound. The drugs were simply too powerful, for even then he found he was powerfully aroused, his hardness pressed against his leg, firm and expectant.

Ignoring his physical conditions, he tilted his head and listened to the way Eileen's voice echoed in the room and tried to focus his nano-mites enough to understand the data they were feeding him. The mites were proving mostly useless however, as the digital portion of his brain could not process very much past the drug in his system or counter the effects it had on him.

Gods, what had the man injected into his system?

"Eileen?" Ghost called, his voice cracking. "Talk to me, please, are you alright?"

"Did you come after me?" she asked plaintively. "Is this my fault?"

"No," Ghost whispered hoarsely, barely able to speak at all, "It's not your fault at all, it's mine. I wanted to catch him when I found out who he was. I'm sorry, Eileen, I didn't even know you were here."

"Ian?" she demanded, some of her former presence of self rising to the surface. "Where is Ian, is he safe?"

"He's safe," Ghost reassured her, "So safe even I don't know where he is."

Her demeanour changed when she scoffed at that, "You work for *them* don't you? Those people who were there to protect Ian. You're part of that group."

"Yes," he hesitantly answered, saddened by the disdain in her voice. "I am."

"You know," she bit out at him, "He genuinely cared about you. He actually thought—"

"He knew, Eileen," he gently interrupted. "It was why he took me home. He knew who I was and what I am from the beginning; it was how we met."

She went quiet, her indignant breath all he could make out of her. Then he registered something else, finally—the faint whine in his ear. At least his communication chips were still working. Cocking his head, he listened and recognised the pitch a moment later. They were being monitored, he realised. That would be fine.

He couldn't manage to piece more than a just a few things together of all that had happened and perhaps why Eileen was here. He didn't know the full story, and there would be no handler to confirm it to him, but he could think clearly enough, and his experience would come in handy. At least, he understood this wasn't about solely Ian at all.

And for Eileen's sake, he hoped he thought of something to do soon.

Resisting the urge to shake his head in an attempt to clear it, for the drugs would only make him lose his centre of balance again if he did that, he tried to focus. He concentrated a little more on his breathing, trying to calm it and hoping that Eileen might unconsciously follow him. He sat up and moved away from where he knew his little puddle was toward where he sensed the nearest wall to be to get as comfortable as he could. It took a long while, but he got there and sat back against it, resting his head between the wide recesses of the metal-panelled wall. Warehouse, he sensed, from the absence of air-flow and wall panelling at his back, and lack of outside noise.

He tried again, "Eileen? Please, I need to know how you are. I can't see."

"I'm alright. I'm like you, tied up and blindfolded."

"But you're otherwise unhurt? How long have you—" he broke off when he felt it, the soft vibrations under his hands and his body of approaching footsteps. In seconds, a door swung open from Ghost's left, the sound marking it as no less than six metres away. A familiar and hated baritone said,

"Ahh, but he's not tied up or blindfolded. The drugs in his system disable him well enough, hindering a large portion of his chemical balance," Stephen drawled, slowly approaching Ghost. "Hence his lack of vision, imbalanced equilibrium, numb mouth, raw throat, the sensations of over-tight skin and... an interesting hardness," He arrived to stand before Ghost and emphasized his point by nudging between Ghost's legs with his foot.

While the temptation to take his captor down seemed intensely inviting, Ghost knew there was no way he could move fast enough to do it. Forcing the attempt would only serve to enrage his captor, and he needed to recuperate rather than try to stupidly fight in his condition, and possibly only gain more injuries. In any case, it took all his will to grit his teeth, a low growl escaping his throat... and not make a sound at the avalanche of drug-induced sensations Stephen's unwanted touch brought him.

"Ah," Stephen murmured, "I see you understand your position. And I also see your... reaction."

"What are you doing to him?" Eileen sharply demanded, and Ghost wanted to smile at her angry protectiveness.

"Oh, how rude of me," Stephen stepped away, walking toward where Eileen's voice originated. Ghost grit his teeth tighter, reining in his worry and panic at the idea Stephen might harm her. "Let me show you."

There was a gasp and soft sobbing before she called tentatively to him, "Kazuhi?"

He realised then Stephen had removed her blindfold. Carefully, he turned his head in her direction, trying to separate the blurs of colour in his vision enough to discern her face, but he could not. Helpless, he listened to her weep, her small murmurs of concern and worry. His attention was drawn away when Stephen's footfalls approached him again, unable to fight the urge to stiffen though he was glad the bastard at least moved away from Eileen.

"No!" she cried, "Leave him alone!"

"Oh?" Stephen chuckled, "Are you trying to protect this little killer? That's what he is, you know; a killer." Ghost sensed him move past and toward the door as he sneered, "He's an assassin, and a damn good one too, because he's run secret 'errands' for even Her Majesty. There is nothing left of his soul to save, no innocence to protect."

There came a loud cranking whir of gears and cogs turning, and metal struck the floor. Stephen must have taken hold of what sounded to be a chain, footsteps barely audible over the noise as he approached. Knowing it would be useless to move away, Ghost controlled his panic and remained still.

"What are you going to do with that?" Eileen demanded. But Stephen ignored her, and she continued to struggle and shout, "Get away from him!"

She fell silent as Ghost sensed Stephen crouch before him, between his feet. Stephen's breath fanned over his face when Stephen spoke again, "I'm a little disappointed you're not putting up much of a struggle."

He smiled into his captor's face and enunciated calmly, "I am not afraid of you."

"Ah yes," Stephen mused, "But you are afraid of what I am capable of doing to you, are you not?"

Stephen attached the chain to his wrist-bindings, and when that mechanical whir came again, Ghost found his bonds being pulled to one side. He tried to get his knees under him, crawl if he had to, but in the end he was forced to suffer the indignity of being dragged across the floor and up to his useless feet. The pulley kept him suspended, his arms thankfully accustomed to his weight as his legs hung like dead-weights.

"See that?" Stephen murmured as he approached Ghost, "Delightfully hard, never mind it took one of my little presents to achieve that. But he's still so attractive, isn't he, Eileen? Made for your brother, isn't that right?" His tone changed when he hissed, "But Ian's never going to have him."

Stephen pushed him where his hands were bound, rattling the pulley on its tracks toward the far wall and over a desk. There, Stephen pushed and bent Ghost down, who struggled in earnest —he really did— but couldn't fight well enough. His head was spinning too much, and his ears rang with Eileen's screams. There came a heavy pressure against his neck and he stilled, recognising a sharp edge when he felt it.

"Good boy," Stephen praised mockingly. "Be a good dog, little Ghost." In horror, Ghost felt as, with rough slashes and harsh tugging, Stephen cut his clothing away.

Bent over the desk, bare and naked with his clothing in tatters around him, Ghost knew fear. He was no stranger to it, he lived with it on each of his missions, but now he feared destroying Eileen who, judging by her harsh crying and pleas for Stephen to stop, watched the entire thing. And he sensed, with horror, what was going to happen.

"Leen, don't look." He forced himself to speak, his voice on its last legs, "Don't listen..." He winced at the harsh blow across the back of his head. Stephen laughed at him, a cold and curdling sound that made Ghost internally cringe.

Focusing, he gathered his control and schooled his expression and entire body to calm. Soon he began to detach, careful to turn his face away from Eileen... and he pulled further away, disassociating. He had done this before, he was trained for it.

To live.

He ignored the foreign hands when they played roughly over his skin, ignored the man's harsh panting in his ear, and disregarded the tongue licking skilfully at his skin. He remained silent at the growl when Stephen's hands tangled in the necklaces at his throat. He felt ashamed by his body's betrayal of him, but did not resist when Stephen's fingers sought to enter him. Forcing his mind, he pulled further away

and withdrew from the external circumstance, away from being aware enough to restrain a humiliated cringe at the way his arousal twitched, begging for attention he did not want to have from this man.

Past Eileen's screams and pleading, Stephen used him, careful even then to use lube so as not to allow Ghost's body to withdraw from his attentions from the pain of entry. No, he used the lube not out of consideration for him, but to complete his conquering of Ghost's body. Humiliating him before Eileen wasn't enough. Stephen made the act pleasurable enough, the sensations driven by the drugs in Ghost's body so that Ghost climaxed against his will, and despite his mental and emotional detachment.

Dirty, bruised and used, he lay panting.

He listened to Stephen right himself, heard the wipe of wet cloth and the running of water. Slowly, he reached for awareness, his survival instincts telling him he needed to regain proper sense of self for whatever came next.

He let himself be dragged away from the desk when Stephen unlocked the chain from his wrists, and let himself fall to the floor. He could not hold himself up anyway. He tensed at the sound of metal and rope, something being dragged in his direction, then jolted, coughing and sputtering when there came a blast of water. A hose, he realised, gasping for breath. The filth of being used, his clothes, all were washed away suddenly by the onslaught. When the water cut out, Ghost immediately started to shiver with cold.

The door opened again, and three sets of footsteps entered, wheeling something in judging by the sounds. Two approached Ghost and wrapped him up in towels. Someone set a plunger-syringe against his neck, and they shot him with whatever vile substance it was that... Stephen saw fit... to abuse... him... with...

He barely registered the two men as they lifted and set him on a cool pallet. They loosed his wrists but belted him down to the bed again anyway. He listened as the two approached Eileen, heard the scuffle as they struggled to get her under control, thankfully, without hurting her. Listening past the buzzing in his ears from the drugs and the whine from the monitoring chip in his ear, he registered distantly that she seemed to realise this and quieted, but begged not to be taken away from him and for them not to harm him further.

"Ah, *Cherie*," Stephen cooed to her, he switched to speaking in French then, and Eileen went quiet at his words, "These games are not suitable for your innocent eyes."

She screamed at him suddenly, resuming her struggling as she was dragged from the room, but Ghost heard her screech, "Curse you, you vile excuse for a human! Stefan!"

Stefan?

Ghost started when the third man touched him, hands soft and assessing. A doctor, Ghost sensed, and immediately a new fear washed over him. His vision was returning but he couldn't move, and he knew by the coming of shrouding darkness that he was losing consciousness. Just as his vision sharpened, as the old drugs finally wore off, Stephen bent over him and grinned madly into his face.

He shivered, but not with cold, and passed out.

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Ian and John caught a red-eye flight back to London.

At Luton airport, a non-descript and rather cliché black Toyota Prius fetched them at the driveway. It was also nano-mite noisy.

Falcon hated the ringing in his head sometimes, the constant buzz and noise of the mites at work. It did, however, distract him from the images and thoughts of what Stefan Artois could be doing with an operative in his grasp, particularly an operative to his sexual taste and who had stood between him and his objective.

He would envy Ian that, when he finally told Ian what had happened to Ghost. Surely it would be better if they didn't tell him just how much trouble Ghost was in? As it was, Ian looked older than he had the day before, when he'd told Ian of Eileen's capture. Falcon dreaded the discussion to come.

At HQ, he led the silent Ian into the building, past the security measures, logging him in and registering the new presence on the system. He accepted the plunger syringe from the security personnel at the last check-point, set it at Ian's neck and pressed the trigger, flooding Ian's system with a new dose of nano-mites. He took Ian up to the residence level, gesturing to operatives in the front room and hall not to question the presence of an unknown person in their residence area.

Opening the door to Ghost's room, he waited until Ian followed him in then shut the door.

"Kazuhi," Ian sighed, taking a deep breath. He turned to Falcon, confusion in his eyes. Searching Falcon's expression, he observed, "This is Kazuhi's room."

"This is Ghost's room," Falcon agreed with a subtle correction, but gave a nod of his head. He gestured to one of the two chairs by the foot of the bed, "Please, have a seat. There are some things we need to discuss."

Ian's eyes widened, and he walked unsteadily to the seat before settling himself down with shaking hands. He said softly, to no one in particular, "Something has happened to him."

"Yes." Falcon paused then said softly, wanting to get the distasteful situation over with, "Artoise has captured him as well." He sighed, then stilled until he recognised the presence that edged silently into the room behind him. He attempted to distract the distraught Ian, "Ian, this is Jason Arch. He's the newest addition to the team." Ian ignored them both, remaining looking down at his shaking clasped hands. "We need to talk to you about Stefan, and what we plan to do next."

"Kazuhi," Ian murmured miserably. "Dear merciful Lord," he breathed hoarsely, closing his eyes. He took deep breaths before he raised his head, gave a feeble nod to Arch then his eyes sought Falcon's, "Tell me what you are planning, and what you want me to do."

"With Ghost's capture, Standard Procedure dictates we remove you from risk," Falcon said, taking the bed and leaving Arch the other chair near Ian. "We will not trade or risk one hostage for the other."

"Kazu is a hostage, too," Ian said, confusion in his eyes. But then it cleared, "You're not considering rescuing him, are you? Is he..." he gave a hollow laugh as he finished, "Expendable?"

"Actually, he's very valuable," Arch said suddenly, his eyes still on Ian as they had been since he arrived. "We brought you here, to his room, to remind you of how real he is. That he is—"

"I sincerely doubt I could forget that," Ian interrupted with a scornful snort, "You don't understand—"

"We understand your relationship with Kazuhi," Falcon interrupted this time, his voice stern, shooting Arch a small look of warning.

Ian glanced over at him, doubt in his eyes.

Arch spoke again, voice gentler, "We know because we saw him change before our eyes. We saw, and we know how he feels for you." Ian's eyes widened a little. "You've been careful, trusting the only female amongst us and yes, she kept her word. Few people know, so don't worry. He'd be studiously monitored and kept well away from you if the Brass were aware of this. But they don't know, we won't tell them, and we don't judge him or you over this."

"And it is because of that we are leaving you here," Falcon finished. Ian started to turn an angry shade of red and opened his mouth to speak, but Falcon beat him to it, "Do you have any idea what Kazuhi would do to us if he knew we put you in danger?" Ian startled at that and slowly deflated. "You are going to stay here and safe, as far as we're concerned. There's no better place."

"You're certainly right about that," agreed a gruff voice from the doorway. Gale stepped in, looking grim and solemn, his expression one every operative who'd ever worked under him knew to be a very dangerous sign. He held a few stapled sheets of paper in his hand.

Falcon's eyes snapped to those pages, dread clawing at his chest. He recognised the top sheet as a security x-ray scan result. He accepted them as Gale stepped forward into the room. Falcon read the report and could not stop his hands from shaking. With a sound of horrified disgust, he set the papers down on the bed beside him and took a moment to bury his face in his hands.

"What is it?" Ian asked softly, dread in his voice. Falcon did not look up, not wanting Ian to see the expression in his eyes. He snatched the papers back when he sensed Ian reach for it, lifting his head, forcing himself to look at the report once more. Ian persisted, "What is on that report?"

"We received a package," Falcon explained hoarsely. He stood, ripped a page out of the report and set it on the bed, then turned and handed the rest to Arch. "There was a message with it." He heard Ian snatch the page off the bed behind him.

"Have Ian open the box," Ian read aloud, "If he doesn't, I will send the other one. And believe me, I will know if this condition is or is not met." Ian's voice shook when he asked, "What does he mean by this?"

"Come with us, Mr Frost," Gale said leading the way out, Falcon at his heels. Ian followed, and Arch took up the rear, eyes fiery as he crumpled the papers he held. As the four made their way back into the operations section of the building, Gale added, "We're heading for one of the conference rooms. We'll continue this there."

"Will someone please tell me *something* of what is going on?" Ian nervously asked.

Exchanging a look with Arch, Falcon murmured in the elevator, "We were right to put you on this floor where there are no monitors and register your nano-mite presence under an alias." He refused to look at Ian, despite being aware of the man's intense gaze in his peripheral vision. "Regardless, not fifteen minutes after we arrived, a package was delivered to the front entrance addressed to you."

"He knows I'm here," Ian muttered. "After everything, he knows anyway." After a moment, he demanded softly "What was in the box?" When no one answered, he persisted, "Falcon, tell me, what was in the box?"

"You read the note, we're not allowed to open it," Arch said stonily.

"Don't give me that bullshit!" Ian snapped breathlessly as they stepped out of the lift. "I know damn well someone's seen what's inside the bloody box."

The choice of phrase forced dry and humourless laughter from Arch's throat before he choked on it then managed to whisper, "An eye."

Ian went quiet, as though not certain he'd heard right.

But then they were in the conference room, and Ian's gaze snapped to the small package sitting on the table. It was a plain brown cardboard box, taped shut with brown paper packing tape, but the package sat atop a sheet of plastic and a cooling unit which blew tendrils of mist over the desk. He looked up at them, one by one, understanding dawning in his face, blood draining and making him pale. He stared in disbelief and horror at the box before he stepped slowly and unsteadily back, away from it, his knees catching on the lip of the seat behind him, and he almost fell into the chair.

Gently Gale said, "The box..." He cleared his throat quietly, "Scans indicate it has one eyeball in it. And according to the note, you are the only one allowed to open this box."

"You don't—" Ian swallowed, "You can't honestly believe..." He gagged, hand covering his mouth. "I can't!"

"We need you to open the box so we can run a DNA test," Arch gritted out softly, "Now open the fucking box!" Gale shot him a warning look.

"My sister...?" Ian feebly whispered as though thinking aloud, ignoring them, his eyes wide, "Kazuhi's?" He gagged again, "I..."

"The longer you take, bastard," Arch growled, taking a step forward which Falcon reached to restrain, "The longer we won't know the answer."

"He's a civilian," Gale berated Arch sharply. "Calm the fuck down; he isn't trained to handle this shit." He turned to Ian, moderating his tone carefully, "Mr Frost, you don't have to look. Just open the box, hand it over, and we'll take it away for testing." When Ian maintained his wide-eye stare at the box, he called sharply, "Ian!" Ian started and met his eyes. Gale tried again, voice gentle, staring reassuringly into the civilian's eyes, "Open the box, don't look, and just hand it over."

An expression flitted across Ian's eyes then, something which Falcon didn't quite catch. But in the next moment, Ian closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and when he opened them, he seemed suddenly calm.

Surprised and rather impressed, Falcon exchanged a glance with Gale.

Ian got to his feet, movements almost normal though his hands shook but the slightest. He took the box from the cooling unit and, ignoring the Stanley knife on the table, slid his thumb-nail along the tape and broke the seal then pulled the cover open. He ignored Gale's outstretched hand to accept the box from him, and instead peeled back the liquid pack cooling lining.

Falcon prepared to jump forward to catch the box should Ian drop it, but instead Ian's pale fingers tightened, and he froze. Ian held his breath, chin lifting away in distaste, though his eyes trained on the contents. Slowly, without breathing, he leaned forward and handed the box to Gale then slowly took the two steps backwards and sat back down.

Falcon glanced into the box as Gale passed. On the liquid cooling lining there was a card which read, *I am watching you.*

And within, one horribly familiar black eye stared back.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CHECKMATE

Ian watched silently, weary and tired, as the six people most responsible for his protection discussed their next move. He'd only been back in London for three days and circumstances had not improved, progress had not been made.

From the morning he had received the package containing what had been proven as Kazuhi's eye, he had not spoken. Heart-sore, he sat in on the meetings and listened to the staff deal with one crisis after another amidst managing the situation with that psychotic avenger's attempts on his life and RIG sanity.

The single room in the entire department without monitors or any sort of surveillance was discovered to be the department's head, Serge Armstrong's office, where they were gathered now. Never mind intelligence and security had deemed the entire HQ hacker free, internal audio and visual monitoring back under control. They held all meetings in this room, under direct Command supervision, taking no chances.

"The main fact of the matter is, we have no idea how and where to look." Snake sneered, "I can't believe I'm saying this." May, his main operative, rolled her eyes at him but remained silent.

"He knows where we are and even how we operate internally. Needlessly, I am sure, I remind you we've had three attempted break-ins; three!" Serge growled, "This is abominable! The fact that they attempt to get in to RIG Head Quarters at all is embarrassing enough, but the fact we haven't caught any of the damn bastards is fucking humiliating." He paced the strip of space behind his desk in a rare show of annoyance and frustration.

"He's quite desperately after Mr Frost isn't he," observed Arch to himself in a lazy tone of voice, leaning back in his seat beside May, though not really talking to anyone in particular.

"No fuck he's after Frost!" Serge snarled at him. Falcon covered a snicker, and May's lips twitched, but Arch just raised both hands, palms up, and shrugged.

Gale swallowed the urge to snap at Arch himself, impatience making him momentarily forget that this was just the way Arch behaved. He fired Arch a glare then tried to distract their volatile leader, "Sir, the point is—"

"The point is it's not us, yes," Serge nodded with a sigh, "I hear you make all the reasons every time. It's him. Artois has measured and studied, and caught up to us. I am not so unreasonable enough to pin this blame on my office or its staff. I know we've got the best systems and programs, we've made all the preparations to the best of our ability." He resumed his pacing. Gale turned and folded his hands before him on the desk while Serge continued, "But we have no protocols for an attack at our own damn base, no one is familiar with how to deal with any of this, and we are getting our arses handed to us. You'd think we had better control and ability to manage the measly forty personnel of this department."

"Discounting that a few units are out in the field," Gale reasoned quietly, then observed, "At least we are learning what to work on; this crisis is good for something at least."

"Shut up," Serge said wearily, taking a seat behind his desk and drumming his fingers on the table. He turned to address the room and commandingly said, "What we need at this point is a new strategy. So far, what do we know?"

Arch, as usual, dared in his trademark languid manner to state the obvious, "Artois has gone into hiding, he's covered his tracks, and we're unable to get a whisper of his whereabouts."

Falcon sat forward, folding his hands before him on the desk, adding to the list in clipped tones, "Intelligence and street cameras haven't provided us a clue of where he went that day he made off with Ghost. Our mite is negated."

"Artois has launched assaults upon our base," Snake contributed, looking particularly displeased about this fact, "Which could or could not be from his base of operations, and which we are unable to confirm as we've been unable to track the spies or catch even one of them." He glanced over to May.

"Attempts at infiltration have been well organised and fast," she said, "No attempts have attacked us in the same way or with the same intent; I surmise he's testing for weaknesses." Ian shuddered at the thought.

Nodding, Gale added, "He's also managed to evade us tracking Ghost's nano-mites, and we've no results from satellite scans."

"He might be underground. Literally," Arch said thoughtfully, tapping his chin in a way that reminded Ian of Kazuhi. "The only way to get a pin-point on him..." His expression cleared, the proverbial light-bulb flashing on above his head. He turned and pinned Ian with his gaze, eyes dangerous, focused and appraising as he said, "I think I might have an idea."

May groaned softly and Falcon rolled his eyes, sinking deeper into his seat when he murmured "Another dangerous one, no doubt." Even Gale narrowed his eyes.

Ian noted everyone's tense posture, but the fact that none said anything against Arch directly pronounced a few things to him. He leaned forward and with a voice hoarse from disuse and tears said, "If there is a chance," Six pairs of surprised eyes swivelled around to him. He cleared his throat and said, "I want to hear it."

They tossed him out of the room anyway.

When they finally let him back in, all their faces were tense and solemn, and Ian hated it. They explained the plan, a simple one, really. Too un-fancy to have been the two hours' discussion it had taken.

"I think that's... the best we got," Serge said slowly.

"It's insane," Falcon interjected vehemently, abandoning what else he wanted to say at a stern look from Gale.

"It's actually quite logical." Ian paused at the expression in Falcon's eyes but said quietly, his voice scratchy and hoarse, "I can't imagine he would be very patient after waiting and plotting all this time." He turned to address Serge, admitting, "He's got to be annoyed and getting desperate but... quite honestly, he will lose patience, and he might do something to Eileen or to... Ghost," he seemed uncomfortable using the name. But he continued determinedly, "to either of them before long. I don't want that."

"You would rather he 'do something' to both of you then?" Falcon said, incensed.

Ian turned to him, fire in his eyes and argued back, "I don't want to sit here and not do anything, that's what is on my mind,"

Falcon scoffed, "So you want to play hero and—"

"Falcon," Gale said softly in warning. Falcon glared but immediately quieted. He said to Falcon and then Ian, "I can see your view on this, and yours. And frankly, Arch's idea makes the most sense at this point whether we like it or not." To Serge, Gale gave his opinion, "Frost is also correct in that it would be best to move quickly, at the soonest opportunity."

Falcon murmured, "You can't actually be seriously contemplating—"

"I am and I will, Mr Falcon." At that dangerous tone of Serge's voice and more formal address, Falcon sat down glowering, but said no more. "You don't have any better ideas, and no one else does either."

Arch shrugged in his usual casual way, softly saying, "We just don't have time."

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Ian turned his face into the wind, closing his eyes and enjoying the noise of Central London. Outside at last, he wanted to enjoy what little freedom he had for however long it would be, not knowing what would happen next.

It had been three days of inaction, three days he had listened to useless arguments and sat through the operations and whatever activities RIG had seen fit to put into action. And now, it was his time. Tucking his hands deeper into his pockets, Ian walked slowly along with the crowd, ignoring the masses until he arrived at Tower Bridge.

"Lovely day, isn't it?" A charity collection agent said cheerfully, her t-shirt calling for contributors to support better living for orphaned children in Africa.

"Not really," Ian replied quietly, eyeing the lost expression of the child on her shirt.

"Aww, don't say that," the young girl played back, big plastic cheery smile in place, "Lots of people in the world aren't as fortunate as you!"

"I'm pretty sure I'm in the same boat as they," Ian put back, "Not knowing if we're going to live to see tomorrow or not." The girl started, her smile slipping, and he passed her on by.

Slowly crossing the bridge, he admired the way the dusk lights reflected on the water of the Thames. The descending darkness hid the filth, thankfully, and he watched as dinner boats sailed past. On the other side, he stepped down a tiled staircase, artfully slanted, to a riverside walkway. Walking along, he relegated the chatter of the crowds and bank-side restaurant patrons to the back of his mind.

Kazuhi.

He could just imagine how Kazuhi's hair would move in this wind. Noting a restaurant that displayed good Italian food, he wondered if there would ever be a chance to take Kazuhi out to visit it. Inevitably, Ian wondered, would there ever be a chance he could spend any time at all with Kazuhi?

Was it sane to wonder and think after a man he wanted desperately but had never even so much as kissed?

A hand closed tightly on his shoulder and a stranger familiarly greeted him with his name, firmly leading him away. As he walked, he desperately wished he would get the chance to at least tell Kazuhi how he felt.

Everything after that was a blur.

He was taken away to a small speed boat, past a protesting harbour guard and several security men. The boat was modern and superb, disgustingly fast and managed to out-manoeuvre pursuing jet-skis and boats manned by both uniformed and casually-dressed officers. The pursuit was a quiet one, rather subtle though fervent, and they did not draw much attention.

At Embankment, near Westminster, without protest he followed orders to disembark and accepted the situation when put into a new person's care. He was marched quickly into the Underground and onto a Jubilee-line train. Not fifteen minutes later they disembarked at Baker Street station and outside, shoved into a waiting car where a driver and another rough-looking henchman waited.

There was an exchange in an Eastern European language he couldn't understand which reminded him of Russian, and he resisted the urge to laugh, the scene so out of a movie that he couldn't help his dry humour. He didn't see the point of the gag they imposed on him at that point, but did put up quite a struggle when he was held down by one man, the other bearing down on him with a standard two-pronged stunner. His cry was muffled, the shock of the electricity hurting horribly, his skin sizzling at point of contact.

Distantly he registered the driver's natural French declare, "That should teach those British idiots how to manufacture proper nano-mites."

Before he passed out, he wondered if the nano-mites were electrocution-resistant. And if they were not then RIG and he were all certainly in a shit load of... shit.

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He wanted, at that moment, to kill someone... maybe everyone, actually. Giving in to mock fantasies of blowing RIG headquarters sky-high, he mentally dismembered Serge with all his biological knowledge down to the skeleton, organ by organ, section by section.

Viciousness hadn't ever been part of his actions; it had always seemed foreign to him. But now Ghost wondered at what he'd been missing. After all, a healthy dose of viciousness would allow him to relish the damage he could do to his fool colleagues... and might have allowed him predict that the Artois hell-spawn would take out his eye.

Shit.

In any case, he didn't need both eyes to see Ian was in bad shape.

Brushing fingertips over Ian's collarbone, he realised Ian was thinner than he remembered, bags heavy under his eyes, lines of strain on what he remembered to be a smooth face. Then there was his new look... he didn't like it, preferring the natural, longer blonde hair to the current short and unattractive brown. Ghost sat quietly, one leg folded beneath the knee of the other, at Ian's bunk-side wondering what the hell his colleagues had been thinking in handing over the last item on Artois' list of 'what I want most'. Now, more than ever, they were in danger.

Absently, he leaned down to the burn mark on Ian's shoulder and kissed it, lapping at the untreated burn with his tongue to soothe what he imagined to be quite painful to the untried Ian.

Running over their location and circumstances in his mind, he wondered what the next step could be.

Waking after the... operation... Ghost had found himself dressed in tie-closed scrubs and lying on a foam-pad pallet of a rather drab prison-style cell. Across from his bedside, mounted like his on the opposite stone wall, was another bed. From what he could observe through the bars of the cell, there was a cell each to the right and left of his own. He had thought at first that Eileen was in one, but no one called back to him.

He'd been treated fairly well, provided regularly with painkillers in plunger-syringes, fed passable food, provided with clean drinking water, and the doctor even regularly returned to change the dressing over his eye. It had now been four days since his ordeal and in all that time, Artois had thankfully left him alone.

Last night, Ian had been brought in and Artois had remained remarkably patient considering he now had everything he wanted. Things would have to move soon, either an escape attempt of some sort or something before that bastard decided on his method of torture.

Innocent, Ghost thought, Eileen and Ian were innocent of his madness. Neither had made any sort of contribution to the torment Artois had suffered, neither had even been aware until the very end. Well, who knew how to follow the logic of a madman, anyway? And yet, it was in finding that path of logic which could make an escape possible.

Find the pattern, find the loophole.

With a sigh of frustration, Ghost sat back up... and found Ian's foggy eyes watching him carefully. Embarrassed, he looked away at having been caught at something he'd deemed necessary... and suddenly only just realised could be taken in another context. And all the questions he wanted to ask! What did Ian know at this point? Was there some sort of plan—

"Hi," Ian mumbled dazedly, breaking Ghost's train of thought and drawing his gaze back with a wince he caught in his peripheral vision.

"Hey," he stupidly replied, all logic fleeing, drowning in Ian's golden eyes as they cleared, waking from slumber. One of Ian's hands reached to clasp his where it rested on Ian's chest, and he closed his hand back to return the grip, wondering how this man had the ability to drive all sane thought from his mind. "I hate you, and a lot of other people, for being here," he whispered, "But I'm... happier than I think I should be to see you."

Ian sat up suddenly and hugged him, pulling him close and letting him press his nose into a shoulder. He wrapped his arms tightly around Ian in return, hands clutching tightly, breathing in the scent he had missed all these long weeks. It felt wonderful to hold this man and be held in return, a sense of security and optimism returning, despite the circumstances and odds stacked against them.

Voice shaking, Ian admitted, "God, Kazu. I wasn't even sure I would ever see you again even if I let them take me. It's foolish I know, but I just had to try. I... I'm sorry."

"No, you're not," Ghost contradicted softly, forcing humour into his voice. Within Ian's embrace, the chill in his heart from the ordeal with Artois seemed to seep away, replaced by the warmth of Ian's nearness and words. "I am."

"You've no reason to be sorry," Ian soothed, rubbing a hand up and down over Ghost's back, "I wanted to do this. I wanted to try to be with you even if might be for just one last time."

Ghost stilled, and a thousand thoughts rushed at him. Forcing a dry chuckle, he asked, "Is that what you told the guys to get them to let you go? You can't have escaped."

"I told them," Ian said, a little forcefully, "But that was after I understood they already knew how I felt about you, anyway." He hugged Ghost tighter, "I did not and would not have volunteered the information; I wouldn't have put you at risk like that."

"What happened?" Ghost muttered, "Should I even ask?" He closed his eye, just relishing the feel of having Ian in his arms, the thousands of words he'd thought and wondered he might say all slipping away, worthless now. Hold tightening, he grumbled, "I thought they were supposed to keep you safe."

"There was nothing they could do," Ian said softly, nuzzling his hair. "Artois is well-hidden and even though this could have been a better chance to find us, send me in and trace me, I'm just glad they let me go." He sighed, "I didn't really care if their plan worked or not."

Not wanting to let go, yet at the same time wanting to look into Ian's eyes, Ghost gave in to the stronger urge and held on, voice muffled when he said, "I would almost agree. But I wouldn't want to see you

hurt, so I really think they made the wrong choice sending you in." He held Ian tighter, "But I'm so glad to have you." When Ian huffed, he joked, "If we die here, I'm so haunting the RIG building."

"Forget it," Ian chuckled, "Coz if we did die here, I'm still not letting you go. You're going to have to suffer me in the afterlife." His arms tightened yet further momentarily, emphasizing his point. Long moments later, he sighed, "So much for tracking nano-mites."

Suddenly the truth hit Ghost hard, and he internally cringed.

Reality came crashing down. Because aside from the hidden message Ian had unwittingly delivered, Ghost realised that Ian would know about what had happened to him... all of it... in the end. A little disgusted, he tried to pull away, but Ian would have none of it, snatching him back and pulling him in tighter than before. Suddenly ashamed, an emotion he'd never really dealt with before, Ghost cringed inwardly again. He didn't want to imagine Eileen bawling out the sordid welcome he'd had with Artois and didn't want to see Ian pity him—or worse, reject him.

It would be best for both their interests if he just... yes, that would be best.

"Eileen will be joining us soon," Ghost carefully whispered into Ian's ear, mindful of the monitors in the holding cell, moderating his voice not to carry in the still and silent confinement space. "We won't have much more time like this."

But it was a half-truth. For the time alone made sense to him; he had studied and been trained in the dynamics of being held captive. This was the 'time together for the lost lovers' scene, then a carefully schooled sequence would follow the reunion: betrayal, hope, suffering and finally the end. Systematic emotional torture; Ghost knew the tricks just as he knew he had no choice for the time being but to follow if he wanted them all to survive as long as possible, maximising the potential remaining time to give HQ a chance to find them.

Hunting for them he would leave to his colleagues; it was his job to keep them all alive as long as possible.

When Ian pulled back, Kazuhi missed the feel of having Ian's arms around him. With a soft, pained smile, Ian brushed a thumb gently over his cheek, below where the bandages covered his sunken eyes socket. A flash in his eyes, and Kazuhi knew that Ian had indeed suffered seeing his removed eye as Artois had planned.

But then Ian's expression and smile warmed further, and Kazuhi thought his heart would melt. A part of him wanted to pull away, rejecting the weakness and submission, knowing this was precisely what the enemy wanted... but he leaned up when Ian bent down, lifting toward...

Heaven.

The sensations rippled and invaded, flooded down to each nerve-ending, making his insides thrum with anticipation and tension. Arching up into Ian, all logic and coherent thought fled as he opened his mouth and received the kiss. Heat swelled, starting from his lips and slowly pooling heavily downward toward

his belly, leaving an urgent tightness in its wake. Lifting both hands to cradle Ian's face, Kazuhi leaned up on his knee, loving it when Ian's arms pulled him closer.

As Ian lay back, he dragged Kazuhi down with him. Kazuhi sprawled over Ian languidly, impossibly powerful sensations radiated over his skin until he could no longer think at all.

"Ian," Kazuhi moaned when Ian pulled away to mouth at his jaw, "We can't—" his words were drowned out by another sudden kiss. Lips crushed beneath the onslaught, he tried to focus on the whine in his ear, the monitor that told him they were being watched...

"Kazu," Ian breathed, breaking the kiss and twisting to let Kazuhi fall on the bed beside him, over his arm and keeping Kazuhi in his embrace. When their eyes met, he said softly, "When they took you from my lounge-room table to the RIG ambulance, you wouldn't let go of my hand, even unconscious." He smiled gently, "I held on just as tightly, but in the end..." Reaching over with his other hand, Ian toyed with Kazuhi's hair, fingertips tracing over one small ear before drifting down to a smooth jaw. He drew a shaky breath before admitting, "I thought I would never see you again. Falcon was good to me, took care of me. But I wanted you, I missed you... I couldn't stop thinking about you."

Kazuhi reached up to his neck, pulling out the necklaces he still wore. He reached to unclasp the chain upon which suspended the jade charm pendants he'd purchased in Hong Kong. "It doesn't have the same meaning as this," he thumbed the gold necklace he wore which had been an heirloom from Ian's mother. "But this... I got it for you. It's part of my mother's culture, she was Japanese." Bouncing the chain between his hands, the three charms chimed against each other softly. Leaning over, he reached to put it on Ian, who leaned forward and lifted his head to accept the gift.

"It's pretty," Ian murmured, toying at the necklace with a fingertip, eyes still preoccupied with studying Kazuhi. The corners of his eyes crinkled when he happily asked, "Do the charms mean anything?"

For the first time in a very long time, Kazuhi flushed under the intensity of a gaze—this trusting and heated one searing itself into his memory. He murmured, "The cat is for luck, the frog for safety, and the dragon for strength... loosely, at least, since they're all lucky charms," He gave a small smile and touched Ian's necklace... His necklace now and added, "If I had something of my mother's..." the words faded, but from the glow in Ian's eyes, the man had understood. Gathering his strength, Kazuhi admitted, "I missed you too. I couldn't stop thinking about you either. I read your letters over and over, and I spent nights up on Primrose Hill like a schmuck thinking only of you."

"Kazu," Ian whispered, eyes shining, "Thank you." The words seemed to mean more than for the necklace, and Kazuhi smiled, Ian pulling him closer, nuzzling. "I don't want to let you go. I want... tonight... I want this for us. Please?"

"Yes," he said, amazed at how easy it had been to answer. Amazingly, the whine in his ear clicked off, and Kazuhi was disoriented a moment before he realised what it meant. His eyes widened and Ian's brow furrowed. Leaning forward, carefully modulating his voice so that only Ian could possibly hear, "They shut the surveillance."

"Then you don't have to whisper anymore now do you?" Ian smiled, his arms tightening around Kazuhi.

And from the expression in Ian's eyes, Kazuhi realised that even if he now had the chance to test the security for a possible escape route, Ian was not letting him go.

Surrendering, Kazuhi leaned forward, arms lifting a little higher on Ian's back to hold him tighter, a whimper escaping when Ian pulled him just as closely in return. Ian hiked up, propping himself on one elbow and pushing Kazuhi over onto his back, leaning over him. Gently, Ian captured his lips and Kazuhi... suddenly couldn't think about escape.

Slowly the tension escalated, the kisses became even more heated, lips slanting, tongues tangling, and stealing Kazuhi's very breath until he was dizzy. He reached, seeking skin, finding his way partly past Ian's necktie and button-down shirt to the smooth chest beneath. More, he wanted more, and pressed a palm flat over one prominent pectoral, the thumping of Ian's heart moving against his hand. Ian's hands drove him mad, made him mentally curse every stitch of clothing he wore, made him wish nothing barred or ever would stand between Ian's hands and his skin.

When Ian easily pulled the ties that held his top closed and his trousers in place, Kazuhi gasped, irritation in his movements when he tried to retaliate. But he fell back once Ian began to explore his skin, arms uselessly clasped in Ian's shirt, grip tight as he threw back his head and arched into Ian's touch, awash in the most fiery sensations he had ever experienced. Weight braced on one arm, one of Ian's hands roamed over his side and down to his belly then back up again, dipping into the small recesses along the way, tracing the jut of each bone. Ian's lips sought his throat, slipping over skin toward his chest and pausing to taste the collarbones that fanned to each side from the base of his neck.

Licking, kissing and nipping, Ian made his way down to one nipple and, finding it, laved it with his tongue over and over again, distracting Kazuhi from the free-roaming hand that suddenly found his—

"Ian!" Kazuhi whispered urgently, arching his hips into the grip around his hardness. Softly, he mindlessly moaned, "Please, this..." He lost his voice when Ian began to stroke and fondle, but eventually he managed to moan, "I dreamed of this, your kisses, your touch..." He gave a short laugh then sighed, "I never thought this would actually—" The rest of his words were lost to a throaty groan.

Dizzy, but wanting to share the pleasure, Kazuhi finally managed to undo the remaining buttons and zips of Ian's shirt and trousers. Free, Ian sat up with a growl and stripped his shirt away, tossing it aside and immediately falling back to love making. For Kazuhi, those few moments had been just enough to get some air in his lungs... and regain some control.

Pushing, he got Ian onto one side and attacked, lips finding and lavishing Ian's neck with attention. Slowly descending, he licked and savoured each inch of warm skin as he went. He licked over his lover's prominent chest, and followed the lines down to a smooth stomach before gently biting into a slim hip bone.

Restlessly, Ian shifted, and Kazuhi could hold back no longer. Bending, he closed his lips over Ian's hardness, becoming even more aroused himself when Ian moaned harshly at the attention, hips bucking to seek yet more. Slowly and with great care Kazuhi made love to Ian with his lips and tongue, lifting and bowing his head, and wringing the most delicious sounds from his new lover.

Lover.

The word made him shudder, and it broke his concentration enough that he had to release the pressure on Ian and gasp on a breath. Ian's hands, buried in his hair, pulled gently, brought him up and into a mad kiss despite how they both panted breathlessly. He let himself be pushed over onto his back, loving how this freed both his hands to explore the contours of Ian's smooth back as they kissed.

Long minutes later, Ian drew back, panting, forehead dropping to press on Kazuhi's. Their breath mingling, Kazuhi studied the warm and gentle expression in Ian's eyes. A wild kind of giddiness swept over him, a happy and uplifting feeling, and he smiled.

Ian paused, staring in open wonder.

And Kazuhi realised Ian had never really seen him smile before, a real one, not one of those he wore when he was acting or trying to blend in for an assignment, or flirt to get information. No, this was a heart-felt smile, and he watched as an answering grin tugged at Ian's lips.

"You're handsome," Ian murmured, stroking his face.

"I would say the same about you," Kazuhi whispered back, tracing Ian's jaw with his fingertips. He caught his breath when Ian caught his hand and pressed a feather-light kiss to the sensitive skin on the inside of his wrist... before bending to tenderly kiss-caress his lips once more.

"Kazu," Ian sighed as the kiss broke, "I want you," he begged with his eyes, searching Kazuhi's with concern and longing, "I want to have you. Will you let me?"

Smiling softly, committing to memory the image of Ian's loving expression, Kazuhi said nothing. Instead, he shifted and parted his legs, letting Ian fall to lie between them and pushing their hips flush against each other. Ian smiled at him, and his heart swelled at the vision of perfect happiness in his lover's eyes.

When Ian leaned up on one elbow, his free hand reaching to lower his loosened trousers, Kazuhi batted those hands away and did it himself, one leg lifting to snag toes on the trousers and kick the garment away. Lying back, Kazuhi accepted yet another mad kiss, sighing when Ian broke it and arching up under Ian's mouth when those lips drifted lazily across his shoulder. Just as languidly, Ian kissed downward, nipping and licking once more, hands pushing Kazuhi's own trousers away. Lifting his knees, Kazuhi bared himself completely, whimpering as he let his lover lick the way down toward where he wanted to accept Ian into his body... where Ian gently and lovingly tasted and thrust and teased until they were both shaking and dizzy.

Arching helplessly, hand covering his mouth to mute the moans and cries Ian wrung from him, Kazuhi gave all he could, releasing his inhibitions and forgetting all his worries. Anything to have this one night; he would give anything, just to have Ian.

He could hardly bear the tender way Ian licked and touched him. The intimacy of the act itself shook him, and Kazuhi wondered how he had ever gone without this before... and in the next heartbeat was oh so thankful to be able to give this much of himself at all, as he had never surrendered in the past as he planned tonight.

When Ian raised his head, Kazuhi met his gaze. When one long finger tested his acceptance, he breathed deeply and received the touch. When Ian probed further, with infinite care, two fingers sliding gently and deeply, Kazuhi arched, taking it all. He responded and thrust back to each push and stretch, moaning as his lover prepared him to receive. And when Ian licked him again, slicking him up one last time, Kazuhi could barely think straight, mind falling the rest of the way to pieces when Ian moved up and over him, hardness pressing achingly slowly into him centimetre by tortuous centimetre.

When he was filled and whole, Kazuhi sobbed, wrapping both his arms and legs around Ian, who curved into him and embraced him just as lovingly, just as tightly. The burn eased, and he shifted, unable to find the words until they simply slipped free,

"Ian!" he moaned breathlessly, "Please... Make love to me."

Slowly, breaking his heart and torturing his mind, Ian rocked against him. It took forever, holding each other in so unrelenting an embrace, gently rocking and pushing, not wanting to let the other go. Bit by bit, pressed so closely together, they changed the rhythm together, and when Ian thrust fully for the first time, sending Kazuhi's vision to bursting with stars, he cried out.

Kazuhi wasn't entirely aware of what he said then, the murmured words of longing and missing, half-formed words of wishing and pleas and begging. But he heard Ian reply, answers that echoed his sentiments and drove the powerful sensations of their lovemaking through his body to bury in his heart until it seemed to become just too much.

Chest aching, the words fell easily from his lips from an unresisting tongue, "I love you..."

Ian groaned at those words, a deep sound ripped from his chest, heavy with appreciation and resonating with joy. He begged, "Never leave me." His hips found a harsher and more demanding rhythm, making Kazuhi cry out again. He bent and gasped into Kazuhi's ear, "Let me love you, let me fill all your days..."

The words were the trigger, shoving Kazuhi violently over the edge, pulling a scream from his throat as he climaxed, shuddering with the power of it. Hearing Ian follow crying out passionately, he couldn't help but let the few tears slip from his eyes.

It was perfect.

Was.

Because despite the overwhelming contentment and happiness the union had brought, as they lay warm and sated in each other's arms, panting and kissing gently, hidden emotions leaking free, reality eventually returned. Logic and sense came crashing back, and Kazuhi desolately wondered,

God, what had he done?

CHAPTER NINE: RESIGNATION

When Kazu said the monitors were back on, Ian couldn't help but think it had come at a very convenient time.

Not to his, of course. Because Kazuhi's strange withdrawal startled him, hurt him. For some reason Kazu seemed upset, almost painfully so, by what they had just done and this confused him. Having Kazuhi as his lover had been one of the most amazing and soul-satisfying beautiful things to have ever happened.

But his lover moved away from him, and he knew better than to ask.

Clothed and wary, they sat together and silently glared back at the minion who came to check up on them. When the goon left, muttering homosexual insults under his breath, Ian studied his lover's profile, thinking about how much he wanted to pull Kazu close, wanted to steal more time with his lover, keep the young man in his arms just one more minute. But Kazu's tense posture destroyed that hope, and he didn't push for it much as it hurt, for he'd already had so much more than he had hoped for.

When Artois himself brought Eileen to their cell, she seemed compliant enough, and relief swept powerfully through him. But as one lackey unlocked the gate and made to put her inside, she suddenly thrashed and managed to introduce her fist to his face.

Artois laughed, as did the other lackeys, which incensed the fool but he had no chance for revenge for Ian had snatched her into his arms and withdrawn. Kazuhi also stood menacingly in the goon's path to them, blocking off any attempt at retaliation, for which he was glad.

"Bitch!" he snarled at her, and she replied by giving him her middle finger rousing another round of laughter from his fellow brutes.

As he led his troupe away, Artois called, "Make the best of what time you have left," his voice lowered and turned darkly sinister when he said, "I have such plans for the three of you. Such plans..."

Ian couldn't help but shiver internally at the sheer evil chill in the man's voice. Eileen, held so tightly in his arms, could not help but sense it if the worried expression in her eyes was anything to go by. Kazu lowered himself onto one of the bunk beds and sighed with seeming weariness, pulling Eileen's attention. She shifted and when he released her, she turned, fell to her knees and grabbed Kazuhi, breaking down into tears and sobbing almost hysterically in his arms. He watched in confusion and shock as she wept, and Kazu's eyes suddenly seemed colder and more distant than ever. It took some time before she was able to get herself even moderately under control.

"Eileen," Kazu murmured into her hair, "Ian and I... we were together." She looked up into his face as she hiccupped, trying to get control over her tears. Kazu sounded hesitant for all that his face remained impassive, gesturing to the bed they'd shared and softly saying, "Here, not too long ago. We were... together."

Ian's cheeks burned when he realised what Kazu was saying. He hissed lowly, embarrassed, "You didn't have to tell her that!"

"No," Eileen said softly, her eyes still on Kazu's face, "He did." She sighed, ducking her head to hug him again, "I... I don't judge you. I—" her face crumpled, "Kazuhi, I'm so—"

"Don't apologise," Kazu interrupted, and finally his arms lifted to hold her in return.

Puzzled, Ian watched them. Sitting beside Ian, he reached and rubbed comforting circles on Eileen's back, his other hand straying to rest on his lover's shoulder, fingertips overshooting the neckline onto warm skin. Glad to have these two he loved most with him, he remained silent, trying not to take it to heart when his lover refused to meet his gaze or even acknowledge his touch. When she finally stopped weeping and sat back on her heels, looking faintly embarrassed as she wiped ineffectually at the stains on her cheeks, Kazu stood.

There was a strange expression on his face as he looked off into the distance a moment. Ian thought he might have imagined it when, with a stern expression and firm gestures Ghost gestured for them to talk but shooed them toward the far wall furthest from the barred gate which separated their cell from the rest of the holding room. Gesturing thoughtlessly, Ian mentally scrabbled at anything in particular, for it was obvious Kazu wanted him to distract the monitors.

"What the *hell* have you done to your hair?" Eileen suddenly demanded with surprising crispness in her voice.

"Uhh..." confused, Ian stupidly stared at her.

"The dye has addled your brain," she decided.

"Shut up!" But that was suddenly settled and he grabbed at the first thought, hands also catching at his sister and he blurted, "Lord, Eileen, are you alright? How long have you been here?"

"Five days," Eileen replied slowly, still faintly amused at his earlier blank, and curious as to what Kazuhi was doing, "Kazuhi was brought in a day after me." She caught on and immediately started off on a detailed description of her capture.

They watched as Kazu bent onto his knee and pulled the foam pad of a mattress out of his way on one of the beds and, with a startling show of strength, ripped out one of the metal tension net cords which supported the pad. Reaching for the other end, he quickly pulled out the other end and yanked the piece free. Glancing up, he gestured for them to turn away. Eileen, already toward the end of her story, immediately grabbed Ian and buried her face in his chest in a dramatic show, her words teary as she talked about her fear when Kazuhi was brought in.

Ian wished he'd looked away too when Kazu reached with one sharp end of the cord and slashed open a deep gash in the hollow of his hip bone. He dry heaved, hand covering his mouth, eyes involuntarily fixed on the freely-bleeding wound.

Without a sound, Kazu reached in and plucked out a capsule the length and width of his littlest finger, before grabbing Ian's discarded neck tie and wrapping it over the gash. The silk immediately turned a dark red, but the bleeding seemed contained. Wiping the capsule down on his trousers, Kazu carefully unscrewed it open at one end and pulled what looked to be malleable pale pink clay from within. Seeing the lack of discoloration on the capsule, Ian realised the stuff had come from the smaller compartment. Turning it over, Kazu uncapped the other end and checked on a similar substance, this time a light grey colour.

Standing, he pushed Ian and Eileen both back against the back wall and down into a huddle, then pulled one of the foam pad beds up and covered them with it until both Ian and she got a good grip. Unable to resist, Ian tilted his head around the side of the mat to watch Kazuhi at work.

The operative rolled the pink clay between his palms into a thin strip. Working quickly, he carefully pressed it into the space between the cell door and where the latch caught, directly over the locking bar itself. Taking the other grey clay he rolled it out in to another thin strip, half the width of a pencil and probably twice as long. This, he wrapped loosely around his wrist.

Grabbing the second mattress foam pad, Kazu crouched by Ian's side. He gave a final nod which made Ian tighten his grip on his sister, then reached and squeezed the webbing of skin between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.

The explosion rang loudly in the enclosed space and Eileen screamed. A blaring alarm sounded but Kazu was already up and running for the main door to the holding room, unwinding the grey clay from his wrist. He slapped it quickly over the door edge along the same space he'd done with the cell door. But when he squeezed the trigger in his right hand, the clay gave a loud sizzle before—

"It melded the door shut!" Ian exclaimed, getting to his feet and bringing his sister with him. "I thought you were blasting us out of here!"

"Too dangerous," Kazu replied over the blaring alarm. He ordered sharply, "Get back and stay under those foam pads."

Ian stared, surprised his lover would speak to him in such a tone but soon obeyed since Kazuhi obviously knew what he was doing. Already there was banging and shouting from the other side of the steel door, but it was all ineffective. The alarm kept blaring but strangely, the shouting stopped. Tense and alert, Kazu stood to one side of the door, pressing his back against the side stone wall and seemed prepared to ambush the first intruder.

What seemed like an eternity later, the alarms died and Kazu smiled, posture relaxing as he moved away from beside the door. Glancing over at him, Kazu asked, "Can you feel them?"

"What?" and then it hit him, that faint thrum from the nano-mites in his body. He could suddenly sense there were other presences around him, and surprisingly, he realised he could sense Kazuhi himself. Startled, he pressed a hand to his own chest, looked up at his lover and exclaimed, "I thought mine were all dead!"

"They were," Kazu replied cryptically, expressionless. Then he turned back to the door and commandingly said, "Just stay where you are until we're found. I don't want us to get caught up in things if someone else gets in here before the RIG operatives do."

There was the sound of distant gun fire, coming closer, until shots were fired from directly outside the door. After some inaudible shouting, someone thumped a precise rhythm on the door and Kazu pounced forward to thump a pattern back.

"Get under those pads," Kazu said, grabbing his own pad, "They're going to blow the door in."

Eileen whimpered in his arms and held him tighter but Ian managed to get the pad up and over them. In two breaths, an explosion sounded, the door gave an impressive protest, but then the steel piece fell forward into the room and crashed loudly to the floor.

"Escape route delivery for three hostages!" called a cheerful voice.

Ghost jubilantly called back, "Arch!"

Ian pushed the pad off of himself and Eileen, coughing at the thick dust in the air. He struggled to get up to his feet, his ears ringing, and he wondered how he could possibly be hearing anything at all—

Oh, that wasn't nice at all...

The sight of Arch hugging Ghost tightly, lifting the smaller man clear off the ground and grinning triumphantly did very bad things to the space behind his breastbone. Turning resolutely away, he helped his sister to her feet.

Coughing, clinging to him, she stumbled a bit as she stood and asked, "Is it over?"

I hope not. The question hit him very hard but he managed to answer, "I hope so."

"Prepare to move people!" Falcon ordered from the doorway, tossing Kazuhi a parcel.

From the plastic, Kazuhi ripped out a three vests and a large pair of wide single-panelled eye glasses. Helping first Eileen then Ian into the vests, he donned his own then pulled on his glasses. The lenses, from Ian's perspective, began to light up and he realised the lenses were actually a screen.

"Yo!" Kazu gave a small grin, obviously speaking to his handler, "Nice to be back, sir."

Falcon said, at Ghost's indication they were ready, "You take second," and tossed him a handgun.

Arch cocked his rifle and told the siblings, "Follow Ghost, I'll be right behind you."

Down unfamiliar hallways and through doors, Ian followed Kazuhi—no, Ghost. Questions raced in his mind, thoughts he wasn't sure he wanted. *He's trying to keep you alive*, he berated himself with an internal shake of his head. They marched up a set of stairs and finally, after crossing down one hall, they made it to the main ground floor.

"Warehouse," Ian breathed, looking up at the tall ceiling and huge space. But then there was the distinct sound of an aircraft. "Hangar?"

"Get down," Falcon hissed, and Ghost push-pulled them both down to the ground as the other two operatives opened fire to a point Ian couldn't see.

Between his own ear and where Eileen huddled at his neck, Ghost shouted, "We have to move!" Crouched but scrambling through the dust and noise, Ian followed Ghost's lead, not looking when Ghost paused only momentarily to fire a single and precise shot, ignoring the answering cry. Suddenly, dashing through a small side-door, open air hit and dizziness struck.

Ghost called, "This way!"

Following his lover, this dangerous operative he almost didn't recognise, he found himself surrounded by police and flashing lights. Suddenly a pair of medics attempted to pry Eileen from his arms and though she initially resisted, she relaxed under their soothing tones. After making sure she was being seen to, Ian stopped and looked around, searching.

"Where is he?" He muttered, turning in a slow circle.

"Sir, please, if you would come with me," one medic protested, trying to pull him along, "It's not safe to remain here—"

"He has an eye missing!" he argued, not even sparing the irate man a glance, still searching for Kazu's small form, "He needs medical attention as well."

"There are only two of you," the medic said, renewing his efforts.

"No, you imbecile," he spared the medic a glare and snapped, "He's an operative but he's missing an eye now, don't you tell me you're going to leave him like that!"

Patiently, the medic soothed, "No, sir, of course not. But if he's an operative then he'll have a separate team to attend to him." Gesturing to their surroundings, the man cleverly argued, "See, he's not here, he's probably being seen to now. They get the best medical attention, trust me."

After one last look around, meeting eyes with May who stood dangerous and armed only a few metres away, and seeing her nod encouragingly, he reluctantly let himself be led away.

~~*

"I told him the truth," Gale admitted softly. Elbows propped on his knees as he leaned forward, his hands clasped before him, and a rare solemn expression on his face. "I had to. It's been over two weeks. He and his sister have done everything we asked, gone to a councillor, working on putting this all behind him, but he hung on to you."

"I don't understand," Ghost said flatly, fighting back the curious and demanding questions that threatened to burst from his mouth of its own accord.

"He tried to drive down into the basement parking," Gale recounted, "Security turned him away, of course. So he came on foot, tried to get into the building without a pass. He reasoned he still had active nano-mites, made a fuss in the lobby when the receptionist wouldn't let him through or even call up." He scrubbed a hand over his face, "They had to bodily remove him from the building and the second time he came they had to call the police."

"So you told him," Ghost finished.

"Yes," Gale murmured, "I'm sorry."

"That was the plan, wasn't it?" Ghost said more than really asked. He turned away, making it look like he had resigned himself when really he was just hiding the wetness in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Gale murmured when he left.

Ghost lay frozen in the clinic bed, letting the pre-op drugs kick in. He blinked up at the ceiling, ignoring the throb in his other eye socket and the insistence of his body that there was something in the empty space. Taking a deep breath, he clenched his fist, yearning for the quiet of oblivion, wanting the ache behind his breastbone to ease, just disappear and leave him the hell alone.

Nano-mites.

Ghost hadn't sensed any from Ian when the civilian had been captured and brought in. It hadn't been until Ian mentioned them that Ghost found out he'd ever had 'tracking' mites in the first place. That and the unmistakeable clue his colleagues had sent him in brutally delivering Ian himself, the civilian so unknowingly speaking of how the others had all known about their attraction to each other.

For when Kazuhi and Ian made love, the exchange of bodily fluids had also delivered a healthy amount of nano-mites into Ian's body, enough that those which had been shorted in the electric shock could be repaired by the newer, fully functional nano-mites from the operative, Ghost.

It had been a plan.

A dangerous and risky plan but an effective one, and two warm human bodies fresh from exertion created enough of a resonance that they had been spotted on the grid and found.

And rescued, and separated.

To Ghost, there was no greater nightmare, to have that one night but for it to be their last –that was the unfairness, and yet he couldn't regret it or what he'd done.

His only regret was that it had caused Ian pain. He could only imagine what kind of betrayal that would be, to discover that the night he himself held dear was all a lie. For while he could hold on to the memories that Ian had tried to find him and had, in his own way, fought for him... Ian had nothing.

Not an explanation or even an apology.

Internally, he lashed himself with the hurt and the full weight of guilt, not minding it because it could never be compared to Ian's pain. Never mind he treasured still each touch, each taste. Never mind he had heartfelt each word he'd spoken. Never mind he loved the man.

The plan worked: After Gale's confession, Ian stopped coming. And Ghost resigned himself to living without his love, the thought making his chest ache heavily, never mind all he'd ever wanted was to keep Ian safe.

He is safe now, a familiar inner voice said softly and without conviction, as darkness rose to claim him, *safer without you*.

~~*

It was some days later, turning his face up into the hot shower spray, Ghost let the steady water flow wash away his sweat, and the sound, his thoughts.

He ached all over and he focused on that. The mild discomfort of tested muscles usually made him proud, made him know the workout had been worth it, but today it held little meaning other than another meaningless job well done. He sighed and soaped up, dousing himself liberally with shower gel and scrubbing at it, foaming it up. And as the water washed the suds away, he longed to trade the lavender of his soap for the ginger of another distinctive scent.

Eyes closed, he reached out with his new mites, sensing the walls of his shower stall, sensing past them into the rest of the bathroom and tried to sense past the door into his own room. The practice distracted him for a while, made him think of how he was going to get better at using the new mites, the better to move on and get on with his life.

Getting back to work was all he wanted to think about. Not blonde hair and hazel eyes, slick skin and sharp taste, salty arousal or sweet kisses.

Not those.

Those, he could push away while awake and busy with therapy. Maybe briefly indulge in a little when in the shower, or waiting for or in the elevator. But otherwise, those memories he treasured and hoarded, leaving them alone until he lay down at night and went to sleep. Where over and over in his dreams, he told Ian how he loved him and Ian replied, voice shaking with emotion as it had that first time he'd uttered the soul-wrenching words,

"Never leave me. Let me love you. Let me fill all your days."

~~*

"He wouldn't let the medics attend to him," May told him softly as he walked away. Ghost paused and for a long moment remained where he stood with his back to her until she spoke again, "he made such a fuss, arguing and insisting you needed medical attention. Even when they told him you were being seen to separately, he didn't want to go."

Then his heart unclenched its control over his legs and he moved away, by sheer force of will alone.

He made his way to the lift and down into the basement where he found his bike, cleaned and maintained as always. He did what he always did, checking her over carefully before revving her up and riding out of the city. Insisting, he maintained his control and rode the bike all the way out, breaking laws knowing he didn't really have to suffer the consequences, and didn't stop until he reached Brighton.

Walking the pebbled beach he kicked at the large stones but didn't really hear the sound they made, focusing on the ebb and flow of the tide, the rhythm of it soothing. He sat down by an old beached little boat and remained there for a long while as the afternoon passed. When he opened his awareness again, he listened to the passers-by chatter. There was a small band playing in the square by the restaurants and beach-side clubs, and he listened to the words they sang, of love lost and found and betrayed.

They had no idea.

Eventually, darkness descended and the crowds of people thinned, the restaurants closed and the bars thumped out beats in their attempt to out-music their neighbours and woo in more patrons. When he looked out over the sea, there were only a few lights. And while his mites sensed no presence before him, the oppression of that open, dark and empty space seemed suddenly overwhelming and he got to his feet. Turning away, he pushed his hands into his pockets and walked away, surrendering.

This time, when he got off his bike, he was in North London. He hopped over the gate in his path and, feeling with his mites, made his way up the unseen path. London sparkled before him, bright even in the midnight hours, and he admired the view, his mind's eyes seeing the view daylight brought from here.

The memory assaulted him, of when he first stood up here with a certain someone, talking of how an attraction wouldn't be a problem, coming complete with rippling blonde hair and nervous eyes. Shifting Ian's necklace beneath his shirt, he wondered where his lover might have done with the necklace he'd given in return.

It had taken hours to scour for the 'right' one, owed to quick manoeuvring on his mission and a luckily delayed flight. Ian would have thrown it away by now, he supposed, and declared it a worthless gift from an insincere lover, from one who'd betrayed him...

He choked.

But they came anyway, the wetness steadily seeping down his cheeks and dripping onto his shirt. He paid them no mind, the indication of his heart's betrayal of his mind. He had never let them loose before anyway, and he supposed it was about damn time they had their go.

~~*

When he returned to base and found his bedroom door, he stood before it not wanting to really go in.

But there was nowhere else to go to rest, not that rest could really be had. And then Arch stepped out into hallway and silently pulled him into his room, into a familiar place, and into a comforting embrace. He had never said anything and he wondered how Arch knew what he needed. He said nothing even now, and Arch respected the silence. There was a shower to use, a towel to accept and pyjamas to borrow, and finally a warm bed and warm arms to curl into.

Sleep refused to come for either of them, however. And eventually Ghost spoke, whisper-light and overflowing with emotion, "I should have never." Arch said nothing and only held him closer. "I shouldn't have gone on the assignment; I didn't need to do it. Gale asked me if I wanted it or not, he hadn't been very bothered, I should have said no."

Arch said nothing, a hand rubbing at his back in soothing strokes.

Without prodding, Ghost continued, "I should have been focused on the job, shouldn't have been thinking about him at all, not him as a person. It was my own damn fault I couldn't do my damn job." He clenched his eyes shut, and whispered, "I shouldn't have let that spy get away, I wasn't focused or thinking straight. And I shouldn't have allowed myself to get hit or hurt. Hell, I couldn't even take care of myself then, I should have already realised I was useless to the case."

It hurt. A clenching in his chest that made it hard to breathe, it closed down a little harder and Ghost whimpered at the pain, hunching over with it. Arch just pulled him closer, pulling him to rest his head on a comforting shoulder.

Then Ghost scoffed at himself, "But no. I wanted to be involved, I wanted to catch the culprit. And in that selfish desire, I let myself not just get hurt, but captured. Captured!" he sneered, "Is there no lower point for me? And even then, after everything I had done, after all the mistakes I made and shit that I cost everyone, I still..." the words failed him but still he choked out, "I still followed the plan... I let him have me..." He sighed remorsefully, "I had him and he took me... and it wasn't all a damnable plan to get us found and free..." He gave a dry laugh, and a small cry escaped before he could whimper out, "He thinks I used him now. He thinks... it was all a lie." He sobbed, "All a... lie..."

Holding him close while he shook, eyes wet but the tears not falling, Arch murmured encouragingly into his hair, "Tell me. Say the words, if you want."

"I love him," the words came easily, and they even helped loosen the tightness in his chest. "I told him, but now they're worth nothing since—"

"Not those words," Arch soothed. "Go back; the other kind."

And Ghost did. He spoke of the soft silk of Ian's hair, the brightness of his lover's eyes, and the warmth in Ian's smiles. He spoke of seeking hands and the reverence in that touch, the gentle disbelief behind Ian's kisses and the amazement he'd seen in Ian's eyes when they'd lain together in the aftermath.

Then Kazuhi looked a little further back, to when they stood together on Primrose Hill and spoke of how Ian's attraction to him wasn't a problem. He laughed, a small but real laugh, when he spoke of their venture into a music store where there had been a fire of possessiveness in Ian's eyes. The girl had been an operative but Ian hadn't known that and he'd been beautiful, glaring the way he had.

"I belong to him," Kazuhi murmured at last, heart-weary and exhausted, slipping toward slumber. He sighed, "I wish... I wish I had told him how much he owned me."

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The sun shone down in a deceptively merry colour, blanketing the world with bright and happy light. Jason Arch resisted the urge to scowl at it all, concentrating on looking at and seeing the positive side of things, both before his eyes and in his heart.

"The visit had been rather anti-climactic, in my opinion," Arch mumbled, not really speaking to Ian, just voicing his thoughts. "He's as belligerent as ever, I really shouldn't be surprised. He makes it look fucking easy, you know? Like his disability doesn't bother him at all." He scoffed, "His force of will was always his greatest weapon." Casting Ian a sidelong glance, he added thoughtfully, "But sometimes it's also his greatest weakness."

Ian said nothing, calmly sitting and people-watching. Arch studied the quiet man's profile, watching the expressions flit across the civilian's face in digesting the accounting he had relayed of Ghost's progress. Feeling particularly nasty and rather resentful at the moment, considering Ghost's reasons for his continued perseverance, Arch glared.

Not that Ian would see it.

But it was good to have privacy to talk, Arch reflected, especially when the topics of discussion are technically illegal... and others, very private. They sat together on a little terrace over a coffee shop, using this section which had been cordoned off, but for which Arch had tipped heavily to have exclusive use of. And there was good coffee, sweet stuff that Ghost would have liked.

The thought made him smile.

"He's still such a trooper," Arch said softly, looking out over the pedestrians below. "Despite the fact he's half-blind, how his depth perception's gone and his efficiency's down. But the bastard still clocks in all the right scores on all the tests and obstacle courses." The words still tasted strange in his mouth and he shook his head, "Even I still can't believe it."

Ian shook his head, still looking out over at the passing crowds, "He's human; he just needs to find a new way, maybe he has found his new way. By no means is this the end."

In complete agreement and proud of Ghost, Arch chuckled, "He said the same thing. And he has, yes." Smiling outright at the pleasantly surprised expression on Ian's face, he explained, "Found a new way, I mean. He was always part of those mite tests; it was how he knew what to do to create that signal for us to find him."

"Sounds... promising," Ian squirmed a little at the reminder of their fateful night. He seemed to try to hide his worry when he asked, "The testing isn't... dangerous, is it?"

Arch smiled reassuringly, "I should have said he *was* part of the tests. He doesn't do that anymore. Mainly, he's part of a new program, new mites, full-time. He's coping very well with this version." He

smiled anew at a memory, "He senses things better. That's what this model was built for in any case—sightless sensing, for pitch black locations." He murmured, "The brat's doing so well, like I said. It's almost rather... creepy."

Ian puzzled, "I'm not sure I understand, but if he is doing well and is happy then..." he paused before continuing, a new hard-to-detect note of bitterness in his voice, "I'm glad for him." There was another long pause then, "So is this his new job, then?"

"Yep," Arch responded. "Sucker learned Braille to compensate, just in case he loses the other one, too." He gave a grimace of apology when Ian cringed at that. "He's doing really well, really." His eyes twinkled when he said, "And as a civilian, too."

Ian nodded, fetching his coffee cup for another sip. It took a few moments but when he stilled with sudden realisation, Arch could not help but grin. But the grin faded when Ian paled but said nothing.

Rolling his eyes, Arch groaned, "You know, he's never going to look for you." When Ian tensed, expression sour, he hurriedly tacked on, "But not for the reasons you think. He won't come looking for you because he wants to keep you safe. This," Arch gestured in general, "Is what he does best. He picked out the option on his contract to work as a civilian because it's what he can do. We're all military brats; nowhere else to go."

Still not meeting Arch's eyes, Ian plucked up his coffee cup carefully, tilting it thoughtfully in his hands. He said nothing, but he seemed to listen.

So Arch continued, "There are things I want to say but I am pretty sure will get my ass kicked so I'll have to just keep them to myself," he smiled a little idiotically, lowered his voice, and said, "But he's a mess without you. The guilt's killing him bit by bit, but he doesn't even think he has the face or right to find you and apologise, he thinks his crimes against you are so atrocious."

Ian stilled, startled, and Arch wiped the humour off his face. Heck, it wasn't that he found this funny, not *that* way. It was just that Ghost, the cold-hearted and efficient little genius, had lost his heart to a civilian... the general populace of which were, in Arch's mind, funny but not really worth his time. The only reason this particular civilian meant anything to him at all was because of what the guy meant to Ghost.

He paused, hesitating, before he said at an even lower pitch, "When you went looking for him, he knew somehow. He knew every time you showed up; I think he sensed you, the mites, I mean. And when Gale broke the news to him, when he found out that you knew the 'truth' of his actions that night, he lost what little life he had left."

"So basically you're saying this is up to me, then," Ian commented, sitting back in his seat and folding his hands over in his lap. "After everything, I have to be the one to lower my head and—"

"Do you even know what that bastard Artois did to him besides take his eye?" Arch hissed, suddenly incensed. "I bet your sister hasn't said a word about *Kazuhi* since she came home, has she?" Ian seemed startled, eyes flying to meet his. "Yeah... you know what I'm talking about. She knows. She doesn't know

the whole picture, no one outside of RIG except you does. She doesn't know about the trick behind the mites, but she knows what Artois did."

Arch stood, shaking his head and giving up. He tried not to wonder what would happen now he'd done all he could, and it was now out of his hands, or if he could do more. Ian watched him, a pensive half-frown on his face.

"You go have a little chat with your sister, maybe then you'll understand the weight of Ghost's guilt." Ian seemed embarrassed, half-standing to try and stop him but Arch said, "You know where to find him, of that I am certain." He turned and as he walked away, Arch called over his shoulder, "It's going to be hell for you to catch him off the clues he left you, so good luck, bastard, you're going to need it."

~~*

Ian studied Eileen's profile in disbelief.

And then it washed over him. Kazuhi's strange behaviour in those few moments before they'd... the fleeting but truly haunted look in his eyes and the sudden withdrawal immediately after...

Shit. It wasn't supposed to make sense.

Something in Ian's mind short-circuited, made him stare at his sister's elegant features, imagination and mind seeing images of her screaming. What she must have seen and been unable to turn away from. Lifting a hand over his mouth, he leaned back on the couch, not needing to try not to think because he had always been a person who went with his instincts... and he was reeling. Eileen glanced at him fleetingly, as though afraid to really take in his expression. And she resumed her speech, voice so low he had to strain to hear it at all...

She need to vent, he understood that. In some part of himself he realised she'd probably not even been able to talk to her therapist about this, it hit a little too close to home. Kazuhi was personal, someone she knew and liked.

On a low tone she spoke of the way Kazuhi looked, the expression in his eyes, the things he said and the distant look in his eyes as it happened, as Artois used him, that it had frightened her. There had been a moment where Artois had grasped Kazuhi's face, turning it up to his own. The lack of expression had shocked her and even Artois himself had roared in outrage... and Kazuhi hadn't noticed.

And he understood suddenly.

Kazuhi hadn't had a choice, could do nothing but to endure that humiliation, and had later sought refuge in him... Kazu had stiffened when he'd spoken about the RIG operatives knowing how he felt. It must have been then Kazu realised what the plan was, the plan he unknowingly relayed. Closing his eyes, Ian scrubbed a hand over his face, only then just realising his sister had finished speaking and was now watching him carefully, warily.

"I'm as big a fool as that idiot," he muttered. "I was the one. I didn't know it then, it took Arch and you together to get it through my thick head, but I get it." Running a shaking hand through his hair, he told

her, "I have as big a part to play as Kazuhi did in all this mess." Then he growled, "But I deserved to hear it from him, not from anyone else."

Eileen spoke gently, "You know, I never thought I would see the day you this shaken, little brother, and over someone like Kazuhi."

"Hmph!" he snuffed, "Don't start with me. This isn't over yet." Glowering, he told her, "You should have spoken to me about this sooner."

"Don't you remember, Ian?" she asked, worry in her voice, "He warned me in his own way not to tell you."

"Eileen," he murmured into her hair, "Ian and I... we were together." She looked up into his face as she hiccupped, trying to get control over her tears. Kazu sounded hesitant for all that his face remained impassive, gesturing to the bed they'd shared and softly saying, "Here, not too long ago. We were... together."

"That little idiot," Ian mumbled again, tousling his own hair once more, a grimace crossing his face.

Eileen reached to pull his hand down and clasped it in her own before gentling telling him, "He's an idiot over you."

"That's the sappiest line I have *ever* heard you utter," Ian replied, yanking his hand back but she didn't let it go.

"And if you don't figure this out and decide what you're going to do very soon," Eileen replied, a flare in her eyes reminiscent of her usual temper, "It'll be the stupidest thing you have ever done."

"This is way beyond us, 'Leen," Ian replied, annoyed. "This is his job, do you understand that? He does this, suffers things like this, for a *living*! In what way can we really understand him and these people? They're not normal!"

A horrible expression crossed Eileen's face then and she tossed his hand away from her, recoiling. She moved slowly away from him and down the couch until she could lean back on the armrest at the far end, a hand over her mouth as she stared at him with wide eyes. "You can't mean to tell me you're..."

"This was a job," Ian ground out, "He did what he'd been *ordered* like a good military dog." He scoffed, "Dog!"

Eileen got to her feet suddenly and swung at him, but Ian was too wound up and managed to dodge her attempt. "You bastard!" She hissed, "I saw him! I watched him! And you sit there talking about him and what happened like it's *acceptable*!" She took a step back, breathing heavily, "In what way can anything of what happened be possibly seen as sane, Ian? It was all orchestrated by a *madman*!"

He moved back along the couch, further away from her, and crossed his arms, glaring up at her infuriated expression.

Giving a disbelieving and humourless laugh, she raged, "He's still human, you said so yourself!" She paused, and her eyes narrowed as she drawled, "Oh but wait. That was some of your 'compassionate' talk, wasn't it? Your understanding side until you can come home and rage about him here and to me." Curling her hands into fists, she told him harshly, "Well, you can't talk to me about it because I know better. I know what he did and I understand a lot better now, but did you ever stop to think he followed those orders because it would keep you alive? Keep us *both* alive?!"

Ian refused to say anything as his sister withdrew further.

Backing away from him, she turned away as she fired, "I can't believe you're so selfish and narrow-minded enough not to see he would have made those same choices just out of his feelings for you!" She scornfully added, "*If that wasn't already the reason!*"

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Many grumbling and scowling hours later, the moonlight from the window behind him cast a shallow shadow on the empty space of the bed.

Ian stared, remembering the view when he had lain in this very place, propped up this same way, looking down at Kazuhi's still form. His imagination could almost cast the picture before his eyes, the calm countenance and small smiles. Perhaps, a view of that small and firm form curled in sleep, never mind he'd never seen Kazu asleep.

But he wanted to.

And he also wanted to forget knowing all the things that he did; the *truths* that turned all the beautiful memories into lies.

With a groan of frustration, he flopped backward onto his back, an arm falling above his head on the pillow as he glowered at the ceiling. He wanted to see Kazuhi sleep. Ian wanted to see Kazu as vulnerable as he'd been that night in the basement of the hangar, expression amazed and drowned in pleasure, eyes wide and glazed, lips parted in a silent scream. Or the way Kazuhi had bitten down on his own hand, muffling the most astonishing sounds Ian had ever heard, back arching upwards, hips shifting.

Ian gave another groan, irritated when he felt that familiar heaviness in his loins. Mere thoughts of *him* always made him like this, made him want unreasonably, made him ache and desire and shake with longing.

And no matter how he clenched and unclenched his hands with the frustration, no matter how he woke sweating and aroused from dreams of lovemaking and whispered confessions... he never wanted to be released. He wanted those memories of Kazuhi to haunt him for the rest of his life.

After everything, they were all he had left.

CHAPTER TEN: CROSSROADS

Six weeks and one day.

It had been six weeks and one day since he and the Frost siblings had been rescued, and Ghost sighed with supreme frustration.

It was the middle of the night but sleep eluded him again and he sat up, wearily scrubbing a hand over his forehead before getting out of bed. Padding over to the window, he took a seat in the leather arm chair there, the newest addition to his room.

He'd found it in France, at one of the quaint set-ups of antique goods on race track grounds. There had been carnivals and concerts, but the noise had driven him away and he had drifted to where the quiet remained, sifting through these things that had out-lived their original owners. Objects of endurance had always held a strange fascination for him.

There had been a motor-car race which two of the therapy assistants were discussing one afternoon. They'd stopped as soon as they noticed the impassive attention they'd suddenly garnered, but opened up enough to answer a few questions.

Ghost had it they were planning to drive over the Channel Tunnel and all the way out to the French province of La Sarthe, all to attend a twenty-four hour race at the race-track Le Mans. They'd been tossing the idea back and forth, uncertain as to whether they should proceed or not as they were concerned about safety. And they needed a third pair of hands to drive parts of the way.

He'd wanted to go. It was an opportunity, both to travel for pleasure as he'd always wanted and to see this country better which Ian spoke so well of. And he wore the necklace of the amazing Frenchwoman who had helped shape Ian into the man he'd become. Somehow, he felt he needed to do this.

Sensing the two would be frightened of him trying to put on a friendly face to them, Ghost remained expressionless as he usually did, but nicely and politely asked if he could join them. The two had exchanged looks before turning back to him to stare. He had been about to retract the question, nervous because they might not know how to refuse an operative but Daniel and Paul's faces had split into wide grins.

The trip had been fun, actually. He'd driven the entire way there, citing superior endurance, and instead of being annoyed with him the two had laughed, appreciating his little show-off for the joke it was. They'd ribbed, played pranks on and kidded each other the entire time and actually become friends along the way.

Smiling to himself now at the memories, Ghost stroked the leather, fingertips reaching under one of the armrests to where Paul had accidentally burned a small hole with a cigarette in helping to lift the heavier-than-it-looked armchair.

Friends.

"I hope you will count me as one of them,"

The memory of Ian's sleepy voice when he'd spoken the words, echoed in Ghost's mind. Tracing idle patterns on the antique brown leather, he sat back and looked unseeing out the window. The idea that he could actually have friends outside of his team-mates seemed strange and yet... Paul and Daniel had been more than accepting of him.

"You okay, man?" Daniel asked quietly, coming up into the van front and taking the passenger seat.

"Yeah," Ghost replied, not taking his eye off the road, "I like to keep going until I'm tired."

"You haven't had a break in sixteen hours," Daniel persisted. "You've driven all the way since we left London. I'm not saying I don't appreciate it but even you need some rest."

"I'm not sleepy," Ghost replied gently, "I'll rest when we get there, okay? I tend to stay awake two days at a time anyway."

"That's a horrible habit," Dan grimaced. A few awkward and fidgeting moments later he hesitantly asked, "Hey, how's your depth perception anyway? Sorry for asking, just wondering, you know? I don't mean anything by—"

"It's fine," Ghost assured him, "The mites more than make up for the missing eye."

"Good," Dan breathed, more relieved Ghost hadn't lost his temper than anything else. "Hey, promise me you'll sleep, and I mean properly sleep, when we get to the camp."

"I promise."

Daniel and Paul had stood guard for him, chatting quietly in the front of the caravan and playing on the Play Station while he'd slept in the back bunk. It wasn't deep sleep like he'd promised Daniel, not at first. He was surprised when he woke, eyes prickling, chest aching to find Paul sitting at his bedside looking worried.

Daniel arrived soon with a bottle of water, handing it over and, exchanging a look with Paul, left them alone, shutting the door as he left.

"You were talking in your sleep," Paul murmured, "Apologising to people." At Ghost's silence, he continued, "You told someone, I think it was 'Eileen', not to listen or look." Ghost stilled but Paul reached to grasp his arm reassuringly as he said, "And you told 'Ian' that you didn't mean to, whatever it was, saying you didn't have a choice."

Ghost looked away, and firmly turned over on the bed, giving Paul his back. But Paul put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently, saying,

"You said a couple of other things. And I think if they're that important, you should tell this guy."

It wasn't until he sensed Paul move away and out the door that he spoke, and Paul paused to listen, "Thanks."

When the sun was higher in the sky, Ghost stood and dressed, and headed for the RIG main-building gym. As usual, Daniel and Paul stumbled in clutching coffee and cookies, thirty minutes after he had started warming up.

"Hey operative hotshot," Daniel greeted, tossing a cookie at him.

Playfully, Ghost caught it in his mouth, ducking down on one knee, a hand down for balance to do it. "Poke fun at me when you can do that," he replied loftily, chewing. Inevitably, the supposed work-out session degenerated into a food fight...

"That was breakfast!" Paul protested with cookie crumbs in his hair, the bits of food scattered about them as they mock-glowered at one another.

"Shut up," Ghost and Daniel replied at the same time.

"I'm hungry," Paul whined, "And we haven't even actually done any working out yet."

"So quit complaining until you've actually had a chance to work up an appetite," Daniel advised, patting Paul's back.

Two hours later, post-work out showered and dressed, they trooped out to the local pub for some real food, ordering huge plates of English breakfasts. They bickered over the sausages and snatched tomatoes from each other's plates, and laughed the entire time discussing racing—since none of the three were, strange for Englishmen, fans of football.

"Thank God, Schumacher retired," Paul worshipped, "I can't wait for Hamilton to wipe the tarmac with all the oldies' faces!"

"It's just a great mix of good talent and even better machinery," Daniel argued. "Luck and great timing, that's all."

"Stuff it," Ghost joined in, "The cars don't have as many of those little trick features the way they used to. Hamilton's so talented he doesn't need it."

"You stuff it," Daniel growled, "It's dumb luck, I tell you, with only a measure of talent. The team's good, they do their jobs well and that punk's just riding on their superb efforts. Alonso's still leading the points anyway so Hamilton can kiss my ass."

"Hamilton will *kick* your ass," Ghost fired back and Paul laughed.

"No fair!" Daniel complained as they stepped out into the street. "I only used to have Paul to argue with and now you go and side with him!"

"Tough luck, mate," Paul said, giving Dan a pat on his shoulder, "Can't help it that I'm right."

"Bugger," Daniel grumped. He turned to Ghost, "Hey, you on for clubbing tonight?"

"He's never on for clubbing tonight," Paul reminded him.

But surprising them all, Ghost said, "Actually, I'm game." The two blinked at him and he merely shrugged, "I have one last errand to run and I'll meet you guys there."

Daniel mused, "Regent's Park again huh?"

Ghost looked away but said, "I just want to catch the view."

"Sure thing, Yu-re," Daniel grinned, using the Japanese word for 'ghost', and assured, "Sun set will be long over by the time we need to drag you out of your cave anyway."

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Black tank top, black cargo trousers and black ankle sneakers—all to complete the perfect dance outfit.

Slicking his hair with gel, Ghost washed his hands before strapping on his watch and gluing on the black patch over his sunken eye socket. Checking himself out in the mirror, he paused to pull out the necklace he still wore and had never removed since the day he'd accepted it from May.

Ian.

Wondering after Ian was a regular habit in the weeks since he'd last seen his lover. And that one word created a tense heaviness in his chest. But he'd live; he knew he just had to keep going. He tucked the necklace away, snagged a jacket, and trotted out of his room, nodding when he passed Arch in the hall, and snickered at the cat-call that trailed after him.

In the garage, he checked over then hopped on his bike and sped out into the dark night. Autumn had set in and winter was coming, sun set came early in the afternoons now and he could feel the cold even through his thick biker-leather jacket.

At Regent's park, he locked his bike, mussing up his hair back into the chunks he'd originally fixed it to and which his helmet had pressed down. Up the path he went, up Primrose Hill and there he leaned back against the view-point railing.

The chilly breeze ensured there was no one else to intrude upon his time here. Watching the lights flicker over London, he shoved his hands into his pockets and just watched. Time passed but he took some time off of monitoring the minutes to just play over the happy memories this place brought him.

"Kind of cold to come up here just for the view," said a voice from behind him.

Ghost hadn't been caught unawares, he'd sensed the presence as soon as it had come within a twenty-metre radius of him... but the voice shook him to his core. With a whimper, his gaze dropped to the ground, his shoulders hunched and every coherent thought fled.

Each approaching foot-fall made his heart pound harder and breath speed up until it came in panting gasps; he fought the urge to run in self-preservation as staunchly as he could. When the polished black leather of Italian shoes came to a stop on the edge of his vision, he angled his head away, unable to bear even looking at Ian's feet.

He screwed his eyes shut when that velvet baritone murmured, "It's been a while, Kazuhi."

"I'm sorry," Ghost muttered, appalled at his audacity at standing there, shocked he could even speak at all, and he couldn't take it. Backing away, feet dragging, eyes still firmly screwed shut, mites automatically sensing the way behind him, he breathlessly gasped, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

Then he turned and ran, not hearing the call after him, not wanting to know if it was a curse or even, mercy of mercies, a cry for him to stop and wait. Too much hung on the word, whatever it was, and he couldn't take one more blow.

Not from Ian.

At the park gate, beyond even the foot of the hill, he came to a stop but didn't dare glance back, his mites sensing no one in pursuit or even in his perimeter. Panting, but not from effort, he paused to lean against the gate wall, his hands shaking. He jumped when his mobile phone rang, cursed then pulled it out.

Checking the display he cleared his throat and answered, "Hey."

"Hey!" Daniel greeted, "It's getting close to the party hour, Yu-re. I just spoke to Paul and he's leaving his place now."

"Do you need me to pick you up?"

"Nah, I'm ready to go," Dan said amidst sudden street noise, "I'm on my way to the tube. Trocadero? Paul's going on about some Shisha bar he found. We can grab some dinner then hit the clubs after."

"Sure, that sounds like a plan," Ghost said, struggling for a casual tone of voice, "Trocadero. I'll be by the candy shop at the main Piccadilly entrance, near HMV."

"Listen, there's this club called Bassment I want to take you to."

"Basement?" Kazu asked sceptically, still focusing on his breathing, "That's a club?"

"Bass," Daniel enunciated. "As in bass guitar? Kind of a word-play; Bass-ment. Basement. Whatever. It's a nice place."

Kazu rolled his eyes, "Uh-huh. Whatever you say, I don't know much about clubs anyway."

Dan chuckled, "See you in forty, buddy."

"Copy forty," Hanging up, Ghost tucked the phone away, stumbled over to a nearby bench, and collapsed with his head tilted back. "Please God," he muttered into the wind, "Let me have this peace for a little while longer." He reached and set his hand at his throat, feeling Ian's necklace under the cloth.

A long moment later he jumped up, made his way over to his bike, pulled on his helmet and drove out.

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"Bassment," Paul reiterated impatiently, hands jammed into his pockets as he, Daniel and Kazuhi stood in a close circle.

"I'm bored with that place," Daniel argued, "I vote we check out that CC Club that Chris recommended."

Rolling his eyes Paul growled, "Dude, CC is the most pretentious and cheesy place I have ever seen. And the music's stupid. It's nothing but a place to see and be seen, so I don't know about you," he slung his arm around Kazuhi, "But my man Kaz here and I, we want to *dance*."

Kazuhi rolled his eyes at them but said nothing, turning to leave them to it and eyeing the candy shop across the way. They were back where they had all first met up, battling out where to go next.

"Fine, fine," Daniel relented, breaking the circle as he stepped back. "I suppose Yu-re has to side with you on *something*."

"You two stick together on racing every. Single. Time," Paul accused, throwing his hands up and leading the way out onto the street. "At least I get him on my team for teaching you what good music is. You need to get out more often. Besides, Kaz and I are dressed for dancing, they won't let us in to CC anyway."

"Stuff it," he told Paul, who ignored him. Turning to Kazuhi, Daniel asked quietly, "You okay, matey? You've been really quiet."

"Yeah," Kazuhi replied automatically but seeing Dan's concerned gaze, and even Paul cocked his head to listen to them as they followed him, Kazuhi amended, "I'll be okay. Music and dancing are exactly what I need. I'm just... a little shaken."

"Onward march!" Paul called playfully, immediately catching on. "We need us some drinks and cute chicks! Hey, that rhymed."

"You're such an idiot," Daniel said, shaking his head with mock despair, "When are you going to grow up?"

Following the pair, Kazuhi felt some of his tension ebb away and felt thankful the two let him stay quiet when he needed to, simply filling in the silence with their usual banter and talk. It always seemed natural for him to jump in when he wanted to, between them letting him watch and enjoy them have a go at the other. There never seemed to be any sort of pressure when he hung out with them.

They just took him as he was.

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At Bassment, they paid their door charges and trooped in.

The club had some smooth, easy groove House Electronic music playing, the crowd much more informal and dressed to move rather than look stylish and pretty. The minimalist metal and glass made the place seem futuristic, the chill-out House beats making it so Kazuhi couldn't help but let the sound take him, make him forget. The lyric-less melodies implied the emotions, and the power behind them soon swept his thoughts away.

He downed some drinks, danced with the cute girl he'd met bumping into near the toilets. A few more glasses and he went off to dance with the handsome guy he'd met by the bar. Daniel, Paul and he met some girls at the bar, three of them who immediately seemed friendly since they hadn't tried to pick the girls up.

Paul was rather downcast when one of the girls praised them for it, leaning over to whisper to Kazuhi and making him laugh, "Damn, now I can't try anything!"

They each broke away once in a while to dance, and Kazuhi found himself finally relaxing for the first time since he'd fled Primrose Hill earlier. A few drinks, he'd learned, dulled his thoughts enough that he didn't have to continuously endure the ache in his heart and soul.

When the beats turned a little lighter, the dance floor cleared. He stood to one side and against the wall, giving Daniel a quick wave, who stood at a nearby terrace. He downed a bottle of water in one go and turned to toss it into a nearby bin. When he faced the dance floor again, a tall figure suddenly stood before him.

Then it felt like the breath had been knocked out of him.

Hazel eyes flashed in and out of his vision to the rhythm of the lights. Familiar blonde hair, still shorter than he truly preferred, fell over a memorable face. Worry shone in those eyes, and when Ian leaned forward, he backed reflexively away into the wall behind him. But Ian's arms closed off escape, hands slapped onto the wall at each of his sides and forced him to stay.

Again, the idea of Ian near him made *Kazuhi* want to flee. But Ian was leaning forward, lips coming to his ear and he stiffened, turning his head because he didn't want Ian's touch, wanted to be safe and *away from here*.

"Don't make me hunt you down again," Ian asked softly. "It was hard enough to overhear your phone conversation about tonight from as far away as I was."

Kazuhi shook, startled that Ian had gone to so much effort to spy on and find him... and chagrined that a mere civilian had kept up with him. He'd been certain there was no one around for at least twenty metres—but Ian was leaning in again,

"Dance with me," he cajoled.

The nearness drove Kazuhi half out of his mind, the familiar scent filling his lungs. But then Ian's hands closed down on his upper arms, making his skin warm, pulling him forward and against a broad chest. Familiar arms closed on him, pulling him along as Ian backed away from the wall, through the people and toward the middle of the floor.

"To dance with me," Ian pointed out, "You have to *dance*."

Obediently, automatically, Kazuhi lifted his hands and set one high on Ian's arm, fingertips on his lover's shoulder, and the other over Ian's forearm. Drawing a shaky breath, he tried to push away the sensations Ian's body wrought on him, the warmth in his arms surrounding him and rushing in a crashing wave. Overwhelmed, he moved thoughtlessly to the beat, the sustained tones interspersing it resonating in a pleasantly dream-like quality.

More people were piling onto the dance floor now, crowding around them both, but all Kazuhi could see was the vision he held in his arms, the man he had held that night in the hangar basement. It brought back memories of the adoration in Ian's eyes, the slow lingering touches and heart-felt moans. He leaned, curving into Ian's body, mind assaulted by loving memories, the feel and joy of being held near almost making him weep.

Pulled closer, looking up into the man he loved, Kazuhi murmured, "I'm sorry." Ian's arms tightened about him, and wetness pricked behind his eyes. His voice cracked a little when he begged, "Don't... I can't—"

"Just dance with me," Ian reprimanded him. "And don't run."

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Through saying quick goodbyes and muttering excuses, waving and pardoning himself from the group they'd met, Ian stood just behind him, tacit and waiting. Daniel hadn't wanted him to go off on his own as he'd had a lot to drink, but Kazuhi assured his friend he would be fine since Ian had a car.

"Ian, huh?" Daniel muttered, looking up to give Ian an assessing once-over. To Kazuhi, he reminded, "Call me if you need anything, Yu-re. Be careful."

"Thanks, Dan."

When they hit the street, Ian asked, "Yu-re?"

"Japanese word for Ghost," Kazuhi answered, not meeting Ian's eyes. He started when Ian pulled at his wrist, tugging his hand from his pocket before enclosing it in a larger, warmer one.

They moved without speaking, from the street into the parking centre and into the car. There, when Ian released his hand, it seemed colder, but he forced himself to lean away. It seemed natural that they went to Regent's Park, and together they walked in silence up to Primrose Hill... and Kazuhi wished Ian

would touch him again. At the peak, they stood quietly side by side, Ian with his hands in his pockets, in the same place they always stood, the same place they always went to talk about their relationship.

The silence lingered for long moments and eventually the quiet between them seemed less settled. There was too much to say and yet Kazuhi had no idea where to begin. Finally, still looking out over the view, he blurted out, "Please just let me say this," he couldn't even say it to Ian's face, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry—"

"You have no reason to apologise," Ian interrupted softly. "You have done nothing wrong in keeping me and my sister alive. I can understand you did... what you had to do."

The tone of Ian's voice seemed almost flat somehow, and Kazuhi was filled with a mad desperation. "It wasn't a job," Kazuhi gasped, whirling to face him, "I didn't do it just because they ordered me to, you have to understand—"

"I know," Ian cut in again, turning to face Kazu fully. A long moment later, he admitted, "I... knew." Still whispering he took a half-step closer, gaze intense, and continued, "I knew... how you felt almost right off the bat. It's what made dealing with you so difficult. I could see your mind work and see the thoughts flashing behind your eyes." He tilted his head, "Remember that morning we were introduced at RIG?"

Astonished, Kazuhi nodded.

"I saw your contempt for me." He shook his head, "Because for some strange reason I could read you even having just met you." Ian chuckled dryly, shaking his head as he spoke, "I was so worried you could read me just as well, that you were stronger, that you could deal with this attraction better than I ever could. I was... afraid that you would turn away from me but not before mocking me for my attraction to you."

"If you could read me even half so well as I can see you do," Kazuhi murmured, tilting his head to one side, a small wan smile pulling at his lips, "You would have seen I could do no such thing."

"I didn't know what to expect. Like what you did... suffering Artois and yet here you stand. I don't know how you could go through that," he shook his head, scrubbing at his hair with a hand. Ian stepped another half-pace closer again and scowled, growling harshly, "That Artois demon deserves to be gutted and skinned alive."

Kazuhi looked away, the memory of that bastard bringing him down. Closing his eyes, he tried to call up happier memories... then realised he only had to open his eyes and the happiest of them all stood right before him. Kazuhi watched as Ian sighed as he ran a hand through his hair, making it stand up on end, uncertain and suddenly quiet. Then Kazuhi noticed something, Ian's movements pulling his shirt taught about his chest where there was suddenly visible the distinctive bumps made by a specific set of charms underneath Ian's neckline; the necklace Kazuhi had given his lover. And suddenly a small smile stole across his face, hope blossomed in his chest and he dared to reach up and cup Ian's cheek.

Instantly, Ian nuzzled into the touch, a hand coming up to cover Kazu's and hold it there, while the other settled on Kazu's hip.

Smiling gently, Ian said softly, "I just want you to know... that I don't hold it against you. I had as much a part of all of that as you. Hell, if it hadn't been for me, none of that would have even happened to you and you wouldn't have had to make those choices."

Taking a deep breath, fingertips quickly covering Kazuhi's lips to stop the attempted interruption, he muttered,

"More than anything I want you to know that I mean it when I tell you..." he took a nervous breath, "that I still want you. If you'll have me, let me stay with you,"

Kazuhi gasped, astounded.

But Ian gave a little smile and pronounced the words he'd been dreaming of hearing since they were first spoken, "I want you to let me love you and I still want to fill your—"

And suddenly the words were gone because Kazu couldn't take it anymore.

He had jumped forward, covering Ian's lips with his own and seeking... Lord, seeking this onslaught of heat and need, Ian's arms suddenly holding him tightly, Ian slanting lips demanding over his own and stealing his very breath away.

Emotions out-poured into that kiss, longing and need, want and tenderness, accumulated after weeks of pining and pointless longing. He could taste how much Ian had missed him in that kiss, and with a small moan returned the emotions, clenching his fists into Ian's clothing and wishing they never had to let the other go...

Eventually and very slowly, the kiss gentled, hands stroked at his arms and shoulders with disbelief. Those hands moved up over his back, fingertips teased at his neck before sliding back down, clenching reflexively along the way. Carefully and tenderly, Ian stroked his lips with a loving tongue, nipping gently at his bottom lip and making him moan. In the very embrace itself, Ian made a silent promise and Kazuhi echoed it, holding Ian just as tightly, wanting to never let go.

Until, with a sigh, the kiss broke.

With foreheads resting together Kazuhi realised the sensations in his chest, the amazing and uplifting hope, were of towering happiness and utter contentment.

"Damn!" Ian snapped softly, almost startling Kazu so that he stared wide-eyed up at Ian, "I always knew I was a romantic at heart." Ian sighed, but a moment later he gave a heart-stopping smile and sheepishly admitted, "I just didn't know I was a hopeless one."

Kazuhi laughed, making Ian's smile widen at the happy sound, and hiked up onto his toes to reach for another one of those earth-shattering kisses.

FIN