

The Fulcrim in the Void

I: Memories Hurt

by Erin O'Brien

People say that those who have done evil can never be redeemed. That we're worthless, condemned, due to a single deed. It seemed to me like they were right. How could I go on, after Shinchaw? I never wanted what happened there. I wanted honor, duty, and the glory of service. I wanted to succeed where my father had failed. I was the shining star of my class at Kinnomori Military Academy. But what we did in Shinchaw City ... and then Kiva. I'd had to leave, or risk becoming a monster. My weeks on the run had made me realize it was too little, too late. The damage was already done. The monster lived in me.

There's nothing but the Dominion on Hertha, nowhere else to go. Except maybe the Insurgency, but they would never take in someone they considered a war criminal. This was not like Old Earth, where I could have fled and found amnesty in the arms of another nation. By now, my face would be on all the holo-screens in Kinnomori City, and probably all over the Dominion, too. All of Hertha must have known what I'd done, and they would reject me for those bare five minutes of my life. For my desertion. For the abandonment of my oath of service. But Aeliana didn't have a clue. Because of that, I had been able to be ... just me. For a little while, at least.

The fire flickered low. It wasn't that cold in the mountain pass, but the light was comforting. Aeliana peppered me with constant questions about the Dominion. I was happy enough to answer her, and guided her subtly away from asking about my past. I told her about the ongoing war between the Dominion and Padgett's Insurrection. About how my team had been deployed to assist the prefecture militias in pushing back the rebels. I told her about what cities are, and about our government. I told her about stores, and holo games. I told her about my Grendel. I don't know how much she understood, but she seemed to enjoy listening. Everything was new to her, and she watched me with wide, sparkling, crystalline eyes that reflected the flames like a mirror.

Eventually, it came back around to me, of course. She asked outright.

"Why did you come to the mountains, Aki?" She asked, her voice impossibly innocent and curious. "I know you were being chased but ... why?"

"Oh, Aeliana. You don't want this story," I warned her.

"But I do."

"Gods of man, Aeliana. I did something. Bad. Alright?" I really didn't want to talk about it.

"What could possibly be that bad?" She wondered.

"Shinchaw," I breathed. Couldn't help myself.

"What is that?"

"I uh ... it's a city. Was a city. I hurt someone. I mean, I – I killed someone. Not in war – no – it was a ... bad death. I gave them a bad death. And then, two days later, I left someone ... left someone behind. Someone I really cared about. Left him behind to die."

"I do not understand, Aki."

"Neither do I." I had to stop to blink the tears away. Kiva...

Pain makes memories stronger...



Aki sat on a picnic table bench, with his back against the tabletop. His long legs were stretched out before him. His eyes were closed, and he was wearing headphones – an unusual sight in Kinnomori City. Aki held the headphones close to his ears, and was weaving his head back and forth with the music. He sang quietly to himself. He had just finished with Old Earth Club and was waiting for Kiva to get done with futbol practice. The Old Earth power metal thrummed in his ears, the guitars wailing. Approaching from across the field, Kiva saw Aki zoning out to the music. He smiled, then quickly straightened his face when his lip twinged with pain.

“You’re such a fucking nerd with that Old Earth stuff, man,” Kiva grumbled. Aki opened his eyes and looked up. His jaw dropped when he saw Kiva.

“Holy shit, what happened to you?” Aki asked, and took off the headphones, gawking at Kiva’s bloody face and disheveled clothing.

“My teammates had something to say. I said something back.”

“With your fists?” Aki snorted.

“What else is a man supposed to do? I don’t buy that ‘turn the other cheek’ bullshit from the Ancient Christians.” Kiva reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette case.

“Is this really the best time for a cig? We’re still on school grounds,” Aki asked. He eyed Kiva’s swelling face. The back field of Kinnomori City High #4 stretched out behind him, dotted by golden-lobed trees with spiraling limbs. They were remnants of the golden forest that had once blanketed Mercia province. The speckled yellow lobes pulsed lightly as they inhaled air into their sacs.

“Can you think of a *better* time?” Kiva mumbled as he rolled the cigarette. His stiff, bleeding knuckles made the process difficult. The finished cigarette was uneven, and marked with red fingerprints. Kiva placed the cigarette in his lips, on the opposite side of the open split that trailed blood down his chin.

“Come on, let’s go home,” Aki said. “Gotta take care of that lip before it gets any worse. I think your eye’s beyond help, though.”

“I got those fuckers good,” Kiva growled around the cigarette, looking down at his busted, bleeding knuckles.

“I’m sure you did, dude, but you fucking paid for it,” Aki agreed. “Was it worth it?”

“Well, if you’d heard them...” Kiva trailed off, lighting the cig and taking a drag, not wanting to speak aloud what the boys had been saying. The two walked toward the perimeter fence at the back of the field.

“Heh, yeah, I don’t doubt it. They’re always saying shit though, aren’t they?” Aki lifted a cut portion of fence for Kiva to duck under, to exit the field into the city. Aki followed him through. This was the shortcut home they always took when they didn’t feel like catching the mag train. From the field into the alleyway between Martin’s Bar and an abandoned tenement, and from there along the aqueduct..

Kiva exhaled smoke. “But it’s never been like *that*,” he said pensively.

“Ah, it doesn’t matter what it was, you thrashed ‘em, right? Let’s see them try and say it again!” Aki laughed a little too hard. Aki knew exactly what the boys were saying; he had been hearing it for weeks and carefully steering Kiva away from it.

“Yeah.” Kiva grunted. His left eye was almost swollen shut, completely covering the fiery mahogany of his iris. His right eye was still narrowed from anger and residual adrenaline. His lower lip was split on the left side, a gash over an inch long. Blood covered his chin. Kiva’s coppery hair was matted with dirt and somebody else’s blood

Aki walked beside Kiva, hands in the pockets of his torn, faded jeans. He scuffed his black-booted toes on the ground, kicking a few stray pieces of the broken Kinnomori City concrete. They slowly made their way down the alley. Through unspoken agreement, because of Kiva’s condition, they would walk the whole way home instead of taking the mag train.

“Hey Kiv, did it really bother you that much? What they were saying?” Aki asked. His usually confident voice faltered a little. He sounded much more hesitant than he intended, and he hoped Kiva didn’t notice.

“Huh? Well I mean – ouch –” Kiva rubbed under his left eye gingerly. “I guess – it’s just that it’s not true, you know? That’s not how it is. We’re not brothers. And we’re not fucking. So why call me a ‘brother fucker’? I have enough trouble without that kind of reputation. ‘Ooh, heir to the Tawney fortune, he’s set for life, and now he fucks dudes, too! Useless throwback fag, doing nothing for the Imperative.’” Kiva referenced the Optimal Imperative, the core mission of the Dominion: the genetic perfection of the human species through controlled breeding.

“Yeah.” Aki said. They walked quietly for a while. For Aki and his swirling thoughts, the buildings passed by like a blur, unnoticed. Aki thought about the Optimal Imperative, the unifying goal of all Dominion citizens – the ultimate perfection of humanity through culture and eugenics. Aki believed in the Optimal Imperative – of course he did. He had a responsibility to the improvement of the human race, didn’t he?. But he didn’t hate Sub-Optimals, rudely called “Throwbacks” by most people, and he was keenly aware that his own blue eyes made him not a perfect Optimal himself. He knew it was much worse for Kiva, whose pale skin and copper hair marked him as an extreme Sub-Optimal. The Tawney family fortune protected Kiva, though. He could buy his way out of any restrictions if he really wanted to. Especially once he turned twenty. Just two more years.

“Hey?” Kiva asked quietly, breaking into Aki’s thoughts.

“Hmm?”

“I just ... I want to be thought of ... as a man, you know? My own man. Not just my family’s fucking money.” Kiva admitted.

“I think there’s no doubt you’re your own man.” Aki reassured him. “And yeah, we’re not brothers. But we’re something, you know? There is a you and me, just, I don’t have a name for it.”

“Yeah,” Kiva mused. “There’s an us. Ever since we were seven.”

“Let’s just say we’re close, and leave it at that?” Aki suggested.

“Erh, people can read all kinds of things into that.” Kiva frowned.

“Fuck ‘em. Who cares?”

“Well, I do. I’m not a fucking puff.” Kiva growled defensively, then took a deep final drag on the cigarette. He flicked the butt to the sidewalk, not bothering to stamp it out. As far as he was concerned, if the city caught fire, it would make for a beautiful sight.

“Alright, alright. ‘No homo’ or whatever. Idiot.” Aki rolled his eyes.

They walked the rest of the way home in silence, hands in their pockets, elbow to elbow. Aki’s faded, slightly oversized plain black t-shirt and torn jeans were a stark contrast to Kiva’s now bloody designer button-up with rolled sleeves, and dark wash jeans which sat low on his hips, held up with a brown belt. They both wore boots: Aki, his father’s old, beat up military issue boots, and Kiva a pair of polished brown ankle boots.

When they entered Aki’s flat, his mother looked up from the faded, threadbare sofa. Her eyes were bleary, and she had a glass of Bevy in her hand. The neon blue liquid sloshed as she turned her head.

“Where have you been- oh, my Jesus God, Kiva what the fuck happened to you?” She set the drink down with a thunk and stood up.

“Got in a fight,” Kiva mumbled.

Aki closed the door behind them, and started to head toward the bedroom he shared with Kiva, but his mother cut him off, forcing herself in front of him.

“Is this what you brought into our home, Hiroaki? A degenerate? I should have fucking guessed.” Her voice became more and more crazed, until it broke with a sharp laugh. “You’re just like your father. Just like him. Not a trace of me in you.”

“Mom – not now. Don’t do this right now, please.” Aki begged, his voice worn.

She raised her hand sharply. Seeing it coming, like many times before, he squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his teeth. Aki could hear Kiva’s sharp intake of breath behind him. She belted Aki with a hard slap across the cheek. The crack resounded, shaking Aki’s brain in his skull.

“Don’t do what? Don’t do *what*, Hiroaki? This is *my* flat, don’t you forget it! This is *my* home, and you brought that – that – *delinquent* to live here! Look at the state of him! I always knew

it would end up like this. Those Tawneys were criminals, and the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. As *you* should know. You're *your* father's son, too."

"Mom, it was just a fight. Calm down, he was defending himself. And it's *his* stipend that pays for this flat. And your booze." Aki said defiantly, lifting his eyes from the floor to meet his mother's cold gaze. His cheek was numb. Kiva watched the redness spread across Aki's cheekbone. Aki felt a light touch on his elbow. He turned his head to look at Kiva.

"I can ... come back later ... if I'm making things worse." Kiva offered.

"No way, you can't go anywhere like that," Aki told him. "Just hold on a minute."

"Oh, yes, tell the miscreant to stay without consulting me." She had walked back to the side table and picked up her glass of Bevy again, and downed half of it. Her golden brown hair hung in greasy strings. The bags under her bloodshot eyes were tinged purple. Her eyes, ice-blue like Aki's, pierced through Kiva, threatening.

"I don't want to cause trouble for you." Kiva turned to the door, and began to open it. Aki leaned his back against the door, and placed his hand on top of Kiva's on the doorknob. Aki locked eyes with Kiva. Although the same ice blue as his mother's piercing, hateful glare, Aki's eyes were deep, wide, and terrified. *Please stay with me.* Kiva could practically hear Aki's plea.

Kiva nodded without hesitation. "Yeah, ok," he whispered.

Aki withdrew his hand and turned back to his mother.

"Look, Mom. He's lived here for a year and a half already, it's been fine. The fight wasn't even his fault. Just – sit back down and watch your holos, alright? Do you need another Bevy?"

"Oh Aki," she purred suddenly. Her face had changed completely, as if a new person now inhabited her body. "You're my hope, my salvation. You're going to be my hero. When you make it – when you make it out of here. My son. The man his father never could be."

"Yeah, ok, Mom, come on," Aki took his mother by the shoulders, and guided her back to the sofa. By the time she sat down, she was sobbing.

"Come on, Mom, don't cry. I'll get you out of here. It won't be like this forever. I'll go to the Academy, I'll make it big as a pilot. I'll get you a house on Palatine Hill like you always wanted." Aki stroked his mother's hair and kissed the top of her head. When he pulled away, she was already fumbling for the holoprojector's remote, mumbling to herself about a game show. Aki looked up at Kiva over the sofa. Kiva was watching, with a dark expression on his bleeding face. Aki sighed. He knew what was coming.

Aki jerked his head sideways, toward the hallway. Kiva nodded, and walked toward their shared bedroom. Aki went to the kitchen to get his mother another drink, then followed Kiva, stopping in the bathroom to grab first aid supplies.

“Should you really have given her more to drink?” Kiva asked immediately as Aki walked in.

“Man, she’s way worse sober. You don’t even know. Just let me handle her, I’ve been doing it forever. I know how she ticks.”

“I don’t like it. Nobody should be hitting you, not ever.”

“It’s fine. It’s nothing new. Sit on the bed, will you?” Aki asked Kiva, who was aimlessly pacing the back of the room.

“How do you stand it?” Kiva demanded, still pacing. “Being treated like that?”

“She’s not well, Kiv. She doesn’t mean it.”

“Why’s it matter what she *means*? What should matter is what she *does*. She can’t just hit you like that. She does it *all the time* and you just *let her*. I just let her hit you, too!”

“I’m alright, Kiv. It’s alright.” Aki’s voice was quiet, reassuring. He knew how to handle Kiva in one of these moods – just like he knew how to handle his mother in one of hers. “She’s just ... got reasons. She’s too weak to really hurt me. Anyway, you’ve been hit a lot harder than me, today. Now, will you sit down?” Aki pointed to Kiva’s bed.

“I can do this myself,” Kiva complained, finally sitting down on the side of his bed.

“Uh huh, but you won’t. You’ll just take that bloody shirt you’re wearing, wipe your face off with it, and throw it in the corner for the mopfs.”

“I don’t need to be fussed over,” Kiva glowered, eyes sullen. “Least of all by you.”

“Shut up and let me do this. I can’t clean the blood off your fucking chin if it’s moving. Hold on, this is going to sting.” Aki wiped the blood away from Kiva’s cut lip with a soaked cloth. Kiva hissed in pain. A few swipes of the cloth, and all the blood was gone. Kiva looked halfway civilized. “I think you might need stitches,” Aki said, looking at Kiva’s lip.

“Really? It’s that bad? Bah, I’m not gonna go get stitches.”

“Suit yourself. It’ll scar. Have you seen how much blood is on your shirt? You look like a massacre. OK, need to clean your eye, and your knuckles, then you need to take a shower because your hair is full of somebody’s blood.”

“How come you’re always telling me what to do?” Kiva laughed.

“Because you won’t do it, if I don’t tell you to.” Aki said. Kiva shrugged. Fair enough. Such had been their relationship for years. Aki was more responsible, and more concerned about propriety. He couldn’t help but keep Kiva in line. For some reason, Kiva didn’t mind it, and accepted the direction with a gracious level of bemused tolerance.

Cleaning Kiva’s eye had been easy enough; the split in his brow was much smaller than the cut on his lip. Kiva’s knuckles, though, were shredded and swollen. Aki cleaned them as gently as he could, but he knew it had to hurt terribly. He could hear Kiva cursing under his breath. Finally, Aki let go of Kiva’s hand.

“OK, done. I guess mandatory first aid class counted for something,” Aki said. “Go.” “A shower now, really?” Kiva scowled. He wanted to just lay down. He started to lean back on the bed.

“Yeah, you’re pretty gross, man. Don’t put that hair on your pillow, you’ll regret it.” Aki warned. Kiva grunted and sat back up, glaring.

“I hate you.” Kiva grumbled. Aki raised an eyebrow at him.

“I could just let you wallow,” Aki offered.

“No,” Kiva stood. “You couldn’t if you tried.” He stalked to the dresser, took what he needed, then floated out the door like a heavy stormcloud.

Kiva’s thoughts ran wild in the shower. Watching the red water run off his head, he found himself pondering why he felt so helplessly angry and protective when Aki had been struck. Why what those boys had said had bothered him so much. Whether it would be best if he moved out, for Aki. Why he hadn’t wanted Aki to let go of his hand on the doorknob. Why he would’ve walked through fire for those blue eyes, when they begged him to stay. Kiva shook his head in frustration, his hair spraying warm droplets onto the shower curtain. He knew. He had always known. They had been best friends for a decade, but it had always been somehow more than that.

Kiva returned to the bedroom with his copper hair towel-tousled. He wore just plaid pajama pants which sat low on his hips, as usual. He was barefoot, no shirt. Aki glanced up from his school-issue holo-tablet when Kiva came in. This was a familiar sight, but he always liked seeing it. Kiva flopped heavily on his bed, to the left of the single small window. His huge brown eyes stared at the ceiling. Kiva sighed.

Uh oh, Aki thought. “What’s up, then?” He asked.

“Nothing...”

“Hey,” Aki lowered his tablet, and turned to look at Kiva, eyes narrowed. “I’ve known you how long? You know I don’t believe ‘nothing’ from you.”

"I dunno. It's just – what does it mean that we're 'close'?" Kiva glanced at Aki, who was staring intently at him. Aki shifted to sit on the side of his bed, legs hanging down. He set the holo-tablet next to him on the bed. An essay about ethics lit the screen.

"I guess it just means we're bound, like, tied together somehow." Aki said. "I'm not sure. But there's something, right? People always joke that they can't ever find one of us without the other. It's true, right, I mean, I'm happier with you around than not."

"Hm. Yeah." Kiva continued staring at the ceiling.

"I think you're too worried about it," Aki said, running his hand back over his shaved head. "Just let it be whatever it is, yeah?" He started to pull his legs back up onto the bed and reach for the tablet.

"I guess," Kiva said, then sat up slowly, cross-legged. "I just -"

Aki's heart slammed in his chest suddenly. *Now*, something told him. *It has to be now.*

"Fine. D'you want to know what it means, then?" Aki asked, looking Kiva straight in the face.

"Know what?" Kiva blinked, surprised by the intensity.

Without another word, Aki stood up and walked over to Kiva's bed. He placed one knee on the bed, and leaned forward. Aki lifted a hand to Kiva's cheek, trailing a fingertip over his jawline. Kiva's eyes widened, and his body stiffened. He didn't move. Aki looked into Kiva's eyes. Kiva looked scared, vulnerable. Like pictures of Old Earth fawns. Lost in the woods. Aki had never seen him like that before. Coming back to himself, Kiva searched Aki's eyes, finding a profound sadness as deep as an ocean.

Aki started to back off, putting both feet on the ground.

"I'm sorry, I -" Aki looked away, anywhere but into Kiva's eyes. "I know you don't want this. I'm sorry."

"No..." Kiva said so quietly Aki could barely hear him. Then louder. "No. Stay."

Aki lifted his eyes to see Kiva's hand reaching for his face. Aki moved closer, leaning forward on the bed again. Kiva's hand made contact with Aki's cheek, and slid down to the side of his neck. Aki shivered and closed his eyes.

"Kiva, I don't want to make you uncomfortable." Aki said at last.

"I'm not. I've wanted this, too," Kiva admitted, the un-marred corner of his lips curling up in a weak smile.

“Really? For how long?”

“Well, always. I just ... thought it was impossible, I guess. How do you cross that fence?” Kiva mused.

“By crossing it,” Aki said, sensibly.

Aki climbed onto the bed fully, cross legged across from Kiva. Kiva dropped his hand off of Aki’s neck, back to his lap. Aki reached for that hand and took it, brazenly entwining his fingers with Kiva’s. With his other hand, Aki traced a finger over Kiva’s lower lip. Kiva watched him, fighting the knot in his stomach. Kiva wrestled his memories back into their pit.

Aki leaned forward and very lightly brushed his lips against Kiva’s. He could feel Kiva’s shiver in his hand. Kiva pressed forward, strengthening the contact, and Aki kissed him fully. Aki could taste the coppery tang of Kiva’s blood from his split lip. His heart pounded faster.

Kiva pulled back suddenly.

“Stop,” he whispered. “Aki, stop.” Aki sat back on the bed, and watched Kiva’s face. Kiva was looking away, his eyes focused on some distant thought. He looked almost upset, disturbed even. Aki felt the tears stinging his eyes, springing up unbidden. Kiva looked up in time to see two trailing down Aki’s cheeks.

“No, no!” Kiva took Aki’s face in both hands, then leaned forward and kissed the tears. “No, it’s not you! Not you, never you.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I put you in this position, I – I feel ashamed. You didn’t want this, you never wanted... you have no one else to go to, and I ...” Aki trailed off.

“No, a *chuisle*, it’s not like that,” Kiva’s tongue rolled over the strange words with a smoothness, a familiarity. “Of course I want this, I said I did. I want you. Always have. I could be anywhere I want, anywhere at all. This is where I *chose* to be, with you.”

Aki looked up again, eyes shining. The tears were still falling.

“Why the tears, still?” Kiva brushed one off of Aki’s cheek with his thumb.

“Relieved, I guess,” Aki said, hesitating. “And scared. And sad? Heh, but I’m always sad.”

Kiva rested his hand on Aki’s. “It makes sense. There’s so much on you ... your mom, your future, me ... you bear a lot more weight than you should have to. I wish I could lift it all.”

“And now this,” Aki said, “Now this. This means so much, I can’t wrap my head around it. What do we do, now? How do we act, now?”

“Well, just be us, I guess. Not much will change. What else can we do, Aki?” Kiva smiled slightly, and ran his hand over Aki’s closely-shorn hair.

“I thought you didn’t want to be called a puff, like, I thought you were really anti ... this.” Aki said.

“Oh. I mean, well. I don’t want to be *called* a puff. And I’m not one, I still like girls. I know you do, too. A lot.” Kiva chuckled. “But what I wanna be called has nothing to do with who I want to be with.”

“Do you know I’ve wanted to know what touching you would feel like ... since the beginning? I thought I’d never find out. I’d accepted it. But seeing you walk in just then, hair a mess, no shirt ...” Aki wondered aloud.

“Couldn’t help yourself, huh? Well of course, I mean, *look* at me,” Kiva grinned roguishly, showing off his busted lip and swollen eye. “You know I’ve always done that on purpose?”

“Jerk.” Aki smirked, still sitting cross-legged across from Kiva, their knees touching. Aki reached across and rested his hand on Kiva’s chest, over his heart. Kiva’s skin felt very warm, very soft. The muscles beneath tensed.

“Ssss... your hand is really cold!” Kiva complained, laughing.

“Sorry,” Aki said and started to pull his hand away.

“Nooo, it’s warm *now*. Stop apologizing, stupid. You’ve never done anything wrong a day in your life.” Kiva held Aki’s hand in place. Aki felt the fire in his belly rise up again. Aki leaned forward, slid his free hand behind Kiva’s neck, and kissed him. Softly at first, then deeper, lingering. Kiva sighed into the kiss, and leaned back, pulling Aki down with him onto the bed. Aki propped himself up with one arm and looked down into Kiva’s eyes. The left eye’s swelling had receded a little bit. Kiva’s lip had broken open again, and a thin trickle of blood trailed down his chin.

“Now what?” Kiva asked, staring into Aki’s bottomless ice-blue eyes.

“Hmh. Whatever I want,” Aki growled, his confidence surging. Aki lowered his head, and licked Kiva’s chin slowly, trailing up and over the bleeding cut. He kissed Kiva’s lip, hard, right on top of the cut. Kiva winced and gasped.

“Did that hurt?” Aki asked playfully.

“Yes, you asshole.” Kiva snarled.

“Good.” Aki smiled wickedly.

“Why is that *good*?”

“Because I want you to remember this forever. To your grave.” Aki nuzzled his cheek into Kiva’s.

“Mmh... how could I ever forget? You don’t have to hurt me for that.”

“Someone once told me ‘Pain makes memories stronger’,” Aki’s velvety baritone voice teased, quoting his father. He brought his face close to Kiva’s, and the resonance in his voice fell deeper. “I *will* be your first thought when you wake up in the morning, and your last thought when you fall asleep. No matter who you’re sleeping next to.” Aki kissed Kiva again, gently this time. Kiva’s lips were soft, open, and pulled Aki deeper. Kiva bit Aki’s lower lip as he pulled away. Hard.

“Ah!” Aki exclaimed, then growled.

“You already are. You have been. I can’t even breathe without thinking of you. I hated it. Sometimes I really hated you, because I couldn’t get you out of my head.” Kiva confessed.

“Jesus fucking Christ, why didn’t we get here sooner?” Aki asked. He turned his head and began kissing Kiva’s neck and throat. Kiva let out something between a moan and a whine, as Aki’s lips brushed his sensitive skin.

“Quiet or my mom will hear us,” Aki whispered, between nibbles on Kiva’s neck.

“Please, that bitch is passed out on the couch. She drunk-sleeps through us playing Mecha Gods in there on the holo, screaming at the top of our lungs. I could howl like the devil, and she wouldn’t have a clue.” Kiva tilted his head to the side to expose his neck more.

“You got a point,” Aki agreed. Kiva ran his hands up Aki’s back, under his faded black t-shirt. Aki shivered at the touch, a thrill running up his spine.

“Wanna take this shirt off? So we can be even?”

“Yeah, ok.” Aki straightened, straddling Kiva’s hips. He stretched his arms up, pulling the t-shirt off. Kiva watched appreciatively, as Aki’s muscles and ribs flexed with his movement. Those broad shoulders and that narrow waist had given Kiva fits for years. While Aki had the shirt half-off, Kiva rested a hand on his waist. The touch startled Aki, and he gasped softly. With the shirt off, held on one arm, he looked down at Kiva and smiled.

“I’ve wanted to touch you there – right there – for so long,” Kiva smiled back up at him. “Wanted to put a claim on you. Wanted the right to touch you whenever I please.” Kiva slid his hand up Aki’s ribs, over his chest, and back down to his belly, brushing the light golden-brown fur under his fingertips.

“Mmm... ok then, I give you that right.” Aki leaned back down, arms on either side of Kiva’s head, propping himself up. “I’ll give you the right to my body. I trust you, Kiv.”

“You’re not gonna ask for a right to mine?” Kiva asked, curious.

“No, if you want me to have it, you’ll give it,” Aki touched his forehead to Kiva’s. He settled his weight over Kiva’s hips and lowered his body a bit. He could feel the pressure of Kiva’s hunger beneath him. He knew Kiva could feel his, too.

“Gods of man, yes, of course I want you to have it. I would sell my fucking soul to you for one kiss!”

“Oh? Well, I’ll take your soul, then ... but you can have as many kisses as you want.” Aki said, whispering the last into Kiva’s ear. In response, Kiva lifted his hips and pressed into Aki.

“Mmh...” Aki moaned. “Yesss, you can have that, too.”

“Say it again,” Kiva said, still pressing.

“Ah... it’s yours. All yours.” Aki closed his eyes tightly, bit his lip.

Kiva took hold of Aki, under his pants. He stroked softly with his thumb.

“This is?” Kiva asked.

“Yesss, that. Kiva...”

“Hmm?” Kiva continued stroking with long, slow movements.

“Kiva, I lo-” Aki began, but Kiva cut him off with a kiss and a deft squeeze. Aki whimpered softly.

“No, let’s don’t say it. Let’s not ever say it. It’s enough that we belong to each other. It’s enough and more.” Kiva said. He fought to keep the sudden panic out of his voice.

“Alright,” Aki said, reluctantly. “As long as you know.” Aki slid off of Kiva, to the side. Kiva followed his movements, turning on his side as well.

“I know. Now be quiet. Let me show you.” Kiva said softly. He resumed stroking. He kissed Aki, gentle, open. Aki was not used to this kind of softness from Kiva. Kiva was usually all fire, and barely contained aggression. Contempt and hatred often flashed in Kiva’s huge mahogany eyes – never at Aki, but he had seen it since they were little. Kiva was a fighter – violent, cruel, defiant. But never to Aki.

Kiva lifted his hand, and pushed Aki’s shoulder until he was laying on his back. Kiva looked down at him. Aki’s bare chest rose and fell with deep breaths. His eyes shone brightly. The sadness and terror from earlier at the door had vanished, replaced by curiosity and wonder. Kiva

ran his hand down Aki's chest, slim but muscled, and rested it on his belly. Aki's eyes flickered with animal vulnerability. He waited, motionless.

"Just let me, ok?" Kiva asked, his voice low and husky. Aki nodded once, having no idea what he was agreeing to. Aki bit his lip, nervous. Kiva's heart roared at the sight.

Kiva pulled Aki's pants and boxers down to the middle of his thighs. Kiva wrapped his fingers around Aki again. Aki squeezed his eyes shut and gasped. His eyes snapped back open when he felt a warm, soft wetness envelop him. His breath caught in his throat. He let out a helpless groan. Kiva's heart soared at the sound.

After, Kiva looked down at Aki, propped up with his arms on either side of Aki's head. A bead of translucent wetness trailed down Kiva's chin alongside a rivulet of blood from his busted lip. Kiva looked Aki dead in the eyes, and swallowed. Aki felt the foundation drop out of his world, and he fell, spinning. There would be no turning back. Not ever.

Later ...

"Are you sure you don't want -" Aki began. His head was nestled into Kiva's shoulder, and Kiva's arm was around him.

"I'm sure," Kiva said, and hugged Aki with one arm. "I got everything I wanted."

"But I want to show you, too, you know." Aki murmured.

"You did, *a chuisle*." Kiva told him.

"What does *a* – *a chuisle* mean? You said it before."

"Ah, um... it's something my mom used to say to me. Is that weird? It's an OE language, Irish? It means *my pulse*, uh, short for *pulse of my heart*." Kiva sounded a little embarrassed.

"It's not weird. I like it. You can call me that." Aki said. "Kiva, you *never* talk about your mother."

"Yeah. It's better that way. There's a lot you don't know." Kiva said, trying to hide the bitterness from his voice.

"I'd like to know, if you'd tell me," Aki rested his hand on Kiva's chest.

"You might not like me so much after," Kiva warned.

"I doubt that very much. There's a lot I *do* already know, after all."

“Oh yeah?” Kiva laughed. “Like what?”

“Stupid, I’ve known you since we were seven. I know you hate everybody except me, and I know you enjoy getting in fights. I know you don’t see life the same way other people do, and the rules are blurry to you. I’ve seen you steal things even though you’ve got your stipend and could easily pay for it.”

“Well then. You’re painting me as a monster! And I hate my stipend, I don’t deserve life to be that easy.”

“If you’re a monster, then you’re *my* monster. Don’t hate your stipend, it’s your birthright.”

“Ridiculous. I didn’t earn it.” Kiva snorted.

“It’s yours anyway,” Aki pressed.

“I don’t want it, it’s blood money.” Kiva growled, then cursed internally.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Um, do you know, Aki ... did you know I get in fights because I like hurting people?”

“Well, I assumed as much...”

“Doesn’t that bother you, to know that?” Kiva sounded a little worried.

“Not as much as it should, I think. Because you’ve never raised a fist to me and I know you never will.”

“That’s the damn truth, I couldn’t hurt you, can’t bear to see you hurt,” Kiva confirmed.

“Oh, Gods of man, how late is it?” Aki suddenly worried.

“Mmh... “ Kiva leaned over to look at the bedside clock. “Late. You wanna sleep?”

“Oh, no. No, monster, we only get this night once. Just wanted to calculate the damage.”

“So you’re gonna call me ‘monster’ now?” Kiva chuckled.

“In private, maybe.”

They lay quietly for a while, breathing in time. Aki breathed in Kiva’s scent – sun-warmed earth, smoke, salt. Grounding, reassuring.

“Hey blue-eyes?” Kiva asked.

“Mm?”

“Since this is going to be a thing, I feel like I have the right to ask this of you now.”

“What?”

Kiva ran his hand over Aki’s shaved head.

“Don’t do this anymore, alright?” Kiva sounded sad.

“Um, why? You know I can’t spend money on a haircut... what difference does it make?”

“Just – you know I *can* afford your haircut, ok? I want you to take care of yourself. That includes not looking like a Gallowgate prisoner.”

“I dunno, it’s been this way for so long ...”

“I fucking know it has! You’ve been bald since we met, because your fucking mother would rather buy a bottle of Bevy than get her son a damn haircut!” Kiva snarled. “Aki, I don’t even know what color your hair *is*.”

“It’s uh ... brown?”

“Gods of man. ‘It’s uh brown’?! Fucking hell, Aki,” Kiva laughed. “*You* don’t even know anymore!”

“Alright, jerk. You made your point. I’ll grow it out. *For you*.”

“So, about the black t-shirts ...”

“No. No. No more changes,” Aki sat up and glared at Kiva. He had worn black t-shirts and jeans, with black boots, exclusively for as long as he could remember. It was the best thing he could come up with to still look put together despite his lack of funds.

“Just let me get you new ones. Y’know, that aren’t faded? And some jeans without holes?” Kiva pleaded.

“I don’t want your money, Kiv,” Aki protested.

“Oh for fuck’s sake ... I’ll steal it all, then, if that will make you feel better!” Kiva spat, and rolled his eyes.

“No! Just leave it alone.”

"I won't," Kiva persisted.

"Why's it matter so much?" Aki looked a little wounded. "Need me to be more attractive?"

Kiva propped himself up on his elbows, to scowl back at Aki's pout. "No, idiot. Look at you, you couldn't ... No. Because. You deserve better than you've been given. You're the only good thing in my life, Aki. You're worth more than you allow yourself to have, so just let me give it to you."

"You don't owe me anything, Kiv. I never asked for anything, just your company. I never wanted your money. I already hate taking it for this fucking flat." Aki's pride would not let him give in.

"I know," Kiva reached up and touched Aki's cheek. "There's a reason I chose to live with you. It wasn't *just* your sad blue eyes. It's because you always wanted me for *me*. Not the fucking Tawney fortune."

"Alright," Aki relented, and flopped back down on the bed next to Kiva. "But no designer brands. And I pick them. And they'll all be black. The jeans, too."

"Absolutely, whatever you want." Kiva smiled. They would definitely be designer brands. Curled together, talking aimlessly, they fell asleep despite their best intentions.

When the alarm rang, Aki sat bolt upright. He was disoriented for a moment, not being in his own bed. He looked around, then down, seeing a shirtless Kiva turning and stretching.

It really happened, Aki thought, in wonder. We're – it's real. Without thinking, Aki stroked Kiva's side, over his ribs and waist, to his hip. *This is mine now.*

"Mmh... pleassseee, turn the alarm offfff, you can feel me up afterrrr," Kiva groaned, turning onto his belly and burying his face in the pillow. Aki climbed over Kiva and got off the bed. He walked over to his nightstand and turned off the alarm.

"Oh thank the gods," Kiva murmured into the pillow.

"Gotta get up, you know," Aki told him.

"Why? Can't we just stay here today?" Kiva complained, his voice smoky from sleep.

"Test in Ethics today. You know, your favorite?"

“Bullshit class. Bullshit. Fucking fuck it.” Kiva said. The pillow muffled his continued cursing.

“Nope, not fuck it. If you fail, you can’t go to Academy with me.” Aki poked Kiva in the side.

“Whaat?” Kiva turned his head to look at Aki. “Since when am I going to Academy? That’s *your* plan. When I’m 20, I won’t have to do shit all.”

“You’re going, because you want to be with me. And I’m going, so. Also, what kind of life is a meaningless existence living off your family’s fortune?”

“A comfortable one.”

“And here I thought you hated that money. You’re already so bored you chose to slum it with me in this crap heap, and you steal things and beat people up for fun. You’ll turn into a serial killer if I don’t keep you busy.”

“So you want me to learn how to beat people up legitimately, for money I already have?” Kiva asked wryly.

“No ... I want you to go to Kinnomori Military Academy with me so we can learn to pilot Mechs together. It won’t be just a holo-game anymore. Don’t you wanna make your own way like you always said?” Aki threw a clean shirt from the closet at Kiva. “Get up!”

“I have another suggestion,” Kiva said, sitting up. His eye looked less swollen, but the purple was setting in. The bruise around his cut lip was livid.

“What’s that?”

“We take my stupid fortune, move to the beach in Magnolia, and never look back.” Kiva pulled on the pale-colored button-up. Tiny blue triangles dotted the shirt in a regular pattern.

“Nope, can’t do that. I have to get my mother out of this shithole, and I need that Academy signing bonus to do it,” Aki said with finality.

“Stupid, I can just pay for a better place when I’m 20!” Kiva exclaimed, exasperated.

“No, asshole. *It has to be me.*”

“Really? Is your pride that important?”

“Every man in her life has failed her. That stops with me. I need to show her,” Aki said.

“She fucking hits you. And berates you. Let’s be real, here, your mother abuses you.” Kiva insisted.

“She has reasons, Kiv. I understand her reasons. I can bear it.”

“That’s sick, *a chuisle*.”

“Maybe, but I’m still doing it. The preliminary aptitude tests are next week, they’re bringing the sim-pods to the school.”

“Fuck,” Kiva said and stood up. He ruffled his copper hair with one hand, which left it in its usual fluffy, unruly state. “You gotta let me think about this, Aki.”

“That’s fine, you think about it, and then you’re going with me. Today for the Ethics test and next week for the sim-pods.” Aki wrapped an arm around Kiva’s waist, dragged him close, and kissed him. Aki pulled back and smiled. “I’m gonna go shower.”

“Fuck,” Kiva said again. “Fuck, what have you done to me!” Aki grinned as he walked out the door, hearing Kiva fall backwards onto the bed with a frustrated groan.

Aki and Kiva walked side by side to the mag train. They both carried shoulder bags, which contained their school-issue tablets and – in Aki’s case – various OE odds and ends like his headphones, and paper books. They walked slowly, wanting to linger before having to switch their behavior and conversation back to normal. Their agreement to keep their relationship a secret was unspoken, but an agreement nonetheless. The Dominion was not particularly averse to pairings which bore no possibility of offspring. It was not illegal, or dangerous like Old Earth. But it presented social challenges neither of them wanted to trigger.

“Hey, you have a boxing meet tonight don’t you?” Kiva suddenly remembered.

“Yeah, it’s Home, #3 is coming over,” Aki confirmed. “Why?”

“Well, I -”

“Yes, you can come,” Aki laughed. “I’ve only asked you to come cheer me on a million times.”

“I didn’t want to look like – I mean, I didn’t want you to think ... Dammit, it’s different now!” Kiva sputtered.

“Yeah it is. Real different,” Aki agreed. “Ugh, I’m gonna be so tired by the time of the meet, we barely slept at all.”

“Worth it?” Kiva asked quietly, and adjusted his shoulder bag. Aki smiled, and felt heat rising to his cheeks. He reached over and touched Kiva’s arm briefly. Kiva sighed at the feeling of Aki’s warm fingertips. Aki’s hand fell away. They walked the rest of the way to the mag train in silence.

Aki watched the buildings of Kinnomori City fly by. The train ride from his home district to Kinnomori City High #4 was short, but offered a nice panorama of the city and botanical gardens at one point when the train crossed a sky bridge. As usual, Kiva sat across from him. They both tried their hardest not to look at each other much, as if that alone would give the secret away.

“Are you gonna be able to focus today?” Aki asked the window, but glanced at Kiva.

“Definitely. But not on the right things,” Kiva quipped. Aki flashed a grin. Kiva’s face grew serious after a minute.

“Aki? You realize I probably won’t get into the Academy, right? What happens then?” Kiva asked quietly, dreading the answer.

“Well ...” Aki was silent for a while. “Your grades are just about the best in class without you even needing to try, and your physical aptitudes should be good because of futbol. And you’re better at Mecha Gods than me. But if you don’t get in, then we’ll do it your way. If we both get in, then great. If one of us doesn’t, then neither of us go. Alright? I wouldn’t leave you behind, not even for that. But you gotta promise to actually try.”

“I’ll try,” Kiva agreed, relief in his voice. “I promise.”

“It will be good anyway, you know? To serve the Dominion like that, to earn Aequalis,” Aki smiled a little and looked at Kiva. Aki had always dreamed of earning Aequalis in some heroic way, in military service. It seemed the appropriate way for him to prove he deserved full rights under the Dominion government – owning property, the right to vote, the right to have children. Aequalis was the badge that told the rest of the Dominion “This person is worthy of continuing the human race.”

“Well, I mean – I guess? I could just pay Sacrifice for the both of us and have done with it,” Kiva said pragmatically. The very wealthy could pay into government services with a huge sum of credits, and purchase Aequalis by virtue of their plenty.

“Wouldn’t you rather earn it?” Aki asked, eyebrow raised quizzically.

“No. I don’t see the Dominion the way you do, Aki, you know I don’t,” Kiva frowned, “I’m a Throwback, after all. We’re not very beloved.” Kiva referred to himself by the offensive term easily, but Aki winced.

“*Primals* have just as much right to earn Aequalis as anybody! Besides, I’m a Sub-Op,” Aki widened his ice-blue eyes.

“Blue eyes are just enough to make you *exotic*. You’re not full-blown red hair, paste-white skin and freckles like me,” Kiva laughed. “You have just enough Primality to make the all-brown girls blush, but they could still take you home to meet mom and dad.”

“Ugh. Fine. The point is, I need to do it this way, to pick up where my dad failed,” Aki looked at Kiva directly.

“Where he failed?”

“You know. It happened right before I met you, it was why none of the other kids would talk to me for years. He was a pilot, a famous one. He deserted, ran from the line of duty. And his family,” Aki finished bitterly. “I’ll never run from duty, never abandon anyone like that.”

Kiva laughed. “You and your ‘honor and duty’. Ever since you were little, a little soldier boy. It’s cute.”

“Cute?” Aki scowled, “I’ll show you ‘cute’. Later.”

“Color me intrigued, soldier,” Kiva drawled.

The mag-train slowed, and the pair disembarked. The stop brought them out near the alley they usually left school by, but they bypassed it this time and headed around the block to the front of Kinnomori City High #4. They entered the school through the front doors and headed toward the cafeteria just in time to hear the first morning bell. For reasons of the Shadow Sovereign’s preference, the model of Dominion schools was virtually unchanged from those in the later ages of Old Earth. Students could have learned virtually, but the government mandated that communal education was necessary for reasons of social development.

“See you in Ethics,” Aki said, desperately wishing he could touch Kiva, kiss him, anything.

“Yeah, that damn test,” Kiva nodded, and glanced at Aki. Aki was looking at him, longing in his bottomless blue eyes. Kiva flashed fire at him, with a wink and a smile.

After school...

Kiva made his way to the gymnasium to sit in the bleachers and wait for the boxing meet. He was early, so he took out his tablet and started reading. Kiva liked to read. Due to Kiva’s irreverent and rebellious personality, most of his classmates were not aware that Kiva’s grades were among the top of his class; better even than Aki’s, who was reputed to be very intelligent indeed. Kiva didn’t care, though. School came so easily to him that he hardly studied or made any effort at all. Aki expressed his jealousy on occasion, but Kiva just shrugged. He didn’t find eternally waiting on people to catch up to him to be much of a blessing. And it was not in his nature to use his intellect to *help* them catch up. Let them drown, if they’re stupid, he figured.

The text he had chosen was the Bhagavad Gita; he’d been working through it for a couple weeks, when he could get time alone. He was a little embarrassed by his fascination with Old Earth religions; he didn’t even want Aki to know about it. Not because Aki would nerd out – Kiva would have enjoyed that. It was because Aki had utterly rejected religion – as was normal in the Dominion

– and considered science paramount. To Aki, religion was nothing more than savage superstition; he regularly stated his belief that religion was responsible for most of the failures on Old Earth. Kiva, however, had questions that he was certain could only be answered by the study of humanity's great mysteries.

Kiva was deeply absorbed in his reading, and did not notice the bleachers filling up with a smattering of well-spaced people. Boxing meets were never well attended, Aki had told him, but families and friends showed up sometimes. Someone crossed in front of Kiva to sit several feet down the same bench, which jostled him out of his concentration. Kiva looked up and watched the ring being arranged. The boys were on first; four matches, followed by three matches for the girls. Aki's match was the third. Kiva saw Aki walk out onto the gymnasium floor, bare chested, in red shorts. Aki scanned the bleachers for Kiva, and smiled his lopsided smile when they locked eyes. Aki pointed to his pocket with his gloved hand, a gesture for "check your comm". Kiva realized he had been so consumed by the Bhagavad Gita that he hadn't heard his comm beep, and hadn't checked it in quite a while.

<Meet us out back after the meet.> *Us?* Kiva thought. He shrugged, and looked back down to Aki who was waiting for his response. Kiva gave him a surreptitious thumbs up.

Aki couldn't focus at all. He knew it was going to be a rough match; he had been paired with a quality opponent. Between the distraction and the lack of sleep, Aki was painfully aware that he would not be on his game. He had never been so nervous before a match. For some reason, Kiva's presence had his heart beating too fast. Aki conjured up every mental trick he knew to regain his concentration and get in the game.

The fight dragged on. Kiva knew from Aki's stories that he was a good boxer, but none of that was on display tonight. Aki was positively manhandled by the other kid, dropping his guard, and even stumbling over his own feet at one point. *Did I tire him out that much?* Kiva wondered, bemused. He resolved to tend to those bruises later, the way Aki had for his. Eventually, the match ended – Aki managed to stay on his feet and in the game, and last the entire time, but his points were nowhere near impressive. Aki tapped gloves with his opponent and they both exited opposite ends of the ring. Aki kept his posture proud, chin up, defiant. He knew why he had lost, and he didn't regret paying that price for what he had gained.

The night was cool, and Kiva tugged his blazer closed to keep the wind from biting through his shirt. He had walked out the front of the gymnasium, and slowly around towards the back of the school. He held a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, on the same side as his split lip. The discomfort helped keep his mind from wandering.

Aki stood, leaning on the bricks of the school wall. Two other boys from the boxing team were there with him, trading stories. Scuffing footsteps came from Aki's left, and the boys fell silent. The first thing Aki saw, coming out of the darkness, was the ember at the end of Kiva's cigarette.

Fire. Always fire, Aki thought. Kiva took the cigarette out of his mouth and exhaled a plume of smoke, stepping closer. His bruised eye looked ghastly in the pale, faint outdoor spotlight.

“Hey,” Aki said coolly.

“How’s tricks?” Kiva asked, and flicked the butt of his cigarette into the weeds.

“Just relaxing after that shitshow,” Aki’s voice was dry. “You know these two?”

“You know I don’t,” Kiva growled, and took another cigarette out of his case. “What’s up? I’m Kiva. Suspect you already know that.”

“Hey, man,” a medium-height dark-haired boy spoke up, “Name’s Ascher. We’ve heard a lot about you.” Ascher held out his hand. Kiva shook it. Kiva had been taught from an early age how to give a proper handshake. To Kiva, proper meant intimidating. Ascher did not shrink away or give in to Kiva’s dominating pressure. Good. Kiva smiled, releasing Ascher’s hand.

“All of it terrifying, I can guess. And you, wallflower?” Kiva asked the boy who leaned with his back against the bricks, feigning aloofness.

“James. Olivieri. Yo Aki, we doing this or what?” James’s surly voice struck Kiva as ... jealous?

“Sure, James,” Aki glanced at Kiva, then turned toward James. Kiva kept his distance, an ember in the shadows. James pulled a bag out of his pocket, and took four rolled sticks out of it. James handed one to Ascher, and one to Aki. His hand seemed, to Kiva, to linger over Aki’s for a while before dropping the joint. Marijuana was legal in the Dominion – at 20. At 18, they had to be careful not to be caught. The penalties were stiff.

“You partake, Red?” James’s voice was mocking. Kiva bristled. It was very impolite to call out a Primal’s appearance. As if his appearance wasn’t obvious already.

“If you’re offering, Short Stuff,” Kiva said, his voice low, treating the smaller boy in turn. Aki knew that tone. He flexed his fingers slightly toward Kiva, gesturing to him to keep his cool.

“Here,” Aki said and held his hand out to James. James laid a second joint in it, then turned away to light his own. Ascher watched the exchange with thinly veiled curiosity. Aki brought the joint to Kiva and offered it to him. Kiva took it between two fingers and looked closely at it.

“Just good old bud,” Aki told him, “Nothing weird. We do this after every home meet.”

“Didn’t know you smoked,” Kiva admitted.

“This kid outsmokes all of us,” Ascher laughed. “Usually outboxes us, too, but damn he got his ass kicked tonight.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Aki chuckled, “We can’t all KO in round one, Ash.” Ascher stepped closer and handed Aki the lighter. Aki lifted the flame and lit his joint, then offered to light Kiva’s. Kiva accepted. The familiar tang touched his tongue; not his usual quality, but not exactly cat piss, either. Kiva inhaled, then looked up at the sky while he held his breath for a second. When he leveled his gaze again, he saw James watching Aki.

“What are you staring at, kid?” Kiva asked, his voice dark.

“Nothing. Mind your own business, Tawney. Why are you even here in KC anyway? Don’t you have an estate to live at?” James snapped. Aki drew his breath in with a hiss. He didn’t know how he was going to defuse this situation. And Kiva could be very unpredictable.

Kiva took another pull on his joint, closed his eyes. Then he settled his eyes on James and walked forward. He stopped inches away from James, who, to his credit, had not moved a muscle.

“What are you gonna do, Red?” James mocked him. Kiva stepped closer, blazer brushing against James’s jacket. Kiva reached into his trousers pocket and pulled out his comm. He pressed a few buttons, and dialed up his Payments screen. He punched in the going shop rate of an eighth, and passed the comm over James’s hand. The comm beeped when it scanned James’s ID chip, and the credits transferred.

“What the fu-” James sputtered.

“I don’t like to owe those beneath me. Call it my treat.” Kiva turned his back to James, brazenly inviting attack for the insult. He glanced back over his shoulder when none came, and flashed James a twisted smile. Speechless, James slumped against the wall, holding his joint in his hand as it slowly burned.

Aki watched Kiva’s every motion closely, ready to intervene if he witnessed any telltale signs of violence. He relaxed when Kiva walked back to resume his conversation with Ascher, who acted like nothing had happened. Aki shook his head when Kiva looked at him. Kiva smiled apologetically. Finally, the smoke took effect, and calm descended on the concrete lot behind Kinnomori City High #4.

Kiva and Aki walked slowly back to the mag train station. The effects of the cannabis had mostly lifted, and they were lucid. It was late, and dark except for the dim sidewalk lights that ran along the ground every twelve feet.

“Why’d you never tell me you smoke?” Kiva asked. His hands were in his pockets. His shoes scraped over the asphalt.

“I dunno, it never came up, really?” Aki said, but his voice sounded a little odd.

“Uh huh,” Kiva murmured. “It’s James, isn’t it?”

“I – well –“ Aki stammered, “Yeah.” Kiva was always annoyingly perceptive.

“What’s that kid’s deal?”

“Um...” Aki trailed off.

“Oh. OH.” Kiva suddenly realized. “You two – wait, what?”

“You didn’t think you were my first, did you?” Aki asked wryly.

“Well, yeah, I kinda did,” Kiva admitted.

“Don’t worry, he didn’t hold a candle to you,” Aki reassured him. “Besides, I don’t know who else to get weed from.”

“Ugh. Well, we can fix that! I know a guy.” Kiva proclaimed, and wrapped his arm around Aki’s shoulders. The darkness shielded them.



They walked in silence toward the mag train. They sat across from each other again. Aki looked at Kiva, directly, his brows knitted.

“Kiva, what do you do on nights I’m at boxing? Meets, and practice. You’re always vague when I ask, and you never ask *me* why I get home so late. You’re always dead asleep, snoring when I get in.”

“You’re not going to like this, Aki,” Kiva warned him, “But I don’t wanna lie to you, either.”

“Hit me,” Aki opened his arms wide. “It can’t be that bad.”

“Cage,” Kiva said softly, looking down at his hands.

“What?”

“I go to a Cage gym,” Kiva repeated, and lifted his head to meet Aki’s jaw-dropped stare.

“You WHAT?” Aki exclaimed. The mag train shuddered as if in emphasis. Kiva rubbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah, I -“

“Have you fought?” Aki demanded.

“Not yet, but -”

“Oh no, absolutely not,” Aki folded his arms and scowled. Kiva laughed bitterly.

“You can’t forbid me,” Kiva admonished him. “It’s my life, my body.”

“Mmm no. You forget it’s my body now, too,” Aki jabbed his finger at Kiva’s chest. “Isn’t it illegal for minors to do Cage?”

“Not if they don’t fight,” Kiva said. “I just spar, no real damage done. They won’t let me fight until I’m 20.”

“Jesus, and you told me all those bruises were from *futbol*. You dick!” Aki leaned back in his seat and sighed deeply.

“Well,” Kiva shrugged, “Now you know. If not for Cage, I would have taken a repeater to #4’s cafeteria by now.”

“Dammit, Kiva,” Aki muttered, shaking his head. “What ever happened to good old-fashioned therapy?”

“Never worked on me,” Kiva stated. “I got frustrated, they got scared, and then my uncle had to pay them off to not lock me up.”

“What the actual fuck?” Aki was taken aback. Usually, Kiva was not so candid.

“Don’t worry, I’m not a risk. And I’m a lot better now – Cage is part of why. Anyway, it’s not as if you didn’t know.” Kiva’s eyes, usually full of fire and energy, looked dim and saddened. The train car was empty, it was so late. Safe from prying eyes, Aki reached across and took Kiva’s hand.

“I did know – some. It helps if I know everything, though.”

“Maybe someday I can tell you everything,” Kiva said. “Until then, can you just trust me?”

“Of course I can, always,” Aki agreed.

“And stay the fuck away from James,” Kiva smirked. “He’s short, and I can get you way better weed.”

Aki laughed. “Don’t worry. I can’t stay away from him, he’s on my team after all. But he’s no threat.”

“I should’ve put the fear of the gods into him,” Kiva muttered.

“Possessive already?” Aki joked. Kiva lifted his chin, and raised his eyes to meet Aki’s. He stared deep, eyes burning, like a predatory animal. Aki’s heart slammed in his chest, but he felt no fear.

They lay again in Kiva’s bed. They had collapsed, exhausted, before even bothering to turn off the lights, or change into sleep clothes. Silence for a while, and simple warmth. Breathing. Aki could smell the faint trace of weed smoke on Kiva’s hair, as well as the usual burn of cigarettes. Beneath the smoke was a soft sweetness, that reminded Aki of the cat he’d had as a kid. He used to bury his face in the cat’s fur, and breathe deep. Molo, her name was. After his father left, his mother had never permitted him to get another. Cats were the most popular pets on Hertha. They had been resilient enough to travel – unintentionally – through the stars alongside humans. No surprise, they were simply following the rats who jumped off of supply craft. There were plenty of ducts and paneling and maintenance chutes to hide in. Cosmic stowaways.

Aki shook himself out of his memory of Molo. Kiva’s head was on his chest, and his arm was around Kiva, hand on his ribs. The texture of Kiva’s shirt was smooth, and his fingers slid along it easily. Aki felt an odd impulse, then. He couldn’t stop himself.

“Liam...” Aki whispered. Kiva twitched, hard, and his eyes snapped open.

“What – why would you – don’t call me that!” Kiva protested, his voice almost sounding... scared? Aki tightened his arm around Kiva.

“It’s the first name I knew you by,” Aki said softly, “That’s what I called you for years. It’s what I still call you, in my head.” Kiva was silent for a while. Aki could feel him fidgeting his toes, the way he did when he was frustrated or confused.

“It’s loaded with bad memories,” Kiva said. “You know I changed it for a reason.”

“Yeah, but you’re still Liam to me, inside,” Aki continued, “Probably always will be.”

“It is a little bit nice when you say it.” Kiva sighed, and rolled off of Aki, and onto his back. He brought his arms up and crossed them behind his head. “I didn’t like the things I felt when people said that name. No one ever said it unless something bad was about to happen. Except for my mom. It was nice from her. She picked it, after all.”

“How bad was it?” Aki asked, venturing somewhere he had never gone before, even though they had been close for over ten years. Kiva had always kept his mouth firmly shut about his past, preferring to deal only with the present. Kiva turned his head to look at Aki. His eyes were guarded, lower lids narrowed just slightly.

“Why does it matter?”

“It doesn’t, I mean, knowing or not knowing changes nothing about what’s going on here. I just want to be able to understand.”

“I don’t really know what bad is. I don’t really know what good is. I only know what happened, and what I had to do to make it stop,” Kiva’s voice was low. “I went to three state psychs before I was 16 and moved in with you, for repeated infractions at the boarding house. They all said the same thing. Each time, the family paid to sweep it under the rug and keep it off my records. It would’ve looked bad on them, you see?”

“What did the psychs say?” Aki was curious.

“Oh, strong psychopathic tendencies. Machiavellian. No qualms about using force to get my way. Stuff like that.” Kiva waved his hand dismissively.

“Did that bother you?” Aki’s brow knitted.

“Why would it?” Kiva smiled wryly. “Those traits saved me more than once.”

“Huh,” Aki murmured. Kiva turned to Aki again, rolling onto his side. Kiva slid a hand up under Aki’s shirt, running his palm along the patch of fur that formed a line from Aki’s belly to his chest.

"You can call me Liam," Kiva said. Aki felt the warmth from Kiva's hand spreading over his heart. "Only you. It feels good, from you. Special."

Aki nodded. "Ok. Will you tell me what happened to you, Liam?"

Kiva shook his head very slightly. "Not yet. Not ready. Name is hard enough."

"Alright," Aki conceded. "Then why did you pick 'Kiva'?"

"Oh," Kiva laughed bitterly, "There was this horse..."

"Wait, an OE horse? Mane and tail *horse*?" Aki sputtered.

"Mhm," Kiva's fingers twirled through Aki's chest hair, slowly. "My uncle Radgett, he bred them. Egyptian Arabians, he called them, each one worth more than this entire block. Gorgeous. The important folks absolutely loved them, came to uncle's parties just to stand in the barn and look at them."

"Gods of man, you've *seen horses*?" Aki was awed.

"Yeah, it's not a big deal, dingbat. Animals are animals, Herthan or Earthen, they're all better than we are. Anyway, my uncle said I needed to learn respect and a work ethic, so he sent me down to clean out the stables every evening. Twenty stalls, every evening after school. It's why I wouldn't answer my comm until late. You don't know, but it's heavy work. I didn't mind though, because it was time away from him. And I liked the horses."

"Wow. Horses."

"Shut up. There was one horse, he was special. His name was Kivadranon Goldsinger, you know, like that old holo show with the space cowboys? He was shiny copper, like me, right? And he was proud to a fault. He gave the trainer hell, constantly biting and kicking everybody. Including me. But that didn't make me scared of him, I liked him more because of it. He got me through a lot, just by being there. In the end, my uncle shot him."

"He what?"

"He shot him. The horse was too much trouble, he said, not worth the investment. Might as well free up the stall for a better product. That horse was too proud, too free, for this world. And I felt like I was looking at my future, watching his blood sink into the shavings. That was the plan that the Uncle Radgetts of the world had for the likes of *me*. So after my uncle kicked the bucket, I decided to go by Kiva, to remember that horse. When I hear Kiva, I feel strength and freedom. When I hear Liam, I have painful memories."

"I don't *have* to call you Liam," Aki offered.

“Shut up again. I already said you could, it’s nice from you. When it’s your voice, I remember us as kids. I remember your kindness, when the other kids wouldn’t go near me. I remember the you and me that kept me going through everything that happened.”

“How the fuck did I not know all this was happening?” Aki frowned. He felt guilty, like he should have done something for Kiva long before now.

“Well,” Kiva sighed, “I’m a master of hiding things. Gotta be, when you’re a psychopath.” He laughed. A genuine laugh.

“I don’t think you’re a psychopath,” Aki said.

“Doesn’t matter what you think,” Kiva said, “I am. Three outta three docs agree. Whether or not you see it. Besides, I’ve always been good to you. You haven’t seen the other side.”

“I’ve seen the burning wreckage you leave behind,” Aki said, his voice drroll. Kiva blanched, but recovered quickly.

“Yeah, well.” Kiva said, as a statement. He pushed himself forward on one arm and kissed Aki, hard. Aki felt like his lips were touching a fire burning with a nuclear intensity. Kiva pressed deeper, his touch a command, his presence an overwhelming force. Kiva relented, pulled back, and looked down at Aki’s stunned face.

“You’ll never be the wreckage, Aki,” Kiva said gently. Kiva’s fingers brushed Aki’s cheek, trailed over his lips, then down his throat. Kiva wrapped his hand around Aki’s throat and bore down just a little bit. The pressure sent a shiver through Aki’s body. He squeezed his eyes shut. His pulse responded. His blood rose. Kiva chuckled; he knew exactly what he was doing.

Aki’s eyes opened, and Kiva could see a vicious gleam in the deep, glacial blue. Aki growled, and pushed his throat into Kiva’s hand, as he wrapped his arms around Kiva’s shoulders. With a twist of a leg and a heavy push, Aki upended Kiva and forced him onto his back. Kiva’s hand fell away from Aki’s throat, and he lay prone beneath. Aki straddled Kiva’s waist, and stared down at him.

“Exactly who do you think is in charge here?” Aki’s voice was gravelly, threatening.

“Just testing my boundaries,” Kiva flashed a wicked grin. Aki brought his face close to Kiva’s, then cheek to cheek.

“There are no boundaries, Liam,” Aki whispered. Kiva groaned and rolled his eyes back.

“You should *never* tell me something like that,” Kiva warned, humor in his voice. Aki straightened back up.

“I mean it,” Aki said. “I don’t want boundaries, barriers, distance. Not from you.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” Kiva warned.

“I do. I really do,” Aki assured him. Aki leaned forward and touched his lips to Kiva’s. The scab on Kiva’s lip was rough, a strange texture breaking up the soft smoothness of their connection. This kiss was different. The others had been fierce, hungry, urgent. This was slow, entwining. Aki’s hands moved to either side of Kiva’s face, warm palms on flushed cheeks. When Aki finally pulled back, only a few inches, Kiva’s eyes were wide. Aki was sure he could see all the way down to Kiva’s core. The silence hung between them as they breathed deeply, taking in the momentous implication of what had just happened.

“Lee…” Aki used Kiva’s old nickname.

“Shh, just be. This moment will never come again,” Kiva said, a depth of wisdom in his husky voice. “Nothing ever happens twice.”

“Let’s make the most of it, then,” Aki said. His fingers trailed up Kiva’s inner thigh. Kiva licked his lips and emitted a purring groan.

“Turn the lights off,” Kiva asked. Aki frowned.

“Can’t we leave them on?” He didn’t want to move.

“I just – please?” Kiva asked again, more earnest.

“Sure but, why? I want to see you,” confused, Aki still hadn’t moved.

“Turn them off. I – I’ll tell you in the morning or something, I just don’t want to think about it right now,” Kiva said. His voice got tighter the longer he spoke.

“Yeah. Sorry, I got you, Lee. Lights off.” Aki climbed off the bed and shut off the overhead lights, as well as the light by his own bed. The room was plunged into total darkness. Aki felt his way back to Kiva’s bed slowly. He met Kiva’s hand reaching for him as he returned.

“There you are,” Kiva said. “Darkness is good, anyway – fewer distractions.”

“*You’re* the distraction,” Aki complained.

“That’s what all the ladies tell me,” Kiva teased. Aki nipped Kiva’s earlobe, as he climbed back into bed.

“Not a lady,” Aki snarled.

“Oh, I’m aware,” Kiva said.

Aki found himself pinning Kiva down again. He could feel Kiva's ribs and belly rising and falling steadily as he breathed. Aki began to unbutton Kiva's shirt, starting with the lowest button. His fingers were sure and deft, and the shirt parted to reveal Kiva's chest. It was covered with a soft layer of hair – Aki knew it was coppery in color, having seen it enough times. Fox fur, Aki had always called it in his head, because it reminded him of the soft pelt of the red fox from Old Earth. Aki rested his hand in the middle of the patch, then ran it down Kiva's flank.

Kiva lay with his eyes shut, focusing on the sensations in the darkness. He reminded himself this was Aki, *his* Aki, and no one else. No fear, no worry. He'd never had a problem with touching, but being touched was a bigger challenge. If Aki could sense Kiva's struggle, he didn't say so. Instead, Aki persisted – warm, strong, even a bit domineering. Aki unbuttoned Kiva's trousers, and after another moment, Kiva saw stars as Aki's hand closed around him, fingers rippling as they adjusted along his length.

Something in Kiva's motionlessness told Aki that he had never been touched like this – with gentleness, openness. He knew Kiva had spent plenty of nights with girls from school, he was a Tawney after all, and therefore considered a hot catch. But the purity of this experience was different, Aki could tell. He considered that he himself had never been with someone quite like this either, female or those times with James. Aki mentally chastised himself, and refocused. He wanted to be present for this, all of it.

"Mmm," Kiva breathed. "You can just do that. Forever. That would be fine."

"Not a chance. I owe you for last night," Aki said.

"Oh?" Kiva's voice was wary.

"Hey, don't sound so worried. You're in good hands," Aki then nuzzled his face into Kiva's neck. "I don't know what's up, but it's me, OK? You're with me." Aki's soothing baritone voice vibrated against Kiva's skin. Kiva relaxed into Aki's touch. He felt safe, something he had rarely ever experienced.

When Aki awoke, he found himself curled in a strange position. For a moment he could not tell where his limbs ended and Kiva's began. They were entwined. He felt a cool wetness on his arm and flank. Aki laughed a little – they must have been *really* tired to fall asleep like this.

"Lee?" No response. "Liam? You awake?"

"Nnnnhh."

"Gotcha," Aki answered. He glanced over at the bedside clock. Normally, he would have panicked, but this time he just laughed again. "Guess we're playing hooky today."

Kiva simply nestled in closer, tighter, and more entwined. Aki smiled. He watched the morning sunlight streaming through the window, shining off the motes of dust. He had no idea what the future would bring, but this moment, and the events of the past two days, would be memories he would hold close for the rest of his life.

I snapped back to myself when I felt something settle around my shoulders. Aeliana had wrapped my cloak around me. I looked up at her standing over me.

"You were shivering," she explained. "You were ... somewhere else, Aki."

"Sorry – thanks. Yeah. Another time, another land," I mumbled.

"Who is Kiva?" Her voice was so curious, always curious. I glanced up at her.

"Someone I loved very much," I said, in all honesty.

"What happened to him?" Aeliana crouched down next to me and rested a hand on my forearm. There was silence, punctuated only by Arden's prolific snoring.

"I left him to burn," I said. Aeliana's hand dropped away, but curiosity was still etched on her face. She knew better than to push, though. She returned to her spot by the fire.