Star-Crossed

by KimiDoll

Summary

Six months after letting Riki go, our favourite Blondie decides it’s time to finally try and return his beloved mongrel to his side. And as we all know, no unforeseen methods or dirty tricks are beyond Iason Mink once he has set his sights on his prey. Mainly slow-burn Iason/Riki, but also Iason/Mimea and Iason/Raoul.
Friend or Foe

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Author’s notes:

Hi everyone!:D I’m back with yet another AnK fic :) I think more canon and less “original” than my other fic, but of course I’m just not gonna be able to help myself and it’s gonna feature all sorts of less likely, scandalous stuff ;)

I know, I know, I haven’t even properly begun writing on “Crossing the Bridge” yet and here I am starting another fic, but I just felt inspired for this all of a sudden and I figured that practising on how to write a more canon version of Iason in this fic could not hurt ;)

Anyways, I’m not entirely sure yet where I’m going with this, but it starts off six months after Iason has set Riki free and he’s basically plotting to get Riki back (duuh :) ) and a bunch of other canon characters get involved in it. But I’m also planning on including other pairings in this well, I felt like Iason and Riki’s temporary separation, misunderstandings and the sense of loneliness in this could create opportunities for other interesting pairings for Iason and possibly Riki as well (although I’ve never really been a big fan of Riki/Guy so I’m not sure if I’m gonna include that). But main focus is of course gonna be our favourite star-crossed lovers Iason/Riki ;)

First chapters should prove to be interesting, as it’s gonna include a pairing that to me seems to make sense at this point in the story, yet I have not read it in ANY other fic, ever!:S Maybe I’m being too original in this, but it just seems a shame that no one has attempted anything with this pairing as of yet ;)

So I hope you’ll all enjoy this first chapter, please review and let me know what you think so far!:D

……………………………………………………………………………………………….

Alphaville – Big in Japan

Neon on my naked skin, passing silhouettes of strange illuminated mannequins

Shall I stay here at the zoo, or should I go and change my point-of-view for other ugly scenes

You did what you did to me, now it’s history I see
Here’s my comeback on the road again

Things will happen while they can, I will wait here for my man tonight

It’s easy when you’re big in Japan

Aah when you’re big in Japan, tonight

Big in Japan, be tight

Big in Japan, ooh the eastern sea’s so blue

Big in Japan, all right

Pay then I’ll sleep by your side

Things are easy when you’re big in Japan

As the bright red sun was slowly sinking beneath the horizon and spread her last rays across the glass and metal city landscape like a fallen seductress, Midas’ redlight district came alive with bright, gaudy neon and the buzzing of the crowd, consisting out of both Midas citizens and tourists. All of them eager to sell their souls in exchange for the fleeting, false sense of satisfaction that the pleasure city used to subdue its prey and smother them in her sweet, lethal embrace. Deep within one of the seediest and shadiest of neighbourhoods the infamous district had to offer, another fallen seductress briefly fluttered her full eyelashes while mentally preparing for another day in what appeared to be a never-ending hell.

Yet not once did the thought occur to her that she had acted carelessly in any way, she did not regret the crime that had condemned her to this degrading, painful and without a doubt short-lived existence. Not even for a second. Better to be alive for one second than to live an eternity in death. A thought that displayed a philosophical and emotional awareness that could have never possibly existed in her mind prior to the turbulent events that had brought her to this fate. In a way similar to one readying herself for her execution, the miserable small creature reluctantly rolled out of the small comfort of the threadbare, filthy blanket that covered her naked, abused form. Her swollen eyes still remained closed. As long as they were, she could pretend that it was all just a nightmare, that it was not real, that she was not really there but safely in her Master’s comfortable home in Eos Tower.

Although no doubt she could feel easily enough that her body was covered in bruises. Not to mention she could not shut her nose to that rank, putrid smell of vomit, piss and fear that accompanied the small, dingy room that was now the only home she knew. She would happily give an arm just to be allowed a brief wisp of the outside air, even if she had never really been on the outside. Truth be told she had never felt any need to venture outside, even in thought, while she had still been bathing in oblivious luxury in Eos. Not until the day she met him, he who changed her very
essence and brought her heart to life, only to see it crushed shortly afterwards. *Riki.* Despite all the hardship that he had caused her, that mongrel was still at the epicentre of her every thought, just the hope of seeing him one more time was what kept her going day after day in this dreadful dump of a brothel.

*It was all a lie. At least this is real.* She often focussed on the pain, she even welcomed it, although she dared not cross the line where she inflicted it upon herself. She still could not bring herself to damage her Master’s creation by her own hand, even if said Master had betrayed her without the slightest hesitation. And all for being guilty of the crime that was called love. She used to not understand at all why some perfect, academy-bred Pets would risk their wonderful lives in Eos for the sake of such an empty, practically non-existent notion. She still did not understand, but that hardly mattered. The unthinkable had happened, she had fallen in love. And not with just anyone, no, she just had to go and choose a mongrel from Ceres. And not just any mongrel, *his* mongrel. *He,* the only one above her Master’s social station, and the only one he would not hesitate to obey in any matter.

She had barely been able to crawl off of the stained, old mattress that served as her bed and open her eyes, when her “manager” barged into the room without even bothering to knock while shouting like a madman. His greasy, unkempt hair hung alongside his grey-ish face and he was wearing a crumpled, bright-orange blazer that only served to further emphasize his oversized belly. The thing about being constantly shouted at was that after some time you developed a kind of immunity to it. Therefore he had been shouting for five minutes before she even realised that something out of the ordinary was going on and this was not a part of his usual Friday evening “time to score big, baby” ritual.

“Hurry up now, Mimi, we’ve got a big client on the way!!! This is the making of this establishment, I tell you, all our advertising and the spreading of good publicity through our clientele is finally paying off! This will put us on the map for good, and he asked specifically for you! Of all the girls, it was you he was after! I just knew the day was coming when you would finally make me some real cash, and now my investment is being returned to me at last!” Her pimp was practically ecstatic while he was dancing up and down the room. Her big, genetically enhanced orange eyes gawked in silence, not having ever seen him in such a mood before and unsure of whether it boded well for her or not.

“Oh, holy Jupiter! Look at the state of you! This will not do at all, hurry, girl, you’re in the suite tonight, I’ll ask Tamara to help get you into shape… And clothes, you’ll need clothes for this occasion! …” He did not stop talking for the entire way to the suite, which unfortunately for her was up three flights of stairs seeing as how the elevator still wasn’t working. She could hardly feel her skinny, bruised legs anymore by the time she got up to the best room of the brothel, which they called “the suite”. Not that the room in anything even remotely resembled what a Tanaguran would associate with the term. The room was slightly bigger than any of the other rooms and had a substantial amount of furniture in it, and even a mirrored ceiling. However it was in no way cleaner than any of the other rooms, it just looked somewhat fancier at first glance, if one did not look too closely. The room was full of hookers and a couple of the bartenders who normally worked in the bar downstairs, and who she had thus never laid eyes upon seeing as how she had been virtually locked up in that filthy room on the third floor ever since her arrival six months ago. Or had it been
longer? It was hard to tell at times, being locked up in a room without daylight while only catching a couple of hours of sleep during the day. What was most unusual was that all of the people in the room were apparently attempting to clean it, not that they were succeeding for some stains on the old carpet had become virtually irremovable and it would take more than simply opening the windows for half an hour to waft out the smell of decades of sexual activities of a more lowly sort.

She was quickly escorted to the small bathroom by three other girls who chirped excitedly at her while they were putting her in the shower and attempting to comb the knots out of her now shoulder-length hair. As the non-too-hot spray of the water hit her she could not help but hiss out in pleasure, for it was a luxury she had not known in a very long time. It felt as if the water was washing off more than just dirt, it was washing off all of the traumatic experiences that she’d had to undergo at the underworld establishment, it was washing off all of the sins she had been subjected to by her various “clients”. After being properly lathered in cheap soap and rinsed until the water had gone ice-cold, she was even granted the privilege of wearing clothes, or what passed as clothes for one of her class. She wore a pair of shine-through red panties with a print of purple flowers and a matching bra, the red being nearly the same shade as her straight, now glossy hair. Having to wear stilettos after such a long time without shoes was making it feel as if her feet were on fire, yet she felt as if by wearing them a sense of her former dignity was returned to her. But no amount of make-up could possibly camouflage the bruises on her body or the purple bags underneath her eyes caused by countless days of sleeplessness because of both physical and mental duress. At least she was clean and she was treated with some semblance of kindness since her arrival at one of the most run-down brothels in Midas.

After all of the nervous hustle-and-bustle of last-minute preparations to both the girl and the room, and contradictory instructions from all sides which she could barely understand in the chaotic myriad of excited voices, the grand finale was upon them: the guest of honour had arrived.

It had not taken Katze any time at all to find out what Midas brothel exactly the former Pet had been sold to, for it had been known to him already that she had been sold to the worst of the worst. A place even the strictly professional and merciless Black Market boss felt reluctant to supply with fresh, living goods. Not that he would ever refuse if there was an obvious profit to be made, but with the poor pay-checks such an establishment could afford to offer, one of importance in business rarely crossed paths with anyone associated with “The Red Lotus”, as the dump of a whorehouse deceivingly called itself.

But what was it exactly he was hoping to accomplish by going to such a lowly place and facing the object of his long-term hatred and jealousy? Even he himself was at a loss, he only knew that if this horrid sense of emptiness and lack of fulfilment continued any longer he would not be able to keep it out of his work and his obligated social life any longer. Because the truth of the matter was that none of them understood what he was going through, it was simply incomprehensible for one who had not experienced it for himself. He himself could not have even imagined that it was possible for him to feel this way only several years ago. But she understood. The same madness undoubtedly still had
her in its grasp. He had witnessed her irrational impulses first-hand, seen the most improbable change that had occurred in her behaviour. The sudden fire that had appeared to erupt from her formerly meek and docile manner. And somehow this caused him to see her for the first time, even if it was in a most negative light. It was as if her madness had made her a living person with a will of her own where before there had only been an aesthetically pleasing thing. Yet even at that time he had not fully realised that he had been infected by the same forbidden disease, that all of his actions concerning the matter had clearly demonstrated this to any who had eyes to see.

Even after six months each and every single thought went back to the dark, fiery object of his obsession. Riki.

So now the madness had brought him here, to the place he had condemned the other sufferer of the same disease to. The flickering, partially broken neon sign above the nearly ruinous, graffiti-sprayed building read “The Red Lotus”. How absurd. There is not even such a thing as red lotuses. Then again there is no such thing as an Elite in love either.

By the time their apparently extremely well-to-do client had made his appearance, the red-haired little whore had become increasingly agitated, both out of impending fear and out of curious impatience. She hardly ever got excited or truly frightened by anything these days, it was as if the first month of this life had rendered her numb to any feeling, she had simply existed from one day to the next. But somehow she already sensed that this day had the potential to change things for her. She did not dare to hope that she would ever be even temporarily restored to her former glory as one of the highest-regarded Pets of Tanagura, but anything was to be preferred above her current predicament. Not to mention that leaving this place was a necessity if she ever wanted to see the one her broken heart still yearned for again.

As she was nervously glancing out the window at the chaos of colours in the busy street below, absent in thoughts about the impending encounter, she had not even heard the nearly soundless footsteps approach her. What she did notice almost immediately however was the scent. For it was a scent that was familiar and did not belong in that lowly place at all. It was fresh, synthetic, sweet yet not nauseatingly so, expensive and both subtle and strong. It filled her heart with memories of long-forgotten times in a careless existence of indulgence, luxury and purpose. But simultaneously it also filled her heart with a sense of dread and made ice-cold fear shiver down her spine.

“Hello again, Mimea”, came the well-known smooth, icily sharp voice.

She did not even have to turn around to see who it was that stood there in all his divine splendour and might, but turn around she did because she could not believe her own ears. After having recovered from the initial shock she instinctively started to lower her gaze … but then thought the
better of it and stared into those arctic bright-blue orbs as if in an unspoken challenge. She had
nothing left to fear, nothing left this man could take from her but her life, and that in and of itself was
not worth anything anymore these days. To have an end to this miserable non-existence would be a
blessing. As soon as she regained her voice she responded, her voice unsteady and hoarse yet also
louder and clearer than it had ever been.

“Hello again, Iason Mink.”

Orange met bright-blue and the air around them appeared to become charged with invisible electric
sparks, like a chemical reaction between two opposing agents brought together.

Somehow he had expected that living in these harsh conditions for six months after having been
pampered and protected all her life would have drained the fight out of this feeble creature and would
have at least made it feign repentance for its actions. But there was no such surrender or regret in the
cat-like, orange eyes that looked right at him. Oh, he could see the fear in those eyes without a doubt,
but he could also see the challenge there: she was not going to back down, even if he were to
threaten to rain down hell upon her. He had already done his worst to the insignificant slave that had
had the audacity to touch what was his and only his. Therefore the only thing he could do now, was
lessen that worst of conditions. After all, at this rate she could prove to be as diverting as the very
mongrel their enmity had been about.

“Have you come to finish me off at last? Or have you come to gloat at my misery?”, she almost
looked like the whore of Babylon in the way she dramatically approached him with outstretched
arms, as if welcoming whatever fate it was he had in store for her while daring him to go ahead and
do his worst.

“Neither. If there is no end to my misery, there shall certainly be none to yours”, the blond Elite
spoke wistfully, his voice uncharacteristically soft and serene.

This unexpected comment caught her off-guard to the extent that she lowered her arms and remained
standing at approximately a metre from his imposing, grand figure. “I do not think anything you
could do to me could possibly be any worse than what others have already done. And even if so, I
would welcome any form of attention from anyone properly bathed and mannered at this point, even
from you”, it sounded as if that last word was meant to be an insult.

“If it had been my intent to personally punish you for your indiscretions I would have done so at the
time your offence was discovered”, the strikingly beautiful Elite responded calmly while gracefully
sitting down on the only sofa in the room, which was not exactly clean despite everyone’s best efforts.

Even while he was seated and she was still standing, wearing ridiculously high heels, Mimea was still several inches shorter than her nemesis. Yet she straightened up, deciding to make the best out of her temporarily increased height, even if physical height would never overcome the social divide between them. “Then by all means, my Lordship, what is your intent?”, she half-mockingly hissed, sounding almost like a cornered rattle snake: frightened out of her wits and ready to strike even if it was hopeless.

Iason paid no heed to the offensive tone the inferior former Pet was using with him and instead indicated for her to sit down on the chair opposite him. After a long hesitation, Mimea reluctantly sat down, but only because she was so exhausted due to malnutrition and abuse that she could not possibly have remained standing for much longer. And there was no way she would give this bastard any opportunity to degrade her any further. She had to force herself to remain silent and wait for him to speak again, for she was immensely curious and rather worried about what had been Riki’s fate. Was he still in the Blondie’s possession? If so in what state of mind was he? Fear quenched her heart at the thought of the Elite having succeeded in crushing Riki’s spirit and subduing him to his own sick inclinations. After what appeared to be a very long and torturous silence for Mimea, he finally spoke again.

“I have come across a problem it appears I cannot solve on my own. And ironically enough the only person I know of that could help me solve it, is you”, his piercing unnaturally blue gaze remained fixed upon her even after he had spoken, as if studying her in an attempt to figure out what she was thinking. That unsettlingly cold gaze made her feel like a butterfly under a microscope, about to be pinned down. She felt grateful that in the past he had never bothered to rest his eyes upon her any longer than politeness towards Lord Am required.

Mimea remained waiting for him to elaborate further on that statement, but as an uncomfortable amount of time passed, she realised that he was expecting her to respond first. She was slightly inclined to purposely keep him waiting just to annoy him, when her worry and surprise got the better of her. “I do not think it is within my intellectual skill set to help you out with a problem of any kind. And to be honest I don’t feel very inclined to help you either way”, she eventually answered, trying to keep her voice as steady and unfriendly as possible.

“While such a reaction is understandable it is far from wise, for one in your position. I could change your living conditions in the blink of an eye if I so choose, for better … or for worse”, the deadly glare he gave her while he spoke those final words made it very clear that he could think of quite a few places he could sell her to that were even worse than The Red Lotus.

She was unable to hold back any longer, damn her embarrassment to hell, she had to know! “Just tell me if he is all right … Riki, he is all right, isn’t he? My thoughtless actions did not cause him any …
permanent trouble?”, her voice cracked and she was grateful that she was already seated or else the overwhelming whirlwind of emotions that came over her would have surely knocked her to the ground. Even if it was six months ago she still had no idea what kind of punishment Riki had been submitted to after she had been sold off, and she still had nightmares about it on a regular basis. For the rage, even if subdued, she had seen on the fearful Elite’s face that day had made it very clear to her just how furious he had been with the mongrel. It had struck her as highly unusual at the time, to her knowledge no Elite had ever shown such fury over something so trifle as the misconduct of a mere Pet.

“My questions further demonstrate that you and I have the same problem. Yet no one else in Tanagura appears to have problems of this sort. Therefore it is only logical that we would attempt to solve our mutual problem together”, he stated matter-of-factly. Then seeing confusion appear on her still-attractive but slightly discoloured features, he continued: “Or am I mistaken in assuming you have strong feelings for Riki as well? Knowing your personality, your actions towards my Pet were very much out-of-character. One with your training ought to think twice about committing crimes that could condemn you.”

Mimea was momentarily gob-smacked, needing some time to process the information that was slowly sinking in. Or am I mistaken in assuming you have strong feelings for Riki as well? As well. Which suggested that he, Iason Mink, Jupiter’s favourite, with an impeccable record and a reputation for cruelty, felt strongly for a mongrel. He was not supposed to feel anything for anybody. But he had felt livid when he had confronted Mimea and Riki with their transgressions, that much Mimea had been able to make out of his facial expressions on that day. At the time she had been too worried about her and Riki’s fate to think about it, but now it struck her as very strange. Why did he get so worked-up over something like that? Why did he get worked-up over anything at all?

When realisation finally struck her, she got up as if in an automatism, extreme shock and grief appearing on her small, perfectly symmetrical face. With wide eyes she stared at the Elite in front of her for a couple of seconds, then she dropped down on her knees in front of him as in a swoon, overcome by a hurricane of suffering, anger and sadness at the injustice of it all. All her hostility evaporated like snow in the sun, and only left a feeling of hopelessness and … compassion. A sudden sense of solidarity had come over her. I am not alone in my feelings. It is not because of a fault of mine.

Jupiter’s most perfect creation was not entirely sure how he had expected the stealing whore to react, but this surprised even him, although of course it did not show on his face, his expression as distant and untouched as usual. “I … I’m so sorry! I didn’t know … I’m so sorry!” She continued to cry at his feet, while now also clutching his knees in her small hands. He noticed that she had small cuts and scrapes all over her shaking hands and that her nails were cracked and unclean, dirt of an indistinguishable nature caked under them. She looked truly horrendous and incredibly distraught and fragile.

Suddenly he was overcome by an impulse he had never had towards anyone except perhaps Riki. It had been his habit to suppress and ignore the impulse then, but now that he had not seen Riki in
months he felt he was less capable of doing so now. It had been unbelievably lonely during those months, and it felt all the worse for one who had never experienced anything akin to loneliness before. The entire situation with the mongrel had first merely left him puzzled, but as time progressed it had made him feel frustrated for the first time in his life. The blonde had failed at obtaining what it was he truly wanted from the mongrel and it had left him with a bitter taste of hopelessness in the aftermath of that failure.

Unable and in truth unwilling to fight these rising feelings any longer, Iason moved forward slightly and clutched her hands in his while simultaneously sliding down from his seat and elegantly perching in front of her kneeling, shivering form. “That’s quite all right, Mimea. It was not your fault, how were you to know when even I did not?” Apparently his comment did not have the intended effect, as a new series of even more violent tremors shook the small body in front of him. Before he had even fully realised what he was doing, he had locked his arms around her trembling, exposed back and pressed her warm, fragile body against his larger one.

Amazement pierced through the haze of Mimea’s miserable sobbing, as she felt the Elite’s strong body surround her own. She was truly surprised at his high body temperature, somehow she had always expected an artificial body would feel cold, especially Lord Mink’s. Of course she’d had no way of knowing that, seeing as how she had never been touched by an Elite, other than those few times that Lord Am had briefly petted her when she had performed exceptionally well. But then her Master had always kept on his gloves, virtually blocking out all sensation and disabling any opportunity for a link between them. And for an Elite to hug a Pet, or even another Elite, as Iason was doing right now was unthinkable. Did he touch Riki like this too? The sudden feeling of peaceful comfort and connection that filled her only caused her tears to flow more quickly and abundantly, and soon Iason’s right shoulder pad was nearly soaked through. But apparently that did not bother him, for he kept holding on to her, tightly but not tightly enough to further abuse her already tortured skin.

The Elite was unsure as to how long he had sat there, on the ground, clutching the hopelessly hiccupping mess that was the ex-Pet Mimea. He felt almost like a bystander, observing his own incomprehensible actions as if they were those of a stranger. “Where is Riki? Is he angry? Does he hate me? … Did he … Did he run away?”, she asked while trying to dry her red, sticky eyes. Iason briefly glanced at the bed, considering it as an alternative seating arrangement, but then decided that the floor was probably more sanitary. “No. But he tried. So I let him go”, Iason spoke, his monotonous voice betraying none of the emotions he was experiencing. “Why would he let him go if he cares for him like I do?”

Iason continued to stare blankly ahead while petting her naked back and threading his gloved fingers through Mimea’s hair, it had grown considerably longer over the last months, reaching until just past her narrow shoulders. “It was the only way. He would have withered and died in Eos, like a picked flower.” The childish girl nodded her pretty head in understanding, her big, inchoate eyes still moist. “You would rather he were away from you and happy than with you and unhappy?”

“I consider it more to be a matter of health than of “happiness”, but yes. Riki was not made for the
life of a Pet, nor does it do his intelligence and his lively spirit any justice. Because of this it appears I have reached an impasse, which I know not how to overcome”, the handsome Elite spoke softly while still caressing Mimea’s back and shoulders. The former Pet felt an unusual feeling of safety going through her, despite these attentions being given by the one she ought to fear. “Perhaps I can help? I am not a mongrel but … I have been in a similar position and even for someone like me it is not always easy. To constantly look for approval and to blame yourself for your expectations if you do not get it.”

“What more attention could he possibly yearn for? I have given him everything I had to give, and more than I should have. I have made it exceedingly clear numerous times that I wanted nobody else and that I would keep him indefinitely. He had far more comfort in Eos than he could have ever even imagined in the slums of Area 9. I truly wonder who, in all of Midas and Tanagura, could have offered him more?”", despite his frustrations finally getting the better of him now that he had found an outlet for them, none of that was evident from his tone or facial expressions.

“Mongrels are different, I think. To me it always seemed like Riki did not care about things, about material comforts. So perhaps to him all those luxuries have no meaning?”

“Oh, I have given him a great deal more than just material comforts. Don’t you Pets know all about that then?”, the Elite teasingly implied, knowing full-well what kind of gossip had been circulating concerning him and Riki among the other Pets at Eos. He heard a soft gasp of disbelief come from the other one. Just being held like this by an Elite was already more than she could have ever dreamed of, it already felt so surreal … The thought of there being more of that, of there being actual sexual contact with one’s Master … It was a desire of the deepest kind, the fulfilment of which would be far higher than the highest aim a Pet could ever have, “If that is true, he must be truly insane to have tried to escape. I cannot imagine what could …”, she stopped mid-sentence when the memory of the first time she had met the fierce, wild mongrel entered her mind.

“And what is it that you want, huh?! You come to make fun of me? Had a nice bet with your cowardly friends over there, huh? I swear, if you come any closer, I’ll beat that smile straight off your pretty lil’ face, bitch!”

At first she had been utterly shocked, and the words angrily shouted at her that day had almost made her turn on her heel and leave never to return to him. But then she thought of how mean everyone had been to him since his arrival in Eos, how every time he would come out the other Pets would be waiting to mock him and call him names. And then it had occurred to her that he had misunderstood her intentions when she approached him: apparently he had thought that she was going to him not to be nice to him but to laugh at and humiliate him.

“Maybe … maybe he thought you were trying to laugh at him? I mean, to humiliate him, put him in his place. If he wanted to leave you I think he did not know how you feel about him.” To her great regret Mimea felt how Iason’s big, warm hands left her back and his strong arms were removed from
around her. She felt a bit unsettled when those arctic sky-blue eyes captured hers once more, an Elite had seldom looked straight at her like that, acknowledging her existence as another intelligent being. “Do you think if I were to tell him more explicitly what my motivations are for keeping him, he would return to me willingly?”

“I’m not sure. Riki is very different from me, from everyone in Tanagura I think. But like that, somehow it makes him seem more …”, as she spoke of him Mimea’s eyes started sparkling with a lustre that the other had seldom seen, even in the eyes of healthy, successful Pets at the height of their career. She still felt very strongly for Riki and the mere thought of him made her live up again despite her sincerely weakened state.

“More real”, Iason finished her sentence as if in an automatism. And that very lust for life that the mongrel possessed was apparently infectious, for Iason could now no longer go through the dull, mindless routines of everyday life in Tanagura any more. He felt like his life needed more purpose, more colour, than that. Now that it had come into existence, his heart yearned for that fire that only Riki could awaken in it.

Jacco, the owner of The Red Lotus, had waited anxiously next to the door of the suite in the mean time and he had even laid his ear against the door at times to listen, but the only things he heard had been occasional sobbing and the soft murmur of voices yet he had been unable to make out what was being said. He was surprised that the girl was apparently crying and not making any of the lewd moans one would expect from a proper Pet show. The man was an Elite from Tanagura, the kind of audience an Academy-bred A-class Pet like her was used to, she should have been jumping at the opportunity to perform for one such as Lord Mink, if only for the lack of physical discomfort on her own behalf. But judging from the sounds coming from the room, she was making a complete mess of things. If I don’t get paid I swear to Jupiter I will chuck that bitch right out, straight into the gutter!

After what had seemed like hours and hours of waiting, the door finally opened and His Excellency exited the room. Jacco was right on top of him immediately: “I am so sorry for any inconvenience to you, my Lord! I swear to you this is our very best girl and we’ve never had any complaints about her, none whatsoever, nothing but high praise, I assure you! I’ve no idea what’s come over her, maybe she’s overdone it a bit last night, or she’s fallen ill, it happens you know. Perhaps I could send in one of the other girls? Or maybe one of the boys, we have a brand-new very nice A-class boy, just came in two days ago, fresh as a …” Iason only had to hold up his hand, without even glancing slightly in the direction of the man, to make him stop his endless rant mid-sentence. In the few seconds before Iason spoke, the sound of Jacco swallowing nervously could clearly be heard. “There is no need for you to exert yourself to such a degree, Mr … “Jacco” … my encounter with your employee was most satisfactory, I assure you.”

The trembling, cowardly pimp’s mouth fell open when he heard that his client was apparently happy
about Mimi’s crying and he just stood there gaping with his mouth open, like a fish on dry land. “In fact I find that I am pleased to the degree that I would like to purchase this Pet from you, I do hope that is a possibility?”

It took Jacco at least five minutes to grasp the meaning of what it was that his filthy rich client was suggesting. “Why… why yes, of course! I mean, it is a tad unusual in an establishment such as this but… but I’d be most happy to accommodate you, Lord Mink!”, the little man rattled on in a rather annoyingly high-pitched voice that was reminiscent of a hyena’s laughter.

“Excellent, I am most glad to hear it”, Iason said while reaching for his credit card, still not even sparing the other man a glance. “Would 15 million cover your future expectations of her performances here?” The greasy pimp’s mouth fell open even further than seemed humanly possible and again he was momentarily dumb-struck. The Elite could have bought the entire complex and everyone in it for that sum.

To Be Continued …

Please leave a review!!! :D
Mimea is taken back to Eos and is given a most unusual proposal by her nemesis, her answer to which will determine both her and Riki's fate ...

Author’s notes:

Hi everyone :D So here I am with the next chapter already, I figured I wouldn’t keep you in suspense for too long :)

I hope my Mimea doesn’t get too out-of-character, but then again this is a character we know very little about from the novels, so anything’s possible really :) Only thing we know about her is that she’s very spirited and brave for a Pet, that she’s madly in love with Riki, that Iason made Raoul send her off to some terrible whorehouse in Midas and that Riki betrayed her feelings by not saying anything when Iason confronted them … Sounds like the ingredients for a truly poisonous concoction, right? ;)

Oh, I’m again also making use of lyrics, I hope that’s not bothering anyone? I just kinda felt that this song matched the events in this chapter :)

I hope you’ll enjoy this chapter and don’t hold back on those reviews please! ;)

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CellDweller – Tainted

Standing out there alone completely naked

Another secret’s been kept and left her tainted

There’s nothing more she can do to make them change it

She does the best that she can to rearrange it

There’s still the question of how she’s grown so tainted

A tattered canvas unfolds, watch as they paint it

She’s at the edge of the world

She’s there standing alone
Orange eyes remained fixed upon the cityscape unfolded before them, a kaleidoscope of coloured lights against the backdrop of the now ink-black night, containing both a frightening chaos and a fascinating beauty and implying both hierarchical unity and desolate isolation. The last of which was not unknown to the physically girlish, mentally adult unlooker. Somehow order had lost its appeal to her in favour of the chaos of life, which had led to her life changing from certainty and security to uncertainty and danger in the blink of an eye. And now that eye could never unsee the ugliness, the inhumanity, the loneliness that made up the seemingly divine order of Tanagura, it was all just a matter of perspective really. That beautiful, glorious place of prosperity, progress and luxury of her youth had merely been a figment of her imagination, and now a corrupt system that caged personality and exterminated innocence had taken its place forever. Once one became an adult, one could never become a child again. And in this world, one could better grow up quickly or be left to pick up the pieces of shattered childhood dreams.

“Is it any better than the view from the Am household? I suppose higher does not necessarily imply better”, the soft yet firm voice rather forcefully shook her from her reverie, as she had not even heard his approach.

There was no telling how long the motionless Elite had stood only one metre from her without her noticing, as Elite were capable of remaining completely still for a seemingly endless duration of time. It was almost as if time did not exist in Tanagura: no one there ever had to even think about the future, either because their future was endless or because they had no future. Moreover Jupiter regulated everything perfectly, so there was no need to concern yourself with doing something so redundant as organising your own future.

“It looks very different from what it did before … but I think that is because I am different now, not because the view itself is”, Mimea responded after regaining her composure from the shock of Iason Mink’s sudden, brilliant appearance. There was no getting used to his presence like there had been to the presence of Master Am. When you noticed Lord Mink it was as if you were facing the sun, blinded by its golden brightness and burned by its merciless rays.

“Ah. Well, they always say beauty is in the eye of the beholder, do they not?”, the radiant blonde spoke again, his voice as frosty as always, if not slightly more so. There was no way to tell at all that he had seemingly melted only hours before, no way to tell but her memory of it. Mimea could not help but think the phrase somehow applied to Riki, he had not been beautiful at all in the eyes of most beholders, but he had managed to steal both her heart and apparently that of the android standing next to her. She would have never guessed one such as him even had a heart.
“If I may be so bold, what is it that you see when you look at it? Has that changed at all?”, the fallen Pet responded, keeping her stance respectfully bowed and her voice soft. But it did not sound like it had before, it sounded hoarser now, probably due to many nights of screaming and crying at that sickly brothel until her voice had become raw.

An uncomfortably long silence followed, uninterrupted by the cacophony of noise below, which could not reach that high or pierce to the thick glass that separated them from the rest of the world.

“I used to see something despicable, something wild and animalistic that had to be kept under control, or otherwise pure chaos would erupt. It was not something I associated at all with myself, not something I thought I required or was even capable of.” The blonde, imposing figure did not continue his speech but his meaning had already been clearly imparted.

The prettily fragile, red-haired creature beside him pursed her full lips before replying, all the while not even glancing in his direction. “I used to think it looked rather attractive, all of those bright lights. But now that I have flown into that light, it’s not so appealing anymore. Then again now that I have had a taste of real life I don’t think the synthetic version will ever be truly satisfying again. It’s hard to explain, it’s … a terrible place. But it’s also a beautiful place because it offers something more somehow, it offers opportunities to …”

“Make your own choices”, it was unclear whether that was a question or an affirmative statement. Even for one of Jason’s high social standard and esteemed position it had become very clear that the Tanaguran system did not allow for true choice, and that him choosing Riki had proven to be very difficult because of that.

A strange sense of understanding began to form between the two very different creatures standing there, gazing out the window. The system had made them to be different: socially, physically, intellectually. Yet in their souls, that part the system had not intended for, they had in fact become very similar.

“Yes. But it’s not true, is it? Except for them, the mongrels, they are the only ones who are truly free. Perhaps that’s why I did what I did, that I wanted to do something because I chose to do it, just to taste freedom for once in my life”, the now retired prostitute said, still unable to keep a tinge of hope from her voice. Despite having been beaten down so harshly because of her foolish emotions, she still continued to worship them on the altar of her heart.

“I suppose that is what I wanted as well, what I still want”, Jupiter’s representative mused while noiselessly turning his head in his interlocutor’s direction, now studying the former Pet rather than the cityscape. “And I always get what I want”, he added icily and rather ferociously, as if a wild
ocean was just below his serene, pristinely white surface.

As she slowly turned her head towards him in surprise, the look of his glacier eyes only served to further enhance that disturbing effect. Strangely fascinated, the small humanoid continued to stare, like a doe caught in headlights. Or a moth drawn to a flame, once more ignorant of its ability to burn. Iason Mink’s blue flame appeared to be something very different from the cheap neon that was displayed far below. Despite all his distance – his gloves, his expressionless mask, his ever-present façade of propriety, his rarely disturbed calm composure, his cruelly emotionless gaze – he had never lied to her.

But then the moment of odd, mutual fascination was disturbed by the arrival of Lord Mink’s latest Furniture, a young boy called Cal who despite his shy nervousness was proving to be a very promising addition to the household. Even while keeping his gaze aimed at the floor, as was expected of Furniture when facing their superior, he could not help but notice the presence of the unknown exotic-looking Pet standing beside his Master. He did not see her clearly enough to distinguish the many bruises and scraps on her otherwise flawless skin.

“Ah, Cal, I was just about to call you. This is Mimea, starting from today she will be a part of this household. Show her to her room and bathe her before dinner, which she will be having with me in the dining room.” Even the sudden use of his now flatly instructing voice could not break the spell he had cast over the small female next to him entirely. But as soon as the meaning of the words spoken to the Furniture penetrated her still-dazed mind, she snapped back to reality with a surprising snap.

“I will be … staying here?” She was not sure what she had been expecting, but last of all that she would be rescued from that dreadful brothel by the nemesis that had put her there in the first place and that he would then make her a part of his household. She had assumed when he had taken her away from The Red Lotus it had merely been his intention to speak to her in a more private setting, or possibly to resell her for a profit. But apparently he was not planning on taking her back to the Lotus or anywhere else for that matter, and she was to remain at his own penthouse, several floors up from the household she had been a part of during her golden years, or rather months.

“Of course. You might come in very handy in my attempt at reclaiming what is mine, so naturally I cannot have you die on me in some derelict establishment in downtown Midas”, and as if those rapidly spoken, supposedly rational words explained everything, he graciously turned away from Mimea and the Furniture and walked straight out the door in a matter of seconds. Strange how Elite could remain so still for such a long time, and then move away so quickly and unexpectedly.

Mimea shook her confused head in an attempt to clear the fog in there and to try and come to terms with both her new position at the Mink household and her apparently altered relationship with the
elusive Master of said household. *Looks like I am a Pet once more, only this time with a former enemy for a Master.*

Cal only now dared to face her and could not suppress a soft gasp at seeing the state she was in, he had never seen any Pet looking quite like this, even those that had been cruelly beaten by their Masters as punishment. A Master would never beat his Pet in places where it showed to such an extent, especially in the face. And the slightly gray undertone of her skin and skeleton quality of her limbs implied malnutrition for a longer period of time.

“Hi … I’m Mimea, what’s your name?” It sounded rather hollow and matter-of-fact, not at all the sweet, cheerful sing-song that one would expect from an Academy Pet. Looking at the boy staring at her, she could tell straight away that he had not been a Furniture for very long and that he had never seen anyone badly beaten or mistreated before.

“I … I’m Cal. I should … I should probably take a look at your injuries”, Cal nervously indicated, while bowing his head all over again after being stared at rather directly, the haunting sorrowful quality in her eyes frightening him.

“Don’t worry, Cal. It’s not as bad as it looks.” *It’s worse.* No physical pain could ever come close to the mental pain she had experienced over the last couple of months. But now was the time to look at the future, now it seemed like she had one again. She was painfully aware now, where she had not been in her younger years, that that future depended on the whims of an Elite. And not just any Elite, the most cruel and unpredictable of all the Blondies, and also the one she had managed to seriously piss off in the past.

After having followed the nervous Furniture into one of the gigantic, white-marble bathrooms and meekly sitting down at the edge of the enormous ground-level tub, allowing Cal to undress her and examine her wounds, Mimea felt the unusual urge to establish some kind of connection with the boy. She had never even considered befriending a Furniture before, seeing them as mere appliances to use when she saw fit. But now as she gazed upon the nervous, slightly clumsy boy in front of her, she could not help but see a kindred spirit. Lost, confused, frightened. Just like she had been, still was to a great extent.

“So what is it like, living at this household? What is the Master like, is he very demanding?”, she attempted to start a conversation, having a feeling that a lot of input from her would be required to get Cal to speak out of his own volition. She tried to keep her voice light and conversational, her eyes-lashes soothingly fluttering and it actually hurt to smile even slightly, maybe because of the bruises or due to not having used those muscles in a long time.

Cal hesitantly looked up from gently rubbing disinfectant on her many scraps and cuts, surprised at the questions and unsure as to how to respond. Master Mink had not had any Pets since his arrival so
he had no experience in dealing with them. Was he even allowed to talk to her? But surely he could not refuse to answer her questions when she aimed them directly at him? But to share his opinion on the Master with her … surely it was not his place to do so?

She immediately recognised the cause of his hesitation. “I mean, do you like it here? What does a normal day look like? Many parties, many evening activities?” If he would continue to respond, she suddenly felt she would go out of her mind with boredom. How strange, it never used to bother me while at the Am household.

“Ergh … Yes, I do like it here. I mean, of course I do, this is the most esteemed household in all of Tanagura. Well, there does not appear to be that much going on. I mean the Master organises social events in his home every now and then of course, but on a day-to-day basis he seems to prefer his privacy. It struck me as a bit unusual that a household of this size would not have any Pets … I mean, not that it should have! Of course it’s not up to me to say anything about it … I'll just be quiet now!” He clumsily attempted to open a tube of moisturizing lotion to apply to Mimea’s purple and yellow bruises, but because of his shaking hands he only ended up making himself even more terrified.

All of a sudden her small, elegant hands were there, clutching his and effectively ending the incessant shaking, gently taking the tube from his hands and opening it for him. When he looked up in utter shock, she smiled reassuringly at him, her beauty clearly shining through now, despite all the visible damage to her frail body. “It’s all right. We’re just talking, Cal, there is no need to be so worried about what you say”, she said in her most soothing tone, imagining she was addressing a frightened little bunny. The analogy even managed to briefly paint a genuine smile on her face, that was already beginning to look more like its former self.

When Cal appeared to have calmed down again and was carefully applying the relaxing, fragrant cream to her pale skin, she attempted to continue their talk. “I know why. Why the Master has kept no Pets for the last six months.” She experimentally waited until he would urge her to tell him. A part of him had to be curious about the fact, or else he would not have stated it in his babbling attack. Yet he continued to silently apply the cream to her skin and then proceeded to cut and file her long, broken nails. As he was beginning to comb through her hair, she tried again. “Would you like me to tell you why that is? Why Lord Mink has not taken a new Pet until now?” The boy blushed slightly, he had been hoping she would just forget about it. But it appeared as if he would be forced to inquire about something that was in fact none of his business. “If you would like to tell me, I cannot stop you.” That was probably as close as this Furniture was going to get to “Tell me now!”, so Mimea responded. “It is because no Pet could ever replace the last one he’s had. I assume you know about the one called Riki?”

Cal shook his head, he had never heard of anyone by that name in Eos. Or there had been this legend about a certain Riki the Dark back in Guardian, but that seemed like a different lifetime now, of which he was not allowed to talk to anyone. And without a doubt the Pet she was referring to shared nothing whatsoever with that legendary figure except for the name.
“Are you serious? Don’t Furniture ever gossip then? Truly everyone I knew was talking about it only six months ago …” But then again to the Pets of Eos six months ago seemed like a lifetime ago. An entire generation of Pets could have retired and another entire generation of new Pets could have debuted in such a short period of time. Seeing that Cal would not take the initiative to say anything to her if not explicitly probed by a question, she proceeded. “The reason why Riki’s arrival in Eos caused such a major disturbance is that he is in fact a mongrel from Ceres.”

Cal immediately seized the motion of removing Mimea’s make-up and in his complete shock he could not help but down-right stare at her in amazement. Surely it could not be the same Riki he had heard about in Guardian? Because that was the kind of personality that would never ever fit in here. And why would an Elite, especially one in a position as high as His Excellency’s, be even remotely interested in a mongrel?

“Yeah, I know! It was quite a stir … I can’t imagine what kind of scandal it must have been when it was discovered that I had slept with him, without our Masters’ permission.” She might just as well tell the kid everything, seeing as how they were going to be each other’s only company during the day. Cal’s mouth fell open at that, not believing what he was hearing. Was this Pet just pulling his chain? Was telling him all of these incredible falsehoods a way for her to amuse herself in her Master’s absence perhaps?

“What, you don’t believe me? I got kicked out of Eos for it, sent to this terrible place in Midas … I’d rather not talk about that, if you don’t mind. But I think it was worth it. Everyone hated Riki because he was a mongrel but … he is actually one of the nicest people I have ever met. There is something real about him, something genuine, he would not laugh in your face and then stab you in the back. And he never gossiped about anyone, when he had something to say he just told you straight to your face. And he was brave, with such passion! He kept on talking about how he was going to escape Eos, how he was going to get back his freedom. It was so inspiring that at some point I even imagined what it would be like to run away together with him, to meet his friends in Ceres, to spend time with him outside of these walls … It’s silly, I know, but somehow he infected me with his fire.”

It was rather tiresome to have a conversation with someone who did not respond in the slightest, but by looking at Cal’s expression she could tell that he was anxious to hear more. *He is interested in mongrels from Ceres? How strange for a Furniture.*

“Has the Master explicitly forbidden you to speak to me, Cal?” In order to have any kind of decent conversation with this boy she would have to somehow convince him that it was OK with the Master. The young Furniture shook his head, but she could tell from how wide his brown eyes still were that he was not yet convinced. “Listen, if you were to speak to me and it would turn out that the Master did not want that … then I promise you I will take the full blame for it. I will tell him that it was entirely my fault, that I was demanding that you answered me and that you were just telling me what I wanted to hear, so anything inappropriate you might say would be my fault then.”
But it turned out that approach had been a grave mistake, for Cal immediately jumped up while shaking his head even more vehemently. He was not the kind of person to let someone else take the blame or risk anything on his behalf. “OK, OK! I’ll just tell him it is all your fault regardless, is that better?”, she laughed with a wink, hoping that perhaps humour would be able to make him open up slightly. At least he appeared to understand that it was said in jest, for he kneeled down again and started pouring contents of priceless, high-quality bottles into the already-steaming bath water.

“I have heard of this Riki you describe. He is dark-skinned with pitch-black hair, right? I would have never guessed someone like that would end up here. How did that come about? I mean, how did Master Mink even get the idea to purchase him?”, he finally said while helping Mimea lower her punished, sensitive body into the hot, foaming water. She moaned in pleasure at the comforting heat of the water, despite the slight sting it also caused where her skin had been broken. When Cal started massaging sweet-smelling shampoo into her hair, her state of complete peace and relaxation was complete. How come she had never realised what a rare blissful pleasure this was before? A deep sense of gratitude filled her at the thought of those months spent in that filthy whorehouse and its drunk, abusive customers.

“The way he told me, Riki was never really purchased by Lord Mink. Apparently he had just been stealing credit cards from tourists in Midas when he came across Lord Mink, who prevented him from being apprehended by the police. And then Riki followed him, demanding to do something for him in return. And from what I understood Riki was simply taken from the street and brought here by Lord Mink several months after that.” When she thought about it like that it really sounded like an unbelievable, highly unlikely turn of events. But then again so was her taking a liking to a mongrel and vice versa. Who would have thought there could have been such an understanding between people from such very different social and genetic backgrounds?

“So what you’re saying is … Lord Mink fell in love with Riki?” Mimea gasped in surprise, he had been remarkably quick in jumping to that conclusion. In the beginning no Pet in Eos would have ever thought that an Elite was even capable of falling in love, least of all with a mongrel. Even if said Elite had decided to take a mongrel for a Pet, that did not mean in the slightest that he had personal feelings of any sort for the creature. Staring at his face, she realised that he knew nothing whatsoever about the matter. To him it had just seemed like a perfectly normal conclusion to draw from what she had just told him. She had never given the intelligence and ways of thinking of Furniture any thought, but she was definitely interested now. It was almost like speaking to an alien all over again, as if Cal came from an entirely different world just as Riki had.

“Well, yes, that’s true. But I only know that because Lord Mink has told me so himself, I would have never even guessed at the time. How did you know that?” Her new friend was proving to be more and more mysterious by the minute. Good thing she had managed to get him to finally talk. Apparently she had not lost all of her charms just yet.

“ Doesn’t it make perfect sense? I mean, why else would he go to such lengths? I can’t imagine
taking a mongrel as a Pet would be easy, probably lots of red tape and it’s without a doubt a huge social risk to take. I very much doubt an Elite in a lower position could have pulled it off. So what happened? Was he forced to give Riki up? Or did Riki somehow escape?” Another very unlikely conclusion. No Pet would have ever even thought it possible to escape Eos, or even understand where a desire to do so could originate from.

“No. I mean he tried to escape but he was caught, shortly after our tryst was discovered and I was sent to Midas. But no, the Master actually let him go.” A fact that up to this point she could not entirely wrap her head around. Surely, to a human his reasoning made sense, but it was not the kind of selfless, uncalculated way of reasoning that an Elite would use.

“Why would he do that? Go through all that trouble to obtain him, only to let him go?” Cal could not understand it either, because he knew – probably even better than any Pet – the way in which the cold, purely mathematical minds of the Elite functioned. An Elite would never even considers a human being’s feelings in any matter, and they would definitely never disregard their own wishes on behalf of those of a mere human.

“He did it because he noticed that Riki was unhappy here, that he would die from boredom and despair if he remained locked up in a cage. Cause that’s what love really is: the ultimate sacrifice.” Cal was equally as amazed at Mimea’s sharp perceptiveness as she was at his mongrel ways of jumping to conclusions. Yet he had always felt that becoming a Furniture was “the ultimate sacrifice”. But seeing as how love was apparently the same thing, he wasn’t missing out on anything.

It was with good reason that any alliances between Pets and Furniture were subtly discouraged in Tanagura. It was not so much that the Pets lacked the actual intelligence or will-power to rebel, but they did not possess the necessary knowledge, skills and experience to do so. And the Furniture by themselves were too isolated from everyone else and too conditioned to obey to even consider any rebellious plans. But if somehow those two factions were to combine their talents in a mutual cause …

“That’s … that’s a very touching story. I would have never guessed that an Elite could care so deeply about anyone, especially a human, and a mongrel at that.” Cal had always felt that his Master treated him fairly, more so than some other Masters he had heard his fellow Furniture speak of. But his admiration had never gone any further than this professional respect. Now that he had heard this amazing story of his Master’s love for Ceres’ very own Riki the Dark, his Master had risen far higher in his personal esteem. He had the capacity to care for human beings, at least for one particular human being. Somehow it made Cal feel less alone in the world, the fact that there was someone so close who cared and from whom he would have never expected it …

“So did you love him too? Riki, I mean?” The Furniture continued their conversation, while now helping her stand up so he could gently lather her body with pink foam that smelled of raspberries. “Yes, I did. And I still do. But I don’t … There is this unspoken rule among us Pets, that the first
person to claim someone has priority over anyone else in the future. So if the Master was the first to claim Riki, I would not dream about standing in his way, regardless of his station. It is so strange, to talk with the Master about Riki, it always makes us seem … not quite like equals, but as if we actually have something in common”, the Pet mused while she absently moved her long fingers through her wet, vibrant locks, unknowingly making herself look even more alluring.

All of a sudden Cal dropped the washing sponge into the bath water and suddenly stared at her. “But when Pets say “claim”, they mean … physically claim?” When Mimea started nodding, his eyes became as big as saucers and his mouth formed the shape of an O. “That’s why there was so much gossip about Riki. Not just because he’s a mongrel Pet, but also because we could see the signs that someone had claimed him on his body. Yet we also knew that he had not been a part of any performance and that there were at the time no other Pets in the Mink household, so there was only one person left who could have left those marks on him: the Master himself.” Cal continued to stare at her in disbelief. So the Master did not just care for Riki’s well-being, but he had also lowered himself to such a base, human act as sex?

This was not exactly a subject Cal had any experience in, yet his interest was piqued and his old curious streak got the better of him. “But you said … marks, like hickeys? Surely you don’t think they … that they went … all the way?” Having bathed the Master and thus seen him naked, and knowing that according to the stories Riki had been rather slight in build for a mongrel, such a thing simply did not appear feasible in his mind. Not without inflicting a great deal of pain.

“Well of course they did! I mean, why leave anything visible on him and risk exposure while not going for the complete prize? Besides, Riki more or less confirmed it himself, although I could tell it was something he was embarrassed about. Imagine that, embarrassed about being bedded by the greatest blonde Elite that has ever lived, the very representative of Jupiter herself! If it were me I would have been extremely honoured and proud. That’s also why so many Pets were mean to Riki, because they were insanely jealous of course!”

“But … but …”, Cal stammered, while taking in Mimea’s petite form, which was considerably smaller than Riki’s even. She was apparently very willing to suffer torturous pains for the sake of showing off to other Pets. A part of Cal admired her immense bravery, also for daring to have an affair with a Pet who she knew was being taken by his very Master. “But surely such a thing must be extremely painful?”, he eventually blurted out when Mimea continued to stare at him questioningly.

A look of pure surprise appeared on Mimea’s pretty, doll-like face. Was it possible that her little brain had not even thought of the physical implications of such a joining? Then it dawned on him: Pets were not supposed to see any Elite naked, only Furniture were allowed to. “You know, Elite are ergh … very … ergh very … well, you know!”, he frustratedly exclaimed why he was making surprisingly accurate measuring gesticulations with his hands.

At that very moment they were both shaken by the Master’s voice, booming through the hall-way all
the way to the bathroom: “CAL! You were supposed to serve dinner over fifteen minutes ago!” Both Cal and Mimea had completely forgotten about the tight schedule they were on while engaging in a gossipy conversation on such tasty subjects.

Both silently stared at each other for a few seconds, wondering if the other one was also thinking very hard about just how far Elite hearing could stretch …

Eventually dinner was served - only half an hour late - and Mimea surprised herself by appreciatively thanking Cal when he served her food unto her plate for her. No Pet had ever bothered to thank a Furniture before, as they were simply doing their job and they were not sentient beings after all. Iason looked up briefly at the words, but did not otherwise say anything about it, apparently not bothered by Mimea’s unusual behaviour.

And her behaviour was not the only unusual thing about her, also her appearance was unusual. For Cal had been instructed to put her into a dark red dress for the occasion, admittedly a rather short dress with a low cleavage and an open back, but a dress nonetheless. This was an item of clothing that was rarely worn by Pets in Eos, even for ex-Pets working in Midas it was rather unusual to wear something that covered their bodies to such an extent. Mimea could only assume that it was because her new Master did not wish to have to look upon her many imperfections, caused by the harsh treatment at the brothel. Yet why ask her to dine with him at all, if he did not wish to gaze upon her? It only happened very rarely that an Elite would dine together with a Pet. And then there was the fact that upon arrival, he had indicated for her to sit in the chair opposite him. Pets were not supposed to sit in chairs, at the same dinner table of their Master. They were always asked to sit at their Master’s feet, if they were asked to eat together with their Master at all.

Apparently the surprise at all of this showed on Mimea’s face, for seemingly out-of-the-blue the blonde inquired about it. “You are probably wondering why you’re even here.” Here? As in dining together with him, in a chair? Or here as in a Pet at his household? Or here, back in Eos, after having been sold off to The Red Lotus? As far as Mimea knew, there was no other Pet that had ever crawled its way back up the waterfall to Tanagura after a fall to Midas.

When he kept on waiting as if expecting her to confirm his statement, she shakingly replied at last. “Ergh … Y … yes, I am wondering about that. I mean, I … I disobeyed my former Master, I broke the law, and I shamed you, my Lord … and I ergh … I …”, she was not quite able to spit out the words “hurt you”, seeing as how that would imply that she, a worthless whore, had some kind of influence over him, the Head of the Syndicate.

Fortunately for her, he calmly held up his hand for her to stop her ramblings, while thoughtfully sipping some of his expensive, imported wine from an even more expensive crystal, design glass. Of
course she shut her mouth straight away, no hair on her head would think to disobey or interrupt him. She may have spoken out in a most unbecoming way after her deceit with Riki had been discovered and earlier at the brothel, yet those words were spoken in a situation in which she thought she would receive the worst possible punishment either way. She may have become more feisty than most Pets after her acquaintance with the wild mongrel, but a very large part of her still sought the approval of a Master and longed for a life of luxury such as the one she was currently living again.

“I am not keeping you here for any of the qualities you have just described yourself to be clearly lacking in, despite your upbringing as an Academy Pet. I am not keeping you here because you are pleasing to look at, even if in time those bruises would disappear and you would grow some more flesh on those bones, you would still be damaged goods. Not to mention nearly too old to be considered as a worthwhile investment. Also females are not to my tastes at all, especially red-haired, skinny ones. And of course, as I am sure even one of your low IQ can comprehend, I am most definitely not keeping you here because of anything you have done in the past to please me or show me your undying loyalty”, despite the calm soft-spoken voice he was using, the icily cutting reproaches were clearly audible in his speech. And all the while he did not even glance in her direction, as if she was not worthy of his attention at all. Moreover he had an almost mocking small smile on his face that implied that perhaps he had purchased her merely for the sake of making her pay for her crimes against him.

_Slowly fading and decaying_

_Please ignore what they’re saying_

As Mimea remained silent and kept her eyes fixed firmly on her plate, he continued his onslaught after a long silence during which she could almost feel his sharp eyes cut through her like icy daggers. “Honestly I cannot imagine what that man - Iago, Jacques, whatever his name was – even saw in you in the first place. That he would consider one so scrawny and feeble-looking, momentarily not including your psychological instability for the moment, to be the best worker he had, I find that very hard to believe. In fact I am positive that someone was paying him to do so because it would mean bad publicity …” And so it went on and on, with long, meaningful intermezzos that in and of themselves seemed to sting even worse than the words spoken after them.

_Slowly fading and decaying_

_Please ignore what they’re saying!_

Mimea just sat there and let it all wash over her like an ice-cold tsunami that was both assaulting her violently while simultaneously making its freezing cold soak into her very bones. After nearly fifteen minutes her eyes were watering, her food stuck in her throat and her fingers were curling around the edge of the table, grateful for at least something to hold unto for she felt like she was being slowly but surely blown away by a merciless blizzard.
“And like I said earlier, one that has fallen as low as you have ought to be considered damaged goods on all levels. The idea of a stranger laying hands on one’s Pet is of course bad enough in and of itself”, a meaningful pause accompanied by an accusatory, stabbing stare was added to this before he continued. “But to have the merchandise having been fucked, licked, beaten, scratched, bit, spat on, probably even urinated and bled on, by an endless hoard of uncivilised, unwashed, diseased, lowly characters of the most despicable nature imaginable …”, he went on and on while his voice remained just as calm as ever yet had a cruel, mean, humiliating undercurrent that cut straight through Mimea’s poor, shivering body to torment its very core.

She fought them bravely until defences caved in
Pressing their teeth to her neck until she gave in
Now there’s no question this girl is well acquainted
With suffering in a world that’s left her tainted

And as he was describing the things that were done to her, it was as if she was vividly living them again, in detail, and humiliated by them even more so by the way his voice implied that it was what she deserved, all she was good for. And then there was the suggestion that these things had irrevocably damaged and fouled her, that there was no hope whatsoever for her to crawl out of that stinking pit of despair ever again to see the daylight or to breathe the clean air. That it would have been best for her if she had just crumbled and died at the very bottom of that pit, buried in filth, to be forgotten, to have meant absolutely nothing in the world.

Slowly fading and decaying
Please ignore what they’re saying!!!
abundantly clear to him that you clearly did not GIVE A SHIT about him, not in a million years! Oh no, you could never come down from your high throne to even ATTEMPT to have a decent conversation with the likes of us lowly people down here!!! So you went and KIDNAPPED the poor boy, against his will, and then LOCKED HIM UP in a cage, HUMILIATED him and then BEAT HIM into a pulp for no sensible REASON at all!!! And then you’re surprised he came to ME?!! He came to me because I’m actually a HUMAN being, capable of EMOTION, like COMPASSION and LOVE, something YOU are clearly NOT capable of!!!” He just sat there in all his blonde, cold beauty and grace and said nothing, apparently waiting for her finish before reacting in any way. Yet his blue eyes were upon her, and within their calm depths there was apparently the silence before the storm.

She’s at the edge of the world
She’s there standing alone
She’s the loneliest girl

She stopped, only for a moment, to briefly catch her breath and reach the conclusion of her high-pitched, yet very loud, tantrum. “So even if I’m mortal, and damaged, and filthy, and disgusting, and willing to degrade myself through carnal acts, and humiliated beyond all repair, and stupid, and naïve… I have something that you will NEVER have, and that is HUMANITY!!! So I’m not ashamed, I’m not sorry for existing or for caring about someone, not one bit, but you ought to be!”, and she ended her shrieking speech by slamming her small fist into the table, breaking her porcelain, antique plate in the process and cutting her hand on the glass until it bled on the priceless, pristinely white, silk tablecloth.

And now she finally feels like she’s coming home

Her new Master was silent for at least five minutes after she had exploded like that. And five minutes was a very long time to prepare for your impending death, especially as it gave you time to think very long and hard about how exactly you had dug your own grave without even thinking twice about it. As if your eminent doom and end was the only goal your life had ever really had. Mimea remained standing during the full duration of those five minutes, even if she was rather shaky on her legs and had to lean on the table for support. She would not back down before the end, she would stand by what she said, even if it meant an even more painful death. That heartless bastard had deserved to hear those words for a very long time, for Riki’s sake.

She was completely astounded when the Elite opposite the table started clapping his hands in applause, after which he gestured to Cal – who had been frozen to the ground as if paralysed throughout the entire event – to clean up the mess Mimea had made. Cal was shaking so bad the entire table was shaking with him as soon as he attempted to clear away the porcelain shards from the table, cutting his own fingers on them in the process. After which he tried to wrap a napkin around Mimea’s bleeding hand while at the same time trying to avoid any more blood staining the tablecloth.
“Bravo. I must say I had my doubts about you, and I surely did not expect a performance of quite such a calibre. It is truly remarkable, isn’t it? Seeing you debut as Raoul’s Pet last year I could have never guessed that it was even remotely possible for you to develop in this way. The treatment at that disgusting establishment should have broken you as if you were made out of glass. Yet you reacted more like a stone statue, shards broke off yet you did not shatter completely. Moreover I would say you have come out stronger than you were ever made to be.”

As sudden realisation dawned on Mimea’s face, she sank down into the chair again, exhausted by her attack, who could have guessed that it would be so tiresome to get angry? “You wanted me to react in that way … You were purposely egging me on … But why? If you knew I would react in such a way, then why bring me back here at all? I am not fit anymore to be anyone’s Pet!” She realised this with a sickening feeling of finality. She had changed.

“Ah, but that’s the beauty of it. You are not fit to be anyone else’s Pet anymore, but you are now very much fit to be my Pet, Mimea. I had never figured that any Pet that could possibly interest me could ever come out of one of Raoul’s labs, and I always assumed that it was because your genetic make-up simply did not allow for anything even remotely interesting in your personalities, or rather lack thereof. But now I wonder whether it was not the nature, but in fact the nurture that made you into what you are. It appears to be the only explanation as to why a harmless, boring Pet can turn into a wild mongrel-like creature overnight, given the right circumstances.”

Urged on by courage she did not even know she had within her frail chest, she responded again, be it that her voice was somewhat trembling and still sore from the shouting. “I am not the only one who’s changed. And that’s why you want me, isn’t it? You want to study the effect Riki has had on me in order to understand the same effect within yourself better. But you can’t study yourself objectively, therefore you have to study me instead.”

“Indeed, that was my initial intent for purchasing you and bringing you here. However now I have observed something even more remarkable in you: you have not merely changed through your encounters with Riki, you have become more like him. I can see it clearly now, the raging fire in your expression, the anger in your incoherent movements, the way in which you lash out and act completely outside of your own interest. Of course a Pet does not have the same kind of self-restraint one such as myself would have, yet to act in such an uncontrolled manner as you just did would be utterly unthinkable for any Pet I have ever heard of. Except for my own, of course”, the blonde spoke in the same bored tone as always while nonchalantly nipping from his glass, however there was a slight spark of amusement detectable in his usually empty gaze.

“Apparently your self-restraint is not as perfect as you thought, since you could not restrain yourself from bringing a mongrel here and fornicating with him”, Mimea mockingly went on. She did it almost without conscious thought, for a relentless urge to put the other in his place had made itself master of her. Perhaps she was just testing the waters, but it seemed more as if she was plunging head-long into their very depths.
“You sound as if you disapprove? My my, that is a very hypocritical thing to say for you, isn’t it, Mimea? Seeing as how you were not too hesitant yourself to fornicate with said mongrel, without anyone’s permission”, the Elite sneeringly pointed out, no longer bothering to mask any of the imperfect jealousy and possessiveness that shone through in his perfectly symmetrical features.

“I don’t disapprove, for love needs no permission. In fact … in fact it gives me a better opinion of you. I can see now that I am not the only one who changed”, the girl with the fiery hair responded, as she began eating her soup with rather ill-mannered, large scoops. Regardless of any immediate danger she was still in, she had not had a decent meal in six months and was not about to waste this opportunity. This must have been what Riki had felt like all his life. Hungry. Hurt. Cold. Cast out.

“Yes, but is the change for better or for worse, I wonder?” The cold-hearted Elite wondered while slightly rising his elegant, fair eyebrows. In the mean time the timid Furniture had carefully approached the unpredictable Pet once more, this time armed with a medical kit to take care of the shallow cuts she had inflicted upon herself.

“Whether you’d want to be stupid and naively happy, or knowing and truthfully unhappy? Doesn’t sound like a very difficult choice to me. I’d prefer someone who truly hated me over someone who pretended to love me any day”, the formerly innocent girl responded, realising full well that true hate was in all probability what Riki now felt for her, after his indiscretions with her had undoubtedly caused him to be punished severely by the unrelentingly vicious android she was currently having a semi-civilised conversation with.

“Ah, yes. The blissful ignorance of all those spellbound by Tanagura’s splendour and magnificence. I suppose that knowing exactly how said system functions on all levels, does not exclude one from falling under its spell himself. Let us say that I was apparently waiting in blissful boredom until such an opportunity as Riki the Dark presented itself to me”, Iason spoke with an inhuman attachment that was highly unusual when considering that the statement was in fact of a very personal nature to him. “I must admit that I had always considered this recent endeavour of mine to defy the Tanaguran system to be a solo-operation, simply because no one else here seems to understand the appeal Riki has to me. They’re all too busy being “stupid” and “naively happy”, as you’ve so accurately put it. But not you. You and I have something in common in that way, do we not?”

“Desiring the same lover is not usually a common cause that results in friendship, is it?” The former Pet gestured to Cal to fill her plate once more, better to take advantage of the situation while it lasted. But she was not about to voice any sentiment she did not feel, regardless.

“We both know there is no such thing as friendship in Tanagura. But a mutual agreement could go a long way for one in your current predicament”, her malevolent host added, now attempting to keep the rancorous undercurrent out of his voice. There was no rational reason for those feelings, as they
belonged to the past and did not serve his purposes at the moment. Even if he had been recently blessed with the ability to feel something for someone, he still thought like a calculating, unfeeling Elite: rational, practical, patient, mathematical.

“So what is it you want me to do? Not fornicate again with Riki? Never gaze upon his face again? That shouldn’t be too hard to accomplish when I’m locked up in here and he’s roaming the streets out there. And I haven’t forgotten how he betrayed me. I’m not a fool, I know he does not feel for me as I do for him. I know now that he was just using me to make you jealous. So in the end you’ve nothing to worry about: it’s always been all about you, even for him.”

“That’s exactly the thing. You do not wish to feel for him anymore, as it is clearly disastrous for you. But it does not work that way, does it? You can’t just turn it off when it does not suit your purpose anymore.”

“It is not because I still feel something that I ought to act on it when I see him. If you want me to promise you not to, I will, because I was not planning on acting in that way anyhow.”

“No. In fact I was hoping you would do exactly that, for this time it would in fact be to the advantage of both of us.” The reintroduced Pet raised a freshly epilated eyebrow at that, her unnaturally bright eyes widening slightly. The blonde synthetic looked right at her as he continued to speak, entirely in control of his facial mimicry once more while spinning an intricate web to catch that ever-evasive prey that was Riki.

“You see, you are right. The reason he went to you willingly and not to me is because he does not feel threatened by you, he thinks he can handle you because you are too innocent, too dumb to do him any harm. And you were. But thanks to his own efforts, you are not so now. How far are you willing to go to make your position in this household permanent and to see the object of your affections on a day-by-day basis again, perhaps to do even more than just gazing upon him?”, the fallen angel said in one of his most seductively silky but simultaneously threateningly harsh tones.

If she agreed she could get everything that one of her standing had ever desired, and maybe even part of what it was she now truly desired, if she would be willing to compromise on the mongrel’s devotion. But if she disagreed, The Red Lotus would seem like a harmless bee-sting compared to the next place she would be sold off to. At least they had left her in one piece at least physically in there, and they had not botched up her memories or sense of self with drugs or chirurgical interventions of any sort.

She’s just done what she’s been told

Her heart is turning to stone
Mimea remained quietly picking at her dessert for some time after that final question, the very climax this entire confrontation with the icy devil had doubtlessly been leading up to. How she responded now would determine how she spent the rest of her life and how long that life was going to be. Everything depended on this moment, her uncertain future was dangling on a mere thread. But of course as long as she lived in Tanagura it would always be that way, but she figured it would be preferable that thread were made out of steel rather than silk. She was aware that said thread could also suffocate her in its web, but she would definitely choose that over a certain fall once her own silk thread snapped. It was only a matter of time, and an Elite as powerful as Iason Mink could buy her as much time as she could ever get in this place. So the only question that remained was: could she betray the one she loved and hand him over to the competition?

“I have but one question to ask before I make up my mind, Lord Mink”, she said in her softest, most alluring voice but in her eyes there burned a dangerous flame, fuelled by both heartbreak and ambition. She might be damaged goods but she had not lost all of her natural charms, in fact from Iason Mink’s perspective her brush with reality had helped her gain charms rather than lose them.

*Here at the end of this girl*

“Which is?”, he inquired, not adding any more words than were necessary at this point, for he could already sense that he had snared at least this prey already. What they were discussing now was merely how high the price was going to be.

“Do you truly love him?” And as she finally spilled out the words she had been dying to speak ever since she had laid eyes upon her icy competitor, she could not help but smile.

*This time she finally feels like she’s coming home*

A wicked, gleeful smile that expressed an ominous satisfaction in the knowledge that the other *did* have a weakness, an imperfection, and a very significant one at that. Yes, they were negotiating terms here. But they were doing so as equals, because *both* had access to something that the other needed like air to breathe.

*Like she’s coming home*

A disturbingly similar yet more distantly regulated smile appeared on the Elite’s divinely inhuman, purely white face. He had been right about her …
She’s coming home.

To Be Continued …

Thnx for reading! :D

Please leave a comment and let me know what you think! ;)

Out on the Town

Chapter Summary

Riki and his gang are cruising through Midas, just out for kicks and some quick cash. But when they have a run-in with the Dark Men, Riki is rescued by an old acquaintance. But not all is what it seems ...

Author’s notes:

Hi everyone :) First of all I’d like to thank the people who have already left reviews for their kind words and encouragement!:D It’s very interesting to discuss this fic and the AnK storyworld in general with fellow fans :)

I’ve been feeling really inspired for this fic, so I’ve gone and written the next chapter already late last night, just couldn’t help myself :) Riki’s making an appearance here, so naturally there’s more action in this one ;) Not yet any real smut, but no worries, I’m getting there :) 

So I hope you’ll all enjoy reading this next chapter!:D And pls leave a comment so I know what I’m doing right or wrong here and what your expectations are for the rest of this fic ;)

******************************************************************************************************

soundtrack: Starship – We Built This City

******************************************************************************************************

Here's your favorite radio station, in your favorite radio city
The city by the bay, the city that rocks, the city that never sleeps

It was just another Sunday night in the city that never slept and continuously kept up its flirtatious games with the night. Its bright lights were winking to any potential lovers whose wallet could afford it and extravagantly dressed worshippers of decadence were crowding its streets in a never-ending mass of movement. In the air resounded a fragmentary collection of sounds, each competing with the other both in volume and spectacularity. All in an effort to sell their products through auditory advertisements or to lure customers to their establishment using enticing music.

We built this city, we built this city on rock an’ roll
And that glitter and glamour did not only lure those who were eager to spend their cash but also those who were eager to steal it. Not that they would ever admit that they needed anything at all from the deceitful seductress of the night to survive. They just considered it good sport and entertainment to illegally cruise the streets of Midas, just another “fuck you” in the pompous face of Tanagura and a way to show off their unrestricted freedom of movement to the virtually caged citizens of Midas. Never would the supposed scum from Ceres allow anyone to forget that they still existed. That even if Tanagura had managed to beat them down and humiliate them, it would never be able to break their spirit or exterminate them completely. The mongrels knew full well that their very presence was an eye-sore to that whole system, which was exactly why they flaunted themselves at every opportunity they got.

Someone's always playing corporation games
Who cares they're always changing corporation names
We just want to dance here, someone stole the stage
They call us irresponsible, write us off the page

It was on this night that the infamous leader of Bison had decided to fly out with his gang and rub it in some more for good measure: Ceres was never gonna back down. And definitely not under the watch of Riki the Dark. When he returned to Ceres after nearly two years spent in Jason Mink’s gilded cage, he’d initially encountered some difficulties to re-establish both himself and his gang to their former glory. But in the end those difficulties had helped him to become even more feared and awe-inspiring than he had been before, for he knew better than ever the importance of what it was he was fighting for: freedom. His hatred for the tyranny that Tanagura exerted over not only its own citizens but those of Midas as well, had never burned more strongly. They would be acknowledged eventually, because they would make both Tanagura and Midas notice them!

“Hey Riki? Y’wanna check out Sasan? I hear it’s real crowded with tourists this time o’ year! We could sneak in and out, grab some cash, and no one’ll even notice!” Sid yelled at the top of his lungs as he was speeding right behind the gang’s leader, closely followed by Norris, then Luke, and Guy closed the hoverbike formation. This sequence was in no way indicative of what was happening relationship-wise between Riki and Guy, as it was the regular formation of a Ceresian gang: leader up front, second-in-command at the rear. No pun intended.

Riki hesitated for only a second, but long enough for the gang members he had grown up with to notice it. Sasan was the place where he had first met the object of both his burning hatred and his secret desire: the icy perfection that was Jason Mink. Misunderstanding his leader’s hesitation, Sid added: “Unless ya think there’s better cash to collect elsewhere tonight?” Since Riki had regained his authority over Bison and had brutally subdued the new rival gangs that had popped up, no one in the gang dared to out-right question his decisions.
“Nah, ‘s fine. Extra Dark Men ain’t gonna be a problem if there’s as much of a crowd as you say. We’ll have to ditch the bikes somewhere and go in on foot though”, the dark-haired mongrel shouted towards his back, his voice sounding rough and not a single tremble vibrating in it. Damn had he gotten good at hiding his true feelings after some time spent in the company of that sick blonde bastard. While he was swiftly and agily steering his bike into one of the less-frequented alleys at the edge of the popular area known as Sasan, Riki was unconsciously playing with his key chain.

“Y’know you never told me where ya got that? Looks like something worth sellin’…”, Guy said as he approached his former pairing partner, while the other gang members were securing the parked bikes as best as they could. Any excuse to try and start a conversation with his friend had to be exploited these days, for conversations with Riki had been few as of late.

“What the fuck’s it to you, huh?!”, Riki hissed out more aggressively than he had intended. He immediately regretted it, because he had been looking for a way to get closer to his former pairing partner and best friend again. But it wasn’t proving easy, as everytime he tried to reconnect Guy saw it as an invitation to make out. And he just wasn’t sure if he was ready for that yet. Especially since the first time Guy had kissed him after his return to Ceres, memories of the extreme ecstasy that he had experienced with Iason had flashed through his head. How was he supposed to make love to Guy while he was still thinking about that psychotic maniac from Tanagura? Would Guy – or anyone else for that matter – be able to truly satisfy him ever again now that he’d had a taste of the android’s eroticism?

“Shit… Guy, wait, OK…”, Riki said as he was checking whether he still had his pocket knife tucked inside of his boot and trying to see if the other gang members were still within hearing distance. Guy momentarily glanced in the same direction, and then returned on his steps, not sure what to expect. Riki had not exactly been forthcoming since his return and Guy had a feeling that maybe his old pairing partner wasn’t interested in getting together again. He just couldn’t figure out what it was he had done to make it so.

“Fuck, Guy, it’s not you… it’s me… I’m just… I never talk about it but… I’ve been through some pretty crazy shit, some very sick shit, while I was away… I just wanna make sure I don’t get you involved in that mess as well, y’know what I’m sayin’?” Riki did not quite have the guts to look his friend in the eye while he spoke. Guy had been able to tell for several months now that Riki was clearly struggling with something. But he had no idea what that something was, so as long as Riki was not willing to talk about it all he could do was wait.

“Yeah… yeah I figured there was somethin’… Crap, Riki, y’know you can always tell me anything, right? That’s what friends are for, and I’m always gonna be your friend, even if nothin’ more”, the other said, that old familiar caring sentiment shining in his light brown eyes. It was the same look that had made Riki approach him on the day they’d met, all those years ago. Guy hadn’t changed one bit, and it felt as if Riki’s very heart was being janked out of his chest at the thought of shutting out his friend or lying to him. But there was just no way he could ever make Guy understand what it had been like for him, up in that terrible marble palace of terror.
“Knowing about that shit… it changes a person, man… and I don’t wanna do that, I don’t want you to become as fucked-up as I am…”, Riki finally said, unable to look Guy in the eye for fear of him noticing the unshed tears in there. When he noticed he was still fumbling with the Aurora coin, he angrily shoved it back into his pocket. He could not even keep the memories out of his thoughts by day, and even less by night. Guy had often heard Riki move uneasily and mumble in his sleep, but Riki had never been willing to share what his nightmares had been about. One time he had even woken up the entire gang by crying out in the middle of the night, they had thought he was being murdered in his sleep by a member of a rival gang.

“The cops torture you or something like that? Hey man, I don’t wanna make you talk about anything you don’t wanna talk about… But not talking about something, it don’t change nothing, it still happened, y’know?” At that Riki finally did look up and into the other’s eyes, and Guy was too shocked by what he saw there to react straight away. He had never seen such raw suffering and fear on the brave mongrel’s face before. Nor such inner turmoil and indecision.

“Hey ladies!!! You comin’ or what?! Before they run out of the good cards!”, Norris yelled at them with a big, fat grin on his face. He loved robbing folks more than anything, and he hadn’t had an opportunity to hone those skills of his in weeks. At first he’d thought that the end of Riki’s relationship with Guy could mean a possible intro for him. But he only needed to throw one look at Riki’s face while he was watching Guy, and he could tell straight away that Riki still had strong feelings for his best friend. What he couldn’t wrap his head around, was why they weren’t pairing partners no more then? Cause it sure as hell didn’t look as if Guy wasn’t interested anymore.

“Who the fuck you’re calling a lady, huh?! Just you wait till I catch you, ya motherfucker, I’ll show you who’s the lady here!” Guy was relieved when he heard Riki yell back at Norris with his same-old don’t-you-dare-mess-with-me! attitude. They decided that splitting up and meeting back at the bikes would be the best course of action. As large groups of mongrels tended to attract the attention of Dark Men or cops more quickly, and they’d probably get separated in the crowd anyways.

Riki decided to finally cut his old partner some slack, so he paired up with Guy but also asked Sid to join their group. Having Guy alone would’ve made further questioning inevitable and he really didn’t feel like talking about it, especially while he was supposed to be paying attention to his surroundings. “All right, fellas, let’s go kick some rich motherfucker asses!”, their leader shouted, to which the others responded with equal enthusiasm. This was gonna be their night.

Pretty soon Riki, Guy and Sid were walking down the main street and into the square that held the most prominent casino’s and bars, close to the Sasan city-gates where the tourists usually landed. So
far they had seen no sign of Dark Men, but then again the bastards had a way of showing up unexpectedly. After only a couple of minutes of prospecting potential prey, they had picked out a middle-aged man with a bald head, who was apparently out on the town all by himself and was literally waving around his fat wallet while greedily staring at the casino’s he intended to visit. The three mongrels got into the usual formation: one right on his tail with another following farther behind under the cover of the crowd, and a third one slightly in front of the victim’s trajectory path. One of the most lucrative techniques in this formation was for the mongrel in the front to create some kind of distraction, while the one following closely behind took the victim’s wallet while he was occupied by the diversion. The third mongrel following slightly behind was mostly meant to keep a look-out or to lead cops away in another direction in case the victim of the robbery screamed for help.

However the bald man slightly upset their scheme by turning into an alley on the side, that was still relatively crowded yet did not offer the density of people that worked best for the execution of their intended plan. Too spread apart now to change their strategy, they simply continued to follow their victim while trying to remain inconspicuous. But the twisting and bending of the street and the presence of many stalls blocking most of the road, made it difficult for Sid - who was on the look-out - to clearly oversee the situation.

It's just another Sunday, in a tired old street

However just as Guy was about to make his move and create a disturbance in front of the victim, Riki saw two Dark Men come from behind a stall smack right in the path of Guy and the tourist. Riki just froze, he could tell even from this distance that Guy clearly wasn’t looking in the direction of the Dark Men, expecting Sid to sound the alarm in case of their appearance. But the Dark Men were standing so close that if he screamed to warn Guy, they would turn and see Guy in the middle of his diversion. Dammit, we should’ve just let him slip and chosen another one in the square!

Unknowning of the danger close-by, Guy made his appearance and ran straight towards the man while loudly asking the man if he could please burrow his phone. You see his bike had broken down unexpectedly closeby and he’d been unable to reach a mechanic because someone had stolen his phone. Despite Guy’s tattered clothes being clearly identifiable as those of a mongrel by citizens of Midas, it would not be so obvious to a tourist. Therefore the man was initially not suspicious at all and was already reaching for his phone. At that time the two Dark Men had noticed that something was going on and had just turned around, while standing only a couple of feet away from Guy and the tourist.

Police have got the choke hold, oh, then we just lost the beat

There was simply no other way to avoid that the Dark Men would notice Guy. “HEY!!!!!!! HEY OVER HERE MOTHERFUCKERS!!!!”, Riki yelled at the top of his lungs while waving his arms above his head in the hopes of momentarily distracting the Dark Men from Guy’s presence. Fortunately for Guy, his plan worked, and as soon as they heard the yelling and saw Riki they were
on his tail, brushing right past Guy in their hurry to get to the mongrel who they had spotted right away. Oh shit now they’re after me, hadn’t thought of that!

Riki ran as quickly as he could, manoeuvring in between passing people like an acrobat. He knew that he could turn the fact that the street was less crowded to his advantage. If he could only gain speed and put some space between himself and his pursuers before disappearing into the big crowd at the square … However the way in which the stalls had been scattered all across the street made that difficult, and all the people in the area had become unmoving obstacles as soon as they had heard that something was going on. He had almost reached the square, almost there. He risked a quick glance behind him and his heart stuck in his throat: he wasn’t going to make it!

Just then Sid started shouting and jumping up and down like a madman some distance beyond the Dark Men, which created a momentary distraction when they looked around. But Sid was standing far enough to get away safely, and the only thing their hesitation did was give Riki a few extra seconds to dive into the mass of people. But contrary to what he’d been expecting, he only managed to shake one of the Dark Men in the crowd. The other one had risen a lasergun and had started randomly shooting up into the air to get the crowd to part straight away upon his approach. Shit! Since when do these fuckers use techniques that are risky to the crowd’s safety?

He was right behind Riki, and armed, there was no way Riki would be able to beat him in a head-on fight if he had the advantage of a lasergun. Seeing no other way out of the situation, Riki ran into one of the casino’s, hoping the security there would not notice him until he had made his way out the back door. Assuming there was a back door, that is. The entrance of the casino was so crowdy that people barely noticed it when Riki dashed inside. But once inside the main playing hall, he slowed down his pace not to draw attention to himself. For once he was grateful that he’d been wearing a new set of clothes when Mink had set him free. For it was the very quality of the material they were made out of, that made the people who saw him hesitant to assume anything. True, he was dressed in the style preferred by the inhabitants of Ceres, yet most inhabitants of that place could not afford that kind of quality. That slight hesitation was all Riki needed to charm his way into the crowd, combined with the pretense that he belonged there and wasn’t doing anything wrong. It was truly amazing sometimes what you could get away with just by pretending you belonged.

But just as he was beginning to think he had pulled it off and the Dark Men were no longer on his trail, they burst in through the very same back door that Riki had been eye-ing as his exit. Holy motherfucker! Riki quickly spun around to go back out the way he came in, only to see that the other fucker had caught up with his colleague and was now blocking the main entrance, already informing the security men there of the situation by the looks of it. There was no other way to go now but up the flight of neon-decorated stairs into the VIP-section of the casino. Maybe he could pull off a roof exit or hide somewhere upstairs until they gave up. Riki swiftly but silently flew up the stairs while staying close to the walls on the side, and by some miracle the Dark Men and the security men weren’t looking high enough to see him.

The mongrel kept on sneaking around upstairs, staying close to the walls, peering around the corner and into the upstairs game-room. He had to admit it looked pretty classy: crystal chandeliers, gilded
Louis XV furniture, velvet upholstery, printed wallpaper and some neo-classicist paintings. Which would be problematic if he were seen cause in that kind of setting he just stuck out like a sore thumb. Only one of the rich dandy snobs in that room had to call security and he would be royally fucked, and not in a good way.

All of a sudden he was awoken from his contemplations by a soft, feminine hand on his arm accompanied by a waft of sweet, expensive-smelling perfume. Probably Chanel or some shit, judging by the multi-layered depth of the scent. As he turned around, ready to physically throw off whoever it was who was attempting to apprehend him, his mouth fell open in surprise at the sight before him.

The familiar girl in front of him had straight, full, glossy dark-red hair that reached until right above her narrow, frail shoulders. Her skin was of the purest white yet he could detect a faint gray-ish undertone upon closer inspection, but for the rest it was entirely unblemished, like a doll’s. The eyes were big, wide and bright which gave the face the appearance of a childish innocence, but at the same time the deep orange colour of the eyes and the sharpness of the jawline rendered it a rather feline, almost predatory quality. The lips were still full, and adorned with bright-red lipstick, whereas the rest of the face was narrower and less filled-out than he remembered. Also her body appeared to be skinnier, although possibly that only added to the elegance and fragility that radiated from it. And best of all, she was currently wearing more clothes than he had ever seen her in, although the fact that the dress was made out of a golden, glittering fabric did not make her any less conspicuous.

“M.. Mimea! What… what are you doing here?”, Riki eventually blurted out, completely caught off-guard, as he had not been expecting to see the girl there in a million years, nor anywhere else for that matter.

“I work here. But I think the bigger question here is: what are you doing here, Riki?”, the young former Pet responded with a wink and an uncharacteristically cheeky smile. Just then they heard voices behind them and the sound of several men hurrying up the stairs.

MIMEA pressed a manicured finger to her shiny lips and indicated for Riki to follow her, after quickly pulling off her heels for those would certainly alert the approaching men to someone’s presence. Riki hastily followed her red and golden figure across the exaggeratedly decorated rococo-style landing, mentally comparing her gracially swinging form to a burning flame. Just after Riki had followed MIMEA into a small room containing some spare furniture and cleaning materials and shut the door, he could hear the security men pass right outside the door. For a few moments they were standing there, close to each other in the darkness, not speaking for fear of the men outside overhearing them.

After five minutes MIMEA decided that it was safe by whispering: “This room requires an access
code, so I don’t think they’ll be checking this one. But just in case, there’s a personnel stairway behind that curtain over there, that leads into the kitchen.” Despite the dim lighting in the room, Riki could still clearly make out the vibrant red of her hair and even her shining orange eyes could be made out in the darkness. As she was softly explaining the lay-out of the building, it became apparent to Riki that she was standing close enough to kiss, as her lips almost moved against his face when she spoke. He was not even sure if she was doing it on purpose. Probably not, he sure as hell wouldn’t want to kiss anyone who’d pulled such a stunt on him as he did on Mimea. But then again he surely would not consider risking his job at a posh place like this for the mere sake of aiding a person who had cheated him so.

“Mimea, ergh… not that I’m not grateful that you’re helping me out here or anything but… Why are you helping me?” The mongrel inside of him realised this was terrible timing on his behalf, but the man inside could not simply accept this girl’s assistance without even mentioning the wrong that he had done her in the past. She had been right, he had been a coward. But he wasn’t about to be now.

“Why? Well, that’s what friends are for, right?”, she responded with a beaming smile as she was pulling the curtain aside, revealing the run-down staircase she had been referring to. They clearly didn’t bother with the same décor back-stage, typically Midas: a fancy façade with ugliness behind it. Was that all he was too, in the end? A brave face with the heart of a coward to back it up?

“I wasn’t acting in the way a friend should, the last time we saw each other. So you’ve no reason to treat me as such anymore.”

Momentarily overcome by apparent surprise, Mimea stared at him for a few seconds, her pretty mouth slightly open now, revealing her pristinely white teeth and giving her face an extra cute expression. “Oh, Riki! None of that was your fault! I know you did not mean to hurt me, and how were you to know that Lord Mink would overreact like that?”, she said comfortingly while she gently brushed a stray lock of wild, black hair from his face. She kept on smiling but the look in her eyes betrayed regret and … compassion? Great, now even an ex-Pet feels sorry for me. Get your act together already, Riki!

“No, no, Mimea, it was my fault. OK, perhaps I didn’t know the fucker was gonna freak out like he did. But still the point is that I misled you into believing I had feelings for you that I didn’t.” When the beautiful creature was attempting to open her little mouth again, he raised a hand to indicate that she ought to let him finish before responding. “I mean, not that I don’t like you, I like you very much, but as a friend, you know? But I pretended otherwise because… the truth is I wanted to make him jealous. I just wanted to do something to him, something that would hit him where it hurt.”

“I think you have succeeded there, Riki.” Was that a hint of sarcasm that he detected in her melodious voice? Could Pets even understand such a concept? He must have imagined it.
“Yeah, look what good it did the both of us. Shit, I’m sorry! Dammit, I shouldn’t have done it… I just couldn’t stand feeling so bloody helpless!” Riki finally burst out, unable to stop the emerging flood of guilt and frustration that he had been suppressing ever since that day that the blonde psycho had found out about him and Mimea.

“It’s all right, Riki”, she soothingly whispered in a rather husky, intoxicating voice. She had gotten even closer to him and was now blowing warm, perfumed air into his ear with every word she said. “I understand very well what it’s like to feel helpless.” With that last sentence she slightly bended her head and let her moving, slightly moist lips make a path along his neck. Considering all the hurt he had caused her, he did not have the strength to pull away from her caresses. But when she laid one hand on his shoulder and the other on his hip, he had to react.

Mimea responded with a startled gasp of disappointment when he pulled away so abrusquely. “Have I… displeased you in some way, that you pull away from me like that? Am I… disgusting to you perhaps?” Riki experienced the forlorn expression appearing on her face and the slight watering of her eyes as a knock right to his heart. Not because he was in love with her, but because he could not bear the thought of causing this innocent girl any more pain because of his stupidity.

“No, no! Of course not, you could never displease me, Mimea. But I don’t want to take advantage of you, ever again. I don’t want to be selfish like that, I don’t want to treat you like you’re some kind of thing without emotions!” Realising that he was perhaps contradicting the point he was trying to make by using such a loud voice, Riki smiled reassuringly and added on a more gentler note. “To me you’ll always be a person, so you don’t have to do that, OK?”

“You can’t betray me like that again, Riki. Things are different now, if we were to seek pleasure in each other, there would not be any consequences, even if someone found out”, she whispered rather seductively, as she started leading the way down the old, dusty staircase. There were no lights in the stairway either so the same soft, hazy atmosphere of darkness remained. “Or maybe you’re not like me in that way? Maybe you are more loyal, in that you seek pleasure with only one other person?”

It took Riki a couple of seconds to figure out that those two last sentences conveyed two meanings, for he wasn’t generally expecting a lot of underlying meanings in Mimea’s words. The first being that she had slept with at least one other person out of her own free will since the last time they had seen each other. The second that she thought that he refused her out of a sense of loyalty to someone else, whom he truly loved, as more than a friend. He was just about to respond when he realised something: he had never told her about Guy. Which meant she had to be referring to… No freakin’ way!

He could not have possibly reacted to it in any other way but a violent way. But with her it was different, she was so sweet and innocent, and she had just saved his butt. It would not do for him to get angry with her now over a wrong assumption she had made without intending any harm.
“Ergh… I’m not gonna judge you Mimea, if it’s just your way to connect to people I get that. And as far as I am concerned, I’m single and I don’t mind staying that way. At least until I’ve had some time to figure things out”, he had added that last part while thinking about the problems he had been experiencing with Guy, momentarily so caught up in his own thoughts that he had forgotten that Mimea did not know about that.

“You mean with Guy?”, she went and made her first mistake. When Riki had made his last statement she had understood very well that he must have been talking about the mongrel called Guy, the one who was also a part of his gang. But in realising this she had automatically reacted in her own childish mind-set: assuming that everyone knew the same things she did and that she was supposed to know all the things that she knew.

The mistake was hardly surprising, considering that she had no experience whatsoever in lying about factual information. Sure, she could deceive others into believing she liked or desired them even if that was not really the case. But her knowledge had always been of the most rudimentary sort, she had simply never obtained any information that needed hiding before. If she realised her mistake, it did not show in her facial expressions, as she continued to gently smile. *If I keep on pretending that everything is fine, perhaps he will do the same.*

“Yeah… yeah, but how did you know that? How would you know about Guy?”, Riki asked, astonishment evident in his voice but not yet suspicion.

What explanation to give? The fact in and of itself that he immediately asked these questions indicated that he recalled that he had not told her anything about Guy. So claiming that he had told her so himself would only prove her to be a liar.

*Stay as close to the truth as possible. Do not mention any unnecessary falsehoods.*

Who else knew about Guy? Who else could have known? She could make something up about a customer at the brothel, but then she would not be sticking close to the truth. Who did Lord Mink tell about Guy?

“I overheard a mongrel talking about him, at Mistral Park”, she answered while keeping her voice calm and matter-of-factly, looking him straight in the eye while fluttering her purple eyelashes to avoid any suspicion. Purposely she did not mention what she had been doing at Mistral Park, she only thought of how it was a place were Blondies and lower-class citizens could meet without any eyebrows being raised. And she knew it was the place where Jason Mink had met the former member of Bison known as Kiri. And the two of them had discussed Guy.
“What? A mongrel at Mistral Park? Who was this mongrel, what did he look like?”, he already had a sickening suspicion at the back of his mind about any mongrel who would have the audacity to show himself in a place like Mistral Park.

Mimea smiled sweetly while giving a very accurate description of the one Riki had immediately suspected: Kiri. Of course she had only ever seen pictures of Kiri. But Riki didn’t know that and he assumed that her very accurate description meant that she was speaking the truth about where she had heard about Guy and Riki’s relationship. The accurateness of Kiri’s description and the curiosity as to whom in Mistral Park he would be discussing him and Guy with, made Riki completely forget about asking the obvious question: what had Mimea been doing at Mistral Park?

“You’ve got to be shitting me! Kiri, that stupid kid! Have you heard anything else? Who was he discussing this with?”, Riki demanded as he grabbed unto Mimea’s shoulders rather harshly, his momentary rage at the kid’s devil-may-care attitude at the expense of others getting the better of him.

And of course it could not hurt to make him think that his precious friends could be in danger, even if I see no more direct need to resort to such measures now.

“With Lord Mink. Which is why I know very little about it, as soon as I saw them I ran outside to avoid any kind of uncomfortable confrontation”, her need to explain herself had now unfortunately reminded Riki of another strange aspect of this story. What had she been doing there?

“What were you doing up at Mistral Park anyways? I mean, what happened to you after you were sent away from Tanagura?”, he had often thought about that at night as well, when he was unable to sleep. What had become of that poor girl after his stupid mistake?

“Back then I worked at a… pleasure-house. But they had some clients that wanted to remain unknown, so I was sometimes brought to places in a hovercar. But then I was bought by the owner of this casino and three days later I was sent here to work.” All of that was actually true. However no hovercar had ever brought her to Mistral Park, as The Red Lotus did not usually deal with such rich clients, unless they presented themselves at the door while waving money. And the casino happened to be owned by Jason Mink, and Mimea had been working there starting from the third day after he had bought her, but that had been only one week ago.

Wrecked by guilt at listening to her words, Riki did not even notice how she was nervously twisting her hands while they were still standing in the dark, abandoned hallway the staircase had descended into. “Oh crap, Mimea, I’m so sorry! I hope that first place you worked at wasn’t too bad?” If they sent their whores to Mistral Park in a hovercar it had to have a pretty high-class clientele at least.
“It was very unpleasant. But it’s in the past now, Riki, don’t worry. My new Master treats me much better, and I am quite sure he will continue to do so as long as I do the work he gives me to the best of my abilities”, she said with a radiant smile, which made her rather hollow cheeks fill out a bit more, partially due to the effect of the subtle blush she was wearing. If she wanted to give the impression that she had been working at a high-class pleasure house that sent call-girls to Mistral Park, it would not do if he would be able to detect the still slightly present signs of malnutrition.

He also grinned reassuringly at that, knowing that his angry scowl had upset Mimea in the past, thinking that it had been directed at her. “I’m glad that you’ve found a place with someone who treats you well, doing a more decent job than… well, you know. It’s no fun being hooked up with random people without having any say in the matter, huh?”

Seeing as how her new “job” required for her to hook up with him, the very man she was still in love with, there really was no arguing there. She nodded enthusiastically and her bright eyes sparkled with genuine mirth and relief: “Oh yes, I am very pleased myself. I had never expected that anyone decent would still buy me after I had worked at a pleasure house. Neither had I expected to ever meet you again, Riki. I am so glad we ran into each other here, I’ve really missed talking to you.”

“You know… If it’s possible for you, and if you want to… Maybe we could hook up sometime? As friends, I mean. You know, just to talk or do something fun together… Like shop…”, Riki started, in an unusually hesitant manner for one as bold and confident as him.

“Shop-lifting?”, the Pet interrupted the mongrel with a knowing, humourous smile. “Sounds like fun. It’s a date, Riki!”, she cheerfully exclaimed as she led him through a kitchen where no one was paying any attention to them, and straight out a back door that opened with her access code. “This is where I have to leave you, Riki. You’d better go before the Dark Men decide they want to search this area further.”

“Sweet exit, thanks a bunch, you really saved my ass out there today. Yeah, sure, it’s a date, I’m sure they won’t even notice that I’m robbing them if I’ve got you with me to distract them”, Riki laughed as he accepted Mimea’s extended arms and gave her a hug. The kind of nonchalant bear-hug that you would give a friend, yet somehow Mimea managed to add several lovers’ caresses and a sticky kiss to the throat to it. *Pets will be Pets I guess.*

She stood waving at the door until he had left the alley, in search of Sid and Guy, they had to be worried shitless by now! After that she immediately took out her new phone while remaining standing in the relative privacy of the back alley.

“Hi, it’s me, I think I’ve got him”, she said while restlessly walking up and down the alley with
clicking golden heels, desperately trying to keep the excitement out of her voice. Better to be safe than sorry. Even if minimal contact was allowed, minimal satisfaction because of it probably wasn’t.

“Excellent. You can tell me all about it over dinner tomorrow night. *La Deésse*, 8 pm. Don’t be late.”, the cold voice spoke with delighted wickedness that chilled her to the very bone. Before Mimea had a chance to respond, there followed a decisive click that indicated he had hung up the phone already.

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To Be Continued …

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Thnx for reading and please leave a review!:D
In the Lion's Den

Chapter Summary

Mimea is settling in again at Eos Tower and is trying to adapt to her new life as Iason Mink’s Pet.

Author’s notes:

Hi everyone! :D So here I FINALLY am again, with the next chapter of this fic! I apologize for the terribly looooonng wait but you know how it is, there’s always something going on that needs doing first ;) Anyway, I hope anyone’s still reading this fic at this point, but just in case you are: here is the next chapter! :)

Some very unexpected plot twists ahead I think, I’m not gonna say any more, that’d ruin the surprise :P I hope canon-lovers will not beat me on the head with a stick for this…

Also I’ve used both an opening and an ending theme in this chapter, I hope you guys don’t think that’s a bit over the top? Whose point-of-view the ending theme is supposed to relate to is kind of double, so I leave it up to your own personal interpretations ;)

Enjoy! :D

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Opening theme: Bastille – Pompeii

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But if you close your eyes,
Does it almost feel like
Nothing changed at all?

When the beautiful, damaged young woman began to awake from her slumber she was momentarily confused about her whereabouts. Rather than the ratty, foul-smelling old blankets covering her there was the feel of silk, high-quality sheets that smelled of fresh lavender. Rather than the traffic noise and the obscene grunting of some drunk lower-class Midas citizen peeking on an overdose of Viagra next door, there was the blessed silence of a Tanaguran high skyscraper and the nearly inaudible gentle hum of classical music that seemed to float in from beyond the airy bedroom.
And if you close your eyes,
Does it almost feel like
You've been here before?

Don’t open your eyes. Not yet, allow the lovely illusion to comfort you for at least another five minutes. Honestly, it probably made no difference for half of her vulgar clients whether or not she was even conscious during their encounters. Dreams of better days and bygone glory were about the only way one could keep oneself slightly sane in the kind of unlife the coquettish, auburn-haired love doll had been dealt. A card that would continue to leave a dull tang to the bad flavour of the rest of her – probably extremely short – existence.

*How am I gonna be an optimist about this?*
*How am I gonna be an optimist about this?*

Had it been worth it? Was being in charge of one’s own life for one second truly worth the sacrifice of the rest of it? Yes, it most definitely was. For living without even the freedom to choose your own lover is not living at all, she firmly believed that, and she would continue to do so regardless of the dark nature of her current predicament.

*Many days fell away with nothing to show*

She waited. And waited. For some unignorable sign of her harsh reality to dispel the notion of a quiet bedroom and a luxurious, comfortable bed. But it simply didn’t happen. As one minute after another passed without interruption of her inner musings, Mimea began to feel more and more anxious. The longer she was kept waiting for that terrible moment of disillusionment, the more afraid she became of it. It was strange how she could still feel so frightened, even now that the worst possible outcome had already come to pass. It was probably something innate to Pets, that fearful anticipation.

*And the walls kept tumbling down*
*In the city that we love*

Unintelligent as they were, unfortunately they were not stupid enough not to realise the brevity of their qualities and thus their usefulness and the privileges that came with them. Like crumbling walls that would eventually fall down, their youthful, flawless appearances would fade away with time.

*Great clouds roll over the hills*
*Bringing darkness from above*
And with this fading the utopian city of Tanagura would appear to change, like clouds darkening the skies after a mere instant of sunshine. The question remained which of Tanagura’s faces was the true one, the sunny one or the shady one? Perhaps they were simply two sides of the same coin. After all there could never be perfection without the merciless removal of everything imperfect. And as long as you were perfect Tanagura was a utopian heaven. But from the moment the slightest imperfection became apparent – in appearance and maybe more importantly in mind – it became a dystopian hell.

*We were caught up and lost in all of our vices*

*In your pose as the dust settled around us*

Like all things imperfect, Mimea had been tossed out. The only unusual fact about that was that the reason for the tossing had been psychological rather than physical, extremely rare in Pets but not very much so in Furniture. At first it had felt as if she were an angel thrown down from heaven into what appeared to be hell. But then - after the dust of the fall had cleared - hell turned out to be earth and heaven turned out to be hell, as the former star academy Pet now perceived it to be.

*Oh, where do we begin? The rubble or our sins?*

The question of course remained where the fault lay. With the system or with the cast out individuals? And was that still relevant at all, after having been thrown out like garbage? The fact that Mimea was no longer a part of that system might be the very reason it appeared to be at fault to her, whereas to the individuals operating within the system it seemed as if the exiles were the ones at fault. Or were they?

After having contemplated these matters for a while, Mimea decided it was time to stop living in the past. Figuring out who or what was at fault was not something a former Pet turned cheap hooker was supposed to concern herself with. So why did it bother her so much? She never used to ponder anything of the sort, she never used to doubt the system. But that had all changed the moment the dark outsider had walked in.

“Riki”. After having spoken out loud there was no way she could keep up the wishful dreams of her former pampered life of luxury. So she eventually opened her eyes … But was then momentarily blinded by the sunny sight of the pristinely white marble that greeted her once more. Only now that her eyes had become accustomed to darkness it came across as even more bright, almost painfully so. A brightness of the sort that was so unnatural it simply had to be lethal to anything natural after a longer period of exposure. But despite the bright light, Mimea felt a smile crawl its way unto her face, as if from beyond her own facial control, as if it was being stuck on with glue by some outside force.
“I am most satisfied that you have not forgotten the reason you have returned here after all,” an icy, frighteningly familiar voice spoke from somewhere beyond the bright light, probably at the very centre of it. She might be able to shut her eyes against the light, but she would never be able to shut her ears against that voice. The voice that had been both her condemnation and her salvation. If Mimea could be compared to the mythical figure of Icarus, then Iason Mink surely could be compared to the sun that had burned his waxen wings, leading to his downfall. Yet the sun was also the source of all life, and right now Mimea was basking in it like a revived flower.

As he continued to speak in that same silky, cutting tone – like diamond shards with a veneer of velvet – Mimea’s new master made his way closer to the bed and within her line of vision. “With the many hours you have spent sleeping I can only conclude it is the only time you are capable of using that inferior brain of yours, Pet” The last word could have been spoken as either an insult or a term of endearment, for the lack of emotion in Iason Mink’s words always made it extremely difficult to decipher his true intent. Did he himself even know what his true intent was, Mimea often wondered?

She had been a resident in the Mink household for several months now. Yet every time she went to sleep she forgot all about her return to her privileged position. Or rather her promotion from the prestigious Am household to the even more prestigious Mink household. Perhaps it was a survival trick of her primitive brain. A way to make sure she did not become accustomed to Tanaguran comforts again, in case she would be thrown out into the jungle again. She could not allow herself to grow soft, she had to maintain the tougher hide she had grown during her years in the Midas brothel.

Mimea had always perceived Iason Mink as a divine statue of perfection. Beautiful, impeccably intelligent, successful, unapproachable, merciless. She had not attached any personal feelings to this image other than perhaps admiration, but that was more due to the fact that she knew her former Master – Raoul Am – admired him so. But then after the affair with Riki everything had changed. Iason Mink had become the enemy she could not possibly hope to resist in any way, but not because of her disobedience or her insulting behaviour towards his household, as she realised now. After he had come to rescue her from the horrors of the Midas redlight district, her feelings towards him had become rather mixed. Part of her still hated him for what he did to her, and more especially what he did to Riki. But another part of her grew to understand him and a strange form of mutual fascination seemed to have come into existence over time. More specifically their conversation about Riki at “La Deéesse” had contributed to this.

A few weeks earlier, at restaurant “La Deéesse” in Mistral Park …

“Now, tell me all about your meeting with my mongrel. And I warn you, if you leave anything out for your own convenience I will know”, the Elite warned with a calmly threatening glare at the girl sitting across from him at a reserved table in the VIP section of the famous top-notch restaurant.

“It did not require any effort on my behalf, actually, he just walked in all of a sudden, and he happened to be in need of help”, the young escort began with a trembling voice and a slight blush on
her pretty face. “See he was being chased by the Dark Men, so of course I helped him escape. I tried
to use my charm on him, but I’m not sure if it worked. I think his feelings of guilt towards me could
be a better way to influence him. When we said goodbye it seemed like he wanted to see me again,
but not in a sexual way. It is strange, how he just seems to laugh away all social differences between
us.” Mimea continued to fumble with her napkin as she appeared to tell Lord Mink’s wine glass
about what had transpired a couple of evenings before, when she’d had her chance meeting with
Riki the Dark at the Royal Casino in Sasan.

“Yes, that is exactly how he is with me as well, although I’d say you have more of a benefit of the
doubt with him at the moment. So his interest in you is no longer sexual then? I wonder why that
is… unless his interest in you was never sexual in the first place. But no matter, as long as you can
fulfil your assignment of gathering information and luring him back in, I honestly do not care what
methods you use, as I said before”, His Excellency responded while gesturing for her to eat her soup.
The farcical occurrence of a Syndicate member and a former Eos Pet eating at the same table at a
public place had attracted a lot of attention, even in the relative seclusion of the VIP section.
However Iason Mink ignored theses prying stares, apparently he did not care much for gossip or
unspoken social conventions. A curious fact that was not missed by the unusually perceptible
Academy Pet sitting across from him.

“Erghm… with all due respect, it seems to make very little sense to me that Riki would not have had
sexual interest at me at any point, seeing as how he… we…”, Mimea started stammering, already
regretting how she was questioning Mink’s words and suggesting that Riki cared about someone
other than him in such a way.

“Well, I am not saying that there wasn’t any attraction, or otherwise sexual contact between the two
of you would hardly have been possible without the use of aphrodisiacs. However I do not think
Riki has any preference for your gender, your class, or you in particular. Looking at the situation in
perspective it is my estimation that Riki having intercourse with you was all about his sexual feelings
for me. For what better way would there be to make me feel bad? What better way to have at least a
form of vengeance for me invoking these unwanted desires that go against his mongrel pride? What
better way even to convince himself that he did not long for me with every breath he took? You were
simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. But arguably you were the right person, for I do not
think many other Pets would have been eager for one from the slums.”

“To make you… feel bad? I’m sure nobody of such low social standing as a Pet or a mongrel could
do that.” She was even sure nobody at all could do that. Making the infamous Head of the Syndicate
feel anything was an impossibility, least of all to make him feel bad. Because feeling bad was
something human, something Mimea could relate to all too well. But Iason Mink was not human,
therefore a meaningless human such as herself could not possibly relate to him.

“As it turns out you are mistaken in that assumption, although it is understandable – even socially
expected – that you should make it. Do you seriously think I would risk the relation I have with Lord
Am over such a minor transgression as unsanctioned interaction between Pets, by demanding the
worst possible punishment for his favourite creation?” Indeed Iason did not perceive such a tryst as
hardly an offence at all. He never had been one to punish where he did not feel it was absolutely necessary. And punishing Pets to do the very thing they were bred to do seemed illogical to him, rules or no rules. That was not the true reason he had demanded the worst from his old friend.

“If I were his favourite creation I don’t think I would’ve ended up at that place…”, the degraded and abandoned Pet whispered, her voice full of unspoken sadness and regret. She did not know why the pricking of tears behind her eyes was simultaneously making her feel so angry or why she was so determined to hold them back. She would not cry in front of this man, this Elite, that had destroyed both her life and the life of the one she loved. How low she had fallen, now that she was willing to betray that very same one only to give in to that selfish need to have him near her. She supposed it was what a powerful emotion like obsessive love did to a person, it changed them into something they themselves hardly recognised.

“I am positive that hurting my feelings was probably the only way you could have managed to do that”, the Elite responded with a semblance of mirth while swirling his expensive wine around in its crystal glass.

Mimea blinked in surprise, not even noticing how it caused some of the tears she had tried so hard to keep to come rolling over her carefully powdered cheeks, making two imperfect tracks appear on her otherwise perfectly made-up dollface. Hurt his feelings. She had hurt his feelings. His! Iason Mink’s! Iason Mink had feelings! She wasn’t the only one who had gone utterly insane at the sight of that mongrel. I’m not alone in this.

Several weeks later in Eos Tower, in a bedroom in the Mink household …

“Do you know what sex by association is, Mimea?” He only called her “Pet” when he wanted to remind her of her mental inferiority to himself, but otherwise that term was Riki’s and Riki’s alone. Iason did not mind the girl’s cockiness but he did not hesitate to remind her of this fact. He had the brains behind the operation, she only followed his orders. As long as she did not stray from that, they would eventually succeed in bringing Riki back to them.

“Isn’t that what Pet performances are all about? Isn’t the sex between us a replacement for the lack of sex between Elite?” She was remarkably clever for a Pet.

“I believe that to be an accurate interpretation of the use of Pets, yes. Although I do not think that many Elite would agree with me. I also believe its effects to be rather unsatisfactory, as it appears to be no valid substitute for the real experience. However such methods might be more effective if actual intercourse is involved. Pray tell, you have had sex with Riki, have you not?”
Mimea was momentarily speechless, as even her former Master – who bred sex toys for a living – never spoke of sexuality so openly. It was strange how it appeared to be a taboo subject for some classes in an oversexed society. Mimea had always assumed that it was because of a lack of interest on behalf of the Elite, but clearly her new Master was an exception to that rule.

She did not like how the conversation went back to her own past transgression, the one that had apparently doomed her. The incident that had sparked a wildfire of jealousy to erupt from the usually stoic Elite currently sitting on the side of her bed. Only now that his glacier blue gaze rested on her, the young girl became aware of her own nudity. The stare caused an unusual feeling of self-consciousness to come over her, unusual because as a Pet she had been trained not to feel any such awareness and therefore she never had. But something had changed, she could almost taste it in the air. The presence of a sexual predator.

“Answer the question, Mimea”, and even the quality of his voice had changed. It had become smoother, more sensual, more intense somehow. Seductive. She was afraid to even glance in his direction now, as she could feel the rising tension the electronic demi-god was currently radiating. The female got out of the bed and instinctually started to back away, never taking her eyes off of the blond.

“Ehm, yes, I had sex with Riki… but you already know that and I know you don’t like it, so why do you ask again?”, she asked while desperately trying to keep the tremors from her voice.

“It might be momentarily beneficial… to both our interests. Seeing as how the object of both our obsessions is currently unavailable”, as he spoke he began to slowly stalk her. “With all the time you have spent spying for me during the last couple of weeks, surely your metabolism must be craving sexual release by now?”, he purred while he deliberately drove her into a corner.

Mimea was still walking backwards while she was involuntarily drawn into his piercing eyes, but hadn’t noticed that there was a sofa right behind her… A chilling sensation of danger came over her, making her clumsy as she began to panic.

“I… I d… I don’t understand!”, she exclaimed, as if hoping that the volume of her exclamation might snap the approaching android out of whatever trance it was that had come over him and was making him imply such irrational things. He was a superhuman Elite, she was a subhuman Pet. Both of them had feelings for someone else. He hated her, enough to bother to demand another Elite to punish her with illogical severity.

Her simple reasoning might have worked, if the back of her legs had not suddenly hit the sofa, making her fall unto it on her back. As she lay there wide-eyed and wildly moving her limbs in a desperate attempt to get up, like a ladybug on its back, he pounced.
Her shriek echoed loudly through the high-ceilinged, marble room but was quickly cut off when her nemesis expertly put his mouth on hers.

“St… stop! This doesn’t make any sense!” Tiny, porcelain hands feebly pressed against his synthetic chest but did not slow him down in the slightest. It was almost comical, her utterly pointless attempts to push him away. Was she really that unintelligent that she did not realise the futility of her actions?

“By Jupiter, stop this madness! No matter how much you may hate me, it is not worth the degradation of lowering yourself by associating with the likes of me! I’m just a thrown-away, outdated toy! I’m a cheap hooker!” Yet she proved him wrong again, for even in her desperation she was smart. Could it possibly be catching, this wild spirit the mongrel had brought into their midst?

“Do you seriously think that mere hate could motivate me in this way?”, he replied in a surprisingly steady, calm tone. He slowed down his attack for a moment and brushed her fiery-red bangles out of her face with a gesture that could be interpreted as gentle. Riki had aided in the damnation of this Pet, therefore according to his mongrel logic a debt of guilt tied him to her forever. Therefore all he had to do to tie his Riki to him, was to tie her to him first.

“I don’t see what else could”, she whispered while turning her head away from him, not wanting him to see the burning tears in her orange eyes. She felt them draw paths into the make-up on her face, like molten lava in rock. The rocky layer flaking off and revealing what lay beneath. Her weakness. Her humanity. Her beauty.

“You have become a fascinating creature, Mimea. Almost as fascinating as the one who made you so. But you know when the fight is futile, do you not? You know the limits of what is humanly possible and the endless benefits of what is superhuman. Fight me and you will be miserable beyond recognition, but work with me and there is nothing you cannot have.”

He felt her petite frame still shaking under his robotic body, but when she looked up the look in her eyes had changed significantly. She had smelled possibility. Ambition had overcome fear. And Pets were ambitious, if nothing else. Yet this one had something he wanted. This one had fire and endurance, this one had become truly human.

“There’s only one thing I want”, she spat defiantly, trying to ignore the voice in her head that tried to press her on. There is nothing you cannot have. No! This Elite had ruined her life! And he could be
“Ah, but now there are two. I will make sure of it. For they say once you get a taste of the divine, you shall be addicted to it for the rest of your life. I know how to make you mine.” The unforgivingly cold glare left no doubt in her of his determination. The mortal who eats the food of the gods can never leave the underworld again.

Why did it hurt so much to know he was right? That she was powerless against his seduction? Mimea did not even realise the hurt emotion rushing through her in this moment was pride. Pets were not supposed to have any pride. Or any will-power for that matter. Without noticing it herself, she had surpassed what Tanagura had deemed the limits of emotional intelligence for Pets.

“But why do you need me willing? I do not understand. You are Elite. You want, you take.” Mimea was fearfully trying to postpone the inevitable, for she knew that as soon as he touched her she would be lost to the lust that was innate to her kind. However unbeknownst to her, those questions and doubts only fortified his attraction to her.

“Do you not know, little one? You cannot own one’s mind if one is not willing. And now that you have a mind, I must own it.” He could afford to wait for her full compliance, his need was not uncontrollable around her. Not like how it was around his beloved mongrel. Yet he was interested in the other Pet as well. The house-cat that had turned wild upon release.

The girl had ceased to struggle physically but still refused to submit mentally. He could detect her need with his superior olfactory sensors, she smelled like a cat in heat. Her will must have grown exponentially to be able to still resist at all by this point, for he was emitting unusually high levels of synthetic pheromones.
Her hormones were driving her crazy, but she could not simply give into those needs. They had compromised her safety before, she would not allow them to do so again. She had to be sure. And unlike Riki, she knew there was a very simple way to be sure. For she knew about Tanagura and she knew about its Elite. More specifically she knew of their inability to lie.

“Will you betray me? Answer me and I’ll cooperate.”

“I have no need to betray you, Mimea. You are no threat to me, I see that now. There is no need for you to disappear if I can make the both of you mine.”

“Answer me. A straight-forward answer.” Otherwise she knew he could outsmart her effortlessly through his wordplays, which would leave him free to betray her as he saw fit at any later point in time. There was no reason why he would not, Elite always preferred to keep all options open.

He bent down his head and brought his lips towards hers while carefully tilting up her head by the chin. His gigantic, metal-enhanced body loomed over her, contrasting heavily with the silky brush of his gorgeous hair. She was awed by both the gentle precision of his grasp and the raw strength she could feel behind it. “No”, he breathed erotically into her open mouth. “I will not betray you. Not now, not ever.”

Tears of relief sprang from her eyes as she allowed her body to rise up and meet his. He was willing to secure her future on the mere chance that she could help him return his Riki to his side. He too had gone beyond his class’ emotional limits.

The Pet wrapped her arms around his powerful, incredibly broad shoulders and moved her lips in sync with his. She did not know how to be a passive participant, nor did she want to be. And apparently neither did her new Master, for he reacted rather enthusiastically to her participation, cupping one of her breasts in his large hand and moving his thumb along her nipple. She cried out her delight and tied her arms around his neck in what would have been a choke-hold if he had been human. Pets were not physically as strong as natural-born humans, however when in a lustful frenzy their aggression more than made up for that.

Mimea started to moan loudly as the blond Elite continued his ministrations to her chest with his lips and tongue. Her small but greedy hands found their way into his golden tresses and she wildly clawed through them, the soft material as unyielding as the thread of a spider’s web. Indestructible beauty. Having sex with Iason Mink was like having sex with divine power itself. How did Riki ever resist this for such long periods of time?

When he lowered his cool, smooth lips along her abdomen and then placed them on her sex,
screamed like a banshee. The sensory input was nearly making her black out. Her body shook almost as if she was about to have a seizure. Too much, it was too much. But then the mercilessly delicious suction stopped and she felt his fingers threading softly through her hair. “Sshhhhh, it’s all right. There is no need to over-exert yourself, my little doll. The evening is still young, after all.” She’d had no idea his tone could be so soothing while his voice was still so frosty and unfelt. It reminded her of her former Master’s warmer, more honeyed vocalisations. All of a sudden there were tears streaming from her eyes again, this time with abundance for she was not holding them back anymore. She had surrendered her body and mind to her new Master utterly.

She blinked and stared up at Jason’s azure depths, catching a shimmer of sadness, not knowing whether it was a mere mirroring of her own or something more. “Don’t leave me. Please don’t leave me.” Unknowingly she had spoken out loud what had been on his mind continuously ever since the mongrel had left Tanagura. “Never. I shall never leave you. And you will never leave me, for as long as you live.” She kissed him with an amount of feeling that surprised them both. A fluttering warm glow appeared to spread itself throughout her body. “I’m sorry for how I made you feel.” And that time she actually meant it.

“How about you make me feel something else, hmm?”, he purred seductively, as he lifted up her right leg as if it weighed nothing and grinded his hips against hers, the movement also causing his large hardness to rub against the sensitive inside of her thigh. She gasped and willingly wrapped her slender legs around his waist. “With pleasure”, came the husky reply.

The tip pressed against her entrance and she opened like a flower in bloom, her breath speeding up against his shoulder as she hugged him close. “This will not be without pain”, he warned, wrapping her waist and back into the iron-strong grip of his arms. A gesture that could be interpreted both as an affectionate reassurance or as a way to prevent her escape.

She blinked, momentarily not understanding. As a Pet, she had been manufactured for the very purpose of taking pleasure in the act of mating. Moreover she had been made to mate with other Pets, all of around roughly the same size. A size which was proportionally slightly larger than a normal human’s, which had led her encounters with Riki and her clients at the brothel in Midas to be virtually painless despite the fact that most human men were taller than any of the male Pets in Eos. Surely there had been pain at the whorehouse, but that pain had been due to the beatings she had been given during the intercourse, not the act itself.

Sex could be painful? That was unexpected. Just how painful would it be? She could feel the cold tendrils of fear sneaking up on her again, making a shiver run down her spine. Her limbs cramped around his body almost as if in a death-grip. “Don’t worry, you’ll forget about the pain soon enough. I simply wanted to give you some warning. Just relax and all will be well.”

At least he’d never had to bother with this with Riki, for he had been of a much tougher breed. Truth be told, he’d much rather not deal with this at all. Psychological management was Raoul’s
department, not his. But he did not wish for the girl to be traumatized or anything of the sort, that would simply not suit his agenda. He needed her willing. He needed her mentally healthy. And most of all he needed her to become enamoured with him as much as with Riki. It was the only way to make it impossible for her to become a liability after she had done her part in bringing Riki back to his arms. Not to mention she could momentarily aid him to relieve some of his pent-up desire for said mongrel.

“Pl… please hold me”, she said with a slight trembling in her voice again. She was already relying on him, trusting his embrace would protect her. “Please, I… I feel so alone…” She risked a glance at the perfect features of his face, pleading with him almost as if he were another Pet or a Furniture. As if he were a human rather than a machine.

“As am I, Mimea. I understand.” It was only after he had spoken those words that he realised the truth of them. By Jupiter, how low he had fallen. The emotional schemes he used on humans would work all too well on he himself now. His enemies must never find out about his attachment to his human from the slums, for it would be his undoing.

“Oh, I know. I know you understand.” Could his momentary shock of five seconds ago have possibly shown on his face? If not, then how did she know? She did not know, she could not know. She was only a Pet.

“I see you, Lord Mink.” Perhaps it would be best to get rid of her after all. “And I see that you are more beautiful than those others now.” More beautiful? She thought human weakness made him more beautiful? He had always associated his beauty with his power. So how could such weakness as loneliness be beautiful? She obviously knew something about human emotions that he did not. She was worth keeping around, even if she also knew his secret. For no one would ever believe such a thing about their perfect Head of the Syndicate, especially not from the mouth of a silly, degraded Pet.

She knew his secret, he needed her utmost loyalty. He kissed her with enough force to leave her breathless but not enough to bruise, while he slipped into the folds of her wetness. She briefly cried out in pain, followed by sobs into his hair. He caressed her back and whispered words of comfort while he pushed deeper inside of her. Like a hawk sinking its claws into its prey.

Sex with her was more pleasurable than he had imagined. Not only because of the feel of a warm, living creature around him, but also because of her ability to fight her own instincts. Pain was bad, a Pet would do whatever it had to do to escape it. Yet she did not try to escape him, she stubbornly refused to allow her bodily needs to overrule her completely.

Some time after he had started to move in and out of her at a more steady pace, he began to observe the tell-tale signs of her increasing enjoyment. She was moving out of the realm of pain and into the
realm of pleasure. She rocked her body along with his and moaned in abandonment. How could something that felt so painful only a moment ago feel so wonderful now? The friction and the feeling of fullness were far more delicious than anything she had ever felt, even sex with Riki had not been this good.

Not long after she had began to moan, Iason decided to move things up a notch. He detached her arms and upper body from his and kept her down on the bed while restraining both of her hands next to the side of her body with his. Surprisingly she even went along in this restraining, immediately folding her fingers into his. In this position he could take the Pet more effectively and more deeply, while being provided with better visual input of the effect his actions were having on her. Mimea did not fight the Elite in this and tilted back her head in rapture, not even attempting to hide her passionate reactions, for as a Pet she felt no shame of her bodily responses.

“Ah! Ah, Master!... Yes! Yes, take me!”, Mimea practically yelled at the top of her lungs. She had not expected sex with her enemy to feel this heavenly. She held unto his hands for dear life, not wanting him to ever let her go. She realised that he did not have meaningless sex, that he considered some element of her to be worthy of him. For he did not sleep around with anyone like a Pet would, he was an Elite and Elite were not even supposed to have intercourse at all.

After keeping her at that same level of pleasure for a while, the android began to accurately hit her sensitive spot with every thrust while gradually increasing the strength and depth of his thrusts. When she was close to her release he kept her there on the edge for as long as possible, curious to see how she would react to being denied fulfilment.

“Hah! Ha…”, she was so breathless that she could hardly yell anymore, instead she issued noises that sounded more like the mewing of a kitten. “Please… Please, Master…” He was getting close to reaching his objective, he could tell by the gleaming in the little Pet’s eyes. What was one more sacrifice of his dignity, if it could help him get Riki back? “Call me Iason.”

I feel like such a fool
There's nothing I can do
I'm such a fool for you

Her eyes flew wide open and her folds deliciously tightened around him. “A..ha… Ia…son”, she gasped without hardly making any noise. She was so overcome by her blissful release that she no longer had any breath left.

I can't take it
What am I waiting for?
After her release she was exhausted and slumped against him. He pulled her into an embrace and softly kissed her shoulder while she captured her breath. Almost there now. Just a little bit more.

My heart's still breaking  
I miss you even more

When she had come somewhat down to Amoy, she pulled out of his embrace to gaze upon his beautiful face. “Ia… Iason? Was… was that OK for you?”, not having received any applause in this kind of context she was unsure if he had been satisfied with her performance, even if it had been under his lead. Could it still even be called a performance? It had seemed too real for that somehow.

And I can't fake it  
The way I could before

He was momentarily silent. Then he gently grabbed a hold of her face - his fingers caressing her skin in the process - and kissed her. Not violently, not forcefully, not even passionately. But very softly, sweetly, almost lovingly.

I hate you but I love you  
I can't stop thinking of you

He could tell from the way both her breathing and heartbeat picked up their pace and from the dazed, wide-pupilled stare that he had successfully fulfilled his goal. She was now completely and unconditionally in love with him.

It's true  
I'm stuck on you

Ending theme: Stacie Orrico – Stuck

Author’s notes:
Yep, I did it again, I completely derailed from any of the fics I’ve ever read and threw in one hell of a rare pairing (I think?). For better or for worse, only your reviews will tell :) Not to worry though, the main pairing of this fic IS gonna be Iason/Riki, duhuh! ;) Cause clearly Iason/Mimea is all about Riki… or is it? :P

Please review !!! Thanks! :D


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To Be Continued …
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Back in Business

Chapter Summary

Due to an increase in patrols in Midas, the Bisons are facing starvation, which leads to a dispute within the gang. Desperate for a way to secure nourishment and to keep his gang from falling apart, Riki seeks to be re-hired in the Black Market. However what he doesn't know is that Katze may have ulterior motives for doing so, again.

Author’s notes:

So here’s the next chapter, it’s not that long and there isn’t anything too shocking happening, but I decided it was best not to wait too long to update ;). I also want to thank everyone for their nice reviews, cause those reviews are so important to keep going as a writer, so please keep them coming :D Also if you’ve got ways for me to improve my writing, let me know! ;) I hope you enjoy this chapter, even if it’s mostly plot development :)

soundtrack: Demi Lovato – Neon Lights

The sun was already beginning to set as he stepped unto the balcony, the chill evening breeze caressing his naked skin as it snuck underneath the silky fabric of his bathrobe. He watched how slowly but surely all of the rooftops of Midas were rendered surreal by the almost magical play of sunlight accompanied by the slowly emerging neon. The natural light gradually being replaced by the artificial, to the point where it was becoming unclear which was the real thing and which the fake.

However from the moment he stretched out his hand to catch the fading rays of sunlight, he could clearly register the difference. Neon did not contain that same kind of warmth, that same kind of quality that all living things required to survive. If kept away from sunlight for longer periods of time, certain kinds of plants would wither and die. The mystery of this had occupied his friend’s brilliant mind for many years and had led him to start one experiment after another, using several types of artificial light and several species of plants in the process. But it would appear that sometimes nature flatly refused to have her mysteries unravelled by the scientists of Tanagura, as even after decades of these experiments Raoul Am was not one step closer to figuring it out. Or so he made it appear as he
talked for hours on end about the subject.

“I cannot move forward unless I can discover the truth of the light, the true meaning of photosynthesis!” Raoul exclaimed as he kept on walking from left to right and then from right to left again in front of the ottoman Iason was seated on, his legs artfully crossed and his face as tranquil as his friend’s was expressive.

“But honestly, my friend, what kind of difference does it make? Sunlight is readily available on Amoy for an average of 9 hours per day, and will continue to be so for as long as Amoy remains habitable.” There was no point to the statement, for the scientist pacing up and down his living room already knew this all too well. Rather the point was to point out that his exaggerated worries had no point. Sometimes Raoul Am could be dreadfully impractical.

“That’s not the point, Iason! The point is that I have to figure out a way to make it possible in the controlled environment of my laboratories!” While he was speaking the scientist was wildly gesticulating with his arms in a way that reminded Iason of a fish that had stranded on dry land, desperately trying to survive in an environment it was simply not adapted to.

“Why do you “have to” achieve this, if I may ask? Will there be some kind of apocalyptic disaster in the future after which all of Tanagura will rely on your controlled plant-growing skills for their survival? I daresay I have no desire to continue living in a world where there is not even any sunlight”, Iason spoke in a definite tone, as if that settled the matter once and for all.

Raoul was momentarily gobsmacked and remained standing in the same place in silence for several entire minutes. “But Iason, Elite do not require sunlight or even living plants. We already know how to artificially create oxygen, therefore we do not depend on a natural atmosphere or on any form of plantlife for our continued survival…”

“There is the point exactly. I do not wish to survive, Raoul, I wish to live.”

“But Iason there is no difference! Surviving simply means to keep on living through the use of innate talents that are suited to a certain environment. Would you honestly... Suppose an unexpected catastrophic event takes place tomorrow, say the planet is hit by a gigantic meteorite and is pushed off-course and moves further away from the sun. You say you are not interested in living under those circumstances, but what if this by chance took place during your lifetime? I mean, Tanagura would not simply cease to be, Jupiter would activate the forcefield and the artificial life-support systems…”

“As the Head of Informatics and Intelligence I believe myself quite capable enough to hack my own systems, Raoul, in case an event such as you have just described were to take place during my
“But that would be... Iason, this is not even remotely funny! To hack into your systems to put an end to your own life would be... would be... would simply be unnatural!” he eventually cried out in desperation, throwing up his arms and whipping around his long curls, only realising moments later that his final argument had actually supported the point Iason had been trying to make all along.

As Midas’ lights started coming on one by one as if they were part of one massive tidal wave, Iason’s gaze was automatically held by that one spot that did not become a part of that sea of light. That one rock surrounded by breaking waves that stubbornly refused to surrender to the current. Ceres.

Staring at the tidal wave of lights switching on over in Midas, Riki’s eyes were automatically drawn to the place beyond that was already bathing in artificial light. Tanagura. And at its very heart was the silver and white beacon of Eos Tower. Its top sparkling like a diamond star in the sky, shining so brightly that it even drowned out the light of all natural stars.

*Baby, when they look up at the sky
We'll be shooting stars just passing by*

“So you just gonna keep staring at it, or try to get your fill of it, huh?” Riki was startled out of his momentary reverie and turned to look at the speaker. “A smart hunter observes before striking, Sid.”

“That what you call it? Freaking “observing”? More like spacing out if you ask me, for real man, why you walking around with your head in the clouds this much lately?” his fellow gang member continued, and despite his teasing tone Riki could hear that part of him was worried. After growing up in the slums together you developed a sixth sense when it came to knowing your gang.

“And what’s it to you, huh? Some of us space out, others get high or drunk, what’s the fucking difference?” But he knew it was true. He never used to think about things much in the past, he just did what he wanted when he wanted it. He’d only think about the danger of their nightly robberies in Midas when that danger presented itself directly, but not in advance. And he sure as hell would not be thinking about how comfortable the bedsheets were and how well-stocked the kitchen was over at Eos Tower’s penthouse.
“The difference is that we’re gonna have to score real big and soon. I dunno how much longer I can keep going on an empty stomach, man. Stout can only make a guy last for so long”, Sid contradicted him with a friendly patting on the shoulder. Sid was not one to complain quickly, therefore Riki knew that when this was coming from him the gang was facing some pretty shitty times.

“That’s what I’m talking about! We gotta hit Sasan! There’s nothing to be had nowadays in any of the other districts…”, Guy started, relieved that someone else had finally brought it up so he could have his say without appearing to challenge Riki’s authority.

“I’d rather go hungry than commit suicide, Guy. I already told you, you wanna hit Sasan, fine, be my guest, but leave me the hell out of it.”

“Y’know, that’s fine by me, let’s just do it. But don’t be expecting any share in the booty, Riki”, Luke added his own little say into the mix of protesting voices. Of all the Bisons Luke had been the one who had lost confidence in Riki’s leadership abilities most after his return to Ceres a couple of months ago. He’d already contradicted him on several occasions and Riki knew he’d have to keep on eye on him if he wanted to stay in control of the gang.

“Shit, Luke, that ain’t how Bison works! We either all go together, or none of us go. It’s as simple as that. If Riki says it ain’t a go, then it ain’t a go!” There Guy went again, defending Riki even while fully knowing that Riki’s decisions as a leader were going to lead their entire gang to disaster sooner rather than later.

“I never said we weren’t going to do anything to fix the problem, dammit! I’m just saying that with Sasan crawling with cops it’s not the best idea. But if you guys wanna get your asses thrown into prison and be skinned alive by those bastard Dark Men I won’t stop you. Just don’t expect me to risk my own skin tryin’ to bust you out.”

“I get that, Riki, I do. But what choice do we have?”, Sid said. He still believed in Riki and did not want to contradict him, but he was also very hungry.

“Don’t worry, I’ll figure something out”, Riki responded as he turned away to continue staring at Eos Tower, as if hoping an answer would come falling from the sky.
“You figuring ain’t gonna fill my stomach! I’ve had just about enough of your bullshit, Riki! You ain’t acting like a leader should, you’re acting like a coward who’s just waiting to die!”, Luke saw his opportunity to speak up. The entire gang was ravenous, so anyone coming up with a plan to provide them with food as quickly as possible would be sure to get the support of the majority of the gang members. With or without the agreement of their formerly infamous gang leader.

“If that’s how you feel then perhaps you should go find yourself another gang, Luke.” If they thought he was going to keep quiet with this insurrection going on he would show them not to mess with him!

“How about YOU find yourself another gang, Riki?! I ain’t the only one who’s fed up with your weakness! Ever since you came back you’ve been a total push-over!”, Luke challenged as he got closer and closer to Riki, ending up waving his fist in his face.

That did it for Riki. In seconds he was on top of Luke, beating the shit out of him. Luke had gotten used to the more passive, new version of Riki and had not seen his violent reaction coming at all. So he was thrown back unto the ground and did not react fast enough to prevent Riki from landing one after another mind-blowing punch, leaving him too dizzy to defend himself. One half of the Bisons was screaming for Riki to stop while the other half was cheering him on, in the chaos it was unclear to make out which half was actually doing what.

“Holy fuck! Riki, stop it, man! You’re killing him!”

“One less mouth to feed! Ain’t that what you motherfuckers are worried about, huh?! You want me to fix the problem?! How about I fix it right now! That what you want, huh?!! THAT WHAT YOU WANT?!”, he roared as he continued to hit and kick Luke’s already-battered body. His nose breaking with a satisfactory crack. His face all bruised and one of his eyes already black.

“Shit, Riki, just stop already!!! This ain’t gonna fix anything! He’s just drunk, man!”

“No!” He kicked Luke’s stomach while he was lying down. “My” He kicked him against his chin. “Fucking” He kicked him against the head, making him moan as apparently he was no longer able to scream out. “Problem!” He was just about to hit Luke’s unconscious body with a broken bottle when Guy intervened, grabbing Riki’s wrist.

“Riki, this isn’t you, dammit! Shit man, we’re all having a hard time here! People act up when they’re hungry, you know that!” If anyone but Guy had dared to interrupt Riki while he was giving a rebellious gang member a well-deserved beating he would have probably received a beating himself. But despite the fact that they no longer slept together, Guy still had a special place in Riki’s heart.
Riki threw the bottle against the far wall of their hide-out in frustration. Guy was right. Killing off his own gang members wasn’t going to make things better for anyone. But hell giving someone a beating would surely make him feel better!

“Yeah, people act up! That’s what I’m doing, idiot, acting up! But apparently I’m the only one here with half a brain, so it’s always me who has to keep my shit together!” Everyone was staring at Riki’s tantrum in desperation. Had their leader finally lost it for real? Who would they turn to, if not the fearless Riki?

“Oh crap, don’t look at me like that! I told you, I’ll figure something out! Can’t any of you morons just wait? I’ll let you know when I need you”, he addressed his gang and then walked out of the derelict building they had taken refuge in, kicking his bike to life and racing off without even knowing where he was going. They were right about one thing. Sometimes you just had to act, even if you didn’t know what the outcome was going to be.

As he made his way into Midas, his eyes kept on straying from the road up to the glittering lights of Tanagura. Simultaneously his thoughts strayed from the famine at hand to blue eyes brighter than any neon and long hair the colour of starlight. As thoughts of Iason started filling his head his treacherous heart started beating faster in his chest.

*Be still, my heart cause it's freaking out, it's freaking out, right now*
*Shining like stars cause we're beautiful, we're beautiful, right now*

Maybe he was going about this the wrong way. He was thinking too much like the old Riki. But he couldn’t ask Iason Mink for help, because there’d be no way he’d help him out. Besides, he’d kicked him out, it was a done matter. And even if by some miracle Mink still had an interest in him, he would not do it for free. Wasn’t there some other way to get his hands on some cash? Mimea perhaps? She worked at a casino after all. But no, he’d already caused the young girl enough trouble as it was.

As he turned unto Orange Road in an old automatism he’d developed while working for the Black Market - the red rays of the setting sun making his black form look as if it was ablaze - the answer to his predicament struck him. *Katze.*

Even if the Black Market boss had initially only offered Riki a job because Iason wanted him to spy on the Bison leader, Riki had clearly shown his particular talent for the job. There was no reason why Katze wouldn’t wish to hire him again if Riki offered. And no reason for Riki not to offer, other than his betrayed pride. But even mongrels could put their pride aside if their stomachs were rumbling loudly enough.
As Katze was going through some files concerning a new player in the market, his most trusted associate and bodyguard walked into his office. “What is it now? Can’t you see I’m busy?”, the broker said without even bothering to look at his co-worker. Things were busier than ever and again he’d had to fire several of his employees today, the youngsters had simply not been cut out for the job. So now he was not only busy but also short on staff.

“There’s a mongrel here, sir. I’ve tried to send him away, but he claims that he knows you personally and that you’ll be interested in seeing him.”

Katze looked up from his screen, his cunning honey-coloured eyes squeezing together in thought. “A mongrel, you say? What did he say his name was?”

“Riki. Said he’s the leader of a gang called Bison. Very dark complexion, black hair.”

“Send him in”, Katze said as he filed and closed what he’d been working on and got up from his desk chair.

“Boss?”

“Don’t make me tell you twice.” He wasn’t shouting but then he hardly ever did. After a while of working for him his employees learned to tell by the subtle changes in his tone when he was threatening them.

When the big, muscular bloke approached him with a somewhat stunned look on his face, Riki put out his cigarette in one of the potted plants in the hallway. “Told you he’d wanna see me. You’ve just wasted your time in searching me and making me wait. Not very effective, pall.”

Full of confidence, Riki burst into the office, not bothering to wait for the bodyguard to open the door for him or to even knock. “Found yourself your very own housekeeper, did you? He sure doesn’t mind making his hands dirty when searching mongrels”, he said as he strode straight up to
Katze’s desk with a nonchalant swagger, determined to bluff his way through any obstacles the Black Market boss might put in his way.

It took Katze several moments before recognition flashed unto his face. If he hadn’t already known who was currently bursting into his office in such a bold, impolite manner he would have surely pulled his gun. Because other than his attitude and dark looks there was very little in the physical apparition that reminded Katze of the young boy that had once caught his Master’s eye.

“Riki the Dark. Well, I see you haven’t forgotten how to make an opening. Please take a seat. Brandy or bourbon?”, Katze calmly spoke, nothing but the momentary widening of his eyes showing his astonishment at the other’s altered appearance.

“Stout, but you don’t have that, so let’s just go for whatever’s stronger”, Riki said as he sagged down on the chair and put his dirty boots up on Katze’s desk.

“You don’t need to impress me, Riki. I’m fully aware of your skill-set and of what you can do for me. With that said, please move your feet off of my desk before I feel myself obliged to remove them.” It was unclear whether he meant he would remove Riki’s feet from the desk or from his legs.

After waiting for another stubborn five seconds, Riki reluctantly put his feet back on the ground, accepting the glass Katze handed him and gulping it down in one go. The stuff smelled expensive but it burned even more than stout while going down, so Riki wasn’t complaining.

“You’ve grown”, the dealer said while eyeing Riki’s increased height and musculature.

“I didn’t know size was an issue in the market”, the mongrel responded cheekily while pointing at Katze’s crotch, or as he was well-aware of the lack thereof.

“People sure as hell didn’t like messing with you before. I don’t think they’d even consider it now. Nice haircut too by the way, Guy’s idea?”, Katze said as he took in Riki’s shoulder-length black locks, the blackness of his hair being stressed even more by the increased volume of it. It also looked like he hadn’t combed it for just about as long as he hadn’t cut it.

“It’s not a cut, more like I did not cut it. And no, this was my own idea. I ain’t that person no more, Katze, so there’s no point in trying to look like him any longer.” Riki’s voice took on an almost wistful quality in that moment, the kind of quality people’s voices get when they are talking of bygone glory.
“Is that what you tell yourself? I don’t look like a Furniture, but that doesn’t mean I’m not.” People didn’t change, not really, that much Katze’s years of experience had taught him.

“That your way of saying you’re planning on screwing me over again, huh?”

“Technically I didn’t screw you over, Riki, seeing as how that was my plan all along.”

Riki got out of the chair that quickly that it tumbled over behind him. “Forget it, I’m outta here. I ain’t gonna trip over the same bloody stone twice. Dunno what I was thinking.”

“You’re right. But that also means you wouldn’t be here if you weren’t in serious need, Riki. No shame there, all of Ceres is in big shit with the increased patrols everywhere as of late. The thing is more patrols also mean trouble for me, it means lousy couriers don’t stand a chance anymore, so I had to let all the lousy ones go earlier today.” Katze got up from the desk and approached Riki, who already had his hand on the doorknob. “I got something you need. You got something I need. As you well know, there are no other considerations when doing business.”

“Aren’t there? Have you no shame, Katze? Don’t you feel even the slightest remorse when selling out people who trusted you?” For he had trusted Katze, for the first time in his life he had felt like he was truly being appreciated for who he was. But that had all changed when Katze had handed him over to Mink, because it showed he would never have even considered Riki as an employee if it hadn’t been for his Master’s obsession.

“It doesn’t matter what I feel”, Katze tried to explain. He’d genuinely liked the kid, he wouldn’t have betrayed him if there’d been any other way. “All that matters is…”

“Well it fucking matters to me! So if you want me to clean up your shit for you, you’re going to fucking mind me!!!” Riki came at him and yelled only inches away from his face while grabbing unto his professionally-starched lapels.

Katze’s bodyguard burst into the room only moments later, a fully-charged lasergun ready in each hand. “Everything all right, boss?”

“Yeah. Folks from Ceres are simply a bit more vocal. Right, Riki?” The implied double meaning behind that smug grin could not possibly be misunderstood. But despite the hostile feelings he still harboured for the Furniture, Riki could not help but see the humour in the situation. Here was a man
who understood every aspect of his life, both in Ceres and in Tanagura. Well, almost every aspect.

“You betray me again, Katze, I won’t forgive you”, the mongrel hissed as a murderous glow lit up the dark depths of his eyes. The threat already showed that Katze had won him over, for there would be no need for it if the mongrel had truly decided to walk out.

“What makes you think I care about your forgiveness? I can’t afford anything like that in my kind of business.” Katze tried to brush it off while he pushed Riki’s hands off of his shoulders and turned around, heading back towards his desk.

“I ain’t talking about your goddamn business!”, the mongrel spat again while following Katze almost as if he was readying himself to strike the back of the dealer’s head.

“Sir, should I remove him?”, the bodyguard started, already lifting his guns towards the offending assailant.

“No, leave us.” The bodyguard didn’t move, thinking he must have misunderstood. Surely the boss would not want to risk his own safety with that wild creature’s outbursts? “I said leave us! Must I say everything twice?! Get out!”

Wordlessly the redhead poured both himself and Riki another glass of vodka. He himself hardly ever touched the stuff, considering it too base a liquor for his tastes. But if he knew something it was that drinking together meant sharing the same bitterness. Riki grabbed the glass but didn’t sit down again, he felt too agitated and didn’t want to give Katze the advantage of height.

“Shit, you know I wouldn’t want any reminders or take any chances, not if I could help it. But like you said, Midas is under lock and key, it’s like they’re trying to starve us out. I tried going over there a couple of times on my own, but I had to make a run for it every freakin’ time.” He gulped down the entirety of the contents of his glass again and simply grabbed the rest of the bottle.

“Say, if I were to work for you again…”, he uncorked the bottle and took a couple of big gulps out of it, slightly coughing as the burn was multiplied. “You could get me a pass, right?”

“With a Black Market steady income you wouldn’t need a pass, Riki. And neither would your friends.” Of course Katze realised that Riki must already know that. If he insisted on a pass, it had to mean he needed it for something other than pick-pocketing. But what else could there possibly be for a mongrel in Midas?
“That’s not what I mean.” The mongrel seemed hesitant all of a sudden, as if he were reminded of something unpleasant, something he’d done that he was ashamed of. “I owe someone something. And there ain’t no way for me to make it up if I can’t get into Sasan.”

“Must be a huge deal for you to take the risk of venturing into Sasan at a time like this. Care to share?”, the dealer said as he poured the mongrel another drink, hoping it would help to loosen up his tongue as well as calm his nerves.

“Ain’t none ov ya… godam buness, Kaze…”, Riki answered, his voice already slurred because of the rapid consumption of heavy liquor.

“If you want to work for me again, it is my business. If it’s a liability of some sort, I need to know about it”, Katze demanded, while keeping the vodka coming. Apparently alcohol was the way to go when it came to getting mongrels to talk.

“Shit, she ain’t no liability, fo fuck’sake!” Riki exclaimed, tripping over his chair. He would have fallen down face-first if Katze hadn’t caught him. Damn, he’d become heavy! Katze realised that without his gun, he as an ex-Furniture would be no match for a grown man of Riki’s stature. Even if he was still skinny and his build whippy, he had grown tall and the muscle in strategic places combined with his aggression and fearlessness would make him an opponent to be reckoned with.

“She?” Katze questioned, realisation beginning to dawn on him. Riki had a girlfriend in Sasan.

“Allight, allight! Mimea… I met er… at a casino…casino…” Katze must already know, he always knew everything. There was no use in keeping it from him. After all, what was it to the dealer anyways whether or not Riki still saw an ex-Pet?

“Mimea, you say? Lord Am’s former Pet? The one you slept with?” It had to be that one, it was not a common name and Katze very much doubted many other females would be interested in seeing a slumdog from Ceres.

“Yeah.. the brothel.. brothel sold er…to a casino…”

Katze was not a specialist when it came to the re-distribution of ex-Pets, but he knew for a fact that Pets were never transferred from brothels to casino’s. Especially a low-level brothel like the one he knew Mimea had been placed in, such a place was simply meant to be the end of the line. And no
casino in Sasan would want to hire a damaged ex-Pet from a place like that. Something wasn’t right about this. Of course Riki had no way of knowing that.

All of a sudden something occurred to Katze. The idea was crazy, but one began to expect crazy things in his trade. “It wasn’t the Royal Casino by any chance, was it?”

“Hah!! Hah, how d’ya… howdya know that?” Katze was about to think of an evasive response that did not show he was lying, when Riki fell over and started snoring only moments later. Perfect. Now he had a drunk as his main courier. Of course drinking vodka on an empty stomach was never a good idea.

After having put Riki on the sofa in a nearby office to sleep it off, Katze began to pace through his office. What was he supposed to do? Get involved, not get involved? Hire Riki, don’t hire him? Give him a pass? There was no way to tell what was really going on other than his own wild speculations. The whole thing could just be a strange coincidence. There was only one way to make sure he took the right course of action here.

As he sat down in his office chair, his fingers automatically formed the number on his phone. He had not dialled it in a while but there was no way he could ever forget it. “It’s me, something’s come up and it’s something of a rather sensitive nature, so I thought I’d check with you first before taking action”, Katze began, unsure of what to presume and what not. The market had not been doing great as of late, so he knew there wasn’t a lot of room for error. He’d have to tread very carefully.

“What appears to be the problem, Katze?”, the icy voice at the other end of the line spoke after just enough time for Katze to start worrying about the appropriateness of his calling at such a late hour.

“It’s not a problem per se. You’ll never guess who walked into my office today.” Katze was buying some time so he could pick and choose his following words more carefully. Perhaps this entire call was a mistake, the kind that would make his Master lose patience with him.

“Something tells me I’m about to find out.” Apparently he was in a good enough mood to be amused by the ex-Furniture’s stalling, despite the state the Black Market was currently in. What on Amoy could have accomplished that? Ever since letting Riki go free his Master had been more merciless than ever, and at times even the Black Market boss had found himself on the receiving end of his destructive rage.
“Riki the Dark. I would have hardly recognised him, if it hadn’t been for his unchanged arrogance.” It couldn’t hurt to give the Master some warning, for sometimes Elite forgot that people actually aged.

“Is there a particular reason why you are informing me of this, Katze?” Iason decided to play dumb for now, if only to see how far his former Furniture would risk going for the sake of sating his own, deep-seated curiosity.

“Why I don’t know… is there a particular reason Mimea is all of a sudden working at the Royal Casino?” He was risking his hide by even mentioning the fallen Pet and his Master’s casino in the same breath. Not to mention the audacity of implying his Master was purposely keeping something from him.

After a prolonged silence, Katze was seriously beginning to regret his bold questioning and thinking of which pills he ought to take to make the pain bearable. But then he was surprised when he heard laughter on the other end of the line, even if very briefly.

“Honestly, Katze, sometimes it is a mystery even to me where you get your information.” What were the chances of Riki walking into Katze’s office and telling him about Mimea? If he played his cards right, he could have an agent manipulating his mongrel’s moves from two sides.

“You forget that drunk mongrels are not particularly good at hiding secrets. After about half a bottle of vodka and demanding a pass for Sasan, he told me everything.” Katze didn’t mention how it had been mostly Riki’s own determination to drink that had led to that outcome, and made it appear as if it had been his intention to get the mongrel drunk all along.

“He still trusts you. Interesting.” Riki would rather die from starvation than walk into the office of someone he did not at least give the benefit of the doubt. There might be hope for Katze yet when it came to luring Riki back to his arms.

“He doesn’t trust me, he told me as much, he just got drunk. So he’s back in the game, is he? What’s this thing with Lord Am’s former Pet all about, if I may ask? How can I be of assistance?” Of course he had to stress how he was only asking so he could better serve his Master. But to be honest his curiosity was seriously picked by this. The whole affair had been unlikely enough back when the mongrel was but a boy. But now that he had shown how much he detested Iason and how very unsuitable he was to the life in Eos it became even more unlikely that an Elite of Iason Mink’s stature would be even remotely interested in a creature such as that. Not to mention he was now a fully-grown, adult man. Nowhere near anything that could be used as Pet-material, physically as well as mentally.
“Give him the job, he’ll need to be fed anyhow. And give him the pass.” It was the perfect way to both take care of and spy on his Riki, without him being aware of it. After all, it had been on his own accord that he’d gone to Katze for a job. The circumstances could not possibly be any more beneficial to his cause.

“Am I supposed to aid him in contacting the Pet?” He had to be mistaken, his Master hated that Pet, if he was still interested in the mongrel he would never want him even near her.

“Yes, but not so much that he suspects that is your intent. For now you just make sure he’s fed and watch his back.”

“I don’t understand.” If he wanted to succeed in achieving whatever goal it was his Master had in mind, he simply needed more information. It was just so illogical, so unlike his Master, that Katze did not know what to make of it. Anticipating his Master’s desires had never been an issue for Katze, unless when it came to Riki.

“You underestimate the power of guilt, Katze. These mongrels have a sense of honour so strong that they’d be willing to do anything to get even with someone they feel they owe something to. Riki no longer owes me or you anything, Katze, rather in his eyes we are the ones who owe him. But that is not true for this Pet, therefore she is the key to getting him back.”

“So we are getting him back?”, Katze spoke as he got up, lit a cigarette and went for the vodka bottle. He was not sure how much more of this Riki-related madness his nerves could take, after all he wasn’t getting any younger. “I’m not sure he fits into that box anymore, he’s very noticeably grown.”

“Then we’ll simply have to fit him into a bigger box, won’t we?”

As he lay sleeping it off on the sofa, Riki couldn’t help how his thoughts would stray from Katze and Mimea to that one person who tied them all together. As usual his alcohol-induced dreams were full of images of golden hair and icy touches that made his spine tingle and his blood boil. They were never about the many excruciating whippings that the blond had subjected him to, for that was not what he feared most. Instead the dreams were about their many passionate encounters in the bedroom, about that luxurious bed covered in silky sheets where Riki had at long last discovered his own feelings.
You are mine, Riki, for always and forever.

Riki moved uneasily in his sleep, desperately trying to fight his growing excitement at the mere presence of his former Master.

You can never escape me.

The lingering feeling in the pit of his stomach made it feel as if he did not want to escape him. Not really. For now that he had finally escaped all he could think about was Iason. He was caught even more in Iason’s golden web now than he had ever been.

Mine forever.

With a shout Riki fell from the sofa and unto the floor, grateful when the fall finally awoke him from his nightmare. As he scanned the room around him, he remembered where he was. Way to go, Riki, get drunk with the guy who sold you out the last time!

He quickly jumped up and made his exit, not bothering to let Katze know he was leaving. Once outside he felt a weight fall from his shoulders and jumped unto his hoverbike. The speed of the bike felt reassuring, as if Riki could convince himself that he could escape Iason Mink with it. But the truth of the matter was that the frosty Elite had become a part of him, he was inside Riki’s head and therefore Riki would never be able to escape him.

As he turned on Orange Road he kept looking back, as if expecting someone to follow him. When he felt sure that nobody was following him, he kept on looking inside any hoverlimo’s he would pass, half expecting to spot Iason. Then all of a sudden he almost rammed his own bike into a passing transport. As he managed to pull up his bike at the last second and prevent a head-on collision, he looked back only to see long blonde hair and a pale, perfect face through the open window of a nearby hovercar.

You’re all I see in all these places
You’re all I see in all these faces

He nearly had a heart attack before he realised that it was not Iason but one of his Elite brethren. What was that one’s name again, Guideon? Not that it mattered. Riki turned his bike away from Orange Road and headed for Ceres, laughing at his own paranoid stupidity. If he were to face Iason by accident somewhere, the blond would probably not even recognise him, let along show any
interest in him. After all, he had kicked Riki out, hadn’t he? Elite were like that, they had fleeting fantasies. Shit, who am I kidding? There’s no way he’d come after me again. At least he had finally found a way of putting some food on the table for Bison.

Little could Riki know that he was in fact living on borrowed time. It had never been Iason’s intention to let go of him for good, he was merely trying to give his mongrel some breathing space while trying to find new ways of making Riki his, in every sense of the word this time.

So let's pretend we're running out of time

Of time

Ending his phone call with Katze, Iason could hardly keep the satisfied smile off his face. Everything was going according to plan, even better now that Katze had accidentally also managed to get a hold of Riki again. He stepped back unto the balcony to enjoy the view of the Amoyan night-sky, as the final rays of the burning sun had surrendered themselves to the night’s relentless embrace.

The twin moons were clearly visible now, one slightly bigger and higher in the sky than the other. As he gazed upon their lights, he was reminded of an ancient myth according to which the moons had originally been lovers who had been forbidden from being together. Yet the burning light of their love had been so strong that they had been able to rise high above the rest of society, free from its rules and prohibitions, forever locked in each other’s embrace for the whole world to see.

Baby, when they look up at the sky
We’ll be shooting stars just passing by

Where was his beloved mongrel? Could his love ever be strong enough to overcome all the obstacles that Amoyan society had placed between the two of them? Could he truly bring his Riki home again?

You’ll be coming home with me tonight
And we'll be burning up like neon lights

Possible or impossible made no difference. He was Iason Mink, he was one of those gods who could make anything possible. He could take on the odds and win. Jupiter might have the ultimate power
when it came to Tanagura’s virtual network and electronics, but her right hand was the one who reigned over the people who made up society. Truth be told, Iason had already risen above society. Now it was simply a matter of making Riki join him on that level.

*Neon lights*

*Neon lights*

*Neon lights*

*Like neon lights, oh*

*Like neon lights, oh*


To Be Continued …


Please leave a review!!! :D
Rebirth of a Phoenix

Chapter Summary

Mimea further explores her altered self and her changed relationship with Iason Mink, who in turn dispells the utopian illusion that is Tanaguran society.

Author’s notes:

And she’s back! :D Sorry for being such a lousy updater, I was preoccupied with writing my master’s thesis and graduation, but now I’m back ;) I know there’s already been quite a bit of Iason/Mimea interaction in this fic so far, but I just feel that any trust between these two would require a lot of time to fully establish itself, even if Mimea now fancies him. My original idea for this chapter was to first have some brief interaction between Iason and Mimea, and then to have Mimea meet Riki, but it turned out longer so I’ve decided to simply post this as a chapter in its own right, and then to have a meeting with Riki in the next chapter, so I hope you’ll forgive me for keeping you all in suspense here ;)

Soundtracks:

Conchita Wurst – Rise Like a Phoenix
Stream of Passion – Out in the Real World

Checking her reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirror of her luxurious bedroom she was genuinely surprised to find that she actually liked what she saw. It was as if the incredibly unlikely activities of the night before had somehow rejuvenated her over night, erasing her past wrongs and resurrecting her as a newborn individual. Not just a juxtaposition of glued together pieces of a shattered life, but an entirely new person that was truly whole again. A better person. A person who would last longer. A person capable of defending herself. A person with a mind of her own. A real person.

Waking in the rubble
Walking over glass

In the bright light of the morning sun that scattered through the full-glass eastern wall of the room, illuminating everything in its yellow-tinged vibrancy, it was easy to think that none of it had been real. Just part of another Tanaguran utopian illusion meant to draw her in only to ditch her as soon as she was no longer needed. It had happened before, therefore it could happen again.

Peering from the mirror
No, that isn’t me

But glancing back at the mirror she could tell that something had definitely changed in her. And such a change that altered one’s appearance so significantly did not occur because of a mere dream. Her eyes had become much brighter, where her irises had been the dull colour of leaves in autumn – fallen, just like she had – they were now the bright orange of a wild tiger’s fur. She could have sworn that they had never been that bright a colour, even back in the high days of her Pet existence in the Am household.

 Stranger getting nearer
Who can this person be

Next to her eyes, the shade of her hair and the complexion of her sharp features were most definitely altered as well. During and right after her days at the Lotus the tint of her hair had decreased to a dead chestnut brown and her skin had looked sallow and even grey-ish. The old bright red of her hair had not quite returned but the hair had taken on a darker, deeper burgundy tinge. The colour of blood spilled. Her skin was still pale but more like the ivory whiteness of a marble statue than of a corpse or someone who was terminally ill. The bright white of immortality rather than the pallor of death. Without a doubt the combination of still hardly any sunlight but a far better diet could explain her altered complexion.

You wouldn’t know me at all today

Yet this bright radiance appeared to be something spiritual rather than something merely physical. Had she truly improved this much in such a short period of time? Lifting up the hem of her short, lacy nightgown she revealed that the scars and cigarette burn marks that had been inflicted upon her at the brothel were still there, but those were old scars and there were no longer any signs of bruising. Somehow Mimea thought she looked better than she ever did, even in her younger years. Her face was no longer heart-shaped, her cheeks were no longer round like a baby’s and her eyes appeared to be narrower and deeper set within her skull. Where her face had been cute before because of its roundness and softness, it had now become beautiful and had even taken on an air of mystery through its sharp angles and its more serious appearance. The face of an adult, not that of a child.

She had no idea what it meant to grow up, for creatures like her were never supposed to last that long. She had been prematurely cast out of her household and been submitted to a treatment so harsh that it had burned all childish innocence from her mind just as much as the cigarettes had burned through the flawless perfection of her lab-grown skin and the malnutrition had burned through the fat reserves of her earlier pampered life. It was as if her old, voluptuous body had needed to die before her new, athletic one could be born. Could she possibly have come out of such hardship looking better than she had before? Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Since when had that become the first thing on her mind whenever she thought she was perceiving changes in herself or in her environment?

Mimea went into her private suite and opened the taps of the massive, marble bath tub, setting the temperature of the water and selecting some high-quality bath salts that smelled of lilies and amber. She did not feel she had any right to still call for the Furniture at this time of day, it was probably already noon and the boy would be preoccupied while preparing dinner. Either way she did not like the way he looked at her, as if she was a bizarre collection of scars and bones sticking out. No matter how much she would eat her flesh never fully regained its previous fullness and pliancy. When she touched her upper arms they felt wiry, all muscle and hardly any fat. He doesn’t seem to mind. Well, he wouldn’t, he’s practically made out of metal. My body must still be like a pillow compared to his.

Mongrels were more muscled as well, weren’t they? Little food, lots of cheap liquor and much
bodily exercise while scavenging and getting into scrapes with other gangs or the authorities would do that to your body. But in her case it was not for lack of eating, some days she felt it was all she ever did in Iason’s absence. Food had been scarce at the whorehouse, if the grey stuff they were given could even be called food. Iason. Since when had she started calling him that in her head? Probably since last night, as he gave her permission to do so then, not that he had implied that she would be allowed to call him that at all times. In fact he had not said or done anything that implied that he wished for a continuation of their erotic interaction.

*I still can’t believe it actually happened*. But even if her mind couldn’t, her body sure could. Remarkably the soreness limited itself to her lower regions and she had not in fact been visibly harmed anywhere. How did one contain such strength in a passionate situation like that? It would take an immense amount of self-control, Mimea couldn’t even fathom the kind of self-restraint required. To be so in control of one’s body meant to surpass its limitations, to become ethereal. Mimea could never hope to strive for anything so divine but strangely enough she wanted to get as close to such a state as she could. For the first time in her life she felt like she was in control, like she had a genuine influence.

After taking a bath in water she herself had poured and drying her body with her own two hands, she went back into the bathroom while still nude, enjoying the feeling of the soft Persian rug beneath her toes as she walked over to her wardrobe, walking with the solid steps of an adult woman instead of with the light thread of a young girl. Standing right in the sea of light permeating through the glass doors unto her private terrace, her red hair appeared to be ablaze and her slender, hardened body took on the sunlight’s red-yellow light almost as if her skin were translucent.

*From the fading light I fly*

“Like a phoenix newly risen from its ashes”, a deep rich voice sounded, simultaneously soft and powerful.

*Rise like a phoenix  
Out of the ashes  
Seeking rather than vengeance  
Retribution  
You were warned  
Once I'm transformed  
Once I'm reborn*

She jumped up, dropped the hanger she had just taken out of the closet and hit her head against the closet door in an instinctual attempt to get away from the unexpected sound of an unknown intruder. “Goddamnit, argh!” And since when had she started shouting those curses out loud rather than just thinking them? Perhaps she had already been conversing with Riki the Dark for too long and had already been infected with the cursing virus he undoubtedly carried.

“I see you’re still doing your best to shatter whatever illusions I might have concerning your intellect, elegance and sense of propriety”, her new Master’s tone was not derogatory but more like indulgent. Grabbing unto her now throbbing, fiery head she turned around to look at him, immediately regretting it, as she would still get dazzled and be momentarily incapable of forming coherent sounds whenever she laid eyes on Iason Mink’s glorious form. Where the sunlight on her had allowed for the illusion of a mythical creature, it now transformed Lord Mink into a true deity, with golden light radiating from his long blonde tresses.

*You know I will rise like a phoenix  
But you're my flame*
The Elite took advantage of her temporary state of paralysis to approach her and to turn her face towards him by gently lifting up her chin, mimicking the exact gesture he had used in their foreplay the night before. It immediately had the desired effect, with the petite form of his most recent acquisition visibly swooning in reaction to his slight touch.

Notably she did recover quickly from his onslaught, her eyes fluttering open and closed a couple of times and a slight shaking of her head accompanied by a small step backwards but not quite enough to disconnect her chin from his fingers. “I thought you would have left for work hours ago…”, she trailed off when she felt the cold-hot burning of his blue eyes on her skin as surely as she did the sunlight.

“I apologize for my tardiness, I did not realize you would be in need of my services this morning… or rather, this afternoon”, she was quick to correct. How she hated herself for this weakness! Show them weakness or consideration and the beating will surely be worse. But no, that was not the case now, if he had wanted to beat her he would have done so already. Unless he was toying with her, hoping that psychological suffering would be worse than physical pain, still out to get revenge for the heartache she’d caused him? Sometimes she felt even that admission of his had been something spun out of her own thoughts rather than real events.

“Why, you do recuperate quickly, my dear, I must give you that. Already so eager again, so early in the… afternoon”, he daftly responded with a dazzling smile. Was he mocking her?

“A… again so soon? I mean, not that I’d mind… it’s not like it’s my place to mind… Or are you mocking me?” Strange how her Pet training would take over automatically at times, only to be interrupted by her newly acquired resistance and straightforwardness. Sometimes she felt as if she had two different personalities, constantly battling each other in the maze of her mind.

“Would it be your place to mind my mockery then?” She could still not tell when he was serious and when he was playing with her. Perhaps his utterances always contained a trace of both, he himself still unsure how he wanted her to respond. How could a mind that was supposed to be so calculated be so entirely unpredictable?

“H.. huh?” It seemed impossible to get her mind to work properly while those glacier eyes were taking her in, almost as if absorbing her sanity and shattering her very soul into a thousand-and-one incoherent fragments with the sharpness of their gaze.

She contemplated tearing her feline eyes away from his but did not dare to with his hand still so close to her throat. Not that it would have made a difference how far away from him she was standing if he’d decide to strangle her. She felt like a mouse being played with by a cat, without knowing just how hungry the creature was. Yet she trusted that the Elite would honour their pact. For if the word of the head of intelligence himself could not be believed, what could?

“Say I were mocking you, would it be your place to mind?” He finally let go of her chin and allowed her some private space, turning away from her to stare out the window, the sun causing a tantalizing pattern of golden shimmers in his hair.

“I suppose it would always be my place to mind, but perhaps not to voice that I mind”, she spoke softly, fully aware that he would hear her anyhow. She simply had an instinctive inclination not to speak too loudly while being stalked by a predator.

“Perhaps not?” It took her a couple of seconds to gather from his expectant stare that it was a question, for it was hard to gather from his unchanging tone.

“Unless you would want me to voice my thoughts”, she spoke knowingly, gracefully following his
steps towards the window with seemingly no effort from her narrow limbs. She even moved differently now, not to be heard and noticed but rather not to be, which made her bearing much more subtle and refined.

“I’d say your thoughts are that you don’t mind a bit”, he attempted to stare her down again by turning his face towards her while she was standing close once more. But she was unfazed this time, more prepared for the brilliance of those icy eyes.

“It didn’t seem like you yourself minded so much last night… Master”, she purposely emphasized that final word, hoping to get some kind of a rise out of him perhaps, carefully checking his expressions for any signs of how he was affected by her seduction or her boldness.

“Indeed it did not seem so, did it? Curious, most curious. Why do you suppose that is… Pet?”, he chose that exact moment to grab hold of her upper arm, and not too gently either, but she could tell it was a calculated move nonetheless.

“I’m your connection to him. And I’ve become more like him. I’m not begging to be your little slave anymore. I’m not soft and cuddly anymore but used-up and hardened. I’m so different that you no longer know what to make of me or how I will react, I’m like a rubik’s cube you just can’t figure out”, she tugged on her arm and to her great surprise managed to pull it from his grasp. There had been hardly a fraction of his true strength behind that grip, he had purposely made it so that she could pull herself loose if she used her full strength to do so.

Cause you wouldn’t know me at all today
And you have got to see
To believe

“Well, if you are not begging to be my slave, than what was all this begging last night about, I wonder?” He let her pull away her wrist without attempting to regain or reacting in any other way to what would be considered most unacceptable rebellious behavior from a Pet.

“And here I thought I was quite clear. I was begging for you to fuck me, obviously”, she spat back, staring straight into his face, demonstrating that she felt no shame or regret at all over her pleas from before. After all there was no point in feeling shame over a physical manifestation of their newfound relationship, in fact it made the rational connection more real to the former Pet, as she was more experienced in sexual dealings than she was in verbal ones.

“I see. So in your mind there is a difference between your subjugation to me in a sexual situation and your subjugation to me in the capacity of my Pet? What a most intriguing interpretation of our relationship”, a rather smug expression appeared on his otherwise emotionless face, as if to him any form of submission from the ex-Pet in front of him was immensely satisfactory because of how she was refusing to submit to him in all senses of the word.

“I do not consider sex as a subjugation of any sort, Lord Mink, but rather as a coming together of two individuals in a mutual show of trust. I agreed to help you get back Riki’s affections and in exchange you agreed to make me a part of this household and to have access to some of those affections as well. That sounds more like a deal between equal partners – who both have something the other wants – than an agreement to submission”, she spoke out, gathering all of her mental strength and courage to look him right in the eye when she stated this, keeping her feminine voice at least loud and clear if she could not make it steady and firm.

“Ah, so you have chosen to interpret our physical joining as a confirmation of a business deal of sorts, rather than as a confirmation of the submission between Master and Pet. However I recall making you a part of this household by purchasing you as a Pet from the Lotus establishment.
Therefore – regardless of any personal arrangements between us – you are still legally my possession, Pet”, the Head of the Syndicate craftily countered his new Pet’s implication of their equality. Could his interactions with her on the previous night have had a different effect on their relationship than he had anticipated?

She openly laughed at his perfectly rational, well-thought out formulation of that line of thought. “Yes, but sex between a Master and his Pet can never be a confirmation of their legal relationship, can it? For there is nothing legal about an Elite having intercourse with a Pet. Even if you are the great Iason Mink, favourite of Jupiter, you cannot hope to alter those fundamental legal regulations for your own advantage”, she sweetly responded without even the slightest hesitation. If the bastard thought she would be so easily outmanoeuvred through logical argumentation he was sadly mistaken!

The superior Blondie momentarily felt beaten at his own game – and by an Academy-bred Pet at that! – but of course this sentiment could not possibly be derived from his impeccably emotionless facial façade. Perhaps there was more to the mind of a Pet than he had given that race credit for, provided the right stimuli and conditioning were applied. If a Pet were to be thrown into Guardian at birth and into Ceres when it came of age, would it even be mentally distinguishable from a mongrel? Could a bred pet possibly become wild again when released in the wilderness and left to fend for itself there? Without a doubt many pets would die in those circumstances, but could those that survived come out stronger perhaps?

He would have to inquire about the matter the next time he spoke with Raoul, although he was unsure of how his friend would react to his purchase of the same prized Pet he had demanded would be sold to the worst of whorehouses in Midas. Mimea had been Raoul’s favourite creation – his child rather than his Pet – and as such the sale had caused a noticeable rift in their relationship and had further enhanced Raoul’s disapproval of Iason’s mongrel. Perhaps by buying her back, he could attempt to make amends? But it also meant that the geneticist would at some point be confronted with the considerable physical and mental damage done to his beloved masterpiece. Even if Iason felt she was much improved both physically and mentally, he was aware that other Elite would consider Mimea damaged goods, thus making Mimea a part of the Mink household surely brought it no more glory than making Riki a part of it did.

“Rationally speaking I have literally nothing to gain from your presence here, Mimea, and everything to lose. That is the truth of the matter. After several years in a renowned brothel such as the one you were placed in you are of no economical value whatsoever, not to mention the strain your presence here will put on my relationship with your former Master”, Iason replied, unsure of why the new Pet was stressing to illegality of their previous sexual interaction. Did she wish to discourage him from initiating such interaction in future perhaps, similarly to how Riki did? If such it only confirmed his earlier statement that it had put her to shame through submission, did it not?

“That’s my point exactly, Iason, neither one of us wishes for any legal or rational relationship here. But how come I put a strain on your relationship with Lord Am?” She did not want to be Lord Mink’s Pet, she was not even sure if she wanted to be a Pet at all anymore. And last of all she wanted no reminder of her former status as Lord Am’s Pet, he who had sold her out and in doing so had sealed her terrible fate.

“Given the nature of Lord Am’s attachment to you, I do not expect that he will forgive the hypocrisy of my initial demand to remove you combined with my later purchasing you easily”, the Elite wondered how the little Pet could have become so insightful when it came to some matters but at the same time remain so clueless when it came to her own relationship with her former Master.

“The nature of his attachment to me? He sold me to one of the worst whorehouses in all of Midas,
I’d say that says plenty about the absent nature of his bloody attachment!”, she suddenly yelled, unexpectedly transforming into a scalding furnace of hellfire in a matter of seconds, even having the audacity to step closer to her Elite Master to better direct her fury.

“On the contrary, it says nothing whatsoever about his attachment to you and everything about his attachment to me, as I was the one who demanded the sale after your transgression with Riki. I daresay I was the only person who could have possibly persuaded him to sell you to such a shameful enterprise, if at all”, the blond calmly spoke – not in the least perturbed by her unexpected rage – and reached out and touched the girl’s cheek with surprising tenderness. She backed away, anger and sadness over the past betrayal of the man she had considered a father making her act on instinct.

“But all of that is in the past, so I suppose the both of you will simply have to accept that there is no altering it and therefore no valid reason to continue down the path of stubborn rejection”, Iason continued, countering her backwards move by swiftly moving forward and grabbing her by both shoulders to hold her still. Her natural inclination was to struggle, but somewhere in the back of her mind she recalled that was not appropriate behavior for a Pet and attempted to calm herself by slowing down her breathing and counting to ten in her head. Once she was over the violent wave of emotion she had experienced when recalling past cruelties and the rush of fear that accompanied the Elite’s act of grabbing her by the shoulders just hard enough to let her know he could break her bones with ease if he chose, she considered his recent utterance.

“What makes you think I wish to reject you? I do not reject you, not when it comes to our deal concerning Riki and… and not when it comes to any personal offers of friendship. If I had thought I could be with Riki by asking a friend to send someone I hardly knew to a whorehouse, I probably would have done the same”, she replied silently, staring at the floor and unthinkingly observing the contrast between her small, naked feet and his bigger, fancily-booted ones.

The android was not sure which implication of her statement he found more astounding. The implication that he was afraid of rejection. The implication that he wanted to be her friend, putting them on equal grounds. Or the implication that he – Elite, Blondie, Head of the Syndicate – would need her forgiveness – she who was an ex-pet, a former cheap whore, a damaged piece of property.

A number of uncertain seconds later a wicked smile appeared on that perfect, usually detached marble-white face. She was just like Riki in her assumption of equality with her interlocutor, only this Riki had apparently forgiven his supposed wrongs and wanted to be his friend. How remarkable, possibly her knowledge on the workings of the Tanaguran social system combined with her experience when it came to matters of the heart had led to this most fortunate outcome.

When she finally dared to look up after her silent confession, she was nearly as surprised as the creature opposite her had been after said confession only minutes ago when she witnessed his unusual facial expression. Admittedly he did not look friendly in the least – rather what currently graced his divine features was a mild representation of profound amusement and curiosity at the encounter of something utterly incomprehensible – yet it entirely transformed his face, from that of a beautiful God to that of an even more beautiful man. A devilishly beautiful man with the strength and intellect of an artificial creation of Jupiter.

“Not in a million years would I have thought that I would want to be your friend, Mimea.” Rethinking the offensive, highly inappropriate implications of her confession, the former Pet gasped for breath when she became aware of the danger she had put herself in. But when her Lord and Master raised his hand to put a halt to any plea she could have made, she frightfully remained silent, her orange eyes wide open and her pupils enlarged, like a pretty doe in merciless headlights.

“Therefore it is truly astounding that you seem to have figured that out, my dear, whereas I myself was completely unaware of it.”
She was at a loss for words for several endless minutes after the realization that indeed, the
dazzlingly beautiful, blonde Elite did want to be her friend. “Er… in your defense, Lord Mink, it was
probably never Jupiter’s intention that you would become friends with a disobedient ex-Pet, so there
was no way for you to foresee that.” As there should have been no way for her to foresee it, but at
some point in their earlier lovemaking she had considered the possibility that loneliness could be a
motivation to initiate sexual contact with a former enemy.

“Well, it was probably even more unforeseeable that I would want to become the lover of a mongrel,
so if you consider that becoming friends with an ex-Pet is in fact much more likely”, the blond
answered in good humour, although of course with an Elite – like with a force of nature – you could
never tell when the tides would turn. Apparently Mimea was one of those who was willing to take
that chance in order to experience the exhilaration of surfing those magnificent, lethal waves.

“Besides, I do not like to repeat myself”, her Master added in a stern voice, “and I am quite sure that
I have already told you yesterday to call me Iason”, her mouth fell open and for a moment she looked
like a pretty gold-fish thrown unto land and gasping for breath, “when we are alone, naturally.”

“I… I am… willing to do so… if you in turn call me Mimea… rather than Pet”, she knew she was
terribly pushing her luck but she could not help herself. For now she had spied a treasure box she
simply had to dig through its contents to see if more gold could be obtained. Absently her small,
porcelain hand moved towards the shimmering gold that was currently bewitching her and proceeded
by combing through those long strings of gold, feeling the weight of their dauntingly high value.

Her condition that he would further lower himself by calling her by her name as well as allowing her
to call him by name miraculously came across as less offensive through the gesture of the love-doll’s
fragile hand and her seeming fascination with his hair, the symbol of his superior status. What was a
name when he would always have the upperhand both legally and physically? This frail creature that
was his to do with as he pleased could hardly ever be a real threat to him. But through his failures
with Riki he had come to realize that despite the power he had over a human, he could never force
one to be his friend, for that it would have to be willing.

“Do I not do so already, Mimea? And if anything you are a Pet just as surely as I am an Elite. What
harm could there be in me calling you such?”, he asked innocently, attempting to keep up as much of
his snotty air of knowingness as possible.

“Oh, I know you already call me by my name most of the time. Except when you want to degrade
me and remind me of my inferiority. If you continue to do so, I fear we can never be friends, Elite.
Friends do not degrade each other any more than they sell each other.” The little red-headed nymph
was doing more than being friends with him, she was teaching him how to be friends with someone.

“Because friendship requires a sense of equality? An impression that I break when I remind you of
your place on Tanagura’s social ladder”, the older man spoke as he removed his large hands from the
girl’s shoulders and seated himself on the sofa, removing the reminders of both their inequality in
strength and in height.

“You’re a quick study, Iason”, his young teacher observed, unable to keep the surprise at his
progress in the understanding of human psychology out of her voice. She became painfully aware of
how she was in fact slightly taller than he while he was seated. Grateful that she was bare-foot in this
situation, and not wearing her usual high heels, she slowly moved towards the couch, trying to keep
her body-language as non-threatening as possible. The young woman was actually relieved once she
was seated next to the formidable Elite, having removed the threat of a Pet trying to look down upon
an Elite. It was truly unbelievable what kind of thing the Elite could take offense to – mercurious,
proud creatures as they were – therefore Mimea would have to walk on eggshells.
He quietly observed her through his golden lashes for a while – possibly trying to gage the sincerity of her remark – before responding. “As are you, Mimea. Indeed Elite do not like it when someone is taller than they are.”

“I’m not. It only appeared that way”, she reminded him, afterwards painfully aware that through her assurance of his superior height she might have offended his intellect by stating the obvious. How was she ever going to get through any conversation on supposedly equal grounds with the king of Elites without evoking his infamous wrath?

“Ah, but therein is the great power of Tanagura: appearances. It is all we have, therefore it must be maintained at all costs. This entire society is one big performance, fake dolls dancing on a stage, playing that they are alive. But we, Mimea, we have become truly alive, through our affections for a real, living, breathing creature, capable of survival out in the real world”, Iason observed, his expression still as lifeless as that of the dolls of which he spoke.

*Out in the real world*  
you are waiting to hear my call  
*through a river of illusions*  
you saw me fall

“Is that what you hope to achieve through your relationship with Riki, a connection to the outside world? Riki is influenced by the system just as much as we are, even if officially he falls outside of it”, Mimea rather accurately mentioned. She had never understood how in being forced to live such a harsh life of chaos in the slums mongrels had managed to maintain their pride as human beings better than any of the pampered, disciplined and educated creatures in Tanagura.

*Out in the real world*  
you are waiting to take my hand

“That is very true indeed, however despite the fact that he is living in the illusionary web that is Midas, he himself is real in his reactions. I imagine the early settlers of Amoy would have reacted to imprisonment and slavery in a very similar way, as such the inhabitants of Ceres have remained much closer to their heritage than we Tanagurans have, we who have forgotten the meaning of freedom”, Iason continued in an almost wistful tone.

*I’ll be looking for an answer*  
that leads me back  
*outside, back in your arms*

At hearing this, the girl pulled her legs under her body on the couch and went to move closer to where the enchanting, inhuman creature was seated. “Iason, do you mean to say that you want to learn from Riki how to be real, how to be free?”, Mimea asked eagerly, her voice high with excitement and hope, because now this Elite with whom she had such an unlikely alliance described the very thing she had been secretly coveting ever since she met Riki.

“I do not believe I could ever be real or free, Mimea. Perhaps you could someday, you genetically belong to the human species at least. But I shall never escape this place and I shall never have a human body. A relationship with one that is the very definition of freedom and humanity is the only way in which I can experience these things, for I have never felt free or human before until my first night with Riki”, Iason continued, sounding serene yet sad, now realizing that he had been the true prisoner long before he ever developed the idea to abduct the mongrel or to lay with him, such had been merely methods to get closer to that which he himself could never obtain.

*I’ve hidden wishes for so long*
buried deep inside

“And before I met you, Mimea, I had never encountered anyone who understood these feelings, who would be willing to die for them. The others in this place – Raoul, your former Pet friends – they could never understand such sentiments. Therefore you must promise me, my dear, that you will never tell anyone about any of the things we have spoken of”, the statuesk android now urged the warm-blooded girl, seizing her soft flesh in his hands of stone.

keeping them secret from a world
that'll never realize
the way I dream

She had to use every bit of her willpower in order not to struggle against the painfully unbreakable hold of the dangerous artificial next to her. “O.. of course not, Iason! I would never betray your secret, it would be like betraying my own!”, she reassured him with a slightly trembling voice.

“You may come to regret your decision to side with me in this matter, at which time you might be inclined to sacrifice me in order to save yourself. Rest assured that if this ever were to pass, I will find some way to make said sacrifice be in vain, do not underestimate my influence with the system or my resourcefulness on how to manipulate it”, he icily threatened, the softer nuances of his earlier contemplations completely gone.

Her fear evaporated as quickly as it had gotten a hold of her the moment she understood why he thought it necessary to threaten her. Iason Mink was absolutely terrified.

She carefully pulled one of her hands free from where it had been pressed against her ribs in his unnaturally strong grasp and lifted it up towards his face in the way you would to console a frightened child, as he had probably never felt fear before. She was amazed when he allowed her to not only release her hand but to stroke his face and hair in a comforting manner. The material seemed surreal in how it felt both dead and alive, like she was caressing a Greek marble statue that had an electrical current. How come Riki had never been fascinated by this marvelous creature? Little did she know that Riki’s aversion was because of his fascination.

“It is all right, Iason. I will not betray you, there is nothing to be afraid of. Besides, there is an old saying that fear makes you know you’re still alive. So even if you cannot be free or human, through fear of death you can be alive.”

“How can one go through daily events rationally when filled with such dread?”, the top Elite wondered, suddenly having developed a profound respect for human beings. Who would have ever thought that vessels so small and breakable could contain such an unstable mixture of powerful emotions? With such a storm of irrational urges contained within them, humans were practically walking time-bombs. When one took that into consideration it was hardly surprising that self-control was an issue for them.

“You don’t. All you can do is pretend that the day you stop existing will never come.” Yet her meeting Riki had made her want to have a life that was more than that, she had seen Riki as a true opportunity for an actual future.

“You misunderstand, Mimea. I do not fear the day I will perish”, the robotic demi-god responded. She gazed upon his face in confusion. Was he denying his new-found fear? Or had she misinterpreted the reason for his threats?

“I fear the day Riki will perish.”
As she was descending in one of the many transparent, high-tech elevators in Eos Tower, Mimea began to feel more and more restless, her breathing and heartbeat speeding up. It took every ounce of her self-control not to start banging on the glass walls to be let out of the small space that contained her. She closed her eyes and started counting in her head to pass the time it took for the device to reach the ground level of the building. Only when she heard the bell-like sound that indicated she had reached her destined level did she open them again.

No matter how hard it may seem

Just breathe. Focus. Do not show your disgust with this place and everything it stands for. Just a few more minutes and you will be out of here. You are not a caged animal, not anymore.

we should never hide
the little things that make us real

Honestly Mimea did not know how much longer she could keep up this pretense, now that she knew Tanagura for what it really was. How does he stand it? Not only staying confined within these walls night and day, but also having to play the part of the greatest representative of Tanagura’s delusions, Jupiter’s chosen one. Or perhaps she was the one being played here? At times it was hard to tell, as she had no experience with the extent of the acting skills of an Elite. Yet she had observed her own Master and several other Elite on a daily basis back when she was a Pet here and she had never encountered any of the ideas expressed by Jason Mink during their last meeting in other Elites’ behaviour. They did not doubt the system, it was perfect and as it had created them, so were they and therefore none had any right to question them. They did not feel anything, feeling was irrational, an emotional human weakness. And lastly no Elite would ever care for a human’s life to the point where the thought of a human’s unavoidable future demise would frighten him.

If only someone could wake everyone living in this supposed heaven on earth and make them aware of how they were in fact living in a white, perfect hell. They were created for one purpose and one purpose only, having no choice in the matter and not even being allowed any personality to speak of. An expiration date was always hanging over their heads like a dark cloud, they seemed to be merely waiting to be disposed of, without anyone wondering where they went or even speaking of them ever again. There was always the aim to please, to perform, only to postpone their unavoidable expiration date. This was not living, this was waiting to die. And Mimea wasn’t dead yet.

Show them who we truly are
we will in time

As the outer doors of the tower finally opened it was like a breeze of fresh air after having been nearly suffocated to death. Mimea stopped right outside of the doors for a moment to breathe deeply. As Lord Am’s Pet she had never even left this building and she still felt a sense of exhilaration everytime she would pass this threshold after having reported to Lord Mink. Jason, his name was Jason now. Smoldering orange eyes looked out across the big square in front of the immense, esteemed skyscraper that had been a prison of illusions for most of her life. How could she ever have thought there was anything even remotely worth living for in that fake place of artificial splendour? Stepping out of the tower’s shadow, Mimea felt the sunlight caressing her skin, as if beckoning her south, towards Midas and further south Ceres. A place of freedom and humanity, in spite of its poverty and violence.
Out in the real world
you are waiting to hear my call
through a river of illusions
you saw me fall

Riki. Was he the only one who had ever truly cared for her, truly wanted to be her friend? The thought of the terrible heartache his supposed betrayal of her had caused him made her feel uneasy. No Pet would have ever felt such remorse for the harm they had caused another, especially if it had been unintentional. The fact that the mongrel even remembered her, after all these years, in and of itself was already remarkable for Tanaguran standards.

Out in the real world
you are waiting to take my hand

Mimea went up the steps to the monorail platform just as the hovertrain heading out of Tanagura with several stops in Midas arrived. She scanned her pass at the automatic doors – the one Iason had given her – and the doors opened with a slightly hissing sound. It was strange how the enclosed space of the train only made her nervous on the way to Eos but never had that effect on the way back to Midas. Mimea sat down, the doors closed with another hiss and the vehicle started moving. Perhaps Riki truly was the answer to all of their problems in Tanagura. One who could put an end to their prison of ignorance simply by waltzing through it and undoing all of its workings with just one biting remark. What the fuck is this shit?! You people are freakin’ insane!

I'll be looking for an answer
that leads me back

As she was contemplating the true purpose of what had started out as a relatively straight-forward plan to seduce the mongrel, the gates of Tanagura were coming ever closer. Mimea was already able to peer through them and spot the highest buildings of Mistral Park on the other side. The moment she had passed through those gates it felt as if the weight of the world had just fallen off of her shoulders, making her light as a feather and free as a bird once more.

Outside, back in your arms

ankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankank

To Be Continued …

ankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankank

Author’s notes:

I know, I know, still about Iason/Mimea, still no Iason/Riki, but I’m getting there, I promise ;) Next chapter will have Riki/Mimea and I was thinking of maybe having Raoul confront Iason in the chapter after that.
And please review!!! :D
A Game of Give and Take

Chapter Summary

Riki meets up with Mimea in Midas and Jason's attempts to re-establish good relations with Raoul take an unexpected turn ...

Author’s notes:

I want to thank the readers who have posted a review for the previous chapter, I hope you’ll continue to enjoy reading this fic! :D I haven’t had many reviews yet for that chapter though, but I guess I’ll just attribute that to the fact that I have posted it not too long ago, so I’ve still got high hopes for future reviews there ;) I hope you’ll all like this next chapter! :)

opening theme: Daft Punk - Derezzed

It was a Friday night and the beginning of a planetary holiday, as such it was to be expected that Sasan would be a real centre of life and activity. People of all origins and social backgrounds were pushing and pulling their way through the immense crowds of the night-time Mecca, all eager to get their fill of the many exotic delights that the satellite city of Midas had for sale. There was only one person in the main square of the pleasure quarters that did not seem so bent on losing both money and sanity in the pursuit of high-quality drugs, pricey booz and manufactured ass. Even in the immense sea of moving bodies of every perceivable kind, this one stood out like a black wolf in a flock of white sheep. Leaning against one of the many obscene fountains – featuring naked nymphs and satyrs – was a mongrel from Ceres. Smoking a home-made cigarette, dressed all in black leather and worn denim, defying Midas’ nexus of capitalist glitter and glamour by his very presence. He did not play the game by the same rules as the citizens of Midas did, bound as they were by their PAM chips. In fact he had no rules to play by but his own.

Look at them, they’re like fucking ants in a nest. As usual, Riki the Dark was appalled by the ignorance, egocentrism and susceptibility to manipulation and bribery of the middle-class masses. Stupid ants who are not even aware they’re locked up in a bloody glass box. After a while of studying the many kitschily-dressed snobs, who in turn gave him dirty looks of disgust and slight fear, he began to get seriously bored. He’d been contemplating robbing some of these rich folks to stave off the infinite boredom that a place like this posed to any self-respecting human being with half a brain, but opted not to. It wouldn’t do to be arrested and beaten the living daylights out of him before his date for the evening had even arrived. Or at least he thought he was supposed to consider it a date, as it was a get-together with a female.
“Sorry I’ve kept you waiting”, a melodically chiming voice sounded right next to him, “Riki.” With all the noisy people walking all over the square he had not even heard her approach. The mongrel turned towards the speaker and silently observed her mature beauty for a moment. She was dressed in a blood-red elegantly cut dress decorated with dazzling gold embroidery. The skirt of the garment came down to her thin ankle on one side but came as high as a snowy upper thigh on the other side. The dress did not exactly have a cleavage but the sheer tightness of the fit made even her small breasts stand out. At the back the dress only consisted out of a skirt, revealing her shapely shoulder blades and a whole plain of milky-white skin. Her hair was a slightly darker tint of red and was wavy like blazing fire, but artfully gathered and somewhat contained on the left side of her head with real gold hairpins.

“Mimea” He immediately felt seriously underdressed in his old jeans and dusty biker jacket, but then again mongrels did not usually own a suitable wardrobe for this kind of occasion in downtown Midas. “You look…”

“Cheap, skinny and old? Practically naked? Exaggeratedly bright?”, she inquired matter-of-factly as she bent forward to hug and timidly kiss him on the cheek, attempting to hide her insecurity about her new looks.

“I was gonna say classy and chic, but you know, whatever works for you”, the cheeky mongrel replied with a grin, sensing her unease and using Ceresian offensive humour to put her more at ease. No reason to be serious about beauty standards with a mongrel like him.

She smiled, her professional lab-grown teeth appearing less inhumanly white due to her choice of bright-red lipstick. Similarly her eyes were made to look less wide by the use of black eyeliner and subtle soft-gold eyeshade. She looked very nice, but not like a big-eyed, round-faced Pet. “Oh, Riki, you always know how to make me smile, don’t you?”

“No shit, I hardly have to do anything to please you. I can just be myself, it’s why I like spending time with you”, he said truthfully. “So… what’d’ya wanna do, girl?” He was silently praying she did not have anything too lame or ridiculous in mind, she was an ex-Pet after all.

“I was thinking we could walk around a bit and just talk” If anything she’d missed the easy communication between herself and Riki. There wasn’t anything you couldn’t tell him, he didn’t judge. Well, perhaps she could not tell him everything this time around.

“Just hang? I’d agree, but I dunno if this is the right kind of scenery for being left in peace…”, Riki responded as he eyed the small group of onlookers that was rapidly forming around them. It was not everyday that the residents of Sasan saw a mongrel from Ceres and a former Pet from Tanagura having a conversation.

“Oh. How about we go to my workplace then and play some games? I’m sure my boss won’t mind, as an employee me and my friends can play for free”, the red-head enthusiastically proposed, imagining that Riki was probably very talented at card games that involved bluffing. Not to mention he could probably cheat his way out of any situation.

“Some boss you have. But it’s gonna be kind of obvious that I’m a mongrel and I’m guessing he wasn’t expecting that when he told you to bring over some friends?” Surely no one in Midas would ever anticipate such a friendship? Ex-pets and mongrels were still on opposite sides of the scales, even if they encountered each other in Midas on occasion a former Pet would never want anything to do with anybody from Ceres. Until now.

“He has been most kind to me, much more so than I deserve. And he already knows about my friendship with you, we don’t keep secrets from each other”, she mused as they started walking the
short distance to the Royal Casino, as if still unsure if that was truly the case.

“Wow. So you and the boss are like… y’know… intimate?” His lips had tightened and a slight crease had appeared in his dark forehead, he did not like the idea of Mimea whoring herself to her new boss in exchange for certain privileges. Was she truly a willing partner in those intimacies? Or was she not given a choice in the matter?

“I don’t know about that. But we’ve become friends, yes. Perhaps friends with benefits” Coming to think of it she did not know to what extent her sexual interaction with her new Master had helped to establish the recent trust between them. But she definitely felt that their conversations about Riki and about the flawed lifestyle of Tanagura had demonstrated that a common ground existed between them, if nothing else.

“I’m happy for you. I mean… unless it was something you were forced into?” Riki was aware how Mimea might be in a situation in which she had to rely on personal favours of patrons to maintain a decent lifestyle and steer clear of the brothels. He could understand that, back in his younger years in Ceres he’d had to rely on sexual favours as well to get food. But there was a difference between making such a rational choice and truly being forced into a sexual relationship, as he had learnt all too well after he’d crossed paths with Iason Mink ...

“It may have started out that way, but I’m glad it did. I don’t think he has anybody to talk to, really, everyone’s always looking for some kind of favour…” Did he even have any friends? Arguably friendships between Elite were superficial at best, however Lord Mink had not established his reputation as the unyielding Ice King by befriending other Elite. Of course he socialised on public events, as befitted one of his station and as was undoubtedly necessary to function as the head of the intelligence department. But the only true friend he’d had privately – the one he had known from childhood – might be the very one Mimea’s insolent behaviour had made relations so difficult with. She felt a stab of guilt at that thought, as if an icicle had pierced straight through her very heart.

“Tell me about it. Back in Ceres everyone’s always pretending to be my friend too, until I refuse to give them what they want and then they try to back-stab me…” Riki could tell she was more affected by her own words than she would have been if she were merely doing a favour for a superior to solidify her own position. Apparently she had truly managed to befriend her current owner, a feat not impossible in Midas yet still extremely rare.

“Exactly like that, yes. You are so empathic, Riki, you’re always considering other people’s emotions. You’re nothing like those selfish pricks back in Eos”, while venting her anger she no longer even considered how unbecoming cursing was for an Academy-bred class A. She was no longer angry with Iason Mink, but she was angry with the system that had doomed him to an inhumanly lonely existence.

“Now look who’s cursing, huh!”, the mongrel said with a wink. “You’ve been around there recently then? I wonder if Eos is still the same, just with different pampered fuckers?”

“There’s one pampered fucker who has returned to Eos”, the ex-Pet remarked with a slight smile, as if she was not sure yet whether or not she was happy about that.

“Wait… Mimea, are you living in Eos again? How is that even possible?”

“I am. And I know, it’s supposed to be impossible, to return to Eos from the brothels of Midas but against all odds...”

“Hold on a second... You’ve been in the brothels then? Holy crap! Shit, Mimea, for how long? I’m so sorry... I’m such an idiot! I never meant for you to get hurt, I just wasn’t thinking straight, I was so
angry and so lonely...” He was yelling rather loudly while walking around in an agitated manner, fisting his hands and kicking pieces of garbage.

“I haven’t exactly been counting the days, but I suspect I was at the Lotus for about two years or so.” At hearing his worst fears confirmed the other clasped a tanned hand in front of his mouth. “Oh Riki, please, don’t feel guilty! I know it was never your intention to hurt me, and if anything I can understand anger at Tanaguran suppression and the loneliness of being a Pet with a mind of its own”, Mimea spoke, grasping both of Riki’s hands in her own smaller, porcelain ones and gazing upon him with a look of pure serenity and adoration. “You are the best thing that has ever happened to me, Riki, I mean that. You have made me see that life can be so much more than just bondage and sex. You have shown me that Tanaguran boundaries are there to be broken, that I cannot allow them to dictate my life. If not for that, I could never have gotten where I am now.”

At hearing this, Riki calmed down somewhat, regaining his awareness that the touristic centre of Midas might not be the best place for him to draw attention to himself through aggression. Accepting one of Mimea’s outstretched hands he started walking down the busy street more quickly, guiding her along while spying the environment for Dark Men or potential snitches. “What d’ya mean you could’ve never gotten where you are now? Making you aware of your own individuality as a human being, I must have made life that much harder for you...”

“Perhaps. But you have also made my life far more gratifying and complete in so many ways! Don’t you understand the effect one as free and honest as yourself has on people from Tanagura? You make us want to be free, like you”, her smile was bright and genuine now, far more lively than Riki had ever seen it in fact. She must have suffered so much in that whorehouse, yet here she was like a resurrected angel of the revolution.

“Is that why you get along with your new boss so well? Does he have similar ideals?” It was a known fact that not all Midasian businessmen of influence were behind the Tanaguran control of its satellite city, but rumour had it that most of them agreed to let matters be in exchange for fat pay-offs.

“Indeed. We talk about such things often. It may be the only thing we have in common, but it has proven to be a very strong glue that binds us together even if we are very different.” It felt like a relief to be able to talk to someone she knew and trusted about her budding relationship with the unpredictable, distant Elite. But how much could she tell Riki without taking the risk of him finding out the truth? Then again the truth was that unlikely that she could probably tell him everything except her new Master’s name and rank without arising suspicion. “Actually we also talk of you, you are more famous than you know, Riki. I think you’ve been a great inspiration to many.”

Hearing such high praise from one he had condemned to two years of hell in Midas’ red-light district was unexpected and in his surprise Riki was not capable of suppressing his emotions. He could feel hot tears stinging his eyes and not much later burrowing their way through his dark cheeks, like molten lava through stone, the ashen darkness of his eyes further adding to the effect. “Shit.... shit, Mimea... I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t need to say anything, Riki. There is no bad blood between us, there never was”, the petite girl spoke as she squeezed his big, tanned hand in reassurance. Walking next to him she could see clearly how much he had grown and matured. Similarly his Ceresian bravado and pride often made room for his newly-developed emotional awareness. But perhaps that was because he knew her and felt she deserved to see his true feelings. In some ways Riki and Iason were not that different, both hiding their true selves behind façades built by the harsh environments they had adapted to.

After walking together in silence – their fingers intertwined now, ghastly white alternating with dusky bronze – for a while they had reached the doors of the infamous Royal Casino. Countless
tourists were gathered at the door, pushing and pulling as they were queuing to get through passport controls, each anxious to get his turn at the reknown paradise of chance. Just as he was wondering how the fuck they were supposed to get through that chaotic crowd, Riki was gently pulled backwards by Mimea, as she moved her red lips close to his ears – barely touching his earshell – and erotically whispered: “This way.”

Following Mimea into an alley right next to the grand entrance of the casino, Riki’s heart started pounding in his ears while a confusing collection of emotions welled up inside of him. Guilt. Surprise. Gratitude. Admiration. Protectiveness. Attraction. He had no idea what to make of the female in front of him now. He knew what she had been before, kind and open-minded as she had thought just like many other Pets back then. Sexuality was the only way in which she knew how to express herself. But she had just proven how she was very capable of expressing herself verbally now. So was her current flirtatious behaviour Riki’s imagination or was she just messing with him? Years and years of communicating through sex had undoubtedly made eroticism a second nature to her. Perhaps she was not even aware that she was doing it and Riki was just looking for something where there was nothing out of the ordinary? Even while contemplating all this Riki had a hard time keeping his eyes away from Mimea’s swaying hips and the way in which the plunging backline of her dress drew attention to her small but well-defined ass.

“Here we are”, just as he had began to study her behind in more detail, she briskly turned around and beamed at him with such vivacity that he was sure she had been very aware of what he had been doing just now. Riki forced himself to pull his eyes away from the appealing sight before him and turned his gaze towards the side-door Mimea had just pushed open. “After you, Mr Dark”, she added with a meaningful, sexy wink. She had been messing with him all right!

“Yeah, that might be best”, the mongrel responded, his tough attitude unable to mask the slight blush that had made its way unto his cheeks. “Seriously, Mimea, just how sharp did you get while I was away, huh?”

“It depends. How sharp do you want me?”, she giggled as she shut the door behind them, shimmering neon lights attached to the walls coming on automatically.

“You been taking lessons on how to intimidate people or something? Nah, I don’t mind the banter, just wondering where you’d learn an attitude like that. Or is it something they teach you at this casino, huh? So you can keep your own in a game and get customers to put in all their money?”, he asked as he followed her through a long, shady corridor and up a metal flight of stairs while also wondering how a place that chic could look so plain behind the scenes. This corridor could have been situated anywhere from the Black Market territory in Midas to the slums of Ceres.

“I guess it comes with experience and age. But yeah, I suppose I’ve had a few lessons from my boss. He has a way of making each and every conversation feel like a dangerous game of wits.” She threw open another door, another corridor, more stairs. Was that a security cam, gleaming at the top of the staircase? Mimea probably didn’t consider that being seen in a place like this could get a mongrel like him in serious trouble.

“I guess it comes with experience and age. But yeah, I suppose I’ve had a few lessons from my boss. He has a way of making each and every conversation feel like a dangerous game of wits.” She threw open another door, another corridor, more stairs. Was that a security cam, gleaming at the top of the staircase? Mimea probably didn’t consider that being seen in a place like this could get a mongrel like him in serious trouble.

“Has he, now? Then how do you know he’s not just messing with you, huh? I hate to break it to ya, but not a lot of Midas folk consider ex-Pets potential buddies.” After spying the camera actually moving and appearing to zoom in on him, Riki did not feel safe here at all anymore. Just who was this new boss of Mimea’s that he would buy an ex-Pet from such a scum establishment as the Lotus – which had a lowly reputation even among mongrels – and be OK with said new acquisition being friends with a mongrel and bringing him along to work? His gut feeling told him something wasn’t right here, but his feelings for Mimea prevented him from bolting straight away. If she was being played, he saw it as his responsibility to get her out of this
“I’d say he’s pretty serious about our relationship. It started out as a business deal of sorts and I know for a fact that he’s honest when it comes to such deals. Not to mention he’s not the sort of guy who sleeps around with just anyone for just any reason ...’, she trailed off as she followed Riki’s line of sight towards one of the camera’s in the stairwell. “Oh, and apparently he’s a bit of a stalker who likes to watch videos of people walking up and down stairs!”, she now shouted in the direction of the camera.

“Are there audio-feeds as well then?” Just great, not only was this a public place at the heart of Midas’ nightlife and tourist industry, it was also bugged from top to bottom. If he stayed here for one minute longer he was gonna be royally screwed at this Royal Casino.

“Probably. What can I say, the boss likes to know what’s going on in his establishment. But don’t worry, he knows what you look like and how highly I think of you, so you’re quite safe here”, the former prostitute assured him as she opened a door that led to one of the inner playrooms of the casino. The crowd was big and versatile but Riki was pretty sure he was gonna stick out like a sore thumb.

“You put an immense amount of trust in people for someone who has been so fundamentally betrayed in the past”, Riki argued, as he remained in the darkness of the corridor while Mimea had already stepped into the dazzling light of the playroom, her red dress fully coming to its right in that setting.

“And you put very little trust into people who have forgiven you crimes that others would have killed you for and for whose company others would kill.” It actually took him a couple of seconds to process the meaning of that dubious sentence. Boy, had that Pet’s linguistic aptness increased or what! Did Midas rich folks like her boss even speak like that?

Oh, what the hell! What was the worst that could happen if he stepped through that door? This was Mimea for fuck’s sake, she had neither the personality nor the brain to betray anybody.

“Strike! Got you again, bitch!” Practically everybody in the room was staring at the mongrel who was currently jumping around the pool table with his cue held high above his head like it was some kind of trophy. “Thanks, asshole. Maybe we should try another game?”, the fiery-haired siren responded with a sly smile. Riki burst out laughing at Mimea’s choice of words, pronounced in that Tanaguran accent she still had.

“Sure. How about strip poker?”, he gauded her, not truly willing to carry out that plan himself with all the dandy perverts in the room. Not that he was expecting to lose, but he did not want them gawking at Mimea any more than they already were.

“Let’s just make it poker. This isn’t that sort of establishment, neither does it want the reputation of such”, Mimea said, sounding very much like the owner of the casino rather than a former Pet-turned-employee.

“Fine. But poker ain’t half as fun if you’ve got nothing to lose”, Riki attempted to negotiate. Life was a game of give and take, if you wanted to get some you had to give some.

“Who says I’ve got nothing to lose?”, she innocently cooed as she catwalked her way to the poker
table and placed a neat, substantial stack of chips on the table.

“What? Your boss’ money? As an employee here you ought to know: the house always wins.” Riki flunked his muscular butt down on the nearest satin-upholstered, gold-leafed chair.

“If I win, you’ll have to join a club I’ve recently become a member of, no questions asked. If you win, you can have whatever it is you want. Deal?” Mimea went to sit down more elegantly than her playing partner, using the cover of the long, luxurious table cloth to toe off those insufferable gold heels. If she was going to win this, she could not have any distractions. However Riki was particularly cunning and experienced at Ceresian equivalents of this game, such as gigolo, therefore he could do with a distraction. To that end Mimea leaned forward far more than was necessary to receive her cards, revealing more of her desirable cleavage.

“A club? Well, how bad could that be, as long as they’ll have me. OK, if I win I want you to come on a robbing spree with me”, the naughty mongrel said with a smug grin, confident in his victory and already imagining the many benefits of having an attractive Academy Pet aid him in his pick-pocketing ventures.

In the mean time a small audience had gathered around the poker table, curious to see the outcome of a poker game between the sexy, dark mongrel and the gorgeous, spirited ex-Pet. It was not every day that they could witness a spectacle such as this, and at a high-class casino no less! Unheard of! Some customers who had been coming here all their lives and had shares in the Royal themselves were wondering why the Blondie who owned and monitored the casino would allow a mongrel to proceed undisturbed in such a manner? It had to be some kind of marketing champagne, meant to draw in more customers. Well, it was definitely working, as more and more people started streaming into the room and apparently none them even thought of calling the police or alerting the Dark Men patrolling right outside. Flaunting the rules of the game that was the social hierarchy, the unlikely pair began to play another game as their cards were dealt.

As the end of the game approached, there was nothing in Riki’s expressions that betrayed his satisfactory excitement. Bluffing had been a big part of both survival in the slums and his job in the Black Market, therefore he had no difficulties with it now. Never show your hand. That had been one of Katze’s golden rules.

Surprisingly there wasn’t a whole lot Riki could go on in Mimea’s expressions either. Not because of a lack of emotion but rather because of an excess in emotions. At one time she would look as if she was deeply depressed, yet at other times she would look as if she was absolutely euphoric. Riki could not make heads nor tails of it, he just could not tell when she was acting and when she wasn’t. It was in fact a bit troublesome for him to reach the conclusion that if Mimea wanted to fool him she could easily do so.

But two could play that game. Anybody in the Black Market could tell you that Riki the Dark was a natural pokerface. The slumdog hid his true feelings behind an impressive, impenetrable wall of challenging toughness and a dare-devil, no-care attitude. Looking at how he was seated and his body language alone he gave the impression that he was bored out of his skull with the game.

When it was finally time for him to show his hand, Riki no longer contained his smugness and flashed Mimea a bright, predatory smile as he turned his cards painstakingly slowly. “Straight Flush.
I gotta give it to ya, Mimea, you were a far more worthy adversary than I’d thought. But there ain’t a lot of people who can beat me at my own game.”

“Really? I suppose I have met my match then, Riki. For there aren’t a lot of people who can beat me at this game either”, the young woman smiled in a subdued manner as she hesitantly reached out a small, fragile hand to turn the cards that would seal her fate. “In fact – as it now turns out – my Master has taught me so well that I can beat even you at your own game.” As she turned the final card and completed her Royal Flush, her blood-red smile turned devilish and triumphant laughter sounded from her swan-like throat.

“Royal Fucking Flush! No way! How the hell have you managed to hide that all this time?! Shit man, I thought…”, the pokerface of Ceres was at a loss for coherent words at this down-right humiliating defeat. The infamous leader of the most feared gang of Ceres had lost against a freakin’ ex-Pet from Eos! All of a sudden Mimea’s red hair and orange eyes reminded Riki of the picture of a fox he had once seen in one of Iason’s books while bored at the penthouse. The animal had struck Riki as very lovely with soft fur, yet in the description of the animal it had said that foxes were predators known for their slyness.

“You thought wrong? Obviously you did, Riki the Dark”, she teased him sweetly as she got up from her chair like a flaming victor out of a war chariot. “Though I have to say, you were far from easy to read yourself. Unfortunately for you there was not much you could do, with your fate quite literally in my hand.”

“Holy fuck! How can you act so frightened and inferior when you know you’ve got me? Those last five minutes, I was so sure you had a low hand!”, the mongrel exclaimed, more alarmed by what had just happened than he cared to admit. How well did he truly know this girl? How much could she possibly have changed in such a short period of time? Then again he knew he had changed significantly during his two years in Iason’s household.

“Don’t worry, Riki. If your fate ever were truly in my hands, I would do with it what I felt was best for you. I could never do anything to you that you could not handle”, she promised with a look of devotion in her eyes as she approached him again, closing the space that had been between them during the game with an air of relief. It was in that moment that Riki realized that she was as much in love with him as she had ever been, if not more so. But little could he know that such love could work to his disadvantage just as easily as it could work to his advantage.

“Yeah, I know. I just wanna protect you, y’know. It’s your goddamn right after what I’ve pulled on you before…”, he started again, hating how he had not managed to do anything so far that might have righted that immense wrong. Surely the day would come that she would ask him for a favour worthy of her forgiveness?

“Ssshhhh! That’s quite all right, Riki, there is nothing to forgive. How about we go to the bar on the next floor and have a well-deserved drink?” She was smiling again, a genuine smile this time. Then again if it wasn’t, would he be able to tell?

intermediary ending theme: CellDweller – G4m3 0V3R

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Back in his penthouse in Eos, Iason Mink was playing his very own game. Frequently checking his wrist com, he was carefully monitoring his little phoenix’ progress in attempting to coil his run-away mongrel around her pretty finger. After a while Raoul began to notice that his friend’s thoughts were elsewhere, even though he was still winning the game of chess they were currently playing, as usual. If a lousy conversationalist at the moment, Raoul acknowledged that Iason was a true Master when it came to winning games.

“Pray tell what is it that occupies your attention in such a way that you cannot even thoroughly enjoy what little time we have together nowadays, Iason?”, the green-eyed geneticist inquired with a sneer, not even bothering to hide his disapproval at Iason’s neglect. Things had not been going well between them for a while now. It started when Iason had finally gotten rid of that filthy mongrel... Or did it already start after Iason had demanded that he got rid of his prized Mimea for that very same mongrel’s benefit? Thinking about it now, it still enraged him.

“If you continue to hold your queen that tightly, Raoul, she will surely be pulverised”, Iason spoke calmly, not even taking his coldly penetrating eyes away from the screen of his wrist com.

“What are you even talking about?!”, the scientist exclaimed, unable to contain his rage any longer, his honey-coloured curls moving about like waves in a storm.

“Your queen? The chess piece you are clutching so desperately? I would apologize, but it is truly not my fault that you have not succeeded in defeating me at this game even once throughout all the time we have known each other”, the pale-haired Blondie responded, now bothering to look his interlocutor in the face only to throw him a smug, utterly unperturbed look. As if it was the most normal thing in the world that the other Blondie was raging like a wild lion.

“Isn’t it, now?” All of a sudden Raoul got up from his seat rather abruptly, knocking over both the table and the chess board that was on it, effectively putting an end to the game.

“If you cannot accept your loss, Raoul, perhaps you ought to not have agreed to play this game in the first place?” It was unclear whether the observant head of Intelligence had already guessed the reason for his friend’s sudden outburst and was talking about his disposal of Mimea or if he was still referring to the game of chess they had been playing. At the very least he was attempting to feign like he had no idea what the other was talking about by formulating his answer in game terminology, or so it seemed in Raoul’s current logic.

“It’s you! You can get anyone to agree to anything, you... egocentric devil!” As if knocking it over was not offence enough to his host, Raoul grabbed the turned-over table and hurled it across the room, where it rather unceremoniously landed in the koi pond with a loud splatter that ruined the Persian rugs next to it.

“Raoul, you are behaving like a madman. What in Jupiter’s name is the matter with you?” He’d genuinely liked that rug. But no matter, he had gotten used to the damages of priceless goods and the bother of replacing them during the years that Riki had lived in the penthouse.

“Mimea! My perfect, darling Mimea!” Raoul lamented as he was now dramatically pacing about the room with his hands in his stunning, shimmering hair.

“Mimea? Oh, yes, I had intended to speak to you on that matter. Although of course I am in no way lawfully obliged to do so, as your friend of many years I feel like I should”, Iason responded, still calmly seated in his sofa as if the other Blondie had not just jumped up and violently thrown his furniture around. Was there truly nothing that could break this man’s cool demeanor?

“And all because of that disgusting mongrel, that filthy mutt of yours!”
"You mean Riki? Well, I very much doubt that he needed to put a lot of effort into seducing your all-too-willing Pet. After all you yourself had trained her to be the perfect slut." He pronounced the final word no differently than he had the rest of his sentence, knowing that would enrage Mimea’s supposed father even further.

"How dare you! How dare you speak of her in that way! I cared for her, you know I did! And yet you had me send her away to that god-awful place! All because you had this depraved attraction to that animal!" For the life of him, he could still not understand how the mighty Iason Mink, Jupiter’s golden boy and the best Head of the Syndicate of all times, could have fallen so low.

"Indeed perhaps my “depraved attraction” - as you so accurately put it - did cause my judgement of the girl to be unnecessary harsh. I agree with you on that entirely."

Not having expected for Iason to actually agree with him, Raoul was momentarily at a loss for words. His mouth fell open in a striking similarity to one of the koi that had been thrown out of the pond and was gasping for air on the ruined carpet.

"In fact – after some due consideration – I find myself entirely submitting to your view of your esteemed creation’s positive attributes. Therefore I had decided that it might be better for her to return to Eos, as that is an environment that is better adapted to the requirements of her finer breeding."

"P... positive attributes? What do you mean, you had decided?" The feline-looking Elite pounced and was nearly literally on his host in seconds, clasping his hands with enough strength to break each and every single bone in a human hand. “Iason, for Jupiter’s sake, I beseech you! Show me some compassion for once in your life and bring my beloved Mimea back to me!"

"I’m afraid I can’t do that, Raoul”, the icy Elite replied, entirely unaffected by his friend’s desperate pleas.

“But... but you said....!”, Raoul was so upset that he was having difficulties speaking. Of all of Jupiter’s creations, he was the only one who was able to allow his emotions to take him over so completely, probably due to a flaw in his genetic make-up that he himself had managed to cover up effectively. It was the reason why Iason had decided to befriend him, even after having already decided at an early age not to have any friends, as none of the other Elite could be trusted.

“I cannot do that because she has already been purchased by another Tanaguran household, Raoul. I am truly sorry for your loss”, his arctic eyes looked directly into the other’s, intently studying them and attempting to distinguish singular emotions in that whirlwind of green. The colour reminded him of a storm at sea, or possibly a hurricane raging through a forest.

“Don’t tell me the matter is out of your hands now! Don’t tell me that you have no way of retrieving her! Like I said, you can get anyone to do anything, manipulation is your game, Iason Mink!”

“Indeed that is true. But I believe that in this particular case, there is no manipulation of any kind that could persuade Mimea’s current owner to part with her.”

“Nonsense! There is nothing that your influence could not achieve in Eos!”

“Ah, yes. But the question then of course is whether or not I would be willing to use that influence to bring her back to your household. And as a matter of fact I cannot, I am sorry.”

Raoul fell down on his knees then, not as a further means to beg Iason for his assistance but as an involuntarily expression of defeat. By Jupiter, I have befriend a monster that will stop at nothing to see me suffer!
“However if you would like to see her on occasion, that could be arranged. How does once every three days sound?”

“W... what? But how...” Surely if he could persuade the owner to lend someone his Pet every three days he could also persuade him to sell her altogether?

“For the love of Jupiter, Raoul, get up. It is truly unbecoming for an Elite to crawl on the floor like that. Then again, who am I to pass judgement on what behaviour is unsuitable, if crawling on my floor brings you gratification I will not stop you.”

Even before Iason had finished his sentence, Raoul reared up just as suddenly as he had gone down and was effectively grabbing Iason’s shoulders while coming much closer than Tanaguran politeness standards would allow even for an Elite of the same rank. “You have her? You have my Mimea! Oh, Iason, why did you keep this from me? How long has she been here? How is she, is she badly injured? Oh, by Jupiter, what they must have done to her over in that shabby place!”

Patiently allowing Raoul to finish his passionate speech, Iason used the opportunity to slowly and deeply inhale the sweet smell of his long hair. It smelled of pine trees and of eastern spices.

“Honestly, Raoul, one would expect that after several decades of acquaintance with me you would have learned to tell when I am leading you on”, Iason breathed, still lost in the magical forest of Raoul’s overwhelming presence.

“Well how am I supposed to tell the difference when you are always leading me on!”, he emphasized his words by giving Iason a gentle shove on the shoulders, an action that ended up bringing the other blond’s face even closer to his chest, enabling him to get a close-up view of the gold-and-green velvet pattern of Raoul’s refined attire.

A brief but exquisite smile appeared on Iason’s usually-stoic, handsome face for a moment. “Am I now?” He did not even attempt to move away from the rude invasion of his personal space. It even appeared as if he was leaning slightly closer, carefully listening to the beating of Raoul’s electronic heart. How he managed to by-pass all of his safety protocols and get it to beat that quickly was still a mystery to Iason.

“What has gotten you in such a playful mood, if I may ask?”, the golden-haired romantic asked as he went and sat back down, still so distraught that he sat down next to Iason instead of in his own sofa, as was expected of an Elite.

“I believe I may have found a way to get my own Pet back as well. I’m sure you can understand that much, what with your unseemly behaviour on behalf of Mimea just now?”

“Your own Pet back? Iason, you haven’t had a Pet in ages, even after I have offered you one for free on numerous sales... Oh no. No, Iason! You cannot mean the mongrel! For goodness’ sake, Iason! Don’t you ever learn?” While trying to bring some sense into his friend, Raoul moved towards him until their legs were slightly touching and had again grabbed the other’s hands, not even noticing that the other had secretly taken off his gloves while he wasn’t looking.

“I am trying to learn. And your Mimea has proven a great help in that respect, therefore I owe you my gratitude. I hope that with Mimea back here we can put our quarrels behind us”, Iason spoke from his frozen heart, grabbing unto the offered hands more tightly, savouring the warmth and softness of Raoul’s gloved hands beneath his bare skin.

Raoul, only now realizing that Iason’s gloves had apparently disappeared, did not have the audacity to pull back his hands even if he had now become aware of the inappropriateness of the situation.
“But of course, Iason. You know that your friendship is very dear to me. I am sorry if I have made you think otherwise as of late. But you should know that Mimea is more than just a Pet to me, she is my finest creation, my child ... in a way ...”

“Then you understand why I must have my Riki”, Iason stated firmly, while putting an ungloved hand on the other Elite’s leg, the warmth of it easily seeping through the thin fabric of Raoul’s silk trousers.

“I am not sure that I do. I have created Mimea myself, I know every fibre in her body, every detail I have calculated according to my own preferences and expertise. But this mongrel from the slums, you know absolutely nothing about that creature! Therefore its behaviour is entirely unpredictable, its attitude makes it unmanageable. It is like a wild animal, even you cannot hope to truly tame it, Iason.” He was considering carefully prying Iason’s fingers from his leg but opted not to, seeing as how they were trying to rekindle their friendship this might not be the best time for such a distancing action.

“And that is exactly why I want him.” The strong fingers grasped the material of the trousers more firmly, like a predator sinking its claws into its prey’s fur. “I like how he is unpredictable, it brings an element of surprise into my life that I feel I could not live without anymore. Truth be told, it is not my intention to truly tame him. I merely want him to be loyal and return to me when I ask it.”

“I suppose that does make some kind of sense. Your job is to gather data and categorize it in order to make new information. Something you cannot understand is not an inconvenience to you, but more like a challenge. Like a science project or a breeding program is to me, which is why I like Mimea so much, she embodies my own area of expertise”, the other was desperately trying to rationalize an increasingly irrational encounter.

“I have to warn you, Raoul, you may find her much changed. I find the change to be for the better, but you might not agree with me on that.” Was it Raoul’s imagination, or was Iason’s face tilted more towards him than it had been only seconds ago? He could smell the fresh but powerful perfume of his long, glistening hair. It always reminded Raoul of moonlight rather than sunlight, which also befitted Iason’s cold composure.

“Why yes, after one has been repeatedly subjected to such humiliating, sexual abuse it is perfectly natural that one would be significantly altered. But what a strange idea that such alteration could be beneficial in any way, Iason.” He had mustered the courage to put his own hand – still appropriately gloved – on top of Iason’s but he had not yet reached the point where he could remove his trousers from its grasp.

“It is truly not so strange an idea to be appreciative of the unexpectedness and spontaneity that is life, Raoul, not once you come to accept it and ravel in it”, Iason said with a down-right seductive smile as he put his other hand right on top of Raoul’s, sealing it in between both of his own hands, as if making Raoul an accomplice in his crime of putting his hand on the other’s leg. “You see, life is full of passionate, it’s what makes it worth living. I believe you to be a rather passionate individual yourself in fact, but the rules of Tanaguran conduct have made you averse to your very own nature, my friend. Let me show you how liberating it can be to let go of all those regulations and limitations.” As he said those words, Iason had started gently kneading Raoul’s legs through his trousers.

“By Jupiter, Iason! What are you doing?! Please cease this madness this instance! Iason, I am warning you! I will not be a participant in this!”

“But you already are, Raoul, my beautiful”, Iason said as he cupped Raoul’s cheek, carefully brushing aside his shiny curls. “You compare my interest in Riki with your interest in Mimea, but
both of us know there is a much better comparison to be had. After being enamoured with Riki myself, it became quite evident that you harbour similar feelings for me, Raoul.”

“Iason, I swear to you, I would never...!” As Raoul was on the verge of tears – somehow he also knew how to override the protocols for his tear ducts – Iason bent over his neck to shower it with butterfly kisses, at the same time combing through the rich, soft mass of the other’s hair with his free hand.

“Act on those feelings? Oh, I suspected as much. But you’ll be glad to know that I fully intend to act on those feelings of yours myself.” While he was now shamelessly licking and nibbling on his friend’s throat, his hand on Raoul’s leg now began to caress its way upwards.

“NO! Iason, stop this! For the love of our friendship do not treat me in this manner!”, Raoul started screaming while trying to pull himself away from the onslaught, only managing to fall down flat on his back on the couch, which allowed Iason to easily straddle him and continue his ministrations.

“It is for the love of our friendship that I am doing this, Raoul. You will understand soon enough”, after stating this Iason moved his hand over Raoul’s hip and started exploring his chest, reaching for the buttons of his expensive satin shirt.

Raoul openly started crying now, tears streaming down his face like rivers through a beautiful meadow. In spite of his fear he was still able to vaguely wonder how he was actually capable of crying without any fluid in his synthetic eyes, before his utter horror took over again. “Iason, please! Please, don’t do this! What did I ever do to you? Why are you doing this?!”

“Ssssssh, it’s all right, Raoul, I am not angry with you”, Iason comforted him as he continued removing the satin shirt and touching his hair ever so gently. “It is not my intention to hurt you, in fact I am positive I will not. But then again with you the very thought of pain might make you experience it”, but he sounded as if he was fascinated with that prospect rather than dreading it.

This horrible nightmare had to end somehow! He had to get through to Iason, he had to! Getting his hands free from underneath’s Iason’s body – that was somewhat heavier than his own, making him unable to lift the weight off of him – Raoul put his hands on either side of Iason’s face, pulling it away from his own neck and forcing his assailant to look him in the eye. “Iason, listen! I swore to myself I would never burden you with this knowledge of my own flawed nature, but I see no other way to get through to you in this moment.”

When hearing Raoul was about to share information on his own flaws with him, Iason paused his lovemaking and gazed upon Raoul’s green orbs expectantly. “I have always cared deeply for you, Iason, ever since we were children. Before you were the Head of the Syndicate, or the head of the Intelligence department, or much of anything really. Sometimes this feeling is so great that I do not know what to do with it, sometimes I feel as if it might drown me or drive me insane. But the truth is, Iason, that I care more for you than I do for myself or anything else. I would die for you. I would kill for you. I would leave Tanagura forever if I thought it was necessary for your well-being. Because to me you are like the sun, you are the centre of my existence, nothing else truly matters but you.”

Raoul waited for a response and with every second of Iason’s silence his dread grew. What if Iason did not want anything to do with him anymore, now that he knew that he was flawed? Moreover that the flaw was connected to him specifically. He would have to kill himself. But how was a Blondie supposed to do that? They were made to be indestructible! He would be stuck in this life, forever doomed to ponder Iason’s rejection and disgust.

“Raoul, why do you suppose I am doing this? What you have just said, I have known for a long time, probably before even you did. It was never my intention to befriend anybody, but when faced
with such undying devotion on your behalf, what choice did I have?”, Iason spoke, his face serious and as unfeeling as usual, but a snow storm in his eyes.

Raoul stared at his friend in complete surprise. Iason had known all this time? And it was actually the reason he had befriended him? “So all this time you have been pretending to be my friend so you could make me pay for my inappropriate feelings?”

“By Jupiter, how can one of your creations be thus utterly dense? I am not making you pay, Raoul, I am doing this to help you. Because deep down, it is what you yourself truly want”, Iason said decisively, as if that explained everything, and continued to unbutton Raoul’s shirt while caressing the side of his face. He often reminded Iason of a painting by Botticelli, in which Venus was born from the foam of the ocean’s waves. In many ways Raoul was like the god of love, for he was the one who manufactured the Pets and of course he was a hopeless romantic with all his interest in poetry and art. His undulating hair was like the waves of the ocean while his eyes were green like the sea. If Iason had not already been in love with his soulmate, Riki, he would have easily fallen for Raoul. Strangely enough the burden of taking the initiative in any intercourse with him now lay with Iason, as he was the only one brave enough to break the chains that Jupiter had put on love.

“But, Iason, I care about you! I could never hurt or abandon you, never! So please don’t torment me! Please, it hurts already because it is you doing it! It is you, the one I cannot be without! Please stop, Iason, you destroy me from within!” He was not even struggling anymore at this point, unable to push the object of his affections away even if it was torturing him. His emerald eyes were alive and wet like the seas Iason felt they represented. He wondered if they would also taste salty.

After hearing Raoul’s declaration of love – which ironically enough was formulated as a plea for his release from Iason’s lovemaking – Iason had received as much confirmation as he needed to continue his attack. He resolutely removed Raoul’s shirt entirely and started vehemently kissing him on the mouth.

“I wanna kiss you

“Nooooo! Iason, I beg of you, please do not torment me so!”

“For Jupiter’s sake! Raoul, you claim you have such devotion for me, yet you do not trust me! Trust in me, trust that I will not hurt you.”

“B... but Iason, you degrade me with these unsavoury actions...”, the other Blondie protested, still not understanding why he was being subjected to such abuse from someone who was supposed to be his friend.

“Trust me, they are not as unsavoury as you think. Nor are they meant to humiliate or torture you, quite the contrary”, Iason assured, looking Raoul in the eye with as calming a look as he could achieve in his current state of arousal. “Now, just lay back and try to relax, yes?”

“Re... relax? How am I supposed to relax when you are doing these terrible things to me!”, Raoul panicked again.

“They’re not so terrible when you’re watching them in a Pet show, are they?”, Iason pointed out, while idly toying with Raoul’s perfect golden ringlets.

“But I am not a Pet, Iason! What a Pet deems to be pleasurable is horrible to an Elite!”, the prey
protested as he tried to pull the predator’s claws out of his hair.

But if I do then I might miss you, babe

“That is a lie Jupiter has told us because she wants us all to herself. I can tell you that I found it immensely pleasurable to do these things with Riki”, the sapphire-eyed creature promised with an erotic stare that would have made the mongrel he spoke of climax on the spot.

“You mean you have done this before? With a mongrel no less?!’’ Unfortunately the Elite in front of him was not so easily turned on as his mongrel. But no matter, Iason liked a challenge.

“I have. Surely if it can be pleasurable with a mongrel, it can be pleasurable with me, don’t you agree? Or do you perhaps doubt my ability in this particular area, Raoul?”

“But I am not a mongrel either, Iason!” What would it take for Iason to understand that this kind of animalistic behaviour was simply not proper for one of their class?

“Yet you are human, like a Pet and like a mongrel. Both of us are.”

“Wh... what do you mean I am human? We are androids, Iason!” Had their unorthodox Head of the Syndicate truly lost it for real this time?

“Not entirely, not where it counts”, Iason said as he pointed towards his head. “Believe me when I say that you are human, Raoul, you are alive, you are biological. You yourself are a part of your own research field.” As if to prove his partner’s humanity, Iason set to the task of sliding down his cream-coloured silk pants over his shapely hips.

“It may be true that our minds are organic in nature, Iason, and without a doubt this affects the way in which we think to a certain extent. But there is nothing human or alive about our bodies, Iason! Therefore I cannot possibly derive any enjoyment from what it is you are doing! You might as well try to have intercourse with a machine! Even if I have the ability to understand what you’re trying to do in theory, I could never truly experience it, even if I wanted to.”

It’s complicated and stupid

“You underestimate the power of the mind, Raoul. These bodies may be robotic but they are under the control of our human brains, in other words whatever it is that we want them to feel they will”, Iason spoke matter-of-factly while looking up from between the other blond’s legs with erotically hooded eyes. He then slid back upwards, brushing along the entire length of his victim’s body like a snake, and whispered right against his lips: “So all you have to do for this to feel absolutely delicious.... is to want it and to surrender yourself to me.”

“What if I try to do so and it does not work? Will you stop?” He knew from indirect experience through several of his experiments that the line between pain and pleasure was a very fine one that at times had more to do with personal perception than with actual stimuli. Therefore, theoretically speaking, what was heaven for one person could be hell for another. He needed some kind of fail safe if he was expected to go through with this, some kind of insurance that no prolonged pain would
befall him if Iason’s experiment failed.

“It worked for me, therefore it will work for you.” Apparently the head of Intelligence’s confidence in his own assessment of the interaction with a mongrel was absolute. Then again Iason did not think like a scientist but like a politician. Unlike Raoul – who doubted everything and always considered the possibility of error – Iason made a decision based on the data he had and followed it through. Shoot first, ask questions later.

Got my ass squeezed by sexy cupid

“Yes, but will you stop if it doesn’t?” If Iason was so convinced this would work, what harm could it possibly do to give his friend at least some form of certainty in that?

“Truthfully I think that you will only succeed in giving in to your desires if I leave you no other choice.” Why were all of his sex partners so determined to deny themselves at each and every turn? Well, perhaps not Mimea, but as a Pet this was what she did for a living.

Guess he wants to play, wants to play

“By all that is holy, Iason, you are scaring me! Just stop and we can talk about this like civilized people”, the scientist tried to argue rationally. But once Iason Mink had set his sights on something there was no changing his mind. Like an alligator he was simply incapable of releasing anything once he had clamped his jaws shut.

After Iason had quickly and efficiently peeled off Raoul’s gloves, boots and underwear he was left completely exposed on the satin canapé. Iason took a moment to bask in the glory of the other’s nude perfection, admiring the flawlessly sculpted, divine body in front of him. For Raoul it felt unusual for his skin to be in such direct contact with both the rich material of the cushions and Iason’s clothes, as if all of his senses had suddenly become heightened. One of the first readings that stood out were how Iason’s breathing, heartbeat and body temperature had risen considerably when compared to approximately half an hour ago. His synthetic body had to be attempting to mimic the biological signs of excitement.

A love game, a love game

After having sated his scientific curiosity through a brief analysis of all of these abnormal readings, Raoul’s own bodily state of panic began to reassert itself. When Iason pulled away to begin removing his own clothes, Raoul saw an opportunity to escape the confines of the couch and began to flee in the direction of the penthouse’s exit. Yet as he approached said exit with superhuman speed, he contemplated how he could impossibly run down the halls of Eos Tower while naked, at least not without anyone finding out that Iason had gone insane.

Realizing the error of his haste, Raoul doubled back to the living room and brushed right past Iason’s
quickly-moving body on his way there. It was only once Raoul had retrieved his clothing that he noticed that Iason’s now partially naked body was currently blocking the only doorway out of the room.

“I believe you might be even more trouble than Riki is, Raoul. You protest as much as he does and you try to run away from me.” He briefly entertained the notion of whether or not physical punishment might be an effective method to condition Raoul as well.

“You are not my Master, Iason Mink, you do not tell me what to do! I merely tried to leave as a final solution to this argument, my apologies if you did not exactly provide me with the opportunity to do so in a more polite manner!” This was utterly unthinkable! How could Iason honestly expect that he would stay here for even another second while he was being treated in such an extremely rude manner, with not the slightest consideration shown for his thoughts on the matter! As he was trying to process the very audacity and impossibility of what was occurring, Raoul was slowly but surely being backed into a corner of the room by Iason’s hungry gaze alone.

“But I am and I do, for is that not what you have said about halfway through this supposed argument? That you cared for me deeply, that there was nothing you would not do for me? Or were you insincere when you spoke those words?” Perhaps that was all that this so-called friendship was, just an oral show of loyalty with no real actions to back it up. Were truly all Elite that shallow and untruthful, even the emotionally expressive Raoul? And then they wondered why he would lower himself to a mongrel. Why there was simply nothing else to be had in Tanagura!

“You know that I am never insincere, Iason, especially not to you. However I believed that perhaps you shared those feelings to a certain extent. But apparently you do not as you are intent on making me suffer!” How could his friend even make such demands from him if he offered no thoughtfulness or affection whatsoever in return? Having been entirely backed into the corner now, there was nothing between Raoul and the impenetrable thick wall behind him but a sturdy-looking chest of drawers. Before he could even flinch his naked buttocks were pushed into it abruptly as his assailant grabbed his hips and started ravishing his victim’s mouth once more.

Hold me and love me

“Is sex with me truly that horrifying that everyone associates it with dreadful suffering and lack of affection on my side?”, the enticing sapphire-eyed blond whispered in between kisses, the sad undercurrent in his voice only adding to his irresistibility. Jupiter’s chosen one was becoming more agitated by the minute. Why did they always run from him? What had he done to deserve being left alone by those he loved? From a mongrel he took no offense, for they did not know the first thing about manners, but from another Elite – his best and only friend at that – he was beginning to take serious offense! The anger made the strength of his plundering kisses increase and the clenching of Raoul’s hips rougher.

Just wanna touch you for a minute

Iason’s sadness and frustration must have struck a chord with Raoul, for he stopped backing away from his friend – who kept on approaching either way – and allowed Iason to place him unto the
piece of furniture behind him while proceeding with his oral molestation. “I do not find you horrifying at all, Jason. Rather I... find the prospect of sexual activities for one of my station... and physical limitations horrifying... even if it would be with the one I care for”, Raoul managed to convey while gasping for breath, his biological instinct of fear stronger than the knowledge that his android body could go without oxygen for several hours before his organic brain had depleted its reserves.

*Baby three seconds is enough for my heart to quit*

“In order for you to move forward as a human being, Raoul, I will need to ask you for what appears to be the ultimate sacrifice to you. I am willing to sacrifice quite a bit for your well-being, even your friendship. Therefore I give you this ultimatum: trust me now and surrender yourself completely, or leave and never come back”, Jason said resolutely, no longer interested in fooling around if all it could lead to would be yet another disappointment. He needed his brother to be a willing participant in this, for he was tired of having to force himself unto his loved ones.

*Let’s play a love game, play a love game*

*Do you want love, or you want fame*

*Are you in the game? Dans le love game*

Was that truly the kind of game Jason wished to play here? What could he possibly be trying to prove so desperately by such an ultimatum? It was almost as if the top Elite was on some kind of social suicide mission for the sake of sexual gratification.

*I’m on a mission*

*And it involves some heavy touching you*

If so then two could play that game. For even if Raoul had never succeeded in winning a single game from the icy Elite across from him, he had also never turned down a challenge for a game. As a matter of fact – knowledgeable on the subject of sexual interaction as Dr Am was – this might be the one game he was finally going to beat Jason Mink at. Seeing as how the doctor had never had the opportunity for first-hand experience of the subject he had been studying for the bigger part of his life, it would be a lie to state that he wasn’t at least a little bit curious. And he had to admit that the burning intensity of his friend’s passion made him want to submit on some deep, primal level.

*I’m educated in sex, yes*

*Now I want it bad, want it bad*
“Very well then, Iason. I shall allow you to lead me down this path of depravity. But do not hold me responsible for what it may make me become”, the love expert reluctantly agreed, suspecting that one so skilled in the manufacturing of the living, breathing definitions of sex appeal could easily become just as skilled in the art of love making itself. Therefore his reluctance to let Iason have his way was not for lack of curiosity in his own speciality, but rather for fear of either an inability to express his affection for the radiant deviant in front of him to the extent he wanted to, or the risk of developing too much of an obsession with the biological act of sex itself.

Let’s play a love game, play a love game

Do you want love, or you want fame

Are you in the game ? Dans le love game

Having succeeded in his persuasion of the innocent creation by inciting not its lust for sex but rather its lust for knowledge, the serpent’s only response was a sinful smile that was both satanic and tempting at the same time. The game master had included yet another player in his game of lust and anarchy. This was bound to get interesting. Very interesting.

Dans le love game

ending theme: Lady Gaga – Love Game

ankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankank

Author’s notes:

OMG cliffhanger!!! :O Do I know how to “torment” my readers, or what? ;) You know what they say, fine line between pleasure and pain :P Nah, it just seemed to me that Raoul would not go down without a fight, and I wanted to be able to devote another chapter on this and this one was already turning out rather long so... ;) But I’ll try my best to update soon :) All right, I admit that I’ve got absolutely NO idea how poker is played (or pool or chess for that matter) :P I just know what hands are worth more at the end, that players are bluffing and that they’re usually playing for money :P So please forgive any gaps or inaccuracies in respect to the pokergame ;)

The beginning of the conversation between Iason and Raoul was more or less inspired by a conversation between Mr and Mrs Bennett in Pride and Prejudice :P Although of course the end of that encounter is nothing like what we can read in Austen’s works ;)

A love game, a love game
I apologize to the Iason/Riki fans out there to keep you all waiting, but the Iason/Raoul more or less rolled into this fic rather unexpectedly, similar to how the Iason/Mimea did :P Let’s face it: Iason has no idea how to express emotion other than through sex ;) And he wants as many Tanaguran accomplices as he can if he wants any kind of change to ever happen there...

I hope you’ve enjoyed this chapter and please review soon!!! :D
Raoul has agreed to participate in Iason's experiment and the two of them finally get down to it, with Raoul attempting to instruct Iason along the way.

Author’s notes:
So here it is, the next chapter in this story ;) It’s the beginning of the holidays, so I should be able to update more quickly over the next couple of months. I hope I did not shatter anybody’s dreams by my interpretation of the Iason/Raoul pairing in this chapter (or the very presence of said pairing in a story that’s going towards Iason/Riki) and I hope that you’ll all enjoy reading this chapter :) My apologies to those of you who are not fond of lyric fics, but the insertion of lyrics in this chapter is very limited so ;)

Soundtrack: Scandroid – Connection

I'm always looking back in time

Looking back at the early beginnings of his relationship with the ethereal being in front of him, it was truly miraculous how things had turned towards this unexpected outcome. For truly, apart from belonging to the same social rank and station, they had absolutely nothing in common at first glance. In the freedom and ignorance of their relatively carefree youth, said opposites had amplified rather than subdued their budding friendship. Yet now such a word could not even begin to describe the depth and multi-layered nature of how their lives had intertwined over the years.

Memories of all the things
That I have left behind

Where Iason had been the rational and socially apt one, Raoul had been passionate and socially awkward. Where Iason had focussed his efforts on what was expected of him by society – careful never to give any more of his personal self than was required – Raoul had always spread his efforts over all areas that had sparked his personal interests and utterly devoted himself to those areas on all levels. Where Iason was coldheartedly calculating and conniving, Raoul was direct and honest to an almost-emotional degree.
And sometimes all this is too much

Yet as they had aged and pursued entirely different careers, the very opposites that had initially attracted them to one another had slowly but surely driven them apart more and more. Society had given them different predestined roles to play and the brotherhood of their young years no longer served any purpose in said society. One of them had watered down to an apolitical man of science specialised in human biology and the other had ascended to the most powerful political figure in the history of Amoy. One represented humanity in all of its depraved, flawed nature and the other represented the perfection of the technological divinity that was Jupiter. One had grown to fear all things emotional and living, whereas the other had come to detest all things informatical and dead.

Over many decades the virtual immortal harmony in Tanagura had remained unchanged. Safe, perfect, predictable, carefully calculated structures built to withstand the ages. Doomed to spend an eternity of certainty and boredom, an existence not worthy of the term life for it had never truly allowed itself to live.

Resigning himself to the marble grandeur he had been etched into, Jason Mink had accumulated power through solidifying and expanding the system in place, perfecting and assuring his own vast influence and superior status in the process. Not for one second had he asked himself the question if this was truly the life he had wanted for himself. For rationally speaking there was no point in wondering about things that could never come to pass.

I'd gladly trade in virtual
For someone I can touch

But then in one unexpected encounter, one unexpected colliding of entirely opposite existences that should have never been allowed to touch, all of that had changed. Like a blind suddenly realising what it truly meant to see and what he had been missing out on, Jason had regarded the raw, wild, living force in the dark eyes of a creature condemned as redundant and flawed by society yet rendered fierce and beautiful by its juxtaposition to the perfectly dead surroundings of that very same society.

Something in the sight of the glorious imperfection of the mongrel in front of him had captivated the blond electronic deity and made him desire things he had never even known were desirable in the slightest. Made him long for human things no words in the Tanaguran language could even come close to defining. Riki had shown him a way to escape the rigid confines of the inhuman system he himself had become the nerve centre of. Yet his heart had never been a part of that system, for such a system had no place for a heart. More than ever he had wished he could simply deactivate his robotic half and undo his virtual purity by staining it with forbidden physical acts of sexual perversity with that filthy creature from the gutter.

Suddenly he had come to realise that his privileged existence as the top Elite was not at all what he
would wish for in life. He had become as cold, heartless and inhuman as the society he had been made to govern, unfeeling and cruel in his dealings with humanity in Tanagura and Midas alike. His interactions with the mongrel had made him see himself through its eyes and he had not liked what he saw one little bit.

His inability to alter himself and his Elitist, domineering ways had eventually forced him to let the mongrel go for fear of destroying that very fire that he loved so much about the human. For a long time he had assumed that his only hope of regaining the brilliant feeling of what they had shared had been to regain the mongrel itself. But little by little alternative paths to that end had revealed themselves. Although the strong contrast between Riki and the world of Jupiter had initially alerted Iason to the wrongs of Tanagura, with time he had come to see that even in Tanagura itself there had been such deviations. The unexpected behaviour and extreme transformation of the red-haired Pet girl had alerted him to their existence and usefulness. As Iason was now Riki would still not be able to accept him, yet Mimea accepted him for she understood the Tanaguran system much better than Riki did. She had seen his potential for humanity where the mongrel had not. But all along there had been another closeby that could understand him much better than even the loyal female did. One that had spent the last century or so practically begging him to be allowed to do just that. *By Jupiter, how could I have been so blind for so long?*

While he had been so desperately searching for long-term, far-fetched ways of bringing his mongrel back to his side, another more powerful potential ally for obtaining the humanity his maker had never intended for him to have, had been right next to him all along. And now the time had come to bind said ally to himself through strong, primal connections that could never be broken by any logic or informatics.

*Let's escape*

*Deactivate*

*Forget about perfection tonight*

*Come with me*

*And let's go see*

*If we can make connection tonight*

Having finally resigned himself to his fate and thus refraining himself from struggling any further against his friend’s determination, he felt fear run like wildfire throughout his entire body. Even if his nerve system was no longer biological in nature, there were apparently no limits to the resourceful ways in which his biological brain managed to transmit its primitive, emotional responses, even while making use of the non-biological nerves in his android body.

Now that his reptilian brain had been activated, he knew that it was futile to try and stop his body’s natural reactions. He also knew that it was equally futile to try and stop the apex predator currently
staring at him with intense, sky blue eyes from noticing said reactions.

He could feel his pupils widening without any change in the lighting of the room. He could feel his breathing and heartbeat pick up the pace even after he had decided not to fight or flee. He could feel absolutely useless tremors running through the entirety of his body. His blood rushing to the surface of his skin, invisibly increasing his body heat for his robotic tissues could not possibly be penetrated by the colour of his clear, artificial blood. As usual when he was truly agitated, he was entirely powerless to stop the unfolding chaos that was his own brain chemistry. The computer chips embedded in his brain for the very purpose of controlling its still-present emotional tendencies malfunctioned once again. What was it about Iason Mink that always got him worked-up to the point where such disastrous malfunctions occurred that he often feared he would be decommissioned if Jupiter were ever to discover them?

*It's always burning in my mind*

Fortunately, as the head of the biological department, he himself was the one who ran, processed and transmitted the results of the tests meant to insure that the human origins of the Elite’s biological brains were in no way a hindrance or threat to the smooth running of the operations in Tanagura. In fact he and Iason were among a select group of but very few Elite who even realised that their brains *had* such human origins. Of course such a responsibility could not be left in the hands of one single person, which was why his current attacker was tasked with checking these lab results every couple of months. Remarkably enough, the Head of the Syndicate never noticed anything out of the ordinary in neither his own nor doctor Am’s brain chemistry tests.

*Memories are getting lost*

*Beneath the sands of time*

It had been such a long time since his brother had even glanced at him in any way that could be described as more than politely distant. Moreover Raoul’s fear for Iason’s safety when faced with his reckless behaviour in connection to the mongrel, had led to an animosity that had put even more distance between them. But if the remnants of his friendship with Iason had to be destroyed in the process of saving his life, then so be it. If Raoul hadn’t been the one to take the tests, he probably would have been as clueless about Iason’s drastically altered emotional state as the other members of the Syndicate were.

For Iason had long ago ceased to discuss such things of personal importance with him, instead never straying from superficial conversations regarding one or the other’s professional life or the general Tanaguran state of affairs. Alas, the game that was Syndicate politics had made it a risk and a distraction for the Head to have any personal conversations at all, let alone with one so incapable of self-restraint as Raoul Am when it came to keeping personal relationships out of the public picture. In fact, many Elite wondered if there was anything other than the force of habit still tying Lords Am and Mink together.
And sometimes I'm trapped inside the game
I'd gladly disconnect from it with someone who feels the same

When a strong, white-gloved hand tenderly but determinedly touched the shimmering golden curls of the shaking scientist, he was finally awoken from his internal reverie and regarded his stalker with wide, humid, jungle green eyes.

Iason smiled in that sly, cold way that only he could and that in the current circumstances made Raoul shiver in spite of his boiling body temperature. The way those deep, icy pools were reverently sizing him up made the green-eyed beauty feel like a very precious bug under a magnifying glass, burning up in that blue intensity.

“I see you still haven’t lost your talent for dramatic bodily manifestations when the situation asks for it, my dearest friend”, his voice was chill and smooth like a mountain stream, gentle and soothing but capable of turning into a raging, all-consuming waterfall in a matter of seconds, as the glacier undercurrent in his arctic eyes betrayed.

“I’d hate to disappoint you but said manifestations are not of my own making, as you are well-aware of”, Raoul miraculously managed to bring out without his trembling voice betraying his verbal intelligence. Yet.

“Indeed I am well-aware of that, but is that not the case for the talents of all great artists?”, Iason spoke as he began to move his fingers through the other’s golden tresses like so many spiders moving towards flies caught in their webs. “A true artist does not aspire to become great, he just is. Often at his own expense.” The searching, greedy fingers now moved from hair to face and dared to experimentally prod dewy, rose-bud lips that trembled sweetly at his determined invasion.

“Need... needless to say that according to your... definition of a great artists there a... are no great artists in Midas.” He was unsure whether to feel relief or disappointment when the probing satin fingers were removed.

“Oh, but there are. They are simply very well-hidden. Regardless, I shall revel in the challenge of finding and luring them out”, the favourite son of Jupiter spoke soundly as he swiftly and efficiently removed his gloves and moved his hand back in the direction of his victim’s gorgeous face.

After mapping all of the other’s nymph-like countenance, the naked fingers continued their exploration to his tender neck, then began to move in the direction of one pink nipple that was already hardened with anticipation.

“Iason, wait!”

“For the love of Jupiter, Raoul, have you no resolve whatsoever to stick to your decisions?”, his assailant interrupted him, feigning irritation while simultaneously transmitting humour.

“I... am I... am I some kind of experiment to you?” He would not abort the proceedings now, but he had to know if they could ever surmount to anything more than merely his own thirst for knowledge and his brother’s thirst for power.

The other blonde laughed, a crystalline sound that cut like knives in its piercing sharpness. “I suppose I should not be surprised that you would put things in such scientific terms. I prefer to think of you as an uncertain investment of sorts.”
“As in... a long-term investment?” hope sparkled in those feline eyes as they hesitantly regarded him from underneath the foliage of wild curls.

“As in a mystery that can never be solved and as such is only certain to gift me surprises at every turn, which in and of itself is my reward.” After those words were said, Iason looked away from the other’s pleading eyes and gently yet surely began to move the tip of his index finger in circles around his partner’s right nipple. The flesh was as sensitive and yielding to his conquest as he had been hoping for, maybe even more so.

“As in a... Ah!... a never-ending experiment that one wishes to solve but... at the same time knows one never can?”, Raoul responded breathlessly. The movement of Iason’s fingertips suddenly stopped and his gaze went upwards again, rendering Raoul speechless due to the burning of the blue embers in its depths.

“Is that what humanity is to you, Raoul?” Iason asked, true curiosity shimmering in his sapphire eyes, warming their usual iciness to a white-hot furnace.

“No... no, it is... it is what you are to me, Iason...” He suddenly realised that he wanted Iason to continue, against all reason and self-preservation. He wanted him to continue because he loved him. He always had.

At that his friend grinned, revealing the perfection of teeth that had an inhuman whiteness and sharpness. “And how far are you willing to go for the sake of this experiment of yours?” As one of his questing hands continued to assault Raoul’s chest, coaxing soft moans out of his lovely throat, the other ventured lower down.

“A... all... all the way.”

“I was hoping you would say that, for truly I do not wish to force you. But I would if I thought there was no other way.” Raoul could hear in the ruthless conviction of his ice-sharp voice that he meant what he said.

The idea of Iason forcibly subduing him and submitting him to Jupiter-knows-what sexual sins both terrified and excited him. He suddenly realised that the emotional, the human part of him wanted this, had wanted this from the moment he had laid eyes on the unyielding conviction that was Iason Mink.

He was grateful to himself that he had chosen the path of no resistance, for he did not think his heart would have survived a confrontation with the cruel side he knew Iason’s passion could take if it was denied. His heart could not bear to be treated so ruthlessly by the one he had secretly loved all his life. Yet somehow his body was turned-on by the prospect.

“I... I...could not...” One of the powerful fingers that had previously caressed his erogenous zones now pushed itself back against peachy, lush lips.

“Sssssh. Raoul, you mustn’t always express yourself through words, my love. I know how you feel, even if you do not explicitly tell me.”

Did Iason really know how he felt? How could he possibly know such a thing?

“Please, Iason. Please, I...” Such longing combined with such dread made it difficult for even Raoul himself to figure out what it was he was actually pleading for.

“Ssssshh”, Iason shushed his distraught friend as he repeated the gesture with his finger, only now also softly prying those delicious lips apart to caress the insides of Raoul’s mouth, knowingly mimicking what he wanted to do with his fingers elsewhere. Raoul’s breathing became even more
erratic and Iason very much doubted he would be capable of speech now even if he wished it, which of course had been his own exact intent.

When Iason’s other hand went on its downwards path again with the fingers in his mouth continuing their ministrations as well, Raoul gasped for unneeded air and felt as if his heart would dance right out of his chest any minute now. By Jupiter, this is really happening. He’s really going to... “Ah, Iason!! Aaaah!” Iason’s hand on his lower belly had suddenly dipped down and firmly taken hold of Raoul’s virgin shaft. He had never been touched by anyone in that place, not even by his Furniture or by himself.

As the hand on his privates began to stroke him with erotic slowness and precision, bliss and desperation were warring with each other in the biologist’s mind. There would be no turning back from this, if he allowed his brother to pull him into this pit of depravity there would be no way for him to ever climb out of it again. The slopes of that pit were as slippery as the hand that was now dragging him down there, slick by his own excited submission to the object of his infatuation.

“Ias... Iason, please! I’m begging you...”, his new lover spoke desperately, his stunning forest green eyes full of tears that were running down his exquisite face in rivers.

“Pray tell, my sweet, what is it you are begging me for? Do you wish for me to slow down perhaps?”, Iason cooed in a sugar-coated tone while speeding up his movements below but squeezing hard enough to prevent the other from reaching completion.

When his questions were met with nothing but loud whimpers, he maliciously added. “Or do you wish for me to get on with it, throw you unto my bed face-first and have my way with you? Would you like that, hmm?”

“Gah... gah!... Iason... please...” To add to his torment, Iason’s other hand was possessively caressing his torso, sides and lower back.

“Would you like me to bend you over and ride you hard? Shall I hold you down as I fuck you?”, the blue-eyed fiend breathed hotly into his ear. Raoul was amazed at how effortlessly his closest brother used such crude language and even more amazed at the arousing effect it was actually having on him.

“N... no...” No, absolutely not! He may have agreed to this, but on his own terms. He was no Pet or whore to be used and toyed with! Although apparently a part of his treacherous human brain was unaware of that fact.

“No? Why, darling, that’s not the word I like to hear, especially in a situation such as the one we are currently in”, Iason whispered in a harsh, warning tone, moving his devouring lips and sharp teeth to his partner’s sensitive earshell and seductively nibbling it.

“I... I mean... ahah!... that’s not... what I wanted to say!” And I do not care what you do or do not like to hear!

“I see. So you do want me to push you down and fuck you hard, but you do not want to say so?” He proceeded by blowing hot air unto Raoul’s neck now, teasingly slowly making his way down his marvellously sculpted chest.

“N... no!” And how in Jupiter’s name did he even know that was – at least partially – true?

“Honestly, Raoul, if you did not wish for me to have intercourse with you, then why did you agree to this? Don’t you want me to take you?”, delicious lips blew against the moist skin of his abdomen.
“Yes!... I mean, no!...” It was difficult to form coherent sentences with Iason’s wet, hungry lips moving along his lower belly. Having removed Raoul’s organ from his vice-like grip Iason now used both hands to hold his hips secure.

“You are apparently very much undecided on the subject. Are you sure that even you yourself know what it is you want, hmm?” He was now teasingly licking Raoul’s lower stomach, then hovering over his shaft – his devious mouth nearly touching it – only to move to the side and touch the inside of a soft, perfect thigh with his lips and tongue.

Grateful for the sturdy chest-of-drawers he was currently propped unto, Raoul held on for dear life as he tried to retain some form of control over the unfolding scenario.

“I mean.... yes, but not like that!...” For some inexplicable reason the terrifying vision of Iason inconsiderately plundering his virginal insides like the both of them had often witnessed overly-enthusiastic Pets doing on soirees began to sound more appealing by the minute.

“Not like what?”, Iason asked with a leer, feigning ignorance while blowing hot air right over the tip of Raoul’s excitement, approvingly noticing a drop of translucent liquid already there. Raoul’s android body mimicked the human biological processes as well as his did, if not better.

“Not like I’m your property!” Anger suddenly enabled him to speak where before he was too breathless and overcome by sensations to do so. “Not like I’m some Pet that needs to be taught its place!”

“How can I have intercourse with you as the dominant partner without treating you as such?”, Iason asked while nuzzling a golden abundance of pubic hair, intending it as a rhetorical question to the fevered ramblings of one lost in sexual sensory overload.

Unexpectedly, Iason felt the grip of Raoul’s hands on his shoulders increase to its full capacity as Raoul used all of his robotic strength to pull Iason from his crouching position up to his full body length. His powerful hands then moved from his shoulders to the sides of his head to pull it towards his own face. Burning emeralds met Iason’s surprised look with a passion and devotion that burned perhaps even more brightly than Iason’s own desire did. Before Iason had any opportunity to speak or otherwise defend himself, emerald eyes closed and plump peachy lips were sweetly yet solidly pushed against his own. Iason was amazed by the dazing sensations that washed over him as soon as those lips made contact with his. He had never felt anything like this before, not even when he reached completion while making love to his Riki. How on Amoy could he make a mere kiss feel this heavenly without even using his tongue?

Seeing as how neither of them really needed to breathe – the oxygen delivery to their brains being entirely automatic – the kiss lasted for about half an hour. Halfway through said time Iason felt the strange urge to close his eyes and to wrap his arms around Raoul’s neck, which he did. When the kiss was over at last, Iason was at a loss for words even as millions of questions were popping up in his mind.

“Now that is how you treat a lover, Iason Mink!”

“I... he never did that to me”, the sexual predator sounded almost sad in that sentence.

“What, the mongrel? Of course he didn’t, it took every ounce of strength I had to do so! So the mongrel could not have possibly subdued you enough during your sex-crazed frenzy to even attempt to kiss you!”

“You mean to say you think he wants to kiss me?”, renewed desire made a hopeful blue light appear
in those frighteningly intelligent eyes.

“As much as I am loath to admit it, the nasty little creature was obviously in love with you.”

“Why would he need to kiss me if he were in love with me?” Under any other circumstances, the child-like ignorance of the head of intelligence’s question would have been hilarious.

“Because it is what humans do to show affection. Just sex is not enough for one who is in love, one needs to feel not only desired physically but also loved and cherished mentally.”

“Then all Pets I have ever witnessed performing were in love with each other?”

“Of course not, you idiot! They are taught to kiss before initiating any other sexual acts to create the illusion of love. It makes them more psychologically stable to continuously switch partners if they are made to believe that each partner cares for them on a personal level. If not the constant switching between partners would lead to emotional confusion and possibly depression”, Raoul shared his expertise on the complex mating behaviour of humans.

“So you are not in love with me? You are merely creating the illusion of love to... what, educate me?” He had expected to be able to glean some information from sexual interactions with his Elite friend, but he had not expected him to actively educate him in the matter.

“Do I look like I continuously switch sex partners and have an IQ that is low enough to be deceived by such tricks? I would never have kissed you if I did not truly love you! By Jupiter, Iason, how can you be so stupid?!?” Did Iason still not realise how he felt about him and how it hurt him to have Iason act as if their interactions meant absolutely nothing?

“Not all of us have devoted our lives to understanding the strange workings of the human mind”, Iason spoke defensively while curiously touching his recently-kissed lips, intrigued by how such a simple, almost innocent touch had stirred such powerful feelings within him.

“Never in a million years did I imagine it would one day help me understand the workings of not just my own mind but yours as well”, with a sigh Raoul used the remainder of the electrical strength he had produced in his limbs to physically overcome Iason once more in order to push him away and get out of his uncomfortable position against the wall and on top of the chest of drawers.

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“Never in a million years did I imagine it would one day help me understand the workings of not just my own mind but yours as well”, with a sigh Raoul used the remainder of the electrical strength he had produced in his limbs to physically overcome Iason once more in order to push him away and get out of his uncomfortable position against the wall and on top of the chest of drawers.

“Where are you going?”, the still-fully-dressed Elite asked, thinking the other was backing out of their deal after all.

“Where could I possibly be going while naked and in this state?”, Raoul snapped while pointing at his obvious arousal, his irritation at Iason’s sheer emotional cluelessness reaching its boiling point. “I’m going to your bedroom, of course! And don’t even think about pushing me down face-first on the bed or I swear to Jupiter I will rip your head off!”

All of a sudden Raoul was beginning to sound very much like Riki. Angry at him despite his obvious attraction to him. But unlike Riki Raoul had said that he loved him, had physically overcome him and had kissed him. So whatever anger he was experiencing was not caused by the sexual interaction being unwanted. Then what was it aimed at? The fact that Iason had not kissed him before stimulating him in other ways? The fact that Iason had asked him if he wanted to be sexually subdued? As he followed the naked form of Raoul’s voluptuous body and bouncing golden curls into the bedroom, Iason still had many doubts about what could have made the scientist so angry in the middle of their sexual interactions.

When he had reached the foot of the bed, Raoul turned around and looked expectantly at Iason. So
he was not opposed to Iason taking the lead? Then what was he opposed to? As he approached the bed, Iason began to efficiently remove his clothes while Raoul was staring at him. Then the other’s hands came up and pushed against Iason’s chest to put a halt to his approach. “Stop. You’re going too fast.”

“I’m not even doing anything yet, Raoul. And why waste any time?”

“Anticipation is half the pleasure. If you’re going to undress in front of me, you should do it slowly and while standing some distance away from me.”

“You speak as if I am putting on a performance for you, Raoul.”

“Because you are. There are always two active partners in sexual intercourse. There is not one who passively watches and another who acts. Neither is there one who puts on a show and another who does not. Both partners have to be equally involved in the process.”

“So we should both act like Pets?”, Iason asked incredulously, raising a pale eyebrow at the idea of it.

“Many aspects of the way in which Pets act during a performance are a mimicry of how humans act when they are mating. Thus it is not unusual at all that if the both of us were to act on our human inclinations, we would proceed in a similar way”, Raoul informed Iason while regarding his striptease, which was amazingly well-executed, especially for one who had never bothered with it before.

Iason smirked as he continued to undress, teasingly slowly and daringly this time. “And here I thought I was the expert.”

“Practically speaking perhaps you are. But in the theoretical sense I am the expert, not you”, the head of the biological department reminded him rather smugly.

“You did not seem like much of an expert just now: trembling, almost unable to speak and begging like a bitch in heat”, Iason pointed out mockingly, disliking the way in which Raoul asserted himself as knowledgeable and therefore implying that Iason was ignorant.

“I am simply not used to being in a state of arousal and therefore find it hard to maintain full control of my bodily functions. And please do refrain from offending me at every turn, Iason, it is definitely not a turn-on.”

“Riki always liked it”, Iason interjected as he removed the last of his clothing, now standing before Raoul like a gloriously naked Roman god.

“Did...” Raoul averted his eyes from the splendid sight before him to be able to find his train of thought again. “Did he now? Well, I suppose as a mongrel he would be used to swearing. But in my experience the residents of Ceres have a sense of pride nearly as strong as ours, therefore they would probably not allow their partners to offend them to such an extent”, when Iason stepped towards him in his nakedness, Raoul averted his gaze once more and held up a hand to stop him in his tracks.

“Perhaps he liked it because it is atypical behaviour for an Elite. Because it could help him forget that you were Elite and therefore his enemy.”

“You know, when you are not trying to convince me not to be sexually active, your advice is actually very useful, Raoul. Unfortunately you do not seem able to speak and participate in intercourse at the same time. Perhaps you can give me your analysis and remarks afterwards.” As if to conclude their verbal communication, Iason confidently pushed his hips and impressive hardness
against Raoul’s behind while snaking his full arms around his waist in a strong hold and pressing wet butterfly kisses against his neck in reassurance.

“And have... oh!... have you go on while doing numerous things that... gah!... I do not like one bit? No, thank... you, that is most definitely not what I signed up for.”

“What in particular is it you do not like one bit then?”, Iason asked in between kisses and licks directed at the other’s throat.

“You’re too straight-forward and m.... much too possessive. Like now your hold is meant to keep me from moving of my own accord. And... aah!!... hah...” Iason had purposely begun to pump his hips against Raoul’s voluminous mounds, making it impossible for him to suppress his pleasured moans.

“And? What were you going to say, my sweet little leopard?”

“And...aah...this thrusting of yours is meant to.... to speed up the encounter... because all you can think about is... oh!... your own climax... you are a selfish lover.”

At these last words Iason ceased his onslaught and allowed his Elite brother to turn around and explain further.

“If you weren’t such a skilled lover in the physical sense, I very much doubt you would have been able to bring a human any satisfaction. Simply put it is a miracle that Riki enjoyed sex with you at all seeing as how your attitude made the whole process unnecessarily rough and extremely painful for him.”

Iason, who had been completely unaware of any of this for the duration of his time spent with Riki, was absolutely gobsmacked at hearing such a condemnation from his friend of many years.

“Don’t misunderstand me, Iason, I am sure both your affection for the mongrel and for me is genuine and far more than merely a fulfilment of your own lust. However you allow your body to run ahead of things and act only in its own interest. You must try to maintain more control and take more care to address the needs of your lover. Which does not mean torment, mock and offend them but which means express your affection in ways that make it obvious that you want your lover to enjoy this as much as you do.”

“Do you mean to say that this encounter is not enjoyable to you?”, Iason asked with clear disbelief in his voice. Surely he could not have misinterpreted both Riki’s and Raoul’s sounds and body language to such an extent?

“No. I mean that this is only enjoyable on a physical level, not on an emotional one. In fact it is very unenjoyable on an emotional level, which is undoubtedly one of the reasons the mongrel hated you so much and fought you every step of the way. The lack of his own emotional involvement in the interactions would have made him interpret sex with you as a sexual attack, as rape.”

“But how can a sexual interaction be considered rape if both partners are attracted to each other?”, Iason wondered, absolutely astounded by how Raoul apparently understood so much about Riki that he did not.

“I’m not saying that the mongrel did not wish to have sex with you. What I mean is that he wanted to have sex with you for more reasons than just to find sexual release and he found it hurtful that you did not want it for those reasons as well.”

“That is not true! If I was only interested in finding release I could have any human I wanted, I could even have another Elite if I chose so, as you yourself now demonstrate. Why would I ever lower
myself to a mongrel from the slums if I was not interested in him specifically? If I was not interested in him for other reasons?"

“Yes, I know this, Iason! But he doesn’t! He probably doesn’t even know that it is forbidden for Elite to have intercourse. He probably thinks that you have chosen him specifically as an offense to Ceres, a way to show him and his people how worthless you think they are. For that is what Tanagurans generally do when it comes to their interactions with mongrels."

“How do you even know any of this? How could you possibly know what Riki thinks?"

“It’s called psychology, you should open a book on it sometime”, Raoul offered, unable to keep the slightly ironical undertone out of his voice.

“Psychology? I did not realise this was one of your areas of expertise”, Iason mused as he went to sit down on the bed in favour of walking around the room naked.

“How could it not be?”, Raoul explained as he sat down at the foot of the bed as well, at a safe distance from Iason’s selfish body. “The workings of the human mind have an undeniable influence on how they function in their everyday lives. If I did not know psychology and apply treatment for psychological disasters at every turn, no human in Tanagura could possibly function normally with all the unnatural situations they are put in here.”

“Can’t you treat Riki as well then? Make him forget that my reactions are... unnatural”, Iason wondered wistfully, staring ahead into nothing, distracted from even his own sexual need at that moment.

“All humans in Tanagura were either born here or conditioned at a very young age. For a human to have lived in a different, more natural environment for a time of several years – especially one that fosters individual resourcefulness and strength of character as much as Ceres does – would make such a human impossible to condition on the long term without making him go insane.”

“So I cannot bend him to my will without destroying him. I had begun to suspect as much when I sent him away. In the end he wouldn’t do anything: he wouldn’t eat, he wouldn’t sleep, he wouldn’t listen. Even sex no longer brought him any fulfilment. It was as if he was already dead while still living. It... hurt me... to see him like that.” Iason had never even dreamed of admitting any of this to anyone. To be admitting it to another Elite, an equal at that, was unthinkable. Yet it was what he needed to do to give Raoul any chance at helping him regain Riki’s affection, if that was even possible. Raoul’s insights had made even him, the great Iason Mink, doubt his ability to do so.

“Indeed it is simply impossible for one such as Riki to be made into a Pet. However that does not mean that you could not have a relationship with him”, Raoul reassured his friend.

Iason looked at him with a puzzled look on his face. “How could I possibly have a relationship with him other than the relationship between a Master and a Pet?”

“You could make him your lover or pairing partner and have a relationship more similar to that between Pets among themselves, as he would expect from one who loves him. Such a relationship he could understand and respond positively to.”

Seeing the shocked look in Iason’s eyes at the suggestion Raoul sighed and threw his arms into the air dramatically. “Iason, you have already broken all Tanaguran social taboos and disgraced yourself beyond repair by bringing him into your household and into your bed! There are no more social conventions you can break with that mongrel other than your own.”
“Will you help me get him back, Raoul? I am willing to consider and try everything you suggest, no matter how absurd. For I feel as if I shall die without his affection.”

Touched by the emotional sincerity of Iason’s confession and very much able to relate to such feelings of suppressed and unrequited love, Raoul went to sit closer to Iason and took hold of his hand, lovingly squeezing it, making Iason gasp at the unexpectedness of the gesture. “I will help you to the best of my ability, Iason. If you can only promise me one thing.”

“Anything”, Iason spoke with resolve as he turned his head to stare into the other’s eyes with ice-cold determination.

“That you will not toss me aside when you’re done”, Raoul said softly, his voice more subdued and uncertain now.

“I have always considered you my one and only friend, Raoul, I would never abandon you”, Iason insured as he strengthened his own grip on the other blonde’s hand.

“I do not mean merely in the capacity of a friend. You may have always regarded me as nothing more, but I surely have regarded you as far more.”

“Raoul, I cannot make myself have feelings I do not have. I like you as a friend, a good friend. And although I may feel attracted to you physically as well, I do not feel for you as I do for Riki.”

“I understand that. But if we go through with this now and all of it ends because your aim of recapturing the mongrel is achieved, I am quite sure my own psychological well-being shall be threatened.”

Then Iason understood what he meant and chuckled. “I am quite sure I am capable of sustaining both you and Riki. I shall even do so at the same time if you want”, he added with a mischievous wink.

“Well, preferably not at the same time, as I still do not particularly enjoy the mongrel’s company in any way imaginable”, the golden blonde objected, a slight sneer destroying the symmetry of his divinely-made face.

“I suppose with you involved now as well, I shall have to begin my own sex club”, Iason offered, having already made all the arrangements for such a secret society.

“What do you mean with me involved as well?”, Raoul asked suspiciously.

“I do hope you will not hold it against me, my friend. But it appears I have found new ways of taking advantage of your beloved Pet daughter.”

“What, Mimea? You are... having intercourse with her as well... for the very same reason you are having intercourse with me! By Jupiter, Iason, if anyone were ever to find out about this...!”

“What kind of difference does it make if I have transgressed with one partner or with multiple partners? The end result stays the same, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, but the chances of being caught increase drastically!”

“Would either you or Mimea ever tell on me then?”

“I do not think neither of us would do so willingly, no. But Jupiter has ways of obtaining information that nobody, not even an Elite such as I, could withstand!”
“Jupiter will not use such methods if she does not see serious cause for it. And without anyone telling her about this, there is simply no reason for her to ever suspect me of such a crime. I have an unusual interest in a mongrel, yes. But many an Elite have an unusual interest of some for or other in a human. Yet that does not mean that they are sexually active.”

“She connects to your very mind every time you see her. How have you succeeded in hiding a transgression of such a magnitude from her so far?”

“It is simple, really. I do not feel any guilt nor do I see any harm in it. Therefore Jupiter has no cause whatsoever to delve deeper,” Iason explained while possessively tightening the hold he still had on Raoul’s slightly smaller hand. “But now that we have those bothersome practicalities out of the way, shall we resume our previous activities?”

Let's escape
Deactivate

Forget about perfection tonight

Come with me
And let's go see

If we can make connection tonight

Before Raoul even had time to process the meaning of Iason’s last sentence, Iason’s body was pressed up against his again and Iason’s mouth was ravishing his with abandon. During the lengthy kiss, Iason’s fingers caressed down his lower back and slipped between his buttocks. Only then did Raoul notice that those fingers were covered in copious amounts of lubricant. When did he...? Just as Iason finished the kiss and started nibbling on the side of his neck instead and Raoul meant to ask when he had seen opportunity to lubricate his fingers without him noticing it, Iason’s index finger slipped further and pressed against his virginal entrance. “Aaah! Ah, Iason... wait...”

“This is what you wanted me to do to you for a very long time, isn’t it?”, Iason whispered against the sensitive skin of his neck in an erotically-charged silky voice, as his finger started to push more strongly to breach Raoul.

“Yes, but...” Raoul let out another moan as Iason unexpectedly pulled out his finger, pressed his partner’s body down on the bed (back-first) and started kissing the insides of his thighs, making Raoul grab unto the silken sheets while revelling in the wonderful sensations caused by Iason’s actions.

When Iason finally put his mouth on his length, Raoul threw back his head – his hair sprawled out all over the pillow like the spilled golden coins of an oriental treasure – and cried out in ecstasy. He would never be able to speak to his brother ever again without being reminded of what more those
thin, pretty lips could do.

“Ahah! Aaah, Iason... yes!.... Yes, aah!” Come to think of it, Raoul was even louder than Riki in the bedroom. Possibly because his artificial voicebox could not overexert itself through overuse. Moreover Iason had to use all of the strength in his hands to hold Raoul still and stop him from thrashing about wildly.

“By Jupiter! Please.... Iason, please!....please....”, he sobbed hopelessly, knitting his hands into Iason’s silky, long hair and stroking his head affectionately, which formed a strange contrast to the wild movements of the rest of his body.

“Ssssh. Patience, my friend, all good things come to those who wait”, Iason smiled before tenderly licking him, first his tip, then along his length, and finally sliding his tongue further backwards and briefly licking his opening.

Raoul moaned wantonly at this and lifted his legs to give Iason easier access to his most intimate regions. His hands began to thread through the long silver-gold tresses more urgently, pleading for his lover to take things a step further. “Please, my love”, he gasped desperately, emerald pools pulling in Iason’s gaze as soon as he had lifted his head to look at his partner.

After briefly pausing to study the mixed distress and pleasure of the angelic creature currently lying on the luxurious sheets of his bed, Iason dipped down his head again and began to suck and twirl his powerful tongue around the other’s member. Not hard enough to stop him from climaxing but hard enough to have bruised a mortal man. The renewed, rougher suction combined with the caress of Iason’s trailing long hair all over his thighs and belly made Raoul reach his peak in seconds. He mewled like a wild cat and tears ran down his face while his hands were passionately stroking Iason’s hair and ears. To Iason’s surprise, Raoul’s climax lasted almost an entire five minutes. During which he continuously made pleasured sounds and towards the end of his completion pulled up Iason and kissed him with an all-consuming fire.

“Oh... oh, Iason. That was the most amazing thing I have ever felt... I love you... I love you with all my heart. I’ll love you till my dying breath”, he said as he kissed Iason’s pearly-stained lips once more.

Iason was at a loss at how to react to his fellow Elite being in such a feverish, sentimental state. He knew Raoul was more emotional and more romantic than any Elite had any right to be, but he had not been expecting anything as extreme as this. A confession of eternal love after a mere blow-job, as Riki called it? It was just Iason’s luck that the expert on sexual interactions and human psychology was incidentally also a hopeless romantic who was head-over-heels in love with him.

“Ssssh, Raoul, just relax. There really is no need for you to profess your love in such a way only because I made you climax...”, Iason started to explain, unsure if Raoul’s overly-emotional exclamations were caused by observation of exaggerated responses conditioned in Pets.

“I love you, Iason, you are so beautiful and mighty, I could forever revel in your divine magnificence. My heart and body are yours to do with as you please till the end of time”, Raoul finished his latest declaration by kissing Iason fiercely and raising one of his legs to put it around his waist, as if urging Iason to take him.

In spite of the absurdity of an Elite behaving so intensely romantic, Iason felt a very compelling attraction to his old friend in that moment, barely able to stop himself from pushing into his velvet depths right then and there.

Even if Raoul was an Elite and his body thus unbreakable, Iason now knew that he would still be
hurt emotionally if Iason did not show consideration and prepared him thoroughly. Enticing as the Botticellian Venus in front of him was, Iason treaded with care and kissed him before gently slipping a moist finger inside of him. Raoul whined at the intrusion. “Ah!!! Aah, Iason!”

“It’s all right, my sweet, I am here. You are perfectly safe, I promise you”, Iason reassured him, unable to make out if his urgent cries were of distress or of pleasure.

“I... I know, Iason. I trust you, I am yours completely.... Please. Please, I love you. Please take me! Make me yours in every way...”, Raoul sang as his bewitching green eyes hypnotised Iason and his loving hands softly caressed his face as if they were magical.

Let’s close our eyes

And make distractions all subside

Lost in the appeal of a green and deep ocean of passion and desperation, Iason ceased his preparations and carefully pulled his fingers free of Raoul’s wet heat. He began to kiss Raoul’s full, fruity lips while shivers of pleasure rocked his body.

He had just started to oil his manhood when he felt Raoul’s burning-hot hands around his. “Please, allow me.” As Raoul’s amazingly skilled hands made him warm, hard and slick with oil, Iason himself could not suppress a soft moan.

“Yes, my love, that’s it. Make it as long and as thick as you can. I want all of you inside of me”, his honey-haired lover coaxed eagerly.

He wrapped his other leg around Iason’s waist as well and pulled him closely against his own hot body, kissing his shoulder with abandon and seductively whispering words of encouragement.

Iason pushed his large tip against the other’s welcomingly-slick entrance. His new lover was shivering in his embrace, causing his portal to deliciously quiver against his thickness.

“Iason. Please, Iason. Please, I love you, make me yours”, Raoul incited desperately, longing for such an intimate connection with his beloved but simultaneously still feeling an instinctive fear of the unknown and of being submissively open to pain in every one of his nerve endings. For he knew he would not be able to shut down his pain receptors when his brain was this far gone in its biological madness. Whatever pain would be there, would be clearly registered in alarming detail by his sophisticated, android nerves.

Iason managed to momentarily stop himself, suspecting that the other’s body was hopelessly subdued by his overactive human brain. “Raoul, my friend, I do not want to hurt you.”

“Then take me. Take me like you mean it! Iason, please!” His perfect hands were shaking as they desperately grabbed unto Iason’s shoulders, as were his legs that were still locked around Iason’s waist.

“You can’t shut them down when you’re this excited, can you? Your nerve endings?”, Iason inquired, his inhuman patience and self-control making it possible for him to pause right before piercing through his lover’s final defences.

Raoul’s silence and slightly increased trembling and raspy breathing gave him a clear enough
answer. “Does that mean you register sensations as humans do when you are like this? How do you even manage such a thing?”

“For the love of Jupiter, Iason, are you suggesting that you would want to copy the greatest flaw ever made in Elite bionics? To answer your question: no, I do not register sensations as humans do, for my android nerves are far more precise and are incapable of short-circuiting. In other words: I feel much more strongly now than any human ever could.”

“I do not understand, your android body cannot be damaged, then what would be the purpose of such intrinsic pain transmissions?”

“Indeed my android body cannot be damaged, but my human brain does not know this. Therefore it will send and receive signals in a way that makes me register unlimited amounts of damage that are, of course, not truly there.”

“I have never understood what it was that Riki enjoyed about pain. But apparently you seem to enjoy it as well…”

“I most certainly do not enjoy it, yet I cannot allow it to prevent me from doing what I want.”

“You are willing to suffer through unnaturally high pain levels in order to have coitus with me?”, Iason asked in genuine surprise, seriously re-evaluating Raoul’s willingness to participate in this sexual experiment of his.

“Have you truly no idea of how overwhelmingly desirable you are, Iason?”, Raoul wondered disbelievingly, using the opportunity of Iason’s stillness to slightly readjust his body so things would slide as smoothly as they could.

“Apparently the one that I desire has no idea of this either”, Iason spoke wryly.

“Of course he does! I am convinced that he is as much in love with you as I am. But undoubtedly his Ceresian, resistant ways make it difficult for him to accept his own feelings. Now can we stop talking about that mutt from Ceres and my malfunctioning bionic nerve systems and just get on with this?”

So impatient for a lowly, forbidden act that will bring him unspeakable pain. All for that strange feeling called love.

Unable to resist the temptation before him any longer, Iason slid inside of the humid hotness of Raoul’s inner sanctum and hummed in pleasure at the way in which his inner walls massaged his hardness, as if trying to pull it in even deeper.

And let's defect and disconnect
From everything outside

Raoul braced himself, gritted his teeth and did his hardest best not to cry. But failed miserably and was soon reduced to a glorious mess of spasms and blood-curdling screams. Iason felt how two robotically strong hands gripped his shoulders, supernaturally sharp nails sliding through his skin and into his artificial flesh.

When he eventually reached his pained, blissful peak, Raoul closed his hot inner walls around Iason
in a vice-like grip, threw back his head – golden curls flying through the air in imitation of an angel’s aureole – and let out a high-pitched scream that pierced through the air and made every glass object in the vicinity explode into a million tiny pieces.

But Iason did not stop his thrusts after that first completion, showing his peer’s blazing nerve endings no mercy. For several hours the entire penthouse shook as if there were an earthquake and loud, shrill sounds echoed through the corridors of the penthouse regularly. The Furniture of the Mink household had no idea whatsoever of what was going on, but recalled that their Master had asked them not to disturb him that night, not under any circumstances. And being so close to the source of the noise, their Master had to undoubtedly be aware of it and its source. Therefore they just trembled in fear and uncertainty but did nothing but glance at the doors to the Master bedroom, where horrible, secret events were apparently unfolding at present.

Let's escape
Deactivate
Forget about perfection tonight

Come with me
And let's go see
If we can make connection tonight

Several hours later – a long night of no sleep or mental rest for any of the inhabitants of the household – the thrashing that rocked the entire top floor of the building and the ear-piercing, screeching noises finally came to an end.

Iason fell down on the bed, truly sated for the first time since Riki’s departure from the penthouse.

“Aaah... ah, Iason, that... was quite the performance...”, Raoul succeeded in sighing after he had regained his breath for several minutes, his organic brain still unaware of the fact that he did not actually need to breathe. A grimace appeared on his face as he stretched what his brain thought were abused limbs. In addition he felt like he had all the fires of hell combined burning inside of his bowels and the fruit of his lover’s fulfilment felt like molten lava dripping out of him.

Slowly Iason turned his head and arctic blue met tropical green. “Indeed it was. I suppose there must be a reason why several of my Furniture call me the Master of Pain.” That was just typical of Iason. No situation was ever too dire to be rectified through the use of dry humour.

“For the sake of whatever remains of your dignity. I do hope you apply different methods when it comes to the correction of your Furniture, Iason?” Raoul smirked as he propped himself up on his elbows in an attempt to lift some of the pressure from his sensitive bum.
“Now there’s an idea. Seeing as how Furniture are physically incapable of experiencing any sexual gratification, the very act itself ought to be pure torture to them, I suppose?”

“I’d assume that it would be. Unless of course said Furniture would be utterly infatuated with you, which would make the encounter physical torture and mental heaven at the same time. But nothing as extreme as my own predicament, I am sure.”

Iason shook his head in good humour. “Surely if any of my Furniture were *infatuated* with me, as you so discretely put it, I would have noticed by now?”

“You’d be surprised at how close-minded and subtle some Furniture can be. Some of them act almost like Elite when it comes to safe-guarding their emotions.”

“How about you? Did your mental health survive my torturous love-making, my sweet?”

“Barely, but do not worry, I’ll live never to tell the tale. This body could be fucked with a chainsaw and survive the ordeal.”

Iason burst out laughing. “Seriously, Raoul, where did you pick up such foul expressions?”

Raoul lifted his shoulders in mock apology. “You’d be shocked at what some young Furniture trainees shout at me when I am relieving them of their unrequired parts.”

“Hmm, I can imagine. Fortunately for me Riki’s uncouth behaviour has kept him far away from such purposes, as I am sure he does not lack the intelligence for it. Well, our unorthodox encounter has definitely given me much food for thought on how to resolve that issue...”

“If you want to have any hope of ever winning back that mongrel after the complete mess you’ve undoubtedly caused during your last series of attempts, you will need the kind of long-term instruction and guidance that only I am in a position to give you”, the golden-haired fae next to him interrupted with a fervent heat that allowed for no protest.

“Why, doctor Am, it’s almost as if you are trying to convince me that I cannot possibly go on without filling up your intoxicatingly sweet rectum on a regular basis”, Iason replied naughtily in his low sex tone as he grabbed the recuperating sex god’s leg and started pulling the gorgeous body towards him.

*Connection*

“I will help you regain the mongrel’s affection, if ever you had it before you threw it in his face. But I do not work for free”, Raoul reminded him, as he pulled his leg out of the other’s clutches with some effort and bent over Iason’s resting body until Iason could smell the sweet freshness of his breath and could feel the softness of his full, golden hair trailing along his face. Leaning down and gazing intensely at him with smoky green eyes he continued. “You know what my price is, Jason Mink. And I expect to be paid thoroughly and regularly. Do we understand each other?”

*Connection*
“Oh, we do. It would appear as if your chosen form of payment would make my enterprise twice as profitable as I had originally intended”, Iason responded with a devilishly charming smile while his arms slipped around the other’s waist and his large hand firmly grabbed Raoul’s butt cheek and squeezed until he could not prevent a mewl from breaking through his lips. Pushing up his hips to let the other Elite feel him grow to his full capacity in a matter of seconds, Iason added with a cheeky grin. “In fact I am ready to pay you again right now, with your permission.” Raoul laughed in an unsuppressed, human way that Iason found most endearing. “Only if you kiss me first.”

Connection

To Be Continued ......
Caught

Chapter Summary

Riki learns something shocking about Mimea's new patron, Guy learns something shocking about Riki and Riki runs away once again ...

Author's notes:

And here it finally is, the next chapter! :D Sorry for keeping you in suspense for so long, it took me a while to find some inspiration again, but then this chapter came out and the next chapter is also going smoothly so shouldn't be too far behind this one :) For those of you who would like to see an update for Crossing the Bridge: hold on! I'm working on that chapter but it's taking longer than I was expecting, probably because it's also getting a lot longer than I was expecting ;) So quite a bit of drama in this chapter, a couple of revelations and some violence, but otherwise nothing too shocking I think... I hope you all enjoy this chapter and please give me some more reviews!! ;)

Soundtracks: Kraftwerk – The Model

Nickelback – How You Remind Me

As the numbers of the digital clock projected high above the Grand Plaza in downtown Sasan switched from 18:59 to 19:00 the square began to buzz with life. It was the end of another long, repetitive work week for most citizens and the beginning of another long, extravagant weekend for the countless tourists and local snobs that were streaming in from the nearest subway exit. Overwhelmed by the colourful, projected wonders of the beating heart of the notorious city of decadence, newcomers and regulars alike did not know where to turn their eyes first.

Until all of a sudden everyone’s attention was attracted by a subtle, profoundly enticing presence, elegantly making its way down the marble steps of the Royal Casino. Dressed in a classy black silk dress and pretty flat sandals, the girl was rather modestly adorned for Midasian standards. Nonetheless to the onlookers who bothered to pay attention to the details it soon became evident that the dress was a one-of-a-kind design by Vernetti and the leather sandals were adorned with small, genuine diamonds.

She's a model and she's looking good
In spite of her classy choice of garments, the girl’s flawlessly symmetrical and perfectly proportioned beauty was clearly the product of one of the test tubes of Tanagura’s Pet breeding facilities. As such she was obviously not in Sasan in the capacity of a citizen or a tourist and was therefore available, for the right price.

*I'd like to take her home that's understood*

As she walked on by she paid no heed whatsoever to the countless men who were beckoning her, some of them even yelling how much they were offering, as if they were bidding on an esteemed piece at an auction. She pretended not to notice that the bidding was aimed at her and simply kept on walking, an attractive smile appearing on her gorgeous face as she thought of the meeting ahead.

*She plays hard to get, she smiles from time to time*

Noticing how one of the security camera’s right ahead turned towards her upon her approach, Mimea looked up and straight into the lens. It didn’t take a genius to know who was watching her on the other side of that camera. As of late her new Master had become rather protective, tracing her every move whenever she left the penthouse in Tanagura. Being the head of intelligence, Iason Mink had immediate and constant access to all camera footage in both Tanagura and Midas. It was therefore no great difficulty for him to keep track of his latest prized possession on a regular basis. The red light on the camera flickered once while she was staring at it. Only now realising the entourage she had drawn while crossing the densely packed square, Mimea giggled. Usually she just ignored strangers who were hoping to buy her services, unaware that those services were not for sale because she had a personal owner, even at her later age. But as the camera flickered once again, Mimea recognised an unspoken challenge.

*It only takes a camera to change her mind*

Tracing back some of her own steps the young woman walked as closely to some of her interested buyers as she could without actually touching them, throwing them furtive glances from beneath her thick, black lashes as she gave them a good look into her cleavage. Knowing they would follow suit, Mimea entered a nearby club and went to sit on a high stool at the bar, making sure that the skirt of her nearly knee-length dress rode up to mid thigh in the process of seating herself. The bartender – a recently retired Furniture by the look of it – approached her with a look of slight surprise, not used to female clients at the respectable club.

“Excuse me, miss, but it is forbidden to sell goods of any kind inside this establishment”, the young man spoke while averting his eyes, impeccably polite even while requesting her to leave.

“It’s a good thing then that I’m here to buy, not to sell. One flute of pink champagne if you please, make it a good brand”, she spoke, not bothering to look the waiter in the eye while speaking to him but studying her long, red-painted nails instead.

*She's going out tonight, loves drinking just champagne*
“Ah, I’m sorry, miss, but I will have to insist. My patron wishes to keep this establishment free of all... other distractions, if you understand my meaning.”

“Pray tell, boy, what is the eventual goal of this establishment? What is the whole point of the existence of this bar?”, the pertinent little Pet asked, taking a bright pink file out of her little gold purse and beginning to do her nails with it, apparently unable to recognise her cue to leave.

“Ergh... ?”, the former Furniture was at a loss for words. Not only because no Pet had ever called him a boy before, but also because he was used to blindly obeying orders without thinking about the purpose or workings of a whole.

“To make money, that is correct. Therefore, if I were to order, say, a round of your most expensive brand of champagne for everyone in here... that would make your patron... how much money exactly?”, the red-head asked sweetly, turning to look at the waiter while putting on her best innocent face. He did not look anything like what she had expected based on the rather unpleasant, impatiently pressuring tone he was using with her. Both his hair and eyes were an unusually dark shade of brown and he was handsome in that particularly striking way that almost made him too attractive to be a Furniture. She slowly ran her burning, orange eyes up and down his body in an approving manner. She would have never gazed upon a Furniture in such a way in the past, but after having observed her new Master assessing his Black Market overseer in a similar manner, she had come to see the appeal. She was a deeply sensual creature after all, a characteristic she unexpectedly shared with her possessive owner.

And she has been checking nearly all the men

“That would come down to approximately 6 million credits, miss, as our most expensive brand of champagne is Golden Empress and at least three bottles would be required to serve all current customers”, a small but decidedly smug grin appeared on his face, ruining the positive effect of her earlier assessment entirely and snuffing out any sympathy she might have had for him.

“Well, then you have my order. I’d like to pay by card”, the pretty Pet said as she held up an unlimited credit card, the gold sparkling enough to draw the attention of several onlookers seated at the bar.

She’s playing her game and you can hear them say

Caught off-guard by the entirely unexpected direction this encounter had taken, the boy momentarily slipped, allowing his thoughts to reach his lips without being sufficiently filtered. “Where...?”

“Did I get an unlimited credit card? Why, where do you imagine? Any fool in Midas knows that only members of the Tanaguran Syndicate have them. I suppose there is some truth after all to the cliché that pretty boys have no brains to speak of.”

As anger began to show through his otherwise perfectly composed façade, making his brows frown in a way that was most unbecoming, the waiter spoke again. “Of course I know that only Syndicate
members have them. The question rather is where a... girl like you... got one.” It could not have been more insulting if he had used the word whore outright.

“Oh? Some of us are actually good at our jobs, good enough to get a promotion of sorts. My beloved Master, Lord Mink – have you heard of him? – has lent me his card in exchange for excellent personal services rendered to him.”

_She is looking good, for beauty we will pay_

“Oh? Some of us are actually good at our jobs, good enough to get a promotion of sorts. My beloved Master, Lord Mink – have you heard of him? – has lent me his card in exchange for excellent personal services rendered to him.”

“I was unaware that the Elite of Tanagura now pay their Pets in actual money, isn’t the honour of serving one as great as a Blondie payment enough?”

“Dude, you’ve clearly never been on the receiving end of one of those blond bastards before, or you wouldn’t be spitting out total crap like that...”, a low, vulgar voice with a trace of masochistic humour rudely interrupted.

“Riki!” The fiery beauty at the bar was off her chair and in the arms of the leather-clad mongrel in seconds, kissing both of his rough cheeks in welcome. “You’re early, I wasn’t expecting you until later...”

_Damn it! How long has he been listening?!_ She wasn’t usually one to flaunt her new-found connection to the Mink household, but of course the only one who was not to find out about it just happened to waltz in seconds after she’d mentioned Iason Mink’s name!

After taking in the picture-perfect vision in front of him – never quite knowing how it was possible he had actually become friends with such a stunning looker –, the infamous Bison leader threw off his worn biker jacket and sat down, ignoring the disapproving glares thrown his way from all over the bar. “That why you told this pompous asshole your mystery benefactor is a Blondie?”

_Thank Jupiter! He didn’t hear!_

Mimea sighed, snapping her manicured fingers at the now even more astonished bartender to hurry up with their champagne and gracefully perching on top of the stool next to Riki. “I’m sorry, I know I should’ve told you sooner... but I just didn’t want you to be upset or worried.”

“I’d say you’ve failed miserably at that... Why on Amoy would you trust a Blondie ever again after all the shit that went down before?” The gang leader leaned back on his metal stool in order to look the shorter female in the eye, giving her a black, incredulous stare. What the hell had Mimea gotten herself into now? Perhaps he was wrong to assume that he’d been the only party responsible for her earlier fall from grace. Could there be such a thing as a bred class A Pet with a talent for trouble?

“I just... he’s different, once you get to know him...”, the girl tried to explain. The whole thing would have sounded unbelievable to her as well only a couple of months ago. So how could she possibly present it in a credible manner to Riki now, without mentioning that her new Master was in fact his own former tormentor? The mongrel wasn’t born yesterday, she’d have to tread very carefully. “I know it sounds crazy but I feel as if he understands me, as if he’s a kindred soul of sorts...”

“You feel a Blondie is your kindred soul? Bloody hell, Mimea, how many drinks have you already had in here?”, the mongrel said with a look of astounded disbelief, downing the entire contents of his champagne flute in one go.

“We don’t know them, nobody does, not really.... Usually they don’t want to be known, but he does.
I think he’s terribly lonely and confused about himself, about his human feelings…”, she continued in a softer voice, looking at him with slightly humid doe eyes, trying to appeal to his conscience and sympathy. For someone used to living in the gutter and minding his own business, Riki’s Ceresian sense of honour was remarkable enough to sometimes make him defend the rights of those he felt were victimised by Tanagura’s tyranny.

“He’s got feelings then? Sure he’s not just bored and messin’ with ya just for the hell of it?” The young rebel couldn’t suppress the shiver that ran icily down his back as he recalled how Iason’s mind games would mess with his emotions. At times he himself had become convinced that the blond robotic deity genuinely cared for him and was chasing after him because he respected his pride and strength of will. But after experiencing the Elite’s determination to utterly destroy his resolve and his very soul, there was no way that could be the case. The pampered prick had been toying with him all along! First ordering him to degrade himself in public and then giving him a kiss every once in a while to confuse him and throw him off-guard, only to strike hard again at a later time. There was just no way he was gonna let that happen to Mimea!

“Oh, I’m sure. The truth is we didn’t exactly hit it off the first time we met, but it gradually grew over time. It’s almost as if the more reason I gave him to dislike me, the more he came to like me. Isn’t that strange?”

“Guess not. It’s sorta what happened with me and Iason too, right?” The louder Riki would refuse him and cry bloody murder, the more he seemed to enjoy breaking his body and spirit.

“Uhu... I don’t think it’s quite the same though. If anything it’s... even more intimate. More like we’re partners in crime.” Maybe she could keep them both at the end of the game. The mongrel and the Blondie.

The Black Market courier lifted a handsome dark eyebrow at that. Partners in crime? What crime of an Elite’s could Mimea possibly be involved in? Or did she think she was being a bad girl by letting some golden psycho bang her? “You partners in sex too?” Mimea nearly choked on the liquid gold she was sipping. “No offence, but that’s kinda your game, right?”

“It is more his game than mine, trust me. I’m pretty sure he thinks he’s manipulating me at the same time I’m manipulating him.” Holy motherfucker. That sounded as if she was in way over her head, caught in a web of crossing and double-crossing.

“Why do they even bother with it, I wonder? I mean, they can have anybody do anything they damn well please anyways! So why the deceit, why the mind-fucking?” And why do people just keep on taking their shit over and over again?!

“Perhaps our minds aren’t the only ones being fucked with. Perhaps their divine Mother in her infinite wisdom fucks with their minds as much as they fuck with ours.” Truth be told, the entirety of the Tanaguran system could not be blamed solely on the Elite that enforced it. Through her close relationship with Iason, Mimea had come to realise that the Elite were tied to Jupiter’s system as well, probably even more so than regular Midas citizens.

Are you sayin’ you think they’re victims as much as perpetrators? I’m finding that a little hard to believe...” As the snobby waiter brought their second bottle of champagne, Riki snatched it from his hands and vented some of his frustrations by smashing its head off against the bar, pouring nearly as much champagne on the bar and the floor as he was in their glasses.

Pretending not to be disturbed in the slightest by her mongrel friend’s rather violent display, the pretty ex-Pet took up her crystal glass again and continued in a civilised tone: “The two of us have had many things happen to us that were a little hard to believe. That doesn’t change the fact that they
did actually happen.”

“So you would explain the Blondies’ interest in us, how exactly?”, as his irritation with the girl’s stupidity reached its peak, Riki smashed his glass down hard enough to break it to pieces. “What, they’re lonely? They want us to be friends? They’re in love with us?” Riki burst out loud in bitter laughter at that last sentence. The very idea of it was absolutely ludicrous! An Elite in love, right!

“To many the very notion of a Pet falling in love with a mongrel would be ridiculous as well. But those people do not know Pets, they do not know that we feel just as strongly as other people do, if not more so”, as she put down her flute it was also with more force than strictly necessary and her voice had become slightly higher-pitched.

“Shit…”, Riki cursed as he realised that Mimea was misinterpreting at whom his anger was directed. “Shit, Mimea, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. Of course I didn’t mean you...”

“You gave me the benefit of the doubt. Can you give my new Blondie friend the benefit of the doubt as well?”

The proud Bison leader slumped down in defeat at that and downed the rest of the bottle of pricy booz in a matter of seconds. “All right then, you got me. But I swear! If he lays even a finger on you...”

“He wouldn’t, our relationship isn’t like that. He knows that if he wants me to be his confidante and adviser he needs to treat me like an equal. Regardless, there is no need for physical violence or threats, as I know all too well he could control every aspect of my life if he chose to do so.”

“You’re not gonna tell me who it is, are you?” Not that Riki knew all the Blondies by name, but part of him just hated not knowing which one of those cocksuckers exactly had Mimea in his grasp.

“I promised him not to, for understandable reasons.” Even if Lord Mink’s unusual relationship with his mongrel Pet had been a public secret, no-one had ever explicitly spoken of it and his status as Head of the Syndicate and representative of Jupiter herself had protected him. It was only reasonable that an Elite of that standing would demand utter secrecy from his Pet.

“Holy smokes, you and one of those blond high ‘n mighty bastards. Makes you wonder, huh? What else is out there.” Was Iason’s infatuation with him truly that unusual? He sure as hell had never heard of any such disregard of social standards, but then again the inhabitants of Tanagura had become masters of deception and discretion. There was truly no telling how many similar scandals might have been covered up in the past. You could take the humans out of a humane world but you could never really take the humanity out of the humans.

“Maybe they’ve got it all wrong. Maybe we don’t know anything about the way of the world at all, maybe we never could and never will know anything”, the dark-skinned man mused as he was randomly moving pieces of broken crystal around the top surface of the bar, almost as if expecting that if he only pushed them around long enough they’d end up forming a semblance of a glass again. In the years right after the revolution it had often been stated by Tanagurans and Midasians alike that it wouldn’t be long before Ceres was ruined entirely and all its inhabitants had perished. Indeed Ceres had been ruined on all levels, but somehow the mongrels had pushed through. Somehow they had adapted to the loss of their human rights without ever really losing the core of their human beliefs.

“I do know one thing for sure”, she said, pushing a stray piece of Riki’s glass towards his hands. For a moment, her powdery-white doll hands were lying right next to his dark strong and grimy ones. Only while carefully comparing the seemingly mismatched set of hands in front of him did Riki
notice that Mimea’s red and gold nails resembled tiny flames.

The mongrel snapped out of his inner reverie and turned his face towards his unlikely Tanaguran ally. “And what’s that?”

“That I love you, and always will”, she said and kissed him.

ankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankan

Never made it as a wise man

I couldn’t cut it as a poor man stealing

He just couldn’t believe what he was seeing in front of his very eyes! All this time he had thought that it was because of something he had done, never once considering the possibility that the other party was to blame. The betrayal stung so bad it made his eyes water and his teeth clench. His hands curled into fists of their own volition, dirty fingernails cutting into the dark flesh of his palms, blood dripping from his fingertips and being soaked up by the greedy soil he was standing on.

Tired of living like a blind man

It wasn’t the fact that his soul mate wanted to sleep with some Tanaguran Pet that hurt the most, it was that he had lied about it. Just how dense did his childhood friend think he was? Did he seriously think he’d never find out about this? Ever since Riki got back from wherever it was he went for years on end without notice, he had acted differently. Perhaps it had been less obvious to certain other gang members, but to him – who had known the old Riki through and through – it had been clear from the start that something was wrong and that Riki was keeping things from all of them, especially from him.

I’m sick of sight without a sense of feeling

Guy got down from the trash container he had climbed on top of in order to be able to peer over the wall of a back alley that gave him a good view of those seated at the bar of the pub across the street. Having seen more than he would have liked to and more than enough to confirm his suspicions, he got unto his bike and sped through the backstreets of central Midas, soon heading the surrounding red light districts and drug lord territories surrounding the centre.

And this is how you remind me
Transforming his building rage into break-neck speed to get out of that blasted city of depravity and deceit, Guy felt tears stinging his eyes. Riki was the last person from whom he would have expected such a betrayal to come. That Kirie would sell out all of his fellow gang members in exchange for a chance at a better life in Midas, was a well-known fact to all. But Riki? It just went entirely against everything he thought he knew about the proud gang leader’s integrity. The Riki he knew would die before ever lowering himself to even beg for Midas’ scrapes and he had definitely not shown any interest in Pets or females before.

**This is how you remind me of what I really am**

As the back alleys of Midas’ periphery passed by in a flash, Guy thought back to all those times Riki had told him he loved him or had otherwise shown it through his actions. Could he really have thrown all that away for a quick fuck with some Tanaguran-bred Pet? Why?!

Could he possibly have misinterpreted the situation somehow? But no matter how much he pained his mind about it, there was no logical explanation for Guy. What other reason could Riki have to meet a Pet in a bar and then allow it to kiss him, other than the obvious? What was Riki even doing inside a Midasian high society bar anyways, weren’t those forbidden territory for mere mongrels? And where the hell did he get the money to buy even a single drink in a posh place like that? Something wasn’t right about it, too many loose ends and inexplicable factors.

**This is how you remind me of what I really am**

As Guy’s speeding bike neared Bison’s hide-out in Ceres, passing the familiar slum landscape that consisted out of several derelict grey-brown buildings and burned-out hovercars, he decided not to say anything to the other gang members just yet. He’d wait for Riki to come home, get him alone and then confront him about it, just in case there was some other explanation for his atypical behaviour. Even if his own hazel eyes had seen it, his loyal heart still couldn’t believe it.

As one liquid petal after another fell down from the dark heavens and was glued unto the transparent barrier made up by the windowpane, the young woman’s vision of her departing black-haired friend and desired lover became less and less clear. Until eventually she was watching a black figure with vague contours speeding off into the night, soon to be swallowed by the all-encompassing brightness of the traffic lights. If only she could have been one of those raindrops that were swept up by the wind and blown far and wide into the night. But she wasn’t, she was one of those drops that were doomed to stick to the window in their downwards slide to oblivion. One of those drops that would stick together until one could no longer tell where one ended and another began, for they all became part of the bigger sheet of water that stuck to the cold, reflective surface.
Yet the copper-haired girl knew that come winter, the drops would at times act differently, some of them taking on the shape of stars as they would harden up against the window, putting a momentary halt to their descent, at least until the thaw. But could she ever hope to be icy enough to become one of those crystals? And was not the fate of such a long-lasting ice flower chained to the window far worse than that of the short-lived raindrop that was blown into oblivion by the winds of freedom?

Mimea was suddenly awakened from her window-gazing reverie when the hypermodern communication device in her small glitter purse began to pulsate with enough force to make the porcelain coffee cup on the table shake dangerously. Quickly and efficiently pulling the zipper on the purse, she was fast to retrieve the buzzing device and to hit the respond button. There was no need to even check who was on the other side of the line, for there was only one person who even knew of the existence of the sophisticated, silver phone. “Yeah?”

“Did he leave already?”

“Yeah, he did, you wouldn’t be calling me if he hadn’t.”

“Why?”

“I guess because you wouldn’t want to risk him overhearing us and figuring out that we were working together.”

An impatient sigh could just be made out on the other side of the line. “Honestly, Mimea, sometimes I feel as if I am giving your intellect far more credit than it deserves. I mean why did he leave so soon?”

“He was in here talking to me for an hour, what makes you think that is only a small thing?”

“The last time the two of you met you were together for one hour and fifteen minutes. The time before you spoke for one hour and a half. The time before that for nearly two hours. Do you see what I mean?”

“It’s not about quantity, it’s about quality.”

“That is an easy statement to make when it is the quantity that is apparently lacking in your performance.”

This is how you remind me of what I really am

She grabbed her coffee cup hard enough for her knuckles to turn white. Her patron’s choice of the word “performance” was no coincidence, it was a word he always used when he wanted to degrade her by reminding her of what she officially – truly – was.

“Well, sometimes the easy statement is incidentally also the right statement.” She put her cup down on the table with a little bit more force than was strictly necessary, eliciting the disapproving gazes of the nearest waiter and several customers at a nearby table. “I told you I would get him to trust me in all things, and I’m well on my way to doing just that. But this can only be achieved over a longer period of time, meaning many short interactions have a far greater effect than few long ones.”

“Pray tell, Pet, if you felt you were failing in your assignment, would you tell me as much?”
This is how you remind me of what I really am

“I do not feel I am failing in my assignment, not at all.”

“Just answer the question.”

Taking a great gulp of coffee to give herself courage through caffeine, she responded. “Yes, I would tell you as much. Of course I would! Is that not what we agreed on, that we would trust each other?”

It’s not like you didn’t know that

“Well, then you will simply have to trust that I know what’s best when it comes to luring him in. You tried it your way and it failed rather miserably.”

“Mimea,” that one word was sharp enough for fear to start to race through her veins right away. Swallowing her apprehension, she began her counterattack nonetheless.

“What, do you deny it? Despite all the interaction time you had put into it, all your attempts to sway Riki were in vain. Whereas where I had spoken to him only a few times, he was willing to risk everything for me. As much as it may pain you to hear it, my Lord, this is something I know how to do and you do not.”

“Perhaps you are right about that, my dove. But do not forget that you are only to use your influence to bring him to me, not to you.”

“You. Me. What’s the difference? We’re all the same player now. Besides, you are the one he fell in love with, not me. In spite of your absolutely disastrous attempts to seduce him, he still ended up falling for you, he probably already had the moment he first laid eyes on you. And everything you have done since has merely served to push him away.”

“Is there a reason – other than a subconscious desire to be punished by my hand – that drives you to speak to me in such an offensive manner?”

Sighing, she put another sugar cube into her cup, wondering how someone with the intellect of a deity could be so idiotic when it came to the basics of human emotion.

“What I’m saying is that you treated him like utter shit and he actually likes you that much that he still feels attracted to you in spite of your shitty treatment. It is not a question of making the guy fall in love with you – as he obviously already is madly in love with you – but rather it is a question of making him perceive you as a person tolerable enough for him to consider as a lover.”

“And do you believe yourself capable of making him perceive me as such a ... tolerable person?”

“That shouldn’t be too hard, seeing as how I already perceive you as such, Iason.”
I said I love you and I swear I still do

“What makes you believe that your perceptions are of any importance to me?”

“Because my perceptions are precisely the tools I need to alter Riki’s perceptions, not to mention they make me more motivated to do so.”

“If you were to – for whatever reason – fail in your assignment, Mimea, you would be worth nothing to me, in addition to already being worth nothing to anybody else of any consequence. I daresay there is more than enough motivation in that, wouldn’t you agree?”

At this barely-concealed threat the former Pet was shaking so much that she almost dropped the small portable phone she had pressed to her ear. Covering the mouth piece, she took a couple of deep breaths and counted to ten in her head.

Cause living with him must have damn near killed you

“You know, that is exactly the shitty treatment that I am referring to. Why are you so terrified of someone actually liking you that you have to discourage them from doing so at each and every turn? You wish for Riki to come to you freely, do you not?”

There was a brief silence at the other end of the communication line.

“Yes. Yes, very much so.”

“Then let a human solve that human matter.”

And this is how you remind me of what I really am

Riding his bike through the downpour that had started right after he left the bar, Riki let his thoughts loose on the unlikely things he had learned from his conversation with the ex-Pet. The rain that fell from the neon sky in buckets made everything around him appear foreign, vague and confusing, even if the route he travelled was well-known to the mongrel. The water appeared to create a multicoloured, magnifying sheet between him and everyone else in the busy streets, casting everything in a variety of different lights and thus creating strange illuminated shapes.

Who exactly was Mimea’s mysterious blond protector? And why on Amoy would a member of the Syndicate lower himself to show any concern for someone else’s discarded Pet? Could it be that not all Elite were the same cold-hearted, selfish bastards? That some of them actually cared about
someone other than themselves, even someone who was not deemed a person by the rest of society?

Nearing his gang’s shelter at the outer border of Ceres, Riki almost wished that the other Bisons would not be there. He had too much stuff to think about that they couldn’t understand, memories of his own time in Tanagura plaguing his mind once more. Least of all he wished for Guy’s presence, as the two of them had barely spoken a meaningful word since his return several months ago. Not telling Guy that there had been someone else and that he therefore he was no longer interested felt like lying to him.

But how could Riki possibly tell him the truth without branding himself a traitor in his eyes? Moreover if it were known that Riki had been an Elite’s Pet for years he would become an outcast in Ceres, never allowed to set foot there again on pain of death. Nobody would even stop to wonder if he had become a Pet willingly, for all mongrels detested both Pets and Furniture because they envied them their comfortable lives in Tanagura, not realising how heavy the price for that moment’s comfort truly was.

Spotting Guy’s bike among the usual bikes at the entrance, Riki couldn’t suppress a sigh as he pushed his bike under the make-shift awning to prevent it from rusting prematurely. Not that it made much difference, for the awning was old and practically a sieve. Casually sliding a hand through his wet, messy hair, Riki entered the shelter, not bothering to kick off his muddy boots for the floor inside was probably even filthier than the ground outside. On days like this he seriously missed the comforts of Mink’s warm, dry penthouse and all the commodities therein. He would just about die for a hot shower, a mug of cacao and one of those clean fluffy bathrobes right about now.

“The prince of Ceres finally returns!!”, a positively wasted Sid got up from the wobbly crate he was seated on and stumbled in Riki’s direction while grabbing the walls of their rundown shelter for support. Deftly avoiding the other’s wildly waving arms, Riki continued in the direction of the campfire the other mongrels were seated around, spotting Guy straight away. Why is he avoiding my gaze? Usually Guy would be the first one to greet Riki when he came in. He must have gotten sick of being ignored by me, my bad.

“Hi guys. Man, can you believe this weather?”, the Bison leader said as he sat down on the only real chair in the hide-out – upholstery sticking out of the plastic back – and accepted the dusty bottle of stout offered to him by Norris.

“What I can’t believe is how long it took you to get your ass back here, Riki”, Luke said. “And without anything to show for it either? That’s unlike you.”

“Maybe Riki was otherwise engaged on his little fieldtrip, Luke”, Guy’s low voice sounded from the other side of the fire, his eyes finally lifting to meet Riki’s, full of accusation.

“What the fuck’s that’s supposed to mean, Guy? What, I can’t go for a spin in the rain just cause I feel like it?”, the other mongrel joked, while knowing full well by the look in Guy’s eyes that whatever his problem was, it was no laughing matter.

It’s not like you to say sorry

“Oh, it’s not the spin that’s got me worried, rather it’s the direction you spun into. I didn’t know they even served mongrels at the bars in downtown Midas, but then again maybe it had something to do with the company you were in, huh?”
For a moment Riki was utterly speechless, a thousand thoughts running through his head in one big jumbled-up mess. “Guy, whatever you heard...”, he began.

“What I saw, with my own eyes”, Guy spoke, his voice loud enough now to alarm the rest of the gang.

“Whatever you saw, it’s not what you think...”

“So you weren’t sticking your tongue down a red-haired female Pet’s throat in some fancy bar called Ecstasia?”

“No, I wasn’t! She kissed me, not the other way around, and it wasn’t that sort of kiss!” Riki felt a wave of anger washing over him so strongly that it made him nauseous. Not anger at Guy, for with what little information he had he was right to be pissed, but anger at the whole injustice of the situation he now found himself in. He’d known it would only be a matter of time before even the wide social distance between Ceres and Eos could no longer protect him from the truth getting out, he’d just hoped he would have had a little more time.

*I was waiting on a different story*

“I didn’t realise there were different sorts of kisses to receive from a whore?”, Guy laughed, but not with mirth.

“She ain’t no whore!”, at this Riki jumped out of the chair, willing to beat up anybody who had the guts to offend his friend, Bison or no Bison.

“That almost sounds as if you know her”, Guy smirked in a decidedly derogatory way.

“Cause I do know her, OK! What, you think I was there buying me some random piece of ass, huh?! You ought to know I’m not interested in getting laid that way!”

*This time I’m mistaken*

“Oh yeah? Then why were you there with that female without telling anybody about it, huh? Just how stupid do you think I am, Riki?!” Guy also jumped up in a sudden fit of rage, knocking over his crate and throwing his stout bottle into the fire, creating a rather frightening fireball right above it, but Riki wasn’t impressed.

*For handing you a heart worth breaking*

“She’s just a friend, all right! I didn’t tell you cause I knew you’d react like this, I knew you wouldn’t understand...” If he had seen Guy in a similar way only a few years ago he would have probably reacted in the same – no, an even worse – way.
“Just a friend?! What, you go to pick up a Pet cause you wanna be friends with her? Oh, come on! Why would you even be interested in being friends with an empty-headed spoiled little bitch like that...”

“If you had even the slightest idea of what she had to go through, you wouldn’t ever dare to call her spoiled! And she’s got a whole lot more brains than many folk that I know from around here.”

And I've been wrong

“What she had to go through? And what’s that, huh? Getting her freakin’ nails done by some castrated traitor punk while she’s sipping lemonade? Moaning loud enough for her Master’s pleasure while some pretty boy’s riding her slutty ass?”

“Shit, you’ve got no idea what it’s like up there, do you? Never mind! If I can’t even get some fucking respect around here anymore and have people mind their own bloody business, I really can’t see the benefits of livin’ in a dump like this!” After screaming those words at Guy loud enough to nearly take his head off, the infamous Riki the Dark turned on his heels and strode out of the derelict warehouse. I gotta get out of here before I fucking kill someone!

I've been down

“Hey!!”, Guy chased Riki outside into the rain while the other Bisons just stood there gaping, unsure what to do or whose side to choose. “Where the hell do you think you’re going, you cheating scumbag?! First making up excuses for whores, and now you’re just running off like some coward?!”

“What, you’d rather I give you a good beating before I go, huh?!! Is that it?! Let’s hear how you moan while I bash in your miserable face!”, as Riki came at Guy armed with a broken stout bottle, Luke and Sid decided it was time to intervene, only allowing Riki to take one hit before they pulled him off of his former pairing partner.

Into the bottom of every bottle

Getting back on his feet and wiping his bloody face, Guy simply yelled on with fists swinging, Norris now getting involved as well, blocking his path. “It sure would be the first time you’d make me moan since you got back! What, am I not good enough for you anymore?! Cause you’ve got some A-Class pampered slut to bang now?!”

These five words in my head
“I’ve had it with this fucking jealousy thing!! If I wanna talk to the girl, if I wanna kiss the girl... hell, if I wanna fuck the girl, then I will! It’s my business! And not you, not anybody, is gonna tell me what to do, you hear me?!”

_Scream “Are we having fun yet?”_

The other gang members exchanged a few surprised glances. Since when had Guy ever shown any signs of jealousy before today? If nothing else, Guy had been an example of the patient, understanding boyfriend since Riki got back, never even asking why Riki didn’t want to have sex with him and was being so distant. It was only natural that he’d react in this way after catching their leader in the act of cheating, and with a female at that.

“Fuck this shit, I’m gettin’ outta here, good luck scraping it together by yourselves from now on, ya bunch of ungrateful assholes...”, Riki hissed angrily, getting on his bike and starting it up with a loud bang before flying off into the night, the cool rain spattering on his face actually feeling like a relief now.

_Yeah, yeah_

Switching the bike into full gear, Riki left the ramshackle huts, tents and abandoned, burned-out buildings of Ceres behind him, heading unto Orange Road, that was as busy as ever at that time of night. Driving like a maniac, Riki could barely avoid colliding with several vehicles, not even bothering to look behind him while dismayed drivers and passengers got out of their cars to call him names. As the dreadful weather beat down on him and soaked him to the bone, Riki could feel hot streams running down his face. Grateful for the rain hiding his unusual emotional display of weakness, Riki focussed on the road ahead in order to keep thoughts of what had just transpired at Bison headquarters at bay. He couldn’t deal with all that crap, he just had to get away from it all.

_No, no_

After driving down most of the main road at dangerous velocity, Riki realised what direction he had been instinctively going in as the gigantic towers of white stone and glittering glass doomed up ahead. Right in front of him, only surpassed in height and grandeur by Jupiter Tower itself, was Eos Tower, its many lights making it appear like a star in the sky, visible from light years away.

_Yeah, yeah_

Both awed and frightened by the path his body had taken him in his moment of doubt, Riki made a
narrow turn, heading into the district of Diego rather than Mistral Park. Finally he was able to stop and shut down the bike at a wharf further down the side of the road, not that the open building offered him much shelter from the storm currently raging.

No, nooo

Parking his bike and leaning against one of the great concrete pillars supporting the dark, abandoned place, Riki finally sank down in a muddy puddle and cried his heart out. How were things supposed to go back to normal from here on out? Had he not done everything humanly possible to get back to his gang and to get things back on track with them? Then why did he feel like he was failing miserably? Just how much misfortune could one person – no matter how tough – take?

To Be Continued ...

Bring on those reviews, please!!! :)

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Chapter Summary

Having run away from his gang, Riki finds himself in dire need of a place to stay and turns to Katze for help. But can Iason's former Furniture really be trusted? And what if Riki's destined path leads him back towards his old Master regardless?

Author’s notes:

So here it is, as promised, the next chapter! It still took longer than I had anticipated cause I just kept adding to it, especially to the ending, but in my defence I do have a much longer chapter to post now :) As I’m sure you’ve noticed this fic is slow-burn as far as Riki/Iason is concerned, but Riki’s definitely taking a couple of steps closer to Iason in this chapter ;)

Now all I gotta do is finally continue writing the next chapter for Crossing the Bridge, which is still moving, steadily but slowly :P

Soundtracks: Nightcrawler – Bloodrage

Galantis – Runaway (U & I)

Opening theme: Nightcrawler – Bloodrage (instrumental)

After sitting there in the cold rain and darkness for a while – he had no idea whether it had been minutes or hours or all night long – Riki could suddenly discern footsteps heading in his direction. “Hello? Anybody in here?” a rough, deep voice sounded. As Riki looked up, he could just make out a bulky figure approaching him. The mongrel scrambled up and prepared to make a run for it, but a familiar voice said: “Riki? That you? What the fuck you doin’ in here, kid?”

As the big man stepped up close and into a beam of light falling down a hole in the ceiling, Riki finally recognised him. “Hector? It’s been like forever, man, how’ve you been?” He was honestly surprised that he managed to keep the despair and heartache out of his voice, for the most part.

“Yeah, been way too long. I’ve been good, y’know, just getting jobs done and minding my own business. You’ll be wanting the boss, yeah? Here, let me put that away for ya, all that stuff gets
stolen round here...”, the heavy Black Market man said as he took care of Riki’s bike, pushing it through the wharf and out a back door, chaining it to the wall there. It was only now that Riki realised he had incidentally stumbled into one of Katze’s illegal warehouses, recognising the building behind the warehouse and the metal stairs leading up to Katze’s unofficial office. “You’re in luck, as it so happens the boss is here today, just up the stairs, head on in, he shouldn’t be too busy...”

Beginning to shake almost uncontrollably after having spent the whole night outside while soaked to the bone, Riki merely nodded his thanks and headed up the stairs as fast as his nearly-frozen legs would carry him, the denim sticking unpleasantly to his wet skin. It was only when he stood in front of Katze’s office door that he wondered what the hell he was doing there. What the fuck was he gonna tell Katze? Was it even wise to be asking help from a guy who had proven himself to be unworthy of his trust in the past? But what choice did he have, if he wanted a place to stay where Guy wouldn’t bother him?

Just as Riki had mustered up the courage to knock on the door anyways, get warm and possibly get some liquor in his belly if nothing else, the door opened for him, revealing a clearly overworked, almost ill-looking red-head. Obviously surprised to see his occasional field agent there – and in such a dishevelled, miserable state at that – Katze gestured for him to follow him back into the office. “Riki... I wasn’t expecting you, not that I’d have bothered to try and make this place any less of a mess for the likes of you”, the former Furniture said as he indicated for Riki to sit down at an unusually cluttered desk. For Katze not to make time to clean up his office, he had to have been impossibly busy. “Damn, you look like you’ve been caught in a blizzard, want a towel?”

“Yeah, thanks man. You wouldn’t send a dog out in this weather”, Riki said, as he gratefully accepted the clean towel Katze offered him, drying his unruly hair and peeling his cold, wet shirt off. The towel absorbed the water quickly and was pleasantly soft to the touch, it was the same brand of towels that were used at the Mink household, if Riki remembered correctly.

“Looks like someone’s sent you out in it though”, the Black Market boss remarked, setting a cup of freshly-brewed quality coffee in front of the shivering mongrel, the aroma wafting from it already making him feel much better.

“Hmmm, I kinda sent myself out...”, he began, taking the cup but nursing it in his hands to savour its warmth rather than its contents. “Listen, Katze. I’ve run into a bit of a problem... Is there any way I could get an advance on my paychecks?”

Surprised at this request, Katze donned his business-face and sat down in the high-backed chair at the other side of the desk, steepling his fingers in that way that always reminded Riki of Iason. “Well, like I told you when you first started working for me, Riki, that’s not usually the way I operate.”

Sighing, Riki took a sip of the invitingly-hot coffee, burning his tongue in the process. “Ah, shit, that’s hot! I know, man, but I’ve had it... with Guy, with the gang, with everything... I want – no – I need something else to do with my life. And from where I’m sitting there’s not a whole lotta options, other than the market I mean.”

“Are you saying that you’d want to work as my permanent employee rather than as an occasional freelancer from now on?” Amber, feline eyes now scrutinized him in a more calculating manner, as if trying to appraise the value of an asset.

“If you’ll have me,” blowing on his coffee in a way Katze thought his Master would have found decidedly adorable, he attempted to take another sip of the steaming liquid.

“Shit, kid, you’ve gotta be one of the most devious minds I’ve ever encountered, in Ceres or elsewhere. Of course I’m having you, there’s always room for the pro street smarts that a man like
yourself brings, and I mean that. But I’m worried that this might just be a temporary phase you’re going through... You see, I can’t hire people for a permanent position and have them run off on me the next week, you understand?”

“I ain’t gonna run off on you. Hell, I can’t even if I wanted to! What am I gonna live off if I do? And there’s no fucking way I’m going back to Bison, Guy’s screwed things over with me real good... Anyhow, by the time my pride would allow me to go back, I ain’t gonna be wanted there no more anyways.”

“So what happened? Not... that it’s any of my business, but I’d like to get a better perspective on the situation... to determine how likely it is that you’re serious about the job, that’s all.”

“Yeah, right. I ain’t stupid, Katze, I dunno what other idiotic slum scum you’ve got workin’ for ya, but I know exactly what you’re thinking”, the former gangleader said and resolutely put down his cup and pushing it towards Katze across the desk, distancing himself from the warmth and comfort it so deceivingly provided.

This was the overseer of the entire Black Market network he was dealing with here, not to mention a man who hadn’t hesitated to sell him out before, in order to improve his own position with the Tanaguran Head of the Syndicate and his former Master. Riki simply couldn’t afford to make any mistakes now, even if he felt like he’d be needing the other man’s help to survive on his own from now on. If anything, Katze would know what it meant to climb your way up out of the gutter: the many sacrifices it required, the childhood connections and inbred ideals that were destroyed forever in that trying ascent.

“You do then? Well, I’m listening, what am I thinking?”, the seasoned criminal mastermind asked with a sly expression, daring the other to be the first to outright mention what both of them were undoubtedly thinking.

“Just how am I gonna get the most out of Riki’s unfortunate set-back, that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Any man working in a permanent capacity for the market can tell you that I’m nothing but fair in my dealings with my personnel...”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it! There’s only one thing in the world you care about more than making money in the market, and that’s...” Pleasing your Master.

Holding up a pale hand to silence him, Katze got out of his chair, opened the office door, glancing left and right, and then closed it again.

“I have something to tell you, Riki, and I’d like you to listen and not interrupt me as I do.”

“Kay”, Riki sulked, leaning back further in his chair and crossing his arms in a nonchalant but also defensive posture.

“Like I said before, I’d be glad to have you in the market on a more permanent basis. However, as you well know, the work is not without risk and the risk increases drastically the moment one becomes a regular in the business. I’m just gonna be straight with you, Riki: I can’t have your death on my hands. And in order for you to make enough money in the market to sustain yourself outside of Ceres, I would have to risk your life.”

Riki opened his mouth to protest but was stopped again by Katze’s hand gesture. Unknowingly Riki reacted to it automatically because it had been the very same gesture that Iason had used when he was being serious.
“But you being unwilling to go back to Guy could definitely work to my advantage, there’s no mistaking that, therefore I wouldn’t mind investing in your well-being. So here’s the deal: you work for me part time and I’ll pick out some relatively safe jobs for you, in exchange I’ll provide you with an apartment here in Diego and a decent allowance to live off.”

“That sounds... more than fair. But it’s you paying this allowance, right?” There was no way he was taking charity from the very same Elite who’d ruined his relationship with Guy and his gang in the first place.

“Of course, the market’s running smoothly, I could afford a great deal more than the maintenance of one lousy little mongrel. You can trust me, Riki, I will not speak of this arrangement between us, unless specifically questioned on the matter of course.”

“No fucking way I trust you, I could never trust you again after what you pulled on me back in the day. But the way things stand, I haven’t really got much of a choice. Until I can figure out something else, I’m fine with your proposal. But I’m gonna need your word that you’ll let me go when I ask.”

Katze sat down in the office chair again, undoing the height difference he had so expertly been using during his speech, spread out his sinewy, pale arms and said with a grin: “How am I gonna stop you from going anywhere?”

After signing all of the required paperwork for Riki’s new job as a courier and intelligence officer – which was semi-official and came with a temporary residency pass for several Midas areas – Katze offered to drive his employee to the living accommodations that came with the job.

“Thanks, but what about my bike? It’s parked out-back and it’s literally the only possession I have so...”

“Don’t worry, I can fit it into the trunk if I push down the back seats. Go get your bike, I’ll bring the car round”, the former Furniture said, walking down the stairs with his usual efficiency but with less of a confident swagger than Riki was used to when he was in his Black Market persona. Katze was probably more exhausted than he was letting on, or maybe he simply didn’t bother with it seeing as how Riki already knew who he truly was underneath all that mob boss attitude.

Unchaining his bike and pushing it across the courtyard and around the front of the building, Riki wondered if he had made the right decision taking a job from Katze. But honestly, what other choice did he have at the moment? He couldn’t go back to Bison, and he sure as hell wasn’t going back to Jason! He didn’t even know if the Blondie would want him back, after all he had sent Riki away, and the mongrel didn’t see how there could have been any other reason for that than the powerful Elite’s momentary fancy having come to an abrupt end.

“Here, let me take that for you...”, Katze said as he reached for Riki’s hoverbike when he got to the sleek, black car’s trunk.

“Nah, it’s fine, I ain’t starved to the point where I can’t lift my own bike no more...”, the mongrel said stubbornly, turning away from the other’s extended hands and sliding his bike inside the trunk in a nearly-Herculean effort, biceps bulging slightly under his dark skin.

“I wasn’t offering cause I thought you couldn’t do it yourself. I just figured you could use a hand,
“life’s more bearable that way”, the red-head said, opening the passenger door for him with practised ease before he could protest again. Riki decided not to start an argument with his employer this early in the game and just got into the car without comment. Once seated in the car, he could barely suppress a sigh of contentment as he felt the softness of the seat cushions and breathed in the scent of leather upholstery. Studying the posh dashboard with the many flickering lights and displays, Riki wondered at the unfairness of the way in which wealth was divided in Midas.

“Damn, it’s weird, at times you’re just like any other mongrel, and then at other times... not so much.”

“Really? How so?”, Katze wondered, turning around the car in a series of smooth, well-coordinated moves before gliding off with graceful speed.

“First off there’s the way you talk, you’re always switching between slang and an uptown accent. Then there’s this weird need to assist people, like just now with the towel and the bike. And of course there’s the choice of car...”

“I fail to see how owning an expensive car is atypical for the boss of a criminal organisation on such a grand scale.”

“I’m not talking about its price, I’m talking about its appearance. It’s just too subtle, this is what someone classy would pick, not what an uprooted slumdog would choose.”

“So you’d choose a bright-red convertible with tigerprint upholstery and purple tail lights?”, Katze joked, turning unto one of the busier streets that led out of the back neighbourhoods and towards the centre of Midas.

“Not exactly, although I’m sure Ceres is full of tasteless morons who would. But I’d have chosen shiny black leather upholstery instead, and I’d at least include some personal clutter in here, like a nice metal pendant on this mirror here, and a fancy built-in ashtray...”

All of a sudden Katze interrupted Riki’s thoughts on the decoration of his imaginary car’s interior with a fit of laughter.

“What?! Why are you laughing? Are my suggestions really that ridiculous?”, Riki asked, trying to sound indignant at the other’s mockery but failing miserably, as he was having serious difficulties not to burst out in laughter himself.

“OK, here we are, you’ll be housed in this block”, Katze informed him, the hint of a smile still present on his usually-stoic face when he parked in front of a modest but clearly decent block of flats on the outskirts of Diego, bordering on the residential areas of central Midas. “Feel free to decorate the apartment any way you see fit, as long as the fixtures that come with the place stay attached to it.”

“That depends, are these fixtures you’re talking about covered in freakin’ gold veneer or some posh shit like that?”

“Of course not, this is still Diego, they don’t do those kinds of fixtures here, even if the building is owned by yours truly. Here’s your key”, he said, holding out a small metal plaque on a keychain. “It’s connected to the registration on your residency pass, so if you ever were to lose it you’d be locked out of your own place so watch out.”

“I will, thanks for the warning”, the mongrel said, a weary look appearing on his attractive face as he accepted his key, holding it in front of the sensor next to the main entrance of the building. A couple of seconds later the red light on the sensor turned green, the force fields across the façade went down
and the automatic glass doors opened into a relatively spacious and well-maintained hallway, leading up to a single elevator.

Katze didn’t waste any time and went straight for the elevator, Riki following him in silence, casting careful glances about him, taking in his new environment. He was relieved that there was no classical music or pleasant chime of any kind playing in the elevator, that had always annoyed the hell out of him back in Eos Tower. Having grown up only a block away from the vast wilderness of the Amoyan deserts, Riki was used to silence and did not feel unnerved by it in the slightest. Listening carefully, Riki briefly wondered why his own breathing was that much louder than the other’s. It was probably just some kind of ingrained Furniture training, cause breathing that quietly could not possibly come natural.

The elevator announced the arrival at their destined floor with a soft ping. Allowing Katze to take the lead again, Riki went out of the elevator behind him. The red-head stopped at a door that was only a few paces away from the elevator, gesturing for Riki to hold his key to the sensor. A moment later they walked into a modest, sparsely decorated apartment that was probably bigger than the entire space Riki had shared with Bison and about the size of one of the Mink household’s smaller reception areas, bedroom and bathroom included.

The main living area had a couch on one end and a set of dining table and chairs next to a big window overlooking most of Diego on one side and the residential area of Janus on the other. Riki also noticed that this building was higher up than most in the immediate area, it had to be the most sophisticated block of flats in this area of Midas. Off to the side of the living area there was a small kitchen island, containing a sink, furnace, microwave oven, fridge and several cupboards, compactly arranged into one single unit.

“The kitchen comes with all the basic appliances, dishes and cutlery”, the former Furniture said, opening the cupboards to show Riki where what materials were stored. “Obviously there are no abundant luxuries, but I don’t suppose you’d be needing any of those for the kind of cooking you’ll be doing in here. You’ll have to do some grocery shopping to be properly set up though, there’s a convenience store just down the street that’s open twenty-four seven that should have everything you need.”

“All right, I’m used to making do with a fire to cook over so this is probably more than I need already”, Riki murmured, moving his hand across the stainless steel of the small refrigerator and then experimentally switching the buttons on the electric furnace. It had enough space for two cooking pots but Riki usually put everything into a single pot anyways.

“Come on, let me show you the bed- and bathroom, right this way”, Katze indicated for Riki to enter the small bedroom first, ever the perfect host.

There was no furniture in the bedroom other than a medium-sized bed but there was actually a small window in the room, which made Riki feel more at ease and less like he was locked up in a cardboard box. Another door in the bedroom led into a small bathroom that housed a washbasin, a toilet and a shower separated from the rest of the room by a shoulder-high, white-tiled wall. It was surely nothing luxurious or ultra-modern, but for someone who had made do without a bathroom or even a toilet for most of his life, it didn’t look half bad.

“There are some towels in the cupboard underneath the basin, but anything else you’ll have to buy for yourself”, Katze remarked, noticing how Riki’s eyes were automatically searching for a window that wasn’t there as soon as they’d entered the smaller space.

“Those be the same towels you use in your office?”, Riki asked, trying to act casual about it and keeping his voice as steady as was possible for him.
Katze glanced at the mongrel in surprise, not having expected him to pay any attention to such details as the origins of a towel. Shaking his head, he said: “Nah, I just kept those around for a special occasion. But if you want some, I’ve got access to heaps of them.”

“They sure are very nice towels. But I ain’t no nice kind of guy, so you can keep ‘em.”

“They’re just towels, Riki.”

“Nothing’s just what it looks like, Katze. That ain’t the kind of world we’re living in, especially on this side of the border.”

“You’re all right with accepting this entire apartment from me but not with accepting a single towel from Iason?” There. He’d said it, the dreaded name. The waiting was over. An uncomfortably long moment of silence followed, both of them not looking at each other.

“Keep talking like that and I might change my mind about the whole job thing”, Riki finally threatened half-heartedly, distrusting the other man but absolutely clueless as to what other path he could take now.

“Now why would you want to do that for? The market’s as good a place as any for someone from the slums, and you know I’ve a great personal interest in keeping you alive and well.”

At this comment Riki rolled his eyes, turning away from Katze and heading back into the bedroom. But Katze’s soft, nuanced voice followed him into the other room: “Not to mention I genuinely like you, you remind me of myself when I was younger. A bit louder and more aggressive perhaps, but decidedly not less headstrong or cunning.”

“You sell out all your friends to sex-crazed psychopaths then, do you?”, Riki snapped, throwing himself unto the bed and testing its resilience.

It was a rather Spartan single but it was decidedly good quality, almost as soft as Iason’s bed but not quite. Also there were no silk sheets and extra cushions, neither did it smell of flowers the way the beds in the penthouse did when they were freshly made.

“In my defence, I didn’t exactly have a choice in the matter. And it’s just the one sex-crazed psychopath, I would have never even considered it were it any other person, no matter how wealthy or influential, you should know that.”

“That’s just what you Tanagurans don’t get, Katze”, Riki said as he bounced up from the bed, shaking off the fluffy comfort it had given him. “There’s always a choice in the matter, you just have to keep fighting for what you believe in.”

“I’m trying to do just that by hiring you, Riki. Don’t think I fail to understand the concept of free will or the importance of it”, the ex-Furniture said, his golden eyes conveying more emotion in that single moment than Riki had ever seen in them before.

“Oh? So you hiring me is actually your choice, is it? You don’t have a secret agenda of some sort? And you’re not planning on telling your beloved Master about it then?”

“You know I’ll have to. At any rate he still asks about you regularly, so even if I failed to mention it of my own accord, I’d be forced to admit it soon enough.”

“But you won’t wait for that moment, will you?”, the mongrel accused.

“There would simply be no point, the only difference being that I would undoubtedly be punished
severely for holding back the information, especially since it concerns you”, Katze tried to reason.

“Yeah, there would be a point. The point being that you wouldn’t have betrayed my trust and that you would’ve held on to at least some dignity and self-respect”, the other young man spoke with conviction.

Katze sighed as he led Riki back into the open plan living space. “If it means that much to you... and if it can help me earn back your trust... then I will not mention hiring you until he specifically asks me about what you’ve been up to as of late. But as you well know, I’ll suffer the consequences for it, however insignificant an offence it may be.”

“Yeah, I know. But if you want me to work for you, if you want me to trust you, you have to give me something to prove that you’re on my side.”

“I’m sure I’ll have sufficient markings to show you as evidence of just that. Now, I suggest you come along to my place, it’s too early to go grocery shopping and I’m sure you must be both exhausted and famished by now.”

“Oh no, Katze, I couldn’t. But I’ll make do, no worries”, Riki said, trying to get out of it. There was something about accepting charity and especially comfort or camaraderie from the man that just didn’t sit well with him at all. It was all a little bit too convenient, a little bit too good to be true.

“I insist. I can’t have my new employee faint on his first day of work”, with that Katze turned around and headed out of the apartment in a confident stride that practically commanded Riki to follow him, so he did.

Perhaps he ought to give Katze the benefit of the doubt, after all Riki knew he had been a mongrel too in a distant past, just trying to get ahead and escape a life of hardship, crime and an early death. And if he was willing to endure a punishment at Iason Mink’s wrathful hands just to prove that he meant it, there simply had to be some truth to his statement that he actually liked Riki.

When Katze got to his own apartment, which was apparently just down the hall from Riki’s, he offered Riki a cold beer and then immediately went to work in the kitchen.

“So... you actually live in one of these yourself, huh?” The apartment hardly looked any more decorated or personalised than Riki’s blank canvas did, suggesting that Katze didn’t truly live in it but only went there to sleep. All the furniture looked roughly the same, possibly the materials they were made out of were of better quality, but there was no artwork or personal paraphernalia anywhere in sight.

“It’s close to work and I don’t need anything more”, Katze explained as he was whisking some eggs in a bowl while pre-heating a pan on the furnace. “I hardly spend any time in here as it is, it wouldn’t make any sense to acquire anything fancier.”

“Listen, you don’t have to do anything special, man, it’s just me, whatever you fix or heat up is fine.”

“No, I like doing it. There’s hardly any reason for me to bother with cooking these days, as it’s only me and I hardly have regular meal times. But to be honest I miss it sometimes, just the simplicity of it, I guess. While I’m in the kitchen I can just forget about everything else, at least for a while.”

“I... never really looked at it that way. But you’re right, it’s like your own little protective bubble. I guess Furniture must be living just as much in a bubble as Pets are.”

“You forgot Elite, their bubbles tend to be the thickest of all”, Katze remarked, as he poured the eggs into the pan and set it on the furnace, moving on to cut up some defrosted vegetables. Of course he
wouldn’t keep around fresh ingredients if he was hardly ever at home, but Riki did notice how perfectly organized his hybrid fridge-freezer looked, all the containers neatly stacked and labelled.

Riki laughed at Katze’s last remark, a genuine laugh that lightened the mood straight away. “You’re definitely right about that, I’ve never met anyone more thick-headed than those motherfuckers up there in Eos Tower.”

It felt like such a great relief to be able to talk about his time in Tanagura with someone, even if it was someone he couldn’t trust in a million years. Of course there was Mimea, but with her being a female and his own guilt complex Riki was always worried that he’d say something to upset her, so they hardly ever discussed their past in Eos.

“Neither did I, and I’ve actually met quite a few dignitaries from other city states and even other planets”, Katze chuckled, adding vegetables to what looked like a super-deluxe omelette in the making.

“Hey, you need me to do anything? I’m not a complete idiot when it comes to cooking, y’know, I’m just not used to using fancy materials and machinery.”

“I figured. Here, you can peel and cook these potatoes. If anything Ceres makes one creative when it comes to gathering ingredients and attempting to make them semi-digestable and remotely palatable.”

“Yeah, I recall this time when I’d actually prepared rat and managed to convince everyone else that it was stolen rabbit”, Riki snickered while grabbing a knife to peel the potatoes, but then fell silent when he realised he’d probably never cook for Bison again.

“Strictly speaking there isn’t in fact a whole lot of difference between a rat and a rabbit, the only difference is in the way people perceive them, associating rats with filth and disease”, Katze reasoned, his facial expression even so Riki didn’t know for sure if he could be implying something more than what he was saying.

“That’s just the way everyone thinks, every man for himself while the big shots continue to boss everyone around”, Riki tried to assure the other. He’d learned from childhood that it was a dog eat dog world and that in the end the only person anybody could truly help was oneself.

Yet he had truly cared about several people at many times in his difficult life, even sharing his hard-earned food and liquor with them. Cause living on your own just didn’t feel like much of a life. But although he had held genuine affection for most members of his gang, Riki had never forgotten that when push came to shove he was alone. If anything the events with Iason Mink and the more recent argument with Guy had reminded Riki of that cruel fact. If Bison somehow learned of what Riki had been doing those years when he’d been away from Ceres, he would be on his own. Hell, he was already on his own just for defending a Pet! If Guy were to ever find out that he’d actually been one himself...
"Divide and conquer", Katze interrupted Riki’s inner worries.

"Exactly! That’s nicely put, how’d you come up with that so quickly just now?”, he wondered. How many years did it actually take to go from sounding like a mongrel fresh out of Guardian to sounding like an Elite yourself half of the time? To what extent could any regular guy from Ceres be moulded and transformed into the perfect Tanaguran lackey? Riki shivered at the thought of what more time spent in Mink’s company might have turned him into.

“I wasn’t the one who came up with it, a Roman ruler called Julius Caesar did, back on Earth about three thousand years ago.”

“No shit. Well, he was right, it still is that way on Amoy today. Every man for himself and Jupiter on top”, Riki said with a shrug, merely stating fact, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with it.

“These things tend to change over time. At times people allow themselves to be governed by nobility, but at other times people have risen up to such tyranny and have taken their rights into their own hands. History is one big repetition of such revolutions and changes in political organisation”, Katze suggested not-too-subtly, appearing far more focussed on his kitchen tasks now, his body taking on a more tense stance of concentration.

“Well, my ancestors tried to do just that by making Ceres an independent state, and you see what that has brought us”, the former gang leader replied rather pessimistically. It had brought Ceres nothing but misery, that was the truth of it, even if no mongrel alive would ever admit it.

“Most revolutions fail, but that doesn’t mean some can’t succeed”, the cunning young man countered. “Usually a successful revolution requires some insider knowledge, some help from within the existing power structure. When Ceres rebelled they were relying on Midas to give them that support, but the Midasians chickened out cause Tanagura still held power over them.”

Riki listened carefully while cooking the potatoes, pricking them with a fork to see if they were ready yet. “So you’re saying that what they needed was some back-up in Tanagura itself? How the hell were they supposed to pull that off, huh? Tanagura is the very enemy they were trying to fight.”

“You speak as if Tanagura is but one single organism, while many thousands of people live and work there.”

“Yeah, but you and I both know that there’s only twelve actually running the show. The whole place is just one hierarchical pyramid, with the Syndicate at the highest level and Jupiter as the pinnacle.”

“That’s not exactly an accurate assessment, Riki. I would argue that Jupiter doesn’t count, because she’s not human. Also there is one person above even the Syndicate that you’ve failed to mention”, Katze subtly corrected, indicating that the potatoes were ready.

Looking up in confusion as he went to drain the water from the potato pot, Riki thought for a moment. “You mean... Iason, right?” Again the feared name entered the conversation, making Riki feel far more nervous than he was letting on.

“Exactly, the Head of the Syndicate, Iason Mink. If for some reason there would be a power shortage in Tanagura, Jupiter would shut down, leaving him – one single person – at the very top of the entire Tanaguran – and by extension Midasian – hierarchy.”

“Why do you make that sound like it’d be a good thing? Why on Amoy would Iason wanna support a new Ceresian revolution?” Riki began slicing up the cooked potatoes as if he was trying to kill them, every movement suddenly fuelled by aggression at the thought of how much the blond bastard
had to hate mongrels to have gone through all that trouble just to torture him.

“I hear personal motivation is often decisive in these matters,” the red-head pointed out, taking Riki’s plate of sliced potatoes and placing them into a frying pan filled with oil mixed with some spices and herbs.

“Personal motivation? Katze, what the *fuck* are you on about here? Cause you’ve lost me ...”

Katze sighed in exasperation at the mongrel’s utter denseness when it came to Tanaguran subtleness. He was going to have to state the obvious on every single little thing, wasn’t he?

“You, Riki! I’m talking about you.”

“Me? What about me? I’m his ex-Pet, big deal!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you know full well you’re much more than that.”

Opening one of the top cupboards, Katze took out a wine glass. If he was going to attempt to explain things to this mongrel, he was going to require a certain amount of alcohol in his system.

“I *know* this? How the hell do I know this?! The guy just grabbed me off the street, imprisoned me, humiliated me, tortured me, raped me, never listened to a word I said and then just threw me back out into the street when he got tired of me. You tell me where the fuck in this story does it become evident that I’m more than just a sex-toy, a temporary distraction to torture the living daylights out of?!”

“He didn’t let you go because he got tired of you. He let you go to save your spirit, for he came to realise that you would go insane if you were kept imprisoned in Eos against your will for much longer. But he still cares greatly for you, trust me, there’s nothing he wouldn’t do to get you back.”

Pulling out a bottle of high-quality red wine from its hiding place underneath the sink, Katze filled up his glass and took a large gulp. If only he could make Riki understand just how atypical the great Blondie’s attitude towards him was and how significantly he had altered the infamous ice king’s behaviour.

“You’re just messing with me, trying to get me to agree to go back to him,” Riki accused, his body suddenly beginning to shake. He instinctively began to move backwards, away from his would-be assailant but never taking his eyes off him, scanning the room for possible weapons but only spotting the knife he’d used to peel the potatoes, now somehow securely in Katze’s grasp.

“You don’t seriously think I’d have to come up with a far-fetched, heretical story like that in order to bring you back to him?”, Katze said, cleaning the knife and then putting it into a drawer, while maintaining a perfectly calm composure. “I could be terminated just for talking about these sorts of things at all, regardless of what my reasons for doing so may be.”

“Holy shit ... You actually *believe* what you’re saying, don’t you?”, Riki gasped, turning his back to Katze and beginning to pace distraughtly around the small living area. “What, you think an Elite could develop like... genuine feelings for a person? Don’t be ridiculous! You of all people should know that’s impossible, you’ve been around those android freaks all your life!”

But inwardly he couldn’t help but wonder if there could be any truth to Katze’s claims. Could Iason possibly harbour any kind of special feelings for him, which could explain his unusual behaviour? For Riki knew for a fact that no known Elite had ever taken any kind of interest in a mongrel before and that Lord Mink keeping one as a Pet was frowned upon by everyone in Eos.
“Which is exactly why I do know, Riki! Nobody else could even guess the truth of it, but I suspected it all along. Like you said, I’ve been around Mink my whole life, I’ve learned how to read him, down to the smallest signs. Although it’s common belief that the Blondies are incapable of emotion, I’ve learned that it’s rather that their bodily control is perfect enough for them to hide all traces of feeling.”

“So you’re saying he does have feelings, but he’s just an expert at hiding them? Well, you might be on the right track there. Cause with all the shit he’s done to me, he has got to seriously hate my guts, but I sure as hell could never see any sign of it on that robotic face of his.” Returning to the kitchen isle, Riki snatched the bottle of wine from the counter and downed nearly half of its contents in one go.

“You are mistaken, Riki”, Katze began in an unusually gentle voice, carefully pulling the wine bottle from his grasp before he drank all of it. It wouldn’t do to have the mongrel drunk for the conversation he had in mind. “Although perhaps his interest in you may have started out of a sense of superiority or disgust, that is definitely not what it grew into over time. Damn, you should see him now, sometimes I think your absence might drive him insane.”

“Well, his presence is what drives me insane! So there’s no way I’m going back, not for you, not to start the next revolution, not to save all of Amoy would I ever set foot near that cocksucking sadist ever again!”

“I wasn’t advising you to go back, Riki. I was merely pointing out how perhaps there are some benefits to be had, when you’re forced to go back eventually”, Katze said calmly, his body relaxed now, his head bowed and his palms opened outward, appearing non-threatening. If anything working as the Black Market boss for most of the last decade had taught him how to talk down a wild mongrel going into a violent ramble.

“What... what the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”, Riki asked hesitantly, fear filling his dark eyes and making them glisten like black onyx gems.

“You heard me the first time. It’s not a question of if you go back there, it’s a question of when, and you know it.”

“When I go back?! I just told you, I ain’t going back! Ever!”, allowing his fear to take him over completely, Riki jumped past the taller man’s body and made straight for the door, only to find it locked. What the hell?! How could he not have noticed that the other had locked it after they’d come in?! The panic really setting in now, Riki started banging on the locked metal door like a madman. “LET ME OUT!!”

“It locks automatically after half an hour, just a necessary security measure for one in my business”, the eunuch spoke in a calm voice, picking up his wine glass again and patiently sipping it while leaning against the counter in a carefree pose.

“Goddammit, you dickless freak, just let me go!!” The mongrel previously abusing Katze’s front door turned around, now directing his unreasonable rage at the former household servant.

“Oh, I’ll let you go, not to worry. But first hear me out”, Katze answered politely, hospitably gesturing his guest to sit down in the living room area.

“Fine then!”, Riki snapped in exasperation as he slumped down on Katze’s grey couch impatiently. “What is it? Spit it out already!”

“Of course, you’re free to make your own choices, Riki, indeed your status as a non-citizen gives
you that right. However in my experience there are two kinds of people in life who run.”

“If this has a point to get to, do fast-forward to it”, the now sulking young man on the couch interrupted.

Pretending not to even have heard the other’s rude interruption, Katze continued completely unfazed by the other’s inappropriate display of discontent. “The first kind spend their whole lives running away from things, always afraid and looking over their shoulders. The second kind... also run, but they do not run from the things they fear rather they run towards the things they desire, always trying to get ahead in life even if they have to run against the natural flow of the world.”

As understanding dawned on the angry mongrel’s handsome face, there was no need for further words. Sighing, Riki allowed his body to relax back into the comfortable cushions of the leather couch. Although he absolutely hated to admit it, Katze was right. All his life he’d been forced to run away. First from Guardian (although technically he hadn’t been given much choice in the matter), then from older mongrels who had sought to beat up or rape him, then from the Dark Men in Midas, from shopkeepers he had been stealing from, from the police, from Iason Mink... and now even from his own gang members and Guy.

In truth when he had been running from Iason in a way he had been running from himself, from who he had become during his time in Eos. The reason why he had felt like running from Ceres almost as soon as he’d gotten back now became clear to him: he didn’t belong there anymore. But then the question remained: where did he belong, if not Ceres?

There remained but two things he knew for sure about himself at this point. One was that he was sick and tired of running, he may be many despicable things, but a coward sure as hell wasn’t one of them! The second was the reality that staying in Ceres would have most definitely meant eventual discovery, if not his own eventual demise.

Suddenly feeling a cool hand resting gently yet firmly on his shoulder, Riki was shaken out of his own thoughts and looked up to see Katze standing there, staring at him with what couldn’t be described as anything other than sympathy and understanding. The old Riki would have broken his nose for daring to show him any sympathy or mercy, that was only reserved for cowards and babies. But the new Riki felt a profound sense of relief when seeing those caring emotions in the eyes of another human being. There was no point in lying to Katze, for he already knew the worst of everything that had happened to Riki, and no doubt he also knew from experience what kind of change that brought in a man.

“Come on now, Riki. The food’s ready, let’s eat before it gets cold.”

Later – after what could only be described as the most delicious and wholesome meal he’d had in a long time and after he’d gotten back home to his new spacious apartment – Riki got out unto the balcony, clutching Katze’s parting-gift: a package of Dark Baccalia’s. Seeing as how it was only six o’clock in the morning, it was still dark out and Riki sighed in pleasure and relief as the first wave of high-quality, undiluted nicotine hit his nervous system. Putting up the collar of his worn jacket to ward off the chilling breeze, it didn’t occur to him why he was even stepping outside to smoke, for the apartment was his to do with or smoke in as he pleased. Blowing out smoke into the night as his stomach rumbled pleasantly in fulfilment, Riki’s obsidian eyes were immediately drawn to the dark
area beyond the nearby lights of Orange Road: the slums of Ceres.

It was strange how the few months since his return from Eos had managed to completely alter all of his ingrained perceptions, leaving nothing but a complete cacophony of chaos and confusion. He had always associated Ceres and his status as a mongrel with freedom, therefore during his imprisonment in Tanagura the hope of returning there had been the only thing keeping him sane. But now that he was back, the slums appeared to have lost all their appeal to him and he had come to see things quite differently than his fellow mongrels back at Bison did.

In truth he had reached the conclusion that Ceres was nothing but a death trap, a place the scum of society was dumped like so many mangled corpses left to fester on a pile of stinking garbage. They were free, sure, they were free. Free to make all the same mistakes their ancestors had made. Free to fight, gamble, sniff and drink themselves into oblivion. Free to throw away their young lives prematurely. Free to despair and free to die, as was every mongrel’s fate well before his natural time.

Yet Ceres was also where his heart had always been. It was where his past was, where his friends had been, where his whole person had developed. It was where he had gained his fighting skills and street wits, his first love with Guy, his undeniable sense of pride and his reputation as the infamous gang leader of Bison.

But there was no denying that it was also the place that had murdered all his dreams and hopes for a better life. When Riki had walked out of Guardian as a teenager, he had been full of hope, it had been the thing that had drawn others to him and that had made them look up to him. Because Riki had a sense of honour and purpose. Riki knew how to put his talents and what little resources he had to good use. Riki knew what he wanted in life and would stop at nothing to get it. Full of ambition and youthful ignorance, he had told anyone who would listen about his great plans for the future. He was going to get out of the slums one day, he was going to prove that it was possible for a mongrel to go far in life.

Riki could no longer deny that the environment that had fostered his strength and that had made him into the man he was, was also the very environment that was now holding him back, chaining him to a sinking block of concrete. As a non-citizen he did not have the official status that was required to ever get beyond the position of a messenger boy for the market or perhaps an unregistered temp worker at a factory. Moreover his life in the slums had bred in him a sense of self-sufficiency, criticism and pride that made it impossible for him to function as part of the perfectly organised, utilitarian system that controlled all of Tanagura and Midas alike. All of those attributes that had made him such an expert at surviving and even thriving in Ceres had been exactly those characteristics that had made it impossible for him to succeed at being a Pet in Tanagura. No doubt they would also prevent him from ever making a proper citizen of Midas, even if his status would have allowed it.

More importantly his Ceresian personality had prevented him from seducing Iason, which had been his plan when he had so foolishly chased after the blond that fateful day in Sasan. What an idiot he had been, he should’ve guessed that a Blondie from Tanagura would have never been able to see anything beyond the pathetic slumdog society had assigned him to be. From would-be seducer to worthless slave in an instant, way to go, Riki!

Now turning his eyes towards the distant sparkling spires of the famous city of the Elite, he remembered how as a kid he’d stare at it for hours on end, fantasizing about what it would be like there and about ways to go there himself. They had been the ridiculous, uninformed delusions of a child who felt unwanted where he was and had nothing better to do with his time. For even back in Guardian his dark complexion and black hair had made it obvious to everyone that he could never possibly be anything other than slum material, so none of the personnel at Guardian had even taken
his education seriously. Of course Riki himself had taken his own education very seriously at the
time, secretly hoping that his efforts would enable him to be one of those chosen to serve in
Tanagura, then not yet knowing the terror that becoming Furniture entailed. Remarkably, Riki had
demonstrated a great deal of talent at the time, especially with computers, however his dark looks had
made becoming Furniture an impossibility from the start.

So what had started out as optimistic, hopeful gazing at the bright steel and glass city in the distance
– sparkling like a splendid sea of countless diamonds – had become desperate, angry glaring at what
he could never hope to have. He would never climb the many metal staircases – for back then he did
not even realise there was such a thing as an elevator and that it would take someone days to climb
all the way to the top of those towers – and he would never step out unto the roof of the highest
skyscraper, surrounded by nothing but heavenly blue and endless possibilities. He would be doomed
to forever scramble around in the mud, down below in the slums of Ceres. Ironically, Riki now
realised that his favourite tower to gawk at as a kid was in fact the very same tower that he had been
kept prisoner in by that Elite asshole.

Thus the young man had now reached an impasse, an unbridgeable gap as it were, between what he
could do as a mongrel and what he had always craved to do as a man. For truthfully he had always
wanted something more from life, something more than simple survival from one day to the next.
No, he wanted his life to actually mean something, he wanted to achieve something that nobody else
could, he wanted something for people to remember him by for all times. But it appeared that – in
spite of his many talents and his firm determination – the society he had been born into would make
that entirely impossible for him.

Deeply indignant at the injustice of it all, Riki tossed what little remained of his nearly burned-out
cigarette down the railing, shifting his gaze from the alluring sight in the distance to the quick descent
of the still-burning, used-up stick of poison, unable to tell where exactly it had landed in the dirty,
littered gutter below.

Without even consciously thinking about what he was doing, Riki then climbed on top of the railing
of the balcony around the same time his thoughts had taken a dark turn, and now he found himself
up there, arms outstretched on both sides in an instinctual effort to keep his balance. As the wind
picked up, he allowed his thin body to swing along on its rhythm, his feet now only resting on the
cold, metal railing by their heels. But the defeated mongrel hardly paid any attention to his own
rapidly developing peril, his black eyes still fixated on that sparkling edifice, thinking about all the
distance between him and it.

As another, stronger gust of wind came rushing in from the direction of Tanagura, Riki’s balance
began to falter ...

Think I can fly

As he was standing there, ready to leap straight off the railing to be swept away by Tanaguran
winds, the mongrel couldn’t help but contemplate just how ridiculous he had to look, standing there
like a young bird readying itself for its first flight. Unfortunately, he wasn’t nearly as stupid enough
to think that he could actually fly. Or could he?
Think I can fly when I’m with you

After all, he had already managed to fly all the way up to Eos Tower, hadn’t he? Admittedly, not exactly in the way he had imagined that he would back when he was a kid, but still. He had actually been there. He had stood right there on the front balcony of the top floor, surrounded by all the luxurious glamour and glitter of the highest mountain top of Amoyan society.

Holy shit.

My arms are wide

Catching fire as the wind blows

Tearing his eyes away from said balcony, Riki turned to watch the rising sun, coming up from the far-away ocean in the east and shedding its bright orange light on the mongrel’s slight but strong form. The many particles of warm light bounced against and reflected off of the shiny leather jacket the youngster was wearing, making it appear as if his arms and torso were set ablaze by the blowing wind.

HOLY SHIT!

Why the hell am I standing here feeling bad about never being able to go there?!

I’ve already freaking been there! For fuck’s sake, I’m such an idiot!

I fucking did it!! I actually got up there!!!

I know that I’m rich enough for pride

I see a billion dollars in your eyes

So what if he’d had some help? Socially speaking there had been no reason whatsoever for Iason Mink to take any interest in him, for he was just a mongrel, a piece of scum not worth the attention and time of such an ethereal creature. Somehow in that one moment, those divine heavenly-blue eyes had seen him. Those glistening sapphires had seen his value as a human being regardless of his mongrel status and had determined that the price of risking Tanagura’s displeasure had been worth paying.

Even if we’re strangers till we die
So what if Iason Mink didn’t act like any man Riki had ever met? So what if he was fiercely proud, immensely arrogant, icily unapproachable, calculatingly rational, abusively domineering and insanely possessive? It was to be expected, for he was an Elite and not just any Elite at that. He was a Blondie. He was the Head of the Syndicate. He was the favourite son of Jupiter. And even if those social and official rankings meant absolutely nothing to Riki, for they said nothing about the innate qualities of the man, said qualities in and of themselves were undeniably present.

Also the blond was smack-bang gorgeous, he was so unearthly beautiful that it was angelic. In addition he was divinely graceful, his limbs moving like weightless flower petals in the wind.

_I wanna run away_

He was probably the smartest living creature ever to come into existence, his sheer intelligence and unforgiving calculation at times down-right frightening.

_I wanna run away_

He was also the richest motherfucker ever to walk Amoy, having already accumulated more wealth than any of his brethren or predecessors.

_Anywhere out this place_

Even his extreme jealousy had its perks: here was a man who was willing to fight and kill any and all competition in his path, daring to defy even Jupiter herself so that she would allow him to keep his illegal mongrel Pet.

_I wanna run away_

And last but not least the man was smoking hot and nothing short of a freaking sex god, giving Riki numerous surreal pleasure and literally heart-stopping orgasms, ensuring that the young mongrel couldn’t thoroughly enjoy sex with a lesser man ever again. What other potential lover that Riki had ever encountered could even begin to compete with so much eroticism and desirability?

_Just you and I_
Riki then turned around on his heels with feline ease, jumped down from the railing, headed back into the living area of his small apartment and ran straight for the front door. Racing through the corridor as fast as his feet could carry him, he made his way to the elevator in record time. After having hit the button to call the elevator to his floor numerous times, Riki decided that it was taking too long and threw open the door to the stairwell, taking two steps at a time and turning around the turns fast enough to make his head spin.

_You and I, I, I, I, I_

When he had almost reached the ground floor, he jumped down the final five steps but got down on all fours with practised ease, already bursting through the door into the hallway in the same movement. Shooting across the modest hallway as fast as a bullet out of an old-fashioned gun, Riki was quick to hop unto his hoverbike out front and was flying down the street only moments later.

_You and I, I, I, I, I_

Hovering down a series of smaller streets with an alarming velocity the mongrel finally got unto Orange Road again, shielding his eyes with his bronze hand against the brightness of the rising sun, momentarily blinded by it even if he sped towards that light. Pushing his bike to its limits – possibly even beyond its limits – Riki raced on while his environment and the traffic around him turned to an undefined chaos of random colours, making him believe that he and his destination were the only existing things in the world, all else lost in the blur of his determined speed. Out of that whole spectrum of colour, the orange sunlight the road owed its very name to shone brightest of all, natural light overcoming artificial neon. Due to the sheer broadness of the road and the lack of buildings in that area, Riki was nearly as exposed to the elements here as he had been near his headquarters right outside of Ceres, the desert wind making his black tresses whip wildly around his head.

_You and I, I, I, I, I_

Then taking the last turn right before Mistral Park, his right boot scraped the surface of the road as his hoverbike turned and flattened entirely with the force of the sudden turn. His destination now in sight, Riki nearly slammed his bike into the frontal stairs of the edifice he was aiming for, jumping off the bike and letting it fall where it may as his feet were rushing up the stairs. Having reached the top of the well-known panorama viewpoint just outside of Mistral Park, Riki made his way to the telescope perched on an elevation at the top of the monument. Turning the device towards the top floor of Eos Tower and adjusting some of the settings, Riki turned what had been a vague image of glitter and glamour seen with the naked eye into a far more precise and realistic image perceived with the aid of the electronic magnifying glass.

_Just you and I_
Gazing out across the vast urban cityscape of Midas, Iason Mink’s sky-blue eyes were immediately drawn to the black stain on an endless carpet of brightness. In such darkness as there was in the mostly unlit area of Ceres, even the Elite’s android eyes could barely make out the general shape of buildings. Somewhere in that dark, unknown jungle was the one his human half yearned for beyond all else, the black wild creature that had conquered his heart. *My Riki. Where are you now, I wonder?* At the thought of the mongrel and how much he missed him, Iason could barely suppress the burning need to run to Ceres as fast as his android body could carry him there and to reclaim the exotic, black beauty as his own.

*I wanna run*

Opening the big glass sliding doors, the Blondie stepped unto the front balcony of his penthouse in order to have a more direct line of vision. Not that it would make any difference, for he knew he wouldn’t be able to discern any people inside the unlit wilderness of Ceres anyway. But as the morning sun began to conquer more and more of the night time city of Midas, he would soon be able to discern at least the block of buildings towards the outer edges of the area, the place Katze had told him Riki’s gang’s headquarters were located.

*Chase the morning sun when I’m with you*

To leave all the power and glory of Tanagura behind would be a small price to pay to be reunited with the one he had now come to realise he loved. In truth Jupiter’s favourite son had been bored of it all for a long time, and when he met Riki it all became even more meaningless in comparison to how he felt about the mongrel. Those human emotions had lifted him up from the well-structured routines of Tanaguran daily life and into an entirely different plane of existence, a plane in which everything was strange but anything was possible.

*Give it all away*

As a sudden breeze came drifting in from over Orange Road, his long perfect hair was blown up around his head in what looked like a halo of sorts. In addition the smooth, golden strings caught the rays of the rising sun in a way that appeared to turn him into a radiant god of enlightenment.

*Catching fire as the wind blows*
Why the mongrel had been so determined to run away from him, the head of the Intelligence department was still absolutely clueless about. Had he not given Riki everything that was in his power to give? He had met his Pet’s every possible need and desire, inviting him to live in the palacial penthouse that was Eos Tower’s most prized residence, feeding him the most delicious and fulfilling dishes available, having his chains customised out of the finest gold that money could buy, allowing him to sleep in the very silken sheets that were supposed to be reserved only for the Elite themselves, even giving him a taste of the forbidden fruit of paradise that per Jupiter’s decree nobody should ever be allowed to ever taste: sexual intercourse with a Blondie. But none of all that had been enough, apparently, to keep his beloved by his side by his own free will.

*I know that I’m rich enough for pride*

None of it had been able to buy the love and devotion of the one person he truly wished it from. For no money in the world could ever buy that what truly mattered, that which no price could possibly be put on, that which was per definition priceless: Riki’s love.

*I see a billion dollars in your eyes*

At this point he simply did not care anymore what he had to do, for he would do just about anything to bring the object of his affection back into his arms. Even if he could never justify the torture he had unknowingly submitted the young man to in the past, even if he could never make Riki understand how he truly felt about him and how much he was willing to sacrifice on his behalf, just having him close would be enough.

*Even if we’re strangers till we die*

But how to go about it without driving the proud Ceresian to depression and near-insanity again? Staring out across the slowly-illuminated landscape in front of him, as if hoping to finally find the answer to this burning question somewhere out there, Iason’s supernaturally perceptive android eyes suddenly detected something unusual near the outskirts of Mistral Park.

*I wanna run away*

From one of the highest points in Midas, he had caught the tell-tale shimmer of reflected light that indicated that someone had to be looking right at him with a telescopic device of some kind. Knowing that looking at the balcony of a private home in Tanagura was an offence punishable by death, the Head of the Syndicate wondered who would be stupid enough to risk his life only to catch
a glimpse of him.

*I wanna run away*

Turning his all-seeing, strikingly bright eyes towards the offender, Lord Mink tried to make out the shape of the person watching him in between the blinding shimmers of light reflecting off of the surface of the distant telescope, his curiosity preventing him from contacting the authorities in that area of Midas straight away.

*Anywhere out this place*

Utter surprise and complete shock struck him as he managed to make out what the figure spying him through the looking glass was doing with the hand he had put up high in the air. The middle finger was stretched out as the rest of the fingers were still curled into a fist, forming the universal sign for what was bluntly known as “fuck you”.

*I wanna run away*

There was only one person alive on Amoy who would have the audacity to dare and offend the most powerful person on the planet – and probably beyond – in such a shameful, lowly manner. Uncharacteristically, the cold and untouchable Elite felt a small but definite smile light up his tanned face as he realised who he was currently looking at across a distance of many miles and social layers of society.

*Just you and I, I, I, I, I*

“Why hello there, Riki. What are you doing, going through so much trouble to stare at your hated captor and tormentor?”, he whispered in a husky-low tone. Even if the feisty little thing could clearly not answer him, Iason’s imagination had no difficulties conjuring up a series of possible rude responses, one more insulting than another but all equally endearing to him.

Half-tempted to rush out and meet his mongrel, Iason was only prevented from doing so by the knowledge that by the time he got there the handsome young man would have surely gone. For undoubtedly Riki knew all too well that he was playing with fire by gawking at his Master so openly, as if daring the Elite to come after him.

*You and I, I, I, I, I*
“Not to worry, my darling Pet. We will be reunited sooner than you think”, the blond stated in a deep voice of smooth velvet. The emptiness of the room did not speaking against it and thus appeared to confirm the statement by its lack of response. Soon the disagreeing voice of the human he secretly admired would return to where it belonged, disagreeing with his every sentence and questioning all of the decisions that he made. All of the carefully orchestrated arrangements that the cunning android had constructed in coalition with his recently-required supporters – be they Elite, Furniture or Pet – would soon bear fruit.

You and I, I, I, I, I

Peering at the far-off balcony through the lens, Riki was amazed at how accurate and detailed the image it showed him was. For a second he even believed that he was back there on that balcony again, smoking Dark Baccalia’s and turning from the impressive cityscape only to come face to face with the even more impressive object of both his utter dread and his complete longing. Gasping at the slight shock of the unexpected sight, Riki altered the settings of the scope with trembling fingers and was granted an even more intimate view of his former Master’s attractive form. The mongrel couldn’t help but marvel at his luck: “No shit, what are the chances of him being out on that balcony just as I decide to have a peek?”

You and I, I, I, I, I

When the perfectly sculpted body in the focus of his viewing lens unexpectedly turned in his direction and looked straight at him, Riki nearly fell off the top step of the small elevation the scope was mounted on. *What the hell, the bastard knows that I’m watching him!*

After a couple of seconds he then realised just how absolutely ridiculous that idea was. Of course the Blondie couldn’t possibly know that it was Riki watching him! Maybe he saw the scope’s reflection and simply thought someone was watching him from that direction?

Sighing in relief, the former slum dog turned back to the scope and peeped back through the viewing tube, only to have that simultaneously anxious and delicious shock fill him to the brim once more! For now a slight but clearly-present, terrible smile had appeared on those pleasing pale features, rendering their abstract beauty even more malevolent because of the raw, predatory emotions they now displayed so powerfully.

*Holy smokes! He really is watching me as much as I’m watching him! How can this be?!!*

Temporarily unsure of how to respond, Riki settled on reacting in a way that probably hid his fear well enough but was decidedly far too bold for his own good. Stepping away from the scope and standing in full view of one of the bright street lanterns of the panorama setting, Riki lifted up a fist and then stretched his middle finger upwards in a universally offensive challenge.

*That’ll teach you to smile at me, psychotic motherfucking creep!*
Just you and I

To Be Continued ...

Please don’t forget to review!!! :)
Chapter Summary

CHRISTMAS SPECIAL in which Mimea somewhat wistfully ponders the meaning of 
winter, Iason is merrily plotting yet another scheme and Riki has a very unexpected 
chance encounter with someone from his past.

Author’s notes:

And here’s a late Christmas present for all of you: the long-expected next chapter of this fanfic!!! :D I 
was planning on finishing this first seasonal chapter by Christmas but unfortunately my writer’s 
block had other plans... But better late than never I guess, so here it is, I hope you’ll all enjoy it! :) 
This is the first of two Christmas Special chapters that I had planned, so you can expect at least 
another merry chapter, hopefully still at some point during the holidays, to keep things more or less in 
the seasonal mood ;)

It’s sort of a sequel to my Christmas fanfic from a couple of years back, Amoyan ChristMass, but 
you don’t need to have read that fic to understand most of what’s going on in this chapter.

Soundtracks:

Opening theme: The Birthday Massacre – Shiver (Tyurr’s nightcore 
cover) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpBic6JyhXQ

Ending theme: Jan Wayne – Christmas Time

Winter always reminded her of falling. 
Gazing out the window, warm eyes beheld frosty diamonds falling from the sky, their sparkle even 
more alluring because of their transient evanescence. For once caught they would perish quickly, 
their sparkling wonder melting into nothingness. It was impossible to own a snowflake without 
destroying it, so one could only glance at their beauty from a distance. Like fragile flowers that 
would shrivel away soon after picking. In a way snowflakes were the very definition of everything 
living. 

When sufficiently low temperatures were reached, winter also offered the possibility of ice skating. 
Although initially captivated by the elegance of the ice dancers, she soon learned that in order to gain 
the skill of ice skating one was required to fall. Again. And again. And yet again. The more she fell, 
the more painful it became. Yet somehow getting up seemed to get easier every time. She had always
admired skills that could only be learned through pain and determination. Somehow a skill that was easily acquired didn’t seem like much of a skill at all. If it came without any effort then what was the point of it? How could one be proud of something one never needed to do anything for? To her, beauty was not about her own skill but about her maker and Master’s. If she wanted any talent of her own to be proud of, she would need to make an effort.

Skating round and round the circular limits of the ice rink, as in a repetitive loop she would see the onlookers’ expressionless faces. Big bright eyes, always watching. Perfectly blank canvases, unaffected by her efforts.

**A painting for every face**

Every time she lost her balance while practicing and fell down again, they would simply continue to stare at her, their faces unreadable. Like masks with nothing but emptiness behind them. None of those observers ever attempted to help her up, from nothing in their reaction did it become evident that they had even noticed her fall.

**No correction, just cover up**

If anything it often seemed as if the crowd took a twisted kind of pleasure in witnessing her pain. So in response she set out to become the very best at ice skating, through many chilly afternoons spent bruising her delicate behind on the mercilessly hard surface of the ice and shivering in her skimpy outfits until she felt numb to the bone.

**She can’t afford to come off**

**Hard cause she’s too cold to shiver**

She had read in the transcript of an old book that falling stars were often associated with this time of year as well. Apparently when one witnessed a falling star, one could make a wish. Unfortunately she had never seen a falling star and therefore had always kept her wishes to herself, forever silently locked inside her heart. Never finding the courage to voice those thoughts that she feared her cold world would never allow her to have.

**Too cold to shiver**

**Too cold to shiver**

**In this cold**

**She’s too cold to shiver**

Another book had mentioned that long ago at this time of year angels had come down from the heavens to bear witness to the birth of the Son of God. This had surprised her, for she had always assumed that the festivities were in honour of Jupiter herself rather than in honour of her Children. It had never even occurred to her that perhaps the book referred to a time long before Jupiter and her Elite. For what else but the wonders of technology and informatics could possibly be divine?

The passage had reminded her of another tale of angels, particularly a tale of one such angel who had rebelled against his god. Yes, the treacherous angel had been cast out of heaven and had thus fallen down to earth. His name was Lucifer, bringer of light.

Nobody understood the meaning of falling and more particularly falling from grace better than she did. She knew all too well that once one had crossed that threshold, one was utterly and completely
alone on the long way down.

All the hands along the wall

Taking time to break her fall

However the fallen angel didn’t despair for long, for soon he appeared in the paradise that was called the garden of Eden to tempt man to join him in his rebellion. But man did not yield, having not yet learned of the domineering nature of his Creator and the wrathful shadows He could bring.

Minds divide the heart in two

Empty as the shadows walking over you

Until Lucifer dared them to search for knowledge their tyrannical god had deemed them unfit to possess, after which they too were cruelly punished but still given a chance to redeem themselves. The fear instilled in their hearts sufficient to keep them in line for generations to come. The divide constructed between man and woman sufficient to keep another rebellion from stirring.

Over you

She’s walking over you

Breaking her fall over you

Even when she was but a young girl, she had often felt as if her entire life was basically one long fall towards oblivion. The life ahead observed as if from the top of a cliff, gazing down into the dark depths of the abyss.

Moreover said life wasn’t even truly hers, and apparently everybody who looked upon her wanted a piece of her. Every hungry stare in her direction another piece of her heart snatched away, until eventually there would be nothing left. Every glance in the mirror another piece of her soul lost forever, the focus on her physical form’s perfection condemning the very notion of spiritual beauty.

Always wanting

Watching

Minds divide the heart in two

For you

Every picture taken adding to the gradual disintegration of her humanity, rendering her more monstrously selfish and vain. Like Dorian Grey’s painting disintegrating in the attic while his attractive body never aged. Only she didn’t even get that form of compensation for her shattered spirit and lack of genuine social interactions. Always her reputation to think of, always the charade to perform.

Pictures for every place

No affection

Every smile rendering the words from her mouth more and more obsolete. Who cared what she said? She was a desirable Pet, a true artwork of beauty. Such a painting did not require any music to
accompany it, if anything a less than perfect melody would only serve to break down its splendid aura. Her words often deemed inappropriately intelligent or critical, she soon learned to keep quiet.

Just shut her up

She can’t afford to come off

Hard cause she’s too cold to shiver

Her eyes being drawn back outside the window, she contemplated how very appropriate the cold weather was in an environment as lonely and as unforgiving as Tanagura.

Too cold to shiver

Too cold to shiver

Thinking back on her own eventual fall through the thin ice she had to conclude that it had simply been inevitable. Her magically enchanting dance across the ice of the Tanaguran winter wonderland had simply come to an end sooner than it did for most others. As if in a dream she vaguely recalled her utter astonishment when she saw the smooth ground beneath her very feet crackle and break into a thousand pieces, the heavy weight on her shoulders quickly pulled beneath the shifting ice by merciless gravity. Reality hitting her full force, like the shock of icy waters closing overhead and surrounding her in cold, liquid black.

In this cold

She’s too cold to shiver

What did she care that everyone she knew had loudly gossiped of the terrible shame of her transgression as she was led out of that cursed, white palace of glitter and glamour called Eos Tower? They were all just glad that it wasn’t them, all shifting negative attentions to someone else to better cover their own short-comings. Always looking for someone lower on the food chain to bully to make themselves feel better, to momentarily forget about the ever-present fear of old age and their Master’s displeasure or boredom.

All the eyes behind the wall

Taking time to watch her crawl

The irony of it was that all those things they fought so hard to keep and were so terrified to lose, weren’t things worth having at all. If one looked close enough, one saw no real prospects whatsoever in that fake place, only deceit, betrayal and unavoidable execution. No human connection or friendship was ever genuine there, it was all just part of the ongoing show of deception.

Broken hearts are never true

Empty as the shadows walking over you

Everyone so busily obsessing over their own pile of shiny wrappers that they didn’t even notice that those wrappers were empty. That they were carefully, individually wrapped pieces of nothingness. Nothing but smoke and mirrors. They were sacrificing their humanity for nothing but lies and they couldn’t even see it.

Over you
She’s walking over you

Watching her crawl over you

After what had seemed like an everlasting banishment beneath the icy surface, without anyone throwing her a lifeline, she finally learned how to swim. To swim through the freezing darkness and back into the light, her lungs hurting as air filled them once again. Burning pain in her frozen limbs when they had to readjust to the warmth. Yet she could never forget that the fluffy, sparkling snow was nothing but a thin layer covering the hard, slippery surface of swallowing depths.

Always wanting

Broken hearts are never true

Waiting

For you

“And what – if I may enquire – are you reading with such a deep frown upon your pretty face, my dear?”, a voice as clear as the chiming of bells awakened her, like the bright light of day pulling her from below the surface of her dark reveries.

Looking up from her window seat – now noticing that the snow outside had finally stopped falling – said pretty face lit up with a smile as Mimea held up the cover of the volume she had been reading.

“Paradise Lost by John Milton? An excellent choice, as usual. If you keep up this industrious reading of high literature you may one day become a brilliant politician yourself”, Iason Mink subtly praised her, as he gracefully folded down his long limbs on the opposite side of the window seat and looked upon his friend’s slight form with well-concealed affection.

“You’re just flattering me, Iason”, the young woman responded with a knowing chuckle. “It’s only a fictional tale to pass the time while being stuck here.”

“Many a historian since Milton’s time has confirmed that this supposedly fictional tale of tyranny and rebellion spoke of very real political oppression and Milton’s own struggle against it. Some even go as far as to claim that Milton’s work lay the very foundations of the political system that later became known as democracy”, the Head of the Syndicate informed subtly, not in the least implying that the two of them ought to start a similar revolution of their own.

Mimea raised one of her finely-trimmed eyebrows in surprise. “I had no idea this book was that old! In fact I was convinced that the author was referring to Jupiter’s reign, Ceres’ rebellion and Midas’ betrayal of said rebellion...”, she trailed off, slightly disappointed that it meant one less person was of the same opinion as she. One less supporter in their cause against the Tanaguran system.

“Hmm, it is strange indeed how sometimes the oldest of tales turn out to still be so relevant at present. But pray tell what did you mean by your comment on ‘being stuck here’?”, the blond asked, without even a trace of concern in his steel-laced voice.

“I merely meant stuck inside, because of that dreadful weather out there”, Mimea assured, only now realising how it might have sounded to the lonesome Elite. No wonder he had abandonment issues. During the months they’d spent together the former Pet had learned to read him better than everyone else. Well, perhaps not better than Katze, his old faithful Furniture. But still, she knew enough to tell
that the icier his demeanour became, the more emotionally involved he was.

“Nonsense, a little bit of winter chill is no reason to remain indoors during the busiest and most festive time of year”, her Master chided good-naturedly. Apparently he was in a far better mood now than he had been over the last few months, impatience and a faint shadow of jealousy adding to his ever higher demands of his new Pet.

Mimea wondered why he was all of a sudden so cheerful – well, not exactly cheerful, of course the detached Elite’s mood could never be described as such. But how could this terrible weather and all that bother with organising festivities and all that came with it possibly make any improvements in the Blondie’s mood? Unless of course one thought he was very dedicated to his cyber goddess and thus immensely excited to prepare a celebration in her honour, but Mimea knew better than that.

“That’s easy for you to say, as you’re actually allowed to wear proper clothing”, the revealingly-clad Pet pointed out, looking at his long-sleeved attire with envy.

“No one but me has the authority to determine what you can and cannot wear, Mimea. And I will not have you feel like a prisoner in here or have you get pneumonia from going outside without proper attire. Your mental well-being and physical health is my responsibility after all”, he pointed out. Always rationalising away any personal motivation for his actions.

“It’s OK, Iason, you don’t need to explain yourself with me. I’m truly touched by your concern, thank you. The only problem is that I do not currently own anything that is even remotely warm enough to tackle this blizzard in.”

“It’s hardly a blizzard, Mimea, there hasn’t been an actual storm within the perimeter of Tanagura in centuries, not since the installation of our weather control technology. And as for your lack of clothing, I have already anticipated and remedied that problem”, Lord Mink vaguely gestured in the direction of his until-then-unnoticeable Furniture, who had been excellently concealed right behind one of the decorative pillars in the main lounge area.

“When did you get this optimistic? No offence, but I wasn’t expecting any of this Jupiter Mass hypocritical bullshit to actually improve your state of mind”, Mimea couldn’t help but curiously question. She wasn’t worried at all about his reaction to her use of the term ‘hypocritical bullshit’ or her impudent prying for that matter. For she knew that when her Master and partner in crime was in a good mood he couldn’t care less about Tanaguran propriety, in fact she had even become convinced that he even liked her occasional bluntness and Ceresian-style cursing.

Cal quickly but subtly approached, holding out a white box decorated with an artfully arranged golden bow. Iason took the box without even acknowledging the young boy’s presence and personally handed it over to his surprised Pet, continuing to thrust it upon her until after several long seconds her slim, manicured fingers closed over it.

“A Mass offering? Seriously, Iason, the concept never did particularly appeal to me, although of course I realise that it’s an honour hardly ever bestowed upon my class.”

A rare, delicate smile appeared on the other’s artificially perfect face, completely ruining its aesthetic balance but working miracles for the humanity of its countenance. “This is no Mass offering, Mimea. It’s a Christmas present.”

“A what?”, she asked, the surprised expression on her face somehow rendering it even more appealing, for a perfect face without any expression was after all just another boringly perfect face.

“Until last year I too did not realise this intriguing origin of the Mass offering. But apparently a long
time ago on Earth – long before Jupiter’s creation or the exodus to Amoy – this celebration already existed and was called Christmas.”

“Christ Mass? I think I read about someone called Christ in one of your books once, although I can’t recall exactly…”, she started uncertainly, absolutely clueless as to where the mercurious Elite was going with this. The look on his face appeared to suggest that this effort was meant to reward her, yet she couldn’t for the life of her understand how handing her an offering would achieve this purpose.

“Indeed, originally the celebration was meant to remember the birth of an important religious figure called Christ. From what I understand he was a benevolent demigod destined to save the human race. Hence the celebration of Christmas itself was associated with caring for others and establishing peaceful relations. More specifically, it became a time to share with others through an exchange of so-called presents or gifts”, the Elite’s encyclopaedic explanation sounded.

“Sharing? Presents or gifts?”, the fire-haired siren asked, all those concepts completely foreign to her Tanaguran-bred mind.

“Throughout the centuries the concept has been forgotten in Tanagura and Midas, however it apparently still persists in Ceres. A present or gift is simply something – usually a material possession – that you give away to someone else without expecting anything in return. A kind of trade without a profit, meant to show someone that you like him or her.”

“So you just… give something… to someone else, but for no apparent reason? Simply because you feel like it, because you want to show that you like them?”, Mimea asked, her warm smoky eyes now glued to the box in her hands as if it had suddenly taken on magical proportions, oozing a mysterious atmosphere from ancient times.

“A most unusual and down-right puzzling idea, isn’t it? Ever since I learned of the existence of this exchange I have found it most intriguing.”

“But wait... Then why did Riki feel like he was indebted to you after you saved his ass from the cops? Why didn’t he interpret it as a present from you, to show him you were interested?”

“I suppose he wasn’t used to applying the concept to unfamiliar persons, especially those outside of Ceres. Also I have been told that the exchanging of gifts often occurs at specific times, for example on Christmas or on the day one was born.”

“Maybe it’s because your present wasn’t a material possession wrapped up in this manner? You should try again, only like this!”, jumping up from her seat the girl excitedly danced through the room while holding up her present to better inspect it.

Smiling almost unnoticeably at the young Pet’s enthusiasm, Iason said: “Actually I already did, at Christmas last year, when I first learned of this tradition.”

“For real!!”, Mimea shrieked and turned around as swiftly and elegantly as a pro ballerina twirling on the top of her toes. “What did you give him? Iason, you must tell me right away!”

Seeing how the Elite raised one of his fair eyebrows at her commanding manner of speech, she quickly added: “Please?”

For a moment he hesitated. So far he had told his newfound companion everything and anything that related to his feelings for Riki. However what he had shared with Riki on last year’s Jupiter Mass Eve was personal. Very personal. Revealing those events to Meme might undo whatever remained of his authority over her. Not that he was afraid she would talk, for even if she did nobody would
ever believe her. Yet he was afraid of losing her respect if he revealed too much weakness. Not a single blond hair on his head would have thought of revealing said information to Raoul, but somehow Mimea’s understanding of his recently awakened emotional side combined with her social non-existence gave her a reassuring and non-threatening air. Especially the way she was staring at him now, throwing all of her cutesy charm into her efforts.

“I gave him a ring”, he purposely teased, giving her just enough information to arouse her but not nearly enough to sate her.

“A ring? What, like a Pet ring? I thought he hated that?”, the curious nymph questioned eagerly.

“No, more like a Master ring”, the blond devil smiled mysteriously as he held up the ring on his finger for her to see.

“You gave him your Master ring?! Whatever for?”, she continued to pry ceaselessly, her extreme disbelief undoing the effect of her carefully-applied dark make-up and emphasizing the round largeness of her genetically-engineered doll’s eyes.

“To set us on an equal footing, if only for one night”, Iason finally admitted, masterfully hiding his insecurity at revealing such a thing to a mere discarded Pet.

“What do you mean on an equal footing? Wait, you don’t mean... By Jupiter, Iason!!!!”, she gasped, nearly choking as she fell right out of her chair and lay there on the floor, panting in shocked disbelief like a red koi fish on dry land. Sitting up and spreading out her arms like an angel in prayer, she continued: “Don’t tell me this ‘equal footing’ extended to the bedroom?! For then he would have to be some kind of idiot to run off again!!”

“I believe the problem with the deal was that it was only for one night, for he left no sooner than the break of dawn, while he thought I was still asleep”, the android responded in a perfectly even voice, yet the wistful depths of his blue gaze were as tumultuous as a storm at sea. “But if it’s any consolation to you, his manner of leaving was rather hesitant and undecided.”

“Rather hesitant and undecided?!! Honestly, what more does he expect you to do?!!”, his match-making co-conspirator cried out in exasperation.

“That, my little firebird, is what I hope you can extract from him with your sly, gentle, little fingers. Now, how about you open your present now, you will be needing it to go out and participate in my latest scheme”, he cunningly changed the subject.

Mimea’s orange eyes suddenly lit up with a mischievous spark. “Your latest scheme? And what exactly does this scheme entail?”, the red-haired imp asked with an almost evil grin as she started impatiently fiddling with the golden ribbon around her present.

“Better not to share the details of it in advance, as to allow you to play your part even better. All you need to know is that I need you in your apartment in Midas and ready to answer Riki’s call.”

Excitedly exiting the penthouse, Mimea had to refrain herself from racing down the corridor, her footwear actually being practical enough to allow it now. Apparently the only way for a female with miniature feet to get decent flat shoes on Amoy was to have them customised using the Mink name.
Shiny, flawless black leather boots without even the hint of a heel now adorned said tiny feet and slender calves, practically begging their wearer to dance her way to the elevator.

The cheerful, newly-attired girl had bounced halfway there when she became instinctively aware of another person walking in the vicinity with a soft, decisive footfall. Still too loud to be a Furniture. Far too heavy to be a Pet. Yet altogether too pronounced and too subtle to be any other Elite but one.

Fixating her eyes on the shiny glass door of the elevator ahead she urged herself to look at and think about nothing but her goal.

*You can do this, Mimea. He means absolutely nothing to you now, so you might as well act as if he is nothing.*

Thus ignoring her former Master and creator entirely, she brusquely walked right past him, not even glancing in his direction but making sure to daringly flaunt the mink fur of her brand new winter coat in his face, in doing so emphasizing her connection to the Mink household.

*Take a long, hard look at what doesn’t belong to you anymore, you selfish prick.*

Just as she was about to step into the elevator, the old familiar voice called out softly. Ever such a caring and gentle voice, like honey poured over velvet. “Mimea”

After taking a second to get over the nauseating nostalgia brought on by that sweet spicy timbre, the petite woman turned around, red hair swaying aggressively as she looked her adversary straight in the eye. An endless jungle of bright green, moist and passively waiting regarded her quietly. Like a seemingly dazing big cat, in reality waiting to pounce.

Not wishing to wait and give him the opportunity to be the first to say anything, she announced in a chipper, mocking tone accompanied by a down-right evil, sweet smile: “Strange, isn’t it? How people can surprise you and turn out to be so very different than how you first perceived them to be. For example those you believed to be most loyal to you can be the very same ones to stab you in the back on a whim, another’s whim at that. Yet those you believed had most reason to detest you can later be revealed to be those who sympathise most of all.”

After a long pause that did absolutely nothing to hide his shock at the way his former Pet had just addressed him, he responded, voice annoyingly serene, belying his own uncertainty in how to approach her. “If you believe that earning Iason Mink’s sympathy might be anything but a burden, you clearly haven’t been around him for very long, my de...”

“Don’t you DARE to have the audacity to call me that! Not anymore!”, she snapped, like the jaws of a crocodile suddenly snapping shut over an unsuspecting prey. Pointing her accusing, manicured finger at him almost as if it were a weapon of mass destruction, she continued her assault at full force: “Not ever again may you call me that! You lost that right when you just sold me off to that hellhole as if I meant absolutely nothing to you! Like the idiot I was I trusted you, for you were my Master, even more than that, you were my father! Yet that didn’t stop you! That didn’t make you stand up for me and protect me like you promised, did it?!?”

“I’m sure in time you too will be driven mad by his random whims and impossible demands”, the scientist calmly tried to reason with her. It was this almost resigned kind of calmness that now did drive her mad, mad with rage aimed at her former Master.

Staring at him momentarily she then laughed cruelly, the shrill sound echoing through the empty hallways of Eos. “You don’t honestly think that he has even an ounce of respect for those that just follow his every command and simply give him what he wants? For what he truly wants is someone
who knows when to refuse him. Tell me, is there a spine somewhere within that metal framework of yours? Or do you just bend over like a good little pussy cat whenever he asks?"

“You may believe yourself to be in a position of privilege now, but as your maker I must warn you that both you and your new Master are heading down a very dangerous road. One that I would hate to see you fall victim to as well, my daughter.”

“If you would really ‘hate’ that so much, then why don’t you join us and make sure we don’t take a wrong turn, hmm? But wait, I almost forgot, it’s not quite that you don’t know what’s wrong with this fucked-up society – oh, you do, you probably realised even long before Iason did – but you’re simply too much of a coward to do anything about it”, then putting all of the rage she had suppressed for years into one single movement, she hit the elevator button for the ground floor with a loud slap and watched Raoul Am’s astounded face for several long seconds before the elevator doors closed with a sense of finality.

xmasxmasxmasxmasxmasxmasxmasxmasxmasxmasxmasxmasxmasxmasxmasxmasxmas

Having worked as a fulltime hacker-in-training and occasional courier for the Black Market for several months now, Riki the Dark was really beginning to get reacquainted with the job, which wasn’t so surprising seeing as how he was learning the ropes from the very best: Katze himself. After taking a few days off following his last risky but successful assignment, he was now on his way to the crime boss’ office for what sounded like another promising thrill during their earlier short telephone conversation. Apparently an opportunity to gather precious, hard-to-come-by intel from one of the market’s main competitors had finally presented itself, and Katze wanted none other than his latest but so-far very best trainee to execute the already carefully-planned job.

Honoured that Katze had chosen him for what was obviously a crucial job – not that he would ever admit as much of course – Riki was in a hurry to get to the red-head’s lair. But unfortunately it was the time of year during which the weather often had other ideas, with snow beginning to fall down heavily from the heavens once more, as if the gods themselves were thwarting the small figure of the black-clad tough mongrel on his racing bike on the slippery road down below.

“Jupiter be damned to hell!!! Can nothing ever go right this bloody time of year?!”, the young man cursed as Dustbiter finally succumbed to the impossibility of the circumstances, the bike had fought hard and bravely all the way to Orange Road but now refused to budge beyond that point. Not that an awful lot of budging would have been possible, for from where Riki was standing he could clearly see that the entire traffic artery was jammed up for miles on end.

Spotting an up-class vehicle just up ahead that was undoubtedly the property of an Elite, the mischievous mongrel shook with laughter when the driver’s vehement klaxon blowing did nothing to remove the piles of melted and subsequently refrozen sludge blocking its path. Apparently the weather also had a way of evening out the playing field, with the more expensive and therefore heavier, more sensitive models of hovercars being the first to be incapacitated.

Crouching down next to his bike, the former gang leader attempted to detect the exact nature of the problem. Putting his ear right next to the part of the bike that housed its engine, Riki tried to run the bike once again and listened carefully. Yep, there was definitely something stuck and frozen up in there. Knowing that putting further stress on the bike now could risk it being irreversibly damaged, there remained nothing to be done but to simply heat up the bike somewhere and wait. The question then remained: how was he gonna get the bike home when he was already streets away from his
Getting up and looking around while stretching his cold-numbed limbs, Riki could see the Mass lights of a nearby store. It wouldn’t be too hard to get his vehicle over there, but the businesses on Orange Road were usually posh enough not to allow a mongrel access, let alone one who wanted to put an old, rusty bike inside as well. Not seeing any other option at the moment and starting to lose all feeling in the tips of his strong but bare fingers, the mongrel started pushing the heavy, snow-laden bike in the direction of the bright lights regardless. Damn, how could a bike that was built to withstand desert sands be so ill-equipped when it came to dealing with snow? There had to be at least a ton of the stuff sucked into the rear accelerator to weigh down the bike like this!

He artfully concealed his bike behind some pine branches out of sight of the store window – thank Ceres for those ridiculous Mass decorations – and went for the door, pulling out his temporary citizen pass and hoping that the Black Market still had some influence in the area the establishment was located.

Upon entering the small store, there was apparently no one on the premises to greet Riki. Wonderful, perhaps he could hide his bike in a less-frequented part of the store without even being noticed. Then detecting a security camera that was already homing in on him, those thoughts soon left his mind. Was there really no such thing as good luck for a mongrel – like ever – in this blasted shit society?

Just as he figured it would probably be best to bail and find somewhere else to defreeze his mode of transportation, a shop assistant appeared out of seemingly nowhere, making Riki nearly jump up all the way up to the ceiling! Motherfucking noiseless ex-Furniture!

“Could I possibly be of service to you, dear Sir?”, a well-mannered, alto voice sounded even before Riki had even seen there was anybody there.

“Whoaa!! Holy shit man, you scared the crap outta me! Do you guys have like a freakin’ invisibility mode to sneak up on people or something?!”, Riki cursed, thinking there was no way to sweet-talk his way into the shop assistant’s good graces anyways, not if he had the discipline of a former Furniture.

“My sincerest apologies, it was not my intention to startle you, sir!”, the mouse-like young man began to apologise, appearing to hide behind a light-brown, half-long bob of hair and wringing his fragile hands nervously, only now looking at his customer’s face. “I simply... Riki? Is that you?”

“Shit, kid, no need to apologise to the likes of...”, Riki began – sick and tired of poor, castrated young lads feeling the need to grovel in the dust even when faced with their social minors – only to become as near to ghostly pale as was possible for one of such a dark skin tone. “Wait a minute! I know you... Daryl?! What the fuck, man!!! I thought you were dead! I saw you executed on television!”

“So people keep telling me, those ill-fated enough to fall down this low that is. To be honest I was most surprised myself at discovering that I was not to be executed after such a serious offense as mine”, Daryl admitted, still tensely fidgeting with his hands even after he’d discovered that his latest client was actually an old friend.

“Such a serious offense? You just opened a gate for a desperate kid who was about to kill himself just to get outta that goddamn death trap! You should’ve gotten a freakin’ medal for that, not an execution warrant!”, still not believing his eyes, Riki surged forward like a fire storm, snatched the former Furniture’s skinny form right off the polished floor and nearly crushed him to death in what could only be described as a bear hug.
“Ugh! Riki... glad to see... you too... Please don’t.... carry out that sentence.... after all... by choking me to death!”, the smaller man protested while being squeezed with more force than he remembered the mongrel to be capable of.

“S... sorry! Shit, how come you stayed this small? You must be like... What?... Twenty-four now?”

“Twenty-five actually, practically ancient, I know. I told the store manager that I was only twenty-two and somehow he bought it...”

“Wait, couldn’t he tell from your record then? But how come you’re not dead?!”, Riki exclaimed again, now grabbing both of the former Furniture’s thin wrists in a slightly too-powerful grip.

“That’s just it, I am dead. At least officially, the record I’m using now is an illegally manufactured one”, the other revealed, selfless enough not to point out that the now much bigger, adult version of Riki was hurting him again.

“How on Amoy did you pull that off? Escaping execution in Tanagura, faking your ID... ?!”
That kind of stuff would not even have sounded likely if it had been Katze they’d been talking about, so it seemed entirely impossible that honest, sweet Daryl would have managed such a feat.

“Actually Katze is the one who created my new ID, on the orders of Mas... I mean, on Lord Mink’s orders.”

“Whohoho! Mink knew about this?!”, Riki asked in total amazement, his dark eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets in an almost comical way.

“Oh, didn’t you know? It is thanks to the good graces of Lord Mink that I am alive today, he knew that a hacking offense at such a level meant that my execution would be inevitable, therefore he came up with the idea to stage my execution and to smuggle me out of Tanagura”, Daryl explained with an immensely grateful expression and a benevolent smile.

“No shit, the bastard never said anything to me! He must have known I’d think you were dead...”, Riki wondered.

“Probably he reasoned that the less people knew about it, the less risk at being discovered?”

“As if anyone in Eos would have even stopped to listen to a word I said... Besides, I would’ve been the last person to do anything to endanger your life!”

“Perhaps he was trying to prevent you from being involved to make sure that no guilt could fall to you? Because in Tanagura knowing that a felony was committed and not coming forward is enough to make one an accomplice in the eyes of the law...”

“Seriously? Holy shit, Tanagura is even more horrible than I knew!”

“But how about you, Riki? How come you are here, did you somehow succeed in escaping Eos after all then?”

“Gah! If only... No, the bastard must have gotten bored with me, cause one day he just let me go. Took off my Pet ring and sent me running back to Ceres, not that I have any complaints about that... Hell, I don’t think I ever ran that fast!”

“Then it is a most advantageous outcome that Lord Mink has helped both of us get out of Eos safely”, Daryl said with another smile, the genuine gratitude in his eyes preventing even a tough
slumdog like Riki from uttering any of the acidic, snappy replies that came to mind.

“Ergh... Yeah, most advantageous indeed, I guess... So you’ve been working here all that time, huh? And how’re you liking the job, I mean... It’s quite something else than what you were used to...”, Riki expertly changed the subject and tried to start an actual conversation, for he knew for a fact that the shy former Furniture wouldn’t, at least not by himself.

Damn, had he ever even had a half-decent conversation with the poor guy before? Probably not, all he ever really gave the kid was a load of smart-mouthing and a lot of trouble. If not an outright physical attack or destructive effort at ruining all of his hard work.

“Oh, my boss is a most generous employer, and he didn’t ask too many questions about my past. But what is it that brings you here today, Riki? I don’t wish to come across as judgmental, but I wasn’t expecting to see you here...”

“No problem, I wouldn’t expect to see me here either. But hey, I’d expect to see me even less in Eos, yet I was there, wasn’t I? Desperate times call for desperate measures, my bike crashed right before I could queue up on Orange Road...”

“Oh dear! You were in an accident?! Were you injured anywhere? Shall I call you a medic?!”, Daryl got into his usual panic, apparently forgetting that the mongrel was no longer his charge and that nobody was going to punish him for not tending to any potential wounds straight away. Or perhaps a part of him would always consider the charming dark mongrel his charge, regardless of what any laws or regulations said.

“No, no accident, no worries... I mean that my bike broke down, y’know, the engine just stopped working. I reckon it’s the cold and the snow, those models were built for daylight desert conditions so it’s not really all that strange I s’pose...”

“Would you like me to call a tow service or a mechanic for you?”, Daryl offered kindly.

“What? Nah, I just figured the problem’d fix itself once I got the bike warmed up a little bit... But I don’t want to get you into trouble with your boss, so I’ll just see if I can drag it somewhere else...”, Riki said as he already started moving backwards to the exit. The last thing he wanted to do was to get the kid he owed so much in trouble again.

“Nonsense, the manager isn’t even in tonight and he won’t be until morning. I’ll just put your hoverbike next to the radiator in the backroom for you”, the ex-Furniture said and peered out of the front window trying to decipher the bike’s position so he could drag it in himself.

“OK, thanks a lot, kid! Dunno how I’m ever gonna pay you back for all you’ve done for me... Cud you jus’ keep the door open for me? Thanks, man!”, the mongrel cunningly gave the boy something other to do than dragging in the heavy bike, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to resist a direct request.

A couple of hours and a lot of cups of hot coffee later, Dustbiter was finally heated into working order again and Riki got up from his chair at the small table in the cosy backroom of the store.

“Well, it was very nice to see you again, Riki! I wish you all the best for the new year! And if you’re
ever in need of assistance of whatever kind, or if you simply wish to converse…”

“Yeah, likewise. It’s easy, talking to you, you don’t judge. I guess I’m actually not a bad dude when I’m not thrashing the place and shouting in your face, huh?”, Riki winked jokingly as he went outside and hopped back unto his now defrosted bike.

“Yes, that is very true indeed. But at least one never gets bored with you and your spirited personality in the vicinity. Moreover one does not need to go through the trouble of finding appropriate topics of conversation”, the former Furniture replied with good humour.

Then Riki kicked his bike back to life and was greeted by the old, familiar roaring of his faithful companion’s engine. He turned to wave at Daryl, who was watching him take off through the store window. As he did so, his gaze was suddenly drawn towards one of the sparkling decorations in front of said window.

**On Christmas night**

**You always have been on my mind**

The tiny white figurine dangled in front of the frosted glass windowpane innocently enough, the Mass lights illuminating it magnificently and the wind blowing it about making it seem as if the angel’s small, feathery wings could really make it fly. But it were the fine, golden threads of long hair that trailed from the figure’s head that had first attracted Riki’s attention to it.

**Of Christmas night**

**I’m dreaming for so long**

*The cold light of dawn was already creeping through the luxurious curtains of the master bedroom in the Mink household, when the mongrel under the pristinely white, silk sheets began to stir. The pure colour – or lack thereof – made for a stark, unusual contrast against the mongrel’s dark skin and night-black hair. The previous night had exhausted him but somehow he knew - as if by some long-forgotten instinct - that dawn was upon him. Probably this was also due to the fact that it was the agreed time starting from which he would go back to being an inferior rather than an equal, and would thus be at risk once again.*

*But before his instincts of self-preservation kicked in entirely, he turned to look once more at his lover from the previous night: the divinely beautiful and coldly distanced Iason Mink, still on display there in all his blonde splendour. Fortunately he was apparently still asleep and therefore there was no need for Riki to rush his exit before being apprehended. Riki took the time to study his nemesis – or had he become his real lover overnight? – in more detail while he was still in Morpheus’ arms. Not that Riki hadn’t been given ample opportunity for looking at each and every delicious part of the blonde angel the night before, yet while asleep Iason possessed an entirely different aura from when he was awake. It was as if an aura of sweetness and innocence surrounded him in sleep, making him appear like a normal, feeling human being rather than an inhuman, unfeeling Elite. Although an exquisitely alluring human being.*

**Oh Christmas time**

**The peace on Earth we hope to find**
Cursing under his breath, the mongrel shut down his bike’s engine once more and walked back up to the front door of the store. Opening the door and hurrying outside, Daryl asked anxiously: “Has the problem with your bike not been fixed after all then?”

Oh Christmas time

We’re waiting for so long

“What? Nah, bike’s fine. It’s just... Do you still hear from him sometimes?”

“Him?”, Daryl asked, confused about who his friend was referring to.

“Iason. Do you still hear from Iason sometimes?” There it was again. That name, hated and desired in equal parts. Iason.

“Why no... I wouldn’t see why I would. I mean, even if he so graciously decided to spare my life, I have failed him in every possible way.”

“Or it would be a risk to your life whenever he did... Cause the authorities could discover that you weren’t really dead...”, Riki wondered aloud, suddenly rethinking the way in which he so far had tried to discover the Blondie’s motives for all that he did.

Perhaps he had been mistaken more than once in his conclusions. After all he would have never even dared to think that the Elite’s utter silence when it came to Daryl’s demise was because Daryl was actually still alive and the number of people who knew had to be kept limited for his own protection.

“Oh, I never thought of that explanation... Although I don’t think Lord Mink would have any reason to contact me. But you on the other hand, I am sure Lord Mink would love to hear how you’re doing! If you’d like I could pass on your contact information, I’ve still got a phone number he gave me, in case of emergency...”, Daryl said hurriedly, his enthusiasm at the thought of reuniting his former Master and Pet making him forget all about his Furniture-bred calm demeanour.

“Nah, that’s OK. I mean, I’m working for Katze again in the Black Market, so I’m sure I’d have no trouble if I wanted to call him or something. Y’know....”, he hesitated to think of whether or not it was wise to share this rather shaming information with anyone. But he just couldn’t take the lonely silence anymore, with nobody but him even suspecting how he truly started to feel towards his old tormentor. “Y’know, this time last year, something weird happened, between me and Iason....”

“You mean to say that you saw Lord Mink again last year? How was he doing? And how did such a meeting come about, if I may be so bold?”, Daryl inquired uncharacteristically.

“You know you can be bold all you want with me, Daryl, there’s not a lot that could shock me”, Riki laughed nervously. “Well, I figure he was doing all right, he was in the middle of some fancy Mass party with a bunch of big-shots when I walked in and interrupted them so rudely... But in my defence, he did invite me to come... Not sure if he intended to have an audience when I went up and kissed him though, but I’m sure the kinky devil kicks on that sorta scandal anyways...”, he rattled on, somehow hoping that adding more to the story could make the other forget about the kissing part. But no such luck.

“You kissed Master in front of an entire audience?!”, Daryl asked in surprise, hardly believing what Riki was telling him but at the same time knowing that it wasn’t like the proud mongrel to lie about such a thing.

“It was sort of like a spur of the moment thing, OK! You can’t ask someone to come with you to a
more private setting when you’re so full of fire you don’t even know what you’re doing anymore!”

“And how did Lord Mink react to this? Was he very angry with you? Oh, dear Jupiter, I do hope you didn’t have another one of those terrible arguments?”, the ex-Furniture cowered, already frightened when imagining his former Master’s ire.

“No argument, he just sent the whole crowd home straight away to continue undisturbed...”

“He did?!” Daryl squeaked, knowing from experience that only the highest placed and most revered Elite in Tanagura attended Lord Mink’s Mass parties. For him to send away such esteemed guests for a mere mongrel...

“Yeah. Perhaps he was bored with the whole thing, or he just figured he could torment me better without those other yuppie fags around....”

“No, Riki, that’s not true! You can make excuses for it all you want, but the truth is...”, suddenly realising how loud he was shouting in the middle of the store – even if there were no customers there at present – Daryl lowered his voice and then continued with a certain air of conspiracy. “The truth is that you are very dear to Lord Mink. I believe that there is nothing that he wouldn’t do for you, Riki. You say he sent you away because he grew tired of you, but I cannot believe that. Not after all the trouble and social judgement he went through to keep you close to him. No, I think that he finally saw what I did earlier, that to remain in chains in Eos would destroy you. Therefore he would rather not see you anymore at all than see you thus!”

“You know, Daryl, you’re the second ex-Furniture from the Mink household to tell me this in only a couple of months’ time. Of course I can’t trust a single word Katze says, as Iason is undoubtedly still pulling his strings. But from what you’ve just told me, there’s no way that he’s pulling yours, right?”

“Not that I know of. Of course I still consider myself loyal to the Mink household first and foremost, especially after everything Master has done to me. But like I said, he has not been in contact with me ever since my so-called execution.”

Knowing that regardless of what his Master commanded him, poor Daryl was simply incapable of lying, Riki knew he had to be speaking the truth, at least as he knew it.

“Shit. Shit, OK, maybe there is... something. Something between Iason and myself, something weird and... totally out-of-line”, Riki admitted, allowing himself to think once again about all the things that didn’t add up, not since their last face-to-face encounter. “The way he was with me last Christime – I mean, last Jupiter Mass – that was not the way I remembered him from my time in Eos at all. It was... for the first time he did something selfless. Admittedly, he succeeded in luring me to him, which undoubtedly was his intention all along, but he was willing to sacrifice himself to do it...”

“Master sacrificed himself? Oh no, did he hurt himself?”, Daryl asked worriedly, his face painted in absolute horror at the thought of his former Master being hurt.

“No, no, nothing like that. At least, I think it didn’t hurt... He’s an Elite after all, they can’t be hurt, right? Especially not through sex, I mean, I’m pretty sure they’re pretty much built for it...”

“I know that Elite bodies are regenerative and that there is hardly anything that can seriously injure them. However I do not know if that means that they never feel any pain. The Elite built for sex? I don’t think that is possible, Riki, because they are forbidden to have coitus by Jupiter’s decree”, Daryl droned in an encyclopaedic manner. “Wait, did you just say that you possibly hurt Master through sex?!”
“Well, I don’t know! I mean, if what you say about sex being forbidden for Elite is true, then... Holy smokes, he must have been a virgin! But does that actually mean anything for an Elite? Oh shit, I must be the world’s stupidest asshole!”

And I believe at Christmas I’m in love again

“What do you mean, Riki?”

“To think it didn’t... it couldn’t... mean anything!”’, the mongrel now defended himself desperately. “But if it’s forbidden for them to have sex, then... Then it must have meant even more than it would have for a human! I just assumed... cause sex in Eos means nothing! It means nothing with a Pet... But he’s an Elite so... I should’ve guessed there would’ve been different standards for different classes! Argh, I’m such an idiot! I was just so focussed on myself and how I felt that I... Never even thought that maybe he felt something too!”

And I believe there’s someone there for me

“Indeed it is hard to imagine that an Elite would, especially Master Iason, for he is widely-known for his perfect demeanour and his ability to show no emotional weakness whatsoever. But as his Furniture of several years, I personally think he is most definitely capable of emotion. Not in his words or facial expressions perhaps, but I’d say it is very strongly there in his actions towards those who depend on him. What he did for me went against the law...”

“And what he did for Katze. And what he did for me. Shit, I’m such a dumb moron!”, Riki yelled in exasperation, his dark eyes inadvertently moving up the familiar sparkling tower in the distance, easy to make out even through the falling snow. He could have sworn he could hear the snow flakes bouncing right off of that incorruptible surface of pristine, icy crystal. How could he have been so blind?!

And far away we hear the bells go ding ding dong

“Oh no, Sir Riki, you are no such thing!”, Daryl tried to reassure him, using the old appellation endearingly without even realising it.

“Quit pulling my leg with the ‘Sir’ already, ya cheeky lil’ twit!”, Riki accused, a broad grin making its way unto his tan, attractive features.

“Oh no, Si... I mean, Riki! I would never purposely taunt you in such a way, I swear!”, the other pleaded in alarm.

Laughing like a madman – his seasonal spirit much improved - Riki smacked his newfound friend’s shoulder a bit more roughly than was his intention, expecting there to be more muscle to lessen the blow.

Oh Christmas time

“Nah, it’s me who’s pulling your leg, kid! Don’t worry about it, jus’ my fucked-up sense o’ humour. Gotta go talk to my boss now or he’ll have my head for being late without the excuse of the snow drift”, the attractive young man said with a glance at the now snow-free sky before jumping unto his old bike – lean as a gutter cat – and racing off mongrel style.

On Christmas night

Please wait for me
To Be Continued ...

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year !!!!!!!!

And please leave me a little present as well in the form of a review! :-) 

Author’s note:

In case any of you are wondering about the references to “last year’s Jupiter Mass Eve” or “this time last year” in this chapter, those are references to my earlier Christmas fanfic Amoyan ChristMass (more specifically to the chapter Under the Mistletoe). I guess you could consider these next two chapters as a sequel of sorts, with the events in Amoyan ChristMass taking place somewhere after the point at which Iason set Riki free yet before the beginning of Star-Crossed.
Fallen Stars and Unsent Letters

Chapter Summary

Katze sends Riki on an undercover mission in upper-class Midas, Mimea reveals the existence of a resistance movement inside Tanagura and Riki receives some unexpected letters. All the while Riki is desperately trying to get a hold on his own life.

Soundtrack:
The Birthday Massacre – Kill the Lights (Tyurru’s nightcore cover)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjc9exrCNrw

Parking his bike next to the front entrance of the Black Market headquarters – not wanting to take the risk of his bike shutting down again while taking the longer route to the back entrance – Riki couldn’t help but wonder at the countless pedestrians strolling through the usually more quiet neighbourhood. Sure, Katze’s office was located in a densely populated part of Janus, with shady businessmen of all varieties and local workers frequently passing through the street. However around the time of the Jupiter Mass festivities it was not unusual to see residents from other areas of Midas, Tanagurans and tourists from elsewhere on Amoy or even from off-world. Although most other city states didn’t exactly worship Jupiter – quite the opposite, with more democratic city states even openly criticizing slavery and human trafficking – it was universally known that there were no parties anywhere else on Amoy quite like in Midas.

Activating the security force field around his bike – a more recent addition paid for by his earnings in the market – Riki glared at an extravagantly-clad passing tourist couple with a lethal fire in his ashen eyes. In spite of the obvious fear that was suddenly all over their painted faces, the two could not help but stare at the exotic attraction in front of them in fascination: they had never seen a real mongrel before! Could this dark but beautiful young man truly be one of those fierce and fearless wild creatures from the slums of Area 9? His looks, clothes and threatening aura definitely suggested as much.

“What the hell, assholes, you wanna take my picture or something?”, Riki said with a predatory grin. “You might wanna take that up with Iason fucking Mink first, cause he can get a tad possessive when it comes to stuff he thinks belongs to him. That is if you wouldn’t want your stay here to come to a very sudden and gruesome end.” Internally laughing his ass off at the astounded looks on the silly tourists’ faces, he barged into the reception area of the business that served as a cover-up for the Black Market headquarters.

Walking straight past the reception and entirely ignoring the desk assistant who started chasing after him, Riki smugly watched the elevator door shut in his face. Then he strode out of the elevator and
burst straight into Katze’s personal office without even bothering to knock, hoping to finally get a rise out of the imperturbable man. But apparently such was an impossibility, for the man did not even blink or look up from his computer screen when the former gang leader suddenly threw open the door, the back of which connected with the wall behind it with enough noise to suggest actual damage to either the door or the wall. Probably both.

“You do realise that the replacement costs of whatever property of mine you decide to damage will be subtracted from your monthly payment, don’t you, Riki?”, the low, mild voice came from behind several computer screens displayed on the utilitarian desk.

“Don’t care, you’re paying way too much anyways”, the mongrel said as he slumped down in one of the two uncomfortable, metal chairs facing the desk, unceremoniously putting his booted feet on top of the armrest of the other chair. Experience had taught him that it was very unwise to put those feet anywhere near the unblemished glass surface of the desk itself. “What’s a slumdog like me supposed to do with all that money: hand it out to those in need?”

“You might want to contemplate saving some of it, after all one never knows when one might find oneself in need in this city of Mercury. On a side note: is there any reason why you choose to parade yourself as the property of my employer?” The boss finally aimed his amber gaze towards his latest trainee, raising an auburn eyebrow but a hint of an inch.

“Parade myself? What on Amoy gave you that idea?”

Turning one of his many computer screens into the other’s line of vision, Katze showed the feed of a camera filming the street at the front entrance of the Black Market headquarters. Pushing a button on the screen, it was revealed that the camera came with a remarkably perceptive audio feed as well. Oops.

“Jeez, man, I was just joking around, OK!”, Riki exclaimed, his wild gestures demonstrating that he was more disturbed by Katze’s accurate assessment of his earlier behaviour than he was letting on.

Katze sighed almost inaudibly and started rubbing his temples with long fingers, the pallor of his face taking on a slightly greyish undertone again. At least the mongrel’s body language was honest, even if his mouth wasn’t. But he was a convincing liar, those that lied to themselves as well always were. If only the former gangster could be persuaded to put those innate skills of deceit to some good, practical use for a change.

“You sure joke around convincingly, but I suppose acting a part is a skill one is bound to acquire after having spent even a fragment of time in Eos.”

“Well, that’s sorta the reason I left, ain’t it? No acting skills to speak of…”, Riki challenged, refusing to give way to the ex-Furniture even when it came to small, meaningless, personal disagreements like this.

“Regardless of whether or not you believe yourself to possess any, you will need all of them for your next assignment, as I have established that out of all my couriers and spies you are the most likely to get out of it – if not unnoticed – unscathed”, the boss said in an expression that showed he would tolerate none of Riki’s protests when it came to Black Market business.

“What I’m supposed to spy in high society for this next job? What made you think I would be any good at that? I kinda stick out of a crowd, y’know, especially in posh places”, Riki mockingly pointed out, never letting an opportunity go by to question the other’s intelligence. For when it came to Katze such opportunities were extremely rare.
“Unless it’s a crowd that already knows you. Besides, you will have a unique opportunity to go in full disguise without anyone asking any unwelcome questions about your attire”, Katze added as he brusquely but efficiently slid a tablet with an open file with all the necessary information for the job towards Riki across the well-organized desk.

A confused frown appearing on his forehead, the ex-Bison tried his hardest not to show his ignorance and started browsing through the case file nonchalantly.

“A masquerade fundraiser ball in Sasan? No shit, I had no idea they even threw anything that fancy in that area... I thought there were just casinos, strip clubs and brothels meant mostly for tourists over there?”

“I suspect the location and wide social range are an attempt to bring different classes closer together, by making them unite in celebration of Jupiter’s greatness”, the bright red-head mused.

“Sounds disgustingly hypocritical, what rich asshole came up with that one?”

“The organisation and purpose of the event is none of your concern, you can find anything that is relevant for the part you need to play in the file. More importantly: does your contact and entry ticket ring any bells?”

“Wait a minute... Mimea’s new Master is the one organising this thing?! And you want me to get an invitation from her? Shit, man, I dunno if that’s possible. I mean, she’d need to have some unusually serious pull with her Elite to get the liberty of inviting someone like me.”

“There will be thousands of people present at this ball and it is organised in the most touristic and socially varied area of Midas. I don’t think one uninvited guest will be noticed and as long as you have a legitimate invitation the automatic doors will grant you access. Besides, as far as my sources tell me the spoiled princess is more or less given free range.”

“She’s not spoiled! She had to go through some serious bullshit and suffering to get to where she is now! So whatever freedom her new Master gives her, she’s more than earned it.”

“I see that you are indeed on very personal terms with her. Excellent, getting an invitation will not pose any difficulties for you then. First things first, you get yourself access to the event and I’ll give you further information on the exact nature of the assignment then.”

When leaving the office, the attention of Riki’s sensitive nostrils was suddenly drawn by a sweet and sour scent that he couldn’t remember having ever picked up in the office, but that seemed familiar somehow. It reminded him of the smell of the citrus fruits he was often served in Eos. Could that be why it was strangely familiar?

“Is there anything else you needed, Riki? I daresay the file speaks for itself.”

“Nah, it does, it’s just that... Have you taken up using perfume or cologne or something?”, Riki questioned, slightly turning towards the other after he’d already reached the door.

Momentarily struck dumb by the unexpected question, the crime lord gifted him a genuine laugh, which was even rarer than an opportunity to mock him. “Perfume or cologne? Not at all. Where did you get such an odd idea?”

“I smelled something striking just now. Like a smell like that of an orange or something, only synthetic.”

Raising his shoulders carelessly yet looking intensely at the other for but a mere second – brief
enough to make Riki think that perhaps he’d imagined it – Katze said in a carefully constructed disinterested tone: “Must be someone else’s then, cause I’m definitely not vain enough to use anything of the kind. Good day to you, Riki, and good luck with the assignment. I’ll be watching you closely, as usual, so don’t fuck it up.”

Sitting down on the cold, icy-wet pavement and leaning his head against the blank outer wall of one of the larger night clubs in the city centre – the bright neon above hurting his black eyes – Riki waited for his female friend to make an appearance. Was he really willing to betray one of the only friends he had left for the sake of a job he’d never wanted in the first place?

In fact he was beginning to have some doubts about his decision to accept Katze’s offer to work for him altogether. On the one hand the courier job gave him financial security and a sense of purpose, but on the other hand he had just become another wheel in the Tanaguran machinery. Even if the Black Market wasn’t exactly officially acknowledged by the Syndicate, Riki had come to realise that it was in fact an essential part of it. For the market made sure that there was a flow of merchandise and job opportunities in the direction of not only Ceres but the lesser advanced areas of Midas as well, which was necessary to keep people there from starting an all out nothing-to-lose-anyways rebellion and to keep them alive to use as an example of what happened when you defied the system.

Riki had to remind himself that his position in the market was nothing more than a temporary solution to the pressing problem of having no roof over his head, not something he wanted to make a permanent career in. But then Katze had started training him in earnest and the former gang leader had discovered that he had many talents that were very useful in his new job and given time might even make him excel at it. With him making a name for himself and people who worked with him relying on him it was hard not to get attached or not to make any permanent ties. But the simple fact that he didn’t really choose the job for himself but was more or less forced into it – if not by Katze himself than by circumstance – was enough reason for him not to pursue a lasting career there.

As he thought about his future, the young mongrel was staring at the constant flow of people passing him by, most of them barely even noticing him and those that did casting him nasty glances as if he was a piece of garbage that didn’t belong there and was ruining their view. Even while working for the market he didn’t amount to anything and had no permanent or official status that safe-guarded his future. But then again did anyone really have such a thing in this world in which everything was constantly changing, opportunities came with a long list of near-impossible requirements and rewards were fleeting at best? How was he supposed to establish any kind of steady life in such an unstable and harsh environment? He couldn’t even figure out who he was as a person, let alone what his life was to be about. Perhaps the problem with that was that the two were interlinked. Future and present. Position and personality. He had tried to deny it for so long, refusing to be the nobody that society dictated him to be. And later refusing to be the inferior sex slave Mink had wanted him to be, the Elite attempting to impose the label unto him by any means necessary and as if it were already a fact. Criminal or whore, some career choice!

Then he thought of what Katze and Daryl had told him about Iason’s supposed affection for him. Both ex-Furniture of the great Blondie seemed to be convinced that his feelings for his former mongrel Pet hadn’t changed at all and probably never would. And as far as Riki knew the Elite were immortal and their power only grew with time, as long as they didn’t fall out of favour with Jupiter.

Yet he had spent years in Eos but it hadn’t brought him a single step closer to having even a real
conversation with the blond bastard. Not when he fought him and not when he eventually complied either. Not when he raged like a mad tiger and not when he cowered like a scared little dog. They had hardcore sex – or rather Iason had sex with or against Riki’s will – and that was it. Riki knew absolutely nothing about what was going on inside the head of the one who had tormented and obsessed over him all those many nights.

At first he had tried to physically fight the other off. Then when that had proven to be impossible and to come with very unwelcome consequences, he opted for the escape option. Which was then proven equally as impossible, even with the help of a Furniture. Then he tried to reason with the Elite to convince him that really Eos was no place for a mongrel and he was unwanted there by everybody anyways. The thought of seducing Iason Mink into doing what Riki wanted had of course entered his mind several times as well, for it was abundantly clear that even if perhaps the man held no warm and fuzzy feelings for him, he definitely had some kind of interest in him, perverted as it may be. But the infamous Ice Man had turned out to be a very tough nut to crack in that regard as well. Not only did he avoid having any half-assed sort of conversation with Riki, he didn’t bother to hug him or cuddle him after they’d had intercourse either. In addition it was particularly hard to play the seducer with someone who usually jumped you just as soon as he saw you or otherwise acted as if you were invisible due to being too busy conducting meetings or whatever it was he did all day (and often at night also).

It was one of the things that had made life at the penthouse nearly impossible for the young man: the infinity of empty space and time around him, threatening to swallow up his very sanity. There was nothing to occupy himself with at the posh and polished palace in the sky, most of the rooms were not even accessible to him for fear of him destroying each and every priceless item inside. So all he could really do was sleep, giving his body the opportunity to recover from his last abuse so he was ready for his next and internally already preparing himself for that long-awaited day that he would go to sleep forever and finally be done with the living nightmare.

This story’s missing a wishing well

No mirror to show and tell

No kiss that can break the spell

I’m falling asleep

The only conclusion was that Katze and Daryl had to be wrong in their assessments of Mink’s regard for him. Perhaps it was simply wishful thinking on their behalf, the thought of having sacrificed their manhood, self respect and whatever life they could have had as free men only to serve a robotic monster incapable of emotion unbearable to them.

But even if it was all just wishful thinking, what if it wasn’t? What could be the harm in trying? The blond had already done his worst and had already seen Riki in every compromising situation imaginable. It’s not as if someone in the mongrel’s position had anything left to lose. He had no family, no gang and hardly any real friends. He had no career, money or other worldly possessions worth having. His existence as a person wasn’t even officially acknowledged so he had no prospects of anything in his life ever improving by itself. And after having spent all those years being degraded in Eos, at times Riki himself didn’t know whether or not he had any pride left at all. All that remained to him was his life and his sense of self-preservation. To claim that even that last personality streak had never faltered would have been a lie but he’d pulled through all right in the end, even if it was without any room to spare. He always had. Surviving was what he did. Therefore there was cause to believe that he would continue to do so. Somehow.
Of course Tanaguran society and anyone who was a part of it – which was pretty much everybody in all of Tanagura and Midas – would claim that the mongrel’s plan for social advancement through an affair with the favourite Son of Jupiter was ridiculously ambitious and had no realistic chance whatsoever at success. In that sense Jupiter’s voice was everywhere, in everything and everybody. For what kept her supreme system going was not just what it dictated in words and laws but its interiorisation in the very thoughts and hearts of the population. Like the Pets in Eos, the people of Tanagura and Midas alike were conditioned to the point where they no longer saw what was right in front of them. Their consumerist love of money rendering them blind to anything else and poisoning their individual minds, so that they wouldn’t question anything and wouldn’t even try to see the bigger picture.

Every prince is a fantasy

The witch is inside of me

Her poison will wash away the memory

But just because society stated that something was an impossibility didn’t make it so. After all nobody would ever believe him if he told them his story of how the very highest and most royal had scoped up the very lowest and crudest from the gutter and carried him off because he had officially non-existent feelings for him. Hell, he would never have believed anything of the sort himself if he hadn’t lived it! Yet he’d be damned if he’d just keep on stumbling around in the darkness of either the poor, meaningless misery of the slums or ignorant slavery for whatever little remained of his life!

The time for action was now, if not for himself then for generations to come. For that was the biggest lie of all, wasn’t it? The idea that people were always alone in the end and that there wasn’t really such a thing as love. Because there was! No amount of brain washing or false information could truly remove the humanity from those who were human. What if even those at the very top did experience emotion, only they didn’t recognise it as such themselves?

We kill the lights and put on a show

It’s all a lie

But you’d never know

That had to be the reason why even Elite were replaced and forgotten every once in a while. Perhaps even some of them began to develop human feelings and to question the system after a while. After all they were supposed to be highly intelligent, weren’t they? For anyone that smart it would only be a matter of time before they’d figure it out. Another thing that Riki had heard whispers about during his time in Eos was that apparently sometimes an Elite had to ‘go in’ to get an internal problem with their software fixed. Even if it had all been very hush-hush Riki’s sixth sense had detected a familiar, very human emotion in the Elite who had been discussing this: fear. He had even overheard Raoul urging Iason to be more cautious because he didn’t want to be the one to have to ‘fix’ him. At the time Riki hadn’t given it much thought, but in retrospect he began to suspect that Jupiter had some way or other to mindfuck her own mindfucking agents as well.

The star will shine

And then it will fall

And you will forget it all

Having grown up outside of the society Riki had only been prey to its preconditioned responses
during his time in Guardian. And even there nobody had really attempted to train him properly, knowing that his appearance and feisty personality would make it impossible to have him function as a part of the whole. In fact he now saw how his misfortunate exclusion from life as a child and teenager had put him in a unique position to develop a critical mind and a conscience that was entirely his own. Now finally putting some of those pieces he’d picked up over the years together – his mongrel status combined with his years in Eos giving him an unheard of perspective – he was somewhat unconsciously beginning to devise a plan to try and actually win the never ending battle against the system.

Then rather unexpectedly a glint of flickering gold rolled across the pavement and stopped right in front of his leather-booted, shivering feet. It looked like some sort of coin or maybe a casino chip. Picking it up, Riki then recognised what it was with a nostalgic sense of predestination. A Pet coin. Like the one Iason gave me the first time he saw me.

“A penny for your thoughts. Isn’t that what they say, Riki?”

Sitting on the direct monorail line that connected Eos Tower to Midas city centre, the red-haired female beauty was all cuddled up in her warm, gold-tinted fur coat and completely focussed on the little booklet she was currently reading. The volume was an antique, fine-print collection of short folkloric stories that dated back to Earth and were called fairy tales. The one that currently absorbed her attention was about a girl called Cinderella, the character’s abuse at the hands of her ‘stepmother’ and ‘stepsisters’ – whatever that may be – reminding the young reader of the plight of Furniture and Pets alike.

However what the story lacked in her opinion was the perspective of the stepmother and stepsisters. Their actions were probably motivated by the fear to losing their own material possessions and position of power to Cinderella after her father passed away. Fearing being cast out of the household after Cinderella had become its new rightful Master, her stepmother had managed to enslave her instead and to take over mastery of the household herself. Many a Pet that carried favour with its Master would have degraded and mistreated another Pet because of a similar fear of being replaced. In truth they could not be blamed for just looking out for themselves, could they? The way things were depicted in the story made it seem as if the stepmother was evil because of what she did, but what choice did she have if she wanted to protect her own daughters? Did she have less of a right to a place in the household because she had only been a second Pet? It was the system that determined that the heir by blood – like an Elite – inherited everything whereas the wife and her daughters – like Pets or Furniture – had no such rights. Yet they had been a part of the household for nearly as long as Cinderella had been, having to earn their Master’s favour rather than automatically receiving it because of any blood ties they had with him. In a sense Cinderella was like an Elite, her inheritance was her birthright. Whereas her stepmother had had to work for a position that was only temporary.

And after midnight we're all the same

No glass shoe to bring us fame

Nobody to take the blame

We’re falling apart
Mimea wondered what would be her own fate if anything ever were to happen to Iason, which given the illegal nature of their little rebellion was far from unthinkable. Even if unofficially he had allowed her to become more like a business partner or fellow manager of the household, by law she had no rights to anything, not even to her own body. After his death she would be auctioned off to anybody else or disposed off if she were too old to still fetch a decent price. It was all just a matter of time.

“Good things come to those who wait”, Iason had told her, and “Patience is a virtue.” It had reminded her of what Lord Am also used to tell her: “Given time every flower will bloom, although some take longer than others and it often depends on the circumstances, such as the weather conditions and the composition of the soil. In my opinion late bloomers are usually the prettiest.” At the time she hadn’t understood the meaningful look he had given her, but over time she had indeed come to realise that he had been talking about Pets rather than about flowers, reassuring her that it was no problem that she was taking longer to reach fertility and to participate in soirees than other females of her age.

Yet how much time one had left was never certain in Tanagura. All anyone could ever do was wait for their time to come and take what they could for as long as they could. Especially for a Pet time was precious because there wasn’t a lot of it and what little there was one never truly knew, making it a big risk to be a late bloomer.

Every story’s a waiting game

A flower for every name

Their colours are paling

In the falling rain

Absently gazing at the swiftly passing buildings of the cityscape and the falling rain outside of the window, she had started to draw figures in the condensation of the monorail window. First she meticulously drew flowers in different stages of growth, having seen them often enough in the paintings of her childhood bedroom to know them by heart without ever having tried to draw them before. Then she drew a heart with the letters IM, MA and R written around it in a triangle, IM and MA at the top of the heart and R beneath it. MA. She only noticed the mistake in her own initials after having written them. Mimea Am, rather than Mimea Mink. Riki had no last name, for he could never truly belong to any household, that much was already clear to her. She thought of adding a B for his gang Bison, but then remembered that he’d told her he was no longer a part of that gang. Then again B could just as easily stand for Black Market or Riki the Black, couldn’t it? Looking at the R once more, she decided that it looked best of all on its own. Riki was simply Riki, nothing more was needed.

Her thoughts were interrupted when suddenly the lights inside the monorail carriage started flickering, followed by a computerised voice informing her and the other passengers that these interruptions were due to the unusual weather conditions, would pass shortly and posed no danger whatsoever.

If these weather conditions were so unusual, then how could they even know as much? It was likely that the flickering of lights throughout the carriage was caused by disturbances in the monorail’s power, which could create problems in other systems as well. Why then did they assure passengers that there was no danger if the power interruptions could possibly cause disturbances in the monorail’s speed or navigational system?

With a sense of prideful satisfaction, Mimea then realised that if she hadn’t read that book on the workings of the monorail transportation systems, she could not have known any of this. To be honest
she had stopped reading the actual texts of said book after a while, only looking at the illustrations, because it was all very boring. Yet the cover had been metallic-looking, the glint of which had first drawn her attention to it. *Never judge a book by its cover.* Such had proven true for other attractive, shiny metallic things as well, but Jason Mink’s contents had turned out to be far from boring. For her favourite kinds of books were mysteries.

The question alone of how much time an Elite had left was truly fascinating. Apparently they could live indefinitely, their life spans having no end in theory. And neither did the position of Head of the Syndicate. History books had revealed to her that the longest reign had lasted for over five centuries! But even so it had not been indefinite, and shockingly the briefest reign had lasted only a couple of months, a young and inexperienced Blondie appointed after the unexpected death of his predecessor at a time of war soon giving way under the pressure. The history overview had not even mentioned his name for apparently he had fallen in disgrace and had been recycled soon afterwards, every mention of his name or other personality traits erased from the system for all time.

*We kill the lights and put on a show*

*It's all a lie but you’d never know*

*Your star will shine and then it will fall*

*And you will forget it all*

Having reached her designated stop in downtown Midas, Mimea carefully pocketed her book – never forgetting that paper books were all rare, authentic pieces – and gracefully stepped out unto the busy monorail platform. Witnessing several other Pets stumbling about on their high heels and one of them even landing straight unto her practically non-existent skinny bum, Mimea felt her cheeks heat up with the unadulterated pleasure at her Master’s most thoughtful gifts: a pair of boots one could easily navigate any kind of iced-over pavement with, a pair of elegant black trousers that were slim fit but not in the least transparent, a warm black sweater fashionably decorated with gold threads and as piece de resistance he had even gifted her a comfortable winter coat with fur trimmings of genuine golden mink.

Even if everyone she passed regarded her long trousers and lack of cleavage or heels in disapproval, their attention was soon drawn by the nearly-impossible-to-come-by fur of her coat and the priceless leather of her footwear. If anything her garments were far too expensive and exceptional for even a highly-favoured Pet, making some passer-by’s uncertain of her status in society. Perhaps she was an extremely wealthy tourist from another galaxy who had her body genetically improved in a Tanaguran lab? For surely no mere Pet could be wearing a regal outfit such as this! In addition there was nothing even remotely submissive in her confident stride and the way she held her head up high.

Taking in the thousands of people walking around the busy square, Mimea had detected the one she was supposed to meet in no time at all. For if they had anything in common, it was that they stood out and people went out of their way to stop and gawk at them, either in fearful disapproval or in confused admiration.

A mischievous smirk finding its way unto her flawless features, she reached a leather-gloved hand inside of her fur-lined pocket and took out the coin she had found while snooping in one of Jason’s drawers in his private office. At first dumbfounded at why anyone would make a keychain out of an ordinary Pet coin, she soon understood that it had to have belonged to Riki. Having removed the chain from it to avoid any unwelcome questions from others, she had taken up carrying the coin with her wherever she went, often playing with it absent-mindedly while thinking. An activity she nowadays spent an unusual amount of time doing, at least in comparison to how much time she used
to spend on it. Which during her young years in Eos had been practically zero minutes per day. That
girl seemed like an entirely different person now, someone superficial and selfish she would probably
not even wish to talk to for even a second nowadays.

Aiming the little golden disk straight at the mongrel’s leather-clad feet – although noticeably clad in
far less luxurious leather than her own – she threw it and missed his right foot by only a few inches.

“A penny for your thoughts. Isn’t that what they say, Riki?”, she asked jokingly in her high, girly
voice. The Pet voice now strangely clashing with her royal attire, proud stance and more experienced
gaze.

“Apologies, ma’am, it was not my attention to pretend to be a beggar. If anything a pick-pocket
would be more suiting, at least those work for their money”, Riki grinned at her as he bounced off
his muscled ass faster than lightning, clearly not having lost his Ceresian reflexes. Opening the hand
in which he’d clutched the familiar-looking Pet coin, he glanced at it curiously, seeing that it had a
small hole in it. Where it used to be attached to a keychain.

“Where... on Amoy... did you get this old thing?”, he asked in surprise, trying to figure out how there
could be any possibility at all of that object ending up in Mimea’s hands. “I thought I’d lost it years
ago, when I was still working for the market the first time around.”

“What goes around comes around, I suppose. Things have a strange way of coming full circle in the
end, so perhaps it’ll work out for us after all. But I gave you a penny, now you have to tell me about
your thoughts!”, she squeaked cheerfully, interlinking her arm with his as they walked across the
square, stared at by literally everyone they passed.

“Actually you’ve just pretty much summed up what I was thinking...”, he started uncertainly, not
sure how much of his thoughts she would be able to understand nowadays. Perhaps he wasn’t giving
her all the credit that she deserved, she was a grown woman now after all.

“Oh? How so?”, she queried, delighted at having absolutely no idea what was going to come out of
his mouth next. With Pets or Furniture you always knew more or less what they were going to say,
which was either more nonsensical gossip than you wanted to hear or hardly anything at all.

“Just thinking how I don’t wanna spend the rest of my life as a courier for Katze any more than I
wanna spend it as a sex slave for Iason ...”, he started uncertainly, having reached the point where he
knew what he did not want, however it seemed that didn’t make knowing what he did want any
easier.

“Or as the leader of a Ceresian gang?”, she added.

“Exactly! I mean, at one point or other all of these options were presented to me as if I had no choice
in the matter! So what, when I was 13 I was destined to be a street rat, when I was 15 I was destined
to be a Pet and now that I’m 18 I’m destined to be a criminal? What if I’m not destined to be
anything, other than what I choose to be?”

“It is my firm belief now that we are what we wish to be, not what we are destined to be. So
whatever it is you’d like to be, simply by wanting to be it you are in fact it already”, Mimea stated
philosophically, her high-pitched voice belying the wisdom contained in those words and reminding
the other of all the ordeals she had already faced in spite of her young years.

“Ergh? Say that again please?”

Laughing at her own hard-to-follow line of speech and the other’s bluntly obvious confusion –
mouth hanging open slightly – she explained: “I mean that we are who we choose to be, that is our true identity. We don’t even need to make society accept us in order to be us.”

“Y’know what, you’re right. Take me for example – or anybody else who grew up in the slums for that matter – according to society I do not even exist, yet I am more my own person than most people. It’s all about knowing what you want and not allowing anything or anyone else to make you doubt that.”

“Speaking of things we want, why did you wish to see me at such short notice, my friend?”, the vixen queried rather slyly, a spark of curiosity lighting up her sunset eyes.

Not bothering to suppress a rising sigh, the mongrel responded: “There’s this job Katze wants me to do... and I kinda need your help for it.” Just out with it, no use in lying to a friend. Probably my only friend now.

Stopping and turning to look him straight in the eye, the pretty seductress regarded her mongrel friend with a heartfelt sense of admiration and respect. “I appreciate your honesty, Riki. So I’ll be honest with you too: I was expecting you to come to me with this request. Therefore...”, she began as she reached a slim hand into her designer purse and pulled out an elegantly-written, gold-trimmed card.

Staring at her in undisguised, gobsmacked surprise, Riki didn’t know what to say as he accepted the invitation. The paper even had an expensive feel to it, for it was thick and textured. “Well... thanks, I guess. How did you even .... ? And earlier, with the coin ... ?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you the specifics of it all, due to a professional secrecy of sorts. Let’s just say I’ve been doing some manipulating and investigating of my own as of late. But Riki, I swear to you, I always have your interests at heart as much as my own”, she assured him as she grabbed both his hands into hers as if trying to shield them from the harshness of the cold air and sharp neon lights surrounding them in the square.

“As do I yours. And I don’t need to know the specifics, all I need to know is that you’re my friend and only ally. I thought the guys from Bison were my friends at one time, but down in Ceres it’s always been eat or be eaten. Nowadays I just want more in my life than merely convenient ties, y’know.”

“I understand. You want to have human relationships that are founded on something real, not just on system-imposed survival mentality”, pausing, she decided a change of topic was required once again to keep her companion from questioning the unlikely coincidences of her knowledge too much. “Hey, you wanna go in there and grab a coffee? I may be wearing all this fur but I’m still freezing my ass off here!”

Laughing at her un-Pet-like language-use, Riki allowed his fire-spirited friend to lead him into a nearby coffee shop, simply ignoring all the glances thrown at them from many customers there. Notably many of those glances were aimed at Mimea’s expensive regalia as much as at Riki’s dark looks.

“Where’d you get that get-up anyways? It looks pretty sweet, for somethin’ manufactured in Tanagura”, the slumdog admitted, curiously eyeing the golden fur-trimmings on her expensive-looking coat as he settled into a comfortable couch next to a merrily-burning, modern, glass-encased fireplace.

“'t Was a gift. A much-appreciated gift”, Mimea nearly whispered, attempting to hold back the sudden emotional onslaught of mascara-stained tears.
“I didn’t know there even was such a thing as gifts in Tanagura. Don’t tell me... it was from your new Master?”, Riki asked, his curiosity once again picked by the mystery surrounding Mimea’s new protector. He knew very little about said Elite, but what little he did manage to pry from his friend suggested that this Blondie was unlike any he’d ever heard of.

“Indeed it was. He’s a tad unusual when it comes to the way he interacts with me. Like me – and you – he craves... genuine human contact”, Mimea carefully added, paying great attention not to reveal too much.

“Isn’t it kinda weird to want human contact when you’re not actually... y’know... human yourself?”, the young man hesitantly asked, unsure to what extent the girl opposite him might be offended by the suggestion that her new Master and confidante was not exactly human.

Mimea stared at him in confusion for several seconds, then burst out laughing in his face, the melodic giggling drawing in even more questioning gazes from onlookers in the café. “Seriously, Riki! Sometimes I’m amazed at how little you know about Tanagura, having lived there yourself for several years! But then again you weren’t exactly socially active, so you never did participate in the never-ending gossip mill of Eos.”

“Judging by how superficial the nature of most conversation there was, I figured I wasn’t really missing out on anything. But please, do tell me what you mean... ?”, the attractive rogue mongrel urged, unknowingly switching back to the Eosian vernacular himself. In truth Riki had never really realised just how much his years in the Tower had changed him, in and out.

“What I mean is that there’s this rumour that... although the Elite are usually strictly robotic in nature, the Blondies in fact have... organic brains”, Mimea whispered in a conspiratory tone as she bend over their table so only he could hear her softly-spoken words.


“Probably more like superhuman, but close enough to human to have all our baser needs, I suppose. For one it would explain Iason Mink’s most unusual behaviour towards you, a behaviour I learned was unprecedented for him but most definitely not unheard of for other Blondies that came before him. Of course none of this is public knowledge, it’s all based on rumours and speculation, but I never heard my Master tell me any different.”

“That’s just... unbelievable! I mean, all this time I thought... that I...”

“Had fallen in love with a strict machine?”, Mimea cunningly chuckled and purposely beckoned one of the servers of the coffee shop and ordered a double espresso, surprising both the server and her Ceresian companion with her uncharacteristic choice.

“Yeah, I’ll have the same... and a chocolate... whatever... cake thingie”, Riki said as he was attempting to decipher the complex descriptions and curly typewriting on the menu, grateful for the momentary distraction from the seriousness of the implications of what Mimea had just revealed.

“Excellent idea, get me one of those as well. I sure as hell could use the endorphins”, the former Pet added, shocking the living daylights out of the poor waiter with her crude speech, as the boy was a recent transfer from Eos himself.

“You seem to have taken up an interesting vocabulary, Mimea, darling,” Riki mocked her with a teasing grin. “But if what you heard is true then... then Iason is actually human?”, he continued in a more pressing tone.
“Shit, that’s truly remarkable”, Mimea said, carefully replacing her cup on its saucer.

“What is?”, Riki wondered impatiently, wanting – no, needing – to hear another’s opinion on his conclusion that at least a part of Iason Mink had to be human. For if it were true, the ramifications of it were enormous. And not just for him personally.

“The way every waking moment of every single day your thoughts are still revolving around him”, the girl across from him spoke with conviction, not leaving any room to doubt that she thoroughly believed what she said.

“I...”, Riki began in a faltering voice, hands beginning to shake around his espresso cup as suddenly he saw the truth of those words as clear as day. Finally the young man slumped down in defeat as the steaming, black liquid spilled all over the pristinely-white cup and saucer.

“Damnit, you’re right! Of course you’re right. Fuck, I’m such an idiot!”, the mongrel exclaimed, suddenly hitting their small table with enough force to send both their cups and the customers from a nearby table flying.

Mimea reassuringly placed a small, porcelain hand on top of his larger, bronze one, turned his chin upward with her other hand and smiled at him. Not the coy, seductive smile that Pets learned to use at the Academy, but a genuine smile of friendship and trust.

“You’re no idiot, Riki, far from it. Like so many people in Midas, you simply didn’t see what was right in front of you. And neither did I. Nobody did back then”, she spoke soothingly.

“I just... I’m just so confused, Mimea! Nothing is making any sense anymore!”, the mongrel hiccupped, long-suppressed tears of uncertain desperation now staining sooty lashes. “As bad as things were before, at least they made some sense to me... But now that the cat’s out of the bag... I just don’t know what to think or do anymore.”

“That’s easy. Just follow your heart. Just do what feels right. Isn’t that what you’ve always done? It’s what I’ve always admired in you, Riki. It’s why I fell in love with you. And I’m guessing it’s why he fell in love with you too.”

“I know. I just... I just never thought... I just never dared to hope... that maybe the way I saw and did things... was the right way... That maybe I was right, where everyone else was wrong”, the conflicted youngster continued, opposite thoughts and feelings mixing together in one giant, chaotic maelstrom inside his mind.

“There was many a night at the... the brothel... that I doubted the righteousness of my own feelings. There were times that I wondered if I hadn’t made the wrong choice, if I hadn’t thrown away my life, self-respect and sanity for an ideal that simply didn’t correspond with anything in reality”, the fallen Pet admitted, her voice sounding more serious than Riki had ever heard it. And softer somehow, but in a way that spoke of inner strength, of acceptance of past conflict and a resolution to do better in future.

“Shit... shit, that must’ve been so hard for you. I mean, having grown up in a place like Eos... that brothel must have been hell for you. But how did you pull through in the end?”, Riki now finally dared to ask, having thought of said question often but always dreading the answer and the accusation that was sure to come with it.

“I received a sign of sorts. I discovered that... I wasn’t alone. Not the only one that doubted the inhumanity of the system. In fact, since then I have learned that there are many people – some in more unexpected corners than others – that feel disgusted by the Tanaguran policy. Alone, we have
always been unable to do anything about it. But together, I believe we can make a real difference, Riki!”, she urged, nearly veering off of her cushy chair with the excitement that now filled her orange eyes once more.

Tiger, tiger, shining bright. In the forest of the night.

“So... so what are you suggesting? That it’s possible to form some sort of organised rebellion?” Out of all the people he knew, Mimea would have been the last one he’d expected to suggest anything of the sort. But then again people always did surprise you, apparently Eosians were certainly no exception to that rule.

“Actually, I think... that such a resistance movement may already exist. I am unsure as to how many are involved yet, however... I’ve been having an awful lot of coincidences and déjà-vu as of late. Regardless of how much I’d like to believe that the mechanisations of destiny are supporting our cause... I have become too much of a realist to believe in such things today.”

“What are you saying?”, Riki questioned, his own blood beginning to boil at the thought of being involved in an all-out, full-scale rebellion against Jupiter’s tyranny. After all, wasn’t that exactly what every single mongrel from Ceres aspired to when growing up?

“I’m saying that me and you having found each other again after all this time is no coincidence. I’m saying that Katze sending you on an assignment at the very same Mass event organised by my new Master and fellow conspirator is no coincidence either”, the girl elaborated, the calm evenness of her voice perfectly masking the chilling shiver of excitement she felt at entering such dangerous waters.

“Come to think of it, many of these so-called coincidences do relate to you either directly or indirectly, Mimea. Like just now with the Pet coin... You know what that coin is, right, what it means to me? And how did you already know what Katze asked me for before I even told you? Was it even a real coincidence that you just happened to be working at the same casino I burst into while fleeing the Dark Men that day we met again for the first time in years?”

Laughing in that typical high-pitched manner of a first-class Academy Pet, Mimea raised a perfectly-polished pinkie and sipped some more of her 100 credits-a-porcelain-cup espresso. “Oh, Riki, you give me way too much credit! And as a matter of fact you just running into my casino really was a coincidence, truly.”

“Maybe, but what about the coin just now?”, the mongrel insisted, now demanding an answer to all of the unanswered questions he’d been asking himself the last couple of months. Ever since I got reacquainted with Mimea. Surely he wasn’t going crazy and simply imagining all of these strange occurrences? Could there truly be some kind of mastermind organising all of this? And if so, in what way was Mimea involved in all this?

“That is for me to know and for you to frustratedly guess at, my deer”, she winked somewhat devilishly and dug into her chocolate cake gracefully well-mannered yet with the appetite of a starving wolf ravishing an unsuspecting prey.

Now you know
After spending another half hour attempting to pry more information from his friend’s dark-cherry lips in vain, Riki finally said his goodbyes, habitually pulling her over for a tight hug before heading out. While inhaling the scent of her perfume during that embrace however, he noticed a familiar citrus-sweet scent and instantly recognised it as the same perfume he had smelled earlier in Katze’s office. “That a popular new scent you’re wearing, hon?”

“I’ve succeeded in crawling my way back up the social ladder a while ago now, sweetheart, therefore I would never wear anything ‘popular’ nowadays. As a matter of fact *Orange Dream* is a very rare export product that is hard to come by even in Eos, so I wouldn’t expect many others – if any – here on Amoy to use it.”

Weird. I could’ve sworn I smelled the exact same scent in Katze’s office today.

Walking out of the hazy warmth of the upper-class coffee shop into the splendidly-lit, beating city centre of Midas, Riki enjoyed the chilling breeze that crawled into his jacket’s collar just as much as he resented having ever left the luxurious comfort of the posh establishment. Damn, I’m getting way too soft if even a gust of wind is having this effect on me.

Inside the right front pocket of his ripped, black jeans his fingers were absently playing with his Pet coin. The coin Iason gave me that first night. No matter how much time passed or how badly he thought of the blonde fucker, those memories never failed to put his heart on fire. If only the beautiful bastard’d had other motivations than just humiliating the hell out of him. *Or did he? Could he’ve had other, hidden motivations?*

At least he’d managed to get the invite that was required for his next BM job, the boss would be pleased. But something definitely didn’t sit right after this last meeting with Mimea. He had the feeling she was hiding something from him, something important. But whenever he’d tried to question her about it she’d just laughed it away or avoided answering the question. Was that because she simply didn’t realise the importance of getting some answers? Or was it all part of some well-orchestrated technique to fool him?

“Tsss, idiot! This is *Mimea* we’re talking about! She couldn’t fool anyone even if she tried... Besides, she’s got no reason to set me up”, Riki whispered to himself while pulling his collar more closely around his exposed neck. *Doesn’t she?,* a small voice in the back of his head asked mockingly. He’d been the reason she had lost her pampered life up in Eos and that she had been subjected to actions that had not only left her aching physically but had no doubt seriously lowered her self-esteem and value in the Tanaguran market. But she forgave him a long time ago, right? She blamed the system for that, not him.

Passing a mailbox on his way back from the busy square to the subway station, a wry smile came to his lips. Of course with the modern technology available to most Midasians there was no more need to send any actual letters, but for some reason the upper classes thought it was *très chic* to send each other messages and invitations on old-fashioned paper. During his time in Eos, probably the only useful thing Riki had done to fill up the oceans of time at his disposal, was to ask Daryl to teach him how to write. As in truly write, with old-fashioned hand-written letters on paper. Or later in the desert sand that always found its way to the pavements of the Midasian border areas or in the condensation on the windows of the subway.

After leaving Bison he’d toyed with the idea of keeping a diary, as now there would be no risk of his gang members finding and reading it. But in between his job in the Black Market and getting drunk on stout he just couldn’t muster up the self-discipline that daily writing required. So he’d started writing letters instead, if they could even be called that. Of course he didn’t use actual paper, even
the recycled kind would be too much of a bite out of his monthly pay check. But he’d write on anything else he could get his hands on: the boxes of take-away pizzas, the wrapping paper around the packages Katze would sometimes send him, the back of receipts from his neighbourhood supermarket... Strangely enough the very act of writing had a calming effect on him and helped him to organise and come to terms with his own thoughts. So of course the letters would focus on the same subject his thoughts usually did: Iason Mink. At first he’d hoped that writing to Iason – even if he’d never have the guts to actually send the letters – would be good for him. That writing down the thoughts on that enigmatic Blondie would also make them disappear from his mind. But it kind of ended up having the exact opposite effect, with actively thinking about the Blondie generating even more unwanted thoughts on the subject.

Nonetheless he’d kept up the writing, having nothing better to do with his time now that he was spending his evenings on his own in his small but comfortable apartment at the outskirts of Midas. Everyone needed a hobby other than getting drunk or high, right? Even if it was a highly unusual and slightly disturbing choice of hobby to be sure. Sometimes he’d even imagine that one day he’d get a response from Iason. A silly thought, especially since he’d never posted the goddamn letters. Perhaps that was the beauty of unsent letters: never receiving an answer meant never being turned down.

Unknown to Riki himself however, he had accidentally posted said letters a couple of nights ago in a drunken fit of courage incited by stout. In fact he had been so thoroughly intoxicated that he couldn’t recall it even days later. Although in his drunken stupor he hadn’t thought to put any stamps on the envelopes, the policy for letters addressed to Tanagura was that upon lack of verification of payment the cost of sending them would be paid for by the recipient. And of course upon receiving a whole stack of ‘love letters’ from the beloved object of his devotion, Lord Mink had been most happy to provide any compensations attached.

*It’s so much better to pretend*

*There's something waiting for you here*

*Every letter that you wrote*

*Has found its way to me, my dear*

Getting on the subway that headed in the direction of the area his apartment building was located, Riki leaned back in his seat and watched the cityscape speed by in a multi-coloured blur of neon and snow.

Unzipping his jacket – the subway was heated after all – Riki noticed a golden hair sticking to the black leather. Carefully fishing the hair off, he noticed that it was unusually fair and long. He would recognise that particular shade of blond anywhere. *It’s Iason’s!* Quickly going over the last couple of days in his head, Riki thought on whether or not Katze had given him a ride in any of the Mink household vehicles. The thing was that he hadn’t, not even once since he’d hired Riki. Probably because he knew it would only freak Riki out, so whenever he’d offered him a ride he’d done so in his own vehicle. And of course Riki never had any physical contact with his boss, the other’s ingrained Furniture training having made him averse to it. Not to mention Riki doubted that Katze ever got close enough to Iason nowadays to end up with one of his hairs sticking to him. Doubtlessly the brushing of those golden tresses was now reserved to a younger piece of Furniture at the household.

*Then how the fuck did Iason’s hair end up stuck to my bloody jacket?!*
Twirling the silky hair around his tanned finger until it was surrounded by a golden cocoon of sorts, Riki failed to figure out how his former oppressor’s precious hair could have possibly landed on the coarse leather of his jacket. Perhaps Mimea hadn’t been spewing superstitious crap after all when she’d talked about predestination.

Finally arriving back at his apartment, Riki decided to add both the Pet coin and the hair to the small cardboard box he’d dubbed ‘cursed mementos of a time I’d rather forget about’. Pulling it out from its hiding place under his bed, Riki opened the box only to find it surprisingly empty. It only took his brain a short moment to register what was missing: the letters. What the hell, did someone come in here and steal my fucking private letters?!

But no, what kind of idiot burglar would have stolen some scraps of paper and left all the electronics in the kitchen behind? He himself had to have misplaced them somewhere...

Searching all over his apartment, Riki eventually got the idea that perhaps he’d been confused while being drunk and had put the letters in his own mailbox in the hallway downstairs. Rushing down several flights of stairs in a matter of seconds – the elevator was busted, again – he ran to his mailbox, unlocked it in a flash and yanked it open with enough force to nearly break off its rusty hinges. Inside the mailbox he found the expected letter. Grabbing unto it in relief, Riki only noticed something was off while sliding his fingers around the envelope on his way back up to his apartment. The paper felt exactly like the kind Mimea’s invitation had been printed on: thick and textured, like Tanaguran, high-quality paper. Definitely not any of the cardboard boxes or paper shopping bags he’d written his letters on. Smelling the paper, he noticed that it was the even more expensive perfumed kind that the Elite used, and only amongst each other.

Holy smokes, what am I to make of this?!

Unsafe of what to do, the mongrel then opted to simply open the letter in order to find out who it was from, for there was nothing other than his name and address written on the envelope, nothing that could help clarify who the sender was. Pulling the luxurious letter from its delicate envelope and folding it open, Riki instantly recognised the handwriting.

My darling Riki

I hope this letter finds you not only in good health but also properly housed and fed, although I am aware the latter may be wishful thinking from my part. I cannot express to you the tremendous joy that filled my lonely heart upon receiving your many pleasing letters, wherefore you have my deepest gratitude.

I too have spent many a day and night contemplating our previous interactions and in retrospect find many of my own relational responses somewhat lacking. Therefore I hereby offer you my sincerest apologies for any inconvenience you may have suffered because of my ignorance on matters of the heart.

Given this unexpected yet most appreciated opportunity of being solicited to respond to your own earlier communications, I must incite your permission to initiate an attempt at rectifying our previous long-term engagement. I pray you do not delay in formulating your reply to my aforementioned suggestion.

Your most sincere and everlasting love

Iason Mink

For a long time Riki just stared at the letter in complete shocked disbelief, his heartbeat and breathing picking up several notches in the course of several paragraphs. If anything that had to be the largest
amount of words the fucker had ever spoken to him. Perhaps he thought that writing required more words than speaking did? Perhaps it was some or other fucked-up Tanaguran politeness policy.

After the shock had lessened somewhat – although not by much – Riki tried to wrap his head around what Iason was actually trying to tell him in that last paragraph. It would probably be best just to leave out some fancy words that didn’t convey much meaning anyhow:

Given this unexpected yet most appreciated opportunity of being solicited to respond to your own earlier communications, I must incite your permission to initiate an attempt at rectifying our previous long-term engagement. I pray you do not delay in formulating your reply to my aforementioned suggestion.

That probably translated to something like: “I ask to fix our relationship. Don’t make me wait for an answer.” Typical! If you left out all the polished niceties the bastard was still telling him what to do and telling him to do it quickly! And what the hell was all that stuff in the second paragraph all about?! His ‘relational responses’ were somewhat lacking? Somewhat?! He apologised for inconveniences suffered because of his ignorance? Inconveniences?! Where did he get the gall to dare call Riki’s kidnapping, imprisonment, rape and torture a mere inconvenience?! That crazy psychopath had gone too far once again!!! The whole letter was one, long, eloquently-put insult!!

Reading over the mystifyingly roundabout lines once more, Riki’s attention was then drawn to other, more unexpected aspects of Iason’s letter.

The tremendous joy that filled my lonely heart.

Iason was lonely without him? Iason did have a heart?

My deepest gratitude.

Iason was grateful that Riki had sent him the crappy letters and even explicitly said so?

My sincerest apologies.

Iason apologised?! If there was one thing Riki had learned during his time in Eos it was that Elite never ever apologised for anything, for they were supposedly perfect in everything they did.

Ignorance on matters of the heart.

Another unheard of thing to say for any Elite: actually admitting to not knowing something!

I incite your permission.

A Blondie – none but the favoured Son of Jupiter himself – asking him – a worthless mongrel from the slums – for permission.

Your everlasting love.

Up until that point Riki had assumed that Iason didn’t even know the meaning of the word love, let alone use it in an address to a lowly gutter rat such as him.

If anything the contents of the letter revealed that apparently Iason was now actually aware of at least the more prominent of his personality flaws and desperately wanted to make amends. Or lure me back in to start up the whole shit show of abuse all over again.

Rubbing his temples in an attempt to stave off a pending headache, Riki decided to just let the cursed
letter rest for now and think about what to do with it later. Besides, he had more urgent business, as the Mass ball thing he was supposed to go undercover on was already tomorrow night and he’d barely received even a shred of concrete information on the assignment ahead.

Glancing around his cluttered dining table in search of his cell phone, Riki’s perceptive dark eyes immediately fell on the foreign object resting there. It was a small square package, wrapped in the grey recycled paper that was always used in the market. When had Katze’s courier managed to drop that off unseen? It must have been when he’d rushed downstairs in such a hurry he’d left the door open. Damnit! If the courier went and told Katze how easy it’d been to get inside his apartment undetected, his whole image and credibility as a reliable agent would be ruined! Then again he could always explain to Katze why he’d been so distracted, cause if anybody understood how overbearingly demanding the top Blondie could be it was him. Perhaps there’d been some truth to the dealer’s conviction that Mink’s so-called feelings were genuine.

Unwrapping the unknown contents of the package with a rising curiosity, Riki closely examined the compact, state-of-the-art device inside. Fortunately it came with a brief explanation in the form of a note. Even the meticulous, former Furniture’s handwriting looked blunt and clumsy in comparison to Iason’s elegant handwriting.

R

This is a portable, remote datastreamer and -collector. All you have to do to get access to the information on any portable data carrier – firewalled or not – is get within a distance of one meter and activate the streaming function. Then you’ll be able to not only access but also copy all data, because you will not have enough time to sort through the files before copying the relevant information.

Don’t worry about storage space, I’ve connected the data streamer to a whole series of remote servers that will filter the data and forward all relevant information to my personal terminal.

Good luck.

K

Well, that sounded easy enough, but knowing Katze the devices and programming he considered to be a piece of cake could still pose a challenge to a tech rookie from Ceres, so it would probably be best to use what little time he had left before the event to practise using the device. Already yawning, the youngster went over to his kitchen isle to put the kettle on for some much-needed strong instant coffee. At least the stuff he could afford now was somewhat more palatable than what he was used to back in the day, for it was gonna be another long night working overtime on some or other complicated device for Katze ...
Just as Riki threw open his front door and rushed out, a courier carrying a large delivery box was about to ring the bell, causing a head-on collision to occur.

“Umph!! By Jupiter, can’t a guy get a fucking break around here?! Like one minute a day without being stalked by one or other moron with an unwanted message of some sort?”, Riki cursed as he scrambled around on the hallway carpet in an attempt to get back to his feet.

“My sincerest apologies, sir. But I come with an urgent delivery from an... ergh... acquaintance of yours, up at Eos Tower in Tanagura. If you would be so kind as to sign for confirmation of the receipt of the package, sir?”, a kid wearing a stylishly-cut yet simple Eos public Furniture uniform said in a slightly-shaking voice, his brown doe-like eyes uncertain as he took in Riki’s exotic, Ceresian features. ‘That is... if you are capable of writing your name? If not, it would also be perfectly legitimate to scan your identification tag... That is, if you have an identification tag? Sir?’

“Don’t worry, kid, I can write my fucking name AND I have an identification card, if only a temporary and undoubtedly illegal one”, Riki said, his earlier annoyance at being disturbed making way for sympathetic compassion as he realised the youngster in front of him couldn’t have been on the job for more than a couple of days, judging from his clumsy manner and the uncertainty literally dripping off his way-too-obvious facial expressions.

Returning the signed data slate to the other’s shaking, sweaty hands Riki asked: “Any idea what I may find in there? And please don’t tell me it’s another love letter or a sex toy or something even more disturbing than my underdeveloped mongrel imagination can come up with? Perhaps a bouquet of poisoned flowers to knock me out so someone can kidnap me?”

The kid in front of him was literally at a loss of how to respond to those strange, blunt questions, the slight O-shape his mouth was currently forming a clear indication of the loop his inexperienced mind was currently in.

“You said it was from Eos, was it top floor?”, Riki asked matter-of-factly, simultaneously expecting and dreading the confirmation of his suspicions.

Before even a single part of the customer confidentiality clause he’d had to memorise only a week ago could enter his mind, the young Furniture had already responded with an unthinking nod, followed by an innocently indignated question: “How did you know that... sir?”

“Just a hunch, I have some unwanted acquaintances with crazies up there. They just won’t quit stalking me, fucking unbelievable. Does a guy need to live in a dumpster not to get any of this bloody junk mail no more? How these fuckers keep on finding me every single time is just beyond me! Thanks for the parcel, kid, I’ll be sure to at least sniff at the contents before chucking it in the dumpster I’ll soon be moving into. Have a good day now”, Riki said, shocking the living daylights out of the unsuspecting, green youngster before slamming his front door shut in frustration for the umpteenth time in the last 24 hours.

You can make believe that what you say is what I want to hear
I'll keep dancing through this beautiful
Delusional career

Faking every tear
Looking like a compromised suicide
Keeping all my dreams alive
Author’s notes:

I’m gonna leave it at that, as this chapter is getting way too long again and you guys have been waiting for an update since forever ;-) 

I apologise once again for the loooong delay and the now inappropriate seasonal atmosphere in this chapter. I started writing this during the Christmas holidays and I ended up only having time to finish it after Easter. So please bear with me and imagine that it’s still winter time rather than spring time ;-) 
It’s gonna be winter on Amoy for another chapter after this one, cause I still gotta write about Riki’s supposed undercover mission at the Mass Masquerade Ball that Iason’s organising...

I hope you’ve all enjoyed this chapter, in spite of the continuation of the Amoyan winter and the relative lack of action. And I promise that RIKI WILL FINALLY COME FACE TO FACE WITH IASON IN THE NEXT CHAPTER! ;-) AND THEY WILL MAKE OUT! (duhuh! ;-) )

Reviews please!!! :-D
Riki goes to a masquerade ball in Midas on an undercover mission for Katze. There he meets not only his accomplice Mimea but also a tall, dark stranger. In the mean time the one-sided relationship between two Blondie brothers continues.

opening theme: Guenta K. – The Phantom (Marimo’s nightcore remix)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrlhs1XOl7E

After having sent away the delivery boy in a state of severe distress, Riki suspiciously eyed the mysterious package the kid had delivered. He wasn’t expecting another package from Katze, was he? Despite the fact that Riki really didn’t have time for any more surprise mail from Eos right now, his curiosity got the better of him. He simply had to know what was inside that box!

Ripping off the protective brown paper wrapped around the parcel like a man possessed and throwing aside the lid in a hurry, the mongrel half eagerly and half anxiously looked inside. At first glance he wasn’t entirely sure what he was looking at.

Inside the box were a variety of black pieces of fabric, which upon closer inspection were revealed to be clothing. But this was definitely not the kind of sturdy, practical clothing that someone like Riki would buy. Pulling out one of the items, Riki examined what appeared to be a pair of shiny black vinyl leggings. The next piece of clothing he picked up was some kind of silk dress shirt with see-through sleeves and a plunging neckline that would leave practically one’s entire chest on display. With the clothes also came a pair of knee-high, black, leather boots and an elegant, black eye-mask decorated with shiny feathers.

It was only when inspecting the final item and noticing a small card with Mimea’s handwriting on it that Riki realised what the strange delivery was for.

This must be my outfit for the undercover mission at the masquerade ball.

Jupiter thank Mimea for helping him out with this! If it had been left up to Riki, he would’ve completely forgotten about it and in doing so would’ve probably blown his entire cover. For Tanagurans and Midasians alike dress code was everything. One could easily pretend to be something else simply by dressing the part.

Preferring not to try on the outfit – it would only bring back unpleasant memories of his
imprisonment in the tower anyways – Riki checked the time and decided to have a short nap before he went. Considering he didn’t get much sleep while figuring out Katze’s data-streamer device and that this mission would take all of his concentration to pull off, that was probably the best idea.

Throwing the Tanaguran garments back into the box without as much as a second glance, Riki went to shut the blinds in his bedroom and crawled into bed fully-clothed. Ever since he’d started living on his own his dreams had been frequently plagued by nightmares about a certain Blondie and their unwanted history. After a couple of months spent on but an insufficient average of 3 hours of sleep per night, Riki discovered that he felt safer while still wearing his clothes, possibly because he’d been naked around Iason most of the time in Eos.

Exhausted as he was, it only took about five minutes for his body to go numb and his thoughts to start shutting down. In those final half-waking moments before sleep took him, he often thought he could still hear his tormentor’s alluringly melodic voice. Shivering, Riki pulled the blankets closer around him, as if he hoped the extra layer of fabric could offer him protection from the horrors that were about to be unleashed inside his mind...

Running.

There was the sensation of legs constantly moving, of having run and run for hours on end, without being able to stop. His breath, coming out in shallow, rapid exhalations. His heart, beating in his throat like a sledge-hammer. One after another white, bright corridor of marble loomed up inside his field of vision, each one exactly the same as the previous. He never passed a living soul as he desperately tried to escape that labyrinth of light, as if he were stuck in an endless loop of pain and fatality.

His legs burning, his throat dry from screaming in frustration and his hands bloody from banging on closed doors with hollow chambers beyond.

Could he ever hope to escape this horrid place of despair and finally death?

But then, from the gaping halls and empty spaces of that marble maze, the echoes of an angelic song reached the exhausted mongrel’s ears.

In sleep he sang to me

In dreams he came

‘Riki. Come back to me, Riki. You are mine, now and forever.’

Slowing down enough to turn around, the mongrel risked a backward glance down the white corridor, only to see what appeared to be silver starlight sparkling in the distance. What the fuck?

Sensing the danger, even if the silver sparkle had appeared to be far-off yet, Riki instinctively started running faster, cutting corners and rushing through the labyrinthine structures of whatever Tanaguran, sterile hell he was currently confined in.

The next time he glanced backwards, icy fingers of pure terror closed over his heart, stopping him in his tracks and paralysing his body with dread. The silver creature that had almost reached him now - at what must have been an inhuman speed - was now revealed to have a humanoid shape rather than that of an actual star. The diamond-covered figure was heart-stoppingly beautiful yet terrible to behold at the same time, making Riki unsure whether it was his morbid fear or his sick fascination that had made him come to a sudden halt. Just as Riki’s curiosity got the better of him and he took a step towards his pursuer, silver claws reached out and tried to violently grab him. Rock hard.
Metallically cold. Mercilessly sharp.

As the unforgiving silver cut through his skin - the pristine whiteness of the perfect floor spattered in red - Riki screamed. The sound was more animal than human and sounded foreign even to Riki’s own ears. How had he been reduced to this? The final specimen of a nearly-extinct species, doomed to die alone as the last of its kind.

That voice which calls to me
And speaks my name

Yet as Riki fell down - the hardness of the cold marble beneath his fragile frame causing his weary limbs even more pain - he thought he saw something unusual in the reflection of the shiny skin of the monstrous killing machine that was about to finish him off.


And do I dream again?

For now I find

Not quite believing his eyes, Riki gawked as an angelic, transparent shape of light appeared to come forth from inside the reflections in the metal. It was so bright that Riki could only make out the external lines of a winged humanoid shape and what appeared to be a golden hallow circling its head.

The phantom of the opera is there

Inside my mind

His saviour was finally there and he couldn’t have been more beautifully fragile! At last the fluttering feeling of hope awakened inside of him, still but a flicker yet already warming up his frozen insides, warding off death and inviting in life.

The phantom

ankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankankan

The phantom

Staring at the angel of light in awe, she reached out a tentative, bloody hand to touch it. The damaged, grasping fingers passed straight through the transparent shape, yet somehow through the contact with the red life-fluid it appeared to have already taken on a more material substance. How could such a dazzling, ethereal spirit possibly reside inside of such a creepy, metal monstrosity as the one she was currently facing? Behind an indestructible, metal face full of harsh angles and cold symmetry? Consisting out of a material that was inherently dead like stone yet somehow animated through the strange magic of the electricity in the circuits beneath its outer hull.

Those who have seen your face

Draw back in fear
But she knew there was more to the machine than met the eye, for the faint apparition before her appeared just as real now as the lifeless artificial did. The ghost-like figure opened and shut its mouth, as if trying to speak, but no sound came out. Yet Mimea could hear the bright chimes of its voice clearly inside her head.

‘Mimea, my dearest friend. You are the only one who understands me. My suffering. My loneliness.’

She knew it was true, for somewhere down the line this angel’s suffering and loneliness had become a reflection of her own. She saw herself in this apparition. Perhaps that was why she saw the shape of a young girl when she looked upon her companion.

I am the mask you wear

It’s you they hear

At the same time there was something other about the ghostly girl, something not quite of this world. Mimea envied the strength of that light that appeared to shine from within. For something so bright to be housed in a shape as fleeting as smoke was truly remarkable. This was no corporeal being, but a spiritual one. As such, there was no telling what strange powers it might possess.

Your spirit and my voice in one combined

‘Help me, Mimea. Lead me into your world and make me real. Teach me how to be human.’

The phantom of the opera is there

Inside my mind

Snapping out of her vivid dream with a sudden shock, Mimea was catapulted right out of the comfy seat she had been nestled in and fell down face-first on the plush, carpeted floor of the limousine.

“I never quite understood the purpose of the biological phenomenon of dreaming during REM sleep. It serves no apparent purpose and at times leaves the dreamer in a rather disoriented state upon waking”, a cold, calculated voice sounded with just the slightest hint of humour.

Scrambling back to her feet and crawling her way back up into the seat, Mimea shook the dizziness of sleep from her head and checked her expensive, red-and-gold outfit for any tears or smudges.

“I find it gets me more focussed, as if I’m able to process certain thoughts better while sleeping. The shapes that appear in dreams are but manifestations of what plagues our subconscious after all”, she spoke, still slightly out of breath from the realness of her dream.

By the looks of it the softness of the luxuriously-carpeted floor had prevented any damage from occurring upon her fall. Good, it really wouldn’t do to show up at this long-awaited event looking anything less than absolute perfection.

“Don’t you require sleep from time to time as well, my Lord?”, she added as she turned to look upon the flawless features of the Blondie artfully arranged on the seat opposite her. “I always figured that’s what your down-time is for. Or is that simply to recharge your batteries?”

“In spite of all my technological and bionic improvements my brain is still organic in nature, therefore I do indeed require a minimal amount of sleep. An average of four hours per week usually suffices, the timing of which always coincides with the recharging of my batteries”, the android explained matter-of-factly.
“So while your human half’s asleep, your robotic half can’t function either, huh? Kind of makes me wonder which one of those halves is actually dominant...”, the older Pet thought out loud as she carefully studied the fascinating half-man, half-machine creature in front of her.

“Why, judging by the sheer amount of extra data storage available to the AI part of my mind as opposed to the far more limited capacity of even a genetically-improved brain, I suppose that should be rather obvious”, Iason stated in such a decisive manner that it made his friend question the validity of it.

“How do you even know that? Cause I’m guessing Jupiter never fully explained to you how exactly this co-operation between your brain and your electronic systems works? Seeing as how you’ve never been switched on while your brain was asleep, it might be possible that what you consider to be your conscious mind is in fact entirely human, with your AI systems merely functioning as back-up storage space. Did you ever think of that?”, the girl surprised him with an unexpected sense of logic and criticism, even if of course the contents of her statement were entirely ludicrous.

He would have to start watching what information he shared with her, or before long she would have him question every single thing he had ever believed, rendering him unable to function properly enough to prevent Jupiter from noticing something was off about him.

“What a most absurd notion that is, my dear. So what you are suggesting is that perhaps I am – like you – but a mere human in spirit?”, the Elite laughed the mere suggestion of it away. Falling in love with a mongrel and noticing certain moral malfunctions in Jupiter’s systems hardly meant that he was human himself. Or did it?

“Probably more like a superhuman, with all those genetic improvements and all that. But definitely something living and capable of emotions. You weren’t sleeping just now by any chance, were you?”, the little she-devil queried further. Once she had caught the scent of blood, it was virtually impossible to shake her off.

“Of course not. Only a human’s timing for sleep could be thus unfortunate. My down-time always occurs at regular intervals and is of course consciously controlled by my systems”, the Syndicate leader continued to deny that there was any truth to her suspicions.

“Perhaps you were but day-dreaming for a minute or so? I read in an old book that the ancients used to believe that human minds would be able to contact each other in dreams...”, Mimea started, bright orange eyes studying the facial expressions of the artificial being across her as her powdered hand automatically reached out as if to grasp the hidden meaning behind that perfect, porcelain mask.

“Although a lot of wisdom may be contained within the writings of the ancients, you shouldn’t believe everything you read in there, Mimea, darling”, Iason responded with a slightly-mocking shimmer in those sparkling sapphire pools.

Arriving at the event roughly fifteen minutes after its scheduled prelude – putting on the way-too-tight leggings just having taken forever – Riki ran until he came in the security guards’ field-of-vision and then walked up to the entrance in an unhurried, casual swagger. When the two guards – hired professionals trained at the Tanaguran Security Academy – caught sight of him they immediately raised their semi-automatic laser rifles, expecting trouble. What was a bloody mongrel even doing
Pulling out the fake Pet ID Katze had handed him for this very purpose, Riki carelessly strutted over towards the two armed men, hips swaying sexily. “It’s all good, fellows, I’m just here for the party”, the appealingly-clad young male said with a slyly seductive smile, putting his hands up palms-first. “I ain’t on your guest list but not to worry, I’m acquainted with the organisers and I’m sure they’ll be most pleased to see me.”

“What in Jupiter’s name is the meaning of this?”, one of the guards – the oldest and most experienced of the two – asked, but refrained himself from firing just yet as he eyed the Ceresian’s expensive-looking outfit, complete with a feathered mask. The mongrel was gorgeous to look at and was dressed all according to the conventions of the event. Could it be that he was somehow one of their host’s attractions for the evening? If anything, Lord Mink’s unusually exotic tastes were known throughout Tanagura, if perhaps not Midas.

Removing the mask from his dark features with slow, deliberate movements aimed to tease, Riki glared hotly at them from underneath thick lashes and smoky eye-shadow. “C’mon, my mates. This is hardly the kind of get-up I’d choose for a fight, is it?”, he challenged cockily, walking right up to them without even the slightest hint of fear and flashing them a hungrily-erotic smile as he handed the taller of the two what looked like a Tanaguran ID-card.

Glancing the card over suspiciously and then scanning it with a portable data slate, the man gasped in surprise when he read the message on the screen. “Well, I’ll be damned... you’re Riki!”

“Why I ain’t dead yet, tough fucker to kill I ’spose. Mimea invited me over, promised this’d be the party of the freakin’ century. I figured there’d be a lil’ somethin’ in it for me if I showed... so here I am. Hope I got the dress-code right”, Riki said, seductively showing off his tightly-clad, feline-muscled body.

“Wait... you know Mimea personally?”, the other, less-experienced guard of the two asked, not-as-of-yet understanding why his colleague had lowered his rifle, for the tawny-skinned man in front of them was clearly a mongrel.

“Course I do. Shit, nobody know about me and Mimea back in the day? Damn, and here I was sure something that scandalous ought to’ve got’n out...”, Riki said with a sharp-toothed smile, feigning a disappointed tone. “Le’s jus’ say me and the red-head were a bit naughty together. I say, she’s the second-best catch in all of Eos.”

“Second-best?”, the security agent in charge questioned, having only just studied the fire-haired beauty up-close about fifteen minutes ago, upon her entrance at her Master’s side.

“Sure thing, didn’t you hear the rumours? About me and your esteemed leader?”, the mongrel challenged, a predatory grin further enhancing the exotic aura of those dark, handsome features

“Well well well, you don’t say”, the guard said, handing the coquettish youngster back his ID-card. As he passed on by, the bawdy man laid a hand on his shoulder to stop him in his tracks and asked in a lower tone: “Tell me, what’s it like... with one of them?”

“It’s a real fucking pain in the ass”, the mongrel whispered flirtatiously, then burst out laughing at the other’s eyes widening in shock and quickly walked inside the building before the guard had a chance to retaliate.
“Don’t worry, he’ll be here. It’s just not like him to be on time, hardly any surprise there”, the young woman softly attempted to reassure her patron. They were standing artfully-concealed in plain sight atop one of the many neo-classicist, marble balconies that circled the central area of the immense, antique building that housed the long-awaited annual Mass celebration. Both dressed in red, chic garments – the elder in a deep shade of burgundy with tasteful black trimmings and the younger in blood-red with gold decorations – they were without a doubt the most striking couple at the masquerade ball.

“Even so, it is unsettling my nerves”, the tall male responded restlessly, twisting one of his long, shiny, black tresses around an elegant, pale finger and then irritatedly throwing the night-black curtain back over a broad, burgundy-satin shoulder.

“What makes you think he’d come on time while on an errand for your ex-Furniture if he didn’t even come on time to perform for you?”, she added, throwing a charming flash of white, perfect teeth towards a group of nearby onlookers.

“Oh, don’t worry, my sweet, I can make him come exactly when I want him to”, he said deviously, his sparkling sapphires meeting her bright fire opals as if in an unspoken challenge.

Sensing those sharp eyes regarding her scantily-clad form and hearing the underlying sex-appeal in that low, cool voice, she couldn’t suppress the anxiously sweet shiver that ran down her mostly-naked spine.

“The better question is whether that control also applies to your own baser instincts... my Lord!”, she gasped as she felt a large, silk-gloved hand reaching even lower down said spine than the plunging backline of her red, Venetian-style dress allowed.

Chuckling at her hopeless gasping, the Elite turned his gaze towards the fully-grown Pet next to him, her slight chin barely even reaching his chiselled chest: “If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought that was an invitation to lessen your hurting Master’s discomfort, my little fire bird.”

“I...”, she breathed out, desperately trying to get her respiratory functions back in order. “I’d rather be able to walk out of here on my own two legs... if my Lord’s good graces allow it.”

Pulling away his adept, plundering fingers, her Master sighed and took a small step away from his female companion. “Send someone over to the men’s room in five minutes. Be discrete.”

“Someone?”, she asked in surprise, not having expected her patron to resort to such shamelessly physical methods to alleviate his anticipatory lust. “Like who?”

“No matter. Someone not-too-easily-traumatized, preferably disposable”, Lord Mink ordered in an even voice, briskly walking off in long-legged strides before his partner-in-crime could question or tempt him any further.

“Iason wants someone in the men’s room in five minutes. Here’s your chance to redeem yourself...
Father”, a familiar, sweet sing-song voice suddenly sounded in his ear, mockingly imitating the higher, cherubic timbre of her younger years yet containing all the cold razor-blades of a vengeful angel of death.

Almost choking in his golden bubbles, Raoul Am quickly lowered his crystal glass and exclaimed in a barely-contained, side-ways whisper: “What?!”

“Never mind, I knew you’d be too much of a coward to accept”, his fiery-headed creation hissed viciously as she rushed past him, not even granting him the slightest glance of recognition.

Decisively placing his empty champagne flute on a passing tray, Lord Am then turned to address his interlocutors: “Excuse me for a moment, gentlemen, I have some urgent business to take care of.” Turning around only to see that his genetically-engineered daughter had left him standing there, Raoul didn’t bother to suppress an annoyed sigh.

How long did the girl expect him to suffer to make up for sending her away? He couldn’t claim he was surprised by this latest attempt of hers to upset him and pressure him into submitting to some form of punishment on her part. What did surprise him this time around however, was his beloved brother’s apparent participation in her vengeful little games. As of late, the two of them had formed a most-deadly alliance of sorts and had taken to ‘ganging up’ on him when he least expected it.

Having dreaded this moment ever since his first sexual encounter with the man he had been secretly in love with for most of his life, the rational part of the scientist’s mind argued that perhaps the immediate, brief pain would be better than dealing with the anxiety for another couple of months or even years. But the emotional part of him left his bowels all in tangles, causing him equal amounts of ice-cold terror and sickly-sweet longing at the prospect.

When the former Bison gang leader entered the main ballroom of the event, he had a hard time preventing an awed gasp from escaping his pouty lips. The room had been most artfully redecorated for the occasion and had been transformed into an amazing, historically accurate replica of an eighteenth-century Venetian palazzo. Not that a mongrel from the slums would even realise how the decoration was a homage to a bygone Earthian era, but Riki could not deny the aura of splendour that the gold and white space was practically oozing.

The floors and walls were all covered in pure marble, the dome-shaped roof was supported by circularly placed Corinthian columns, and the walls and ceilings were lined with gold-leaf candelabra and huge, crystal chandeliers. In but one glance Riki could tell straight away that all the priceless materials used were the genuine thing, as opposed to the cheaper, veneer-layered imitations one often came across in Midosian establishments. Even wearing a silk dress shirt with actual sleeves on it, the young Ceresian still felt seriously underdressed while surrounded by such marvels.

Mimea’s Master must’ve gone through some serious trouble to do up this place properly, cause there’s no way in hell a place in down-town Midos would’ve been covered in the real deal. Why bother with all that just for a one-time event? And why would an Elite even organise a Mass party in Midos at all?

Gazing up at the shimmering chandeliers dangling from the frescoed ceiling of the dome, Riki’s thoughts inadvertently strayed to another chandelier, be it a fake one in an entirely different kind of
establishment. Although club Minos’ back rooms were of a similar style, everything about that love hotel had been fake, any notion of real love included. The place was a brothel and sex hotel, nothing more. Back in the day, Riki had been fully aware of that fact and had never minded.

Sex he knew and understood, for it was a tool he had often used to strengthen his bond with those people close to him and at times had offered as a trade when the direness of his situation in the slums had called for it. In spite of that Riki had dared to hope – in some hidden corner of his mind – that there might be something more to sex and attraction than mere lust or convenience. That there was someone out there meant only for him, someone who would love him without condition or the promise of security, be it financial or social. Even after becoming Guy’s pairing partner, deep inside Riki had always doubted if the loyal mongrel he’d known since childhood could ever become that person. He had loved Guy like a brother – still did – but that wasn’t quite the same as finding a true soul mate.

What a fool he’d been, falling into that same trap that had no doubt sucked countless other idiots into the inescapable madness of the Tanaguran vortex. Soon after laying eyes on said chandelier at Minos he’d been briskly awoken from that dream, when he realised the angelical being that by some miracle had followed him there was only interested in humiliating and punishing him for back-talking and refusing to accept his underdog position in life. The sexual encounter with the blonde fucker had been nothing but a lesson to him, a lesson in the inevitability of his worthless status and in the inhuman viciousness of those in power of the system.

After he became a sex slave in Eos he stopped believing in whatever subconscious hopes he had fostered about love, they had been as counterfeit as everything else in this world. There was only money, survival and the pleasing of different kinds of physical need. Anyone who thought the world they lived in could offer them anything else was just kidding himself and being too much of a coward to face reality.

Slowly strolling into the gathered crowd, Riki nearly stumbled into several other guests who were just like him gawking so much at the magic of their surroundings that they weren’t paying any attention to where they were going. Suddenly the good-looking mongrel was shaken from the hypnotic beauty of the place and his own despairing thoughts on the subject by a staccato of familiar, high-pitched laughter.

“Why it looks like even the undereducated, uncouth citizens of area 9 can be entranced by some good old Italian culture”, Mimea chuckled as she approached her favourite guest, the golden embroidery on the satin bodice of her elegant period dress catching the sparkling light of the enormous chandelier Riki had been staring at. She briefly wondered what it was about the antique piece of Earthen history that had apparently enchanted the young male enough to not even notice the approach of an A-class female Pet clad in bright red.

“Mimea, hi... Yeah, it totally has a sort of – what do they call it – nostalgia over it...”, the mongrel spoke in a somewhat absent-minded, uncharacteristically reminiscent voice. “Not to mention it looks authentic enough to be worth a fortune in the intergalactic market, a bit heavy and high up to remove unnoticed though”, he then added cheekily in an attempt to somewhat lighten the mood. It wouldn’t do to upset his friend by letting her notice how nervous he was about the mission ahead and the methods he’d have to use to accomplish his goal for the evening.

“I don’t think even the market’s most notorious customers would dare to purchase that chandelier if they knew who it belonged to, so you’d be wasting your time anyhow”, the gorgeous redhead winked at him, graciously handing him a flute of the best champagne money could buy. “Yet I’m curious to hear how an antique from thousands of years before there was even human life on Amoy would trigger a sense of nostalgia in a practically illiterate Ceresian such as yourself?”
Suddenly very much aware again of the high-class ‘audience’ surrounding them and now intensely honing in on their every word, Riki knew better than to answer that question honestly and explicitly. Accepting the glass and swigging it in a single gulp as if posing her a challenge in a drinking contest, Riki cockily raised his shoulders in a sign of nonchalance. “Hell if I know, I just figured it’s gotta be old enough to be from a time way before Tanaguran rule. Shit, this stuff isn’t too shabby, can I get a refill?”

“Indeed this sparkling delight ought to be to your liking, for there is nothing quite as divine as wine from the fabled vineyards of Elysium. I suppose you’re right in defining the Italian Renaissance on Earth as the opposite of the Tanaguran highdays on Amoy, for unlike most other countries of the era Italian city states had a more or less democratic self-governance”, Mimea explained with an unusual brightness in her eyes, almost like a spark of rebellion.

“How does a Pet like you even know that sort of stuff, huh?”, Riki teased as he snatched another champagne flute from the serving tray of a passing Furniture. If he was going to pull this off, he’d need some serious alcohol in his system. “They teach you Earthian history at the Academy?”

“Reading is both an entertaining and an educational pass-time, you should try it sometime. Especially history can be most interesting, as certain events have a tendency of endlessly repeating themselves”, she played along in his game of back-and-forth sneering, putting on her most stuck-up face.

“Sounds kinda boring, like a Pet show in Eos: endless fake bullshit on loop”, the former slumdog taunted with an impish smirk on his dark face.

“There is nothing boring at all about history. The facts may be printed black on white, but the interpretation is up entirely to the reader, even if the author has done his best to present events in a certain way”, the young woman spoke knowledgeably in a slightly condescending tone.

“Whatsoever. Wanna dance? A pretty girl like you just standing around and sputtering nonsense like this is just a total waste”, Riki jousted loudly enough to make bystanders gasp in shock at the rudeness of his remark. Even if bred Pets weren’t exactly known for their intelligence, it was considered very impolite to comment on their lack of it.

“Why my dearest Riki, I had no idea you even understood the concept of a waltz, let alone be able to dance one!”, she cried out in mock astonishment.

“I’ve no idea what the fuck a ‘welts’ is, but I’ll dance whatever you want to get my hands on your wares, sweetheart, just show me what to do”, the handsome mongrel replied with a saucy smile.

When he heard someone enter the men’s restroom, Iason turned around and was surprised to see his brother and friend Raoul there. “Raoul. Is something the matter? Did you come here in search of me?”

“Yes... I mean, no, there is nothing the matter...”, the other Blondie started hesitantly, unsure of whether or not this was such a good idea after all now that he was confronted with his mercurious, charming brother in the flesh.

_Oh, by Jupiter, get a hold of yourself and stick to a decision for once in your life, you coward!_
“You see... Mimea sent me. Apparently it is you who is in need of assistance?”, he explained, forcing himself to look Iason in the eye.

Confused as to why Mimea would have thought he needed Raoul’s help or advice, Iason looked into the other’s jungle green eyes and it suddenly became clear why he was there.

Sighing in exasperation, one white-gloved hand automatically went through long, silky-soft tresses in a shockingly human gesture of irritation. “I swear the girl gets more obnoxiously independent by the minute. I ask her for someone disposable and she sends me someone indestructible.”

“You asked for a random, dispensable person?! Dear Jupiter, what has gotten into you, Iason?!
Judging by the lack of emotional control you’ve been experiencing as of late, I am positive that someone indestructible and trustworthy would indeed be a far better choice! Could you imagine the irreversible scandal if some unsuspecting Pet or Furniture were to run out of here battered and traumatised with the most unbelievable story to tell about the favourite son of Jupiter?”, Raoul exclaimed, shock written all over his face and concern clearly evidence in his emerald gaze in that emotionally expressive way of his that Iason had never seen in any other Elite before.

“That’s where the disposability comes into play, meaning said person would not have been walking out of here”, the Ice Man argued in an uncaring, merciless tone.

“Well, that is even worse! You can’t just use people for your own perverted needs and then murder them to protect your reputation!”, the other Blondie accused, golden curls flying all around his head like numerous snakes around Medusa’s.

“Is that what it is called when something disposable is recycled? Murder? You most definitely have a flair for the dramatic, my friend”, Iason laughed in good humour as he beheld the passionate power of his friend’s moral convictions, although not quite understanding why Raoul was getting so worked up over something so trivial.

“I wonder if you would still say that if someone even suggested to ‘recycle’ your beloved mongrel!
For in the eyes of the law by which you abide, he is even more worthless than whatever random Pet or Furniture Mimea would have sent in here”, the controversial scientist hissed, pointing a finger at the Head of the Syndicate in a rather confronting manner.

“Isn’t that the same law by which we all abide then, including you?”, Iason rationally pointed out, not liking the way that fact somehow made him feel empty and inadequate. Guilty. Selfish.

“I was merely hoping that perhaps you’d reached a level of human maturity that enabled you to see the flaw in such egocentric thinking patterns, but apparently I was giving you too much credit!”, Raoul fumed with green eyes bright enough to light up in the dark. He then turned around – shimmering curls aggressively flying – to head out the door again.

“If anyone would ever dare to lay a hand on my Riki I would finish them off without even a second thought, there is nothing I would not do when it comes to protecting what is mine!”, he yelled, blue eyes suddenly seething with white-hot rage. “Now are you going to help me with my problem or not? If not, please leave”, he finished his speech irritatedly.

“Whether or not I stay and help you is entirely determined by the answer you give to the following question: Would you finish me off without a second thought as well?”, sea-green pools asked as if dreading the answer. “Because I’m not interested in wasting time and energy on you only so that you can throw me away when you’re done.”

Please tell me I haven’t fallen in love with just another unfeeling machine.
Please tell me you’re different than the rest of them.

Please don’t break my heart, if ever I had one.

Waltzing around the ball room with Mimea, Riki had to admit that it was by far the most effective way to get within the required radius of several highly-placed officials without raising suspicion, in order to copy the data from the cellular phones and tablets they had on them. The only questionable thing about it was how on Amoy Mimea knew who the officials on the list presented to him by Katze were.

Could Katze have hired Mimea to assist me with this mission? The idea was absurd, yet Mimea secretly working for the Black Market boss would explain quite a few things that had been bugging Riki as of late. For instance it would explain how her extremely rare perfume had somehow found its way into Katze’s office...

“He didn’t tell you what it was for, did he?”, she unexpectedly asked as she hugged his body closer to her in their dance.

“Huh?”, Riki asked, somewhat spooked at the sudden question and more intimate embrace while he had been deep in thought.

“Your boss, he didn’t tell you what the real purpose of you coming here was? You should know that it’s not the usual objective of earning money but that it’s for a good cause. A cause I helped to create and for which I think you would be a great permanent asset as well.”

Is she saying what I think she’s saying? Shit, with Tanagurans it’s always so damn hard to tell, cause they always speak in fucking riddles and never say what they actually mean!

“By ‘cause’ do you mean... that secret club you asked me to join a while back? Like a resistance group or something?”, Riki asked, utterly surprised at even the mere suggestion of it. He would have never even suspected that something like that could exist, especially in a place as securely under Jupiter’s control as Eos Tower.

“Or something”, she laughed, flashing him a sparkling glimpse of perfect, bright teeth.

Already sensing that he wasn’t going to be able to pry a clearer answer from her than that at the time – possibly because they were in a public place surrounded by members of the Midasian and Tanaguran high society alike – Riki decided to let the matter drop and continue gathering data for Katze. For now.

He did wonder why Mimea kept glancing in the direction of the public restroom? Maybe she had to go badly and didn’t think it polite to say something? One never knew with those ridiculous Tanaguran rules of propriety!
“Do you honestly think I would be capable of that? If so, you don’t know me half as well as I thought you did. You are my brother and closest friend, I will always need you by my side, no matter what changes I go through or what happens to the world around us”, Iason assured Raoul in an uncharacteristically caring voice, raising one ungloved hand to the silky-soft skin of the other Blondie’s emotionally expressive face.

When did the sly bastard manage to remove his gloves without the usually so observant scientist even noticing?

Strong, naked fingers ran along his cheekbone and down his jawline, nimble fingertips coming to rest on full, rosy lips that slightly parted at the tender caress. Shakingly exhaling, Raoul momentarily closed his eyes in surrender and moved into those agile fingers, basking in the delicious warmth that simple touch ignited deep inside of him. Finally icy eyes were directed upwards and pierced the other man’s jade ones with an erotic intensity fierce enough to burn into his very soul. Once in a seductive mood, Iason Mink didn’t mess around, his inner wildfire was all-consuming. Raoul had never thought he could come to enjoy burning so much that he would willingly offer to be incinerated by the flames of his brother’s blazing lust.

“Ia... Iason...”, was all he could gasp, his brain cells melting and sticking together in an incoherent mess of equal amounts of pain and desire. “Please.”

“And here I thought that it didn’t take much to get poor Riki all hot and bothered, but apparently it takes even less to put you on edge, which I suppose was to be expected in this context as well as any other. You never did manage to keep your head, Rara”, Iason teased, using the nickname he had invented upon hearing Raoul’s attempt to stammer out his name the first time they’d met.

“Just shut up and kiss me!”, Raoul snapped impatiently, feeling like a man dying of dehydration in the desert. The blue of Iason’s eyes was his oasis, his one and only chance at quenching his terrible thirst. Oh, how he hoped that promise of cool water wasn’t just a mirage conjured up by his desperate subconscious.

“As his Lordship commands”, Iason snickered before slamming the other Blondie’s 7-ton synthetic body into the marble washing table behind him with enough force to make it crack.

Raoul moaned hopelessly as the main character of his wildest fantasies started devouring half his face, a moist hot tongue soon attempting to suffocate him by effectively blocking his larynx. To die in such a heavenly way would surely bring one straight to paradise. Or were it the scorching flames of hell that were pulling him in?

Slowly combing long, golden curls away from his soon-to-be-lover’s face, Iason gazed upon elegant, symmetrical features that were both similar to and different from his own. The nose far less sharp, the tip of it pointing less upward. The cheeks much rounder and filled out. The cheekbones just a bit lower and less defined. The jawline not as harshly pronounced. The eyebrows broader and much fuller. The skin-tone the slightest bit darker, as if a peachy pink, warm light was glowing from beneath it. But it was the eyes that made up the biggest difference: endless pits of magical green, the shade of them ever-changing like the emotional state of their owner. On some days protective and reassuring like a forest. On other days as unpredictable and dangerous as a turbulent sea. Especially now that he was turned on and the raw life force was emanating from every pore of his body, even if it was as artificial in nature as Iason’s. That and of course the wild, golden foliage crowning the other’s head and hiding most of his forehead from view, like deep woods with meandering paths one could get lost in forever.

“You’re truly divine like this. Like a forest nymph from Greek mythology”, Iason observed with an air of genuine awe, suddenly remembering what it was that had originally drawn him towards this
particular Elite back when they were both still young and ignorant of the true ways of Amoy. And there wasn’t a lot that succeeded in awing the stand-offish ice king, even back in his younger years.

“I suppose that would be fitting... seeing as how... nymphs are considered only lesser gods”, Raoul agreed, slightly out of breath due to Iason’s determined fingers sneaking their way up his strong, elegantly long legs and underneath the lower half of his traditional, Veronese costume.

“Or perhaps a spring goddess. The one that was abducted by the king of the underworld who made her his queen”, the blue-eyed devil suggested as he ghosted his fingertips over the other’s abdomen before slipping them inside silk tights and across naked hips.

“Only you had to... go and abduct Cerberus... rather than Persephone, didn’t you?”

Electronic, highly shimmering tones echoed around the marble walls of the washing room at that most accurate comparison to myth. Just leave it to Raoul Am to find a way to make such cynically humorous remarks while in the middle of an incestuous tryst!

“By Jupiter, Raoul, you just never cease to amaze me! Would you rather it had been you who had become the victim of my illegal desires, hmm? Well, that could still be arranged if you feel so inclined... and possibly even if you don’t”, Iason added on a teasing note, quite aware of how the notion of being powerlessly forced into sexual acts by the object of his secret affections was a massive turn-on for the always-in-control scientist.

“You conniving trickster, you know full well I feel so inclined! Always have and always will... Jupiter have mercy on my soul!”, the nymph-like Blondie gasped out in desperation. The honey of anticipation trickled through his veins thick and sweet as his brother slowly started sliding down his tights, the feeling of silk caressing the sensitive skin of his creamy thighs nothing short of maddening. Closing his eyes in surrender and squealing slightly, Raoul allowed the intoxicating sensation to envelop him in its waves.

When his assailant balanced him on top of the washing table, his velvet design shoes slipped off on their own accord, which enabled Iason to easily remove his forest-green tights all the way, rendering his legs and genitals completely bare for glacier-blue eyes to feast upon.

“It’s all right, sweet little brother. I’ll take good care of you”, Iason huskily whispered into the golden blonde’s ear before slipping a wet, warm tongue inside, mimicking the movements he was about to execute in different, lower regions of his friend’s delicious body.

“Iason... wait!”

“So I’m guessing that it’s no coincidence that you were in a perfect position to get me an invite to this thing AND you just happen to be in on tonight’s top secret BM mission? What, are you working for Katze too?”, Riki questioned for what had to be the millionth time during their rather wild tango, the mongrel apparently having a natural talent for pulling off all sorts of elaborate dances that he’d never even seen before in his life. “Or... are you and Katze both working for a third party... who’s organised all this as a set-up to get all the required information in this one room?”

“You know, Riki, sometimes I fear you may be too smart for your own good. Best keep your curiosity at bay for now, good things come to those who have the patience to wait. So tell me... how
are things going for you in the market?”, she expertly changed the subject, as usual leaving her mongrel friend hanging when it came to the identity of her new Master.

“Fine I guess. I enjoy the work, it makes me improve my skills and... I dunno, I just like how it makes me feel useful, as if my existence actually serves a purpose”, he slyly dodged what she was really aiming for by not mentioning any of the stuff that’d been bothering him.

“And... what do you not like about the job?”, she continued, not fooled in the slightest by the mongrel’s omission of the negative aspects of his new position in life, which in and of itself was already an indication of the abundance of such aspects.

“Pretty much everything else”, the former gangleader grinned, on some level pleased that his Pet friend was now observant enough to notice when he was hiding something from her. “Shit, I just... Maybe it’s my personal opinion of Katze, but I just can’t get myself to trust him. I feel as if he’s forced me into accepting the position cause of my lack of a gang and income, like it’s extortion.”

“Then what are you going to do? Do you wish to go back to Ceres, back to your gang?”, she asked, purposely allowing some of her would-be disappointment to slip through the carefully constructed façade of her porcelain, dolled-up face.

“Sometimes I feel like it, yeah. But I know that when I do go back I’m gonna feel as outta place there as I do in the market... It’s like I’ve seen too much of different walks of life to be satisfied with living just one of ‘em...”, although Riki realised that put him in a rather unique knowledgeable situation, he was still totally clueless as to how he might somehow benefit from it. What point was there in knowing what was wrong with the system if you had no way of changing it? Or did he?

“I know all too well what you mean by that. For me too it’s been difficult to adjust... from pampered Eos Pet to rebellious mongrel-lover, to worthless whore, to adviser and confidante of one of the most influential Elite in Tanagura...”, Mimea said in amazement, the unlikely significance of her strange life history only sinking in now that she had actually stated those highly unusual changes out loud. But whether it would prove to be her making or her undoing she was unable to predict. Then again she’d been undone before and had scrambled her way back up the food chain, surely she could do it again if necessary.

“Who is this posh new Master of yours anyways? To organise something as extravagant as this in Midas he must have some serious pull with the higher ups...”, Riki wondered. Moreover it was highly unusual that anyone of major importance in Tanagura would even show himself in the establishment in Lower Midas where Mimea had been placed, let alone buy someone else’s old, discarded Pet there. *Whoever this Elite is, he’s gotta be pretty damn eccentric.*

“You’ll find out soon enough... when you meet him tonight”, she said with a bright smile that strangely enough appeared to convey something rather ominous. “Excuse me for a moment, I need to use the ladies’ room”, she then added and bounced off towards the public restrooms, not giving him the chance to say anything further.

At first not understanding why Iason was reaching for the soap dispenser next to the gold-framed mirror behind him, Raoul had to wonder at the other’s timing for personal hygiene. Until the erotically wicked grin on Iason’s face when he added some more liquid soap to the already generous
amount in his right hand made it perfectly clear to Raoul what he had in mind. Nearly fainting at the mere suggestion of what was about to happen – and for the second time at that! – Raoul grabbed unto his partner’s broad shoulders for some much-needed support, both physical and moral. The pleasant smell of jasmine and patchouli filled his nostrils as Iason’s slippery fingers slid all the way up from right above his knee to the very top of his soft inner thigh, leaving a wet trail of expectation in their wake.

Holding on for dear life, Raoul’s hands bunched up the fabric of his friend’s shoulder pads nearly to the point of ripping it to pieces. This suspense was killing him!

“Ia... Iason...”, he cried out, eyes shining in a bright green like the early shoots of spring.

“Hmmm? Does his Lordship require any more considerations from me?”, Iason teased.

“Stop...”

Surprised, the taller man did actually halt his fingers’ torturously slow ascent. “And here I thought I’d had it understood that there would be no turning back once you complied, my sweet Raoul”, he spoke warningly, barely keeping the inherent threat out of his voice.

“Stop playing around... and just do it!”, the other Blondie finally managed to exclaim in hardly-concealed frustration.

“My, my, Rara... I’ve always mistaken you for the romantic type. But if you prefer a more head-on approach, I’m all for it”, Iason said with a perverted wink, somewhat disappointed that he wouldn’t need to physically fight his friend to have his way with him.

“I never implied anything of the sort, I’m not a masochist! Just leave it up to you to cross the line between gentleness and torture...”, the younger brother lamented, in truth a hopeless romantic at heart but too proud to be subdued by the older Elite’s twisted games to a too great extent.

“And who is to say torture cannot be gentle? In my experience gentle torture actually gets the best results”, the infamous head of intelligence spoke knowingly. “Just the right combination of punishment...”, deceptively sharp nails scratched along the line between Raoul’s leg and crotch with just enough force to create a thin cut, making the other hiss at the sudden burn. “.... and reward”, long fingers unexpectedly wrapped around the other’s excitement and gave him one long, exquisite stroke, causing him to emit shrill cries that bounced off the marble walls.

“Gah! You... you might be right about... that...”, Raoul panted, nearly coming undone after that one single touch.

“Of course I’m right, I’m always right. Especially when it comes to matters of conditioning”, Iason said calmly and factually, not appearing to be affected in the least by what his hands were doing to his friend’s body, as if the voice and face were operating completely separately from the hands. But not his eyes, those bright doorways of blue fire betrayed his true intent.

The sticky fingers finally found their way to his victim’s sphincter after he had pulled the pliant body closer to and slightly over the edge of the cold, marble surface he was currently perched upon. Slipping a first digit past slightly trembling defences, icy eyes carefully checked his facial expressions for signs of either pain or pleasure.

“Ah!... Ah, Iason... Please...”, Raoul cried out, emerald eyes growing wide at the suddenness of the intrusion before softening and closing halfway at the artful skill of the other’s ministrations.

“Do you like that, little brother? Do you enjoy having me inside of you? Does it make you feel...
alive?”, he whispered enticingly, pushing a second soap-soaked finger inside that reached deeper, up until it slightly brushed against that special spot.

“Oh! Oh, Jupiter help me!”, the other’s cries continued as he relished in the sweet torture he was being subjected to, his head already spinning with the intenseness of the pleasure.

Iason continued to slide several fingers in and out, stretching Raoul’s opening a little bit more and pushing in just a little bit further with every push, making sure to caress his sweet spot every few thrusts.

Now nearly delirious with delightful bliss, Raoul gasped and moaned far louder and more convincingly than any of his creations ever had. Pulling out the appendages just as suddenly as he had pushed them in, Iason paused his sensual assault.

Poised at the stone edge of the washing table and leaning back weakly, legs still stretched luxuriously wide, the biologist momentarily marvelled at the sound of his own rapid breathing. It sounded almost human, hardly distinguishable from the laboured breathing of the Pets during their performances. Then his scientific curiosity was interrupted by a slight ruffling of clothes followed by the tell-tale metallic sound of the unbuckling of a belt.

“Iason?” Even his voice didn’t sound like his own, much softer and more uncertain than a Blondie’s voice had any right to be. He just felt so ridiculously vulnerable in that moment.

“Ssshhh. Just relax and hold still for me, I promise the pain will be brief.” Even Iason’s deep voice sounded different than usual, less frosty somehow, soothing and almost gentle.

“Please... Please kiss me! Don’t take me... without kissing me...”, the younger blonde begged, attempting to force his torso upwards in a rush of fearful panic. “Please, Iason, I lo...”

Sliding his arms around the other’s waist reassuringly, Iason helped to lift up his friend’s body so he could look upon his face and laid his index finger on the other’s rose-bud lips before he could finish his last sentence. “I think that it would be better for both of us if you didn’t state that out loud, Rara.”

Seeing the forlornness of the other’s expression and the moistness of those green pools at that, Iason sighed. “I’m sorry, but I think it would make things too confusing between us and would be unfair towards you”, he explained, not wanting to see his beloved brother and life-long friend hurt because of his own selfish needs. He wouldn’t have stopped to consider any of that if he had been dealing with anybody else, but Raoul was his equal and most trusted ally. Probably his only true friend other than Mimea, who Iason still didn’t trust entirely.

“I know, Iason. I know you don’t feel the same way about me. But I need you to be considerate with me, I need... at least that kind of connection.”

Iason nodded. “I understand.” He himself had felt the need to kiss Riki long before he had even considered sleeping with him. Somehow kissing signified something more than just the convenience of an outlet for lust but rather a connection between two people. Perhaps the bond he felt with Raoul was not quite the same as the one he felt with Riki, yet that didn’t mean that it was any less true. Not to mention there was no actual need to force Raoul into anything, as he was more than willing to participate if not submit entirely.

With a sudden clarity he realised that all of the people he’d engaged with sexually had been people who considered themselves his equals or acted as if they were. Riki. Mimea. Raoul. They didn’t just do whatever he wanted but objected to certain actions or took actions of their own, and it was this independence in his sex partners that gave him a sense of satisfaction that no Pet performance ever
Framing his brother’s face with soft touches, he looked into that green brightness and then pushed his lips unto the other’s with a gentleness he hadn’t known he was capable of. All of his kisses with Riki had always been so passionate and domineering that they had bordered on violence. Somehow the mere proximity of the mongrel unleashed a destructive force in him that was beyond his own control. But here with his trusted adviser and loyal friend there was no such force, just the itching of lust and a hint of loneliness.

Submitting himself fully to the tender invasion of his temporary lover’s kiss, Raoul parted his pink lips and hugged Iason’s body to him with arms and legs alike. When Iason eventually breached him down below in the midst of their kissing, a cry that contained both pleasure and pain erupted from Raoul’s mouth and was soon muffled by the intensity of his partner’s continuing kisses.

“Aaah! Ah, Iason, yes! Yes, take me! Take me...”

Sensing that his friend was now completely overcome by passion, Iason firmly put his hands on Raoul’s hips to keep his body in place and started to pound into him in earnest, with enough force to shatter bones in a mortal. In between heated kisses, the other Blondie called out his name with a rising sense of urgency, moving in tandem with Iason with an equal amount of force while uncharacteristically keening noises made their way out of his throat. Elitist propriety demanded that Raoul should be embarrassed at producing such sounds, yet he was not at all ashamed of what he felt for Iason in this moment and made no attempt whatsoever to hide his body’s reactions to the deep plunging movements inside of him.

When their shared passion finally reached its climax, the washing table had cracks all over, pieces of the wall behind it had come tumbling down and the sex cries of both Blondies echoed through the high-ceilinged space. Delicious shivers ran through all of Raoul’s body and made him squeak almost like a female Pet while Iason filled him up in a last deep thrust, accompanied by a slightly-pained grunt.

Leaning back in the peaceful laziness of the aftermath, Raoul knowingly displayed his attractive body out across the damaged, white stone in a way that was provocatively hot and stared at Iason smokily from underneath thick, golden lashes.

Chuckling with genuine mirth, Iason returned the unspoken challenge with a bewitching sapphire look of his own and said: “If you continue to look at me like that I will be unable to stop myself from ravaging you all over again, possibly more brusquely this time.”

Not moving from his tempting position in the slightest and continuing his heated glare, Raoul nonchalantly raised his shoulders. “Then go ahead, I was just about ready for another round.” Rising up from a lying to a seated position on his elbows and reaching out a hand towards Iason’s, Raoul continued: “In fact, you can take me anytime you want, as in truth I am always willing.”

Feeling heat start to pool towards his loins again at those words and the appealing sight before him, Iason had to steel himself against his brother’s flirtations. “Hmm, as delicious as that sounds, I have other matters to attend to tonight... and I’m afraid they cannot wait any longer”, he said as he accepted the other’s outstretched hand and kissed it softly. “Therefore I must bid you goodnight now, my sweet nymph.”

Letting his disappointment show for only a brief moment, the other Elite quickly masked it by throwing his head back in laughter, golden curly locks flying around like a living extension of his body. “Ah, my darling brother, always the charmer, even when in rejection.” Rising and putting his tights and shoes back on with a swiftness that belied his unwillingness to leave, Raoul returned his
brother’s supposedly innocent hand kiss with a bit more tongue than was strictly necessary and left the restroom with an amount of dramatic flair that only Raoul Am could achieve.

Listening to his brother’s residing footsteps long enough to make sure that he was out of hearing distance, Iason then spoke to a seemingly empty washroom.

“Exactly how long have you been neglecting your assigned duties for the evening in favour of this atypical voyeuristic venture of yours... Mimea?”

After a short silence, a hesitant female voice came from the other side of the lower, partial wall that separated the men’s restroom from the women’s. “Long enough to know that Lord Am isn’t as much of a coward as I thought he was. I suppose I should give him some more credit, if not for his trustworthiness as our ally then for the extent of his undying devotion for you, which I assume no amount of fatherly love for a mere Pet could exceed...”

“Oh, is that why you came here then, as an expression of daughterly love you previously deemed lost forever? Why, you seem to share your creator’s taste for drama if nothing else. And here I thought your little dance with a certain mongrel had turned you on so much that you required some outlet of your own to keep your good manners, with the added benefit of... How did you put it... being able to walk out of here on your own two legs.”

“I admit, such was my original motivation for coming in here, although I must say it was because of a certain... curiosity... as well. I mean... two Blondies making out? How often does a girl get to witness that!”, the red-haired minx giggled from behind the partition, even while realising full well that it didn’t provide her with any real protection from the Elite on the other side of it, but it gave her enough of a false feeling of safety to make her a bit giddier than usual in her exaltations, especially given the fact that she’d just been caught eavesdropping.

Sighing in what Mimea now realised was only fake irritation, her Master said: “Well then, I hope the performance was to your satisfaction, my dear. Now go back to your lover boy on the dance floor and introduce him to me when I approach, omitting my actual name of course.”

Immediately obeying his dismissal – not wanting to push her luck by antagonising her usually short-fused Master any further – the older Pet left the ladies’ room in a hurry, golden heels clicking restlessly on the marble floor.

Readjusting his satin trousers and straightening his long, dark scarlet cloak around his shoulders, the splendidly dressed Elite shot another glance at himself in the mirror. There was something about charcoal black hair on him that made him feel somewhat ill at ease, but then again his disguise would hardly be convincing while complemented by his famed silver-gold tresses. Replacing the black, feather-decorated mask to conceal his upper face Lord Mink stepped outside with a perfectly straight back and a confidently graceful swagger that was a tad more sexual in nature than would be deemed proper in an Elite.
Hiding from the public view behind a broad pillar that wasn’t being camera-monitored, Riki quickly checked the device he had been given by Katze for a confirmation that all necessary data had been sent, which indeed appeared to be the case. Seriously, if it hadn’t been for Mimea’s help in so effectively dancing him right into the path of every single high shot on his list, he wasn’t sure he would’ve been able to pull it off before morning. He would have to question Katze later about his connection to Mimea though, as that sort of inside knowledge on a BM assignment combined with her perfume lingering in Katze’s office made it abundantly clear to Riki that something had to be going on between those two behind his back.

Tucking the data streamer safely away in a hidden fold inside his dress shirt, Riki looked up only to see his red-and-gold undercover muse approach him once more, a somewhat naughty smile lighting up her face. What had she been up to while she was supposedly in the bathroom? More than powdering her tiny nose, that much was obvious.

“Good evening once more, my darling Riki”, she beamed as she grabbed unto both of his hands in exalted greeting. What had gotten her so hyped up all of a sudden?

“Hi there, beautiful, what took you so long? Were you spying on someone in the restroom or something?”, the mongrel asked only half-jokingly, wondering how likely it was that Katze had donned out a separate top secret mission to her as well.

“Yeah, sort of, two hot guys were going at it in there so I just couldn’t resist eavesdropping”, she responded in a light-hearted tone, somewhat mimicking the mongrel’s linguistic register.

“Really? Gee... And did you actually do something as well while you were in there?”, Riki teased her with a sassy smile.

“Well, I still have the sex drive of a pedigree Pet, so what do you think, huh?”, the natural seductress replied with a cheeky wink. “So we were talking about my new Master when I left so rudely, weren’t we?”

Completely astounded that she would start on the subject herself after having so daftly avoided it ever since they’d gotten reacquainted at the Royal Casino, Riki just gawked at her with his mouth agape. “Wh... what did you just say?”

Giggling wickedly, she repeated: “I said that we were talking about my new Master earlier, and I promised you that you would get to meet him tonight, didn’t I?”

“Err, yeah... but I didn’t think you were being serious!”, Riki exclaimed in shocked disbelief. “So why’d you keep him a secret all this time only to point him out to me now?”

“Cause I just talked to him on my way back from the restroom and he was in a curious enough mood to want to be introduced to you. Of course he knows who you are, as I talk about you practically everyday”, Mimea babbled in barely-concealed excitement.

“Wait... he said he wanted to meet me? As in actually talk to me?! Who is this guy to just flaunt every single rule in the book to sate his interest in his Pet’s poor choice of friend?” Riki couldn’t even imagine a lower Elite acting in such a way, let alone the allegedly very influential Elite that was now Mimea’s Master. Could he really be as revolutionary different from other Elite as she had made him out to be?

“Well he didn’t say ‘talk’ exactly, but he’d like to have a dance with you. To be completely honest I
believe he has been checking out your dance movements all evening long. Anyhow, he should be coming our way shortly”, Mimea concluded her enthusiastic speech with another wink, practically squealing in delight. “Now, do tell me about the downside of the job in the Market. Is Katze really such a tyrannical boss to have?”

Sighing, Riki averted his eyes from her questioning gaze before finding the courage to answer truthfully: “It’s not that Katze is a bad boss or that the work in and of itself is bad... It’s just that the whole scene is just... way more Tanaguran than I would’ve hoped, with it being an illegal, fairly democratic enterprise and all. OK, so I get things done, I get a generous monthly pay and I’m sorta good at it. But at the end of the day it’s every man for himself. I mean, I could die at any time and the next guy in line would be happy to take my place. Hell, even if I’m accepted by my colleagues, there is nothing remotely official about my position there, legally speaking I don’t even exist! At least in Eos I had a real ID...”, the formerly idealistic Ceresian started.

Here I stand, helpless and left for dead

“And where is the personal gratification in a job that basically just sells overpriced left-overs from the high-life of Tanagura and Upper Midas to whichever poor, criminal scoundrel is willing to pay the highest price? In a job where killing the competition to guarantee new customers or selling innocent kids to guys who want to molest and torture them is simply a part of daily business? It’s just the same fucked-up bullshit as everywhere else on Amoy, only at least they’re honest enough to leave off the veneer layer of so-called civilisation”, he continued, all of his frustrations from the last couple of months now rising to the surface. Was he supposed to just keep closing his eyes to the sickening injustice that was surrounding him wherever he went? Was there nowhere left in this world that was truly pure and free?

Close your eyes, so many days go by

“I suppose you’re right in that the way the Market operates is not exactly morally justified. But is that really so different from how you used to run your gang in Ceres? You can point out the flaws of Eos or the Black Market as much as you want, but that doesn’t undo the fact that every single system is flawed in its own way and so are the people operating within said systems. Focussing on those flaws is only going to make it harder for you to function in any system, so why would you do that to yourself?”

Easy to find what’s wrong

Realising that she was right, Riki wondered when it was that he had started this personal vendetta of his against the very fabric of injustice their world was made of. As far as he could tell, he’d gone to wage his war on the immorality of the system as soon as he’d left Guardian, possibly even sooner within the equally oppressive rule inside of that so-called safe haven for minors. Even if he’d done what was necessary for him and his gang to survive, he’d always thought it essential to have a code of honour and lines he wasn’t willing to cross no matter what. Always keep your promises. Never betray a friend. Pay all your debts. Cause without an internal moral compass to guide him, how could he ever hope to swim against the tide of the data stream that surrounded every single aspect of life in Midas and eventually set his course to the destination he had in mind?

Harder to find what’s right

“I’m not saying you’re wrong, in fact your criticism and your refusal to go along with whatever comes your way is why I fell for you in the first place. I’m just saying that it makes life so much harder and I’m wondering how you came to be this determined about defending what is right?”
I believe in you

Raising his shoulders in a universal mongrel sign of nonchalance, Riki said: “Dunno, I guess I just don’t like being told what to do. I’d hardly call it a quest for a better world or any of that idealist shit that gets people killed.” But the truth was that he would sooner die to maintain those values he had set for himself than he would give up on them. And what had truly been bugging him as of late was not just the bad shit he’d seen while working for Katze but his own inability to change his situation in life. Stepping outside of the illusion of Ceres’ protective barriers of stubborn pride, he had come to see that even during the high days of Bison neither him nor the people he loved nor any of the things he’d achieved meant anything at all to the rest of the world. Being thrown out into Ceres as a fifteen-year-old he’d basically been sentenced to death and had been but a dead man walking.

Glancing over at Mimea, he could tell by the expression on her pretty face and the dilation of those big orange eyes that she wasn’t buying his I-don’t-give-a-shit-about-anything act at all. Damn, sometimes he thought she understood his motivations far better than he could ever hope to himself.

I can show you that I can see right through all your empty lies

“OK, so maybe I do care! But what kind of difference does it make? I’m doomed either way, aren’t I?! Simply knowing that I am isn’t gonna change anything! So perhaps... perhaps it’s better to just pretend it doesn’t matter, before I go totally insane over all this!”, the cornered mongrel desperately yelled, tears of both anger and frustration stinging behind his eyes but what was left of his pride refusing to let them fall.

I won’t last long in this world so wrong

“I don’t believe that’s what you truly think, Riki. If I did, I wouldn’t love you the way I do. You say it won’t change anything, yet it already has. In your short time in Eos you have altered more lives than you know, mine among them and for that I am eternally grateful. But I agree that if you want to have a bigger impact you’ll need some back-up, nobody has ever achieved any kind of revolution all by themselves after all. And here comes just the sort of man who could help you with that...”

Following along the line of his friend’s backward glance, Riki’s dark eyes were instantly glued to the approaching figure dressed all in burgundy satin, his long period cloak billowing out behind him as if he were some kind of spectre floating towards them. Surrounded by white marble all around, the redness of the figure reminded Riki of the colour of his own life’s blood as it had been slowly flowing out of him and dripping unto the pristinely white floors of the Pet room back in Eos. Or a drop of living red defying the odds in a white petri dish in some state-of-the-art lab where Jupiter’s android servants were studying how to control and smother human life to death. Strangely enough it had never been that red reminder of his own mortality that horrified Riki, but rather the unnatural, bleak lifelessness of the white surrounding it.

Before the young man had even had the time to shake himself from his rather philosophical contemplations the red apparition was already right in front of him! He barely registered Mimea’s mouth opening and closing while the high timbre of her voice sounded like it was coming from somewhere far away. Too far away for Riki to make out even a single word she was saying while he continued to stare as if he were seeing a ghost.

When said ghost reached out a red-gloved hand after speaking a number of incomprehensible words, Riki didn’t hesitate to take it – not even to say goodbye to his friend – and let himself be guided unto the dance floor, all the while staring as if hypnotised and unable to form any coherent words.

Say goodbye
As we dance with the devil tonight

One of the first remarkable things he observed in closer proximity was the unusual, bright blue colour of his new dance partner’s eyes, entrancing the hopeless Ceresian from behind the black, feathered mask. Due to those eyes’ intense pull in combination with the red attire, Riki couldn’t help but mentally compare them to the bright blue colour of a very hot flame. And hot was exactly what the remarkable man currently waltzing him through the grand, marble-and-gold ballroom was, hot up into every single fibre of his being. Not only was there a definite sexual energy surrounding him, but he was emitting a compelling aura that was both scary in its intensity and somehow irresistibly daring.

Don’t you dare look at him in the eye

Having never backed down from a challenge, the infamous former gang leader wasn’t about to start now. As Riki grabbed unto the tall stranger’s shoulders as if bracing himself, his dark eyes moved up to look his challenger straight into the eye in a down-right sizzlingly heated stare, black eyes shimmering like onyx gems. When blazing black met blistering blue it felt as if a volcano erupted right there in the middle of the dance floor, burning lava being pumped around Riki’s body with every frantic beating of his run-wild heart. In all his life he had never encountered such scalding hot temperatures as were practically radiating from this sexy creature’s pale skin. Not when the scorching sun had mercilessly beat down on his back in the desert outside of Ceres and not even when Iason Mink had been beating him even more mercilessly with an electroshock whip. What he was experiencing now was simply out of this world, so much so that for a second Riki contemplated the existence of the fire pits of hell described in ancient myths. Was this what it felt like to dance with the devil himself? Or could this fire possibly be of a more heavenly origin?

As we dance with the devil tonight

Boldly placing one large, vermilion-gloved hand on Riki’s silk-clad shoulder and the other on the exotic beauty’s narrow hip, the handsome apparition wasted no time and immediately took the lead, determinedly guiding his young partner along in a sensuous, graceful dance. Spellbound by the azure light shining from within dark and unknown depths, Riki’s limbs automatically moved along without him even realising what dance they were performing. As those powerful hands slid ever lower down his tan backside and eventually found their way up and underneath his flimsy dress shirt, Riki felt himself become increasingly aroused. Along with the frenzied beating of his heart and his suddenly accelerated breathing, his dusky skin began to shiver as if it was attempting to crawl right off his bones.

Trembling, crawling across my skin

But in spite of his intoxication it wasn’t long before certain similarities between this most recent acquaintance and a certain, all too familiar Blondie were becoming imminent and Riki’s skin started crawling out of an entirely different cause. Along with his newfound passion, anxiety that seemed as old as time dug its claws deep into his restless heart. Memories of that very same shade of blue filled his waking mind once more, accompanied by nightmarish visions of the hell he had gone through while he was that sick psycho’s Pet.

Feeling your cold, dead eyes

Stealing the life of mine

That blue had been as mercilessly beautiful and carelessly unforgiving as a glacier slowly drawing every last bit of body heat out of him, and it would have continued to do so until he had become
nothing but a frozen corpse, every bit of life sucked out of him as surely as some of his other bodily fluids. Luckily for him, he’d gotten out before the former had happened. Although the proud mongrel would never admit it out loud, he had seriously feared for his life during those final weeks under the Head of the Syndicate’s thumb. Every time he’d stepped out unto that balcony those cityscape depths had become more and more inviting, the hard concrete below more and more welcoming in the promise of everlasting reprieve from all his suffering and humiliation. In truth, it had only been the sacrifices made by others for his benefit that had kept him from taking that final leap of desperation.

_Daryl._

_Mimea._

They had proven themselves true and loyal friends even when they’d hardly known him and he’d treated them like total shit. They had believed in him, a belief that had been strong enough to risk even the ultimate sacrifice. It was that very fact that had stopped the desperate mongrel from simply giving up and taking his own life, his code of honour not allowing for their deaths to have been in vain.

_I believe in you_

Even if at the time he had not realised the truth, they apparently had known he was meant for great things. That he had the character and stamina necessary to live through it all and eventually come out stronger and resolved not to back down. That he had the vision required to alter the essence of Amoy’s confines and with it the future of its population. That he was that one little grain of rough desert sand hard enough to put a stop to the mechanical cycle that had been controlling people’s lives for centuries. That one speck of dust that could penetrate its way right to the very heart of the machinery.

_I can show you that I can see right through all your empty lies_

Trying to resist that fate had been as futile as trying to break the chains that had imprisoned him and he saw now that it was only through accepting his destiny that he could truly free himself. For true freedom always came from within. Once the heart was free, it was only a matter of time before the rest followed. If he could right the flaws within himself, then he could fix all the wrongs in the world around him as well. Not an evolution but a revolution. Not an adaptation to his environment but an adaptation _of_ that environment.

_I won’t last long in this world so wrong!_

Thinking back to his old mates down in the slums, Riki felt a sharp pain in his chest at the thought of abandoning them once again. But as soon as the quarrel concerning Riki’s involvement with Mimea had broken out, he had realised that his time in Eos had changed him and that he was now motivated by thoughts outside of the other mongrels’ thinking patterns. If he truly wanted to be able to make change happen, then he needed to detach himself from those old ties and start fresh with an open mind.

_Say goodbye_

_As we dance with the devil tonight_

Where at first Riki continued to let his body be pulled along in the gently swaying waves of the dance led by the black-haired, crimson angel that had captured his attention so strongly, he then began to participate in the movements more actively as if demonstrating that the stranger was only
able to move him along because he *allowed* it. He was wondering what kind of relationship Mimea had with this mysterious new protector of hers and how it could help what the spunky red-head had dubbed ‘their cause’. Strange and extravagant as this creature appeared to be, there was no question that he was still an Elite, an electronic android manufactured and controlled by Jupiter. Was it truly possible for one of her own creations to turn against her, completely outside of her knowledge? Surely there had to be fail safes built in to make sure such a thing could never happen?

*Don’t you dare look at him in the eye?*

*As we dance with the devil tonight*

But no matter what he did, he just couldn’t stop looking into those sapphire depths, it was like diving into an all-encompassing ocean. It was as if he was being pulled further and further into the blue by the unpredictable force of the tides. The mongrel was hopeless to do anything other than just hold on tight until the storm in those blue pools had passed.

*Hold on*

Pulling his agile yet slightly dazed dance partner closer to him under the pretence of a well-orchestrated tango move, the red angel seductively breathed into Riki’s ear in a deep, velvet voice: “How about we leave this charade behind us and go somewhere more private to get to know one another a little bit better?”

*Hold on!*

*Well, Jupiter’s tits, here we go again, another Elite making a pass at me!*

To Be Continued ...

Thanks for reading and please leave a comment! :-)
I’m so so SO SORRY that it took me FOREVER to update! I really have no excuse this time other than my own heat-induced laziness and lack of inspiration. And I know, I promised that Riki and Iason would make out and now I’m postponing it to the next chapter again! :-O But somehow a whole lot of further Raoul/Iason found its way into this particular chapter and I felt that it would just be too much to forcefully cram in Riki/Iason as well at the end... Also this chapter has gotten to 30 pages and I’d hate to keep my beloved readers waiting even longer for an update ;-) But hey, one needs to build up some suspense in these stories, right? One step at a time, at least Iason and Riki have met each other again, so there’ll be more to come in the next chapter. ;-)
Getting to Know Each Other

Chapter Summary

Riki unknowingly meets his intoxicating nemesis again, a dispute leads Mimea into the darkest of regions, and just as Daryl is starting to miss his old life it comes back to haunt him in a most unexpected way.

Author’s notes:

Hi everyone! :-) So I’ve FINALLY finished the next chapter, just in time for Halloween! ;-) I hope you can forgive me for being such a terribly slow updater AGAIN, I had most of the chapter already written a while back but didn’t get around to finishing it up until now, with working part time while looking for a second job and also working as a volunteer.

Anyways, I’m glad to finally have this ‘little’ gift (although I’m happy to say it’s gotten rather long) to present to my beloved readers and I hope you’ll enjoy this chapter as much as you did the previous ones! :-D And please don’t forget to review! ;-)

Opening theme: Dance with the Dead – Skeletons in the Attic

“How about we leave this charade behind us and go somewhere more private to get to know one another a little bit better?”

Starstruck at the mysterious stranger’s enticing request, Riki was momentarily at a loss of how to react. He’d only met the guy like half an hour ago and in that time they’d barely spoken a word, yet for some reason now this dude wanted to get him alone in a private room?

Just my luck that these Elitist, domineering fuckers are always after me! Thanks a lot, Mimea!

But Riki couldn’t deny the sheer strength of the overwhelming attraction he’d been overcome with ever since he’d laid eyes on the tempting man clad in red.

“Ergh... Depends... Depends on what you mean by getting to know me”, that came out a whole lot less tough and casual than Riki would’ve liked. But at least he hadn’t automatically agreed like he’d at first been inclined to do, there was just something so magnetically irresistible and vaguely familiar
about that man...

“Well, what would you want it to mean then?'’, the black-haired charmer unexpectedly asked, throwing the ball back into his mongrel dance partner’s camp.

*Shit, how should I know, crazy motherfucker?! I don’t even know you! I don’t know what you want with me!*

“Ergh... I don’t know. What... What do you mean by it?'”, Riki said, preferring to simply bounce back the question again rather than having to face his own twisted desires. *Man, what is it with me and these bloody overbearing robots? I thought it was just Iason...*

He sure as hell had never felt that kind of attraction for any of the other Elite he’d come across during his unwanted stay in the Mink household, and being a part of that most powerful and important of all Tanaguran households meant he’d had more such encounters than he would’ve liked, even if Mink had been unusually protective of him. *Selfish bastard wanted me all to himself. He probably never cared about what anyone else wanted in all his goddamn life, spoiled brat.*

“Whatever you want it to mean”, the stranger eloquently countered Riki’s move, after having allowed for just long enough of a pause to make the other wonder about what answer he was composing.

“Y’know, it’s kinda annoying, you putting this on me. I mean, I don’t even know you or what your intentions are towards me, so how can I know what mine should be?’” In fact Riki knew all too well what his intentions were, he just wasn’t sure what they ought to be. Probably not what they were, even if the older man was Mimea’s protector and a supposed rebel, he was still an Elite! There was no way Riki could ever share what was truly in his heart with one of those inhumanly cold, distant children of Jupiter.

“ Aren’t Ceresians used to making their own decisions then?’” *Whether they be informed or not,* he silently added in his mind, still finding it truly puzzling how the mongrel would always rush into things without even a clue as to what he was getting himself into. Apparently the youngster had gotten burned quite a few times with that approach, for it seemed he had become somewhat more cautious. Surely that couldn’t be a sign that he could be losing that passionate spark, that fire that had originally drawn Iason to him? Fear grasped his electronic heart at the mere thought of it: his Riki, finally defeated! And even worse: he himself having had a hand in it by his earlier, thoughtless approach! He had to make it up to his Riki now, he couldn’t risk waiting any longer while the young Ceresian continued to drown in his own doubts and self-deprivation! But how to go about it without exposing himself? How to make Riki understand that he had changed, that he truly cared and desperately wanted things to work out between them?

“Yeah, just not to Tanagurans allowing us to make them. It’s confusing.” *And frightening, for it’s gotta be a trap. Right? A way to lure me in, only to play me for a fool!*

“Confusing as in a bad way?’”, Jason asked, picking up the vibe of fear and anger even if Riki had not intended for it to seep into his voice.

“No... No, I guess not”, Riki responded slowly, thoughtfully. He hadn’t expected an Elite to hand him the reigns and then to sound nearly apologetic when he experienced it as confusing. “Shit, Mimea’s right, you’re different than the rest of them”

“Am I? I thought you said you didn’t know me?”’, the tall dark-haired stranger questioned. Was that a slight note of derogatory irony in that smooth, even voice? It couldn’t have been, for Elite didn’t even know what humour was. Or did they?
“I suppose...”, Riki started uncertainly. “I’ll have to get to know you then.” There was something about the handsome stranger that was eerily familiar though, especially the way those piercing blue eyes pulled him in. It reminded him of Iason’s icy sapphires, only there was something much warmer in this man’s regard. Riki felt more like he was staring into a superhot flame than into a glacier. Also there was no way in hell that Iason would have taken in Mimea and that he would degrade himself by dying that glorious golden hallow pitch black. The Onyx were the very lowest on the sports of the Elitist social ladder after all, often regarded as mere errand robots by many of their higher-placed brothers. In that respect it was hardly surprising that if against all odds an Elite were to be part of a rebellion, he would have to come from that lowest of categories.

“Which brings us back to our earlier predicament”, the beautiful creature said with a slight yet downright dazzling smile. “What do you mean by getting to know me?”

Temporarily gobsmacked, Riki took the time to slowly exhale and inhale in an attempt to calm his racing nerves. He’d never actually talked to an Elite that didn’t have any hostile or otherwise questionable intentions towards him, so the mere presence of one was enough to activate his fight or flight instincts. “Just... talk, I guess. You tell me something about yourself, and I’ll tell you something about myself.”

“I’m assuming you mean something the other is as of yet unaware of?”, the intimidatingly tall synthetic asked, trying to think of a way to continue while concealing how much he already knew about the exotic youth in front of him.

“Yeah. Like... your favourite colour.”

There. His mongrel had managed to surprise him once again. In spite of all the information he’d asked both his Black Market dealer and his latest Pet and confidante to convey, he still was absolutely clueless about this simplest of facts concerning his beloved. Sliding long, pale fingers through Riki’s hair in an automated gesture of affection, the stranger replied without hesitation.

“Black.”

“And here I thought you were gonna say red”, Riki said, pointing towards the other’s all burgundy-red, classical costume while desperately resisting the urge to either move into the other’s touch or pull himself away from it too rudely. He didn’t really want to scare this strange Elite away, for in truth his curiosity had been picked. Just what kind of person was Mimea’s unlikely saviour? And why did Riki’s sixth sense tell him that he’d met this man before?

“And yours?”, the disguised phantom informed curiously, interlinking the young man’s tan arm with his and guiding him towards a nearby niche with comfortable seating arrangements. It was away from prying eyes yet open enough to reassure the mongrel, for in this public location he could still scream for help or escape the other’s clutches if he so chose.

Only letting himself be steered along due to the velvet gentleness of the gloved touch, Riki sat down on the luxuriously-cushioned loveseat and dazedly stared up into his mysterious partner’s masked gaze. “What?”, he asked absent-mindedly, sounding rather dumbfounded, as if he had completely lost track of the conversation they were having. “Oh, my favourite colour... Ergh, I like all colours really, but if I’d have to pick one... it’d be blue. Like sky blue.” Not blue like the sharp ice that had remorselessly encased him during those hard years, but blue like the open sky in which he had found his freedom again.

“And here I thought you were going to say black”, the Elite mused good-humouredly while meaningfully twisting a charcoal lock around his finger.

“OK, how about another one...”, the mongrel said, suddenly ashamed of his own earlier superficial
assumptions about the other. Was he himself really better than those stuck-up twits at Tanagura, or just wishfully imagining that he was? “What’s your favourite pastime?”

“Thinking about you”, the Elite answered without the slightest hesitation. Either he had prepared that answer ahead of their conversation or it was true.

Snickering, Riki said: “Seriously? You just made that up to flatter me!”

“It’s true. I never tell outright lies”, the synthetic responded without even the slightest hint of indignation in his voice, as if the other’s questioning of his integrity meant absolutely nothing. “And your favourite pastime?”

“Flying my bike. Always has been”, Riki responded truthfully, suddenly realising he’d never really had an open conversation about himself like this with anyone, not even with Guy. It caused a rather unsettling feeling in his stomach how easy it was to reveal these things about himself to a complete stranger, and an Elite at that! Also how could this ethereal apparation’s favourite pastime be so focussed on him if they’d only been introduced just now? His gut feeling told Riki he had to tread very carefully around this man, but at the same time that sickeningly sweet need to please just wouldn’t go away. “Listen, I don’t wanna get off on the wrong foot. Mimea sorta dragged me into this, I’m sure she meant well but... I don’t generally get along with Elite.”

“Me neither if I’m completely honest. Why do you suppose that is?” It was truly remarkable how much one could find out about one’s own motives through comparison with a human’s.

“Dunno... they’re just all about following the rules and putting everything into labelled boxes... But I just don’t think that way. I don’t think myself less just cause I was born a mongrel. I don’t think it’s right to put people into classes, cause a person’s always more than just that. I don’t like how Tanagura treats human lives as if they’re worth nothing, as if they’re all replaceable”, Riki released the pent-up frustrations he’d been walking around with for months, if not years. It felt good to finally tell someone, possibly someone who was personally to blame for the way things were. Did he even know the harm he had undoubtedly caused people over the years, the irreparable damage to their self-esteem and dignity?

“Ah, but there you contradict yourself, Riki. You say a person is always more than merely their class, meaning I am more than simply an Elite. Yet you give the fact that you do not generally get along with Elite as a reason for not wishing to continue our acquaintance?” There it was. Stone-cold rationalism effortlessly exposing all the idealistic youngster’s shortcomings in an unforgivingly accurate assault.

“Fuck...”, the mongrel swore in a reflex of powerlessness, realising that he’d just backed himself into a corner. No point in denying it now then. “Fuck, you’re right. I guess I’m just a hypocrite, thinking I’m outside of the system, thinking I know my own mind.”

Angry at himself for making his mongrel experience such self-doubts again, the divinely attractive Elite cradled the other’s face inside his big hands and looked upon those dark, pleasing features and obsidian eyes with all his supernaturally charming grace. “You do know your own mind, Riki. You merely think that the Elite are responsible for the way things are, and maybe in many ways we are, but not all of us always like things that way.”

Desperately trying to keep the impending tears from falling at the Elite’s uncharacteristically sympathetic display of comfort, Riki said in a shaking voice: “You don’t?” He knew he ought to at least grant this unusually kind Elite his direct gaze but he was afraid that once he did he’d be unable to stop himself from out-right crying. It was just such a relief to have someone truly listen for what felt like the first time in ages. Of course there had been Mimea, but with her being a Pet and a female
at that Riki always tried to stay strong in front of her, revealing heated aggression rather than the deep sadness that had been in his smouldering heart for so long now.

“No, and I know I am not alone in that. Though the system is set up in such a way that we always think ourselves alone, unable to fight back, unable to even voice our displeasure”, from that perfectly neutral intonation it was impossible to determine whether or not he approved of said system.

*But he just said that not all Elite like things the way they are, right? So he has to disapprove...* “How do you know that’s why the system is set up in that way, and that it’s not just an accidental consequence?”, Riki asked, not for the first time wondering if maybe there was some higher power that was consciously trying to control people’s lives after all, even if everyone in Ceres liked to think that idea was complete and utter bullshit.

“I know because I’m the one that makes sure it *keeps* functioning that way, for people can be unexpectedly inventive when it comes to thinking of ways to escape their cage. Jupiter can’t simply build a cage for humanity and expect it to last for a thousand years and continue to work on hundreds of generations and millions of different minds without any form of regular maintenance”, the electronic Tanaguran explained calmly and seemingly without any trace of empathy.

“If...”, Riki paused, trying to properly reorganise his thoughts. Could he have been mistaken in his assumption that this particular Elite disliked the way the system imprisoned people? “If you knew what you were building, then why did you build it in the first place? Or why did you help to maintain that system if you know what it does to people?” *What it did to you as well.* Could there truly be someone behind that flawless façade who hated Jupiter’s system just as much as he did?

“I didn’t realise there were two systems. One for you... and one for us. I’d never given it much thought but we are in fact very similar. All that time spent focussing on the differences, while the similarities were just as obviously there. I suppose one doesn’t want to live knowing one is imprisoned, therefore most would rather feign ignorance.”

“Tsss, I know what you mean. Y’know...”, suddenly hesitant to further expose himself to this strange man, this servant of Jupiter even, Riki stopped to consider. But then he decided that it didn’t matter one bit if he revealed his weaknesses to an Elite, cause no matter what he did he would always be weak in the face of such a formidable opponent. Then again, the black-haired Elite had admitted the flaws of the system he himself had helped to keep up and Mimea apparently trusted her new Master unconditionally. “I left Ceres because of it. I couldn’t bear to look at my gang and to hear them talk as if they were beyond the reach of this fucked-up world, like somehow they were better. Cause they aren’t, not before and not now. Just to hear them judge and curse those poor kids born or forced into servitude made me sick to my stomach.” *In our own different ways, we all did this. We all have a responsibility. We all kept this system in place, even those of us who swore against it.*

“Truly? Is there not a single one amongst them then that secretly feels the same way you do? Someone who is willing to back your cause, whatever it may be?”

“Possibly, I never really gave them a chance to follow me. But how can I when I’ve no idea myself where I’m going? Better for him to find his own path in this world.”

*Him.* Riki had to be referring to that former pairing partner of his. The one called Guy. Fighting against the jealous rage that suddenly tried to get a hold of him, Iason composed himself before responding. He had to show that he was trustworthy and that he wouldn’t judge no matter what his Riki said. “You make that sound as if you are alone. Yet you strike me as the kind of person who is never truly alone, the kind of person many people would choose to follow. Why do you not use this natural charisma to rally people to your cause?”
“Why haven’t you? You’re an Elite, you don’t just have a natural appeal but an actual, lawfully recognised position! Why don’t you make people listen?”, Riki asked, remembering the outstanding loyalty of the Furniture he’d come across. A Furniture was usually loyal to his own household rather than to the general Tanaguran system as such. As was evident from the way the Furniture of the Mink household had assisted in keeping their Master’s relationship with his mongrel Pet a secret, even if it went against Jupiter’s customs.

“You are apparently under the wrongful assumption that being an Elite means one can do whatever one pleases. But the laws are such as they are, for Elite and other classes alike. Jupiter would not hesitate to turn on her own children as well if she were to find out they were disregarding her sacred laws. On her children and on their households, for by law the members of a Tanaguran household are considered the property of the Master of said household and are therefore equally guilty of all his crimes.”

“Holy shit... You’re keeping quiet to protect them, aren’t you? Mimea and the others of your household?”, Riki gawked, never really having contemplated what a huge responsibility it was to have a whole household of people depending on you for absolutely everything, even for the right to live. In comparison the Bisons had never relied on him to such an extent, for each individually they’d already proven they were tough enough to survive on their own.

“You sound surprised”, Iason said, wondering why he had never before seen the need to explain the social workings of a Tanaguran household to the boy from the slums, even while making him a part of one. He had on some level assumed that Riki already knew or would learn soon enough by experience. Clearly he hadn’t and his Master’s lack of instruction had been the cause of that. How could he expect Riki to be happy in his household if he didn’t give the young man even the slightest idea of what it meant to live there? After all he himself had needed Mimea to instruct him on what it meant to be human and how to behave as such, him being an Elite meaning he hadn’t needed to learn to be human as surely as Riki being a mongrel meant he hadn’t needed to learn how to be Tanaguran.

“Why yes! I thought Elite saw the members of their household as mere property”, again Riki pronounced the word ‘property’ as if it was something disgustingly horrendous. Could it be the Ceresian understood something inherently different under that term than the Elite did? For an Elite the term ‘property’ was as neutral a term as any to describe human servants.

“Do you needlessly damage or destroy your property then?”, Iason asked in an effort to uncover why the term was so offensive to the one he secretly loved.

“What? Of course not, I don’t exactly own a lot after all”, Riki mused, thinking back to how ridiculously easy it had been to just up and leave the place he had lived with his gang since adolescence. He hadn’t even needed to pack. He used to think a lack of personal possessions was convenient, but now he wasn’t so sure anymore. If he were to die, the people who’d known him wouldn’t even have anything to remember him by. Perhaps that meant they’d soon forget about him, another convenience of not owning anything. Mindlessly, he started fumbling with the Pet coin he’d started carrying around in his pocket again ever since Mimea had returned it to him.

“Well, Elite don’t exactly have many people they can trust either. To disregard one’s household is to end up alone, vulnerable and miserable. Human property is not as easily replaced as material property, if at all”, the disguised Elite responded in an attempt to make the other understand. He’d never enjoyed the process of dismissing old staff, not only was it a practical inconvenience to have to acquire and train new staff but over time he’d learned that there were no two humans who were exactly alike. Sooner or later he always lost someone with a characteristic that he never again found in anybody else. There were only so many useful or endearing characteristics one could acquire
through training, a most problematic phenomenon which Raoul had always called ‘nature versus nurture’.

“Which is why people can never **be** property! Cause property can be replaced, it isn’t truly worth anything, but people **are**!”, Riki nearly shouted, shocked at how the Elite on some level seemed to realise the truth of the matter yet didn’t stray from the notion that humans were property. **How can he know what it means to be lonely yet not know you can’t treat people like property?**

“Property isn’t worth anything? Is that an ideology that helps the inhabitants of Ceres cope with poverty?”

“It’s how they cope with Tanagura and Midas’ inhumane obsession with money. As if money’s the only thing that’s important in life, worth even your very soul! There are far worse fates than being poor. Like what you said, like being alone.” **Like being in love with a blonde, robotic monster. Like being hated by the people you grew up with just cause you befriended a Pet.**

“I see. But in Tanagura to be poor means to be alone, the two are virtually synonyms.” **Unless of course a factor from outside the Tanaguran class society comes into play. I’ve never bought and paid for you, yet you turned out to be absolutely priceless, my sweet Riki.**

“Don’t you always end up alone anyways? Cause no matter how much you paid for them, you can’t keep Furniture and Pets indefinitely, can you? You don’t throw away old Furniture and Pets because you tire of them, do you? You throw them away because it’s part of Jupiter’s stupid laws! Laws to make sure you’ve got nobody, nobody other than her...”

“I had never actually thought about it that way, but I believe you might be correct in that assumption, Riki. That is probably the reason why I have taken up a rather unusual relationship with Mimea. Even when she will no longer be my property by law, she will always be mine by choice.” **And so will you. The thought of finally laying claim to what was his through passion rather than by law caused a pleasant tingling in his loins. Not yet. Be patient.**

“Yours as in your friend, not your property?”, understanding finally dawned on the other’s alluringly dark features. He was completely baffled at how anybody could confuse the concepts of property and love. How did you even go about befriending someone who was in essence your slave?

“As I have explained before, for the longest time I have considered those two concepts synonyms. As all Elite do”, the Elite repeated, truly surprised at how interested the youth appeared to be in deciphering the mysteries of the Elite mind. Could it be he was contemplating the possibility of Iason Mink having had different motives than the mongrel had apparently attributed to him at the time?

“Your ‘material property’ doesn’t have the ability to think or a will of its own, so that’s what I’d consider just stuff, objects. But your ‘human property’ as you call it does have their own will, so that’s what I’d call... My gang? My friends? My lover? That sorta thing?”

“Indeed, that assumption is once again correct. You are remarkably intelligent and quick to catch on, for a human”, another thing about his beloved that Iason thought was most delectable. Choosing to interpret that last remark as humorist teasing instead of as a barely-concealed insult, Riki wondered: “But what about your relationships with other Elite? Cause you can’t own them, can you?”

“My relationships with other Elite are strictly work-related, they are not what you would call friendship or love. Our unfeeling, egocentric nature usually prevents us from taking any relationship with an equal any further.”
“Usually? You mean you’ve befriended another Elite? Ah, but that must be it. You’d never need to replace another Elite, for that one’d stick around indefinitely. But what kind of Elite would tolerate your possessive tendencies... cause to you friendship is possession, right?”

“The kind that owes me his life, from the first. Mind me, such was never my initial intention. I merely sought to prevent the loss of great potential, even if accompanied by a mostly flawed personality. Then again, I am not one to talk of flawed personality these days.”

“So there’s two of you? And the other one’s loyal to you cause you saved his life. Shit! This could get some serious rebellion you’ve got going, if you’ve even got the support of another Elite. There’s like a realistic chance of making an actual difference! OK, I’m in, screw the risks. You can tell Mimea she was successful at convincing me. That’s why she kept on seeking me out, right? To convince me to join your cause? I just knew there was something she wasn’t telling me...”

“Something like that. But I cannot deny that she has a very personal interest in keeping you close to her. You see, where to an Elite property and love are synonyms, to a Pet sex and love are. Needless to say you can’t pick up a sexual relationship with someone who is not in your physical proximity.”

“What does a Furniture see love as? Just out of curiosity... Wait! Mimea still wants to have sex with me?!”, Riki cried out in disbelief. After all the shit he’d put her through and the polite manner in which they’d engaged contact over the last couple of months, Riki had assumed that all that was definitely over.

“I don’t know as of yet, I would need to befriend a Furniture to find out. Interesting that you should mention it, of course our cause would need Furniture as well”, the sly Head of Intelligence artfully dodged the issue at hand in order to further bait the shocked mongrel. There was just something so incredibly cute about the way those dark eyes would open wide, pupils huge and shimmering, and of course the way those soft lips would come apart in a slight O-shape, almost as if in invitation.

“Does or does she not want to have sex with me?! Oh my God! Is that why she keeps on texting me and meeting me whenever? I thought she wasn’t interested in me that way anymore! Why didn’t she say anything?! Why didn’t she...”, the mongrel gasped, not sure at all how to respond to this new bit of compromising information on his last remaining friend and ally.

“She was probably afraid you would misunderstand her intentions and wouldn’t want anything further to do with her. Because you consider both property and sex antonyms of love, do you not? Therefore if she revealed to you that she felt a sexual attraction towards you, you would think it meant she didn’t truly care for you. Am I correct in my line of thinking so far?” He was getting better at this, Mimea’s lessons were finally starting to pay off.

“No! I mean, yes! But only because she’s Tanaguran! I’d never assume a mongrel didn’t care for me just cause they’d want to have sex me, cause that’d mean nobody cared for me...”, the youngster sounded almost wistful as he spoke those words. Hell, maybe nobody does nowadays, I’ve sure managed to fuck things up real good with Bison. And now I’ve discovered that even Mimea hasn’t been completely honest with me.

“Where was my logic flawed then? You do not always consider sex the opposite of love?”

“Of course I don’t! How the hell could I have any kind of relationship if I did?!”, but in truth he did feel hurt by the revelation that Mimea still considered him a potential sex partner. He had hoped that at least his friendship with her could stay easy and straight-forward, without all the complications that a sexual relationship would bring.

“So it is a natural correlation in fact, sex and love? If you mentally love someone, a physical need to
have sex with them is in fact normal?”

“Yes! I mean, only if it’s romantic love and only if it’s reciprocated”, Riki explained, finding it hard to believe that the undoubtedly much older man didn’t know something that was so basic. He was as of yet unaware that rather than testing his own knowledge on the subject, the Elite was testing Riki’s interpretations on it.

“How does one in fact determine – with an acceptable degree of certainty – whether one’s intentions are reciprocated?”

“What, do you just jump someone without even speaking to them?”, Riki accused, apparently the Elite really had no idea what they were doing when it came to these things. “First you gotta ask the person if they’d be willing.”

“And what if the person claims he is not interested but you know he is lying? Like how you were lying to me. Why did you pretend you didn’t want me, my love?”

“Then I suppose…”, Riki said hesitantly, not sure how he felt about having this kind of talk with a stranger. Were they even speaking hypothetically? Cause it felt like that question was hitting much closer to home than he would’ve liked. Could Mimea have told him about my true feelings for Iason? “You could ask them why they’re not interested. It’s not always a physical thing, sometimes… people just aren’t meant for each other. So then it’s just easier not to get involved in the first place”, he finally concluded. Yeah, that definitely was the best way to deal with it. Sometimes love just wasn’t worth all that trouble, as he himself could attest.

“That sounds like a coward’s way out”, the stranger said matter-of-factly, his cool voice deceptively calm but his blue-hot eyes shooting daggers that made Riki’s spine tingle.

As usual when taken by fear unexpectedly, the former gangleader lashed out: “I may be many things, Mister stick-up-the-ass, but I’m no fucking coward!”

“Shall you come with me to a back room then? I can take off my trousers and show you that there is no stick up my ass but rather something else in there that wouldn’t mind being up your ass, Mister I-am-no-coward”, the erotically-charged Elite challenged teasingly, sex appeal now virtually coming off of him in maddeningly seductive waves.

“What the fuck?! Are you guys all the same or what? Freaking sex maniacs! What is wrong with you?!”

“I cannot deny the prospect excites me”, the sexual predator breathed, moving ever closer towards the now gradually retreating mongrel, expertly backing him into a corner. “Surely there is nothing wrong with a healthy libido when it comes to interactions with a young, intelligent, aesthetically-pleasing male such as yourself?”, the eloquent, attractive Elite stroked the other’s ego as he approached him with long fingers itching to stroke other parts of him as well.

“Can’t you put your libido up someone else’s ass, huh?”, Riki defended, doing his best to ignore his rising sense of dread when he felt a velvet-wallpapered, solid wall behind him. Surely the guy had to be joking? “Like say, your other Elite friend’s?”

“Indeed Raoul did enjoy it immensely when I did just that about an hour ago in the men’s room”, his assailant bluntly said, knowing how much the mongrel hated the biologist and hoping that he might even get jealous at the mere mention of Raoul’s name.

“What? Raoul fucking Am did?! You’re lying!”, Riki blurted out, trying to expel the distasteful
images of the usually so composed and proper Blondie in several sexually-compromising positions from his head. *Holy crap, I gotta get outta here!*

“I leave you boys alone for fifteen minutes and you’re already fighting? Besides, Riki, my Master’s so obsessed with finding out the truth of things he’s virtually incapable of telling an outright lie. But make no mistake, he’s manipulative ‘as fuck’ nonetheless, so don’t let him fool you”, Mimea said with a playful wink when she briskly walked over – heels clicking and hips seductively swaying – and handed each of them a glass of perfectly-chilled champagne.

“Why I ought to have known that there would be no way for me and Riki here to have a private conversation while your adorable, little prying ears were in the vicinity, my sweet”, the tall Elite practically purred at the girl, taking advantage of the opportunity the offered glass presented to briefly brush past her delicate, nailpolished fingers, which did not go unnoticed by the young Ceresian.

“Indeed you ought to have”, the feisty girl spoke in a clearly reprimanding tone, having suspected the conversation would turn heated at some point she had stayed in the vicinity in case she needed to intervene. “Which reminds me: I would enjoy it immensely as well if you were to put your libido up my ass, or whichever bodily opening is your preference”, the experienced Pet boldly challenged before turning towards Riki and whispering in a conspiratory tone: “You don’t know what you’re missing, honey, not only is he gifted with tools of a most generous size but he knows how to use them too.”

“Must be a general thing for Elite then. Thanks but no thanks, I don’t fancy lying flat on my back for the next two weeks, on top of that Katze would whoop my poor ass if I didn’t show up for work”, Riki refused, more unsavoury images of a past he’d rather forget struggling to get to the forefront of his mind. *He probably reminds me of Iason cause he’s an Elite and they’re all sort of alike when it comes to exaggerated sex drives. At least this one bothered to have a decent conversation with me before heading down that road.*

“Perhaps it could be arranged to stick my Master’s generous size up Katze’s ass too then, to make him more understanding? In spite of the scar and the sour attitude my fellow redhead’s actually quite the looker, right, Riki? Don’t tell me you didn’t notice while working so hard for him for all those months?”, the pretty female dare-devil offered with a leering, lipglossed smile.

“Honestly, Mimea, sometimes even I have difficulties keeping up with those perversions your depraved mind keeps coming up with. Katze is a Furniture and not even remotely interested in sexual distractions of any kind, especially not those that would incapacitate him and keep him from his work”, her Master spoke undisturbed, nipping champagne with an emotionally flat, aristocratic face. And all of a sudden that complete lack of emotion on that Elitist face whereas the man was clearly joking around with Mimea, gave Riki the nearly unsuppressable urge to laugh.

“How would you know?”, Mimea continued without pause, in spite of being very much aware of Riki’s predicament. “Did you ever ask him? Besides, our infamous, tight-assed dealer has got the hots for you, I noticed last time he saw you.”

Nearly delusional with ceaseless guffawing at the prospect of Katze being sexually pursued by anyone – let alone Mimea’s Master – Riki was unable to join in the conversation he was being witness to, vaguely wondering if his latest acquaintance frequently crossed paths with the dealer.

“Don’t be absurd, unlike you he simply takes pleasure from intellectual conversation without the need for any sexual undercurrent. If anything, I think he would be much alarmed by any such attempts towards him, for I have heard he has been at the receiving end of unwanted affections prior to his training”, Iason gave the conversation somewhat more serious spin in the hopes of preventing his beloved mongrel from dying an early death due to asphyxiation caused by a laughing fit.
Suddenly falling silent when the light-hearted banter of their talk turned to a more serious tone, Mimea felt somewhat ashamed at pressuring the matter. “I... didn’t know that.”

“Wait, what?”, Riki joined in now that there was no more reason to be choking with laughter at the way those two clearly revelled in pushing each other’s buttons. “Katze’s been assaulted in Guardian? Bloody hell! That’s awful, man. I mean, assault’s bad enough as it is, but as a child? That’s some serious shit... No wonder he joined the Furniture programme.”

“Riki, you do realise that most would-be Furniture don’t actually join the programme willingly?”, the Elite carefully tested the waters further. The mongrel had always seemed strangely sympathetic to the plight of Furniture. Could the unusually perceptive youngster possibly have suspected as much?

“I thought so after having met some of them myself, yeah. In Guardian everyone just assumed the smart kids thought they were better than the rest of us. But I would’ve never guessed there was a reason Katze was so accepting of his lot in life.”

“Which is all the more reason to engage him in sexual activity in order to conquer his fears!”, Mimea continued to urge with a passion, appearing to actually be serious about the whole thing now.

“Now you’re simply making up excuses to act upon your own unfounded lust towards him, my dear”, her patron gently attempted to nudge her in a different direction, not understanding why she chose to go further down that line of thought now that the conversation had turned serious.

“I’m not, he’s clearly traumatised!”, she persisted, apparently having some ulterior motive beyond her Master’s understanding. “I mean, I always notice that he gets uncomfortable in my direct proximity, but I could’ve never guessed why that was! It’s because I practically ooze sexuality, and that’s exactly what he fears! It’s just not healthy to suppress your fears like that instead of facing them outright! Right, Riki?”

“You think he will benefit from coming to fear and distrust the both of us then?”, Iason saved Riki the trouble of having to come up with an answer on a subject he might not feel entirely safe with. Could she possibly be referring to Riki rather than Katze? Yet the mongrel had never given any indication of being uncomfortable with sexuality, had he? If anything he was the most responsive human Iason had ever come across.

“No! That’s just what I’m saying, he knows us well enough to trust us under all circumstances!”

“So Katze’s a part of your rebellion as well?”, Riki tried to change the subject, sex being the last thing he wanted on his mind with that hypnotisingly erotic Master of Mimea’s standing right there. “No shit! I would’ve never guessed! Or... that was what he was talking about! That night when he first showed me my apartment, he talked about changing things but... I never thought he meant anything quite like this!”

“You have to give it to him, Katze’s nothing if not subtle. Most people who are manipulated into doing things by him never even realise it”, Mimea said, giving just enough information to maintain an air of trustworthy openness in spite of having kept her affiliation with Katze a secret.

“Your perfume!”, Riki blurted out as soon as the thought re-entered his head and another piece of the puzzle finally made sense to him.

“My... perfume? What of it? It’s an off-world brand called Orange Dream. I’m surprised you’d even notice a thing like that, Riki”, she said slowly, as if the tiny wheels inside of her pretty little head were spinning overtime. “Could it be that part of you is more Pet than you care to admit?”, she then threw in, trying to keep things light-hearted.
“I knew you’d been in Katze’s office cause I’d smelled your perfume there”, Riki explained excitedly. “I just couldn’t figure out what you could’ve possibly been doing in there...” *Mimea and Katze, members of a secret rebellion!* Who could’ve thought? Those two made a most unlikely partnership after all.

“My, my, I think we may have a perfectly viable replacement just in case you ever get a chance to ruin Katze’s efficiency through sexual traumatising, Mimea”, her Master said, seeming impressed with the Ceresian courier’s razor-sharp perception. “Riki sniffed you out and you never even realised it”, he concluded with great emphasis while intently staring in her direction.

Falling silent, Mimea apparently had nothing further to add to the conversation, for she turned away from the pair without another word and chased after the nearest platter of champagne flutes, leaving Riki completely stunned at how she could move that quickly while sporting those impossibly high heels.

“What’s up with her? Did I say something wrong? Hell, she doesn’t think I actually blame her for not telling me she was working with Katze, does she?”, Riki asked, a slight frown of worry appearing on his face.

“No, she doesn’t, don’t worry.” *She thinks I blame her. And I do. That single mistake could’ve chased you away and ruined everything.* “I’m afraid it’s about time we said our goodbyes, Riki. It was a most delightful pleasure talking to you, I sure hope the opportunity will present itself again very soon”, and with a slight, polite bow and a chaste but absolutely delicious kiss to the young man’s dark-skinned hand, the majestically-dressed Elite said his goodbyes and followed in the footsteps of his female acolyte with the agile grace of a large feline.

Blushing, Riki wondered what relationship exactly the unlikely pair had. Friends with benefits? The easy banter between the two spoke of a very trusting and honest relationship with plenty of room for humour and criticism. But they still had to stay within the set perimeters of a Master-Pet relationship, didn’t they?

Either way his conversation with Mimea’s protector had given him much food for thought. Could he take the unusual Onyx – whose name he just realised he had never asked – as a typical example of his class? Could he possibly even use his interpretation of the world as a way to comprehend the inner workings of Iason Mink’s mind? How much difference was there between the mind of one Elite and the mind of another? Apparently even Raoul Am had a soft spot, although Riki had always suspected that if the biologist harboured any romantic feelings for anyone it would’ve been for Iason, with the way he would always come around the penthouse – often with one or other pricey gift – and displayed such open hostility towards Riki, almost as if he were jealous.

Stopping in his tracks, Riki’s attention to detail in combination with his sharp mind presented him with a very real possibility.

*Could Mimea’s new Master actually be Iason Mink?*

In fact, the more he thought about it, the more the horrifying thought was supported by small, seemingly insignificant pieces of information that he had come across. Mimea had never wanted to tell him the name of her new Master and now that they had finally been introduced Riki still didn’t know what his face looked like. And hadn’t she implied at some point that her new Master was a Blondie? But the Elite who had just left had been an Onyx. There were just too many things that didn’t add up! Also there was their apparently close affiliation with both Raoul Am and Katze.

But that would mean that the man he had just had that most revealing and insightful conversation with, had been none other than his former tormentor and ultimate nemesis!
“How about we leave this charade behind us and go somewhere more private to get to know one another a little bit better?”

There was just no way! No way that the same man who had so selfishly and carelessly disregarded the needs and feelings of others, had also formulated those head-on understandings of human emotion that they had just shared.

“That sounds like a coward’s way out.”

No way that the same monster would have consoled Riki when he showed such weakness.

“I cannot deny that the prospect excites me.”

No, it couldn’t be possible, if Riki was sure if anything these days it was of Mink’s obsessive need to see him destroyed. To punish him until his body shut down. To humiliate him until he didn’t have a single ounce of dignity left. To have him submit and beg on his knees. To break his spirit and take away all his hopes at freedom. To take his very will to live away and turn him into an undead corpse.

He had to be seriously sick in the head to even be capable of loving such an abomination! Why couldn’t he have simply fallen for Mimea’s Master instead, if he just had to go and fall in love with an Elite? At least the man possessed an understanding of human emotions and even displayed a curious interest in such things. Then again when he had said that Riki had sniffed out Mimea just now, Riki had caught a glimpse of something that he hadn’t thought he’d ever see in her eyes again. Fear.

Could one person truly contain two such completely opposite personas? Could the same person who tortured and abused people to such an extent, also feel loneliness and love? Could Jupiter’s own chosen son be the instigator of a rebellion against her? Could the one who had jealously hated Mimea enough to have her sent to the most terrible place imaginable for her, also be the one who had saved her from that same fate and embraced her as a close friend?

No. It couldn’t be. Even if Iason Mink and Mimea’s Master were both Elite, they were like two complete opposites in every other way. Two completely different people. Night and day. Black and white. Fire and ice.

Briskly continuing down the well-lit pavement, she didn’t slow down in the least when she heard another set of footsteps approaching heavily behind her. Just keep walking. As she sped up her pace and risked a brief look behind her naked shoulder, the gilded heel of one of her diamond-covered shoes got stuck in a slight crack in between the glistening pavement stones. Tripping and falling down face-first on the wet, hard ground, she screeched in frustration! Her silk dress ripped and one of her designer shoe-heels broken off, she slipped her feet out of the shoes’ painful embrace and started down the street in a run.

I can’t do this, not now.

Hearing her stalker’s footsteps pace up to match her current tempo, she risked a peek behind her again and yelled: “Just leave me alone!” Spotting an automated cab that had just pulled into a parking space up ahead, she sprinted the rest of the way there and jumped inside, securing the bullet-proof glass door behind her in a hurry. Slipping several slips of credit into the slot with shaking hands and
pressing a few buttons, she glanced outside only to see nothing there but a dark, empty street, rain now pouring down on pristinely-kept pavements. Did he really just leave?

As the transparent, orb-shaped cab rose up and hovered away, she had no idea where it was even going. Being in a hurry, she had randomly pressed a couple of buttons without paying any attention to the directions she set. There was no telling where she would end up now and frankly she didn’t find it in her to care at the moment. Anywhere is better than with him.

Watching the neon-lit streets of suburban Midas speed by in an indistinguishable blur, her thoughts strayed back to the last couple of months and how things had changed for her. She wasn’t sure anymore whether those changes had been for better or for worse. Her life used to be so easy, she’d know what was expected of her and she would deliver without fault. In exchange she had been rewarded with material luxury and peaceful tranquillity, at least most of the time. Did all this drama about love truly make things better? For if she’d learned anything it was that love and hate were but two sides of the same coin. To love meant to hate, the two were inescapably linked. Frustration. Self-doubt. Jealousy. Anger. Guilt. If those were the things that love entailed, then perhaps one was better off with nothing but lust.

She flew around most of Sasan and Janus alike before either her aircab’s batteries or her credit slips ran out, having never even taken a cab before she could only guess at the exact cause of its descent. Disembarking from the vehicle, she looked up and glanced at the environment surrounding her. None of it looked familiar in the slightest and the rusty trashcans lining the dirty pavements suggested a neighbourhood closer to Ceres than to Janus, somewhere along the unofficial border between two completely different worlds. One belonged to the light and one to the darkness, as was immediately evident from the obvious lack of street lighting in this area.

Holding unto her golden, embroidered clutch with suddenly sweaty hands, she opened it to see that there wasn’t a single paper credit left in there. In her thoughtless panic, she had fed them all into the cab’s greedy slot. Stranded at what appeared to be the edge of the slums, her golden credit card was obviously utterly useless. Of course she still had the cell phone, but she refused to call him and admit that she needed him to come save her! She wasn’t ready for that kind of humiliation just yet, he needed to stew in worry somewhat longer. If he even is worried about me, that is.

She started walking barefoot down the unknown, seedy street in the direction of the unmistakable, well-lit skyscrapers beaming in the distance, near enough to see yet far enough to be in another world. Like how one could clearly see the snow-covered peeks of mountains reaching up into the sky, even if one could never get close enough to even attempt to climb their steep heights. The barely-covered girl shivered at the night chill and wished that she would’ve at least bothered to put on her fur coat before heading out of the venue. But the memory of the golden, warm mink furs encasing her did nothing to ward off the cold, if anything it further intensified the feeling. Now able to make out the neon-red sign of a bar next to what appeared to be a pile of randomly-stacked rubbish, she wondered if perhaps she’d be able to hitch a ride with some of the customers there. Maybe if she waved her golden credit card and offered money for assistance rendered? Standing right outside the rusty-hinged, paint-bladdered door to the bar, she could read that the sign above said ‘Depraved’. That didn’t really sound like the kind of bar she would find people willing to help her, but what choice did she have at this point?

Breathing steadily in and out in an effort to calm herself, she pushed open the door and walked in. The bar was one of the filthiest, ill-reeking places she had ever visited – the lowly brothel she had been confined to included – and was lit by but a number of light bulbs casting an eerily yellow glow around. It didn’t take a close inspection to see that the few customers in attendance were possibly even less inviting than the pub itself was. They were all dressed in rags and looked as if they’d never even heard of washing. Or a decent hairdresser for that matter, as most of them had either long,
greasy, unkempt hair or were completely bald-shaven. Some of them even had a most unsettling combination of both those hairdos.

Most of the customers were seated alone or in twos at either the bar itself or at make-shift barrel tables in dark corners, but there was a slightly larger group of youngsters laughing and playing at a ramshackle pool table. Perhaps one of them would be willing to give her a ride home? Or at the very least back to civilisation. Carefully approaching the group while trying to remain inconspicuous, she nearly jumped up against the ceiling when the bartender barked something at her.

“Holy smokes, what have we got here! Just look at what just walked into my bar, fellows! For the life of me, I don’t think I’ve ever seen one of those up close... You reckon she’s an A-class?”

Looking up from their pool game, Sid and the other Bisons stared at the stunning, red-haired female Pet that had just walked into their regular haunt. “How the hell did one of those even get here? Y’reckon she walked all the way here?”

“G... good evening, gentlemen”, Mimea said in a small, slightly stuttering, distinctly feminine voice.

“Shit, she just said something! What’d ya call us, hon, ‘gentlemen’? Gah! She thinks we’re gentlemen!”, the bartender burst out laughing. “Why don’t ya sit down and tell us what ya doin’ here, sugar?”

Gratefully climbing atop one of the old, metal barstools, Mimea tried to compose herself before explaining: “I... ergh... I’m a bit lost. So I was wondering if any of you good men might be able to give me a ride into town?”

“Good men she calls us! Why, I haven’t seen a single good man in here since... well, since never!”, the bartender continued to joke.

“Wait a minute, I know this one...”, one of the young men at the pool table said with a none-too-friendly look in his dark-brown eyes.

“Whah? Guy, y’know this gall? How the fuck did’ya manage that?”, Norris wondered, scratching his dreadlocked head.

“Yeah, this is that red whore I told you about, the one that stole Riki away!”, Guy shouted accusingly and pointed a finger at her as if she were the foulest creature he had ever laid eyes on.

“Are you sure, Guy? They all look the same to me... Maybe some even are the same, y’know, like from the same series or something?”, Sid said, taking off his trade-mark shades to have a closer look.

“Please, I don’t want any trouble...”, the girl started, not liking where the situation was going. Remembering the name Guy from Riki’s many stories, she realised that as his former pairing partner this mongrel probably saw her as competition.

“If you didn’t want trouble you shouldn’t have stolen him away from us, you cock-sucking bitch!”, Guy yelled threateningly, coming at her armed with a pool cue.

Suddenly furious at the way even one of Riki’s closest friends talked about him as if he were just a thing to possess, she unexpectedly backfired: “He’s not an object you can own, OK! He makes his own choices, so nobody can ‘steal’ him!”

“Would’ya look at this now, she’s got spirit, this one! What, y’know Riki, hon? I can see why he’d take a likin’ to ya...”, the bartender whistled, pouring himself another glass of stout and then downing it in one go.
“That’s right, Riki ain’t no damn thing! But you are...”, the mongrel with the ponytail spat at her, disgust evident in his demeanour and pure hatred in his eyes.

“If you really believe that, then you’re just as bad as all those motherfuckers up at Tanagura”, she hissed at him, not quite knowing where she found the courage to go into a discussion with a bunch of hostile mongrels in some run-down bar at the edge of the slums, where nobody could hear her scream, or rather nobody cared if she did. At least she’d been able to pick up some of the neighbourhood vocabulary in her many conversations with Riki.

Thinking about how this girl apparently cared for Riki enough to antagonise Guy when he was being like this, Sid went to stand in between the two of them. “Listen, man, you clearly ain’t thinkin’ straight... If she’s a friend of Riki’s, don’t ya think he’d be upset with you if you did anything to ‘er?”

“Stay out of it or you’ll be getting a beating too, brother or not!”, Guy shouted violently, breaking his wooden cue in half over his knee with a scary cracking sound, sharp splinters sticking out of the ends of both halves.

At that the pending argument was interrupted by the bartender noisily smacking his glass down unto the bar. “All right, kids, you wanna beat up this young lady, you ain’t gonna do it in my bar, take your bloody business elsewhere!”

Shoving Sid out of the way and seizing the red-haired Pet by the hair, Guy started towing her towards the door as if she were a sack of merchandise. Screaming, she instinctively grabbed him by his long hair in retaliation and pulled with more might than anyone would have thought she had inside of her small, fragile body. Roaring in surprise at the unexpected attack, Guy loosened his hold enough for her to pull free and make a dash towards the exit.

Sid and Norris rushed to his side when they saw their second in command stumbling backwards after the girl had suddenly pulled free. “Grab her, you idiots! Don’t let her get away!”

Running down the street with adrenaline pumping through her veins, the young woman didn’t even feel the numerous shards of glass cutting into her bare feet or the cold rain beating down on her flimsily-clad back. Ducking into a nearby dark alleyway and hiding behind a stinking dumpster covered in obscene graffiti writings, she almost ripped her gem-embroidered purse to pieces when she grabbed for her phone. This confrontation with Riki’s ex-boyfriend was spinning way out of control, she had to put her pride aside and call for help!

Punching in the numbers in rapid succession without even thinking about using speed dial, she initially wondered at why the phone wasn’t working, only then noticing that apparently there was no reception in the area. Not even cell phones can work down here? For real?! Moving further into the alley while crouching down in the hope of getting a stronger signal there, she didn’t get any warning before she was hit in the back of the head with a heavy, blunt object of some sort.

“Gotcha now, you worthless slut! I GOT HER!!! SHE’S IN HERE!”

“But like I said, Iason, there is no reason at all for you to be worried. She’s always been prone to these antics when she doesn’t get her way, I’m sure she’s just out clubbing somewhere and simply
hasn’t contacted you out of spite”, Raoul spoke soothingly as he accepted two glasses of high-quality scotch from his latest Furniture – a young boy by the name of Derek – sliding one across the shiny mahogany surface of the antique table, towards his deviant brother who was elegantly reclining in the sofa opposite his. Even in relaxation Iason’s fair hair was perfectly arranged and his long limbs were most artfully posed. *Like a beautiful angel, carefully painted on canvas by the great Michelangelo himself*, Raoul thought absently. A thought that was disturbed only by the knowledge that inside that marvellous, golden-crowned body was the demonic spirit of a frightening sex fiend.

“Although I believe you may be right, there is no telling what she might have gotten herself into while in such a distressful state. Don’t tell me, it is I who am to blame for this falling out, I’m painfully aware of that”, Jupiter’s golden son admitted with a deep sigh, graciously accepting the offered crystal glass of solace.

Looking up as if just awoken from one of his many inner reveries, Raoul registered the gist of the other’s words as if in a delayed observation. “No, no, Iason, there is no need whatsoever to take the blame for what happened. In fact my Mimea has always been somewhat difficult to handle, I just became very proficient in covering her tracks and keeping her in check”, the scientist reassured his friend once more, settling down more comfortably in the safety of his plush couch as he took another sip of comforting, amber liquor. The rich taste left his throat burning in a not-entirely-unpleasant manner, reminding him of the taste of certain other painful pleasures he had indulged in earlier that night.

“Pray tell, how did you keep her in check, if I may be bold enough to ask?”, the pale-haired Blondie asked, wondering if perhaps a part of the girl’s mind had always been as stubborn as she revealed herself to be when she came into his service. Could Raoul have known all along just how much his supposed daughter’s personality had derived from the norm? If so, why had he not reported her or at least attempted to fix her up psychologically?

“Mostly bribery, combined with a considerable amount of flattery”, the scientist explained without the briefest of hesitations, an answer that came out that quickly it had to be the result of careful consideration and repetition. It was a practiced answer and therefore undoubtedly a false one.

“Well, in that case I haven’t got the slightest idea of what I’m doing wrong, because I have bribed and flattered her into oblivion every step of the way”, Iason tried to bait his brother into revealing something more about Mimea’s previous history.

Considering that his most cherished creation had spent a considerable amount of time as part of his brother’s household, Raoul decided it was safe to try and give him some advice of a more useful variety. Purposely choosing rather vague terminology, he said: “Perhaps you gave a little too much and got her craving more?”

“A little too much of what?”, Iason wondered. Surely he couldn’t be talking about nourishment? Or about the sex?

“Love. Attention. Patience. Freedom”, the more emotionally-inclined Blondie explained, hoping that after the whole thing with the mongrel and Mimea’s so-called tutoring perhaps his older brother had developed a better understanding when it came to human feelings.

“Yes... yes, you might be right about that, my friend”, the blue-eyed Blondie agreed, rather relieved that his younger brother was as of yet unaware of the sexual interactions he’d partaken in with what the geneticist still deemed to be his greatest achievement thus far.

“About which one?”, Raoul asked with a bit more curious enthusiasm than was becoming in a Blondie.
“About all of them, and probably more.”

Abruptly interrupted by the sound of his buzzer, the Head of the Syndicate reluctantly put down his still full glass and got up. “Duty calls I’m afraid. Thank you for your kind hospitality, and please don’t hesitate to call me in case she were to contact you first.”

“Of course, the pleasure was all mine, what are friends for?”, Raoul smiled as he stood up to accept the other’s customary peck on the cheek, only Iason went to his plump lips instead and briefly plundered the inside of his mouth most expertly, rendering him utterly incapable of speech.

“Hmm, don’t get me started on pleasure, Rara, or you might not make it through the night after all.”

Gotcha now, you worthless slut!” a threatening voice sounded from somewhere near her, yet she could hardly make out any of the individual words through the deafening ringing that was currently filling her ears. Slowly, she succeeded in forcing some feeling back into her numb limbs and started crawling in the opposite direction that she had heard the voice coming from.

“I GOT HER!!! SHE’S IN HERE!”, the hoarse shouting made her head throb painfully. Blinking desperately in an attempt to make out her surroundings, her vision returned only partially to her and revealed nothing but a dark blur from which it was impossible to derive any shapes or figures.

Blindly, she continued to slither her way through what felt wet and slippery enough to be a gutter, the moonlight making her squirming, slimy body glisten like a golden-scaled snake. When she wiped her face in an effort to return her vision and to appease her pounding headache, she felt some kind of dried crust covering her face and a sickening metallic scent filled her nostrils.

Blood. My blood.

Moving her fingers along the side of her face and unto the back of her head, she could feel more of it in a more or less congealed state, making her hair stick to the back of her scalp in a clotted mess. When she heard heavy footsteps approach from behind her, she instinctively stilled her movements and curled up in a ball to protect herself.

“Jus’ where the hell do ya think you’re goin’, huh?!”, Unknown hands grabbed her roughly by the hair and yanked her backwards hard enough to pull her to her feet, if only for a couple of seconds before her knees gave way beneath her and she fell down into a puddle with a filthy splashing sound. “There’s nowhere left for you to run, bitch. You’re gonna get what you deserve, what all of you bastard Tanagurans deserve! Ain’t that right?!”

Realising that she was in no state to run from this man and that there was most likely no way to reason with him, Mimea opted to play dead, not responding to his taunting comments in the slightest. Perhaps if he thought her dead or unconscious, he would leave her alone? But unfortunately there was no such luck, for her lack of response seemed to agitate him even further.

“What’s the matter, huh?! I’m not even worthy of a response from the whorish likes of you?! Answer me, damnit!”, Guy yelled like a man possessed, kicking her in the stomach and head repeatedly until a keening, pained whimper finally escaped her lips, shortness of breath preventing her from making any further sound. “You’re just pathetic! I really don’t get what Riki sees in you...”
“Yo, Guy! Wait up... did ya find ‘er?” a familiar voice sounded from the entrance of the alleyway. When her aggressor turned around in order to beckon his fellow gang members, Mimea abruptly saw in a moment of clarity as clear as day that this may very well be her only chance to ever see Riki or Iason again.

It’s now or never.

Not even consciously knowing how she had gotten up in spite of her injuries and shocked state, she was suddenly running faster than she had ever thought her tiny feet could carry her, dirty brick walls passing by her in a hazy, blurred fog. Not even seeing two feet ahead of her, her feet kept moving on until she nearly ran into a solid wall ahead, smacking unto the hard, muddy paving with enough force to make her spine rattle. A dead end?!

“How! She went this way!” it sounded from a not-too-far distance.

Urged on by the proximity of her assailants’ voices, she uselessly scrambled around on the pavement, frantically searching for a way out that couldn’t possibly be there at the dead end of some back alley that led absolutely nowhere. Dirty fingers covered in small cuts and ending in broken nails crawled along the concrete like spiders, until finally they came across a surface that felt different than the unyielding stone. A surface that reflected the rain instead of soaking it up, a surface that only partially covered the ground, allowing her fingertips to slip through. A metal grid!

Pushing her fingers through the small openings until they bled, she pulled as hard as she could, her fragile joints creaking from the strain. But the hard grid just wouldn’t budge. Further scraping off the skin of her fingers, she briskly pulled them out of the grid holes and slid them along the outer edges of the grid. There’s gotta be some way to open it!

Hearing multiple pairs of booted feet running through the overflowing gutter right behind her, she knew her time was nearly up.

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others, not tell others what their wishes ought to be! Was there truly nothing of his better days that he could keep, if only to soothe his aching nostalgia and try to have at least some order in an incomprehensibly chaotic world? Apparently it was expected of him not to give up only the supposed luxury of wearing proper footwear, but now his very personality itself as well!

Deciding that the floors could use some more thorough cleaning, he went into the back storage space to get a mob plus bucket and then got to work. The smell of the cleaning products in and of itself had a calming effect on him and the familiar, efficient mobbing movements worked miracles for his aching muscles. There was no need for him to go to any of those loud, unpleasant night clubs, for he had his very own sparkling clean dance floor right here in the store minus the audience, just the way he liked it. Softly he started singing a song that matched the rhythm of his graceful mobbing dance, an Eosian song that he hadn’t heard since his time up in the Tower.

In spite of all the bad things that had abruptly put an end to his stay there, he still thought of all the positive aspects of his life there more often than not. For him, Eos had been the perfect environment, providing him with secure safety, rational order and clear instruction. But for poor Riki it had been a true hell that had almost been his undoing. Curious about the young Ceresian’s reasons for stubbornly resisting the system’s every suggestion to live a well-organised, healthy and productive life, the ex-Furniture had taken a closer look at his daily existence and realised that where it might be what suited him personally there was no failsafe in place in case someone else would require something different. For after all no two individuals were ever exactly the same, as a well-trained Furniture he knew that even Pets with an identical genetic code often required a different approach. So why was it expected that everyone would fit into those very same routines and regulations that were applied to all of a certain class in Tanagura? The limited number of classes in the hierarchical system could possibly cater to all different personalities in existence, a fact that before meeting Riki had been completely lost on the passive, obedient Furniture.

The recent awareness that not all people were the same, even within one class, had been a true eye opener for the boy. It helped him see clearly that the fault was not with those individuals who fell out of favour or could not function properly, but rather the fault was the unawareness of the existence of individual difference. As of late he himself had in fact acquired more experience when it came to having to function within a routine that didn’t quite match your own inclinations or skill-set and it had made him feel a profound respect for those few atypical individuals he had come across. Riki. But also Katze, who by his own admission was a far more efficient and motivated Black Market dealer than he had ever been a Furniture. And the young Mimea, Lord Am’s former Pet, who apparently preferred a sexual relationship with a mongrel over one with another Pet. And perhaps even Lord Mink, who he was eternally grateful for the unexpected mercy bestowed upon him. Even now, his former Master continued to hold a protective hand over his head by indirectly keeping him employed within his own enterprises, which given his status were manifold.

Finishing up his cleaning activities with a final polishing swipe, the young ex-Furniture gathered the cleaning supplies and went to the storage space to put them back in the designated cupboard, already feeling much more like himself again after having allowed himself the short respite of an – in his opinion – way overdue cleaning session in his current work space. After having turned off the stereo installation and main light switch, the youngster finally turned to his personal locker to take out a fresh shirt from the pile of free time shirts he kept stored there. Not that his so-called “free time” shirts looked any different or in any way less formal than his “work time” shirts, but he simply felt uncomfortable in anything else, wearing casual clothing without a turtle neck simply made him feel scruffy and as good as naked. Truly, it was not for lack of trying. After his first day at the new job he’d been unusually excited to go down to a department store – low-budget of course, cause his wages weren’t exactly generous and he wanted to keep a tight check on his finances from the start – in order to purchase some clothes to wear in his spare time. For the first time in his life he’d had the opportunity to buy clothes for himself that would be his very own. He could choose any set of
clothes he wanted in any colour or style – as long as within his carefully calculated budget – and he was going to pay for them using his first, self-earned wages. After having arrived at the department store men’s clothes section he had been overwhelmed by the incredibly wide range of choices available. How in Jupiter’s name was one supposed to make any decision when surrounded by so many different possibilities, each with their own merits and down-sides? In an effort to make a choice that really suited him, he’d tried on every single item of men’s clothing sold at the store. But after a tediously long, exhausting session of stripping and re-dressing, he hadn’t gotten any closer to making a decision. In the end he’d opted to just buy the equivalent of what he wore for work and what he had been wearing all along ever since he left Guardian, not knowing what other criteria to use to make a selection.

Mentally forcing himself to cast at least a glance in the general direction of the mirror on the inside of the locker door – a obligation he’d held up ever since he started working but as of late had only upheld for about once a month – he was in fact somewhat surprised at the face he saw looking back at him. When had the shape of his face sharpened like that? And was it just him or was his hair a much darker shade of brown than it had been last time he’d checked it in a mirror? Glancing down after having pulled on his spare time trousers he had to conclude that unfortunately he would have to re-undertake the whole clothes store expedition sometime soon, for apparently his legs had gotten longer AGAIN and it simply wouldn’t do to have his ankles showing whenever he reached up to grab something off a high-up shelf! Even if this particular pair was only meant to be worn at home or when going out to get groceries, which was pretty much his only spare time activity besides cleaning the compact studio he currently occupied.

But he was actually grateful for the long days at work, for if he could not decide on what to wear in his free time, how was he supposed to decide on what to do in it? Much dreading that future forced, undoubtedly random selection of activities – for his first annual holidays were coming up next month – he thought about starting a conversation with one of his co-workers at the store so he could just copy whatever they were planning on doing. Although they would probably find it strange for him to start up a conversation on his own initiative after having worked in the same place for nearly a year without hardly ever speaking two sentences to anyone. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to communicate with someone or that he didn’t want to make friends. It was just that whenever the moment arrived, he had absolutely no idea what to say, except for things relating to work and given the nature of their work those were fairly limited. He had in fact spent several evenings trying to prepare such a conversation, contemplating the options that his day-to-day life appeared to present for social interaction – both at work and outside of it, taking careful notes on how to proceed in those different scenarios and then memorising them. Only the situations that did occur were always somewhat different than what he had envisioned at home, or someone else came along and joined in the conversation before he’d had a chance to say anything other than “good day”, “yes” or “no”.

Perhaps it would be a more realistic idea to try and eavesdrop on a conversation concerning the activities his co-workers would participate in over the holidays? Julio and Enrique were both full-blown chainsmokers and would stand right outside the backdoor talking and smoking like clockwork every day. If he hadn’t been so convinced of how detrimental nicotine was for one’s health, the young man would probably have started smoking himself only to have an excuse to at least stand around in the proximity of an acquaintance during breaktime. At least it would give him some way to fill up the utterly pointless time-gap he was now expected to endure up to 3 times a day. For the life of him he still could not understand the point of wasting an entire twenty-minute timeslot on just sitting there, leaving work where it was, while in the full knowledge it would need to get done after the break anyways. Fortunately it took him about 5 minutes to finish his sandwich and water bottle at lunch and he could fill up another 5 minutes by going for an extended restroom session that included washing his hands, face and at times even feet (those shoes his boss had provided for him were always suffocating them). But the rest of those painfully long 10 minutes of obligated break weighed
heavy on his heart, providing him with way too much room to think and doubt everything that ever was, is and will be.

Dark, cold, sticky fluid closed around her body like quicksand trying to suck her in and keep her trapped beneath the surface until her very skin dissolved and her flesh rotted, leaving nothing behind but clean, perfectly-bleached bones. Already the lack of air was making her small lungs burn and the unforgiving cold of the toxin-saturated waste water was numbing her limbs and senses.

No! It cannot end like this! I refuse to go down like this!

Feeling her light body being carried along by the artificial current beneath the muddy water’s surface, she stuck out her arms and legs as far as they could go in a desperate effort to find something to hold unto. Finally, when her lungs felt close to bursting and stinking fluid was already slipping past her lips and into her airways, her right hand felt metal once more and grabbed unto it for dear life. As she hoisted herself unto the metal service ladder and out of the waste water with energy she didn’t even know she had left, she coughed and vomited all over the place, for the first time ever not giving a shit about how disgusting it no doubt made her look and smell. Forcing herself up the ladder with every final ounce of strength that remained within her, she feared the worst when the metal grid above her turned out to be tightly shut and not opening by even an inch.

Not wanting to accept that there was no way out and dreading a return to the cold water’s lethal embrace, she screeched in frustration and her tiny fists banged unto the hard, metal surface. Then unexpectedly, the metal grid was pulled away from her and strong arms caught her around her bruised ribs, pulling her out of the dark, reeking waterway and back unto dry land where she could at least see the stars and twin moons above.

Weezingly pulling in breaths in between puking on the ground, she didn’t even bother to look up at her saviour. Until she recognised that voice: “Did you really think you could get away from me that easily? Think again, slut! I’ll find you, no matter where you run to!”

Mentally sighing before shutting the locker with slightly more force than was strictly necessary, the young shop assistant slipped on his coat and hoisted his satchel over a scrawny shoulder. Then he finally went out the front door of the store and carefully locked it behind him using the retina-scanner, for having employees carry around key cards would be much too risky in a neighbourhood this close to the slums. Only yesterday the manager had warned him to take care on his way back home after working late, for the “lowly scoundrels” as he called them were “migrating up!” and would soon be “swarming” their side of Orange Road “like so many filthy cockroaches!”.

Shivering at both the cold night air hovering icily around his exposed neck and the invisible threat of would-be assailants from the slum stalking him in the shadows, the youth turned up his coat collar and started walking briskly in the direction of his small, one-bedroom apartment, which fortunately was only a few blocks away. Don’t be silly, you’ve walked this road a thousand times without ever
even glimpsing any mobsters or mongrels altogether for that matter.

Turning a street corner in a hurry while glancing backward in worry at what was but the sound of howling desert winds, the boy was scared half-shitless when he unexpectedly bumped into another warm body moving at a high velocity.

“Help!!! Somebody help!!!....”

“Umph!”, all the air crushed from his lungs at the impact, both him and the body he had collided with falling down and rolling across the cold, slippery pavement. Had the stranger he had just bumped into been crying out for help, or had that merely been another one of his fearful imaginings?

“Oh, crap! Sorry, man, I didn’t see you there... Shit, you gotta help me!! There’s this girl, she’s hurt, like real bad... I dunno, maybe she’s dead already... Fuck, you gotta help me, man! C’mon, it’s right this way, they left ‘er in a gutter...”

Before he even gave any conscious thought to what he was doing, the young shop assistant scrambled to his legs and ran after the other boy, following him all the way into what had to be the filthiest, darkest alleyway he’d ever seen. It was only when he reached the end of the final pool of dim light beneath a street lantern that he even considered the risk paired with following a complete stranger – dressed in very shabby clothing now that he was looking more closely – into a pitch-black alley where any unknown threats might lurk in the dark.

“C’mon, hurry, kid! I don’t think she’s got much time left!”, the youngster clad in a tattering pair of jeans, muddy sneakers and a worn grey-ish hoodie implored him, grabbing his arm none-too-gently and hauling him along further into the darkness, the stench of the sewers strong enough now to irritate his nostrils and make his eyes water. *By Jupiter, I’ve never smelt anything so foul in my life!*

“How can you even see where we’re going in here? Are you sure this is safe?”, he asked uncertainly, the sheer height of the pitch of his voice appearing to startle the other boy.

“Dun... dunno, but they left ‘er lying unconscious here, so I don’t think they’ll be back anytime soon...”, he responded, as if he were trying to convince himself of that fact just as much as the other.

*They* left someone unconscious? Who were *they*? And apparently *they* could come back...

“But if they do, they’ll be in for a surprise...”, the kid continued, as suddenly he flipped open a huge pocket-knife, right in front of the ex-Furniture’s face. “What about you? Got any weapons?”

“Ehhh... Not really?” What on Amoy had he gotten himself into?! He should’ve never followed the strange kid! The shabby youngster looked a lot more threatening in the shadows, the moonlight glinting off the rusty blade he was waving around with such nonchalant ease. Most of his grimy face was hidden by hair that looked as if it hadn’t been combed in years and was coiling around his head like snakes.

“Then we’ll have to hurry, just in case they come back for more. Come, help me get the girl outta here...”, the shabby youngster said, glancing behind his shoulder as if expecting some monstrosity to jump out and devour him alive any second.

It was only now that the shop assistant even noticed that what he thought was a pile of garbage heaped up in the gutter next to them was in fact a lifeless body lying face-down, covered in old newspapers and trash.

“I covered ‘er up, just in case anyone else came along. I didn’t wanna give the crazy sickos out there any ideas, y’know...”, the filthy kid with the messy hair said while he uncovered a battered, fine face
and a bloody, naked torso. Covered in scraps, cuts and angry bruises it was hard to even make out the flawless paleness of bio-engineered skin and the two, dusky-pink nipples crowning two slight bumps on the chest.

*It’s a Pet! A female, A-class Pet!*

Crouching down while helping the skinny kid dust the rest of the trash off the body, the ex-Furniture noticed the unusually bright-red shade of the Pet’s hair. Where had he seen a female Pet with hair like that before? There was something vaguely familiar about this girl...

“Is she... alive?”, he asked, his voice even more high-pitched now and shaking unsteadily.

“Dunno. Could be. But this sure looks like a lotta blood...”, the snake-haired youngster said, apparently not as appalled by the sight of blood and possible death as the other one was.

Carefully grabbing a hold of her cold, mud-smudged wrist, the ex-Furniture pressed a finger against her pulse point. “She has a pulse, but it’s very weak. Can you tell if she’s breathing?”

Moving his right ear right above her mouth, the kid listened carefully. “Nah... nah, I can’t hear a bloody thing.”

“Then we’ll need to resuscitate her”, the ex-Furniture stated, starting to roll up his sleeves.

“We gotta do *what*?...”

“Reanimate her, give her mouth-to-mouth”, he explained patiently.

“You mean like... kiss her? Oh man, don’t tell me you’re one of those fucking sickos too!”, the kid yelled, suddenly jumping up and waving his knife at the other in a clearly threatening manner.

“Of course I don’t want to kiss her! Why would I want to kiss her?!” He’d never even kissed anyone in all his life. And with the way the other was now coming towards him with deadly intent, he was probably never going to.

“But you said mouth-to-mouth...”, the other stopped in his tracks, still clutching the knife.

“As in start up her breathing again! Please, move aside so I can help her”, he pleaded.

“OK...”, the mongrel kid said as he pocketed the knife and stepped slightly away from the female, abused body. “But you better not do anything sick to ‘er!”

Still not understanding why the kid with the strange, messy hair seemed to think anyone would be so intent on doing anything unorthodox to the girl’s lifeless body, the ex-Furniture chose to ignore those final words for the sake of efficiency. It would be unprofessional to start an argument with this aggressive youngster while a life was hanging in the balance.

After attempting for several endlessly long minutes to restore the badly-injured girl’s respiratory functions, the young salesman feared that it was simply beyond his own, limited medical abilities to resuscitate her pale, lifeless body. If only he’d still had his Furniture med kit! Or access to Tanaguran medical facilities...

“What’s wrong? Why’d ya stop?”, the young mongrel who had led him there asked, trying to keep up his tough act and not allow the worry to show on his face, but failing miserably in front of one who had spent the better part of his life concealing emotion. “Ya need me to take over for a sec? Just show me how...”
“I... I don’t know how... I’m, sorry, I...”, glancing at the bruised, bloody face again with the knowledge that he was failing her, he saw – truly saw – her elegant features for the first time and recognised her instantly. Mimea!

“What is it? Did ya think of somethin’ else?”, the young mongrel asked, a slight shimmer of hope shining in his dark brown eyes, nearly concealed by all that wild hair yet not quite.

“I... I know her! I think... I think there’s someone who’d want to help us!”, fiddling around in his satchel, he finally got a hold of his cellular phone and immediately started punching in one of those Tanaguran phone numbers he hadn’t needed to use in what seemed like forever yet could still remember effortlessly.

Allowing himself to fall down into a disgraceful heap of limbs on the couch, Raoul was relieved when his mercuriously unpredictable curse of a brother had walked out the door. Could they not have one single get-together anymore these days without every single sentence being laced with sex? When opening that forbidden door, Raoul hadn’t truly known what he was getting himself into. Obviously having a romantic relationship with Iason at all – no matter how infuriatingly and egocentrically sex-oriented – was to be considered a form of improvement, but he was beginning to understand what had driven the young mongrel to want to run as far away from his gorgeous, sex-crazed and slightly psychotic Master as he possibly could. Not only was the notorious top Blondie insatiable, he was also alarmingly obsessive, selfish and blunt about it.

Truly, Iason, have you no shame at all? Have you no fear of repercussions?

Picking up the crystal chalice that sat on a Chinese imperial side-table, the romanesque beauty thoughtfully drank what little liquor was left and had just made up his mind to continue writing on his latest concerto composition when the phone rang. Preferring to manage his own telephone calls rather than relying on his Furniture to deal with such supposedly trivial matters, Raoul ran across the room to beat his young, eager Furniture to it. The boy meant well, but he had an irritatingly tenacious tendency to answer any and all calls to the household without the Master of said household ever getting a chance to do so himself. Perhaps the Furniture that finished training nowadays were perfectly capable of handling most matters addressed over the phone, but either way Raoul at the very least wanted to know what was going on in his own household! It was sufficient that the youth record the calls during working hours and report them to him in the evenings, as Raoul had desperately tried to explain on several occasions now. But it was as if the youth simply couldn’t understand what he was saying, for in spite of his obedient nature he had not paid his Master’s wishes on the matter any heed.

Or had Raoul been speaking Italian again without even realising it? Ever since studying some of the ancient, Earthian languages for recreational purposes, he had often caught himself unconsciously speaking them in everyday life. Sighing when he saw the red flickering light on the communication device present in the living room turn green before he had been able to press the response button, Raoul wondered if it would be too late to have Derek transferred to another household. The boy was of good will to be sure and obedient to a fault, yet he seemed to lack what Lord Am considered to be good communication skills when it came to asking further questions after being given an instruction that was not clear to him or posed some other difficulty. Ironic in one so stubbornly eager to take up each and every form of communication addressed to the household!
As such, Raoul was truly surprised to hear his Furniture call out for him when only one minute into the conversation on the phone. Derek, asking him advice on how to react to a caller? Unheard of! Perhaps there was hope yet of a future in the Am household for the boy. Less it was Iason again with one or other ridiculous matter relating to the ill-fated mongrel, but shouldn’t he still be in an audience with Jupiter at the moment? Rushing over to the communication centre before young Derek had a chance to change his mind and proceed on his own after all, Raoul nearly snatched the device from the other’s small hands and said:

“Am household, Lord Am himself speaking, how may I be of assistance?”

Upon hearing what the caller had to say, the enchantingly gorgeous Blondie’s face turned as white as a sheet. Deigning no further response needed than a brief: “I’m on my way, stay there!”, Raoul turned to his Furniture and commanded: “Derek, bring the car round the front, quick!”

“Ergh.... Of course, Sir, however I ought to inform you that...”, the youngster began hesitantly.

“Hurry up, no time to waste!”, Lord Am shouted somewhat louder than he had intended as he ran out the front door without even bothering to put on a cloak and still clutching the phone in his hand, his booming voice and hurried manner scaring the poor boy into submission.

Once inside the glass elevator, he dialled Iason’s private cell phone only to be automatically referred to voicemail. “Iason, it’s me, something’s happened to Mimea. I just received a phone call from your ex-Furniture, stating that she was found somewhere along the Ceresian border and badly wounded, possibly fatally so. I’m heading there now myself and sending for an ambulance. I’ll call you once I know more.”

Walking through the gigantic, decorated front doors of Eos Tower, Raoul couldn’t care less about being seen running in public while making his way over to his fastest car. For once he was grateful for his new Furniture’s presuming manner in selecting a car other than the usual one without being told to do so. Before putting on his seat belt or even bothering to shut the car door, the Blondie gave the frightened young man behind the wheel the coordinates he’d gotten off Daryl’s cell phone and urged him to make haste.

End theme: Tokyo Rose – Yakuza (feat. Alex Ultraboss)

To Be Continued ...
Sid ventures out into the streets of nighttime Midas in search of Riki. Riki tries to get to a badly injured Mimea, completely oblivious to the fact that he's not the only one who cares for her. How will Riki react when he is finally face to face again with none other than Iason Mink himself?

**************

**soundtrack:** Voicians – Prayer

**************

I try

I try

Rain fell down heavily on already-drenched, bony shoulderblades as the rag-clad youngster ran down the slippery street, ignoring the brownish water that splashed up knee-high as already-soaked feet continued to pound across the filthy, flooded pavements of the border area. Even to those who had grown up in Ceres the intricate network of small, criss-crossing backstreets and alleyways was still very much like an inescapable maze filled with the ruins and despair of the former district's violent past.

**You are trapped in a maze of pain and desire**

Ill-boding images of the bloody result of blind hatred inflicted upon pale, female flesh replayed in his mind even as he tried to blink them away. Whatever the Tanaguran girl had done with or to Riki, a part of him knew that it could never justify the brutality of the punishment afflicted on her by Guy and the rest of his gang. If any one individual could be pointed out as responsible for the suffering of the inhabitants of Ceres, that young girl most definitely was not that person.

She’d never asked to be born into a life of abundant luxury and hedonistic pleasure any more than she had asked for the mongrels to be thrown out into the slums to die at the age of 15. If anything she
was probably a victim in all of this as well, even if in a very different way. After all the privileged existence of Tanaguran Pets was limited by the expiration date on their youth and beauty, after that they would end up chucked in the gutter just the same or even worse: sold to a brothel in Lower Midas – likely catering to a sadistically-inclined clientele – or even to a mining colony or an illegal organ-harvesting operation.

Whatever the female’s motivations for venturing out into the slums at night, she was a friend of Riki’s and that meant she couldn’t possibly be the self-centred, cold-hearted bitch Guy had made her out to be while having barely spoken a word to her. Guilt at having neglected to do anything to stop his fellow gang members from mutilating the poor girl now came to the forefront of his mind in full force, especially after having seen that other sales kid’s reaction when he’d apparently realised that he knew the girl. Neither of those two had struck him as the typical self-serving Tanagurans who looked down on everybody else that the gang members had often lamented about, just people in the wrong place at the wrong time, caught up in life’s crazy maelstrom like the rest of them. The only thing left for him to do to make amends was to at the very least find Riki to tell him that his friend had been gravely injured and where he could find her.

Shit! Where the fuck am I even going to start looking for him?!

Realising that not only was he utterly clueless when it came to the location of Riki’s new hide-out but he didn’t even own a hoverbike anymore after the last old piece of rusty shrapnel had broken down for good. The young mongrel was breaking his head over where he could get some proper transportation real quick in the middle of the goddamn night while mindlessly running in the direction of the Midasian border through another deserted street decorated with faded graffiti and littered with trash.

Suddenly the answer to his transportation problem presented itself to him through the falling raindrops almost as if it were a revelation sent by some ancient god everyone now deemed to be nothing but the product of mere wishful thinking. But apparently sometimes wishful thinking paid off, for as the slum kid ascended the white, stone steps a shiny, metal monstrosity just thundered to a shuddering halt right in front of him, sleek transparent doors hissing open automatically as if in invitation.

Follow me out of there

I can take you everywhere

Hopping unto the nearest monorail car before the doors had a chance to shut in his face, Sid didn’t even contemplate the possibility that perhaps he was required to purchase a ticket before boarding. Slouching down into a comfortable, pristinely white seat right next to the door, the young mongrel sighed in temporary relief.

Looks like luck is on my side today, even if it wasn’t on that poor chick’s.

As more and more people boarded the monorail from Janus onwards, Sid started feeling more and more out of place with every stop. It was funny how visibly the Midasian social hierarchy manifested itself as the car moved further and further north, towards Minstral Park and Apathia and finally Tanagura. Most people who looked like they didn’t belong got out somewhere in Janus, before they approached Sasan, thus even if Midasians of all social standings made use of this means of public transportation, they hardly ever met anyone too far below or above their own status. Just as people
were beginning to notice and even point at him and he was beginning to wonder about the probability of Riki being anywhere this far north, Sid was startled out of his worried indecision by a strange, vibrating sensation against his left butt cheek.

*What the fuck’s up with these monorail seats?! What, is this some kind of massage or something?*

Getting up from the seat in a reflex to get away from the evasive vibrations, the youngster then noticed that they were in fact originating from his own back jeans pocket. Only then did he remember how he had nearly stumbled over a cell phone lying around in the gutter of one of the alleyways as he ran to find help earlier. Not able to give it any thought at the time, he had automatically grabbed the device and put it in his pocket before running on.

Pulling the phone out of his pocket he saw that beneath the muddy dirt caked to it, its original colour had been a bright shade of pink studded with diamond decorations of some sort. *Shit! This has to be her phone!* Feeling it continuing to vibrate in his hand, he quickly used his sleeve to clean the smudges off the screen and instantly recognised the word appearing even if he’d barely learned how to read before being kicked out of Guardian prematurely. *Riki!*

In a frantic hurry he started blindly pushing all of the buttons in an effort to answer the call, as more and more passers-by were starting to accusingly glare at him as if he had just stolen that phone off of somebody. At some point in his hurried frenzy he had apparently pushed the right button, for a familiar voice sounded from the device.

**Come on search me finally**

**I can take you everywhere**

**Answer my prayer**

“Finally! Fuck, I think you’re taking that shit about ‘anticipation’s half the pleasure’ a bit too goddamn serious, Missy! I’ve been waiting here for over three hours now and I was just starting to get seriously worried when you didn’t pick up! I thought you said we were gonna meet up to discuss what went down at the party... Or wait, you’re still there? What the hell, it’s like two in the morning, aren’t those assholes supposed to go to work in six hours?”

“R...Riki... It’s me, Sid...”, he said, trying to sound as nonchalant and tough as usual but his voice came out in a broken whisper instead.

A long silence followed after that, which went on and on and on.... until Sid nearly found himself throwing away the phone just to not have to tell him.

“Sid?! What the hell, Sid? How... How’d’ya get this number? I mean, how come you’re on my speed dial, you don’t even have a phone...”, Riki’s confused voice sounded at the other end of the line, its timbre familiar and reassuring to Sid even if his old friend was currently stumbling over his words in nervous confusion.

“I... I found her phone.... in a puddle in the alley.... after... after... Oh God, Riki!!! Oh God, it was so awful!! It was so bloody awful! And I just stood there... like I couldn’t move, like... like a goddamn coward!!”, he finally burst out hysterically in an uncharacteristic fit of emotion, falling to his knees in the middle of the monorail car in front of all those higher-class Midasian snobs and crying his heart
out as if he were all alone in the world.

“You found her phone... Mimea’s phone...”, for a moment Riki’s heart stood still at the realisation that something truly horrible had to have happened to Mimea to make Sid freak out like this. “How the hell do you even know who she is?! What was so bloody awful? Oh fuck! Did something happen to her?! How the hell were you there?!”

“I... I... It wasn’t my fault! It was him! It was Guy, he convinced the others that... that she’d stolen you away from us! That she was evil... I didn’t think that but... but what could I do?! I tried to help her... after they’d left... and then I ran into this kid and he did this... this CP... CP whatever thing! But I don’t know if it worked, I left her with him to come find you...”, the younger mongrel desperately ranted on, turning round and round inside the relatively crowded train car while nearly crushing the flashy, high-tech cell phone against his ear.

“Sid... Sid! Listen to me! You gotta calm down, OK? Calm down and just tell me this: where is she? Where is she, Sid?!”, Riki said slowly and articulately, momentarily succeeding in staging off his own panic attack. If he wanted any chance at resolving this situation or at least gathering the necessary intel, he had to keep a clear head.

“I... I left her in the alley near the back of Skankies, behind the trash bins. Y’know, the alley with all the broken windows and the Red Tigers graffiti. This other kid’s with her, he was just passing by when I called out for help, said he was a Furniture before so... so I guess he’s had some medical training...”

“OK, Sid. But where are you at the moment?”, Riki added, only then contemplating that Sid was probably running all across Midas in an attempt to find him, thus making himself an easy target for the Dark Men or other local authorities. The last thing he needed right now as for yet another friend to get into trouble because of him.

“I... I’m not sure...”, the other mongrel started unsurely, for the first time since picking up the phone now glancing out the window at the speeding, neon-lit landscape of glass and metal. All of it looked so alien to a kid from the slums, where the brick buildings had a slightly less harsh and warmer appearance and at the very least the obscene graffiti writings and pictures added a bit of colour to the bleakness of their everyday existence.

“What the hell d’ya mean, you’re not sure? How can you not know where you are?!”, Riki temporarily lost his nerve at the seeming stupidity of the other’s comment.

“Cause I’m on the monorail, OK! I had to come find you quickly and... I’m not sure what the last stop was...”, his voice faltered as he glanced around trying to discern any information from the texts that rapidly flashed by on several screens in the car, but he couldn’t even tell if those texts had anything to do with public transport or if they were simply commercials or news reports.

“Did you pass Sasan yet?”, Riki asked, trying to keep the worry he was currently feeling from his voice. Anywhere past Sasan detection would become virtually unavoidable and Sid would be sure to get into trouble. A lot of trouble.

“Yeah.... yeah, like ages ago... I don’t even recognise any of these buildings, but they’ve really gotten a lot taller and shinier...”

“Shit! You gotta get off, you idiot! It’s a freakin’ miracle the public transport police hasn’t discovered you yet!”, Riki yelled, knowing from experience how fast the monorail could get you from the edge of the slums all the way to Upper Midas and beyond. And once a mongrel got stuck way up there, the chances of them getting down again without getting caught were practically zero. Plus the Dark
Men often let minor offenders go after giving them a good beating because the Midas police stations too over-crowded to house everyone who got arrested. The Tanaguran police force however, had no such restrictions...

“I dunno where I am... I’ll ask those people over there...”, Sid said, removing the phone from his ear and approaching a nearby Furniture who didn’t appear to be hostile.

“No!! No, you gotta hide somewhere and keep a low profile! Just hide on the train until it hits back south!”, Riki yelled, just as his phone was starting to emit that beeping sound that meant the battery was critically low. *Shit shit shit!*

“Hey? Hey, kid? Can you tell me where I am? I’ve never been on one of these before and I got sorta lost...”, Sid asked in the friendliest voice he could muster, showing off all of his crooked, yellowish teeth.

Staring up at him with wide eyes in blank terror for a couple of seconds, the Furniture then jumped from his seat and ran away down the entirety of the monorail car as if none other than the devil himself were on his tail.

Nearby onlookers were whispering to each other that maybe someone ought to call the police, for a mongrel on a monorail car couldn’t mean anything good, possibly that scoundrel was planning a terrorist attack!

“What are we going to do with him? What’s to stop him from coming over here and attacking us?!”, a young Pet cried out in anguish.

“Why haven’t the security cameras picked up this disturbance yet? What’s taking the public transport police so long?”, a high-class Midasian businessman wondered while contemplating whether or not to inform the authorities himself.

Soon realising that he wasn’t going to get any help from these people, Sid then also turned tail and quickly made his way down the train while looking for a place to hide. Once the authorities had been informed, the monorail would become a death trap for the mongrel, with no way to get off without being arrested...

*I try to help you*

*I fight to get to you*

*I try to find you*

*You need to get out of there*

Glancing at the missed calls section of his high-tech, silver phone out of mere habit as he quickly yet elegantly descended the marble, fountain-lined stairs of Jupiter Tower’s main entrance, Lord Mink was surprised to see several missed calls from both his old friend Raoul and surprisingly Daryl, his ex-Furniture who he had secretly helped to escape persecution for the crime of letting loose an unruly
Raoul calling him at this time of night was one thing, but the former Furniture having the guts to do so after having left his employ for over a year was highly unusual and therefore picked his interest. But then he realised that Raoul had been there when he was summoned by Jupiter earlier that evening and it didn’t seem at all like his scientifically-minded brother’s usual efficiency to be calling him while fully aware that he was unavailable...

Opting that Raoul’s call was undoubtedly of more importance and maybe even related to Daryl’s, Iason answered the green-eyed Blondie’s call first only to be automatically sent to voicemail. That was strange, what could Raoul possibly be doing at this time of night that was urgent enough to switch off his phone? Only then bothering to listen to his recorded voicemail messages – something he otherwise never did for with the number of messages the Head of the Syndicate received on a daily basis he could fill his days with virtually nothing else – Iason was even more surprised to learn that Raoul had left him a message. He knew that his closest brother hated talking to voicemail machines more than anything else and therefore hardly ever resorted to such an indirect means of communication.

Upon hearing the short, hurriedly recorded message Iason felt the artificial blood practically freeze in his veins even as his electronic heart started pumping over-time. *Something’s happened to my Mimea!*

He immediately concluded that it was all his fault, if he hadn’t pushed Mimea into an argument – which was basically nothing but a childish jealousy reaction on his part upon witnessing her interact with Riki first-hand – she would’ve been safely at the penthouse now! Once again he was stunned at how only a small mistake was required to make human relationships ‘go to hell’, as Riki would’ve put it. One moment of needless jealousy could’ve very well caused the loss of his one and only confidante. The moment she had left, he had felt the guilt start to ceaselessly gnaw at his heart at the memory of seeing true fear in her eyes for the first time in months. All that hard work to gain her trust had been undone in one stupid moment of regression!

**You escaped to a place which forced you to give in**

Rushing down the rest of the stairs in an unflattering hurry, not caring if his white cloak billowed open behind him and got wet as he sped past the decorative fountains, Iason immediately activated the tracking device he had installed on Mimea’s phone a while back. He didn’t want to risk spoiling the authentic relationship he’d managed to build with the young woman by giving her an actual Pet ring, but he simply couldn’t leave her safety up to chance.

Running down the street at top speed – which made him look more like a passing white-and-gold blur rather than a distinguishable figure – the Blondie took the stairs up to the nearest monorail station in all but two impossible jumps. Spying a monorail car just leaving and realising that taking the next one would require him to wait for at least another half an hour, Iason opted to run after it until he was close enough to grab unto the back of the last car and swing himself unto the roof of the speeding train. It was a good thing that said roof was made out of metal and that his robotic feet had built-in magnets, for even a weight such as his could’ve easily been thrown off the rapidly-moving vehicle as it turned a bend in the line.

*This has to be by far the most insanely inappropriate thing I’ve ever done.*
In public, that is.

Follow me out of there

I can take you everywhere

Not but five minutes later, the honourable Representative of Jupiter slipped inside the last monorail car through the window as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. Fortunately for him hardly any passengers were on a train from Tanagura heading to Midas at this time of night, therefore nobody had apparently witnessed his most severe indiscretion.

He quickly took off his wet, ripped cloak that had been completely ruined by being whipped all over a moving train roof and stuffed it in a nearby trash bin, after which he straightened his attire and combed his fingers through his hair before heading out into the more crowded monorail cars.

He would just have to pretend that the black skid marks on the front of his formerly pristinely-white leggings were part of some or other Elitist fashion statement. With any luck the few passengers he did encounter on this nightly outing would be mimicking his look by the end of the week, causing several high-class clothing stores in Upper Midas to start producing and selling skid-marked leggings in all colours and sizes.

But the mirth of the situation was lost on Iason, for a dark and unsettling feeling had taken a hold of his mind over all else.

Mimea, my darling, what have I done to you?

Come on search me finally

I can take you everywhere

Frantically searching for something inside the small bathroom that would help him barricade the door, Sid realised that he’d really put himself in some serious shit this time. Why the fuck did Guy have to go and beat Riki’s Tanaguran girlfriend to within an inch of her life?! Since when was one of his oldest youth friends a bloody psychopath?! Sometimes it just felt like the whole damn world had gone bat-shit crazy!

“Fuck fuck fuck!!! And why the hell am I wrapping toilet paper around the door handle!! Like that’s gonna stop anyone from getting in here!”, he angrily hissed at himself, after which he switched on the tap over the small sink and stuck his head under it in a desperate effort to calm himself down and force some or other miraculous escape plan out of his brain, but to no avail. Glancing out the small window, he immediately opted against trying to break and climb through it, for surely jumping from a moving train at this speed would be pure suicide.
He nearly jumped straight through said bullet-proof window anyways when he heard a loud, booming voice right outside the bathroom door:

“This is the Tanaguran Public Transport Authority, please come out and identify yourself at once!”

“Fuck, just leave me alone! I didn’t do anything wrong!”, Sid cried out in desperation before he could even think to act cool and dignified like a proud mongrel from the slums ought to. Nothing about this place or this situation was even remotely familiar to him, and it was starting to seriously scare him. The way all those dolled-up, pretty passengers had looked at him, as if he were vermin or some dangerous wild animal rather than another human being...

I try to help you

I fight to get to you

“Sir, by the power invested in me by the Tanaguran Syndicate and almighty Jupiter, I order you to open this door at once! If you fail to comply, we will be obliged to take disciplinary action”, the smooth, loud voice continued to reprimand him.

Even if the mongrel barely understood half of the vocabulary used in those two sentences, the veiled threat in the police officer’s tone left no doubt as to the severity of the situation he was currently in.

“I’ll go away just as soon as this thing heads down south again, OK! I got here by accident, I ain’t trying to break any of your laws or anything!”, the youngster pleaded desperately again from the other side of the door.

“Sir, this is your final warning: open this door at once and prepare for an inspection of your papers!”, the monorail inspector now harshly stated, his patience having worn thin.

“Damnit, I don’t have any fucking papers! Why’d’ya think I don’t wanna open this door, huh?!”, Sid admitted. There was no point in denying it now for they’d be able to tell straight away what he was just as soon as they’d laid eyes on him, if they hadn’t already by the language he was using. He kept turning round and round inside the small, confined space as if still trying to find a way out, like a caged animal refusing to see that it was doomed.

That was when all of a sudden the metal door slid open automatically after a security override had been activated from the outside panel, revealing not only the Public Transport inspector but nearly a whole corps of Tanaguran police officers accompanying him, all heavily armed with high-tech, state-of-the-art laserguns...

Swiftly moving through a number of empty railway cars, Iason fished his phone from his pocket to once again check the signal of Mimea’s locator beacon. To his surprise he saw that her signal was coming right his way in the tempo of a rapidly-moving vehicle. In but twenty seconds their locations would nearly overlap... 18 seconds... 17 seconds...
Trying to think logically in spite of the direness of the situation, Iason made a quick calculation of Mimea’s signal’s average speed and then pulled up an overview of all vehicles capable of such velocity.

But only a couple of seconds later the answer to the problem presented itself to him when another monorail heading into the opposite direction crossed the one he was currently on.

*Mimea has to be on that train!*

Getting off at the nearest station, Iason didn’t hesitate to break into a nearby hovercar as he used his override codes to have the monorail halt long enough at the next station for him to catch up to it.

He didn’t think twice about any of the illegal activities he was currently conducting, in fact he was rather smug with himself for not giving ‘a damn’ about what laws he broke in his pursuit to ensure his friend’s well-being.

*I simply need to find her and make sure she’s safe! Nothing else matters now.*

**I try to find you**

**You need to get out of there**

But as he approached the station and laid eyes on the monorail car currently at a stand-still there, he began to also dread Mimea’s reaction to his unasked-for arrival. Would she still be mad at him for the juvenile way in which he had behaved towards her earlier that evening? What was he even supposed to say to her after all that had happened because of his infinite stupidity when it came to matters that involved feelings? And more importantly, would she still believe him when he told her that he truly did care about her? At times he still found it hard to believe it himself, therefore it was only natural that the humans would doubt whether he was even capable of emotion at all.

**As time goes by I realize what I have done**

**I made you run away from me**

At least Mimea *had* believed that he felt for her at one time, whereas with Riki he was starting to think that it was highly unlikely that the mongrel had ever considered him anything other than a heartless bastard seeking to humiliate, hurt and ultimately destroy him. In his own words and ways he had tried to let the mongrel know what he truly felt for him, but seeing as how at the time he didn’t even fully comprehend the nature of those feelings himself, it was very possible that his message had not reached the other at all. But still, had he not clearly expressed his need to have the young man by his side and in his bed, not just in that moment but for all eternity? How could Riki then think that such a sentiment would be motivated by hate and disgust? If he had truly hated the mongrel and wished to torture him for a longer period of time, he could’ve found much more efficient ways of doing so, such as having him thrown into a Tanaguran jail cell where Iason could ‘interrogate’ him as often as he pleased. Why would there be any need for a whole deceitful charade that included placing the mongrel in his very own home and even sleeping with him?
All that Iason could conclude from what Mimea had told him regarding the way Riki had interpreted his actions, was that the young man just couldn’t trust a single thing any Elite said or did. If he ever wanted to gain the mongrel’s trust, he was going to have to fight very hard for it. And now his ridiculous, childish behaviour from earlier that evening could have cost him his one and only ally in that ceaseless struggle.

You didn’t trust in words and time

Answer my prayer

Nevertheless Iason knew he had always had an innate ability to discern human intentions, even if he often didn’t understand the motivations behind said intentions. All of his Furniture have always been loyal to him in spite of the slightly headstrong streak that he preferred in them, for upon meeting his would-be servants Iason had been able to sense that they had taken a personal liking to him, for whatever reason. He was positive that he had felt that very sentiment from Riki the first time they met, and the fact that the young man had run after him and invited him to a love hotel of his own volition seemed to collaborate that interpretation.

Even after he had taken the youngster to Eos Tower against his will and imprisoned him, he had often still picked up that same sentiment. But the strange thing was that from that point onwards everything that Riki had said or done had pointed towards the very opposite sentiment of what Iason had thought he could detect. Even so there was no denying that the Ceresian had taken great pleasure from their sexual encounters, which had led Iason to further pursue him in a mostly physical way, for in spite of their many differences it was apparently a language they shared. But the stubborn youngster’s outrageous behaviour had often forced Iason’s hand when it came to disciplining him, which was a necessary evil if the Blondie wanted to keep the mongrel in Eos without outside interference preventing it. Clearly what had left a lasting impression on Riki more than anything else had been those disciplinary measures, installing in him a need to escape Eos that had proven great enough for the Blondie to have no choice but to eventually let him go...

Sometimes I heal you

Sometimes I make you cry

And now you’re drifting away from me

Leaving the confiscated – the word ‘stolen’ just didn’t seem quite applicable to anything related to an Elite – hovercar right in the middle of the street, Iason ascended the marble staircase leading up to the monorail platform in a matter of deciseconds, boarding the train and passing through several cars filled with passengers barely even noticing that he was there due to his inhuman speed.

Rushing down the last car before he would be at the location of Mimea’s cell phone signal, Iason was surprised to see nearly a whole corps of Tanaguran police officers standing further down the corridor, apparently guarding a public bathroom.

What in Jupiter’s name is going on here? Could Mimea be in there?
Screaming when the security agents rushed into the small space while pointing half a dozen laserbeams at him, Sid’s first instinct was to fall to his knees and cover his head with his hands.

“State your name and your purpose here!”, the first officer ordered him, regarding his reaction as yet another obstruction of inspection. Could the intruder be trying to feign a physical malady of some sort in order to escape persecution for a crime that he had committed?

“I... I’m Sid... I ergh...”, the young mongrel started uncertainly.

“Your name is Sid? Give us your last name and identification number!”, the security agent demanded, his men’s laserguns still pointed at the supposed offender.

“Ergh... I don’t have any...”, he mumbled while staring at the floor.

“You don’t have any what? Speak clearly!”, the uniformed police officer interrupted him impatiently, suspecting him of needlessly drawing out his answers.

“I don’t have any more names or... or numbers or anything, OK! Just Sid!”

“What is your purpose here?”, the guy in uniform asked, cold eyes clearly showing that he couldn’t imagine what the likes of Sid could possibly be doing on a Tanaguran transport vessel.

“I was trying to find Riki... a friend of mine...”, he explained, not sure at all how any of that could be important to the police officer.

“What is this Riki’s last name and identification number?”, the calm voice continued to question relentlessly.

“Is this Riki you speak of an inhabitant of Tanagura? If so, what class is he registered under?”

“Shit, I dunno, man!”, he finally cried out, the remorseless and forced questioning at gunpoint starting to overwhelm him. “I just know that a friend of his – a girl with red hair – that she was badly injured, so I wanted to tell him that...”

“A girl with red hair? Do you have any idea of how many girls with red hair there are in Tanagura?”, the officer asked rhetorically, a fact which was lost on the panicking mongrel in front of him.

“Shit, how the hell am I supposed to know that? I bet you don’t know that either!”

Sighing at the intruder’s obvious lack of intelligence, the head of public transport security tried to keep his calm. If he wanted to obtain the necessary information for his report in good time, he would have to be patient.

“What in the name of Jupiter is going on here?”, an authoritative voice of icy velvet then sounded from the corridor behind the officers.

The public transport first officer turned around in annoyance but that quickly turned to surprised reverence upon recognising the man who had just spoken, for clear as day there was the Head of the
Syndicate – the Chosen Representative of Jupiter herself – towering right in front of him. Quickly bending down in a bow deep enough for his nose to just about touch his polished shoes, the officer hastily replied: “My apologies, Your Excellency! We were unaware that you were on board this train and did not mean to disturb you or offend your presence with this trivial security matter.”

“If you truly do not wish to offend me, then you will answer my questions when asked, for I do not like repeating myself. I ask once again: What is going on here?”, Iason continued in an even icier tone, clearly unimpressed by the head of public transport police’s practised display of supposed humility, for the man had in not so many words just told his superior to mind his own business.

“We have just apprehended a stow-away mongrel without papers and were questioning him regarding his motivations for being illegally aboard this vessel.”

“I see. Step out of the way so that I may lay eyes on this man”, Lord Mink commanded without further hesitation or need for niceties.

“But...! Your Excellency, that would be highly inappropri...” SLAP!

Shocked and initially barely understanding what had just happened, the first officer brought a hand to his now bleeding and broken nose, swollen black eye and the painful bruise that was marring about half of his face. The Head of the Syndicate himself had just slapped him and it had hurt like a raging fire storm hitting him in full force, even though it was quite evident that the Blondie had been holding back most of his enormous strength.

“Speak out of turn one more time and I will have you flying straight out that window, regardless of how far down you fall. Your life means absolutely nothing to me”, the pale-haired Elite hissed viciously at the public officer, having had just enough of being treated almost as if he were the one being questioned, and by such a low-ranking officer at that! Clearly the man needed to be taught a lesson in humility.

Nearly jumping to get out of the tall Blondie’s way lest he carried out his threat, the police officer didn’t know how he could ever survive the shame of the officers ranked under him seeing their chief humiliated in such a way. But what choice did he have but to back down when faced with a Blondie, the Favoured Son of Jupiter himself at that?

As he regarded the trembling mongrel – still on his knees – in front of him, Iason searched his memory for any recognition from known camera footage and identified the mongrel as belonging to Riki’s old gang, Bison. What remained unclear however was why this mongrel was omitting Mimea’s cell phone signal and why he had been hiding in the bathroom aboard a monorail car heading for downtown Tanagura.

“You are called Sid, are you not? Seventeen years old and a member of the infamous Bison gang, if I am not mistaken.”

“Y... yeah, that’s right...”, he started, uncertainly gazing up at his new interrogator, clearly intimidated by the tall blonde’s powerful presence. “Sir!” he then quickly added, having witnessed how disrespect could unexpectedly turn this man to anger and death threats. Even if Sid had no idea who this blonde guy was, it was clear that he was a very influential Elite and not someone you wanted to mess with.

“My, my, a mongrel with manners, you don’t see those very often”, the cold Elite said mockingly, although Sid could have sworn he detected a hint of amusement in that frosty baritone. Turning to the security officers still standing around staring, the Blondie continued: “Perhaps you gentlemen could learn a lesson or two from this young man. Now get out of my sight before I have you all
executed for insubordination."

Not daring to spark their Supreme Leader’s legendary anger any further, the security officers didn’t waste any time running away in a backwards fashion that was probably meant to show respect but in fact looked utterly ridiculous and had them nearly tripping over their own feet in their haste.

“Perhaps we could continue this conversation in somewhat more agreeable surroundings than the floor of a public bathroom. Unless of course you prefer it that way?” the Blondie inquired, his tone not revealing whether or not those words were spoken in mockery.

“I ergh... no... I mean, yes!... I mean, yes to the more agreeable surroundings and no I don’t prefer it that way...”, Sid finally managed to say, slightly out of breath. Even if this strange Elite had interrupted what was becoming a most unpleasant interrogation session with a probably even more unpleasant outcome, Sid had witnessed first-hand the fear this man instilled in others, so he wanted to thread very carefully around such a figure.

“Excellent. Right this way, if you would”, Iason said, leading the way to a nearby seating arrangement next to a big window with the confidence of one used to issuing orders and being followed. In a weird sort of way, he reminded Sid of Riki back when he was the leader of Bison. Commanding of respect and admiration.

Feared by those who knew of him but didn’t really know him.

Emanating a charismatic presence strong enough to draw everyone to him like moths to a flame.

When Sid stirred from his mental comparison to Riki he noticed that his feet had automatically followed the blonde Elite to the seats. Yet now that he was closer to the synthetic creature he could also see the dazzling beauty and elegance that had earlier been belied by his size, strength and authoritative stance.

Iason gracefully reclined on the cushioned couch, artfully folding his limbs as he courteously gestured to the space next to him.

Hesitantly, Sid approached the couch and sat down, trying to stay a polite enough distance away from the Elite’s overwhelming aura yet not daring to sit too far away for fear of offending him in that way.

“You seem a lot less brusque and head-on than Riki”, Iason observed out loud, not really caring what the young mongrel next to him might make of his association with another mongrel. The boy probably didn’t even care, for he clearly had no idea who Iason was. But apparently he’d been smart enough to already learn that offending him came with the potential for harsh retribution.

“Wait, you know Riki?! I mean... It just seems unlikely, ’s all. Wait, do you also know that red-haired girlfriend of Riki’s then?”

“Riki’s... girlfriend?”, Iason asked uncertainly, considering the possibility that the young man could be referring to someone other than Mimea. Said possibility was decidedly very slim, wasn’t it?

“Yeah. I mean, not his girl-girlfriend, but a friend who happens to be a girl... At least that’s what I think. Oh, right, I have her phone here, I just... accidentally grabbed it when I went to look for help...”, Sid explained rather sheepishly as he fished the pink, diamond-studded phone from his back pocket, all the while looking at the pristine, white floor of the monorail car, not daring to look the tall android in the eye. His eyes just seemed so unnaturally cold and lifeless that it was down-right creepy, even when the Elite apparently wasn’t in a threatening mood anymore.
Accepting the phone from the other’s outstretched hand – the cool, white silk of his glove momentarily touching the other hand’s warm, sun-tanned skin –, Iason asked in a perfectly level voice: “Why did you go to look for help? What happened to her?”

“She... she got up beat up real bad. And assaulted, sexually. It was... a monstrous thing to do, especially to an up-town girl like that. I tried to stop ‘em, I mean, I told ‘em to just leave it be but... He was determined to make her suffer, thought it was his right or some shit...”

“You mean... the one called Guy was responsible?”, Iason inquired, his voice deceptively calm where the violent images of bloody revenge flashing through his mind were anything but.

“Yeah... Hey, how’d’you know about Guy? Wait! You do know Riki, don’t you?!”, Sid asked, instinctively sure of it even if logic dictated it to be the most unlikely thing in the world, for surely there were no two people as opposed to each other on all of Amoy as Riki and this Elite. They were black and white, fire and ice, chaos and order.

“Hardly as well as I would like to. But yes, I know a thing or two about his former lover”, Iason spoke, further ice being added to the glacier that was now shifting inside his voice.

“Are you... are you gonna kill him? Guy I mean...”, Sid asked quietly, feeling as if speaking too loudly might bring on a deadly avalanche that would leave him choking underneath tons of crystalline, white snow.

“Probably”, Iason responded without any further ado or polite trimmings. If indeed that Guy had done all of those things to Mimea, then it didn’t matter how much Riki would resent him for murdering the ‘son of a bitch’. Maybe Riki would even want to murder the other mongrel himself when he learned of Mimea’s fate and Iason would just be doing him a service. At least that was what he kept rationally telling himself throughout the murderous intent of the rage that was currently building inside of him, like destructive tidal waves stirring beneath the ocean’s deceptively calm surface.

An uncomfortable silence followed after that, like the quiet before the storm.

“Are you... are you gonna kill me too?”, Sid finally asked, deciding that if he was going to die he would prefer to just get it over with. But even with that resolve it was hard to keep the fearful trembling of his heart out of his vocal cords.

“I don’t see any reason why I should. Do you?”, Iason asked matter-of-factly, then turned his blue, piercing gaze directly to the human’s worried liquid-brown eyes.

“N... no! I mean, I had no part in the violence done to the girl. I guess I could’ve done more to try and stop ‘em but... Shit, you don’t take on a hostile gang all by yourself in the slums, even if it’s your own...”

“I can understand that much. Although I am positive that Riki would take on ten hostile gangs by himself to defend a friend in need”, Iason remarked, not even attempting to mask the admiration he felt for his proud mongrel.

Laughing at that remark felt like a relief to Sid’s hot-wired nerves, even if he couldn’t have suppressed that laugh even if he’d tried. “Yeah... yeah, that sounds like Riki, all right! Never back down, no matter what.”

“Tell me where she is and I shall get you out of your current predicament unscathed, no questions asked. I’ll even give you some pocket money, if you feel the need for it.”
Genuinely surprised that this Elite apparently wanted to let him go and even wanted to give him money, Sid said: “I last saw her in the alley behind a bar called Skankies, it’s right on the edge with Janus, about a mile or two from the bridge over Orange Road... I could take you there, if you want.”

“Thank you, but I will travel faster on my own and I know the bar of which you speak”, Iason spoke as he already got up from his seat, ready to switch back to the monorail heading towards Midas. When timed right the monorail was the fastest mode of transportation from Tanagura to Ceres after all.

“OK. But help should already be on the way, cause I asked this kid who happened to walk by to help... I don’t remember his name though, something with a D...”, Sid said, holding a hand against his forehead as if hoping that would somehow stimulate his brain to remember.

“Daryl.”

“Right, Daryl! And right before I left to find Riki he said he was gonna call some doctor guy who could help her... ergh...” Holy fuck, I just can’t think properly around this guy! But part of him knew all too well that his inability to think wasn’t only due to the intimidating strength and aggression but also due to the blinding beauty and undeniable sex appeal of the creature in front of him.

“Raoul Am.”

“Yes, that’s the one! Hey... No offence, but how the hell do you know all that?”, his mouth asked before his brain had even had time to think that it was probably a bad idea to question the other any further, as clearly he had a short temper and seemed to be in a hurry.

Smiling in a very subdued, barely visible way, Iason answered: “It’s all just a coincidence really. All of those lives that by the system’s laws should have nothing at all to do with each other, suddenly all overlapping in the most unexpected of ways. And it all started with Riki...”

“Then... how do you and Riki know each other, exactly?”, Sid asked, figuring that he might as well continue to pry now that he had already taken the risk.

“To make a long story short: I caught him stealing. Then he invited me to a love hotel. Then I kidnapped him. Then we had sex, many times. This is my stop, best of luck to you”, Iason said inanimately, as if he was merely discussing the weather, then walked out of the automatic, glass doors before the open-mouthed mongrel had a chance to ask any further questions.

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Racing down the dark, abandoned streets of Janus, Riki barely slowed down enough to safely follow a bend in the road, the outer metal hull of his bike briefly scratching the side of a brick building.

In his heart he knew it was probably already too late to help Mimea if she had truly been subjected to such physical trauma at none other than the hands of his own former lover, but after all the harm that he’d caused her he owed it to her to get there as fast as he could, even at the risk of his own safety.

He had actually started to believe that in many ways his current relationship with Mimea was good for the both of them, that it was helping them to heal past wounds, but now all of that was thrown into the wind again. For the truth was that Mimea got seriously hurt – probably even fatally so, even if Riki couldn’t allow himself to think it just yet – at the hands of his jealous ex! If anything he even...
understood Guy’s frustrations towards him, for they were well-justified, but Mimea was the last person deserving of that resentment. And now, because of his careless, petty selfishness when it came to dealing with Guy, he might very well lose her forever...

Sometimes I heal you

Sometimes I make you cry

And now you’re drifting away from me

But no, he couldn’t allow himself to give up just yet! He had to get to her, maybe it wasn’t too late! Please, please, please don’t let it be too late!

Racing through the most deserted streets in Janus as to avoid heading any passers-by or inciting any fights with whatever other mongrels would be outside at this time of night, Riki then heard that tell-tale sputter in the sound of his engine that told him he was low on gas. Shit, first my phone and now this! Whatever happened to my good luck, huh?!

Apparently all of it had run out over the course of but a few hours. Whereas earlier that same evening things had seemed to be going so well, with Mimea introducing him to her mysterious new benefactor and the two of them revealing in not so many words that they were trying to oppose the Tanaguran regime from within. Riki had felt truly excited at the chance of becoming a part of an organised rebellion of sorts, especially with the chances of success going up considerately with an actual Elite on board. Not to mention he had felt a very strong pull towards the charming, dark-haired beauty, although it had somehow felt like much more than just a sexual attraction.

When his bike finally broke down about a block from the alley Sid had told him he’d left Mimea, Riki was briskly awoken from the momentary distraction of his daydream. “Oh, come ooon! You couldn’t get me just one street further, could you?! Blasted old piece of shit!”, Riki yelled as he non-too-gently threw his bike into the gutter and kicked it on its way down, the pain shooting through his foot and all the way up to his leg telling him that he had probably just broken a toe or two. Cursing his own stupidity, he started running down the street as fast as he could, gritting his teeth against the sharp pain that continued to flare from his foot with every step he took. Pain was nothing, neither was keeping his toes intact. All that mattered was to get to Mimea in time...

I try to help you

I fight to get to you

Just as he could see the front entrance of Skankies appear in his line of vision from around the corner, he suddenly tripped over a bunch of snow-covered empty stout bottles and fell into the gutter face-first, nearly splitting open his skull on a brick that lay only about 5 centimetres from the place where his head had landed. Way to go, Riki, get yourself killed as well before you even find her!

Wasting no time, he scrambled right back up and continued to stumble through the dark street with not only a couple of broken toes but also a collection of angry bruises on his body and an angry open
wound across his forehead. If the blood hadn’t continued running down into his eyes, he probably wouldn’t even have noticed that he was bleeding, for his mind was set on but one thing: Get to Mimea! How he was going to be of any use to her in his current state and without even a bike to take her to a nearby hospital, didn’t enter the forefront of his consciousness just yet. ‘Do now, think later’, was and had always been his motto in life. Don’t consider the impossibility of your intentions, just act on them.

As by some small miracle he actually managed to pass the front entrance of Skankies without any troublemakers happening to go in or come out at the time. The only other living creature he encountered was a stray cat going through a pile of trash on the sidewalk. The bony, black animal looked just about as miserable as he felt in that moment, taking the pains to go through a stinking pile of waste in the hope of finding some buried treasure in there. Just as he passed by the creature, he heard it mewl victoriously when it came out of the heap of trash with a rat’s tail hanging out of its maw. Taking it as a sign that his luck might also be about to turn, Riki quickly manoeuvred in between several dumpsters that partially blocked the entrance to the back alley behind the low-life bar, hissing in pain as his injured foot got caught in between them, nearly causing him to trip again.

I try to find you
You need to get out of there

Jogging deeper into the pitch-black, stinking alley as fast as his injured foot allowed, Riki thought that he could discern a shape lying in the gutter ahead, although he could see so little that it might as well be another heap of trash or another stray that had curled up and died there. Judging from the smell, it was most likely to be the latter.

It was only when he sank down to his knees next to the filthy-looking heap that he could tell that it was indeed a human literally covered in trash. It was unclear if someone had purposely placed said trash there or if the person itself had crawled underneath it. As far as camouflage went, it was an excellent choice, for if Riki hadn’t been looking for a body in that exact spot, he would’ve never guessed there was a human being there.

Grabbing unto the slim, bare shoulders of the body, careful as to not startle the person in case it were just a junkie or a drunk sleeping it off, Riki turned the figure around to see his or her face.

Please, please, please, be Mimea! Please, please, please, be alive!

Answer my prayer

Flying down the metal staircase in one giant leap, the Elite didn’t waste any time entering a hoverbike store across the street. Fortunately there were no other customers at the small business at the time, so he didn’t even need to use his intimidating glare to scare them away. Looking around, he had to conclude that the ramshackle, unclean state of the building and shop itself were misleading, as he couldn’t see anything but the fastest hoverbike models currently on the market on display, and
Decisively walking to the counter after having already selected the fastest bike in sight, Iason was surprised to find neither sales clerk nor bell button there. Could the store already be closed? Yet on the neon sign outside he had clearly read “open”, unless of course the owner had forgotten to switch off the sign.

Just as he was considering to take the bike and leave proper paper payment on the counter, a grizzly older man appeared from the back. He wore a greyish, dirty coverall which original colour could hardly be identified from between the many stains, and his face was barely discernible underneath the many black oil smudges. On top of his head he wore a tattered bandana of some sort, but if it served the purpose of protecting his wild mob of hair from the apparently frequent oil spatters that occurred it had failed miserably.

“Holy freakin’ Jesus, Mary and Josef! I oughta really stop usin’ that damn pod if it’s givin’ me visions even when I haven’t been smokin’ it...”

“As much as I am flattered by being called a vision, I must tell you that I am very real, sir”, the blonde vision said good-naturedly, finding it refreshing not to be greeted with the usual ass-kissing and grovelling in the dirt.

“Why... Very real indeed it would seem! Gah gah, haven’t had a Tanaguran in here for decades! What can I help you with? If you’ll be lookin’ for somethin’ with luxury cushions and fancy knick-knacks I can’t help you, but if speed’s what you’re after... then you’ve come to the right place!”, the man said, pausing dramatically before the end of his short but very convincing speech and holding up a greasy finger as if to prove his point.

Even if he was wearing the worst possible attire for the job, Iason couldn’t help but admire the true-felt passion behind the man’s sales pitch.

“Indeed speed is what I am after, for I have very little time to get where I need to go. What’s your fastest model?”

Only five minutes later, Iason was already speeding down the high-way on a black, sleek hoverbike, the follow-up of the very same model he had seen Riki admire in a shop window several years ago. Apparently his mongrel had a nose for speed just as much as that shopkeeper did, he would definitely have to remember that address for future reference.

After about half an hour Iason could tell that he was getting closer to his destination by the appearance of the street and buildings surrounding him, as clean, well-kept stone walk-ways and unblemished, marble-and-glass façades gave way to littered, dumpster-lined pavements and spray-painted, brick apartment blocks. Once on the other side of Orange Road, things started to degrade even further, with crumbling stone buildings turning to burned-out or caved-in ruins. Moreover dirty, run-down pavements and roads became one giant muddy mess where hoverbikes and pedestrians alike went wherever they pleased and hardly any hovercars at all could be seen.

Grateful for the time of night – soon to be early morning – and the apparently drunken or intoxicated state of most people he passed – shiny blonde hair billowing behind him from underneath his black helmet – Iason hurried down to the location of Skankies, a bar known to him only because it was often used as a neutral meeting ground between Katze’s men and their Ceresian business associates.

Hurrying down a network of back alleys, it took all of Iason’s navigational skills to safely guide his bike through an obstacle course of dumpsters, trash bins, old furniture, burned-out car wrecks and Jupiter knows what else was blocking the narrow passageways. Honestly, how could people live in a
place like this? Didn’t the stench ever entice anybody to attempt to clean up this giant mess? Narrowly missing another car wreck, he was surprised to suddenly see two people jump from it with thread-bare blankets thrown around their shoulders, one of them carrying a make-shift cooking pot made out of a rusty can. Were people actually living in old car wrecks here?

Finally he spied a neon sign that said ‘S_a_k_es’ in barely-legible neon letters at the end of a street that smelled foul enough to house an entire toxic-waste dumpsite. Approaching the entrance of the derelict building that housed the bar – at least he assumed that was the entrance as there was a hole in the wall from floor to ceiling that was big enough for a man or two to fit through – Iason saw that the entry to the alley next to it was blocked by dumpsters and descended from his bike, leaving it against a nearby wall but not forgetting to activate its security force field.

As he darted down the streets his night-vision already registered two human shapes up ahead, one lying on the ground and the other sitting next to it. He could also detect the sound of crying but didn’t know which of the two humans the sound was coming from. Could the seated person possibly be Daryl?

But as he got closer that assumption was proven incorrect, for he could clearly tell from the man’s dark hair and attire that he was a mongrel. At the same time he was also close enough now to spot the tell-tale red hair and golden sparkle of the dress Mimea had been wearing earlier that evening. Suddenly stimulated by protective aggression, the Blondie entered battle mode as he approached the seated mongrel. If this was one of the despicable creatures responsible for his Mimea’s injuries, Iason would make him suffer in return!

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Despair got a hold of Riki’s heart as all of his attempts to awaken his red-haired friend proved fruitless. Quickly removing all of the trash from her body, Riki ripped off part of his shirt and used it to try and clean the copious amounts of blood and mud from her skin, an attempt that was further aided by the heavy downpour that had picked up again, although it did nothing to alleviate the shaking of his own body. Even if her wounds would prove to be non-fatal, he could tell by the low temperature of her body that she was either already dead or highly hypothermic. Judging by how pale she was, she had to have lost a lot of blood... He then placed his ear on her mostly-exposed chest – wet hair sticking to the white, cold skin in a black, bloody mess – and listened carefully for sounds of breathing or a heartbeat. As Riki bent over her in an effort to see enough of her body to ascertain the damage, he didn’t even notice that he had started to cry.

Then suddenly he became aware of another presence that was there with him in the darkness of the alley. “D.. Daryl, is that you? Did you bring the med kit?”, he asked in a small voice, his gut already warning him that it most definitely was not Daryl.

Getting up from his crouched position and turning around to peer through the falling rain, Riki would have screamed at the sight before him if he hadn’t already screamed enough that night to leave his voice raw. For only about 3 metres away from him a pair of bright blue lights lit up the shiny metal surface of a giant robotic figure. Even if the mongrels of Riki’s generation had never seen one in real life, they had all heard enough stories of the terrible destroyer robots Tanagura had sent to destroy Ceres and wipe out most of its inhabitants after the area had declared its independence from the rest of Midas.

“What the *fuck...*, Riki all but whispered as he backed away, not quite believing his own eyes.
Perhaps the stress he’d had to endure over the last few hours had been too much and this was his brain’s way of coping with it, coming up with an imaginary enemy he couldn’t possibly win from in order to make him feel better about his failure to save Mimea. Or perhaps it was meant to be an avenging angel, come to punish him for being such a lousy friend. For even if by all accounts the terrible, metal creature that now took a heavy step towards him fitted the descriptions in the horror stories, those tales had never mentioned anything about the robots having long, golden hair.

“Riki.”

When the golden-haired thing stopped right in front of him, looked him straight in the eye and said his name in a low, electronic voice however, recognition suddenly hit the hopeless mongrel like a freight train. “Iason! Iason, is that really you?”

I can take you everywhere

Metal starting to shift with a horrifying, unearthly slithering sound, the whole outer hull of the supposed battle robot disappeared in seconds, leaving only the flawless, pale skin and white Elite attire of Iason Mink. “I was about to ask you the very same question”, the well-known, icy voice said, looking at the other’s wet, dirty appearance with no small amount of worry.

I can take you everywhere

Relief flooding through him in uncontrolled waves at the familiar sight of the beautiful Blondie, Riki didn’t even know what he was doing until after he’d flung himself into the other’s long, strong arms and buried his face in that gorgeous, silky hair, the familiar crispy-fresh smell of it comforting like nothing else at such a time. “Iason!!”, he sobbed, more tears beginning to flow down his dark cheeks uncontrollably at the realisation that he wasn’t alone anymore.

Answer my prayer

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To Be Continued ...

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Whatever Iason’s expectations had been of Riki’s reaction upon spotting him on the scene, this hadn’t been it. Not quite believing that the mongrel would ever, under any circumstances, react so positively to his presence, Iason wordlessly accepted the young man’s embrace, safely encasing him in the shell of his powerful chest and arms, then lovingly ran his glove-clad fingers through the dark hair in an effort to calm down the crying mongrel. Pleasant as it was to have the exotically attractive youngster jump into his arms at the sight of him, it was also an indicator that Riki was most likely in shock.

As soon as the immediate danger and relief of the situation had dissipated however, Riki quickly pulled away and found himself at a loss for words. Sure, he’d know what to yell at a nightmarish battle robot come to rip him to pieces, but not in a million years what to say to his ex-lover. Then he considered how even if the scenario of Iason Mink showing up at this very same alley at the very same time that he had come to look for Mimea here was more likely than that of an ancient battle robot appearing, it was decidedly still a very unlikely coincidence. And that was exactly where that theory ended: there was just no way Iason’s presence here was a mere coincidence...

Crouching down next to Mimea’s petite, battered body and in doing so shifting the height difference in the still standing mongrel’s favour – but only by a few inches – Iason’s cool, serene voice asked: “Were you able to ascertain the extent of her injuries?”

“I... ergh... No... no, I can’t see shit in here and obviously I’m no doctor...”, Riki started to answer as best he could, strangely not even thinking about whether or not he actually wanted to answer the question, considering who it was coming from. For the proud Ceresian realised that his friend’s life was hanging in the balance and that without the other’s help he could do nothing but hopelessly stand by the side and watch her die.

“Do you know where Daryl went? He was here earlier, was he not?”, Iason questioned further as he appeared to be examining Mimea’s broken body with an atypical gentleness for one normally so
detached. Probably the Elite had all had basic medical training of some kind, for he appeared to know what he was doing. Hell, maybe it was just a programme that they uploaded or something.

“Yeah, he... he went to get a med kit... from his work place over at Orange Road. I hope he didn’t get mugged or anything, I gave him my gun just in case. Is she... Can you help her?”, Riki heard himself say, not sure at all how he was even managing coherent answers of any kind in this impossible situation. An to further add to the general atmosphere of chaos and confusion, it was clear to Riki from Iason’s demeanour around Mimea’s unconscious body that he was for some reason or other concerned for her well-being.

But why on Amoy would Iason Mink care even in the slightest about what happened to a worthless piece of merchandise that had committed the grave error of messing around with what was his? If anything Mimea’s demise ought to give him a sense of satisfaction, for the extent of his jealousy had been very real in the past, real enough to send the poor girl to one of the worst brothels in all of lower Midas. So what had changed? What had there been going on between those two that Riki knew nothing about?

“Leaving yourself completely defenceless in a place such as this, with a very real possibility of hostiles still being at large in the vicinity?”, Iason reprimanded, baiting the mongrel into a discussion of a more futile nature with the purpose of momentarily distracting him from the seriousness of Mimea’s current state. For in all honesty he himself didn’t know whether or not she could still be saved, as health care was not his area of expertise.

“I still have a knife, OK! And the ‘hostiles’ are my own gang, they know better than to challenge me after pissing me off like this...”, Riki said in his defence, knowing all too well that he was only saying that for the sake of squabbling with Iason. In truth he didn’t even feel anger towards his former gang members, just the emptiness of bitterness and regret. It was remarkable how even at a time when he was feeling this lifeless, the Blondie could still light that spark in him with all but a few spoken words.

“Shall I eliminate them for you? Or maybe just the one called Guy?”, Iason spoke calmly, but Riki could clearly detect that dangerous, frost-lined undertone that signalled the Blondie’s suppressed rage had nearly reached its breaking point. Only now that rage wasn’t directed at him but at the ones responsible for his friend’s suffering, and Riki was shocked to discover that part of him got seriously turned on by the threat of violence in the Elite’s aura.

“Look, I don’t give a shit about that right now!!! Just help me get her to a freakin’ hospital! Or is all this your doing somehow?”, Riki said, going straight to accusations in order to forget about those feelings the blonde bastard still instilled in him, after all that time...

“I honestly had no idea that you would be here. And my own Pet being attacked and near-fatally wounded does not exactly fit my agenda”, Iason rationally explained, deciding that a time of crisis called for honesty rather than deception. Anyhow, this whole cat-and-mouse game with Riki had lasted long enough as far as he was concerned: it was far past time for him to reveal his hand.

“Wait... Mimea is your Pet now? How the fuck can that be? You hate her, don’t you?”, Riki asked rhetorically, but the uncertainty at the truth of that final statement was clear from the lack of conviction in his tone. If it were true, it would explain what Mimea had been hiding from him and why. But that information in and of itself brought with it a whole series of new, even more pressing questions.

“For heaven’s sake, just look at the state of me!”, Iason uncharacteristically exclaimed, gesturing at his wet, torn and smudged clothes, forgetting to point out the dishevelled state of his long hair. “Do you really think that I would just drop everything and come to this foul place in the middle of the
“No... no, I don’t think that. Shit, I don’t know what to think anymore...”, Riki trailed off doubtfully. Mimea was Iason’s Pet? But did that mean... that the black-haired Elite he’d met earlier that evening... the one who seemed to have actual feelings and disapproved of many of Jupiter’s laws...

“Just help me get her to a hospital!” There was no time to consider any of that right now, saving Mimea’s life was the main thing. He could worry about the rest of those implications later...

“Of course”, Iason agreed, taking off his ruined overcoat and carefully wrapping Mimea’s body in it, then picking her up as if she weighed nothing. “I’m sorry you had to witness her like this, it’s all my fault.”

“What are you talking about? This is all my fault...”, Riki started as he followed Iason in the direction of the dumpsters at the head of the alley, only now wondering what kind of vehicle Iason had used to get here. Would it be sufficient to transport both him and Mimea? There was no way he was leaving her alone, even if it was in the Blondie’s capable hands...

“Let’s agree to postpone our argument about whose fault it is, as time is of the essence now”, Iason spoke sensibly, effortlessly pushing aside the heavy dumpsters that blocked the alley’s exit. One would expect there to be less trash on the ground with all the dumpsters and trash bins everywhere in the area.

“Agreed”, Riki answered without the usual delay of questioning whatever the other said. “Do you have a car?”

Just as Iason was about to tackle the dilemma of whether to send Riki ahead on his bike with Mimea or to take her to the hospital himself and leave Riki behind, a sleek, flashy, white-and-green sports car came speeding down the street with enough force to bring out several mongrels from the pub, who thought it was a raid of some sort.

Momentarily struck blind by the intensity of the bright headlights, Riki only recognised the tall figure that jumped out of the front passenger’s seat by the sound of his velvet voice as he ran in their direction, honey-gold curls chaotically flying all over the place when he finally came into focus.

“Iason! Did you find my Mimea? Dear Jupiter, what did they do to her!!”, Raoul Am’s voice cried out several tones higher than usual. Bright green, bewildered eyes stared first at Iason’s face and then at Mimea’s lifeless form in a grief-struck way that made even Riki feel sorry for him. Then those emerald eyes passed over him and narrowed dangerously.

“What’s he doing here? Don’t tell me he had something to do with this!”, Raoul hissed threateningly as soon as he recognised the mongrel, which took a millisecond longer than it should have due to how much the mongrel had apparently grown in all but a year, both in size and musculature.

Quickly moving to stand in front of Riki protectively, Iason said: “No, Riki merely came here to help her. As did Daryl, he should be around here somewhere.”

“Master Iason!!! Thank Jupiter you’re here, Master! And Lord Am...”, a shrill, high but clearly male voice yelled from somewhere down the street, as Daryl ran like the devil was on his heels, still holding up the medical kit he’d procured.

When the kid was in front of him, Riki was surprised to see that Daryl was now actually taller than he was! But somehow the increase in length only served to give his sinewy limbs even more of a fragile, willowy appearance.
“How’s Miss Mimea doing? Did she wake up yet?” the former Furniture asked with wide, doe-like eyes. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Yes, you can hold open the car door”, Jason said as he carried Mimea’s lifeless form over to one of the back passenger doors of Raoul’s sports car.

Immediately obeying, Daryl was fast to step back into his old role, even eager to. Riki could only conclude that whatever new life Daryl was currently leading, it hadn’t quite met his expectations. He still couldn’t understand why, but over the years Riki had learned that freedom wasn’t for everyone. Some people needed the security and routine that only the system could give them. Although he’d never really seen Daryl as one of those people, with all of the rules he had broken and risks he had taken to save him back in Eos.

Pushing Jason out of the way none-too-gently, Raoul didn’t waste any time taking out his stethoscope to examine Mimea, first listening to her breathing and then feeling her pulse. “She’s breathing and she has a pulse, although both are extremely weak and irregular. There is very little I can do for her without the proper tools, I shall need to operate in a hospital as soon as possible.”

“You wish to operate on her yourself?”, Jason asked in surprise, confused by how willing his brother suddenly was to disregard all social rules and regulations. Of course Raoul – as the Head of the Biology and Health Care Department – was more than capable to perform a surgery, however such information had been conveyed to him for a solely theoretical purpose, for as a Blondie he was never meant to actually apply said knowledge directly himself.

“I’m not about to leave such a risky undertaking up to chance! Besides, I know the specifics of her constitution like nobody else. Derek, get us to Midas Central Hospital as fast as you can!”, Raoul responded without the usual hesitation, apparently so overcome by worry that he didn’t even contemplate another approach than to resolve the situation personally.

“Lord Am, Sir, if I may just point out one thing...”, Derek started uncertainly but with a sense of great urgency.

“What in the devil is it with you and constantly interrupting me tonight! If I tell you to drive, then you drive!”, Lord Am finally lost his patience.

“But I don’t have a driver’s license!”, Derek finally succeeded in shouting out, after having fruitlessly tried to tell him over the past hour or so. “I’ve never driven a hovercar in my life, or any other vehicle for that matter!... Sir”

“You drove us all the way down here from Tanagura through the traffic of downtown Midas at top speed and you don’t even have a driver’s license?”, Raoul asked incredulously, wondering whether or not there was a possibility that the boy was pulling his leg, then dismissed that thought. “Why, you must be a natural then, just keep on doing what you’re doing, don’t worry about getting any tickets.”

“I could drive if you want?”, Riki unexpectedly offered, recognising the masked terror on the boy’s face at the prospect of repeating his earlier driving experience.

“In what universe do you think I would ever even consider letting you drive my car?!”, Raoul lashed out even as he was arranging Mimea’s unconscious body as comfortably as he could on the back seat of the sports car.

“Riki is a more than capable driver, I assure you”, Jason unexpectedly came to the mongrel’s defence, “and I think it might be a good idea to give your Furniture some rest after all the stress he’s already had to endure this evening.”
“Fine then, but you’re co-piloting!”, the green-eyed Elite grudgingly gave in, after which he shut the back door in both of their faces. Then turning towards Daryl and Derek he said: “Give me my tools, they’re inside the med kit underneath that seat...”

Not wasting any time, Riki got behind the wheel of what had to be the most expensive hovercar he’d ever driven. And the fastest, he noticed with no small amount of excitement as he studied the information on the dashboard.

“You do know that if you were to get yourself killed while driving this car, I will have no choice but to punish you most severely?”, Jason threatened, nothing but the very impossibility of the paradox within that statement revealing that he wasn’t being serious. He always did know how to keep a straight face.

“You planning on bringing me back from the dead to do so? Oh, great, then I don’t have any reason to hold back...”, Riki grinned in that old, typical, devil-may-care way of his, turning on the engine and switching the car in reverse, nearly running over a group of mongrels standing around gawking at the never-before-seen sight of not one but two Blondies in Ceres. “Outta my way, motherfuckers, here comes the King, woohoo!”

“Is it really necessary to be constantly making noise as you drive?”, Jason hinted after catching Raoul’s dark facial expression in the rearview mirror.

“Talk about a buzz-kill! Jason, why aren’t you ever any fun?”, Riki joked, as much trying to distract himself from the intensity of Mimea’s life depending on his piloting skills as Jason was.

“I can be as ‘fun’ as you like just as soon as Mimea is safe”, Jason promised with a dazzling, predatory smile that went straight to Riki’s groin.

“Jason! Don’t distract me like that, OK! I mean it, I gotta concentrate...”, Riki exclaimed as he swiftly navigated the sleek sports car out of the slums without any accidents, albeit he missed several old dumpsters and crumbling brick walls by but an inch.

“Perhaps you’d like to slow down a little bit, lest we reach our destination in one piece?”, the blonde Elite suggested.

“Nah, ‘s fine, I jus’ gotta get used to the way this baby glides, hardly any turbulence at all, must be some shock dampeners on this thing...”, Riki responded, only then contemplating the irony of him being the pilot with Jason as his co-pilot. “It’s kinda nice, being in charge for a change...”

“Well why didn’t you say that you enjoyed being on top sooner then?”, his former Master replied with another sly, white-toothed smile, the spark in those bright blue eyes speaking volumes of erotic fiction.

“Could you just stop distracting me already?!”, Riki yelled in frustration, not sure how much more of Jason fucking Mink’s flirting he could take while attempting to safely guide the car along the busy early morning traffic of Orange Road as fast as possible. But in spite of that it gave him a more than welcome sense of normalcy, something he hadn’t had in a long time.

“I can’t help it that you’re so easily distracted. Besides, I’ve found that you perform much better when you’re angry”, the Elite effortlessly rationalised his shameless behaviour.

“You’re not making me ‘angry’ with those comments, you dumbass!”, Riki berated him as if he had never stopped doing so. It was almost as if that year in Jason’s absence hadn’t happened at all.

“Then what, exactly, am I making you?”, his tempting tormentor asked innocently but the glint in his
eyes betrayed a very different sentiment.

“Dead, if you don’t stop!”, Riki hissed at him as he nearly missed the closest turn to downtown Midas, avoiding a head-on collision with an oncoming supply truck by only a hair.

“Could you at the very least try to hold this vehicle steady as I’m incubating?!!”, an angry Blondie yelled from the back seat, reminding Riki that there actually were people other than him and Iason in the car and that they weren’t on a joy ride. Of course not, why the hell would he even want to go on a joy ride with Iason Mink, of all people?

“How about we put on some music?”, the Blondie suggested, surprising Riki with the seemingly innocent humanity of the idea. Riki would’ve never even guessed that the Blondie liked music. Wasn’t that supposed to be a human thing?

“Music? Really? At a time like this?”, Riki asked, trying to mask the fact that he was pleasantly surprised by the other’s suggestion.

“Everyone seems to be rather agitated, and it has been proven that music can have a therapeutic effect”, Iason then argued rationally, nearly undoing the illusion of humanity but for the brief shimmer in his eyes that Riki caught in the rear view mirror. The Elite was feeling far more out of sorts than he made out to be, that much was clear as cracks were starting to form in his usually impeccable façade, making the mongrel sitting next to him wonder at what exactly was behind that infamous façade of unfeeling perfection...

Thinking about it for a second and then nodding, Riki said: “You mean like take off the edge? I guess so... Why not, let’s turn on the radio, see if there’s anything good on air.” After but a moment of switching between channels – which Iason could tell annoyed Raoul to no end – Riki settled on a song. To his surprise Jason recognised the tune, for it was something he had heard Mimea playing on her MP3-player many times.

He comes alive in metropolis lights

When the music’s way too loud

Expertly handling the steering wheel to steer the lightning-speed car through the busy traffic of central Midas, Riki allowed himself to be momentarily carried away on the waves of the music, as if hiding himself away in the warm, dark folds of its embrace. Continuing to contemplate the unlikely scenario of Mimea being Iason’s Pet now, Riki concluded that it had to be part of some or other scheme of Iason’s to get him back. He hadn’t just been imagining this force that appeared to be trying to wreck his life and steer him back towards Tanagura just as surely as he was this car: Iason had been behind those machinations all along.

Deep in the night it’s easy to hide

And he’s got it all figured out

Neon nearly blinding him as he blinked the oncoming sleep from his eyes, Riki drove through the
well-polished, clean main street of the business district of Midas, barely even seeing the sparkly-lit businesses and high-class restaurants they passed. Midas Central wasn’t far off now, with some luck they’d be there in half an hour. Raoul had gone quiet in the back as he apparently continued to work on reviving Minea or prepping her for surgery or whatever else he was doing back there.

The question not only remained of whether or not she was going to survive, but also the question of whether or not she had ever really been Riki’s friend. Had she merely been spying on him all this time? Was she nothing more than another one of the Head of Intelligence’s security satellites in human form?

White satellites getting lost in his eyes

But to him she’s just another girl

Already spotting the tell-tale medical symbol of a cross entwined with two snakes above the entrance-way to a tall, glass-and-steel skyscraper up ahead, Riki spoke for the first time since they’d put on the music: “Iason, I gotta ask you something... and I need you to be honest with me. After all the shit you’ve pulled on me, I deserve that much.”

“How dare you talk about what you deserve, you useless piece of mongrel trash! You are the reason any of these horrible things have happened to my poor Mimea!”, an exasperated, upper-class voice sounded from behind him.

“Raoul, please, Riki and I are trying to have a conversation here, with which you have absolutely nothing to do”, Iason swiftly silenced the other Blondie, for he was very curious to know what it was Riki wanted to ask him.

“Why, of course, I have never got anything to do with any of the stunts you pull! Unless of course it is to drop everything to come and help you clean up the mess that comes after!”, the other Blondie angrily yelled from behind them, after which he continued to ignore all others but his unconscious, most precious creation.

Ignoring his brother’s powerless lamenting for what it was, Iason turned back to Riki: “What is it that you wish to know? Ask and I shall answer truthfully, you have my word.”

Knowing from hear-say that the Head of the Syndicate had never ever broken his word, Riki was surprised that he would offer that very same honourable promise to a mere mongrel and former slave of his.

Thinking carefully about his question one more time and taking a deep breath, Riki responded: “Why did you take Mimea as your Pet, after all the things that she has done to displease you?”

In the back, the green-eyed Blondie stayed quiet, for he also had been asking himself that very same question for a while, never able to get a clear answer from his mercurious brother. Sometimes he thought the only thing Iason ever responded to was either violence or madness, a clear manifestation of a deep-felt desire to go against the system of reason and all that it stood for. His own unwillingness to let go of the support of that system, was probably why he had never truly understood Iason, even when caring very deeply for him and doing all within his power to stay close to him.
Roll with the tide like the wind and the sky
And he’ll only let you down

Racing through the hospital parking lot towards the emergency entrance, Riki anxiously waited Iason’s answer.

“I shall do my best to explain it to you at another time, Riki, for Mimea is in urgent need of medical assistance now and I wish to be by her side, as do you I suspect”, the Elite expertly avoided answering the question.

Ooh, Iason

Shit! I should’ve known he can’t be trusted! , the mongrel thought angrily, trying to use that anger to hide his disappointment at being tricked once again by the Blondie.

“Goddamnit, Iason, you gave me your word!!!”, he yelled even as Daryl and Raoul’s Furniture set to the task of moving Mimea out of the car while Raoul rushed to the emergency entrance in person to get a stretcher.

Tell me what you’re chasing

“Yes, and I fully intend to honour it. Only now there are more pressing concerns, as I’m sure you can agree on, Riki. I will explain to you my motivations as best as I can, once she is safe. I promise”, the blonde Elite said, looking straight into the other’s dark eyes as he did, something he’d only ever done when Riki’d been performing or they’d been having sex.

Desperately trying to stop his body from reacting to that burning-blue, passionate stare, Riki grabbed a hold of the other’s white-clad wrist, hard enough to bruise if Iason hadn’t been an android. “I’ll hold you to it, Iason Mink!”, he said, daringly answering the other’s stare with conviction in his eyes.

Slightly smiling at the other’s bold move, Iason said: “I’d expect nothing less from you, my Riki.” Paralysed in his seat by that blinding half smile and those intense sapphire eyes, Riki found himself powerless to resist in that moment.

Fortunately – or unfortunately – instead of using the rare opportunity to physically assert his domination over the dark, handsome man, the Elite got out of the car to assist in strapping Mimea to the stretcher and wheeling her inside the emergency unit.

Because the night will never give you what you want
Sighing – not even sure if it was in relief or in disappointment – Riki went to park the car in the nearby parking lot. The sun had started to rise, casting a red-gold hue over the parking lot that was reflected by the car windows and all the glass in the hospital building, nearly blinding the approaching mongrel.

*Sighs*… what the hell is it that I actually want? If he assaults me, I’m upset. Then when he doesn’t, I’m also upset! What the fuck is wrong with me?!

When he finally got to the emergency unit on foot Daryl was waiting to safely guide him inside without any incidents with security. Just as the former gangleader was starting to think if it was wise for him to stick around after his female friend had been brought to safety, Daryl spoke: “Lord Am is already performing surgery on Miss Mimea in person and Lord Mink is taking care of the necessary paperwork. I think Derek went to the hospital cafeteria to get everyone some coffee and snacks.”

“Derek?”, Riki asked absently as he allowed the young man to help him down the white hospital corridor and into a seat in what appeared to be a small waiting room.

“Lord Am’s Furniture, who assisted us earlier with Mimea”, he explained and sat down in the seat opposite Riki, restless enough to jump up just as soon as his bottom had hit the white plastic with the excuse of procuring a bunch of magazines from a nearby bookshelf.

“Oh, right”, Riki responded as he accepted the out-held magazine and leafed through it without reading the text or even seeing the pictures. “So… so how long till she… ergh…”

“How long until she comes out of surgery? Apparently it’s hard to tell, but Lord Am roughly estimated it to be somewhere between three to five hours.”

“Five whole hours?!”, the mongrel cried out in disbelief.

“Needless to say the damage to Miss Mimea’s body was extensive, and I believe Lord Am to be more than capable enough in his field to trust his estimation”, Daryl said confidently in an effort to reassure the other.

“Why does he even have to do it himself? I mean, aren’t the doctors here waiting in line to be given the privilege to operate on a Pet with such outstanding owners…”, Riki said mockingly, not even realising how rare it was for any Elite to go through such troublesome lengths to restore a damaged Pet. Most Elite would have simply let Mimea die and purchased a new Pet, to most of them the mere idea of continuing to make use of damaged property would be preposterous.

“Lord Am knows himself to be more talented when it comes to medicine, and obviously he has a great personal involvement…”, Daryl politely yet adamantly defended Raoul.

“A personal involvement?”, Riki now interrupted him, throwing the magazine aside. “He sent her away to die in a bloody whorehouse!!!”

Shushing Riki as several others in the waiting area glanced at them in shock after the mongrel’s loud-mouthed comment, Daryl said: “You of all people should know that there are times when we cannot do what we want or are forced to do things we don’t want to do, Riki!”

“This is a Blondie we’re talking about here! Since when does one Blondie need to do what another one says, huh?!”, the mongrel continued to shout, not caring what any of the pompous pricks in the waiting room thought.
“And what do you imagine Lord Mink would have done to her if Lord Am had not already punished her to the strictest extent that propriety allowed?!”, Daryl hissed, still polite enough not to raise his voice but angry enough at the other’s seemingly complete lack of empathy when it came to Elite to allow it to show on his face.

“If Iason hates her so much, he has a weird way of showing it,” Riki finally muttered and sank back down into his seat, his anger melting away just as soon as he remembered the direness of his friend’s current situation, leaving nothing behind but despair and confusion.

Moving over to sit beside the other young man rather than opposite him, Daryl clasped both of the other’s hands in a reassuring gesture. “I have faith that Miss Mimea will be saved and that all things will be explained in due time.”

“Fuck, kid, how’d’ya even do that, huh? How can you have any goddamn ‘faith’ in a world like this, after all the shit that you’ve had to live through?”, Riki wondered out loud, not understanding how anyone could be that optimistic without being stupid. Surely a serious lack of life experience was required to continue to think in such a positive way? And as far as he knew, Daryl had gotten his fair share of life experience after he’d been nearly executed and sent away from Tanagura in disgrace.

“Oh, I don’t have any faith in this world, Riki, just in some of the people living in it. You’re the one who has taught that, you and Master Iason. The both of you together have saved me: you from a meaningless life of servitude and Master Iason from certain death or worse”, Daryl explained with a small but bright smile, subdued even when he was clearly enthusiastic about what he was saying.

“Why’d you even still call him that? He’s no Master to you anymore, is he? You’re free now”, Riki pointed out, not liking or understanding why Daryl would still wish to defend his former Master, the man who had bought him like a piece of property and then had bossed him around on a daily basis, at times even forcing him to assist in whipping others.

“By his actions towards me he will be my Master for all times, just as you will be my friend from now until the day I die, Riki”, Daryl spoke near-ceremoniously, as if he truly was pledging himself to the other for life.

“So what, him saving you from the executioner all of a sudden undoes all the other shit he’s done to you over the years?”, Riki asked, still not understanding how anyone could be so supportive of the same person who had bought and treated them like a slave.

“If Master Iason hadn’t purchased me when I’d finished my Furniture training, some other Elite would have. Master Iason is not personally responsible for my plight, and it is my firm belief that much suffering has been spared me by being chosen to become a part of the Mink household rather than another one. And of course, I would have never had the privilege to get to know you, Riki”, he added with a small smile.

“Some privilege”, the former gang leader snorted. “I’ve never been anything but horrible to you and I’ve done nothing but give you trouble since the day we met.”

“You truly do not realise it yourself, do you?”, Daryl asked incredulously, now daring to outright stare at the other in unmasked fascination.

“Realise what?”, Riki asked, completely clueless about what the other could possibly be referring to with all this talk. Perhaps the shock of what had happened to Mimea had been too much for the kid to take.

“The effect that you have on people! This... aura... that you have around you that influences others.
Even when you’re not trying to, people are drawn to you and inspired by your actions! It is actually not unlike the effect that Master Iason has on people and Elite alike”, Daryl concluded, not trying to hide his surprise at getting the confirmation that Riki himself had been wholly unaware of this.

“Well, I guess... back in my earlier days in the slums, people did follow me. I always assumed that was because I was smart, good at riding a bike, good at fighting... But y’know half the time I was just pretending to know what I wanted and what I was doing, kidding myself into believing that I was actually working towards something, that I was gonna make something of my life”, Riki spoke wistfully, missing those early days of careless freedom when he just did his own thing without worrying about how unfair the rest of the world was.

“Maybe you were pretending at first, but you’re not pretending now and you have made something of your life, Riki. Much more than many people in Tanagura ever have, even with all the privileges and chances they were given”, Daryl continued to insist, apparently hell-bent on cheering him up.

“Err... I have made something of my life? Yeah right, I’m doing an illegal, dangerous job in the Black Market and I’ve managed to lose my gang and now maybe even my only friend... I really don’t see how any of that is a big success”, Riki sighed as he sank further into his seat, hands in his black, messy hair.

“First of all, Mimea is not your only friend, Riki. You have far more friends than you realise, me among them”, Daryl reassured him, still holding unto his hands, which was starting to get somewhat unnerving, especially from an ex-Furniture. “And I wasn’t referring to the job that you’re choosing to do at the moment but to the social connections you have achieved and the rare opportunities that come with those.”

Suddenly reminded of a similar speech delivered to him by Katze when he had just started working in the Black Market again, Riki said hesitantly: “You mean... you mean my connection to Iason? Look at the good that’s done me!”

“Master Iason doesn’t see you in the way that you think he does, Riki. You’re not just a piece of property to him. At the very least it should be clear to you that his relationship with you is anything but convenient for him”, Daryl explained, still not understanding how Riki couldn’t see how very unusual Lord Mink’s behaviour towards him was and how many people would give everything they had just for the chance of being noticed by any Elite in such a way.

“Then why the fuck does he keep on bothering me?! Why can’t he just leave me the hell alone?!”, Riki burst out, no longer capable of suppressing the panic he felt at being back in the higher-class part of Midas with Iason Mink right around the corner, apparently anxious to sink his claws back into him. Maybe even for good this time.

“Because... I think that he cares very deeply for you, only given his nature as an Elite it is difficult for him to express what he feels”, Daryl spoke reassuringly, getting a glass of cool water from a dispenser close to where they sat and handing it to Riki.

“Tsss, his nature as an Elite...”, Riki said, accepting the water but being too busy thinking over Daryl’s thoughts to drink any of it. “What does that even mean? What, his nature as a complete and utter selfish bastard?”

“It means that Master Iason has been trained from birth not to show emotion and not to allow it to influence him in any way. But for a long time I have suspected, that even though he is clearly very efficient at masking his emotions, it does not necessarily mean that he is incapable of feeling or even of acting on those feelings. Then when you came to Eos, it confirmed my suspicions.”
“So what you’re saying is... that he kidnapped me and did all that shit to me... because he what? He feels for me? He cares about me? That just doesn’t make any sense...”, Riki said, putting down his plastic cup of water untouched.

“I understand how it could appear that way to an outsider, someone who isn’t from Tanagura and doesn’t understand the way things work there. Furniture too are trained not to show any emotions and not to let personal feelings get in the way, but surely you can’t deny that we are capable of emotion?”, Daryl tried to raise a comparison to something Riki might understand.

“That’s different, even if Furniture have been trained from an early age, you’re still human! You can’t ever really take emotion out of humans, cause it’s just something that’s part of our humanity!”, Riki exclaimed with heartfelt conviction, not liking how Daryl even suggested that his own emotions would somehow be unreal or second-rate to those of other humans.

“What about Pets then? Is Miss Mimea human, according to your theory?”, Daryl continued somewhat slyly, using the comparison to Furniture and Pets as bait, knowing full well that Riki would jump to their defence straight away.

(Of course she is! She’s flesh and blood, she walks and talks like a human, she laughs and cries like a human... There is no reason why I should see her as anything but human!”, Riki allowed himself to be baited further, jumping straight in to defend Mimea’s human rights just as much as he would Daryl’s.

“Yet were you to observe her DNA you would see that her genetic information derives enough from that of Homo Sapiens to classify her as another species”, Daryl informed him, now doubtful if Riki even knew about that. The Pets’ status as non-Homo Sapiens in the genetic sense was what had made their production, sale and elimination possible in the past, for as long as they weren’t officially human it could not be legally considered slavery.

“I don’t know anything about genetics and all that, but I’ve met enough humans in my life to know when I’m talking to one!”, Riki cried out, not caring about what some genetics chart in a science lab said, but trusting his own gut feeling above all else.

“Suppose this accident renders her body completely useless, leading to her being put inside a synthetic body instead. Would she still be human then?”, the ex-Furniture went a step further in his theoretical deductions.

“They don’t put damaged Pet minds inside synthetic bodies, Daryl! I’m sure that would go against every single protocol there is, I’m not even sure that it could be done...”, Riki said, suppressing an involuntary shiver at the thought of such a thing really happening to Mimea, on top of everything else. Would he even still recognise her if she was standing right in front of him, if they were to put her in a completely different body of which the face wasn’t even capable of expressing emotion? Even the mere thought of it was downright horrifying!

“But let’s hypothesize that it was possible. Would she still be human?”, Daryl tried to force the other one into an admission or standpoint of some kind.

“Of course she would be! If someone chops off my limbs tomorrow and replaces them with robotic ones, I’d still be me! Cause my identity’s not inside a bunch of skin, muscles and bones, it’s inside my mind!”, Riki argued out of a sense of self-preservation as well as moral conviction. His mind had been the only thing that he had ever been given in life, therefore the importance of it was essential to his sense of self-esteem.

“Do you know what the mind of a Blondie looks like, Riki?”, the other young man unexpectedly
asked, the link between the previous things he had said and this next question not immediately clear
to the mongrel.

“What is that even supposed to mean? They’re robots, right? They were made, not born. There’s just
no comparison between Mimea and Iason, which is where I suppose you’re going with this whole
far-fetched thing?”, Riki asked, pretending that the other young man’s line of thought hadn’t grabbed
his attention. What did he truly know about the actual nature of the Elite anyways? Could it be that
he was being just as ridiculously judgemental about Elite as everyone else was being about
mongrels?

“You’re right that most of the Elite are androids, consisting out of robotic bodies and artificial minds.
But the Blondie class is the exception to that rule, for their minds are not artificial but organic. Of
course I don’t know by what percentage the DNA of those organic minds would derive from what is
considered the human norm, as that is highly classified information. But your assumption that Master
Iason is a non-living, purely-artificial being is incorrect”, Daryl pointed out, apparently trying to
prove that his former Master was more human than Riki had suspected.

“So what, he’s... half robot, half man? What, he has a human mind inside of an artificial body? What
the fuck... Why would Jupiter even do that? I mean, she hates humans, right?”, Riki said, trying to
keep an open mind but still finding it hard to believe that there could be any truth to what Daryl was
implying. Could part of Iason really be human? And if so, what exactly were the implications of
that? Would that make him a better person, or an even worse one?

“I do not know, as all of that information is classified. But I can take the educated guess that
Tanagura and Midas could not be governed efficiently without the Blondie class, otherwise it would
have no reason to exist. Apparently there are some thought processes that regular, fully-artificial Elite
are incapable of performing and that are necessary to keep our society functioning”, Daryl argued,
speaking quietly for he was fully aware that discussing those kinds of things in public came with the
very real risk of being arrested and convicted for treason.

“So then these... feelings... that you claim he has for me... those would be caused by some or other
error in his thought processes? Something biological caused by the fact that his brain is in fact
organic?”, Riki asked incredulously, having never contemplated that possibility himself, even if he
had spent far more time thinking about Iason over the last year than he would ever care to admit.

“Yes, but I do not believe this to necessarily be an error. Surely the Elite or Jupiter would consider it
such, but I don’t think humanity is a mistake, no matter the circumstances”, Daryl spoke in a whisper
now that several other people had sat down not too far away from them in the waiting area.

“And how exactly is me awakening human feelings inside a Blondie a good thing? I mean, if anyone
were to find out, that’d probably be the end for both of us...”, Riki whispered back, suddenly feeling
excited at being part of some kind of conspiracy because of the apparent forbidden nature of their
discussion, judging from Daryl’s hush-hush reactions.

“How is it a good thing? You have lived in Eos, you have seen the way things are in Tanagura and
Midas alike! You have lived through the persecution of your own people in Ceres. You have time
and time again stressed how much you loathe the system and how everything about it is wrong!”
Daryl hissed slightly louder, even if he was still suspiciously glancing around at whoever might be
passing by.

“Yes, but how is Iason having a human flaw in his personality gonna fix any of that?”, Riki asked
again, his patience starting to wear thin. Where was Daryl going with this? And why was it so
goddamn important for him to bring it up in a public place and at such an inopportune time?
“You still don’t realise it, do you? How much power and influence Master Iason truly has! His authority is second only to that of Jupiter herself...”, the ex-Furniture whispered in a more urgent tone.

“OK, OK, chill out! I get what you mean, I guess... But even if Iason has these weird feelings for me, he acts on them in ways that aren’t exactly useful to me or humanity in general. I mean, it doesn’t make him listen to me or care about what I think! It just makes him want to see me naked, among other things...”, Riki explained, thinking that Daryl just didn’t know what things were like between him and Iason, always having been on the outside looking in.

“Are you sure about that? Have you tried – truly tried – to reason with him? Have you tried to offer him a compromise of some sort, a way for the both of you to get what you need from one another?”

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“To get a little, you have to give a little...”, Riki whispered, more to himself now than to the other as he was lost in thought. “You know, I don’t think I’ve really... tried to give him anything. Not that I got the chance to, I mean, he sees something he wants, he just takes it, that’s it. No negotiations asked for.”

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“But clearly that didn’t work out all too well”, the ex-Furniture responded in a slightly reprimanding tone.

“Hey, I’m not the only one to blame for that, OK! I was just trying to survive...”, Riki defended himself using that same old argument that countless other mongrels had used before him for an endlessly wide array of legal and/or moral crimes.

“And has that been to your satisfaction thus far then? Just surviving?”, Daryl asked in an even slightly satirical tone.

“Why are you talking as if the way the world works is my fault somehow?!”, Riki nearly yelled at the other, needing all his resolve just to stay seated and not jump up like some madman ready to commit one or other atrocious act of violence himself.

“Because I believe you are one of the few people – maybe the only one – with a very real opportunity to change the way the world works. If only you’d be brave enough to take it...”, Daryl trailed off, knowing how special the other one was and seeing a genuine opportunity for general improvement there, but powerless to do anything about it himself. No, Riki was the one who had to take action.

“Shit, Daryl! You don’t know what you’re asking of me, you don’t know what you’re asking me to risk...”, Riki started automatically, being used to talking to people who didn’t understand a thing about life in Tanagura and the sacrifices that came with it, like his former gang members.

“Don’t I?”, Daryl asked with raised eyebrows, wondering if Riki could already have forgotten the sacrifices he had made in order to help him.

“Crap... crap, you’re right. I’m sorry. Obviously you do know. But many others don’t, all they care about is living in luxury and safety. They just don’t get that there are more important things than that, things that you need... to be human, y’know. The things that make life worth living, the things that give us a sense of dignity and self”, Riki said with a fiery fierceness, even though he knew that Daryl wasn’t one of those push-overs. Could it be that all this time trying to protect those ideals by trying to stay away from Iason and Tanagura, he had in fact been denying them? Could it be that he had been putting his own physical well-being and safety above his ideals, just like all of those cowards out there?
“I am not asking you to give up on your ideals, Riki. On the contrary, I’m asking you to act on them rather than just keep them to yourself. Don’t you think everyone deserves a chance to have that sense of self that you’ve just described?”, Daryl asked, knowing that on some level Riki really did care about people and was willing to sacrifice himself on their behalf, even if they were complete strangers like he and Mimea had been.

“That’s just what I’m trying to tell you, Daryl. Most people aren’t like us, they don’t want that chance, they despise the very things that make them human! They’ve alienated themselves from what they truly are...”, Riki said, not even sure who he was trying to convince at this point. Could it be that he was merely kidding himself into believing the whole idea had no chance of succeeding simply so that he wouldn’t have to take any personal risks?

“Maybe that’s true for some, but not for all. And you don’t know until you try to convince people, until you give them a fair chance”, the ex-Furniture said.

“Oh, yeah? And who was it that gave me a fair chance, huh? Nobody! I just had to take care of myself, while the rest of the world watched and told me how useless I was! But really it’s they who are the useless ones, and they deserve it!”, Riki yelled again, several people in the vicinity stopping to listen to the rest of his rant, wondering if they ought to alert hospital security.

“So Mimea and I didn’t give you a fair chance and deserved what we got?”, Daryl responded accusingly, angry at the other’s pessimism even after others had placed their hopes in him.

“That’s not what I’m saying! I’m saying that this world deserves it! I’m not referring to any individuals living in that world, I’m just referring to it as a whole! All that money, and all that knowledge, and all that power... and this is what we’ve built with it, this cage we’re now all forced to live in! This is the best that humanity could come up with!”

“Not all of it is bad, Riki...”, Daryl started carefully, for the other had jumped out of his seat and was now screaming at him while gesturing wildly.

“No, no! That’s exactly the kind of thinking that I mean! The kind of ‘half is good enough’ thinking that’s gotten us all into this mess! Goddamnit, half is not good enough! Why the fuck don’t we go for the full 100%, huh?! Why do we keep on lazily, selfishly, stupidly settling for half?! And the bad half at that!!! I’d rather live in a world without technology, without science, without luxury, without all that useless shit... but where people truly care about each other and work together and help each other to build a better life!”

“And here I thought the two of you would be bored while waiting here. I dare say you make quite the orator, Riki”, that familiar, ocean-deep voice sounded.

Ooh, Iason

Turning around, Riki was surprised to find not only a dozen or so shocked onlookers who had apparently all been listening intently, but also Iason, glorious in his all-white, silk ensemble – even if it was somewhat smudged in certain places – with his long hair running down his chest and back like a golden waterfall.
And if you can’t escape it

Seeing that the spirited, dark-haired youngster was stunned into silence, the divinely good-looking blonde informed them: “Mimea is still in surgery, which is estimated to take about another hour or so, but Raoul tells me everything has gone fairly well thus far. I have finished filling out the paperwork and a suitable room has been prepared for her on the tenth floor.”

I hope you find whatever you’ve been looking for

When no reply of any sort was given by either Riki or Daryl, Iason gracefully descended on the plastic chair next to Riki. When both the silence of his chosen companions and the volume of the amazed stares thrown his way from everyone else in the room continued, he picked up a nearby magazine only to put it back after glancing at it for all but a second. Apparently the waiting room only had fashion and cooking magazines, neither of those subjects were particularly interesting to an Elite or to a mongrel for that matter.

Where do you go in a town full of ghosts
And everybody knows your name

The more time passed, the more painful the silence and the more deafening the stares, now that they were being accompanied by excited whispers loud enough for him to make out every single word with his artificial hearing. By the life of Jupiter, what was it with Midasian citizens and their endless gawking? Did they perhaps imagine that part of the power and skills of the Elite would rub off on them if they looked at them long enough? Sighing, Iason remembered why he absolutely detested going out in public without the company of other Elite.

Worst of all were the spoiled, off-world trophy wives of some of the more esteemed Midasian businessmen. Unlike former Pets they lacked the natural respect for their superiors and didn’t even try to stifle their fits of giggles as they openly and extensively discussed each and every aspect of the Blondie’s flawless appearance.

And all the homecoming queens in the small town scenes
They’ll offer you a place to stay

“Hey, you think we could try talking to him? Looks like he’s just waiting...”, the youngest and prettiest of the women said. Although her agreeable appearance paled in comparison to that of the average Pet.

“Are you crazy? That’s not just any Elite, that’s a Blondie! They’re like part of the Tanaguran
government...”, one of the other women explained in a slightly more subdued voice. Apparently that one had been living in Midas for a longer period of time and knew more about its customs and social structure.

“So what? He’s still hot as hell, isn’t he? I’ve never seen such a beautiful man before!”, the good-looking one argued, imagining she had a good chance at seducing Iason in spite of his cold, distant façade. It was pathetic, really.

“I mean that they don’t like talking to outsiders, or anyone who isn’t an Elite for that matter. Besides, it’s not like your flirting could ever amount to anything with one of them...”, the more knowledgeable woman told the younger, dumber one.

“What do you mean?”, she asked, still rudely eyeing Iason like he was a slice of delicious cake she couldn’t wait to devour.

“You really are fresh off the spaceship, aren’t you? The Elite aren’t exactly human, and they’re not interested in sex.”

“Then what’s up with all those gorgeous Pets they keep?"

“That’s just to look at. They don’t actually do anything with them, they think that’s below them.”

“Maybe that’s because they haven’t met a woman like me yet!”

A cluster of nearby Pets – both male and female, but all far prettier than the off-world women – started laughing their heads off when they happened to overhear the conversation. Those outsiders had to be truly stupid to think they had even the slightest chance that a Blondie would even look at them for two whole seconds! Besides, how did they hope to give proper satisfaction to anyone when wearing so many clothes? Their assets had to be seriously lacking, otherwise they would have no reason to hide their bodies, would they?

Some want forever instead of whenever

When they’re naked in the light

Iason was starting to contemplate calling security to have the women removed from his hearing range. Foreigners or not, when on Amoyan soil they were expected to follow the same rules and regulations as everyone else. Moreover he could tell that their offensive talk was upsetting Riki, even if the mongrel was trying to hide his anger. Could he possibly be jealous? Did the youngster really imagine that he would ever pay those pathetic, boring off-worlders any attention? Yet part of him was pleased that apparently his Riki cared enough for him to have such an averse reaction.

Just then Derek finally showed up with the coffee and snacks, the stress having caused the poor boy to get lost on his way back from the cafeteria, after which he had run all across the hospital in search of them, juggling several trays of full coffee cups and plates. Tripping over the magazine that Riki had carelessly thrown onto the floor not too long ago, the poor boy would have ended up spilling the contents of the precariously-balanced trays all over the white-tiled floor had Iason not reacted with lightning speed, grabbing a hold of the small torso to stop him from falling over with one hand and stabilising the arms that held the trays with the other.

“Oh dear!! Th.. thank you, my Lord! My deepest, heart-felt apologies! I don’t...”, the boy started
apologising as if fearing the worst possible retribution for what was but a single oversight in more than understandable circumstances.

“When was the last time you slept?”, the Blondie interrupted the start of what was without a doubt a long enumeration of pointless apologies.

“I... ergh...”, quickly checking the watch on his slim wrist, he said: “I estimate it has been approximately 25 hours since, Sir.”

“I do not believe Lord Am is in any immediate, further need of your assistance. Therefore it would be a more efficient use of time for you to return to the Am residence and acquire a couple of hours of bedrest”, Iason pointed out, surprising Riki, who didn’t think the great Blondie would think of or bother with the well-being of a Furniture, least of all one belonging to someone else.

“I... Of course, Sir. Thank you, Sir”, the young Furniture started carefully, for the last thing he wanted to do was to insult the most powerful Elite of all Tanagura. “But I am afraid that I would require Lord Am’s permission...”

“Needless to say I outrank Lord Am, as Head of the Syndicate the welfare of each and every Tanaguran citizen is my concern. Moreover it is clear to me that the fact that Lord Am has as of yet not dismissed you is merely due to his mind being preoccupied”, the top Elite insisted in a level voice that indicated he wouldn’t tolerate any further refusal.

“Yes, of course, Your Excellency, as you command”, Derek responded submissively, recognising when his Master’s authority was overruled. Leaving the food on a nearby, low table he then bowed to the three of them before taking his leave. “Good day to you all.”

Waiting until the boy was out of hearing range, Riki said: “Kid’s gotta be some talented pilot, taking on such a distance and traffic his first time driving...” Did I just start an actual conversation with Iason Mink? Why the fuck did I do that, shit!

First handing one of the coffee cups to Daryl and then moving to take one for himself, Riki found a large, white-gloved hand already handing him a cup. The mongrel gratefully accepted the hot, caffeine-rich brew, for he too was beginning to suffer from sleep deprivation.

“Indeed some Furniture are willing to go to great lengths to obey their Masters’ commands. It is most admirable”, Iason agreed with the other’s assessment, glad that a subject for discussion was being provided at last without him needing to ignore Mimea’s advice to leave the initiative to Riki whenever possible.

“Back in Guardian everyone always thought those who became Furniture were spineless weaklings. But I don’t think anyone as brave as some of the Furniture I’ve met could possibly be called weak... Guess there’s different kinds of strength”, Riki admitted. Seeing both sides of Amoyan society had given him a very different, more open-minded opinion on many subjects than most of the residents of Ceres. Also he was curious to find out to what extent Iason might agree with his views.

“That is a most accurate analysis. For instance, very similar things are thought in Tanagura about the residents of Ceres, yet I have found many admirable qualities in you”, Iason spoke rationally, deviously changing the topic to something he personally considered worth discussing in more depth.

“You have? You mean like personality traits? Really?”, Riki asked incredulously, not having expected Iason to recognise any such qualities in him, let along speak of them.

“You seem surprised? How come?”, Iason asked, at times forgetting that behind all his bravado the
mongrel did have many doubts.

“Gee, cause I had it in my head that you didn’t like my personality much”, Riki said, not sure at all where the blonde was going with this. *What the hell is up with those complements all of a sudden?*

“What would make you think that, I wonder?” the Elite asked again, truly not comprehending how Riki could have made any deductions about his thoughts on the matter, for Iason had never commented on the other’s personality traits.

“Oh, I dunno, maybeee ... you trying your hardest to beat every hint of personality out of me for several years?”, Riki feigned ignorance, mocking the stupidity of the other’s useless questions.

“I believe such might be impossible, for your wilfulness is apparently without boundaries”, his former Master spoke almost endearingly rather than reproachfully. “It was never my intention to change anything about your personality, merely your self-control when it comes to acting on emotional impulses at all times, as it would appear that such is often not in your own best interests.”

“Lack of self-control is an essential *part* of my personality, you dumb-ass! Like the more people try to tell me what to do, the more I rebel. Never noticed that?”, the mongrel continued to jest in order to hide his hurt feelings on what was proving to be a very sensible trip down memory lane for him.

“Yes, but I couldn’t for the life of me see any logic in such a line of thought”, Iason mused, sounding neither positive nor negative.

“That’s cause there is no logic in it, not everything in life is about freakin’ logic! I’m not some dog you can train to do whatever you want. I’ve got my own sense of self and I’m proud of that”, Riki said exasperatedly. Really, there was no point in even trying to explain something so essentially human to someone so essentially rational. It had been a grave mistake to start this conversation, for apparently even *talking* to Iason was proving immensely challenging at best.

“I would never presume to be able to train you to do what I want, unless of course it also happens to be what you want. I cannot understand why you insist on always denying your own needs”, the blonde Elite tried to explain. It was in fact quite the challenge to determine what Riki’s wants and needs were, for what he vocalised or showed often clashed rather violently with what he was really feeling on the inside. Not unlike an Elite, but what Elite were thinking was always determined by logic and their own self-interests, therefore it was never truly difficult for Iason to determine the nature – or rather the mechanics – of their thoughts.

“I’ll decide what my needs are, damnit!”, Riki started arguing, interpreting the other’s statement as an effort to dictate to him what he needed.

“How can you *decide* on your emotional needs when you yourself have just said that emotional responses are not to be controlled?”, Iason then asked, still finding it difficult to understand his mongrel’s motivations even after several months worth of ‘training’ in that area with Mimea.

“Shit, you’re just totally twisting my logic here!”, Riki exclaimed loud enough to have everyone in the waiting room stare at them, even more than they already were due to a Blondie sitting right there. How dare a lowlife like him speak to a Blondie in such a way, after being gifted the rare privilege of speaking to the very Son of Jupiter!

“But you just said that there is no logic involved in your thought processes...”, the blonde started, desperately attempting to get the other to explain himself. How was he ever supposed to know what to do or say when there was simply no way to determine Riki’s thoughts?
“Holy fuck, you’re impossible to talk to!”, Riki cried out, throwing his arms up into the air and nearly knocking Daryl straight in the face, who deftly evaded the sinewy-muscled fist and arm without the other even noticing.

“I am nearly attempting to understand your line of thought, Riki. I am not trying to tell you what that line of thought ought to be”, the Blondie spoke in his defence, maintaining his outward calm in spite of the storm of frustrated confusion that was currently building in his formidable mind.

“Will you just ... !”, Riki started another temper tantrum but then realised what the other had just said. “Wait, you’re not?”

“As I have said earlier, such training has proven an utterly fruitless undertaking in your case, therefore it is simply no use to further attempt it.”

“Then what the hell is up with you having adopted Mimea as your prized Pet all of a sudden! If not to continue to assault me, then why, huh?!”, Riki yelled as he got up from his seat. Before even giving the blonde bastard the chance to respond, he added: “Fuck this shit!!! You Tanagurans are all the same, aren’t you? All lying, deceiving sons of bitches who enjoy toying with people’s lives just so they can feel better about their own empty existence!”

“You think this is a game for me, Riki?”, Iason now responded frankly, not caring about the audience at hand. “Something to do in my spare time to stave off the boredom? Perhaps it may have started out that way, I honestly do not know. But now it has become much more than that, for there is literally nothing I would not do in my pursuit of you. Whatever methods prove necessary, I shall resort to. Just tell me what it is you wish me to do.”

“I have told you over and over what it is I want you to do, asshole! I WANT you to LEAVE me the fuck ALONE!!!!”, Riki finally screamed, all those feelings of hopelessness and pain and hate that he had been bottling up inside of him throughout the years coming out in one giant explosion. After which he quickly turned on his heels and fled the waiting room.

First taking a second to maintain his serene equilibrium, the Elite then followed the mongrel through the corridor and outside through a side entrance, into the pouring morning rain. Grabbing his dark-skinned arm before the mongrel had the chance to reach the parking lot, he said: “I daresay I have given you your space for quite a while now, Riki, yet it clearly has not brought you back to me.”

“That’s because I don’t want to come back to you!”, the already-soaked mongrel spat at him, trying to wrench his arm out of the other’s steel grasp in vain. “I never wanted to come with you in the first place!”

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“Was it not you who implored me to follow you then, the first time we met?”, Iason pointed out accusingly, confusion making way for anger at the other’s useless, stubborn denial, causing a sharp glint in his eyes that wasn’t missed by the other.

Fear suddenly grabbing a hold of him as surely as the pissed-off Elite in front of him was, Riki resorted to a verbal attack: “Yeah, for a one-night-stand in exchange for not reporting me to the Dark Men!” Instinctively sensing that his cutting words were having some effect on the other’s impregnable façade, he continued his assault with a mean sneer. “I’m sorry I hurt your so-called feelings if you were expecting something more!”

“Is that what you have been telling yourself all this time? Well, I have been telling myself that all I wanted to do was set an example by teaching a certain insolent mongrel a much-needed lesson in humility”, Iason started, not missing the other’s slight cringe at hearing those words.
Still hurt to hear the true reason for the Blondie’s attention for him spoken out loud even if he had known that painfully humiliating truth all along, Riki renewed his efforts to pull free from the other’s impossibly strong grip and couldn’t prevent tears from forming in his obsidian eyes, hoping that the heavily-pounding rain would render them invisible.

“But that false reasoning was merely what I believe you would call bullshit”, the tall blonde then continued unexpectedly, not loosening his grip on the handsome young man’s arm in the slightest, not caring that the down-pour was further ruining the state of his clothes and hair. “Something I told myself so that I could simply continue my normal life despite those clear changes to my personality that meeting you has invoked. There was no more truth to that line of thought than there is to your one-night-stand-out-of-gratitude theory."

It’s a strange little potion

When those dark, shiny eyes simply stared at him in disbelief, Iason pulled Riki closer to him and whispered in his ear, soft lips ghosting over his sensitive earlobe as cool air was blown across his wet face like a summer breeze: “You needn’t fear me for the power I have over you, Riki, for you hold the very same power over me in return. And I find that instead of frightening me, as I always thought such power would, it in fact invigorates me in a way that nothing else ever has. Feeling the way I do about you now, nothing else in this world truly matters to me anymore. Only you.”

But sometimes the motion

Hopeless to resist the other’s close proximity and confession of love – or at least that’s what it appeared to be – Riki’s body went limp and his mind went mushy, dark spots blurring his vision. Seeing his mongrel’s body cave in on itself, Iason’s arms were quick to catch him and hold him safe in his embrace for the second time in under 24 hours. That in and of itself was a tremendous feat, but having tasted even a fraction of that warmth, the Blondie found himself craving more of it. More. Give me more, give me everything. Make this cold, dead body come to life once more.

Almost makes you feel alive

“Ia... Iason... Gah... What the hell’s the matter with me... Did you drug me?”, Riki asked as in a haze, pupils wide and breathing rapid, smaller hands desperately clutching the blonde’s powerful shoulders.

Did the icy, unnaturally flawless Elite really mean what he said? Did he really feel something for Riki, something strong enough to make Riki the most important thing in the world to him? Could a lowly street rat really have that kind of power over the Head of the Syndicate and right hand of Jupiter himself? Hard to believe as it was, even the mere possibility of it was dizzying ...

“Of course I did not drug you. There is no need for such measures when it comes to you anyhow”, Iason said matter-of-factly as he walked back towards the hospital side door, glancing at the black,
wet figure in his arms when he didn’t receive another biting comment or accusation as reply and seeing that the young man had lost consciousness. *All that stress and physical exhaustion of the last couple of hours must have been too much for his body to take. He needs to rest.*

*.flex*

“Hmmm…”, Riki moaned, then opened his eyes and looked around in surprise upon being laid on a metal hospital bed covered in white, clean sheets. Where was he? How could he not have noticed the Blondie carrying him inside a bedroom? “Where… where am I? What happened?”

“I believe you briefly lost consciousness. My apologies, I did not know you would become thus afflicted. Shall I call a doctor?”, the Elite asked in a sincere voice, appearing genuinely worried about the mongrel’s health.

“No… I don’t want a doctor, you idiot… I just want you…”, Riki rasped before he’d even had a chance to think those words through. For the first time in his life he realised the truth behind them. He’d wanted the hauntingly beautiful Elite since the moment he’d first laid eyes on him. And he’d never stopped wanting him, no matter what horrible things the blonde had done to him. But in the knowledge that those feelings could never be reciprocated by a creature that cold and heartless, his love had turned to rage and despair instead.

**Ooh, Iason**

“Hmm…”, Iason sighed in delight as he bent over the other’s horizontal form and gently brushed a few black locks of hair from the mongrel’s attractive yet damaged face. “As much as I would enjoy obliging you, I must raise some concern. You’ve had a lot to deal with over the last couple of hours, you are soaked-through, injured and clearly exhausted.” Having waited for as long as he had, he could wait a while longer. Furthermore he didn’t want to appear too eager, worried that he might scare his Riki away again. This was a crucial moment and timing was everything, therefore he had to tread carefully.

“I don’t care about any of that. For the first time in a long while I know what I want, and it’s you”, Riki said decisively. Truly, when he thought about it, Iason had been the only constant in his life so far. Everything else had just withered away and watered down to nothing. Even his friendship with Mimea was in jeopardy, for even if she did survive her ordeal there remained the question of where exactly her true allegiance lay and whether or not she would blame Riki for the extreme violence inflicted by his former gang.

“Riki…”, the strong blonde started, afraid to touch his beloved’s smaller body when he was in a frail enough state to lose consciousness.

**Tell me what you’re chasing**
“By you I don’t just mean your body”, the youngster interrupted, touched by the other’s apparent concern. “I really mean you as a person... As in the whole package, body and mind and... I’m not sure you even have a soul but yeah, that too.” If he was going to do this, he was going to do it properly. What better way to find out if the other’s claims of love were true than to strive for a mental relationship as well as a physical one. He knew it was a long shot, but with everything that had happened, what more could he possibly have to lose?

“Oh, is that so?”, Iason asked in that teasing, supposedly inquisitive voice that he always used when he was flirting. “Does this package you speak of include my mouth?”

**Because the night will never give you what you want**

Suddenly feeling those cool, slightly moist lips on the sensitive skin of his throat, Riki threw his head back in ecstasy to offer more of his throat, nearly banging into the metal headboard of the bed. “Shit, this is so embarrassing...”, he muttered, thinking of how only a year ago he would have endured any amount of suffering for any duration of time just to not have to surrender to this man’s maddeningly enticing touch.

“There is no need for you to be embarrassed, my sweet”, the blonde said in that velvet, husky voice he used during foreplay. As he continued to lay soft, smoldering kisses all over Riki’s throat, his naked hand found the other’s smaller one clutching the bedspread and intimately interlaced their fingers.

**Ooh, Iason**

“Argh!! Fuck...”, Riki cried out, even if the Blondie was merely kissing him and holding his hand. Just the thought that this perfect synthetic creature was moved to such acts by emotion further magnified the effect of even the simplest of touches.

“Ssssh”, Iason shushed him, the vibrating sensation of his lips against the mongrel’s throat stimulating him further. “Not yet. But soon, little one.”

“Gah!!... didn’t mean that... literally.... Argh! Holy crap, I don’t care anymore... I need you! Please, Iason...”, Riki whimpered as the blonde’s questing lips reached his collarbone and started to worship it with burning kisses, sucking as if trying to absorb skin, flesh and bone alike.

“There, there”, Iason whispered comfortingly as he explored the junction between neck and shoulder with his agile tongue. “Be patient now, my Riki.”

**And if you can’t escape it**

“I... I can’t!”, Riki shrieked, already feeling that familiar tension building in his loins. *You’ve got to be shitting me!* “Iason, I... I’m gonna...”, he gasped as he desperately held unto the Elite’s back and
long, golden hair.

Expecting the Blondie to say something mercilessly mocking along the lines of ‘Already? My, my, that was quick, even for you’, Riki was surprised to hear something quite different.

“It’s all right, my love. No need to hold back”, Iason reassured him, wrapping his arms around his lover’s slender frame to tenderly caress along his spine and finally kissed him full on the mouth as his bright-blue, flaming eyes met Riki’s.

Crying out when the beautiful blonde’s silky-soft lips met his own, Riki’s entire body shook in violent spasms as the spine-tingling, delicious waves of completion ripped through him from head to toe, sweeping him away in an endless tsunami of passion.

I hope you find whatever you’ve been looking for

Iason greedily swallowed the dark youngster’s erotic sex cry and continued to gently kiss him throughout his intense climax. Even if the other’s sensitivity and passionate reactions gave him enormous pleasure, the Blondie didn’t feel the immediate need to do anything more than kiss his lover senseless. At the moment at least. There will be plenty of time for that later.

Gasping for breath as the remnants of sweet fire still sizzled through his limbs, Riki momentarily tried to pull his lips away from the other’s. “I... Iason... gotta breathe...”

Pulling away to allow his mongrel to catch his breath, Iason brought Riki’s hand – still interlaced with his own – to his mouth and tenderly kissed the tanned, warm fingers one by one. “Of course, my love. I apologise.”

“s OK”, Riki sighed, still breathing rapidly and marvelling at being called ‘my love’ repeatedly. Iason had never called him that before. “Holy fuck... What the hell just happened?”

“I kissed you. You came, hard”, the immensely satisfied Blondie said, trying his hardest not to sound too smug. Now we’re making progress. He’s even more sensitive when he’s willing.

“Argh, fuck fuck fuck!”, Riki cursed with abandon, nearly throwing his head into the headboard all over again while pulling at his hair in seemingly hopeless despair. “You were probably on to something with the whole ‘lack of self-control’ thing... cause I have none whatsoever when it comes to you! Bloody hell!!!”

And I’m gonna keep on

“Is that a good ‘bloody hell’ or a bad one?”, the Elite asked hopefully, unable to tell what emotion exactly was triggering the mongrel’s swearing. Like how it had sometimes been hard to tell whether his facial expressions indicated pleasure or pain.

“Good. No, I mean, definitely bad. Or... Fuck, I don’t know anymore! Both good and bad, I guess”, Riki sighed. Why couldn’t he just make up his mind already?
“You seemed to be rather sure of what you desired earlier”, Iason reminded him, not about to let him pretend nothing had changed and that he had once again been an unwilling victim.

“Yeah, I am sure that I want you”, Riki admitted, the relief of finally being able to say it out loud truly liberating. “But I just don’t know if that’s a good thing…”, he then added uncertainly. He used to think it was definitely a very bad thing, but now he wasn’t so sure anymore. Could there be some truth to what Katze and Daryl had said about him supposedly having the power to really change things, through his connection with Iason? And even so, was it in his own personal interest to surrender to the blonde demon’s tempting seduction?

“How would it not be a good thing?”, Iason asked in a tone as near to incredulous as an Elite could get it. What have I done wrong this time?

“Why? Seriously, you’re asking me this? Because you’re Iason fucking Mink! You’re the guy who did all those horrible things to me, who made me doubt everything I ever thought I knew about myself and threw my entire life upside down!”, Riki accused, for regardless of what the older man’s motivations had been for abducting him, it had still been abduction. And all the ‘punishments’ that had followed after becoming the Blondie’s Pet had still been torture. Even when they’d had sex it had essentially been rape without Riki’s permission, even if his words of refusal had not corresponded to the way he truly felt. If anything his secret love for his tormentor had only made matters worse, adding mental hurt and betrayal to the physical pain he’d had to endure.

“The same could be said for you, but I have long since stopped considering those changes bad. If anything I would say they are good rather than bad, even if they go against everything I’ve ever known… probably because they go against everything I’ve ever known. But then again the very concepts of good and bad are relative, for they are merely moral constructs created in the human mind to maintain a sense of order and stability in modern society.”

Sighing, Riki allowed himself to fall back unto the bed in a wet, tangled heap of limbs and messy hair. “Well, the ‘concept of bad’ felt pretty real to me! Like everything you ever did to me before this…”, he began, but then couldn’t say any more because of the sudden sob that pushed its way out of his throat. “How could you do it? How could you possibly do those terrible things to someone you claim to care for?!”
Having absolutely no idea how to respond to that, the Elite finally changed the subject: “Perhaps you ought to wash up a bit and have someone look at those wounds”, after which he disappeared into the small adjacent bathroom for a short moment and returned with a small bowl of fresh, clean water and a wash cloth. He then proceeded to carefully clean the filth and blood off of the other’s forehead, put a band-aid on the cut and then moved to the foot of the bed to take off the other’s dirty, leather boots.

“Hey! What are you...”, Riki began to protest, the reaction postponed due to his amazement at seeing the most powerful of all Elite degrade himself to chores normally assigned to Furniture. But he had to admit that the cool touch of the cloth on his forehead and the tenderness of the blonde’s hands were comforting. New tears started to form in the corner of his dark eyes at the shrill contrast with how those very same hands had caused him so much pain and humiliation in the past. Blinking them away, the young man tried his hardest to focus on the here and now instead.

“Your left foot was injured, was it not? At least let me clean the wound before you get an infection...”, the blonde insisted, pulling off one of his boots and attempting to peel off the wet, muddy sock from Riki’s injured foot, noticing the amount of blood on the piece of clothing with no small amount of concern. He hadn’t realised some of Riki’s injuries weren’t just superficial, for the mongrel hid his pain well and Mimea’s severe injuries had been more pressing. Guilt pressed on him like the weight of all the skyscrapers of Tanagura combined. Not only had he allowed his beloved to get hurt but he had also neglected to tend to his wounds. How careless!

“I’m not saying my foot doesn’t need looking after. I’m saying that you don’t have to do that, at least not personally”, Riki explained, not sure at all why his former Master was performing those menial tasks. But a part of him was down-right fascinated by seeing the Blondie carry out such normal, everyday actions. Strange as it was, it was not unpleasant at all.

Ooh, Iason

“I told you there was nothing I would not do, did I not?”, Iason said, using the opportunity to prove his earlier claim. “Besides, I do not consider this task unpleasant at all when it comes to you, and I’d rather have my own hands on you than those of a stranger.”

“Shit, you always enjoy yourself anyhow, don’t you?”, Riki said, reminding both of them of similar words spoken by Iason in the hotel room where they’d had their first sexual encounter. Don’t worry, I’ll enjoy myself. That had been the only time that he had given the blonde permission before sex, yet he had felt far worse after that encounter emotionally.

Tell me what you’re chasing

“Hmmm, you know me all too well, Riki. Please allow me to remove these wet clothes as well, before you catch pneumonia”, the devilishly-charming creature purred seductively and slowly removed the mongrel’s soaking wet jeans and socks, making those simple touches feel sinful even if they were performed out of practical necessity.
“Holy mother, help me, the biggest pervert in the whole goddamn universe is wooing me!”, Riki exclaimed, feeling extra vulnerable with half of his clothes removed. He then briefly winced in pain when the Blondie set to the task of washing his bloody foot, even if Iason was being uncharacteristically gentle.

**Because the night will never give you what you want**

“I’m the pervert? Are you quite sure about that? For I wasn’t the one who just came in my pants after a mere kiss”, the Elite analytically pointed out.

“The fuck do you mean a ‘mere’ kiss? Kisses have meaning, at least they do to lowly scum like me. Which I guess is why you Tanagurans hardly ever bother with it in your disgusting shows”, Riki said irritably, trying to pull his bare foot out of Iason’s soapy hands but failing.

“I did not imply that there is no meaning in kisses. I simply meant that to most humans the act of kissing alone is not enough to reach completion”, Iason reasoned as he started to dry off Riki’s feet and lean, dusky legs with a fluffy towel. It felt much more like a sensual caress than a methodically carried out task.

**Ooh, Iason**

Biting his tongue against the shiver of delight that ran through him when the blonde’s talented hands softly rubbed his thighs, Riki tried his best not to let it arouse him all over again. “All that kinky stuff’s overrated, y’know. Excitement, I mean real excitement – both physical and emotional – has a lot more to do with feelings than it does with actual sex”, he then said, wondering why he was going through the trouble of explaining things that to him as a human were just obvious, common knowledge. Could Iason really not know about these fundamental things?

“Perhaps that is the reason why I became sexually active. I have never felt the need for it before I met you”, Iason wondered out loud, something he had rarely done in the past but had taken up since starting his instructive sessions with Mimea.

“So this insanely intense desire you have for me... comes from your feelings for me rather than your lust for me?”, Riki asked, then inhaled sharply when the Elite’s long, adept fingers lightly brushed past his boxers on their way up to remove his wet and torn T-shirt. Crunching his teeth to ward off the overwhelming sensations that threatened to engulf him as the Blondie was slowly undressing him, he tried to focus on the conversation instead.

**And if you can’t escape it**

“Where else could it possibly come from? Seeing as how my body is bionic and completely artificial, I can switch my sexual excitement on and off as I see fit, like pushing a button on an electrical device. To me the physical sensation you describe as ‘lust’ is literally a mere setting of which I have
full control at all times”, Iason explained, not sure why he hadn’t realised earlier that the mongrel didn’t even know that single fact about his artificial body. He had always assumed that Riki knew at least those basics of Elite anatomy, but apparently he did not. After removing Riki’s poor excuse for a shirt, he attempted to move the towel to the mongrel’s abdomen but suddenly had his hands slapped away.

“You can do what?! Are you for real about this?! Then why’d you have to push that damn sex button of yours like 20 times in one damn night!!”, Riki exclaimed heatedly as he scrambled upright to get away from the blonde’s heavenly touch, not understanding at all why he had dragged him through countless sex marathons when his own lust hadn’t even been an issue. I just knew he was a total sadist!

“Because I wanted to see the look of sheer pleasure on your face as often as your human body could stand it”, Iason answered truthfully, allowing his hands to be slapped away even if he had more than enough strength on the mongrel to keep them right where he wanted. “Because I love you, Riki.”

I hope you find whatever you’ve been looking for


To Be Continued ...


Awakening

Chapter Summary

They all come together at last.

Author’s notes:

Hi guys! :-) So sorry to keep you all waiting this long, I was busy with other stuff and found it somewhat hard to find a suitable end to this chapter. I hope it was worth the wait and that you’ll forgive me for being such a lousy updater. ;-) 

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Soundtrack: Scandroid – Awakening with you

✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯

I am not certain if I have a heart

But I can imagine it breaking apart

If I could feel something then I’d like to start

With you

Awakening with you

✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯

“Because I wanted to see the look of pleasure on your face as often as your human body could stand it. And your estimate of 20 times is incorrect, the maximum number within 24 hours was 12”, Jason corrected as he poured a generous amount of disinfectant on Riki’s injured toe – causing him to scream out –, then put on a sterile band aid and wrapped a bandage around it with the expertise of a professional nurse.

“Aaaaaargh!! Fucking Jupiter in hell, what is it with you and making me scream?!”, Riki yelled.
accusingly. Just then the door opened to reveal a quietly reserved but immensely relieved Daryl.

“Pardon the interruption, Master, but Lord Am has finished the surgery...”, the former Furniture began, then stopped as he was unable to process the unbelievable scene of a Blondie bandaging the foot of a mongrel and former Pet.

“Is Mimea gonna be OK?!?” and “Has the lethal damage to Mimea’s body been repaired?” sounded simultaneously before the young man had even had the chance to recover from the shock at seeing his former Master perform such a degradingly menial task as bandaging one’s foot.

“Y... yes... to both questions I believe. She is resting now but Lord Am said everything went well and that given time and revalidation therapy, Miss Mimea should recover completely”, Daryl confirmed with a smile he didn’t even realise had snuck its way unto his face.

“Thank Jupiter”, Iason said and Riki fell backwards into the pillows as relief gulfed through him. Mimea wasn’t just his one and only friend in the world these days, but she was also the only one who could help him get through this mad thing with Iason Mink. How on Amoy the girl had managed to obtain a truce with none other than her former nemesis, was beyond him. Apparently Mimea was much more of a sly vixen than he’d realised.

I must be crazy to even consider giving it another go with the cursed blonde. Hell, what am I even thinking, I never willingly gave it a go with him to begin with!

“Did Lord Am mention when she might wake up?”, Iason then asked with an uncharacteristic sense of urgency. Not only had the possibility of being forever denied the comfort of his accomplice’s company instilled a very real fear of loneliness in his heart, but now that the situation with Riki had taken an unexpected turn and picked up speed he was in dire need of her advice.

“I am afraid Lord Am did not mention when she might wake up, Sir”, Daryl replied, eyebrows slightly frowning at his own neglectful oversight in failing to ask about that. “But I’d be more than glad to escort you to the room where Miss Mimea is resting, if you’d like to see her now.”

“Indeed I would, thank you. Riki, would you care to accompany us?”, Iason asked, now torn between his love for the mongrel and his worry for his more recent confidante and friend.

“Of course I’m coming with you, dumbass! I wanna make sure she’s all right... and I’ve got like a million questions to ask her when she wakes up”, Riki said, then crouched up his face in pain when his injured foot smacked unto the ground a little harder than he’d intended due to his hurry to get out of the bed.

“Easy now, Riki. Here, let me assist you”, Iason reacted before the ex-Furniture standing in the doorway got a chance to. Any excuse to wrap an arm around the intoxicating young man’s waist was a good one to be sure, but he also did not wish for his beloved’s injury to worsen.

“You never miss an opportunity for your perversions, do you?”, Riki accused, trying to be angry but somehow it ended up sounding more like an endearment.

“You might be right about that, the effect you have on me is not unlike the attraction between two opposing forces of physics. In other words: I simply cannot help myself”, the blonde admitted in a way that sounded almost poetic, although he wasn’t consciously being romantic but merely attempting to rationalise his feelings through a scientific comparison.

“Fuck, it’s weird to hear you say sappy stuff like that. Care to tell me again about these so-called feelings you have for me?”, Riki asked, no longer able to deny to himself how thrilled he was at the
thought of the beautiful Blondie having amorous feelings for him. Wasn’t the very possibility of that
the reason why he had grabbed the Elite’s wrist all those years back, refusing to let such an
opportunity pass him by? Of course at the time he hadn’t had a clue as to what he was getting
himself into, but regardless that very same intent was still burning somewhere in a dark, hidden
corner of his weary heart.

When they followed Daryl into the hallway, Riki started feeling slightly nervous when he saw how
far ahead of them the youngster was, almost as if he was trying to give him and Iason a sense of
privacy.

“I find it difficult to put my feelings into words, as in truth there is nothing that compares with them
for 100%. But if I had to describe it differently, I would say I need you like I need air to breathe”, the
Elite mused, walking slowly while carefully pulling the injured mongrel along, taking on most of his
body weight as if he were as light as a feather.

“Do you? Need actual air to breathe?”, Riki wondered, once again feeling like some kind of idiot for
never having bothered to find out more about Elite anatomy, considering he’d been living and
sleeping with one for several years.

“Of course I do. All organic brain tissue needs oxygen to stay alive. Although I can do without it far
longer than the average human due to the nanites in my brain”, Iason explained patiently, delighted
that Riki was showing an interest in him, even if it was merely in the physical aspects of his android
body.

“The na... OK, never mind, I don’t wanna know, it sounds creepy”, Riki said. *At least he has an
actual organic brain.* “Back to the subject of your feelings. What emotions would you say you feel
around me then?”

“Oh, a great many of them”, Iason started, slightly disappointed at the mongrel’s dismissal of the
exact functioning of his bionic brain. Although it was probably better that Riki did not ask for any
information that was classified, for his own safety. “Admiration. Curiosity. Longing. Devotion.”

“Well, that does sound...”, Riki started, thinking that maybe having Iason be more open about what
was going on inside that mastermind of his wasn’t as bad as he had initially thought.

“Annoyance. Confusion. Frustration. Anger. Worry. Fear”, the blonde then continued, shattering the
slightly more positive image that had just started to form in the mongrel’s head.

“Hey, why the fuck are there more negative than positive ones?!”, Riki spat, only afterwards
realising how he was revealing his own secret longing for the Blondie’s approval. *Crap.*

“And I believe love. Although it is hard to tell, for I have never had any reason to feel love before”,
Iason continued as if he hadn’t heard the mongrel’s undignified reaction at all. He had to keep in
mind that the average human’s attention span was limited, therefore it would perhaps be better to ‘cut
to the chase’ as soon as possible rather than go into too much detail.

“Love?! You would say you love me? That what you feel for me is in fact love?”, Riki gasped,
stopping somewhere in the middle of the hospital corridor to clutch unto the railing that lined the wall
for support, be it mental or physical.

“I do not particularly care what it is called”, Iason considered as he allowed the young man to rest a
while, but never took his arm off his waist even if the wall was now providing him with all the
support he needed. “It makes me feel whole when I’m with you and torn when I’m away from you.
It makes me feel powerful, yet at the same time it also makes me weak. Ecstatic and enraptured when
“Fucking, that really does sound an awful lot like love...”, Riki said, stunned that the other would ever admit to feeling foolish and incompetent, for whatever reason. Perhaps what was going on inside the Blondie’s head was more human and flawed than anyone would suspect...

“If you were dead, I am quite sure I would take my own life if I could. Like in that ridiculously sentimental play by William Shakespeare that Raoul likes to watch”, Iason continued, unaware of how his mention of suicide made Riki’s dark eyes go wide in shock, for the mongrel’s handsome face was momentarily turned to the wall.

When the long silence was starting to feel awkward, Riki tried to somewhat lighten the mood: “Raoul watches plays in which lovers kill themselves? Kind of a different climax than in his usual choice performance, huh?”

“I believe he has quite a bit of a flair for the dramatic. Sometimes I think he enjoys pain just as much as you do”, Iason remarked in jest, realising that the mongrel’s earlier silence was an indicator of discomfort with the subject of death and thus trying to compensate for that with humour.

“I do not enjoy pain, OK!”, Riki burst out, as expected, then added rather sheepishly: “I just enjoy... well, you. Even if you’re being a sadistic motherfucker. But that doesn’t mean I like sadistic stuff!”

“Even if so, those who feel pain strongly apparently feel other things strongly as well. Strongly enough to overcome the sensation of pain”, the blonde said, risking a glance at the other’s obsidian eyes, their gazes suddenly meeting.

“But...”, Riki started, momentarily awe-struck by the intensity of that bright blue, then recovered. “But you don’t feel pain? I mean, can you turn it on and off like you can arousal?”

“Quite the contrary, I can’t help but feel it whenever you are not with me or when you are struggling against me. I did not realise that feeling was in fact pain, until Mimea told me. I always thought that pain was nothing but a physical sensation, meant to inform the brain of damage to the body, which through a wrongful association leads humans to believe that they are in mortal danger whenever they feel it, making most of them do whatever they can to avoid it”, the Blondie argued rationally, almost as if the whole question were merely a scientific one.

“So you think you are in mortal danger when you’re not with me? Funny, I kind of feel that I’m in mortal danger whenever I am with you. Cause when I’m with you there’s always the risk of...”, his voice trailed off, stopping mid-sentence.

“Of what? Punishment? Sex?”, Iason asked, not liking the thought that his mongrel feared him, even while knowing that he had to, somewhere hidden underneath all that proud bravado. All humans feared the Elite on some instinctual level, especially those who had been punished at their hands.

“Rejection. And in case you’re wondering, to me punishment is rejection. It’s like... rejection of me as a person”, Riki said, not even knowing why he now thought it was such a bright idea to reveal his most intimate feelings and the potential weaknesses that came with them, only knowing how relieving it felt to finally share that which he had kept buried for so long. I gotta be bat-shit crazy to reveal myself like this. And to an Elite at that, of all people!

“I only ever punished you to keep you safely by my side, Riki”, the tall blonde tried to reassure him, noticeably tightening his grip on the young man’s waist, cool fingers ghosting over his right hip. “Therefore to me, it was the opposite of rejection. I did not enjoy hurting you, but I often did enjoy your reactions.”
“Fuck, you really are a goddamn sadist!” Riki exclaimed, trying to move away from the other only to realise that the Blondie’s powerful bionic arm was still securely wrapped around his waist.

“I simply mean that you reacted differently than other humans. You did not allow fear of pain to limit or stop you. If you wanted to do something, you did it, even if it meant punishment. Some would call that stupidity, however I would call it bravery and strength of character. Even during the punishment, you would fight against the pain by trying to hide your physical responses to it. As if you were simply making it disappear by power of will alone”, Iason spoke in fascinated admiration, having never encountered such will-power in a human before, not even in the rebellious Katze.

“You know, it wasn’t just about not allowing you to stop me. I mean, sometimes when I broke the rules it wasn’t really because I wanted to or thought it would be worth it. Sometimes I was just doing it on purpose. To rebel, I suppose, although... there was another reason...”, Riki confessed, only now consciously thinking about the motivations behind his own past disobedience.

“Oh? What other reason could there be? Annoying me to the point I let you go?”, the Head of Intelligence asked inquisitively. Figuring out people’s motivations was part of what his department did, but where it concerned Riki’s motivations his curiosity was far more pressing than normal.

“Yeah, that too. But... if I’m being completely honest...”, Riki said, briefly wondering why on Amoy he would want to be completely honest with his former captor and torturer. No, he had to stop thinking like that. If he ever wanted a chance at becoming this man’s lover he would have to interact with him under the assumption that he was at the very least a potential ally, not an enemy. “It was also about what came after the punishment.”

“Accelerator?”, Iason asked in disbelief. Could his mongrel possibly be more masochistic than he had thought? Could such inclinations be detrimental to the young man’s mental health?

“Of course not Accelerator, you moron! That’s just more fucking punishment! Shit, you don’t even know, do you?”, Riki sighed in exasperation. What the hell was he getting himself into here? In order to make the blonde understand anything about humanity, he’d probably have to re-raise him.

“Please care to enlighten me”, Iason asked, suddenly feeling very ignorant when confronted with the human’s frustrated impatience. Was he truly such a ‘moron’ when it came to emotional matters? “What did I do after the punishment that made it worth your while?”

“You kissed me. You always kissed me after. But you never apologised. You only apologised after sex. As if there was more reason for you to apologise for sex than for torture! Nevertheless, it made it a lot easier to bear in the end. Cause you asking for my forgiveness indicated that I actually meant something to you. That maybe – just maybe – you kept me as your Pet because you loved me. Or at the very least liked me enough to want to have sex with me”, Riki finished in a quieter voice, hoping that his words might be too soft for the other to hear yet knowing that a Blondie’s superior hearing would pick them up easily. He was really setting himself up to be shot down here.

“Your surrender in the end was never about the actual sex then? It was about the apology?”, Iason asked and tried to meet the other’s gaze once again, surprise evident in his eyes in spite of his serenely calm voice and facial expressions, or rather lack thereof. He’d never really given much thought to his own reasons for apologising at such a time. All he knew was that he was subjecting the human to a great amount of physical duress for no apparent reason other than his own incomprehensible desires, therefore even one as low in social standing as a mongrel deserved an apology. But there had been something else nagging at the back of his mind, something about seeing Riki in pain when he wanted to pleasure him that just didn’t sit well.
“Now don’t tell me you were apologising to freakin’ Jupiter for breaking the rules or something!”, Riki interrupted the other’s line of thought, simultaneously turning away from the Elite’s unnaturally-intense stare.

“Of course not, there is no point in apologising to an entity that lacks the ability to feel mercy. Which reminds me: you often apologised to me when you broke the rules, thus deeming me capable of feeling compassion”, Iason argued, having always assumed that the mongrel had continued to do so because he believed that his captor could be merciful.

Thinking back on it, Riki couldn’t help but feel like some weak kind of idiot to think that a Blondie of Tanagura would show any mercy when dealing with a human. “But you’re not capable of compassion, obviously. It was just stupid of me to degrade myself like that for nothing.”

“I did feel compassion, Riki”, Iason said, his voice somehow softer now. Pale, bare fingers reached out and tucked a loose stray of ashen-black hair behind the mongrel’s ear, unveiling more of his attractive face. “But it merely strengthened my resolve to see you punished, for punishment was the only way in which I could protect you in Eos, because it was the only thing to dissuade you from committing even graver trespasses that could eventually lead to the intervention of higher authorities, which would mean far worse punishment and possibly even execution.”

“Fuck me... Tanaguran logic’s just totally twisted”, Riki gasped after a short pause, having trouble following the strange, meandering path of the other’s line of reasoning.

“Was that an actual invitation, or merely a matter of speech?”, Iason asked in an even voice, which made it unclear whether or not he was being serious. If the way his grip around the dark youngster’s waist tightened further was any indication...

Riki wasn’t sure how much more of this his heart could take. Conversation with the Blondie was nearly as tiresomely overwhelming as everything else with him was, for even when they were discussing lighter subjects and joking around, there was always a crackling surge of energy hiding just below the surface of that unblemished, creamy, synthetic skin. Always that sense of an underlying danger lurking closeby, like a predator waiting to pounce on an unsuspecting prey.

“Wohow! Enough with the sex cravings already! I wanna go see Mimea, even if she is unconscious. I owe her that much after all that’s happened”, he said as he braced himself and then pushed away from the support of the railing, forcing more weight unto his injured foot. After everything that had happened he could endure it just a few corridors further.

“What happened to Mimea last night was in no way your fault, Riki. You were not one of the aggressors, nor did you tell them to do anything of the sort. You were not even there when the attack happened and you had no knowledge of it until several hours later”, Iason reassured him, practically lifting up Riki’s entire body as he led him through the corridor more swiftly, already spotting Daryl further up ahead, patiently waiting for them to catch up. It would’ve been much more practical to simply pick up the mongrel’s slight body and carry him to Mimea’s hospital room, but he had learned how much Riki detested being carried.

“No, Iason, you don’t know. It was my fault”, Riki said as he put more weight on his foot than was strictly necessary, as if subconsciously trying to punish himself. “I left my gang to rot after we had a fight about Mimea, so it’s hardly surprising they reacted like they did when they happened to come across her. True, I never guessed that they would run into each other like that. But I should’ve known that it wasn’t smart to leave my gang behind on such terms, especially Guy.”

“As far as I understand gang politics, it is they who owe you for leading and protecting them for all of those years, not the other way around”, Iason pointed out, wondering if Katze’s assessment of
“Yeah, most guys from Ceres will tell you that, but that’s not a great way to make gangs last for a longer time. A leader’s only as good as his crew, you know. I never had any real power over them without their say-so. If one day they’d decided to turn on me there would’ve been no way for me to win that fight. I didn’t just need to lead them, I had to befriend them. So you see it’s not my betrayal as a leader that’s really bothering them, it’s my betrayal as a friend.”

“And for Guy the added betrayal as a lover”, Iason said, quickly gaining a deeper understanding of Ceresian gang dynamics through Riki’s words on the subject. He was stunned at how well the seemingly crude slumdog knew how to read people when it was in his own best interest. Perhaps there had been more to the position of power he’d had in Ceres than just a foul mouth and a lot of aggression. In spite of being difficult to handle from a Tanaguran perspective, it was becoming clear to Iason that Riki in fact possessed a high degree of social intelligence.

“Right, that’s why Guy’s even more pissed at me than the others. Although strictly speaking we haven’t been pairing partners in a long time and I never gave him the impression that it was ever gonna be that way again between us. I guess me leaving over a Pet showed him that I really meant it and that Tanagura had changed me”, glancing up at the blonde when he stopped moving, Riki only then noticed that they had reached their destination.

Daryl carefully opened the door of the hospital room and quickly peeked inside, then turned back towards the others and politely gestured for them to enter. Stepping inside, Riki’s attention was immediately drawn to a small, pale figure lying in a big bed with white sheets near the window. The bright morning sunlight filtering through the partially-drawn blinds illuminated her hair in a way that appeared to highlight its red vibrancy from within. But the hair was the only thing about Mimea’s unconscious form that looked unchanged in its beauty and flawlessness, for the rest of what was visible of her face and body was still terribly bruised and disfigured by countless cuts and scrapes.

Rushing towards the bed as soon as the blonde released him from his iron grip, Riki fell to his knees next to the nightstand as tears ran down his tanned cheeks in an unstoppable current of guilt, grief and relief. “I’m so sorry…”, he whispered, his voice already hoarse from crying. Gently placing his hands underneath Riki’s armpits to lift him back up to his feet, Iason then placed him on the side of the bed, careful not to let him touch the unconscious girl’s fragile body. “You have nothing to apologise for, Riki. I am entirely certain that she does not place any blame for what happened on you.”

“No… I guess she wouldn’t”, Riki responded, continuing to whisper, as if not to wake her from her slumber. “But then again, she was never one to hold a grudge.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that”, Iason said, mimicking the other’s quiet tone as he settled down in a chair on the opposite side of the bed, near the window, apparently completely unaware of how the filtered rays of sunlight created a magnificent golden aura around him.

“Wh… what…? She holds a grudge against you then?”, Riki asked, momentarily turning his eyes away from the girl’s bruised face, his gaze drawn in by the golden splendour on the other side of the bed.

“No, not against me. I was not the one sworn to protect her then. Although of course I am now and I was the reason she was out there last night, upset and alone”, Iason admitted, finding that sharing even his guilt over his own short-comings was a relief of sorts. He would’ve never dreamed of sharing that with anybody else, but somehow it felt good to do so with Riki.
“What do you mean, you were the reason? Did you send her over there?”, Riki asked, thinking that maybe she’d gone to Ceres to come looking for him.

“Of course not. But I treated her unnecessarily harsh, after which she ran away. And then I just let her go. I should’ve gone after her”, Iason whispered. The very fact that he was whispering was somewhat unsettling to Riki, for the only other times he’d really whispered had been when he was comforting Riki after punishing him or when they’d been having sex.

“Sometimes giving people some time alone when they’re angry is the best thing to do”, Riki said in an unusually soothing tone, or maybe it just seemed that way because he was keeping his voice low. Could it be that the Blondie had been so reluctant to let him go because he had been afraid something like this would happen to him? “You couldn’t have known she would venture out to Ceres. It’s actually a very stupid and weird thing to do for a Pet.”

“Since when did you start making excuses on my behalf, Riki?”, the blonde teased, quite pleased at such an unexpected outcome of events, even if the cost of Mimea’s well-being had been far too high. Here he was, beating himself up over what had happened to a Pet, and there Riki was, comforting him and telling him that it wasn’t his fault. The way things had turned out was incredible, really.

“I dunno, am I? I just know what it’s like to feel responsible for what happens to others, to always feel like the guilty party even when you weren’t there”, Riki whispered somewhat wistfully. “I guess sometimes I just get... tired, y’know. Tired of always having to fight against everything and everyone.”

Leaning across the bed and placing a large, ungloved hand on top of Riki’s – which in turn was lying on top of Mimea’s smaller one on the bed – Iason looked at him with those vibrant, ethereally-blue eyes and spoke in a subdued voice: “You don’t have to fight me, Riki. I am not your enemy.”

Glancing at the other’s serenely-lit, angelic features from across the bed, the young mongrel suddenly burst out in tears. It was simply too much emotion to keep bottled up inside of him. All this time he’d fought tooth and nail just to stay alive and sane. He’d never ever received anything in life without having to fight for it some way or other. Even Guy’s affection and the loyalty of his gang had been something he’d had to earn over a long period of time. He’d often thought what he had done that was bad enough to deserve Iason Mink, but only now did he start to think that maybe he deserved the Elite because of the good he had done in his life. Perhaps in the end, staying true to himself and his own personal code of honour had been the right choice.

Seeing his mongrel’s tears, Iason placed his other hand on Riki’s as well and swore solemnly: “I promise that I will always do everything within my power to help you, Riki. Even if you never give me anything in return. I do not think my feelings for you will ever change, regardless of whether or not you share them.”

“Fuck, you’re as much an idiot as I am, aren’t you, Iason Mink?”, Riki sniffled, looking at the other through tear-filled, black pools.

Surprised at being called an idiot straight to his face like that, the Blondie made no response whatsoever as he stared at his beloved’s handsome, tear-streaked features.

“I’ve shared those feelings of yours from the very moment I first laid eyes on you, stupid!”

✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯
I woke up from the longest dream
Where I was drowning in the datastream
Now I exist where access was denied
And calculations could not emulate
How it feels to be alive

✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯✯

“What... did you just say?”, the normally so composed Blondie asked hesitantly.

“Nice try, asshole, but I ain’t gonna say it twice!”, Riki said half-jokingly.

“Say what twice?”, a small, raspy voice then sounded unexpectedly from beneath the sheets in between the Blondie and the slumdog.

“Mimea!! You’re awake! Holy shit!”, Riki swore from the right side of the bed in that familiar Ceresian accent of his.

“Jupiter be praised!”, an equally familiar velvet, deep voice could be heard from somewhere on her left side.

Slowly but surely the formerly vague, white blur that made up her environment transformed into an unknown hospital room and a glance to the right revealed the dark, alluring face of a mongrel well-known to her. “Riki.”

Clasping unto one of her tiny hands rather painfully, the young man asked in a worried tone: “Are you all right? Fuck! I’m so sorry about what happened! I had no idea Guy had become so hell-bent on some insane revenge quest!”

“Actually...”, she started, her throat sore and her voice hoarse like sandpaper. “I don’t remember anything about what happened to make me end up here... but something tells me I’m better off not knowing.”

“There is no need whatsoever to dwell any further on that matter, if you do not wish to engage in that conversation”, she heard the cool, reassuring voice of her new Master and co-conspirator come from a chair next to the window. Glancing at the golden-haired adonis currently seated on her left side, she immediately turned her head back to the former gangleader seated on her right.

Switching her amazed stare from one side of the bed to the other several times in rapid succession, she finally regained the ability to form coherent words:

“You’re here. Both of you. You’re both here... together”

“Of course we’re here, silly! Apparently we both care about you... not sure about the together-part though”, Riki said hesitantly, doubt evident in his tone.

“Only you could succeed in unintentionally bringing two people together by the completely illogical act of getting yourself into serious trouble, Mimea, dear. At times I am truly awed by the sheer brilliance of your endless stupidity”, the Blondie then spoke in seeming fascination, although it might
as well be sarcasm, as there was virtually no way to tell from his ever-even voice.

Sighing as she shifted around the bed in an effort to get somewhat more comfortable in spite of her countless physical aches, the red-head responded cheekily: “Don’t you have anything better to do than mock me? Seriously, I’d think that now that he’s finally in the same room with you, your Excellency’s most benevolent attentions would be focussed on *Riki* rather than on me.”

“Apparently I am unable to stop worrying about you, even though it would appear that the goal of our joint venture has been reached”, Iason admitted, meeting his mongrel’s obsidian gaze from across the bed but for a few seconds before the other brusquely turned his face away from him.

“Is that what I am to you guys then? A joint venture? A prize to be obtained through deception?! And to think I actually felt guilty about all this...”, Riki muttered angrily, getting up from his chair and moving towards the door with a sense of resignation. *I just knew there had to be a catch here... Man, I’m such a fool!*

“It wasn’t our intention to deceive you, Riki!”, Mimea gasped in panic, grabbing unto his arm with her tiny, bruised fingers with hardly any strength at all. But somehow that very weakness was what kept the other from pulling away. “We just didn’t know how else to get you back, how else to make up for the mistakes from the past... It’s not exactly something they cover in either the Pet Academy or Elite training for that matter.”

“Well, loyalty and honour weren’t exactly taught at Guardian either! But that doesn’t mean I don’t know what they are!”, Riki exclaimed, unsure why he felt so reluctant to pull himself out of the girl’s grip. The confirmation that the two of them had been plotting together made him feel like a mouse caught in a trap, yet somehow it had now become a trap of his own making. Even now that he knew what Mimea’s true motivation for approaching him that day at the casino had been, he still couldn’t stop feeling like she was his friend. Also there was all that stuff about love that Iason had said in the corridor just now... Was all of that just lies or could there still be some truth to it?

“You really have no idea just how special you are, do you, Riki? How rare it is for one to teach himself those values, even when they go against all of society’s laws and regulations?”, the blonde remarked, unable to catch the suspicious young man’s gaze again.

Turning his body away from both of his assailants, Riki just stood there with his back turned to them and his tanned hands pressed to his temple as if to ward off a terrible headache. *This is just fucking unbelievable! The two of you have actually joined forces for the purpose of... What? Driving me completely nuts?!*

“I just want us to be friends, Riki, all of us! All we want is a second chance, to do things right this time!”, Mimea implored with a tear-struck impression on her bruised, pretty, little doll’s face.

“Then why didn’t you just say so?! Why all the lying and the scheming behind my back? Is this how Tanagurans make friends, by stalking people and lying to them? By kidnapping and torturing them?!”, Riki yelled, suddenly livid at the whole injustice of it all.

“That is precisely the point right there, Riki. Tanagurans don’t make friends, we’re not supposed to. Therefore everything in the Tanaguran social system is designed to render it virtually impossible to make friends or to form any kind of human connection at all, especially in between different classes”, Iason explained, quite amazed at how apparently the young mongrel still didn’t understand the key to the system in spite of his hatred for it.

“But I don’t belong to any class!!!”, Riki screamed exasperatedly. Why couldn’t these people understand that he simply didn’t belong with them? Why did they ceaselessly continue to pursue him
even after he’d left Tanagura, coming up with all sorts of tricks and devious plots to get their hands on him?

“Exactly. That’s probably the reason why all three of us on some level succeeded in forming a
connection with you, at least in part. You are quite literally the glue that holds us together, the
translator between us if you will”, Iason continued, glad that even if Riki still didn’t understand their
interest in him, he at least understood the essence of what made him different from the rest of them.

“What the fuck d’ya mean, all three of you? Who’s the third...”, Riki began, then followed the Elite’s
icy gaze to the still figure standing diligently and nearly invisible beside the door. Daryl. “Oh, great,
you’ve got to be shitting me! The kid’s involved in this too?!?”

“Not consciously perhaps. Before last night Daryl knew absolutely nothing of the pact between
Mimea and myself, or the end of said cooperation. Yet it is true that he, like us, has experienced a
changed perspective ever since bonding with you back when you were my Pet in Eos”, Iason stated
matter-of-factly, in spite of the clearly enormous ramifications of his words. It was all so clear, once
one knew where to look.

“How do you even know that? What, did he tell you this?”, Riki asked, only then noticing Mimea’s
wide eyes and slightly open mouth. She was as surprised by this latest revelation as he was. And
undoubtedly so was Daryl, although his Furniture training kept his facial expressions neutral for the
most part, at least to the untrained eye of a mongrel.

“He does not need to tell me. Over the years I have become quite adept at analysing and interpreting
changes in the behaviour of Furniture, even former Furniture set loose in Midas”, Iason said.

“Shit, everything’s a fucking analysis with you guys, isn’t it? And now that you’ve finally come
across something you can’t analyse, you’ve become obsessed with it...”, Riki concluded with a sigh,
turning round and round as if still contemplating escape, yet making no move to do so.

“Wouldn’t you become obsessed when presented with an example of what your life might’ve been
outside of Tanagura’s restrictive walls? Who you might’ve been if not for... them?”

For a moment, it was unclear to all of them who was in fact speaking those words. The voice was a
soft but firm one. It was hard to tell whether it was male or female, as it appeared to contain elements
of both. Slowly turning their attention back towards the door, the Pet, the mongrel and the Elite were
surprised to find that the words had come from the pink, thin lips of the former Furniture currently
still stationed there.

“Wait... you are obsessed with me too?”, Riki gasped, not sure how much more of this his nerves
could handle. These Tanagurans just never stopped baffling him with the tenacity of their insanity.
And not in a good way either.

“Probably more so than them, seeing as how I’ve as good as sacrificed myself to free you. Wouldn’t
you agree?”, Daryl said calmly, not passing judgement but merely stating a fact.

“Oh no! This is the part where the ex-Furniture runs off with our Riki!”, Mimea then shrieked
childishly, throwing up her blanket in order to hide her face in it.

“Why that would only be right, wouldn’t it? Cause he didn’t lie to me or conspire against me, like the
two of you did!”, the mongrel hissed accusingly, still immensely disappointed in Mimea’s betrayal,
even if a part of him had suspected her deception all along.

“We’re not against you, Riki, we’re with you! You’ve brought us together, you’ve helped us to
finally see the truth!”, she cried from beneath the blanket, the tears prickling the cuts and open wounds on her face like flames licking her fragile skin.

“Damnit, I don’t want anything to do with this! I don’t care about what the fucking ‘truth’ is!! I just want to be left the hell alone!!!!”, Riki yelled in a gradually-rising crescendo, like a dragon breathing fire.

“Oh, were you truly happy then, living in the slums with nothing better to do than drink yourself into oblivion, fight for scraps and wait to die? Suffering through a short, useless life as an outcast, like you were some disgusting insect in the gutter?”, the Elite asked derogatorily.

“I ain’t no bloody insect and I ain’t useless, you stuck-up piece of blonde shit!”, the poor Ceresian spat in self-defence. What were these crazy people even trying to achieve here?! To break down what little there was still left of his sanity? But to what end?

“Then prove it. Show all the world how wrong they are, how they’re all just living a lie, pretending that they’re better than you. And what better way to show them than to join us in this... pact... we now seem to have established”, the Blondie spoke convincingly, the logic of his argument irrefutable.

Turning round and round to look from one face to another, Riki was suddenly struck by the resemblances between the three seemingly very different faces around him. They were all looking to him for guidance, for hope at a better and more meaningful life. Like they were different parts of some terribly ill-fitting puzzle. Like dogs that had escaped domesticity and were out in the wild looking for an alpha to their new pack. Or a bunch of young street kids without a gang leader. Holy smokes, what am I supposed to do now?

“I...”, the mongrel started uncertainly.

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We've determined
We're the first of our own kind
The first to feel and think
With our own minds
In this ancient garden we are free
Together in this Eden made of electricity

I am not certain if I have a heart
But I can imagine it breaking apart
If I could feel something then I’d like to start
With you
Awakening with you
To Be Continued ...